



## **School-Level Student Attendance Patterns During Digital Learning, 2020-21**

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### **Context and Rationale for This Report**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) transitioned to digital learning for all students in March 2020. Students continued digital learning through the remainder of the 2019-20 school year and from the start of the 2020-21 school year through the end of February 2021. SDP started its phase-in for hybrid learning on March 8, 2021.<sup>1</sup>

This report examines student attendance during in-person learning from September 2019 through February 2020 and student attendance during digital learning from September 2020 through February 2021 to answer the following questions:

1. What were the overall attendance trends for students from September through February during the 2020-21 school year, and how do they compare to the trends in attendance from the same period the previous year (2019-20)?<sup>2</sup>
2. What were the school-level trends in student attendance from September through February of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years? Are there schools that had better student attendance than others? What characteristics are associated with these schools?

To answer these questions, we looked at attendance data for all students enrolled in District schools for at least 10 days from September through February. Using this data, students were grouped into attendance categories based on the percentage of enrolled instructional days they were absent from school, regardless of whether or not the absences were excused or unexcused. These categories, or attendance bands, included: 95% or more, 90-95%, 85-90%, 80-85% and 80% or fewer. In this report, we also looked at another category of students, those who were “chronically absent,” meaning they had 10 or more unexcused absences.

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<sup>1</sup> Hybrid learning started with preK-2 students and, as of this writing, has been expanding to include students in grades 3-5 and special education students in grades 6-8. By the end of 2020-21, all students in grades 6-9 will have the opportunity to opt-in to hybrid learning. For more information, visit <https://www.philasd.org/coronavirus/schoolstart2020/>.

<sup>2</sup> February 2020 was the last full month during the 2019-20 school year students attended school in person before they transitioned to digital learning. This comparison allows us to see how student attendance during digital learning (2020-21) compares to student attendance during in-person learning (2019-20).

## Student Enrollment and Attendance

In this report, attendance data is considered at the District and school levels. For school-level data, as long as a student was enrolled in a District school for at least 10 days, their attendance during the time they were enrolled is attributed to that school. This means that if a student was enrolled in more than one school for at least 10 days in a given year, their attendance at each of those schools is included in the figures that contain school-level data in this report. The 10-day enrollment rule applies to data from both school years considered in this report.

## Tracking Student Attendance: Practices and Procedures

In response to the need to for students to learn digitally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SDP developed and implemented attendance policies that were specific to the digital environment and aligned to the guidance provided by Pennsylvania’s Department of Education (PDE). These policies require teachers to record attendance for each student for each class period and submit these records by the end of the day. If a student is marked present for at least one class period, they are considered present for the entire school day. SDP provided five criteria that teachers could use determine if a student can be counted as present:<sup>3</sup>

1. At least 90% participation using the virtual platform identified by the District.
2. Interaction with a teacher as part of synchronous small group instruction.
3. Submission of assignments through the digital method identified to include email, phone, text or other methods that demonstrate the student’s engagement with the course materials.
4. Participation in online instructional/learning tools (e.g., iReady or Edgenuity).
5. Attending an approved city site to engage in digital learning (e.g. PHA community centers, libraries, etc.).

These criteria are reflected in the data presented below for the 2020-21 school year. For the 2019-20 school year, the attendance data outlined below are based on the attendance policies enforced during in-person learning.

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<sup>3</sup> See the SY20-21 Attendance [Guidelines](https://www.philasd.org/studentrights/programsservices/attendance-truancy/) posted by the Office of Attendance & Truancy found here: <https://www.philasd.org/studentrights/programsservices/attendance-truancy/>.

