

THE GREAT DIVIDE

While student chronic absenteeism numbers remain high, Boston and Mass. show signs of recovery

By **Christopher Huffaker** Globe Staff, Updated May 21, 2023, 4:58 p.m.



School officials cite COVID cases, commitments outside of school, and an increase in social and behavioral problems among students as some of the causes for elevated absenteeism. ALLY RZESA/GLOBE STAFF

School absenteeism rates, which soared to record heights in Massachusetts as students returned to in-person learning during the pandemic, began to recede this year, but still

one in four students across the state has missed at least a tenth of school days this year through March, according to recently released state data.

In Boston, more than a third of students are chronically absent, a slight improvement over last year but still nearly 50 percent above pre-pandemic levels — a crisis rate, according to district officials.

Routinely missing school is most common among the highest-needs students, including those from low-income households, English learners, and students with disabilities. Research shows chronically absent students perform worse in school, graduate at lower rates, and have lower social engagement.

District officials hope reforms including increased collaboration between school departments, more investments in social workers and other support staff, and transparent data sharing with families will help the district not only recover but make progress relative to the pre-pandemic average — long higher in Boston than statewide.

For BPS student Jayliss Gonzalez, the pattern of skipping days every week started in middle school but worsened once she reached high school.

Her hour-long commute from South Boston to Hyde Park's Boston Community Leadership Academy required her to get up before dawn. At times, it felt like too much. She fell behind in school and felt disconnected from her classmates and teachers. Then the pandemic hit, and she had to tune in to her remote classes from a crowded apartment. Soon, she lost stable housing. While she found a full-time job to support herself, the hours were overwhelming. The more school she missed, the further she'd fall behind.

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“It was a constant, vicious cycle,” Gonzalez said.

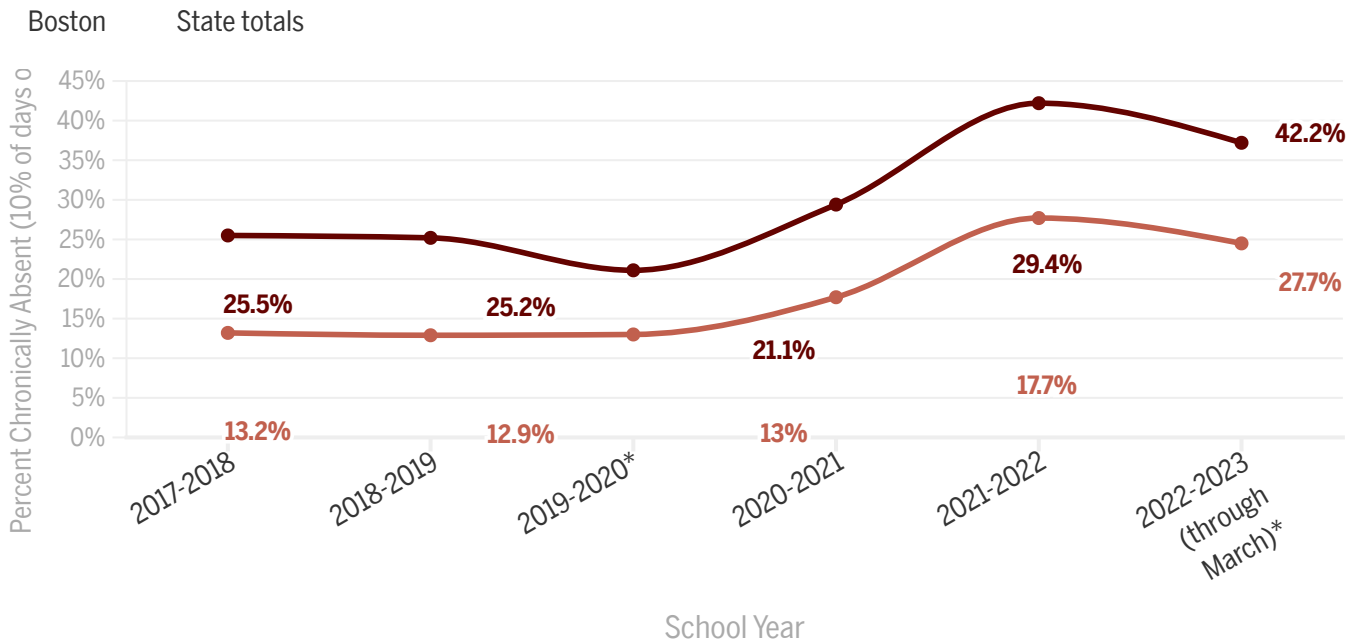
Though Gonzalez’s attendance has been far from perfect this year, the 20-year-old is more on track, graduating by December from a hybrid program at the Boston Day and Evening Academy, an in-district charter school that serves students who have not had success in traditional schools.

