

# CHRONIC ABSENCE IN THE EARLY GRADES

April 2016

**Takeaway finding:  
A small but significant  
group of early-  
elementary students  
in Iowa is missing  
substantial amounts  
of school. That group  
of students is faring  
much more poorly  
academically than  
their peers who more  
regularly attend school.**

**A** growing body of research points to the critical importance of helping young children—at the start of their academic lives—get into the habit of attending school every day. A student is considered chronically absent if he or she misses 10 percent or more of school days for any reason. In Iowa, that means 18 days or more in a 180-day school year, the equivalent of nearly a month of school.

Good attendance in the early years is strongly correlated with reading proficiently by the end of third grade, graduating from high school on time and success in adulthood. Chronic absence is an early-warning sign that intervention may be needed to ensure a child is on a path to success.

Using data from the Iowa Department of Education on over 37,000 students, CFPC has analyzed the prevalence of chronic absence among Iowa early-elementary students (K-3).

The data, tracking the attendance of students from when they started kindergarten in the 2010-11 school year through third grade in 2013-14, show that a small but significant group of early-elementary students in Iowa is missing substantial amounts of school, and many of those students are facing other challenges in their academic and home lives.

Students who have been chronically absent during any year of their early-elementary schooling are less likely than their peers who rarely miss school to be reading proficiently by the end of third grade, an important marker for future academic success (see next page for specific findings).



**Good attendance in the early years is strongly correlated with reading proficiently by the end of third grade, graduating from high school on time and success in adulthood.**

Low-income students, students of color, students receiving Special Education and English Language Learner services are all more likely than their peers to miss substantial amounts of school in their first years of school.

This brief is organized around key findings (at right). After this brief introduction, the balance of the report, starting on page 7, highlights more detail about each finding, focused on a particular data point or set of data points.

### Why measure chronic absence?

Traditionally, Iowa schools—like those around the country—have measured attendance using average daily attendance (ADA) at building or district levels. ADA measures the percentage of children present in school on a given day.

**95 percent average daily attendance sounds good, but in reality could mean a significant share of children are missing large amounts of school.**

But average daily attendance can mask attendance problems. A 95 percent average daily attendance sounds good, but in reality could mean a significant share of children who are missing large amounts of school. A 93 percent average daily attendance almost certainly does.

Tracking chronic absence is a better way to understand attendance patterns. (See Finding 3 on pages 9 and 10 for more on the relationship between chronic absence and average daily attendance in Iowa.)

### What do we know about the factors that drive chronic absence?

Unlike truancy in later school years, early-elementary absences are usually excused. Chronic absence in these years can have a variety of causes:

- School issues, such as too little monitoring of or intervention in chronic attendance or broader difficulties engaging parents in meaningful ways

## Key findings

1. Chronic absence rates were highest in kindergarten, when 9 percent of students (3,523) were chronically absent, then improved through third grade, when 4.5 percent (1,465) of that cohort were chronically absent.
2. One-third of Iowa districts and nearly 40 percent of elementary schools have rates of chronic absence among kindergartners in excess of 10 percent.
3. Average daily attendance masks significant differences in rates of chronic absence among Iowa districts. Average daily attendance rates of 95 percent among kindergartners translated to chronic absence rates from 5 percent to over 18 percent.
4. Patterns of attendance established in kindergarten—coming to school regularly or not—are likely to continue in subsequent grades.
5. Iowa students who are chronically absent are over one and a half times less likely to be proficient in reading by third grade.
6. Chronic absence is more pronounced among racial and ethnic minority groups who experience constrained opportunity even before birth.
7. Low-income students were three to four times more likely than their peers to be chronically absent across all four school years documented in this report.
8. Students receiving special education services were two to three times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.
9. English Language Learners were more likely to be chronically absent in the earliest years, but the gap virtually disappears by third grade.
10. Boys and girls in Iowa are chronically absent in the early-elementary years at very similar rates.

## Strategies for reducing chronic absence

Attendance Works, a national group focused on improving school attendance, has identified the following key strategies for schools:

- A. Recognize good and improved attendance
- B. Engage students and parents
- C. Monitor attendance data and practices
- D. Provide personalized early outreach
- E. Develop programmatic response to barriers (as needed)

It has also identified key ingredients for systemic change, including positive messaging to convey the importance of building a habit of attendance, actionable data, capacity building and shared accountability among districts and community partners.

Attendance Works has produced a wealth of material to support communities in improving attendance. They are available at [www.attendanceworks.org/tools/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/).

- Family issues, including difficulty managing chronic illnesses like asthma; untreated dental problems that cause pain; lack of resources, including transportation; high levels of mobility; and in some cases parents' history of negative school experiences
- Community issues, such as neighborhood distress or violence that makes getting to school safely difficult

We know that chronic absence is much more likely among students living in poverty, whose families face many challenges—including those noted above—that can hinder regular school attendance. Chronic absence is also more likely among children of color. High rates among Native Americans, blacks and Hispanics, in particular, reflect not only relatively high rates of poverty among these groups, but special challenges stemming from historical and current marginalization and discrimination.

These challenges range from practices from more than a century ago to remove Native American children from reservations and place them in boarding schools away from their home languages and culture to current school discipline practices that disproportionately suspend black students from school. Black students are also more prone to health conditions like asthma. Hispanic students face special language challenges, and some take visits back to their home countries, which provide valued connections to family and culture, but can be disruptive to the school experience.

For fuller discussions of the reasons for chronic absence, see Attendance Works, “Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting a Course for Success,” September 2015, and Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero, “Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades,” National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008. Both are available at [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org).

### Improving attendance in the early grades is doable

The findings from these Iowa data make a compelling case for the many individuals and organizations working to improve school attendance starting with young students. And the good news is that we know strategies that help support families and kids and can boost school attendance (see sidebar at left).

Among the most active efforts in the state is the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, a national initiative supported

**High rates of chronic absence among Native American, black and Hispanic students reflect not only high rates of poverty, but historical and current marginalization and discrimination.**

by a broad range of public, private and nonprofit organizations. In Iowa, the Campaign is engaging communities across the state around strategies to assure every child is reading proficiently by third grade and specifically around strategies to reduce chronic absence. It sponsors the Iowa Attendance Learning Network, a peer-learning network that offers participating communities the opportunity to learn best practices from peers and outside experts, review attendance data with key partners in the community and inform Iowa state attendance policy and practice.

**The good news is that we know the strategies that support families and kids and can boost school attendance.**

Currently 11 Iowa communities—Ames, Cedar Rapids, Cedar Valley, Council Bluffs, Des Moines, Dubuque, Dyersville, Grinnell, Jackson County, Marshalltown and the Quad Cities—participate in the network.

More information on local Iowa efforts can be found at [www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/iowa/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/iowa/) and on the national work of the Campaign at [gradelevelreading.net](http://gradelevelreading.net).

**There are effective approaches and specific next steps that can improve early-elementary attendance in Iowa**

The efforts of communities in the Campaign to improve school attendance in the early years have kickstarted interest in this issue in Iowa. This group of communities are establishing—and sharing with peers—a variety of exemplary practices. But, given the findings of this brief, we know there is a pressing need for schools and community organizations around the state and for the state of Iowa itself to do more:

**Shorter-term and school-based strategies**

- All Iowa districts should calculate and report on chronic absence at both

## Five protective factors

One powerful approach that can be applied across discrete programs is to help families build the strengths they need to thrive. The Strengthening Families Framework, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, identifies five specific protective factors that promote healthy outcomes.

Families who possess these traits are much more likely to be able to assure regular school attendance and to help their children be happy, productive learners:

**Parental resilience**

The ability to bounce back from all types of challenges that emerge in every family's life

**Social connections**

Emotional support, help in solving problems, parenting advice and opportunities to give back

**Concrete support in times of need**

From food, shelter and clothing to treatment and help in times of crisis

**Knowledge of parenting & child development**

Accurate information to help parents see children in a positive light and have appropriate expectations

**Social & emotional competence of children**

The ability to interact positively with peers, self-regulate behavior and communicate feelings

the district and individual school levels and by grade, race, ethnicity, home language and income. The Department of Education should support districts in doing so through technical assistance and other tools.

- Administrators, principals and teachers should receive enhanced and expanded professional development opportunities on chronic absence and strategies to address it.