# Key Findings

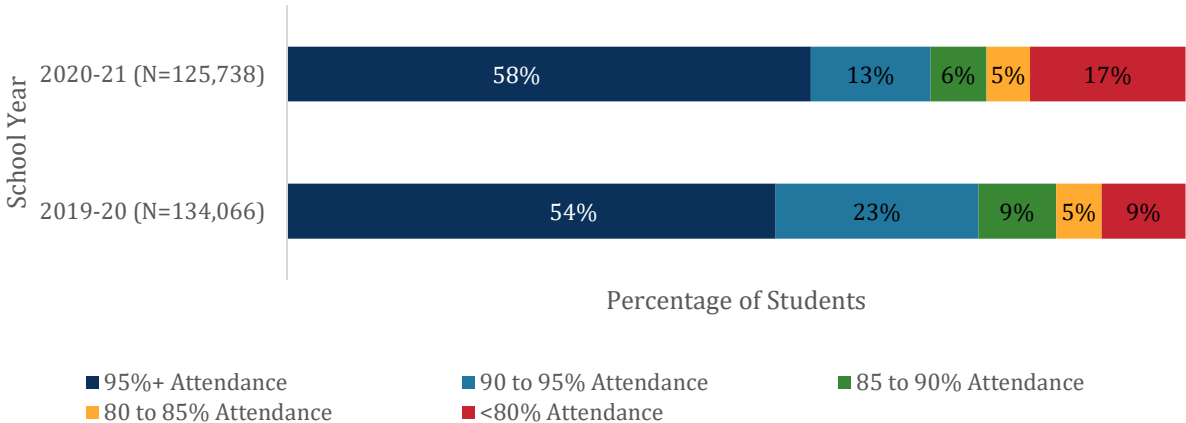
## District-Level Attendance Rates

We examined District-level data for all students who were enrolled for 10 or more days to answer the first question about overall attendance trends for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. In particular, we examined the percentage of students in each attendance band in both years, as well as the percentage of students who were chronically absent (accumulating 10 or more unexcused absences). First, we compare attendance data from February 2020 to February 2021, then we look at the data by month from September through February for both years.<sup>4</sup>

### From September to February 2020-21, higher percentages of students were in the highest and lowest attendance bands compared to September to February 2019-20.

In 2019-20, 54% of students had attended 95% or more of instructional days from September to February, compared to 58% in 2020-21. However, there was an even larger increase in 2020-21 in the percentage of students who attended fewer than 80% of school days, increasing from 9% to 17%. The attendance band that saw the largest change was students attending 90 to 95% of instructional days, where there was a 10-percentage point decrease from 2019-20 to 2020-21.

Figure 1. Percentage of students in each attendance band from September to February in 2019-20 and 2020-21



Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

Note: The total number of students included for each school year represents the number of students who were enrolled in the District for at least 10 days through February of that year, not the total number of students enrolled at a given point in time.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> February 2020 was the last full month during the 2019-20 school year that students attended school in person before they transitioned to digital learning. This allows us to see how student attendance during digital learning (2020-21) compares to student attendance during in-person learning (2019-20).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about enrollment in the 2020-21 school year, see our [School Profiles](#) website

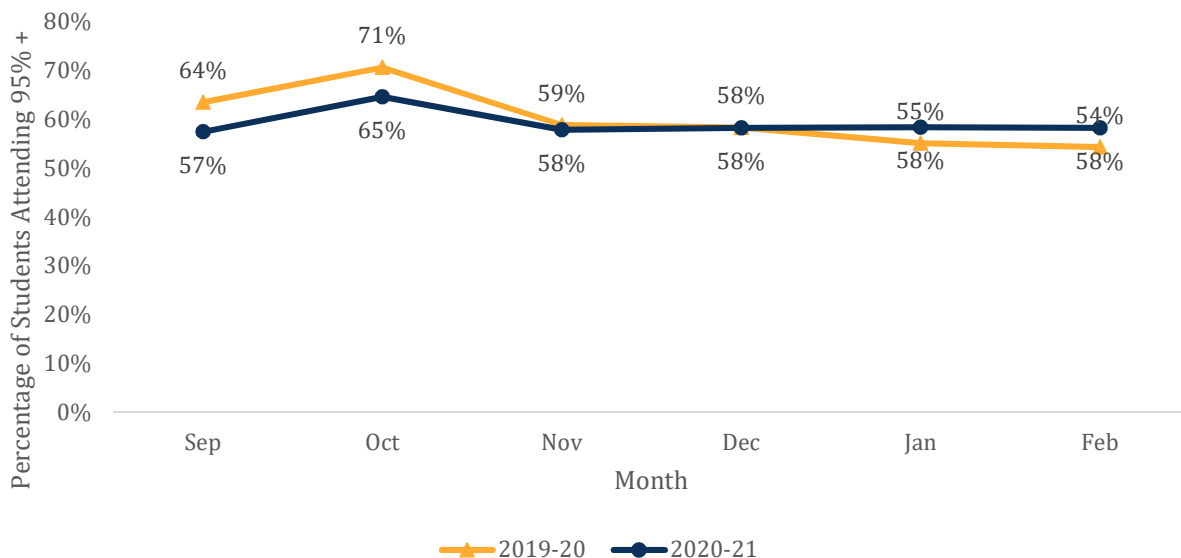
## District-Level Monthly Attendance

Next, we examined monthly attendance trends for students who were in the highest and lowest attendance bands (that is, those who attended 95% or more of instructional days or fewer than 80%) and those who were chronically truant (i.e., had 10 or more unexcused absences).

*Beginning in January 2020, there was a small increase in the percentage of students who attended 95% of school days or more compared to the previous year.*

From September to November, the percentages of students attending 95% or more of instructional days in 2020 was slightly less than the percentages the previous year. However, by January, the percentage of students attending 95% or more of school in 2021 surpassed the percentage from the prior year (see Figure 2). By February 2021, 54% students attended 95% or more instructional days, compared to 58% in 2020.

