

**– Chalkbeat Chicago –**

**Chronic absenteeism went up when COVID hit. It got even worse last year.**

**Dec. 19, 2022**

**By Samantha Smylie**

One in three Illinois students missed at least a month's worth of school last year.

English teacher Briana Morales is not surprised. She notices her high school students in East St. Louis 189 missing for weeks at a time. Many are working during school hours to support their families, lack access to transportation, or need child care but can't afford it or find someone that they trust.

"I have a lot of students who have missed 40-plus days of school at this point in the school year," Morales said.

Her district – where 100% of students come from low-income families — had one of the highest chronic absenteeism rates in Illinois last year at 69%.

Statewide chronic absenteeism climbed to almost 30% last year, after it [shot up in 2021 to 21.2%](#), according to state report card data. A student is labeled chronically absent if they miss more than 10% of the school year — or about 18 to 20 days — with or without a valid excuse. Illinois defines the school year as a minimum of 185 days, with student attendance required [for 176 days](#).

Chronic absenteeism is sometimes conflated with truancy. But Illinois defines truancy, which could lead to legal consequences for families, as a student missing about 5% of the school year without a valid excuse.

Missing school — with or without an excuse — impacts student learning, especially at a time when districts across the state are dealing with the academic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. National and state test scores have shown a significant decline in [math and reading scores](#) for students.

Chalkbeat Chicago's analysis of state data found that 228 out of the state's 852 school districts had a chronic absenteeism rate over the state's average in 2022. Some had rates as high as 80%. Chicago Public Schools rate was almost 45%.

School districts with larger populations of students of color and students from low-income families had higher rates of chronic absenteeism, according to Illinois' most recent report card data. The chronic absenteeism rate was 48% for Black students, 36% for Hispanic students, 43% for students from low-income families, 35% for English learners, and 40% for students with disabilities.

Illinois is not the only state seeing chronic absenteeism soar. Michigan's rate in 2022 was [38.5%](#) and Ohio's rate was [30%](#).

Nationally, about [one in five students was chronically absent](#) during the 2020-21 school year, which means 10.1 million students were chronically absent, 2 million more than in 2019, according to an [analysis by nonprofit Attendance Works and John Hopkins University](#).

National data for 2021-22 is not yet available, but Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, found that in some states chronic absenteeism rates have doubled this year. As the pandemic enters a new stage, Chang says schools will need to step up efforts to get students back in class.

“The high level suggests that it’s going to take a real intentional approach to help our kids fully recover and get back into school,” said Chang. “Make sure they feel confident about being in the classroom, given how much they’ve missed.”

### **Rockford students did not have a normal school year**

Across Illinois, many schools were looking forward to a return to normal last school year after the state shuttered school buildings in 2020 and many schools continued remote or hybrid learning for the following school year. Principals, teachers, and students looked forward to seeing each other in person every day.

But getting students in classrooms regularly was harder than expected.

In Rockford School District 205, the state's third largest district after Chicago and [Elgin U-46](#), students struggled to get to class. The chronic absenteeism rate in the district rose to 61% last school year, up 26 percentage points from 2019 when it was 35.4%.

Morgan Gallagher, Rockford's chief of schools, attributes the high chronic absenteeism rate to lack of transportation for students, a spike in COVID-19 cases, and students who transfer between schools within the district due to insecure housing that makes families move around a lot. About 45% of Rockford's students are from low-income families.

Rockford, which serves almost 28,000 students across 44 schools, struggled to find bus drivers to transport 18,000 students at a time when districts across the state and country grappled with a national school bus driver shortage, Gallagher said.

The district provided additional bus service to schools with a higher chronic absenteeism rate to ensure that students who were more likely to miss school got there, he added. But the district still had to cancel routes for students for several months.

Gallagher also noted that it is harder to increase attendance for students who live 1.5 miles within their school's walking distance because they are not eligible for bus transportation [due to a state law](#).

When omicron hit schools across the state last winter, Rockford's average daily attendance rate dropped from 82% to 72%. After the surge in COVID-19 cases eased during the spring semester, daily attendance went back up to 84%, but was still below pre-pandemic rates.

Another issue for Rockford is the district's high student mobility rate — defined as the number of students who transfer between schools. Students who transfer outside of school multiple times throughout the school year or between school years [are four times more likely to be chronically absent](#) than students who do not change schools.

When a student transfers out of a school it doesn't mean that they transfer out one day and start at a new school the next day — they often miss days in between the process, Gallagher explained. Many factors contribute to students transferring in and out of schools, including insecure housing, he noted. Families that have to move to find an affordable place to live often move outside the attendance boundaries for their schools, requiring students to transfer schools.

While Rockford struggled last year to get students back into classrooms, Gallagher says there are signs that this school year is better. Rockford has enough bus drivers and is trying to add more bus routes to support families that need transportation.

Gallagher believes that the chronic absenteeism rate should be lower on next year's state report card because the district's average daily attendance rate is 6% higher than last year.

### **Illinois dedicates money to bringing students back to classrooms**

As the state and local school districts, such as Rockford, start to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic, they are taking steps to encourage students to come to class every day.

