

Columbus Dispatch headline October 21: Charter school absenteeism rate higher than state average.

A Columbus Dispatch analysis of chronic absenteeism rate shows that charter school rates are nearly 15 percentage points above the average of school districts.

The chronic absenteeism rate for charter schools is 40% compared to an average of 25.1% in public school districts according to the Dispatch analysis. These results are laid out in the first five short paragraphs of the article. The following 20-some paragraphs are largely quotes from charter school advocates who attempt to explain away the dismal results of the charter industry.

A high rate of absenteeism is not a new problem for charter schools. Several years ago, the Auditor of State did an attendance audit of some charter schools. In some charter schools the State Auditor's Office found zero attendance on the day of the audit. In other cases, they found a small percentage of the enrollment reported for state payment purposes.

In the early 2000s, two reporters with the Scripps Howard News Service did an on the ground study of charter school attendance in Ohio. They found one charter school in Cincinnati had a daily absentee rate of 64% for the school year.

How do state and federal politicians respond to charter school failure? They reward charter schools for dismal results.

A couple weeks ago the U.S. Secretary of Education made a stopover in Ohio with a check in the amount of \$105 million for expansion of the charter industry, Go figure!

Charter school attendance eyed

Chronic absenteeism rate higher than state average

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Two in five charter school students in Ohio are chronically absent, nearly 15 percentage points more than the average rate in traditional public schools, new state data shows.

According to Ohio Department of Education data, 40% of charter school students are considered chronically absent, and in Franklin County 37.2% of students are considered chronically absent across over 80 schools. Chronic absenteeism in Ohio is defined as missing 10% or more of a school year for any reason.

A charter (or community) school is a public, state-funded school that is not connected to a traditional public school boundary, and can be either for-profit or nonprofit.

According to the 2024-2025 Ohio Department of Education and Workforce state report card, the statewide average for chronic absenteeism was 25.1%, a slight improvement from 25.6% during the previous school year.

So why is the rate of charter school chronic absenteeism so much higher than the state average?

Officials say absenteeism fueled by demographics, transportation

Charter school administrators and researchers say there are several factors behind a higher absenteeism rate at charter schools compared to the overall statewide average.

Aaron Churchill, lead Ohio researcher with education think tank The Fordham Institute, said that while it is concerning “anytime you see chronic absenteeism rates going over 25, 30, 40%,” it is important to consider that charter schools serving students in urban environments have similar chronic absenteeism to urban public districts. For example, Columbus City Schools has a 52.6% chronic absenteeism rate.

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“Low-income students from distressed communities tend to have

higher chronic absenteeism rates than students in rural or suburban areas,” Churchill said. “The types of students that charter schools are educating tend to be less advantaged than students statewide.”

Churchill also said it is more challenging to engage students and families in urban areas than in other parts of the state.

“And that is a challenge that urban schools need to work on, including charters, making sure kids are there every day,” Churchill said. “You need to have that expectation that kids are there every single day, regardless of what their background is.”

Andy Boy, CEO of United Schools, a charter school that serves around 900 students across four campuses, said that transportation is a significant factor in driving chronic absenteeism for charter schools. United Schools had a 54.2% chronic absenteeism rate in 2024-2025.

“When you don’t have reliable transportation, it’s going to impact your attendance,” Boy said. “We don’t have control of our transportation unless we take it over on our own.”

United Schools announced in August that it was launching its own in-house transportation network, and Boy said the school has already seen a “marked improvement” in attendance rates since students have more reliable transportation to school.

Boy also said that while urban school districts like Columbus might have large administrative support networks dedicated to tackling chronic absenteeism, charter schools are constrained by their size. United Schools has an attendance team and is working to address the issue but does not have dedicated employees whose sole responsibility is attendance.

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“That is a challenge for us at United, and I assume for all of our smaller, independent charter schools,” Boy said.

Schools with highest rates serve at-risk students

Nine Franklin County charter schools have a chronic absenteeism rate over 90%.

However, all of them are “dropout prevention and recovery” programs, which serve students ages 16-21 who “are at least one grade level behind their cohort age groups or experience crises that significantly interfere with their academic progress,” according to the state education department.

Community schools that serve most of their students through dropout prevention and recovery programs receive report cards with alternative ratings, according to the state. Dropout prevention and recovery schools receive Exceeds Standards, Meets Standards, Does Not Meet Standards or Not Reported instead of number ratings.

YouthBuild Community School, a dropout recovery school that serves over 250 students in the Milo-Grogan neighborhood, is exceeding standards on every metric on the state report card but has a 97.4% chronic absenteeism rate and attendance rate just over 51%.

Christopher Bond, the school's director, said it is working to address underlying issues with the students it serves, whether that is trauma, homelessness, parenthood or a variety of other crises in their lives. Since coming to the school three years ago, he said he has worked to get the attendance rate above 50%.

"Rome wasn't built overnight," Bond said. "(Attendance) was probably one the things on the top of my priority list."

He said dropout recovery programs help at-risk students find a "nontraditional way of finding success," whether that's through a GED or career technical development.

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"You're working with fathers; you're working with mothers — for me, or for any parent — you empathize and you understand the challenges," Bond said. "Dropout recovery provides a different equation for a student that's tried traditional, and they can't figure it out."

To address the underlying challenges, Bond said that when students first enroll, they spend the first week in a program called "Jump Start," where the school works to identify what setbacks a student is dealing with.

The school offers on-site behavioral health services as well as working to help students facing homelessness or food insecurity. There's even a young mothers and young fathers group for students to engage with. Bond said half the fight is demonstrating that you care about the students.

"I think for dropout recovery — it can't be the excuse (for attendance and chronic absenteeism) — it can't be the why," Bond said. "You have to dig deep and try to find alternative messages ... trying different ways to reach these students and give them a sense of resiliency they haven't encountered, or weren't aware of."

Cole Behrens covers K-12 education and school districts in central Ohio. Have a tip? Contact Cole at cbehrens@dispatch.com or connect with him on X at [@Colebehr_report](https://twitter.com/Colebehr_report).