Figure 2. The percentage of students attending 95%+ of school by month from September to February during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years

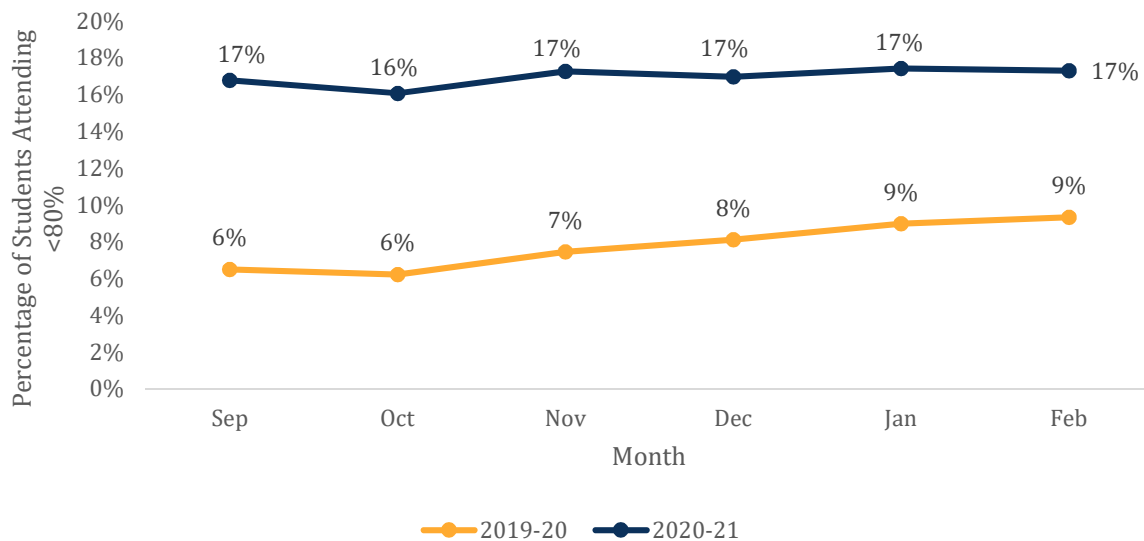


**Source:** Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

*A higher percentage of students attended less than 80% of the time each month in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20.*

In contrast to the trends for the percentage of students in the 95% or more attendance band, there were large differences in the percentage of students attending less than 80% of school across the two school years. In 2019-20, the percentage of students in the lowest attendance band rose by three percentage points from 6% in September to 9% in February. In 2020-21, the rate was consistently higher than the prior year, at around 17% (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The percentage of students attending <80% of school by month from September to February during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 schools years



Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

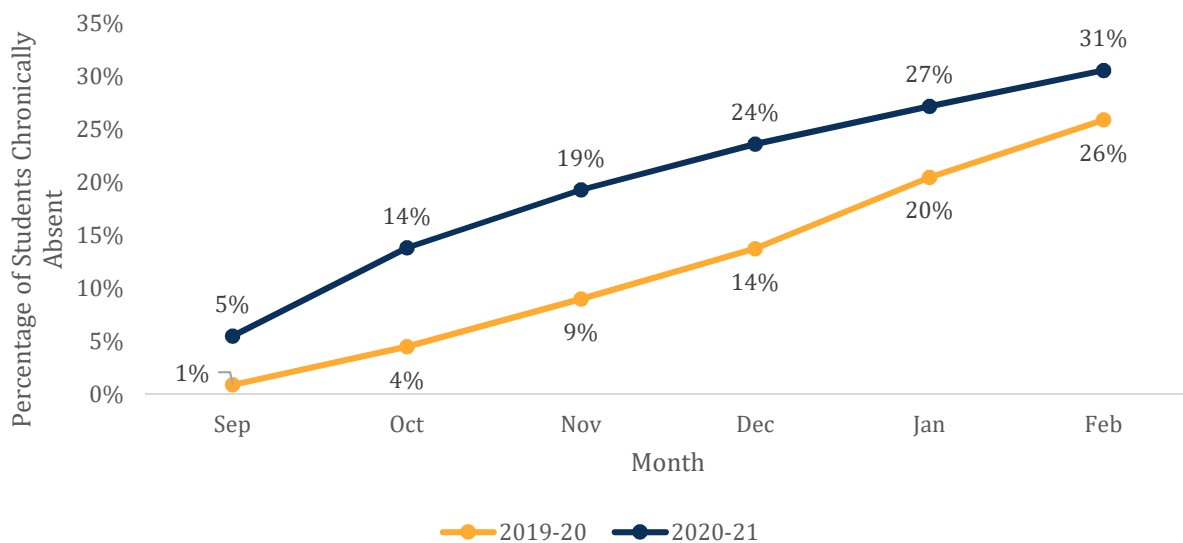
### What does it mean to be Chronically Absent?

