Are Ohio’s youngest children healthy and ready to learn?

Are Ohio’s youngest children healthy?
The foundation for a healthy life starts early, before a baby is born. Without increased investment and focus, young children in Ohio with mental and physical health problems can face life-long health challenges.

*The data below provide a snapshot of Ohio’s performance on ensuring young children are healthy.*

More than 1 in 12 Ohio babies are born with **low birthweight**, and there has been little improvement in the past decade.

Low birthweight babies, born weighing less than 5.5 pounds, are at higher risk for infant mortality, developmental delays, and poor health outcomes in adulthood.³

**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020)

Preventing lead exposure

Young children can be exposed to lead through contact with contaminated paint, toys, soil, or water. Poorly maintained or older homes pose increased risk of exposure to lead and other toxins that can be incredibly harmful to health.

Research suggests that Ohio ranks second highest out of all 50 states on the number of children with lead in their blood, and lead paint may be present in as many as two-thirds of Ohio’s homes.⁴ There is no safe blood lead level; even small amounts of lead exposure in early childhood can lead to:

- Delayed growth and development
- Harm to the brain
- Learning, behavior, speech, and hearing problems⁵

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Are Ohio’s youngest children ready to learn?
Children who enter school ready to learn are more likely to demonstrate stronger math, reading, and social skills later in life, whereas children who enter kindergarten unprepared are at a disadvantage for future success. Ensuring that children are ready for school gives them a fair chance to succeed and creates greater opportunities for a more inclusive and prosperous Ohio.

The data below provide a snapshot of Ohio’s performance on ensuring young children are ready to learn.

Less than half of Ohio’s children are ready for kindergarten.

41.9% ready for kindergarten

Kindergarten readiness is a predictor of future academic success and educational attainment. It is the cornerstone of a healthy and productive workforce.

Source: Ohio Department of Education (2020-2021 school year)

Young child health and education are closely linked

How can poor health hinder educational attainment?
Poor health can be a significant barrier to academic success and educational achievement. Children who are physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy, active and well-nourished have higher school attendance and are better able to focus and learn while in school — laying the foundation for greater academic achievement.

How can educational attainment create better health?
People with greater educational attainment are more likely to be employed and have jobs that pay higher salaries and offer better benefits. These economic assets can pave the way to better health by reducing stress and increasing access to important resources like quality health care and nutritious foods.
How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected early learning outcomes?
Unfortunately, Ohio’s youngest children have experienced the majority of their first 1,000 days — the most foundational for success later in life — during the COVID-19 pandemic. The full extent of the pandemic’s impacts on young children will take years to discern. However, early indicators signal that the pandemic has increased disparities in education, affecting young children’s access to quality early learning opportunities, health care, and social services.

For example, Ohio saw a marked drop of approximately 25,000 fewer students enrolled in preschool and kindergarten between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.9

Low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities have been more negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating existing disparities in education outcomes such as chronic absenteeism.10 Impacts of the pandemic such as stress, housing instability, and the loss of family members and caregivers only worsen the barriers that some children and families already face.

There was a 47.1% increase in chronic absenteeism (students missing at least 10% of school attendance time in a year) for Ohio students in grades K-3 in the 2020-2021 school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Absenteeism Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020-2021</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ohio Department of Education (2020-2021 school year)

Children of color and children facing economic disadvantage are much more likely to experience chronic absenteeism than their white or non-economically disadvantaged peers.

- **5.3 times worse** for children experiencing economic disadvantage
- **3.7 times worse** for Black children
- **2.5 times worse** for Hispanic children
- **2.2 times worse** for Native American/Alaskan Native children
- **2.2 times worse** for multiracial children

Source: Ohio Department of Education (2020-2021 school year)
## Ohio’s performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most recent</th>
<th>Trend</th>
<th>Ohio compared to U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Healthy and ready to learn</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Health status, young child.</strong></td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>Worsened</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of children, ages 0-5, with poor or fair overall health (2019)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low birthweight.</strong></td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>Same</td>
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<td>Percent of live births where the infant weighed less than 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds) (2020)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Elevated blood lead levels, young child.</strong></td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>Improved</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of children, ages 0-5, who received a blood lead test and had elevated blood lead levels (2020)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Kindergarten readiness.</strong></td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>Improved</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students demonstrating kindergarten readiness based on the Ohio Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Revised (KRA-R) (2020-2021 school year)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fourth grade reading proficiency.</strong></td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>Same</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of fourth grade students proficient in reading based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Chronic absenteeism.</strong></td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>Worsened</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students in grades K-3 missing at least 10% of school attendance time in a year (2020-2021 school year)</td>
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</table>

For additional information on the data and analysis, see the data appendix.
We must act to ensure that Ohio's youngest children are healthy and ready to learn. This means investing early in Ohio’s children to achieve equity and lay a strong foundation for every child through:

- Early learning access and quality
- Healthcare access and quality
- Early childhood adversity and trauma prevention
- Economic stability