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## Study: One in 10 Students Misses a Month of School

By [Sarah D. Sparks](#) on May 17, 2012 6:18 AM

While the Education Department and policymakers work to improve a list of "dropout factory" schools, a new study suggests there may be an equally problematic list of "drop-in" factories, schools in which a significant percentage of students attend sporadically.

The report, released this morning by the Everyone Graduates Center at the Baltimore-based Johns Hopkins University and the [Get Schooled Initiative](#), sponsored by the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, found that, among the six states studied, chronic absenteeism ranged from a low of 6 percent in Nebraska (in 2010-11) to a high of nearly one in four students in Oregon (based on 2009-10 data.) In high-poverty areas, chronic absenteeism can go as high as one-quarter of all students in rural districts and one-third of all students in urban districts, according to report authors Robert Balfanz and Vaughn Byrnes of Johns Hopkins University's Center for the Social Organization of Schools in Baltimore.

States greatly differ on how to count unacceptable absences, but in the end, it **doesn't much matter** why a student misses school. Chronic absenteeism—missing 10 percent of the possible school days in a year—causes a sharp decline in academic achievement. Based on data from Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon and Rhode Island—the only states that actually track chronic absenteeism—the researchers estimate one in 10 American students, or 5 million to 7.5 million students nationwide, misses a month or more of school every year. And as I've reported before, **absenteeism isn't just a problem with older students**; more than 10 percent of kindergartners nationally and more than 20 percent of Oregon kindergartners are chronically absent.

As in Mr. Balfanz's previous research on "dropout factories," he found chronic absenteeism is often concentrated in high-poverty schools. For example, the researchers found 61 schools in Maryland in which 250 or more students missed at least a month of school each year. If one of these schools happens to be identified as "persistently low-performing" for federal accountability—not an unlikely bet—its efforts to turn around may be hamstrung by having students who miss as much as six months of school during a five-year period.

Take Providence, for example. In 2011, the district was home to **19 of the 29** persistently lowest-achieving schools in Rhode Island. In the 2010-11 school year, the district had a rate of chronic absenteeism at 34 percent, or 8,000 students.

Chronic absences have been shown to increase a young student's **risk of being held back** and an older student's **risk of dropping out**, but the report found the effects go beyond school. In Rhode Island, researchers found more than 75 percent of all students **involved in the juvenile justice system** had been chronically absent.

"The existing evidence could not be clearer," the researchers conclude:

"Academic achievement from kindergarten forward, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment are all highly sensitive to absenteeism. Missing even some school can have negative impacts, especially for students who live in or near poverty. Missing a lot of school, at any time, throws students completely off track to educational success."