Students are considered chronically absent if they have 10 or more *unexcused* absences. This differs from the other attendance groupings because those include all absences (excused and unexcused) and are also looking at the *percentage* of time a student is not absent, rather than the *number* of days they are absent.

### *A higher percentage of students were chronically absent each month in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20*

Similar to the trends seen for students attending less than 80% of instructional days, the percentage of students with 10 or more absences (i.e., chronically absent) was greater in every month from September to February in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20. In 2020-21, the largest month-to-month increase occurred between September and October, when there was a nine-percentage point increase from 5% to 14% in chronically absent students. Comparatively, in 2019-20, there was a three-percentage point increase during this same time frame (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The percentage of students who were chronically absent by month from September to February during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 schools years



Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

### School-Level Monthly Attendance

To examine how *school-level* attendance patterns were different this year compared to last year, we identified schools that, prior to digital learning last year, were either successful in achieving high attendance or facing challenges. Specifically, using attendance data from February 2020, schools were sorted into quartiles based on the percentage of students who attended 95% or more of instructional days, less than 80% of the time, and with 10 or more unexcused absences. Schools that were in the top quartile for 95% attendance and the bottom quartiles for both 80% or less and 10 or more absences were considered schools with low attendance challenges. Schools that were in the top quartiles for both *less than 80%* and *10 or more absences* and in the bottom quartile for *95% or more* were considered high challenges with attendance schools.

***Schools with low challenges with attendance in 2019-20 continued to have low challenges in 2020-21.***

Based on school-level attendance data from February 2020, there were 41 schools that met the following criteria: 1) They were in the bottom quartiles for students attending less than 80% of instructional days and the number of students who were chronically absent; and 2) They were in the top quartile for students attending 95% or more of instructional days. Across these 41 schools, there were 27,238 students who were enrolled for at least 10 days. Just under half of these schools (49%) were elementary or elementary-middle schools (Table 1).

Table 1. The number of schools with low challenges with attendance and the number of students enrolled in those schools based on February 2020 attendance data

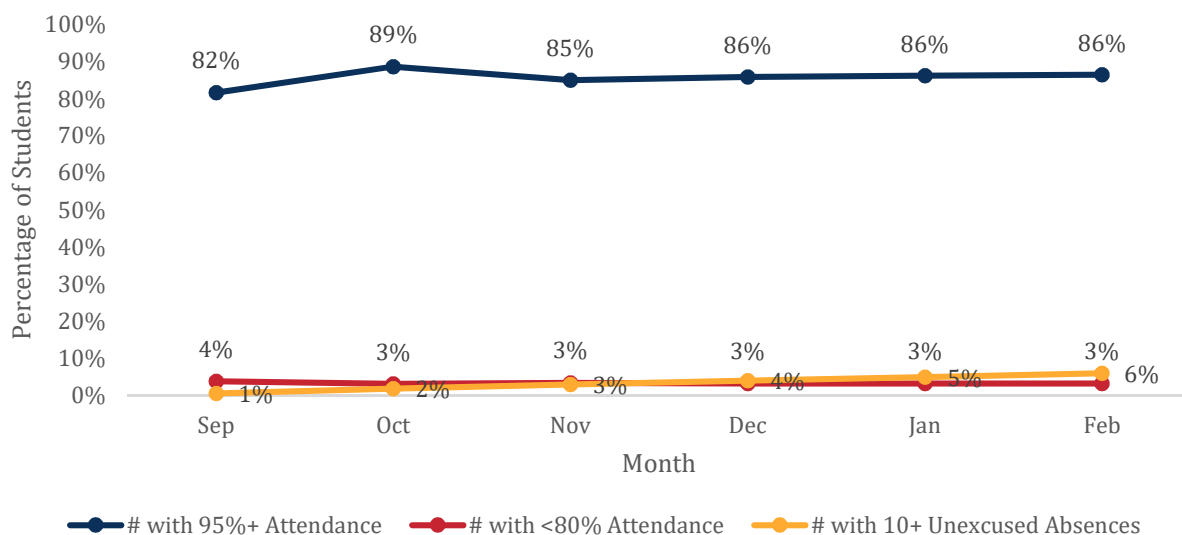
School level	Number of Schools	Total Number of Students*
Elementary	5	3,128
Elementary-Middle	15	9,409
High	10	7,333
Middle	6	3,698
Middle-High	5	4,170
Total	41	27,738

Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

\*Includes students enrolled for 10 or more days.