- The Iowa Reading Research Center, which was established in 2012 and works under the auspices of the Iowa Department of Education to carry out education goals outlined in legislation and policy, should play a central role in helping sustain data collection and analysis and identifying and diffusing exemplary practices at the school, district and community level.
- Schools need adequate staffing and support—beyond technical assistance (which is important but not alone sufficient)—to address the range of child health and family needs contributing to chronic absence and to build welcoming relationships with families.

### Longer-term and broader approaches

Given these often complex factors, specific strategies to promote regular school attendance must be part of a broad agenda to support Iowa families in raising their children. For Iowa to prosper in the future, kids need a solid foundation on which to build.

Such an approach must enable access to regular physical and mental health care, supports contributing to family economic stability, access to parent education and high-quality early care and education (see sidebar on page 4 for one frame that incorporates many of these elements).

### Acknowledgements

The Child and Family Policy Center is grateful for assistance and guidance from: the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which provided financial support for the production of the brief; Attendance Works, which reviewed a draft and offered very beneficial feedback; and the Iowa Department of Education, whose staffers were incredibly helpful in pulling and assembling the data used here.

Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of CFPC alone.

It also requires a strong push for racial equity that focuses on all our public systems supporting children and families. Funding and institutional practices and policies should all be oriented toward addressing long-standing inequities.

In many ways, chronic absence is the canary in the coal mine of child well-being. Patterns of school attendance are not only an indicator of future academic success, but also give one of the state’s most important child-serving systems—our schools—a strong indicator of how able families are to navigate the challenges of daily life and support the educational, resource and health needs of their children. It also gives schools and community organizations a measure of their own openness and creativity in reaching out to and engaging families.

The balance of this brief spells out more information about each of the ten key findings listed on page 2. These pages offer many more details on attendance patterns in this cohort of over 37,000 students as they progressed from kindergarten through third grade. In totality, they reveal clear areas of challenge. It behooves us all to respond in ways that help kids get to school every day.

**Strategies to promote regular school attendance must be part of a broad agenda to better support Iowa families and their children.**

## About the data

The data in this brief, which are the bases for all subsequent findings, were pulled from of the Iowa Department of Education’s longitudinal data system. The Department provided information over four academic years on the group of students who started kindergarten in an Iowa public school in the fall of 2010. Information includes the number of days each year through the 2013-14 school year each student was enrolled and the number of those days the student was present.

The dataset also includes information on the school and district the child attended each year, demographic data and information on participation in special services, such as special education.

The group started with 37,638 students. The number of students in the cohort had declined to 32,214 by 2013-14, reflecting moves out of state, transfers to non-public schools or home schooling.

A few additional definitional points: The brief uses free and reduced-price lunch participation (FRL) as the measure of poverty. Families with annual

incomes of up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$43,568 for a family of four in the 2013-2014 school year, were eligible. The vast majority of students participating in that program, however, were eligible for free lunches, which were available to students with family incomes of up to 130 percent of poverty, or \$30,615 for a family of four in 2013-14.

The dataset also includes information on whether a child had an IEP (individualized education program), the tool for students with intellectual, physical, behavioral or emotional disabilities who are receiving Special Education services, and whether a child received ELL (English Language Learners) services. ELL services are for students with a language background in a language other than English and who need extra support in English for academic success.

Race and ethnicity were identified by parents when they first enrolled their child in school.

## Summary data on cohort of 2010-11 Iowa public school kindergarteners

	Total		FRL		IEP		ELL		Boys		Girls		Chronically Absent	
	No.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	
K	37,639	16,528	43.9%	2,781	7.4%	2,531	6.7%	19,537	51.9%	18,102	48.1%	3,523	9.4%	
1st	33,896	15,257	45.0%	3,177	9.4%	2,340	6.9%	17,351	51.2%	16,545	48.8%	1,868	5.4%	
2nd	32,879	14,631	44.5%	3,521	10.7%	2,213	6.7%	16,835	51.2%	16,044	48.8%	1,768	5.3%	
3rd	32,215	14,155	43.9%	4,006	12.4%	2,119	6.6%	16,496	51.2%	15,719	48.8%	1,465	4.5%	

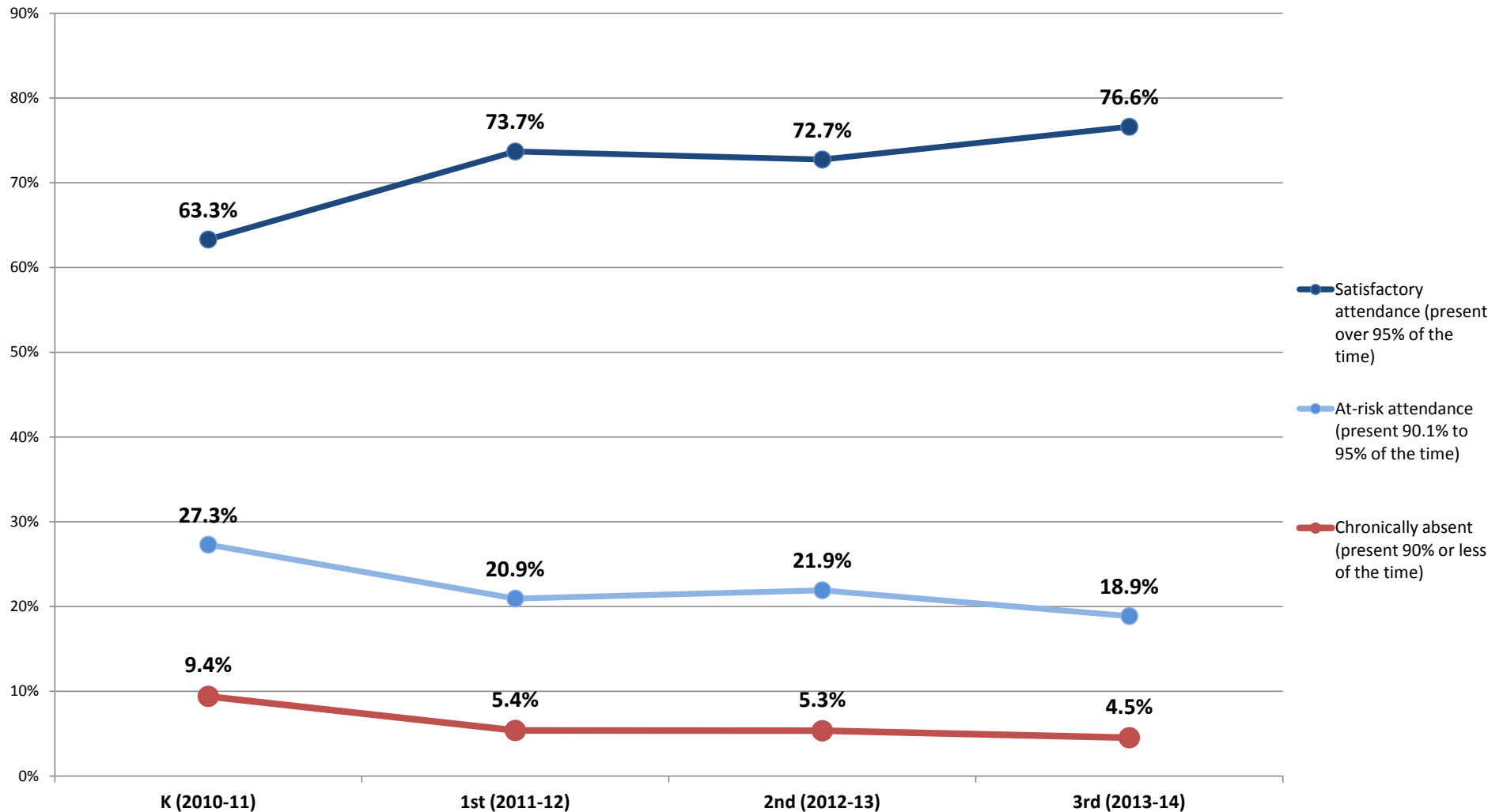
  

	Total		White		Hispanic		Black		Multiple		Asian		Native American		Pacific Islander	
	No.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	No.	Pct.	
K	37,639	29,743	79.0%	3,775	10.0%	1,936	5.1%	1,150	3.1%	783	2.1%	177	.5%	75	.2%	
1st	33,896	26,933	79.5%	3,337	9.8%	1,692	5.0%	1,028	3.0%	696	2.1%	148	.4%	62	.2%	
2nd	32,879	26,267	79.9%	3,196	9.7%	1,583	4.8%	992	3.0%	657	2.0%	128	.4%	56	.2%	
3rd	32,215	25,781	80.0%	3,120	9.7%	1,540	4.8%	965	3.0%	635	2.0%	123	.4%	51	.2%	

