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## **Comptroller's Office Studies Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy in Schools**

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has completed a thorough review of student attendance in Tennessee, including issues of chronic absenteeism and truancy.

Chronic absenteeism includes all absences, *excused* and *unexcused*. A Tennessee student is chronically absent if he or she misses 10 percent or more of instructional days (typically 18 days absent). State chronic absenteeism rates remained steady over the three years analyzed, dropping slightly from 13.6 percent in 2017 to 13.3 percent in 2018 and finally to 13.1 percent in 2019. Chronic absenteeism rates were not calculated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



OREA found that during the time analyzed, economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities were more likely to be chronically absent than their peers due to the multiple barriers faced by each subgroup. Black students had higher chronic absenteeism rates than either White or Hispanic students. Hispanic students were chronically absent at a lower rate than both Black and White students during this period.

Between the 2017 and 2019 school years, nearly half of all chronically absent students in Tennessee were in high school. As students progress from freshman to senior year, the likelihood of chronic absenteeism increases. On average, 25 percent of high school seniors were chronically absent compared to 15 percent of freshmen.

Truancy includes *unexcused* absences only and may have legal consequences. A Tennessee student is truant if he or she accrues five unexcused absences.

During its review of attendance data and local attendance policies, OREA concluded that variation in policies and practices at the district and school levels results in the inconsistent classification of absences as excused or unexcused across Tennessee. Outside of what is specified in state law, each district (and in some cases, each school) determines through its own policies whether an absence will be excused. As a result, a student might be considered truant in one district but would not be considered truant in another.

While TDOE collects unexcused absence data by district, school, and student, it does not calculate truancy rates as it does for chronic absenteeism. Additionally, no reliable data exists on the implementation of the progressive truancy intervention plan required by a 2017 state law. Due to lack of data and issues of local

variation, OREA was unable to conduct an evaluation of truancy rates or the effectiveness of the progressive truancy intervention plan.

The Comptroller's Office has included several policy options for the General Assembly in its report. These include changing requirements for data collection and calculation, clarifying aspects of the progressive truancy intervention plan, and making certain attendance-related policies more uniform for all districts, schools, and juvenile courts.

To read the report, please visit the Comptroller's website at: [tncot.cc/orea](http://tncot.cc/orea).

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