Schools where students were attending 95% or more of instructional days at high rates in 2019-20 (that is, schools with low challenges with attendance) also saw high rates of students attending 95% or more of instructional days during the 2020-21 school year. This trend held true when looking at the percentages of students attending less than 80% of instructional days and students who were chronically absent, as the rates were low in 2020-21, just as they had been in 2019-20 (Figure 5).

Figure 5. At schools with low challenges with attendance in 2019-20, the percentage of students attending 95%+ of days was above 82% and the percentage of students attending <80% days or who were chronically absent was less than 5% in 2020-21



Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

*Schools with high challenges with attendance last year continued to have high challenges in 2020-21.*

Based on school-level attendance data from February 2020, there were 46 schools that met the following criteria: 1) They were in the top quartiles for students attending 80% or less of school and students who were chronically absent, and 2) They were in the bottom quartile for students attending 95% or more of school. Across these schools, there were 19,624 students who were enrolled for at least 10 days. Thirty out of the 46 schools (65%) were high schools (Table 2).

Table 2. The number of schools with high challenges with attendance and the number of students enrolled in those schools based on February 2020 attendance data

School-level	Number of Schools	Total Number of Students*
Elementary	2	1,067
Elementary-Middle	8	4,345
Elementary-Middle-High	1	175
High	30	12,920
Middle	1	106
Middle-High	4	1,011
Total	46	19,624

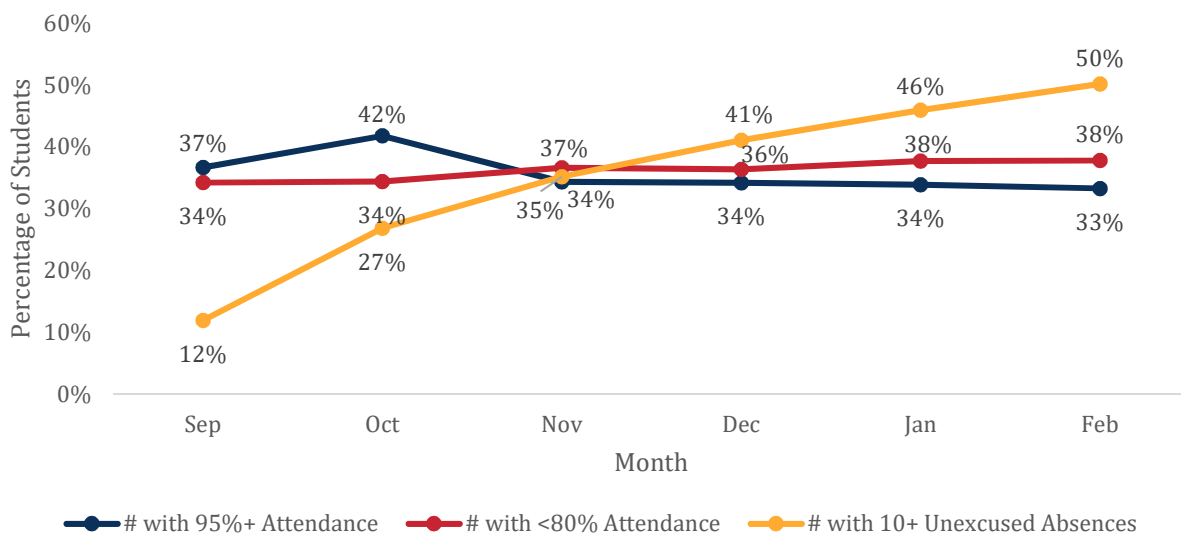
Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021

\*Includes students enrolled for 10 or more days.

Schools that faced attendance challenges in 2019-20 – schools with high rates of students attending less than 80% of school days and that were chronically absent – also saw high rates of students attending less than 80% of school days and who were chronically absent during the 2020-21 school year. Moreover, these schools with high challenges with attendance had low rates of students attending 95% or more of instructional days. By February 2021, half (50%) of students at these schools with high challenge with attendance were chronically absent, compared to a third (33%) who were attending 95% or more of instructional days (Figure 6).



Figure 6. At schools with high challenges with attendance in 2019-20, the percentage of students attending 95%+, <80%, and chronically absent in 2020-21



Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

### School-Level Attendance Rates by School Type

To further explore the differences between attendance patterns based on the grade levels that schools serve (school type), we grouped schools based on the grades they serve and looked at the percentage of students in each attendance grade band as of February 2020 and February 2021. Schools results were analyzed in four different groups:

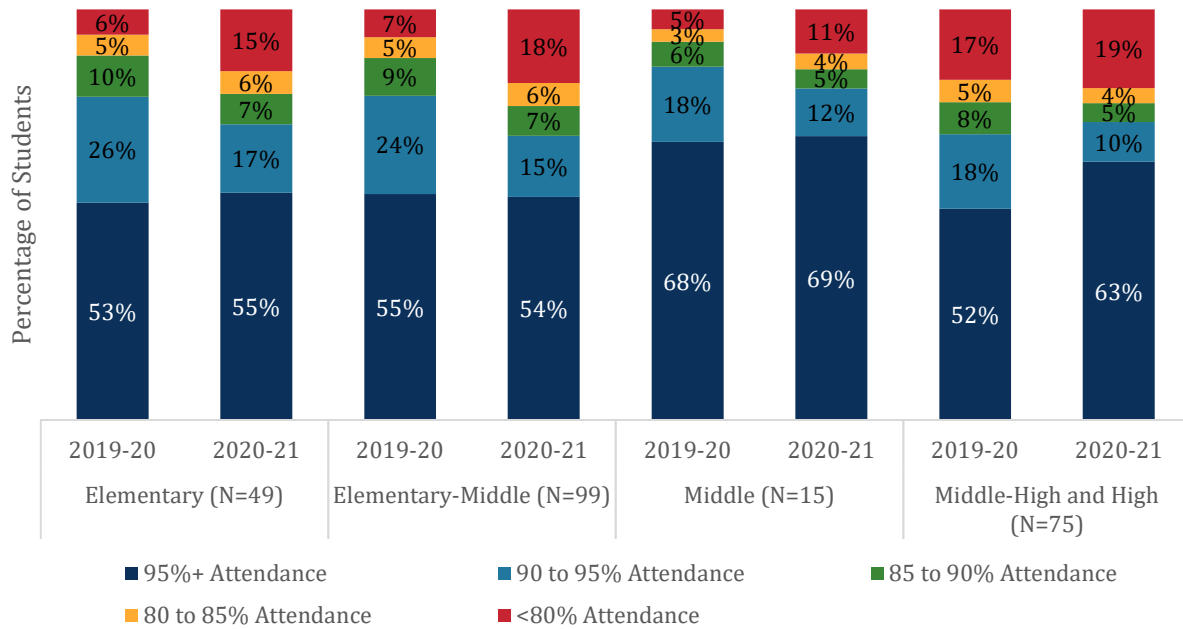
- **Elementary:** Schools that serve students in grades K-2, K-3, K-4, K-5, and K-6.
- **Elementary-Middle:** Schools that serve students in grades K-8.
- **Middle:** Schools that serve students in grades 5-7, 5-8, 6-8 and 7-8.
- **Middle-High and High:** Schools that serve students in grades 5-12, 6-12, 7-12, and 9-12.

*The increase in students attending 95% or more days of school from 2019-20 to 2020-21 was primarily driven by middle-high and high school students.*

The percentage of students attending 95% or more days of school at elementary, elementary-middle, and middle schools remained consistent from 2019-20 to 2020-21. However, there was an 11-percentage point increase in the percentage of middle-high and high students attending 95% or more days of school in 2020-21 (Figure 7). This means that increased attendance rates for older students are primarily accounting for the District-level increases in the percentage of students attending 95% or more of instructional days.

Conversely, while there was a two-percentage point increase in the percentage of middle-high and high school students who attended fewer than 80% of school days, there were larger increases (6-9 percentage points) in the lowest attendance band for students enrolled in elementary, elementary-middle, and middle schools (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The percentage of students in each attendance band by school type for 2019-20 and 2020-21

