

Showing Up Matters: A Look at Absenteeism Inside Newark's High Schools

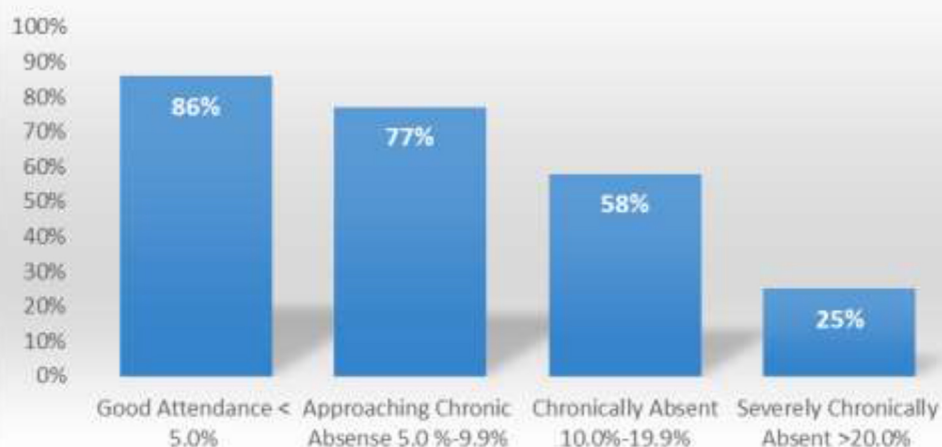


Executive Summary

Nearly half (48 percent) of Newark Public Schools' high schoolers were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year. The rate has remained relatively unchanged since 2010 and is almost triple the state average of 14 percent. Newark's K-8th grade average chronic absenteeism rate was 23 percent. Students who miss 10 percent of school days (about two days a month) are more likely to fall behind in school and not graduate on time.

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) has been leading the charge to raise awareness and combat chronic absenteeism statewide. In an effort to understand the causes behind low attendance rates, ACNJ conducted interviews and focus groups with high schoolers, teachers, parents and administrators throughout Newark. They revealed pockets of success in reducing absences but underscored the need for systemic approaches to encourage attendance.

4-year High School Graduation Rate by 9th Grade Attendance (2015 cohort)



The lower a ninth-grader's attendance, the less likely they are to graduate high school on time (Source: Newark Public Schools)

Why Are Students Absent?

- ❑ **School disengagement:** Students felt discouraged by their academic performance or disconnected from curriculum, leading to more absences.
- ❑ **Social-emotional health:** Students need social-emotional support when facing community violence, depression, anxiety and abuse or neglect.
- ❑ **Distance from school:** Students face long walking commutes up to 2.5 miles.
- ❑ **Personal safety:** Students often feel unsafe walking to/from school and may feel bullied by students in school.
- ❑ **Family factors:** Parents and adults may view students as more independent, giving them a choice of whether to attend school.
- ❑ **Student responsibilities:** Older students may have family responsibilities like child care or employment that take priority over attendance.

ACNJ's focus group participants noted the importance of strong relationships between schools and students. A single adult in school could make a positive or negative impact on their attendance. Students appreciated when teachers took extra steps to connect with them.

Recommendations

Newark's high schools showed some promising practices and in the 2017-18 school year, each school principal will work on an attendance strategy to reduce absenteeism in their school. But moving from plan to practice will require follow-through, buy-in and support for administrators, teachers and staff to be successful.

ACNJ's recommendations for Newark Public Schools

- Foster supportive leadership in school principals and administrators.
- Review attendance data early and regularly.
- Support trusting relationships between students and staff.
- Provide professional development and support for social-emotional learning.
- Apply attendance and other policies consistently.
- Build in routine communication to students and parents.
- Align and re-evaluate other policies to encourage attendance.

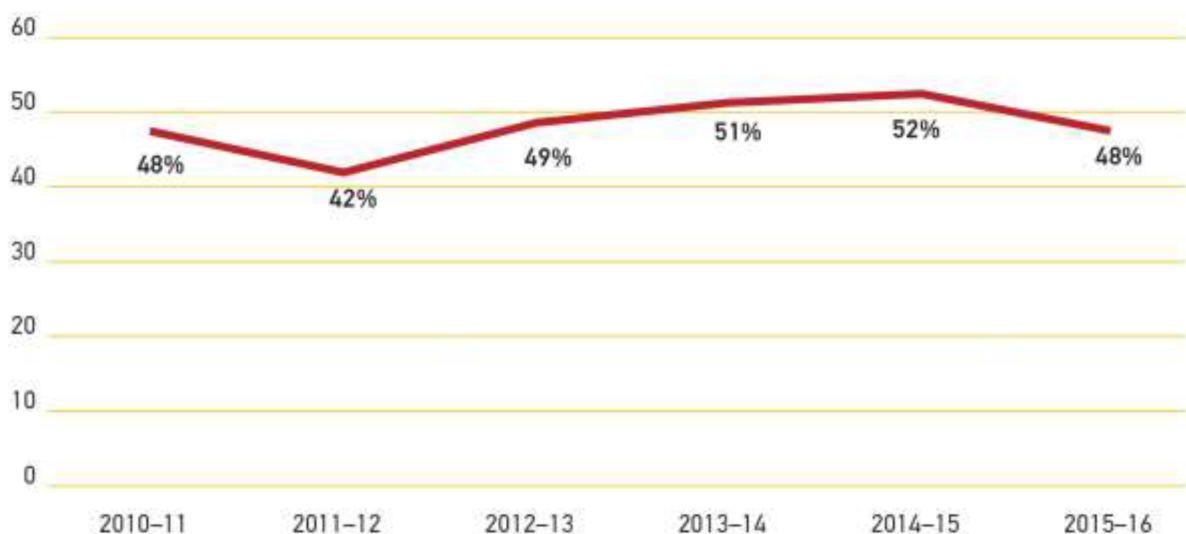
ACNJ's recommendations for the City of Newark and community-based organizations

- Improve public safety near schools.
- Coordinate attendance data sharing with schools.
- Develop and launch a community campaign around chronic absenteeism.
- Provide supports for students with social-emotional health needs.
- Engage parents on the importance of regular attendance in high school.
- Track student attendance at school.

Summary

- Nearly half of Newark Public Schools' high schoolers were "chronically absent" during the 2015-16 school year.
- Chronic absence in high school is linked with higher dropout rates.
- Reasons for absences include school disengagement, social-emotional health, personal safety, family factors and student responsibilities outside of school.
- *Strong leadership and strong relationships with students and families* are necessary foundations to a school and community strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism in Newark's high schools.

Chronic Absenteeism Since 2010 in Newark High Schools (grades 9-12)



Source: Newark Public Schools