## Finding 1

### Chronic absence rates are highest in kindergarten, then improve through third grade

Percentage of Iowa students in cohort by attendance rates, 2010-11 through 2013-14

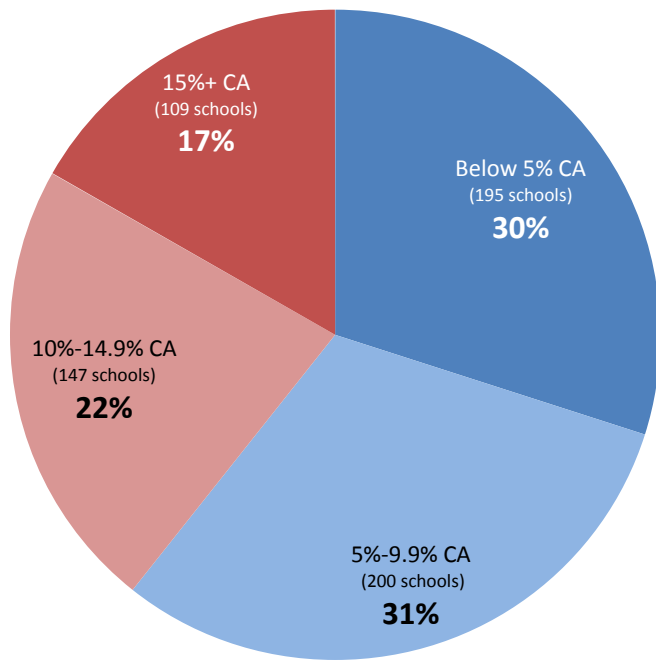


Even in kindergarten, the majority of children were attending school nearly every day—over 95 percent of the time (dark blue line). But a small but significant group is missing troubling amounts of school. In the early elementary years, chronic absence is highest in the first year of school. In Iowa’s 2010-11 kindergarten class, nearly one in 10 students missed 10 percent or more of school days (red line). By first grade, that rate had fallen significantly, to just over 5 percent of students and it edged down slightly further in the next two years. But even in third grade, nearly 1,500 students in the cohort were chronically missing school.

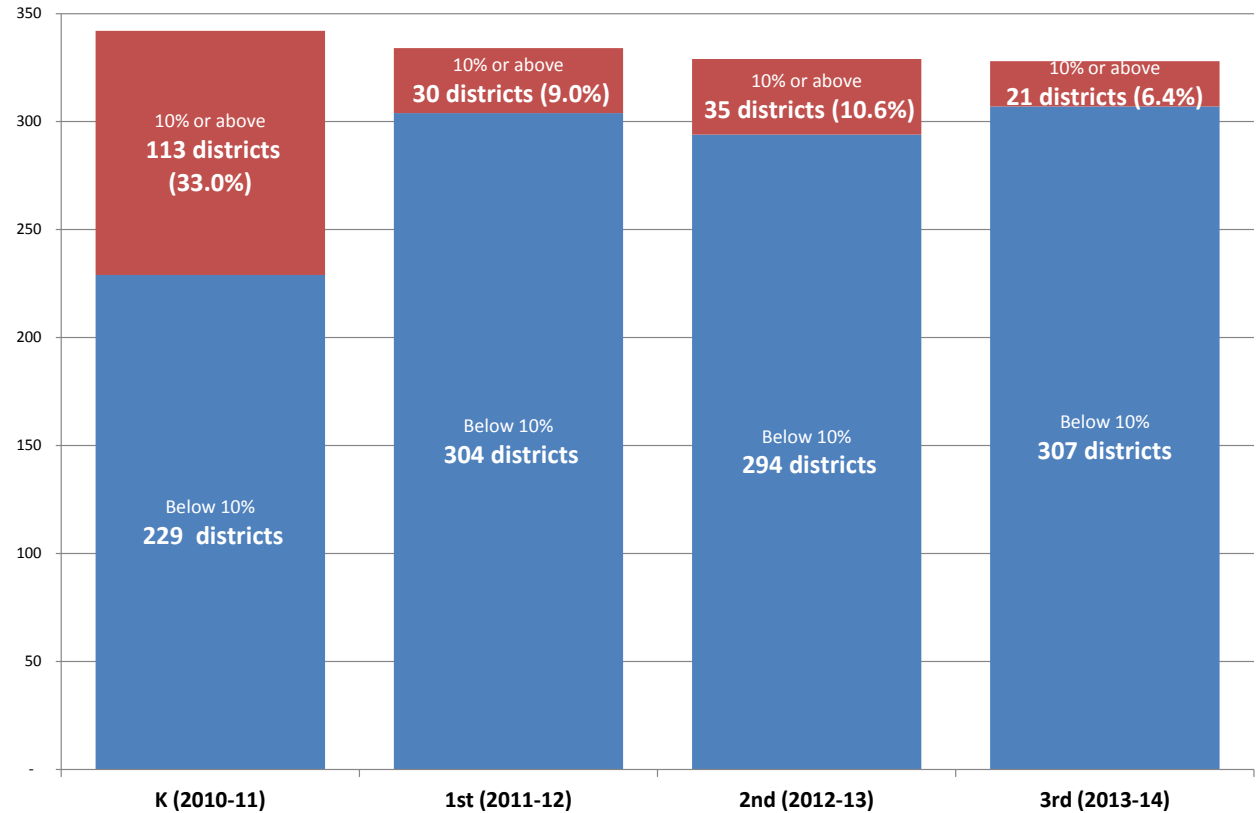
Finding 2

**One-third of Iowa districts and over 40 percent of elementary schools have rates of chronic absence among kindergartners in excess of 10 percent**

Iowa elementary schools by chronic absence rate among cohort in kindergarten (2010-11)



Iowa school districts by chronic absence rate among cohort, 2010-11 through 2013-14



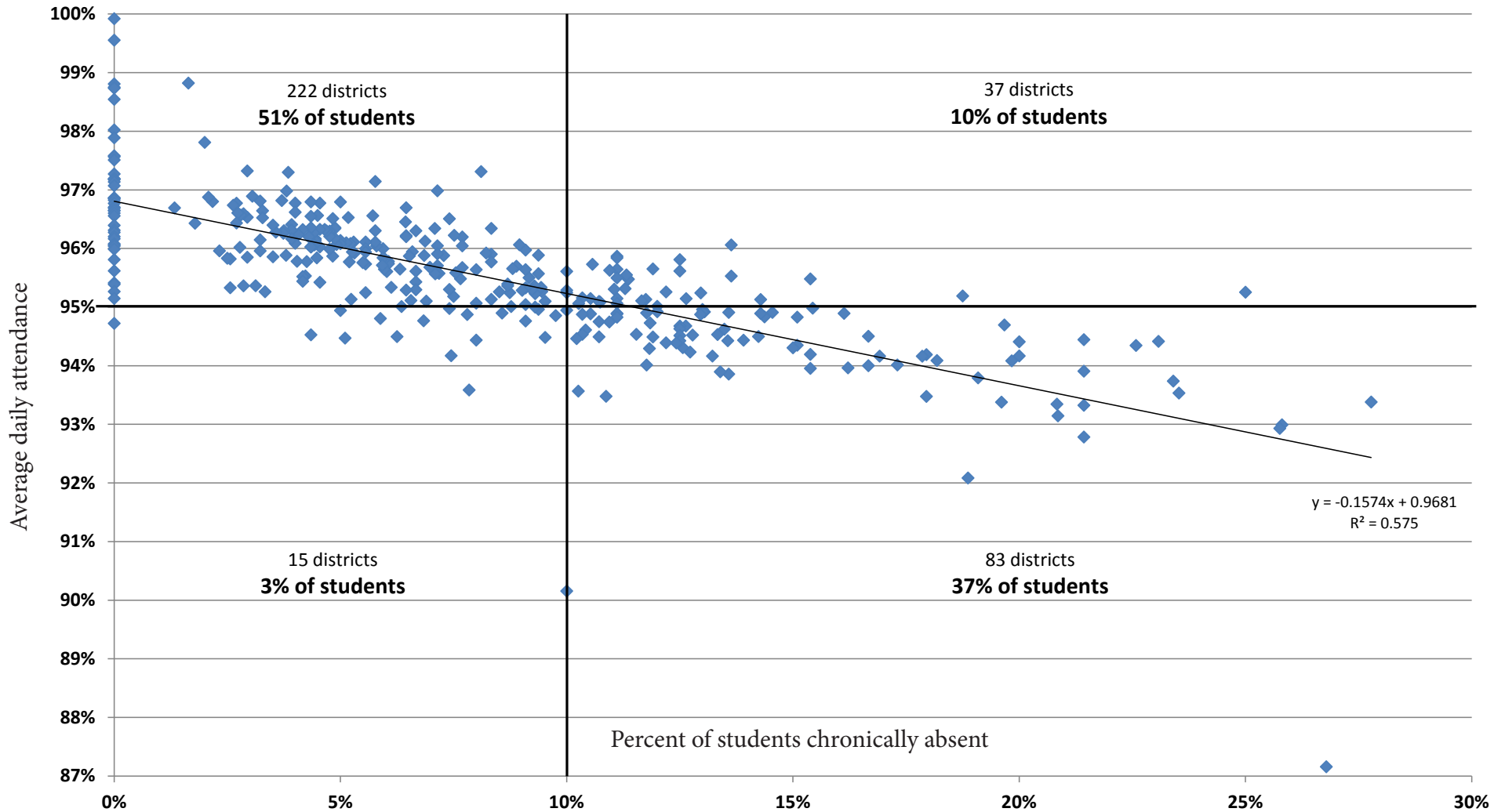
Despite overall rates of chronic absence ranging from 4.5 percent to 9 percent in the early grades, some schools and school districts have much more significant problems with attendance. One-third of districts and nearly 40 percent of schools had chronic absence rates among their kindergarten class of 10 percent or higher. This is a district- and building-wide problem because chronic absence doesn't just affect the students missing school. Students regularly moving in and out of the classroom can slow down learning for everyone, as teachers have to take time to go back over material those students have missed.