The Illinois State Board of Education provided \$12 million to the state's 38 Regional Offices of Education and Intermediate Service Centers and Chicago Public Schools to hire more staff to connect with families through home visits and phone calls.

In Rockford, district officials have allocated \$27 million to schools to use for any services that would help students in academics or with social-emotional support. Some schools have focused on chronic absenteeism and decided to hire attendance specialists who will reach out

to students missing 18 or more days of school. Others hired parent and community liaisons who call and visit chronically absent students.

Schools are constantly looking at attendance because it plays a significant role in how students will do in school, Gallagher said.

“Attendance is the number one predictive factor related to a student being successful in school and ultimately getting to graduation,” he said. “The flip side of that is if you are chronically absent, the likelihood of you ultimately graduating with your high school diploma plummet.”

In Springfield SD 186, where about six out of 10 students were chronically absent last year, many students aren’t just missing classes for a day or two throughout the month, said high school English teacher Crysta Weitekamp. They often miss weeks of school and might show up one time and then miss another 10 days.

That puts them far behind their classmates. It also means more work for Weitekamp, who has to help those students catch up while making sure the rest of the class stays on track.

“As a teacher, I want the students here in my classroom. I want them to learn,” she said. “I want them in my classroom doing the work learning alongside everyone else, so they can be successful so they can graduate.”

Many of Weitekamp’s students are either working or babysitting kids in their families. About 56% of the district’s student population comes from low-income families.

Weitekamp’s school has hired a truancy interventionist, who works with both students who are chronically absent and truant, to contact families and students and do home visits to get students back into the classroom.

Morales, the East St. Louis teacher, is glad her district has partnered with an organization to provide therapy to students dealing with mental health crises that could be preventing them from going to school.

She said they also hired a truancy officer at each of the district’s 10 schools to make phone calls and home visits to help students who are missing school because of chronic absenteeism or truancy get back to class.

But Morales worries that one person won’t be able to track down every chronically absent student. There are just too many students missing too many days.

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## – Daily Herald –

### Good News Sunday: Students at Elgin's Washington Elementary get surprise holiday party, gifts, visit from Santa

Dec. 18, 2022

By Susan Klovstad



**Washington Elementary** first grader Emily Hernandez leans in for a hug from Santa Claus during a holiday party at the Elgin school Tuesday. *Rick West | Staff Photographer*

This is Good News Sunday, a compilation of some of the more upbeat and inspiring stories published recently by the Daily Herald:

Eyes got big and smiles got even bigger Tuesday morning as a special potbellied guest walked into the lunchroom a couple of minutes late to a surprise holiday celebration at **Washington Elementary School** in Elgin.

A jolly, bearded fellow in a red suit waved to an enthralled roomful of kindergartners who went wild.

"This is the best day ever!" kindergartner Karter Ahamed yelled out.

Karter and his schoolmates in kindergarten through sixth grade were treated to a winter wonderland celebration put on by the Boys and Girls Club of Elgin and a team from the Elgin Meijer store.

Meijer donated \$10,000 for gifts and treats for the 360 students at the **Elgin Area School District U-46 school**.

A team from the store and the club decorated Monday night and kept the plan a secret from students and teachers until they were called down to the room.

**Principal Lori Brandes** said between 85% and 90% of the school's students qualify for free lunches.

"For some of our kids, they might not have the opportunity at home to have gifts or a tree or to see Santa, so this gives them that great experience," she said.

## – Daily Herald –

### **Bartlett rallies from 14 down, knocks off Hinsdale Central**

**Dec. 17, 2022**

**By Jared Birchfield**

**Bartlett** overcame a 14-point first quarter deficit to beat visiting Hinsdale Central 67-62 in non conference action Saturday afternoon.

The **Hawks** managed only three baskets and trailed 21-7 after the first eight minutes.

Momentum swung **Bartlett's** way when it stepped up its defense. The **Hawks** chipped away at the Red Devils' lead in the second and third quarters and took the lead early in the fourth quarter.

"We really came out flat and they hit their shots from the perimeter. We were giving out kick-out 3s and giving up easy postups," **Bartlett coach Jim Wolfsmith** said. "But we buckled down in the second and third quarters to climb back into it."

The **Hawks** narrowed the Red Devils' lead to 32-23 at halftime, and trailed only 44-41 to start the fourth quarter.

"We defended better after the first quarter. We like to run at a high pace and it's hard to set that pace when you are catching the ball through the net," Wolfsmith said. "When we defended better, we hit our pace and that opened shots up."

"We did not finish our shots and we did not finish our game," Hinsdale Central coach Nick Latorre said. "Give them a lot of credit, they did not give up. We had some decent leads, but we couldn't put some stops together."

**Bartlett's Kegan Kunzer's** jumper, the first basket of the fourth quarter, pulled the **Hawks** within one.

Ravi Banipal's layup for the first Bartlett lead fell short, but the senior was fouled on the attempt. Banipal canned both free throws for the **Hawks'** first lead of the day, 45-44.

