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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

## STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN TENNESSEE



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61 Parent note policies  
61 Conversion absence policies

62 Variation in local policies and practices and the inconsistent classification of absences as excused or unexcused across the state makes analyzing and comparing district truancy data problematic. This prevented OREA from fully evaluating the effectiveness of the progressive truancy intervention plan (PTIP).

63 Variation at the court level  
63 Qualitative data used by OREA to evaluate the PTIP

63 State law does not address whether the PTIP should restart each school year for all students.  
64 State chronic absenteeism rates have remained steady since 2017, the first year chronic absenteeism was included as an accountability measure on the State Report Card.

64 Students who are economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.

65 High school students, especially seniors, are more likely to be chronically absent than students in other grades.

65 Accountability for chronic absenteeism and for truancy are different. Districts and schools are held accountable for chronic absenteeism rates, while students and parents are held accountable for truancy rates.

66 Confusion exists among some school officials about how to use alternative attendance plans for qualified students as part of an IEP or Section 504 plan.

## 66 Policy options

66 The General Assembly may wish to require additional reporting by districts and schools of PTIP data and other attendance-related data.

67 Number of unexcused absences required for Tier 1 of the PTIP  
67 Number of students who move through each tier of the PTIP  
67 Number of students referred to court for truancy and their number of unexcused absences  
68 Number of times PTIP tiers were skipped due to lack of parent cooperation  
68 Number of students in the PTIP based on absences from the previous school year  
68 Parent note policy  
68 Conversion absence policy

68 The General Assembly may wish to clarify certain aspects of the PTIP given confusion on the part of some districts, schools, and juvenile courts.

69 Restarting tiers for all students each year  
69 Conversion absences

70 The General Assembly may wish to make certain attendance-related policies more uniform for all districts and schools.

70 Parent notes  
70 Conversion absences

71 TDOE may wish to begin calculating truancy rates for districts and schools, taking into account local policy and practice variations.

71 Juvenile courts may wish to adopt a uniform definition of truancy case and a more uniform method for tracking truancy cases and actions taken.

72 Schools districts may wish to share best practices for addressing student attendance issues.

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# Disclaimer

The following research is based on attendance procedures and policies in place *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic. OREA administered surveys in December 2019 and January 2020; consequently, all resulting data is based upon the respondents' pre-pandemic experiences.

# Introduction

Members of the Tennessee General Assembly requested that the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) research chronic absenteeism and truancy in Tennessee, including an analysis of data, evaluation of districts' use of available tools to address student absenteeism, and identification of successful strategies. Truancy includes only *unexcused* absences; though not defined in law, a student is truant in Tennessee when he or she accrues five unexcused absences and may be subject to legal intervention. Chronic absenteeism includes all absences, *excused* and *unexcused*; a student is chronically absent if he or she misses 10 percent or more of instructional days per school year (typically 18 days missed). It is possible for a student to be chronically absent *and* truant, depending on the student's total number of absences and if the absences are *excused* or *unexcused*.

According to *Tennessee Code Annotated* 49-6-3001, all Tennessee children ages six through 17 are required to attend school. This section of code requires districts to enforce compulsory attendance laws using various methods, up to and including referral to juvenile court. While state law specifies certain steps that must be taken before attendance becomes a legal problem, districts and schools have a great deal of flexibility in what interventions are used, what consequences imposed, how absences are defined, and more.

### 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).

### Truancy

Includes *unexcused* absences only. A Tennessee student is truant if he or she accrues five unexcused absences.

There is not a comprehensive definition of excused absences in law, and districts are able to create their own policies regarding *excused* and *unexcused* absences within the limited parameters specified in law. In general, *excused* absences are those that result from illness, a death in the family, or those for which a parent note has been provided. An *unexcused* absence meets none of the criteria for an excused absence.

To meet the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirement for a nonacademic measure of school quality or student success, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) selected chronic absenteeism for its plan, as did many other states. As a result, districts and schools are evaluated on chronic absenteeism annually. In addition, as of the 2018-19 school year, schools are now required by state law to use a progressive truancy intervention plan prior to filing a petition in juvenile court for truant students.