Finding 3

**Average daily attendance and chronic absence in Iowa school districts are correlated ...**

Iowa school districts by average daily attendance and chronic absence rate among kindergarteners (2010-11)

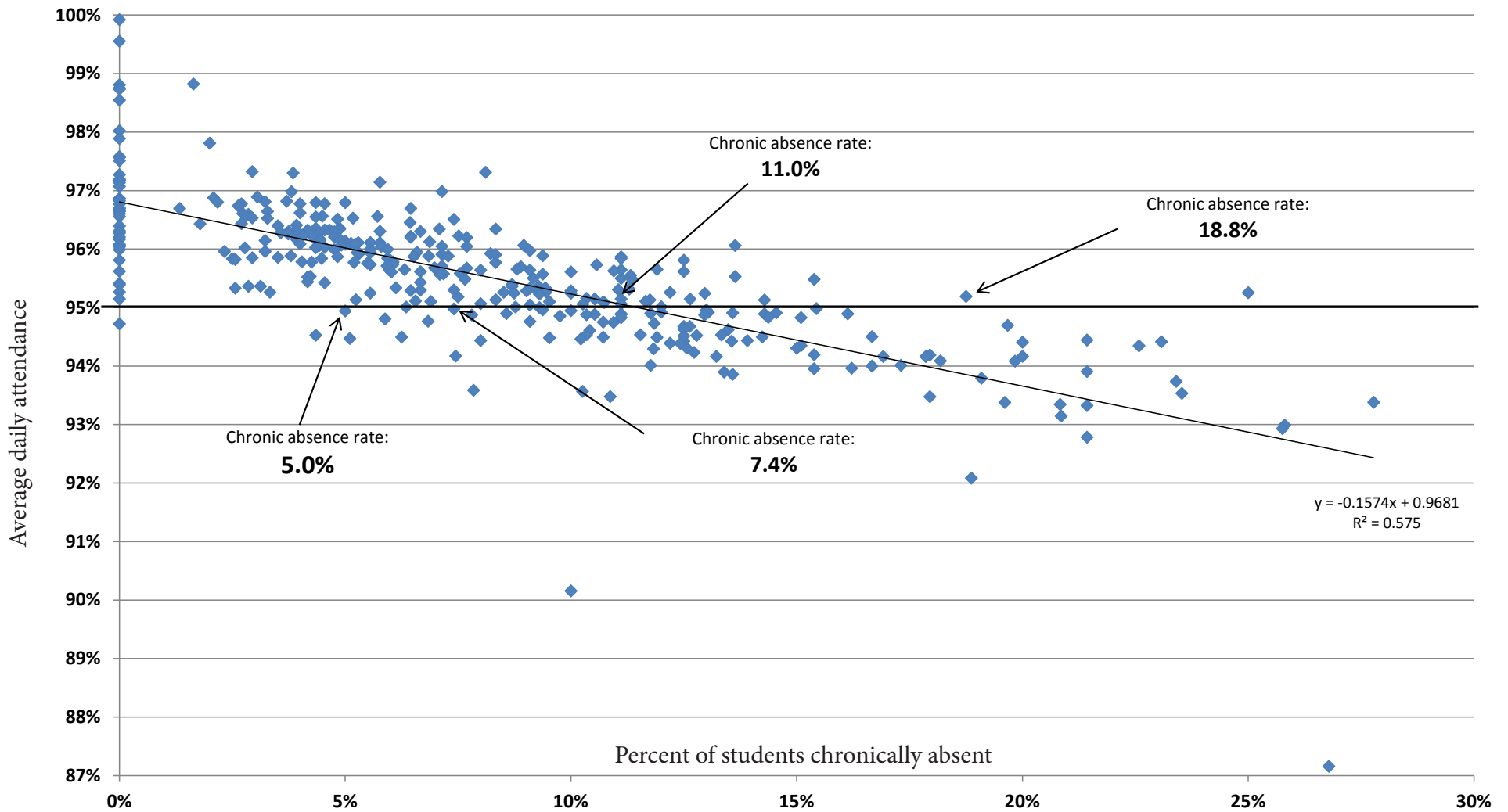


Schools with lower average daily attendance are more likely to have bigger problems with chronic absence (Bruner, Charles, Anne Discher and Hedy Chang, “Chronic Elementary Absenteeism: A Problem Hidden in Plain Sight,” Child and Family Policy Center and Attendance Works, November 2011.) A slight majority of Iowa districts have both chronic absence rates below 10 percent and average daily attendance rates of 95 percent or better, and 37 percent struggle with both measures. But 10 percent of districts have troubling rates of chronic absence (10 percent or higher) despite average daily attendance of 95 percent or better.

Finding 3

... but average daily attendance alone doesn't tell the whole story

Iowa school districts by average daily attendance and chronic absence rate among kindergarteners (2010-11)