Chronic absenteeism is defined by 18 or more absences per school year. Through March of this year, those who were chronically absent in BPS fell five percentage points to 37.2 percent, meaning about 2,300 more students regularly show up for school.

Chronic absenteeism down from record highs

Almost one in four Massachusetts students has missed more than 10 percent of the school year so far.

- All students
- Black students
- Latino students
- English learners
- Students with disabilities



Source: Department of Elementary and Secondary Education • CHRISTOPHER HUFFAKER/GLOBE STAFF
*2019-2020 and 2022-2023 school year statistics are through March 2 and March 1, respectively.

A Flourish chart

This school year’s improved attendance numbers are due in part to fewer direct COVID absences this year, said Brian Marques, the BPS administrator who oversees attendance. While illness is an excused absence, it still contributes to the absenteeism rate.

“We’ve had a good run here in terms of less impact of students being out of school for illness or COVID,” Marques said. “That allows us to build momentum.”

But before Boston and districts across the country can fully recover, they will need to address other issues that create attendance barriers, including the increase in social and behavioral problems among students since the return from remote learning.

“We’re continuing to make gains in terms of that safe and welcoming environment,” Marques said. But “we know that BPS and other districts have had challenges coming back from the pandemic as it relates to being around one another again.”

Campus and district leaders are doubling down on efforts to engage students and families, hosting parent groups, and inviting families to school events, he said. Boston has invested in more [social workers and family liaisons](#). Some schools also recognize students for strong attendance, and the district started last year sending families “nudge letters” that inform them of how many days their children have missed.

Often, there is more behind attendance issues than just students not wanting to go to school, said Brandy Brooks, deputy director of the education- and housing-focused nonprofit Boston’s Higher Ground.

“There are definitely cases where young people have the appearance that they just don’t care,” Brooks said. “But no, I promise you, there is something going on. We just may not know it.”

For Widz Etienne, a parent whom Higher Ground helped find affordable housing, that primary challenge was transportation. Etienne lost his Boston home after falling behind on rent following hip surgery in 2021. He eventually was assigned to a shelter in Methuen but without reliable transportation he found taking his son, Widz Jr., to kindergarten became impossible.

“The school called my son and asked if he was going to school. I asked for transportation, and they wouldn’t provide it,” Etienne said.

[The district provides transportation](#) to homeless students up to an hour away, but Widz Jr.’s Mattapan school, the Ellison/Parks Early Education School, was too far. In October, after a month of absences, Etienne instead enrolled his son in a school in Methuen. Since then, Etienne has secured housing back in Boston, where he hopes his son can return to Ellison/Parks, he said.

The district has thousands of families like the Etiennes who lack stable housing; other students have complex medical needs, work to support their families, or have lost loved ones. Kelly Gallagher, a regional social worker with the district, conducts home visits with attendance-focused “success teams.” These 45-minute visits, scheduled in advance with families, allow district staff to learn about those challenges.

In one case this year, Gallagher said, an Excel High School support team learned on a home visit that a student had stopped receiving treatment for a mental health problem. The staff was able to make referrals for the student to resume outpatient treatment.

“He has re-engaged, as far as attending school and getting into the building,” Gallagher said. “But the work continues. The work never ends.”

Last year for the first time, Massachusetts released data on students missing more than 20 percent of the school year or one day a week, on average. Statewide, that described more than 6 percent of public school children through March — 58,000 kids. The BPS rate was 14 percent.

For students like that, it often takes collaboration between families and staff to get students to attend school regularly. Emmanuel Allen, director of the district’s Reengagement Center, works with students who have dropped out or are chronically absent — categories with a blurry boundary, he said.

“I’m working with the students who are struggling the most,” Allen said, noting the center works with students to determine why they stopped attending and develops a plan to help them graduate. “We take the approach of talking to every student case by case.”

In Gonzalez’s case, it was an attentive teacher at BCLA who connected her with her new school. Her hybrid program, Blended Learning, involves two days a week in person. That flexibility has allowed her to continue working, and she recently switched from working full time to part time, which accelerated her progress.

Gonzalez hopes that someone will read her story and realize there's a path to regularly attending school.

“I hope it finds someone who's going through the same thing, and they think, ‘I'm not alone,’” she said.

The [Great Divide](#) explores educational inequality in Boston and statewide. [Sign up to receive our newsletter](#), and send ideas and tips to thegreatdivide@globe.com.

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