In this report, OREA presents information about chronic absenteeism and truancy, including an explanation of the two terms, analysis of available data, and an analysis of available tools to address student attendance.

# Methodology

OREA reviewed three years of attendance data provided by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) as part of an analysis of chronic absenteeism rates. OREA also conducted a total of 52 interviews with stakeholders from across Tennessee, including attendance supervisors, principals, and state-level representatives. Additionally, OREA distributed online surveys to every attendance supervisor, principal, and juvenile court judge in Tennessee. A total of 102 attendance supervisors (each representing a different district) and 545 principals (representing 110 Tennessee school districts) participated in the surveys. Eighty-two districts had representation on both surveys. Forty-three judges completed the survey, representing 43 juvenile court districts. (Note: The boundaries of Tennessee’s 98 juvenile court districts do not always align with the boundaries of the state’s school districts.)<sup>A</sup>

## Attendance according to Tennessee law and rule

Elementary and secondary school attendance falls under *TCA 49-6-3001 et seq.*, which covers compulsory attendance laws, length of school terms, attendance reporting, truancy, educational neglect, specific excused absences, home schools, and other subjects. The law gives the State Board of Education (SBE) the authority to promulgate rules that prescribe guidelines for the attendance standards and policies established by school districts. These districts’ policies must be firm but fair so that every student has a reasonable chance to meet the minimum requirements. Schools must keep parents informed of their child’s absences. The law mandates that district attendance policies take extenuating circumstances into account, accommodating emergencies and situations beyond a student’s control. Students must be given a chance to appeal excessive absences and be provided with alternative program options if minimum attendance requirements are not met.

Attendance policies shall be firm but fair.

Effective recordkeeping and communication shall keep parents informed of absences.

Policies shall accommodate emergencies and circumstances beyond a student’s control.

Students shall be given the right to appeal excessive absences.

SBE rule states that each school district shall develop a firm but fair attendance policy. Attendance policies must comply with *TCA 49-6-3007*, concerning, among other things, procedures that must be followed for unexcused absences, and *TCA 49-6-3009*, concerning the development and adoption of a progressive truancy intervention plan. Policies must address the excusing of absences for certain reasons. (See pages 6-8.)<sup>1</sup> Additionally, district policies should not be used to penalize students academically and attendance issues should be resolved at the school level whenever possible. Policies must also allow students with more than five unexcused absences the opportunity to appeal absences, with the burden of proof resting on the student or parent/guardian.