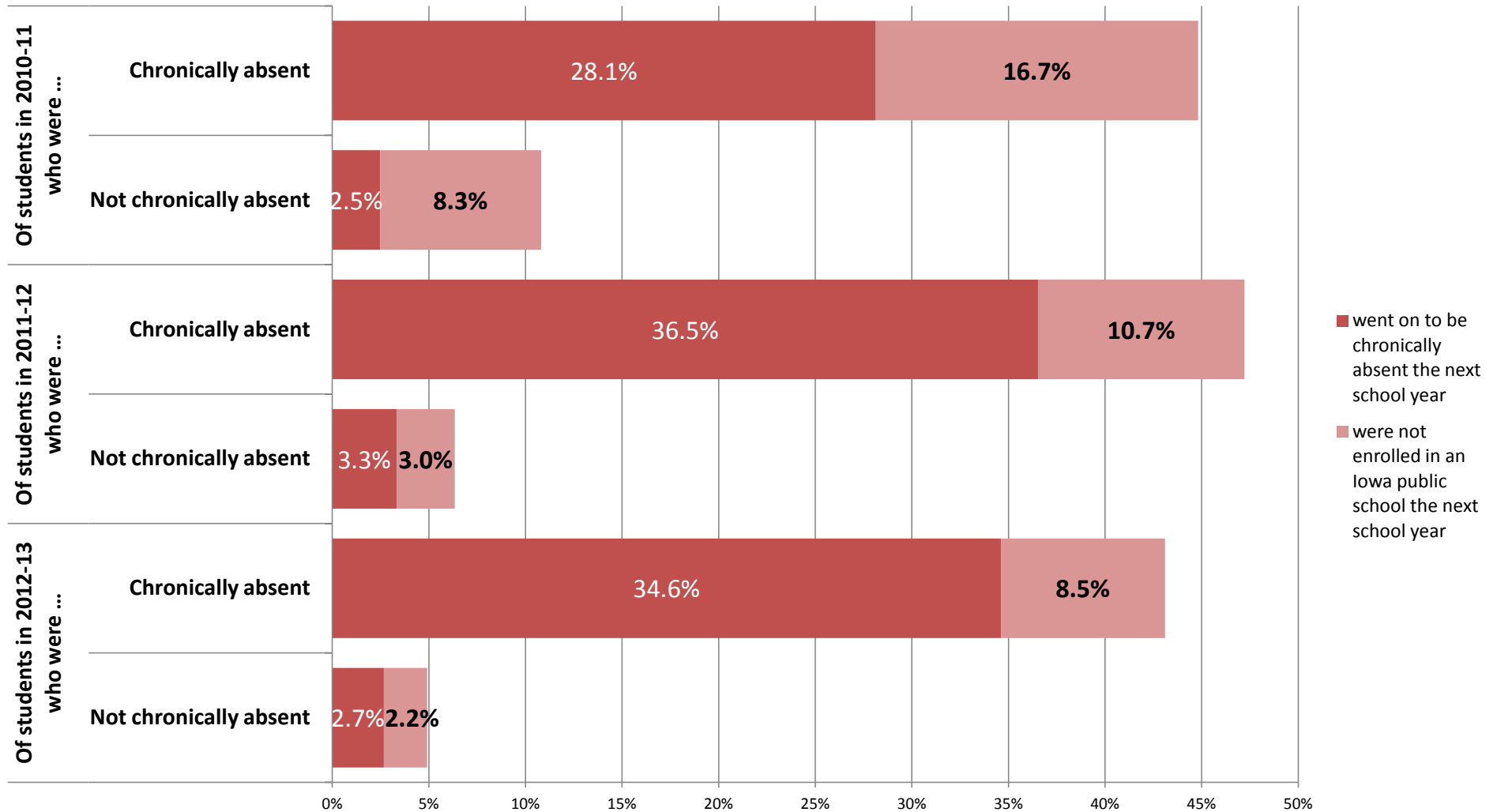


Average daily attendance can mask problems with chronic absence. Note the four highlighted districts, which all have average daily attendance rates of about 95 percent among their kindergarten students—a rate often perceived as good—but very different rates of chronic attendance. Tracking chronic absence offers schools and school districts a much better sense of what's really happening in their buildings with attendance, as well as the opportunity to identify and intervene with individual students early.

Finding 4

## Once established, patterns of attendance are likely to continue in subsequent grades

Percentage of students in cohort who did not have regular attendance or were not enrolled in an Iowa public school in the subsequent year, 2010-11 through 2012-13

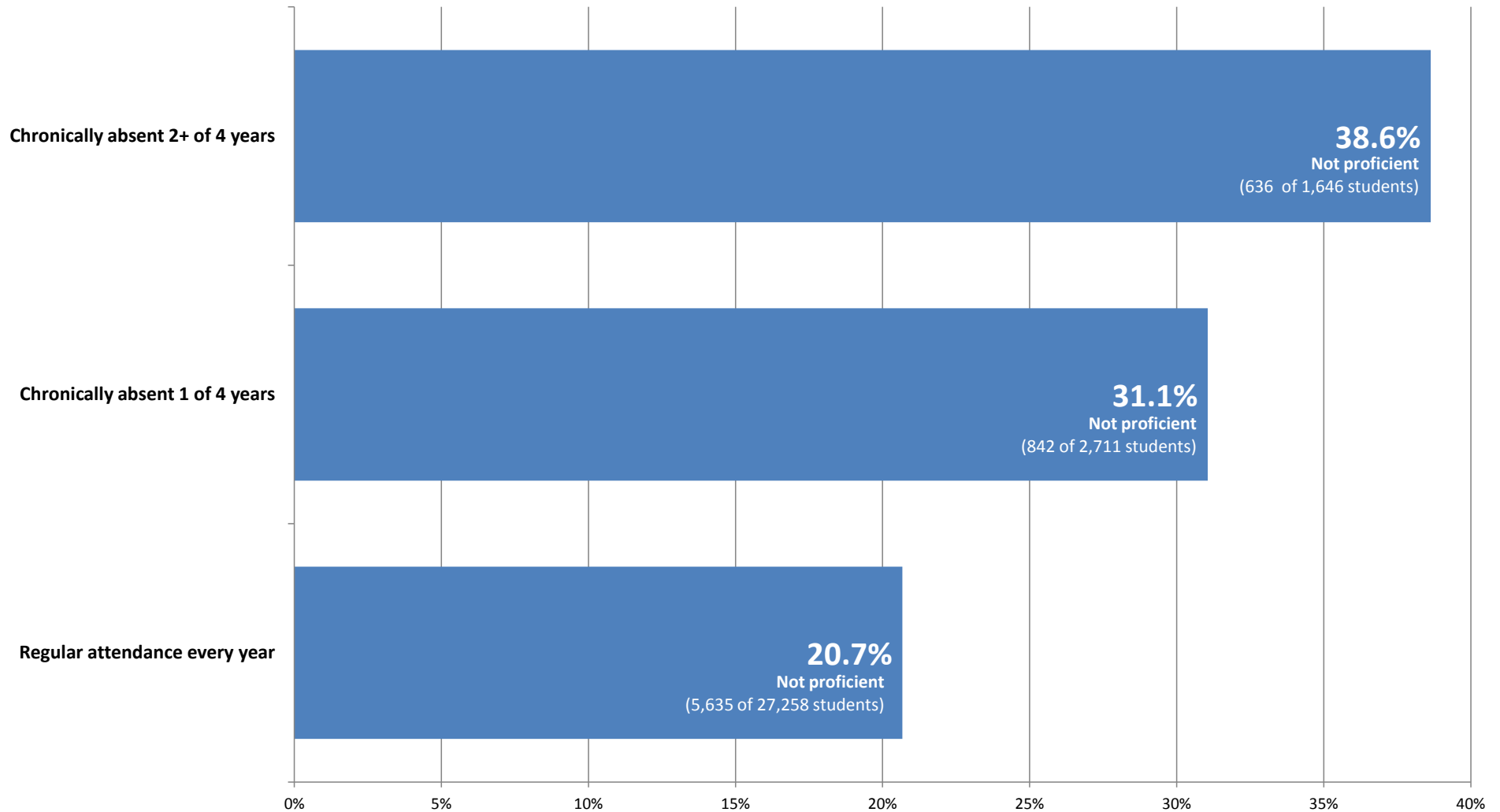


A habit of regular attendance in school, once developed, tends to stick. Among Iowa early-elementary students, those who are chronically absent during one school year are far more likely than their regularly attending peers to also be chronically absent the next year. That is also true over the long haul. Among kindergarteners who were chronically absent in 2010-11, 18 percent were also chronically absent in third grade (2013-14 school year)—four years later. By comparison, among kindergarteners who were not chronically absent, only 2.5 percent went on to be chronically absent in third grade. Students who are chronically absent are also much more likely to leave the public school system altogether.

Finding 5

## Students who are chronically absent are much less likely to be proficient in reading by third grade

Percentage of third graders in cohort not proficient in reading (as measured by Iowa Assessments) by number of years chronically absent (2010-11 through 2013-14)