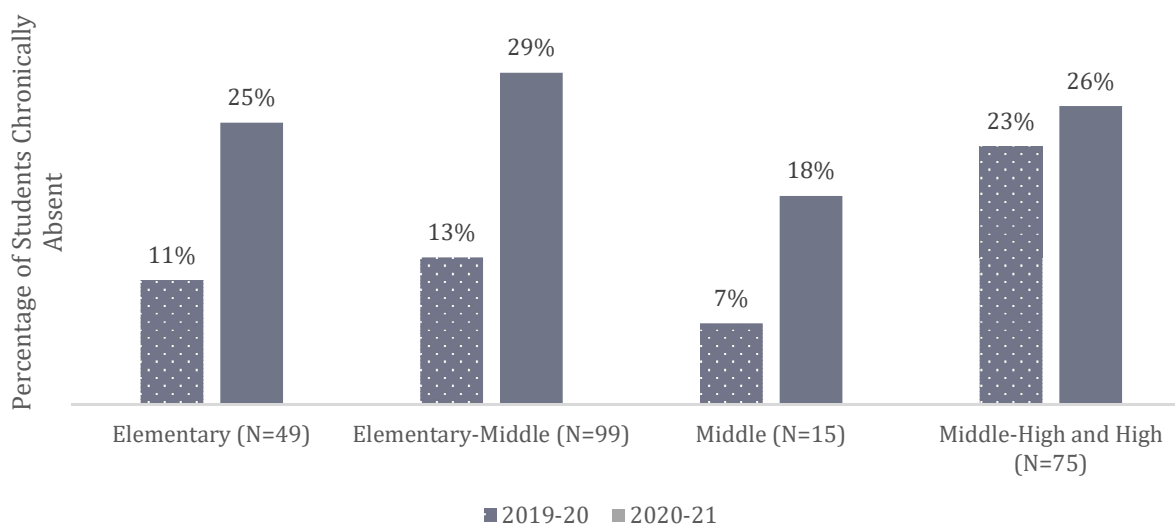


Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

***The percentage of chronically absent students increased from 2019-20 to 2020-21 across school levels.***

Students attending elementary-middle schools saw the greatest year-over-year increase in the percentage of students who were chronically absent, with an increase of 16 percentage points. Conversely, the smallest increase, 3 percentage points, occurred for middle-high and high school students (Figure 8).

Figure 8. The percentage of students who were chronically absent by school type for 2019-20 and 2020-21



## School-Level Attendance Rates by High School Type

Next, we looked to see if there were differences in attendance trends across different types of high schools. There are four types of SDP high schools: Neighborhood schools, Citywide admission schools, Special Admission schools, and Alternative schools.

- Neighborhood:** These schools do not have entry requirements outside of capacity limits. Each student has right-of-access to the Neighborhood school associated with their place of residence but may also apply to a different Neighborhood school (or to a program within a Neighborhood school). Applications to Neighborhood schools are included in overall school selection participation rates.
- Citywide Admission:** These schools might have requirements for acceptable grades, attendance, and/or behavior. During the time period covered in this report, these requirements sometimes varied across schools and/or across years. Admission to these schools requires an application and is not based on residence in a designated area.
- Special Admission:** As a group, these schools and programs have the most stringent entry criteria. Specific schools have customized requirements, but they generally only admit students who meet minimum standards for grades, standardized tests scores, attendance, and behavior. Like Citywide admission schools, admission requires application and is not dependent on the student's place of residence.
- Alternative:** There are different types of Alternative schools. Some have programs that allow students who are overage and under-credited to get back on track or enable students to earn high school and college credits simultaneously. Others are designed for students who have committed serious Code of Conduct violations or those in need of intensive academic and social supports. For more information about the different Alternative school programs, visit <https://www.philasd.org/opportunitynetwork/>.

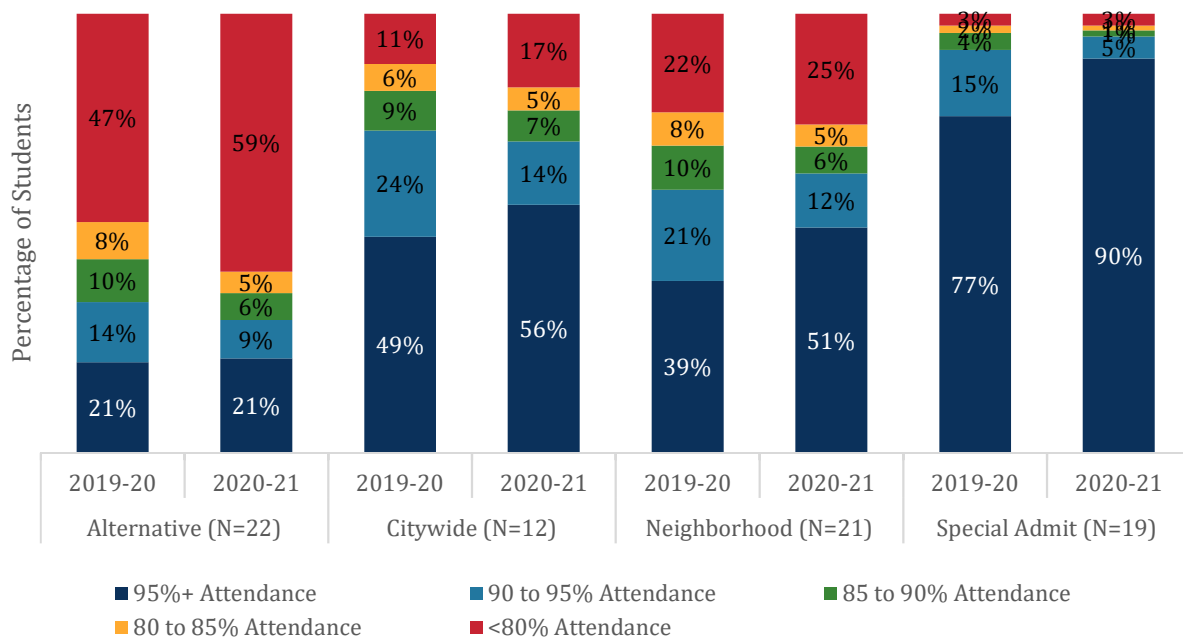
In order to attend a Citywide or Special Admission high school, students must participate in the school selection process, which occurs each fall for the following year’s enrollment. While most eighth graders participate in the school selection process, any student can enroll at their neighborhood school, regardless of whether they participated in the school selection process.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past two years, Special Admission schools have the highest percentages of students attending 95% or more of instructional days, while Alternative schools tend to have greater levels of attendance challenges. This is in part because an acceptance criterion for Special Admission schools is having 95% or more attendance. On the other hand, students who attend Alternative schools often do so because they face barriers to regularly attending school.