A Ben Oosterbaan basket at the 7:01 mark of the period put Hinsdale Central briefly backup on top. The senior scored a team-high 23 points.

On the **Hawks'** next possession, Banipal's pull-up jumper returned the lead to Hawks, 47-46 with 6:20 left to play.

**Bartlett** (9-2) started to pull away. Reserve Shubh Mangrola's 3-pointer from the left wing put the Hawks' up 57-48 at the halfway point of the period.

Hinsdale Central started fouling in an effort to get the ball back. **Bartlett** took advantage of the trips to the free-throw line by making 10 of the 16 free throws in the last four minutes. The Red Devils were unable to close the gap.

**Bartlett's Nathan Scearce** and Kelton McEwen provided most of the teams' offense and were key to the **Hawks'** comeback. Scearce scored a game-high 24 points, with 11 points in the third quarter.

Scearce said defense was one of the keys to the win.

"We started playing more as a team and played better 'D,'" said the junior. "We got stops and then we started hitting more shots."

McEwen tallied 23 points. The junior drained two treys in the second quarter that were closer to the half-court line than the 3-point arc. In addition to connecting on seven of 10 free throws in the fourth quarter, McEwen pulled down seven rebounds.

Evan Phillips scored 10 points for Hinsdale Central.

## – Elgin Courier-News –

### LOCAL SCOREBOARD

**Dec. 18, 2022**

**By From Staff Reports**

**THURSDAY'S RESULTS**

**HIGH SCHOOLS**

**BOYS BASKETBALL**



Aurora Christian 67, Mooseheart 31

East Aurora 55, Larkin 50

Glenbard South 68, Elgin 39

Grayslake Central 52, Johnsburg 38

Grayslake Central (7-1): Dennis Estepp 10 points. Kai Taylor 9 points.

Hyde Park 71, Morgan Park 23

IMSA 64, Indian Creek 40

Rochelle Zell 58, Intrinsic 34

Sandburg 66, Southland Prep 34

Sandburg (3-7): Paulius Mizeras 14 points, 7 rebounds.

South Elgin 47, West Chicago 33

Stevenson 48, Lake Forest 33

Stevenson (7-1, 3-0 North Suburban): Michael Maloney 10 points, 6 rebounds. Brandon Sorokin 10 points. Christian Uremovich 9 points, 5 rebounds. Aidan Bardic 9 points.

Lake Forest (3-4, 1-2): Asa Thomas, Tommie Aberle 9 points.

Compiled by Josh Krockey.

To read the full article, click [here](#)

## – Daily Herald –

### **Glenbard South gets the quick start its been looking for, drops Elgin**

**Dec. 15, 2022**

**By Lou Nunez Jr.**

One of the area's big prep hoop stories and in particular the Upstate Eight Conference is the return of new **Elgin coach Brett Johnson** to his alma mater after helming the **South Elgin** boys basketball program the past seven seasons.

"Our goal as a staff and as a program is (to) try and change the Elgin culture and bring it back to the tradition that it had," said Johnson, a 2002 **Elgin** grad and former **Maroon** hoop alum. "We know (that) it's hard and it's difficult and the kids have to be willing to fight. We know it's in them. As a team they have to start deciding that you know what, we're tired of playing this way, let's believe in what the coaches are saying and see what happens."

For Johnson the road on which he seeks to restore **Elgin** to both UEC and area prominence is one that will require some more renovation and repairs. The **Maroons** dropped a 71-32 home decision to visiting Glenbard South Thursday evening at Chesbrough Fieldhouse.

The Raiders (4-4, 3-2) raced to an early 8-0 advantage in the opening minute of play thanks to nifty handiwork of senior guard D'Manual Payton. His 3-pointer and 3-point play were sandwiched around a Cam Williams layup that had South in cruise control as it never looked back.

After **Maroon** junior guard Maddox Hollian connected from beyond the arc to get the home team on the scoreboard at the 6:26 mark, another basket from Payton (game-high 18 points) keyed an 8-1 run that had the visitors from Glen Ellyn up 16-4 just past the halfway mark of the first (3:55).

The Raiders would lead 24-9 at quarter's end, 39-21 at the break, and 64-32 after three to commence a running clock in the final frame.

Payton, who added 5 steals, spoke of the importance of getting off to a good beginning which set the successful tone of his team's night.

"The last couple of games we started slow. We wanted to come out and just play hard and play our game," Payton said. "We're all team players, we all want to move the ball and score. We just want to get our teammates involved and get some points and get the win."

It was the point that Glenbard South coach Wade Hardtke seconded.

"That's something that we've been stressing, something that we've been working on all season long and tonight was really the first night we've been able to see that," Hardtke said. "That was our biggest take away of the game."

Junior forward Jalen Brown joined Payton in double figures with 15 points.

Glenbard South hosts UEC front-runner **Bartlett** Tuesday while Hollian's 16 points paced the **Maroons** (4-6, 1-4) who host St. Edward in a Saturday afternoon non conference matinee before a return to Upstate Eight play Tuesday at West Chicago.