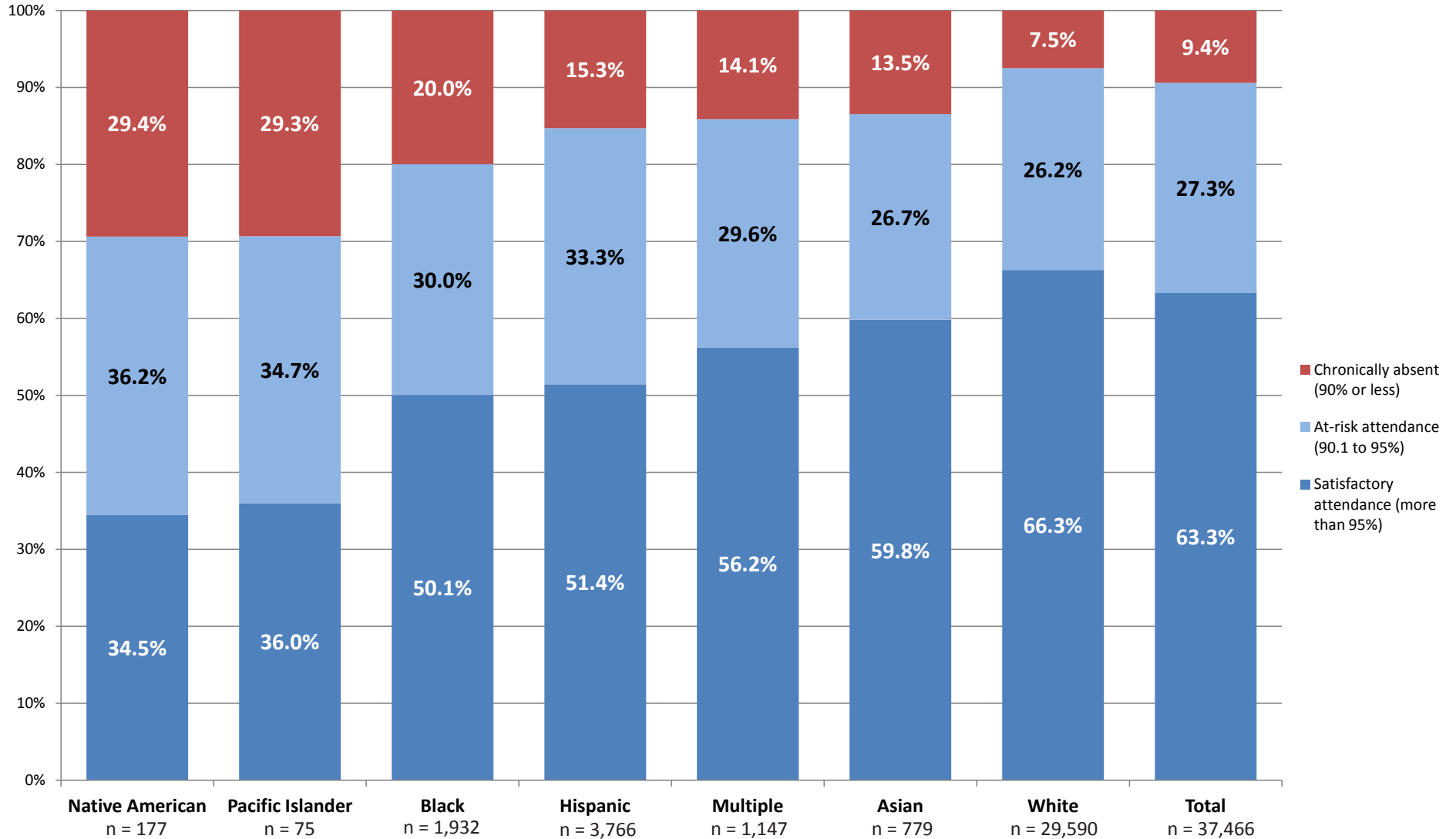


There are many reasons for academic difficulties, but at its most basic—you have to be in school to learn. Students who missed significant amounts of school are far less likely to be proficient in reading. Among students in this cohort who took the Iowa Assessments in third grade (2013-14 school year), those with regular attendance in each of the early-elementary years were nearly twice as likely to be proficient as those who were chronically absent two or more years. They were half again as likely to be proficient as their peers who had been chronically absent one of the four years.

Finding 6

**Chronic absence is more pronounced among racial and ethnic groups facing constrained opportunity ...**

Percentage of students in cohort by attendance rate and race/ethnicity, kindergarten (2010-11)

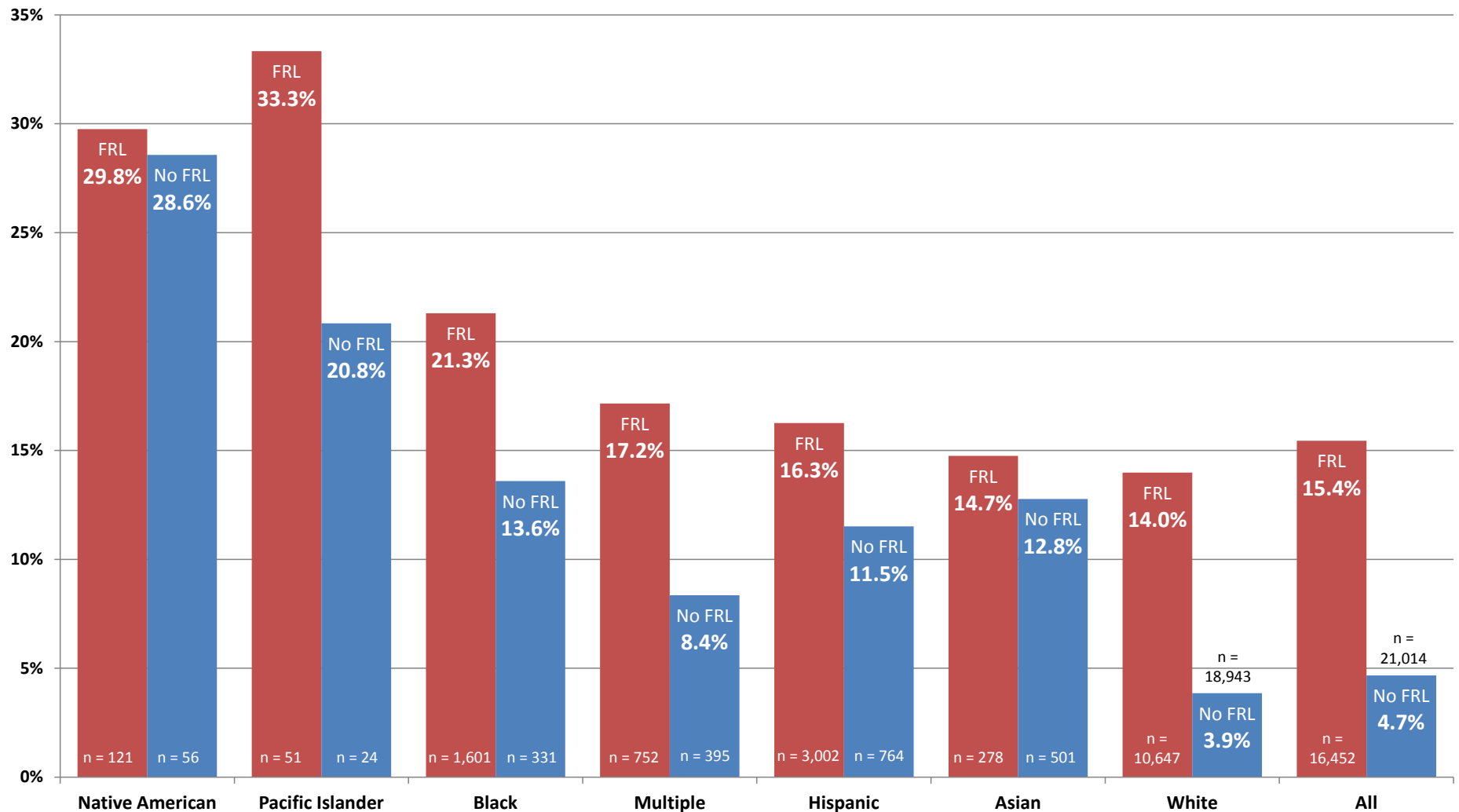


This chart shows differences in school attendance frequency among different racial and ethnic groups in Iowa. Chronic absence (red portion of bars) is more pronounced among racial and ethnic minority groups who experience disparities in opportunity even before birth. Native American and Pacific Islander children have the highest rates of chronic absence, followed by black and Hispanic children. These high rates have their roots in systems patterns of discrimination and marginalization that have become established over centuries and continue, in sometimes subtle forms, even today.