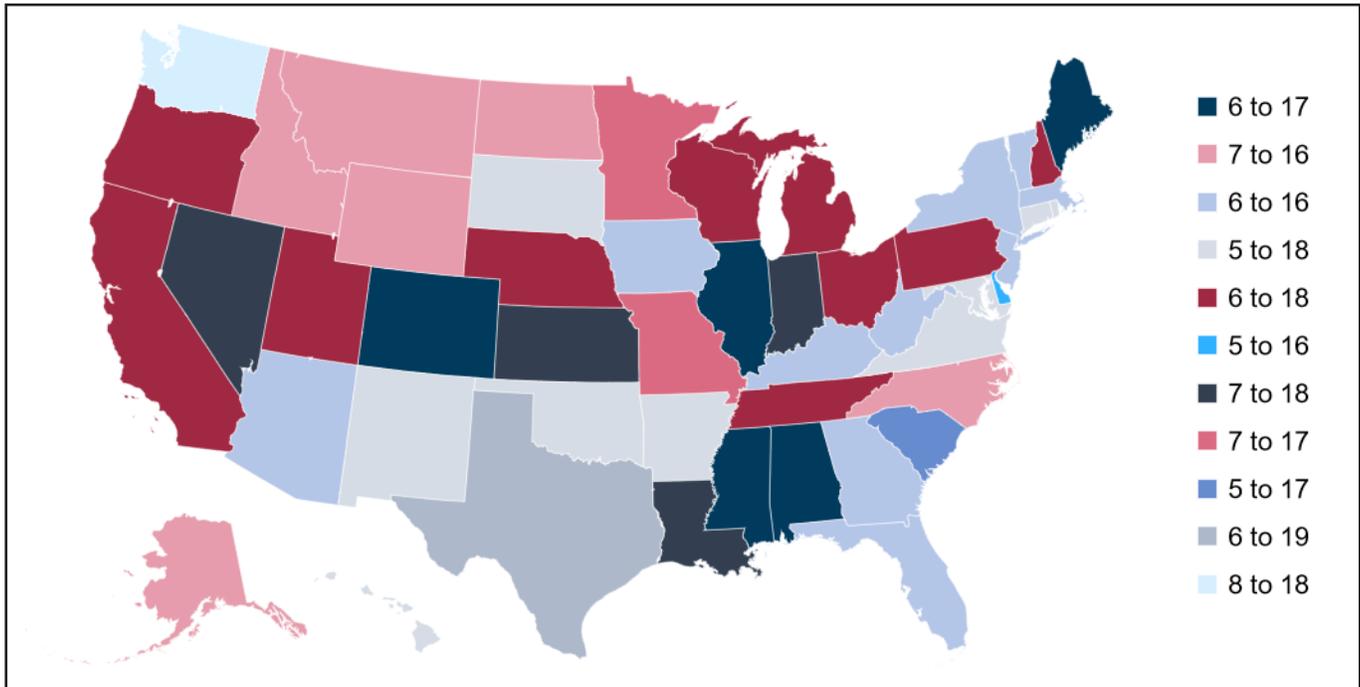
## Compulsory attendance

Though no federal law requires it, each state has compulsory attendance laws. As shown in Exhibit 1, the required ages for school attendance vary by state. Twenty-five out of 50 states (plus the District of Columbia), including Tennessee, require children to be enrolled in school by the age of six. Once Tennessee students reach the age of 18, whether they have completed high school or not, they are no longer required by state law to attend school. Texas requires that students remain enrolled until they reach the age of 19 or graduate from high school. States policies differ regarding students who fall outside the ages for compulsory attendance. For example, Indiana law specifies that students must be enrolled in school by the age of seven, but if parents choose to enroll their children earlier, they must complete the term of enrollment (e.g., if they enroll in

<sup>A</sup> See Appendix A for more information on the methodology.

kindergarten at age six, they must finish the year). Tennessee, by contrast, allows parents who enroll a child younger than six years old to withdraw the student within six weeks of initial enrollment without penalty.

**Exhibit 1: Age range of compulsory attendance laws by state**



Source: Education Commission of the States, 2020.

Tennessee students under the age of 18 are not required to attend school if they meet one of the following criteria:<sup>B</sup>

- doctor-verified mental or physical disabilities that prevent the student from performing school duties,
- completion of high school and possession of a high school diploma (or HiSET diploma),
- enrollment and satisfactory progress in course leading to HiSET diploma,
- temporary excuse that falls under SBE rules and regulations,
- enrollment in a home school, or
- determination as a detriment to the order and education of other students (applies only to those who have reached age 17).<sup>2</sup>

State law requires education officials to take steps at the beginning of each school year to ensure that all parents<sup>C</sup> comply with compulsory attendance laws. First, the director of schools in each district supplies principals with a census-based list of students who fall under compulsory attendance laws. Principals must notify the district of any students on the list who do not enroll in a public school. Private and parochial school officials must submit complete enrollment rosters to directors of schools within 30 days of the start of the school year. Parents who homeschool their children must also report their intent to do so to districts on an annual basis.