*The percentage of students attending 95% or more days increased the most from 2019-20 to 2020-21 at Special Admission and Neighborhood high schools. In contrast, the percentage of students attending less than 80% of days increased the most at Alternative high schools.*

Between September to February 2019-20 and 2020-21, the percentage of students attending 95% or more days of school increased for Citywide, Neighborhood, and Special Admission high schools, while the percentage of students attending less than 80% of days increased at Alternative, Citywide, and Neighborhood high schools. Across all school types, there was a decrease in the percentage of students attending 90-95% days of school (Figure 9).

Figure 9. The percentage of students in each attendance band by high school type for 2019-20 and 2020-21



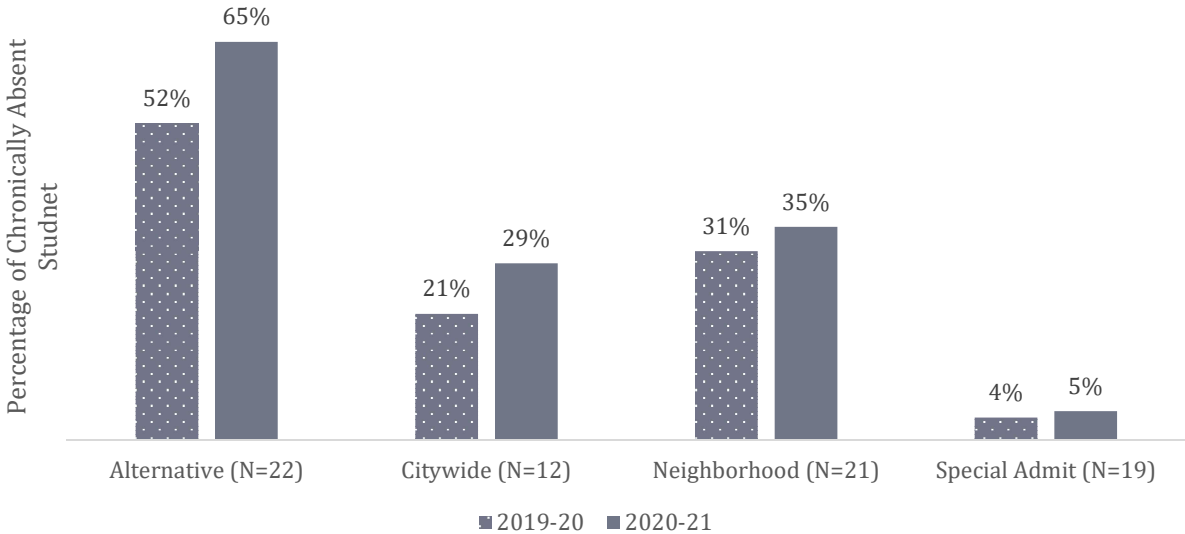
Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, please see our brief on the [school selection process](#): School Selection in Philadelphia, 2015-16 to 2018-19: Applications for 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, ORE Research Brief, September 2019.

*The percentage of chronically absent students increased from 2019-20 to 2020-21 across all high school types.*

While there were increases in the percentage of students who were chronically absent across all four high school types, some increases were greater than others. For example, there was a 13-point increase for student attending Alternative schools compared to a 1-point increase for students attending Special Admission schools (Figure 10).

Figure 10: The percentage of students who were chronically absent by high school type for 2019-20 and 2020-21



Source: Qlik Climate Matters App, retrieved 3/11/2021.

## Conclusions

The findings that emerged from the comparison of attendance data from September to February of the 2019-20 school year, when students were learning in person, to September to February of the 2020-21 school year, when all students were learning remotely, suggests that for some schools, attendance increased, while for other schools, attendance decreased. Specifically, District-level data showed that, while there was a slight increase in students attending 95% or more days of school, there were increases in students attending less than 80% of school days and increases in the number of students who were chronically absent. Moreover, school-level data showed that these changes were not equally experienced across school types, as some schools had worse attendance in 2020-21 compared to others. **Notably, schools that faced attendance challenges when school was in-person continued to face these challenges when students switched to digital learning.**