Finding 6

**... but within racial and ethnic groups, income remains a strong predictor of chronic absence**

Percent of students in cohort chronically absent by race/ethnicity and free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) status, kindergarten (2010-11)

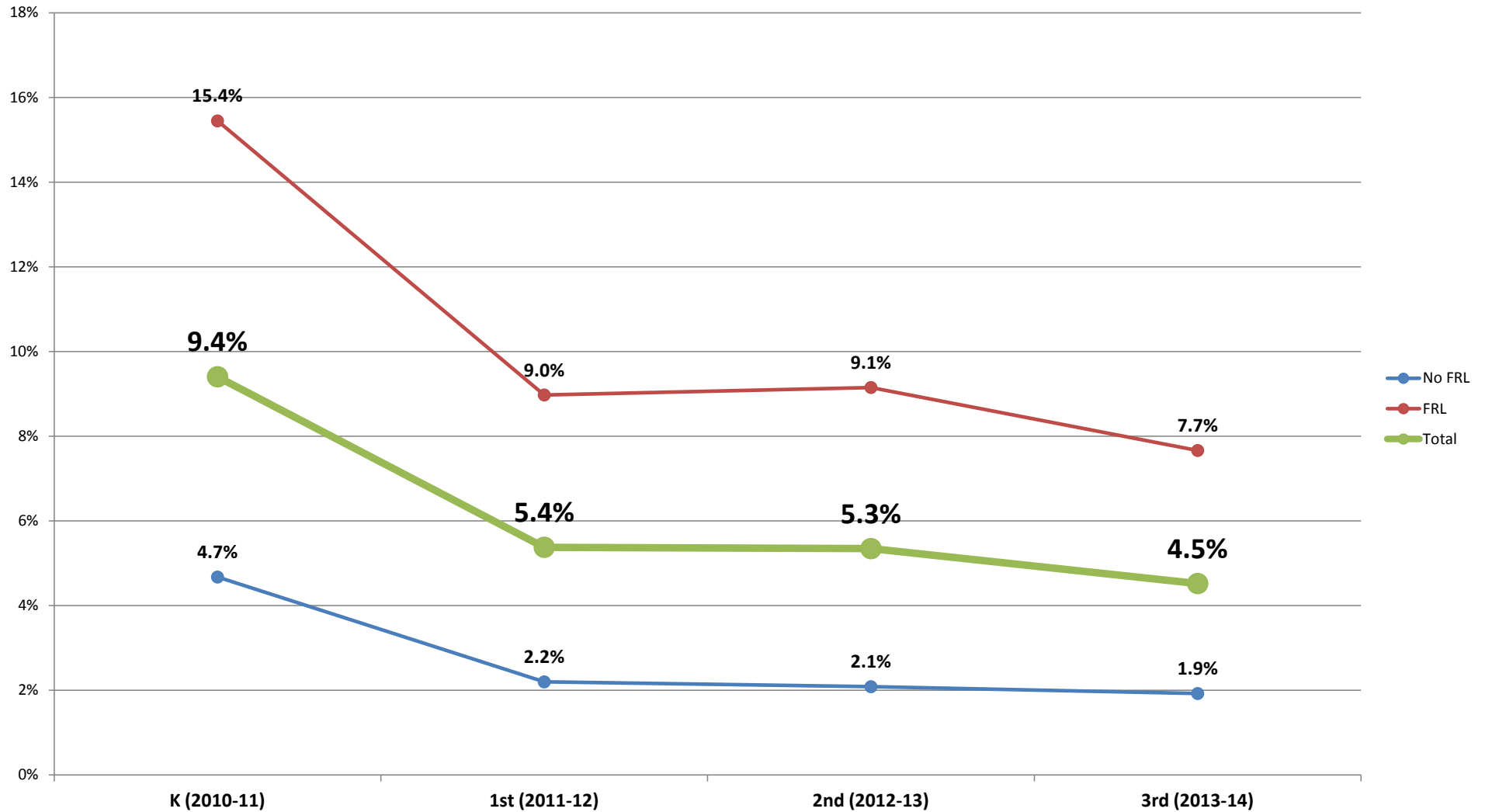


When chronic absence data by race and ethnicity is further disaggregated by income (in this case measured by participation in the free and reduced-price lunch program), the story gets more complicated. The difference in rates of chronic absence by race and ethnicity is greater among children not eligible for free and reduced-price lunches, and is much narrower—and actual rates much higher—among children eligible for them. In fact, in percentage terms, the difference in chronic absence rates between students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and those not receiving them is the greatest among white students.

## Finding 8

### Chronic absence levels are consistently higher among low-income students than their peers

Percentage of students in cohort chronically absent by free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) status, 2010-11 through 2013-14

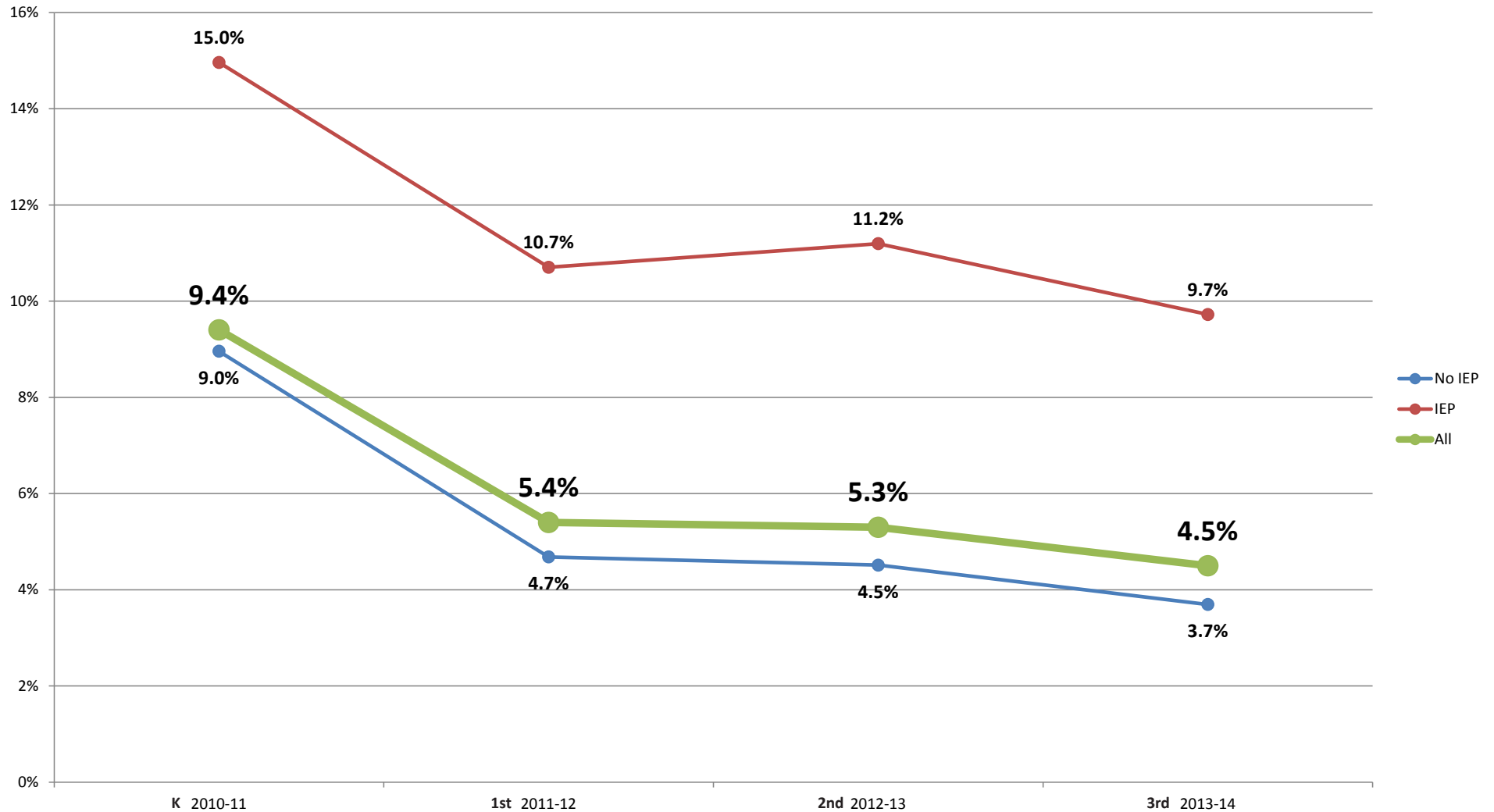


There is a very large gap in chronic absence rates between poor students and their peers—between three and four times over the four years tracked here. That is a troubling pattern because research demonstrates that although regular attendance is important for all, it “is especially critical for children living in poverty, who are less likely to have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom.” (Chang, Hedy and Mariajose Romero, Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades, National Center for Children in Poverty: September 2008.)

Finding 10

## Students receiving special education services are more likely to be chronically absent

Percentage of students in cohort chronically absent by IEP status, 2010-11 through 2013-14



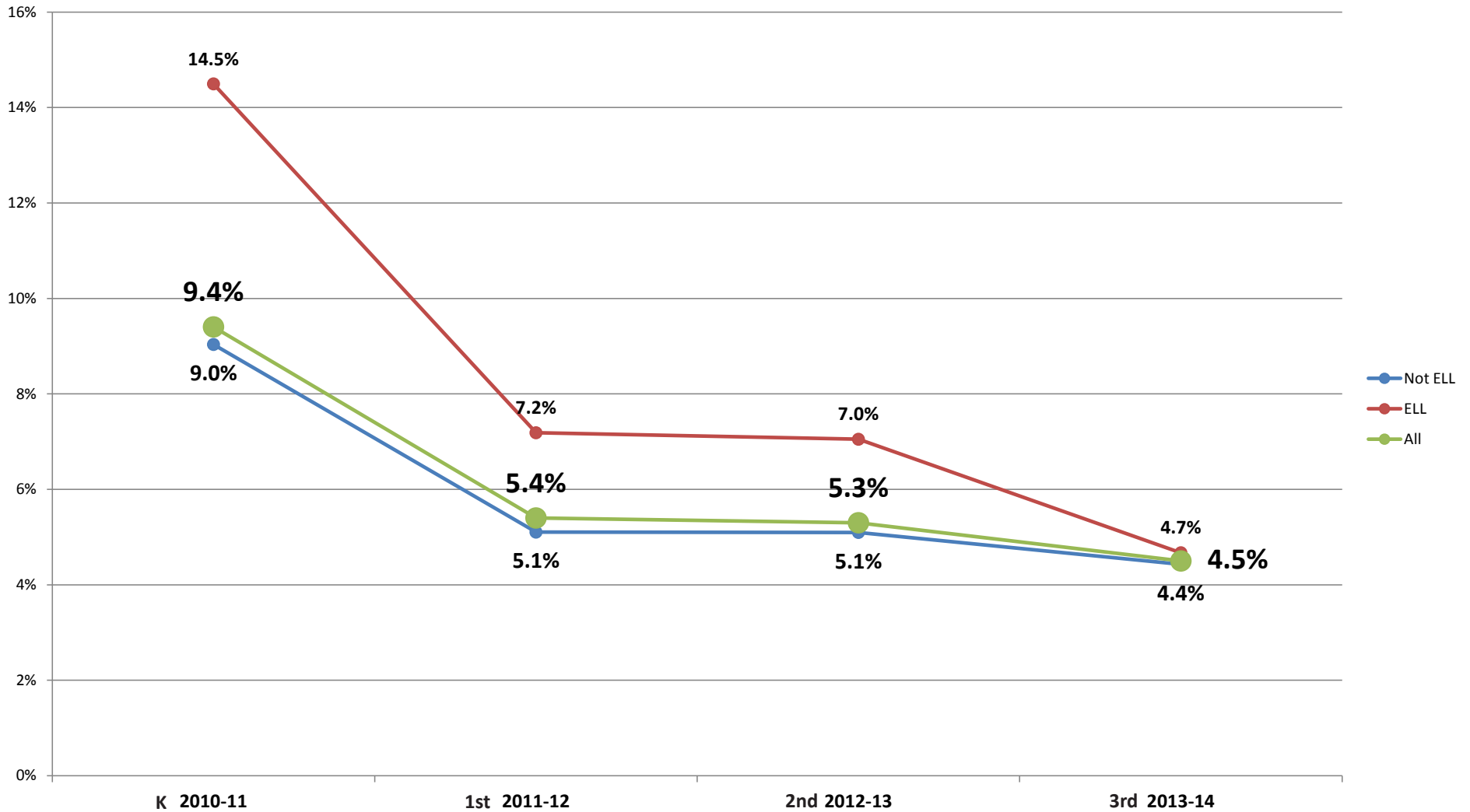
Early-elementary students receiving Special Education services (for students with intellectual, physical, behavioral or emotional disabilities) are much more likely than their peers to be chronically absent. The rates decline for both groups over the four years measured here, but the relative gap actually increases over time—special education students are .7 times more likely to be chronically absent than their non-special education peers in kindergarten, but more than one and a half times more likely to be chronically absent in third grade. Nearly one in ten special educational students in this cohort were chronically absent that year.



Finding 9

## English Language Learners are more likely to be chronically absent in the earliest years, but the gap virtually disappears by third grade

Percentage of students in cohort chronically absent by ELL status, 2010-11 through 2013-14

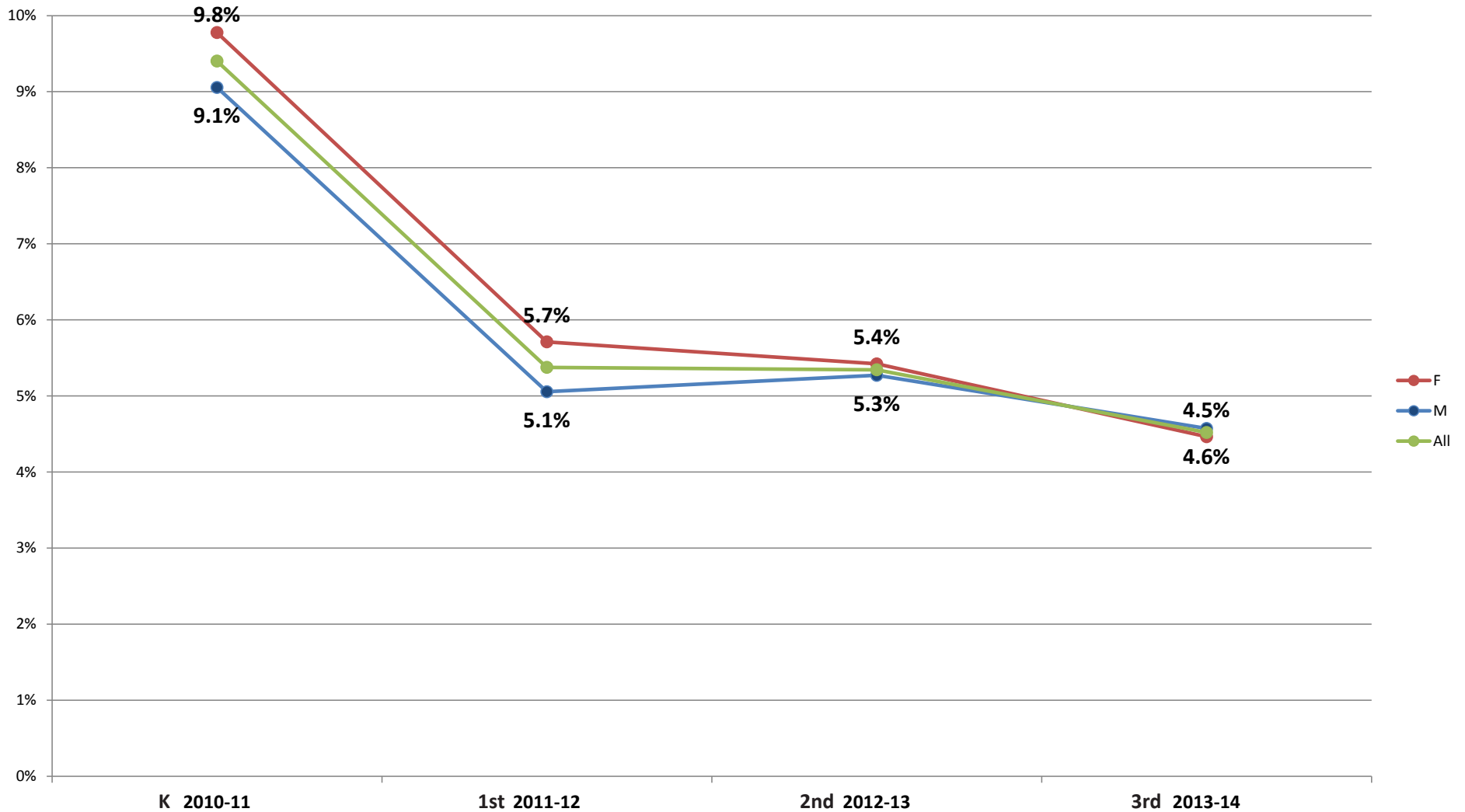


In kindergarten, children receiving English Language Learner services were over half again as likely as their peers to be chronically absent from school (14.5 percent versus 9 percent). That gap narrowed significantly as this cohort of students moved to first grade, and narrowed even more in each of the two subsequent years. By third grade there was virtually no difference in rates of chronic absent between the two groups.

Finding 10

## Boys and girls in Iowa are chronically absent at very similar levels

Percentage of students in cohort chronically absent by gender, 2010-11 through 2013-14



In the early years of elementary school, there is very little difference in rates of chronic absence between boys (M) and girls (F). Boys and girls were both much more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten than in subsequent years, although struggles with attendance continue through third grade for a small—and similar—share of students of both genders.



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