**Attendance supervisors**

State law requires all school districts to designate at least one qualified employee to be the attendance supervisor for the district. State law requires attendance supervisors to assist the local school board with the enforcement of compulsory attendance laws and to carry out other duties related to absenteeism and truancy. Attendance supervisors are responsible for ensuring students and parents follow school attendance

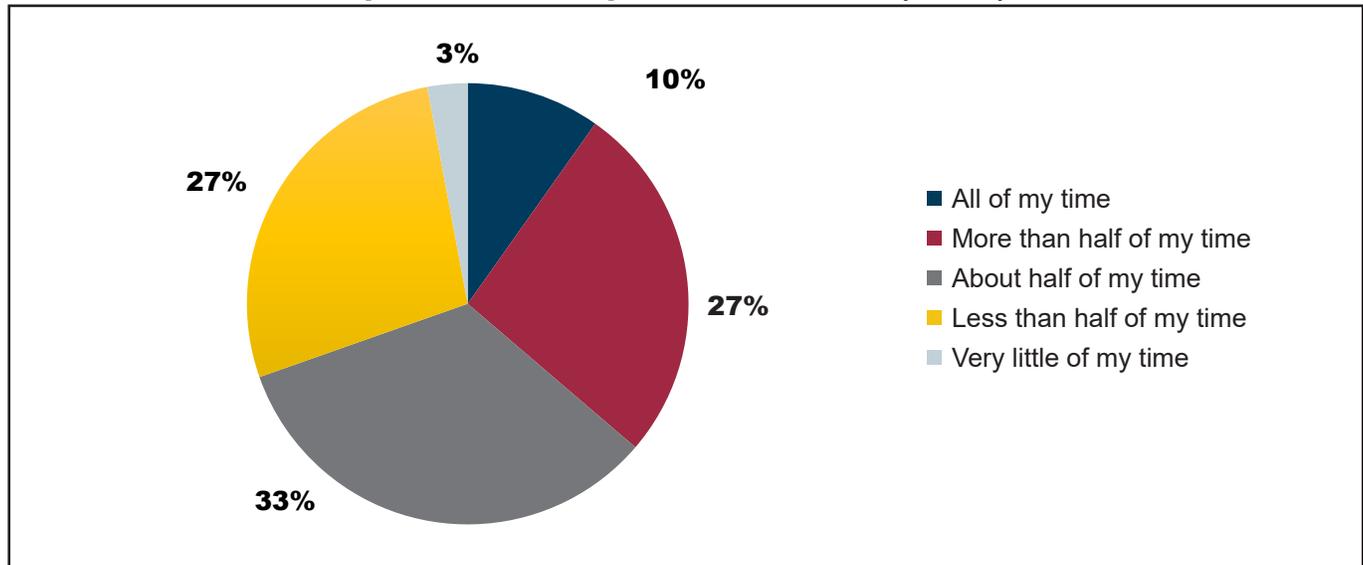
<sup>B</sup> In all cases of exemption, TCA 49-6-3005(b) requires the local school board to obtain a written recommendation for the exemption from the director of schools and the principal of the school the student is zoned to attend.

<sup>C</sup> This report will use the word *parent* in lieu of *parent, guardian, or other legal custodian* as written in law.

laws. In carrying out this responsibility, district attendance supervisors may work with school personnel to monitor attendance data, address attendance barriers, and implement the progressive truancy intervention plan,<sup>d</sup> among other duties. Attendance supervisors may also handle or assist with transportation, homebound services, technology matters, or other responsibilities.

Out of 102 respondents on the OREA survey of attendance supervisors (each representing a separate district), 10 supervisors (9 percent) stated that attendance matters take up *all* of their time. Most supervisors (33 percent) stated that attendance takes up about *half* of their time, while 27 respondents (26 percent) stated it takes up *more than half* of their time. Twenty-eight supervisors (27 percent) stated that it takes up *less than half* of their time, and three (3 percent) indicated that attendance takes *very little* of their time.

**Exhibit 2: Attendance supervisors’ time spent on attendance (n=102)**



Source: OREA survey of attendance supervisors, December 2019.

Attendance supervisors who are responsible for monitoring systemwide attendance data rely on school-level staff for accurate attendance data. From the teacher who takes roll to the attendance clerk who records late arrivals of students (commonly called “tardies”), several different staff members play a role in the attendance recording process within a school.

### **Support staff for attendance supervisors**

Most districts employ at least one staff member to assist the attendance supervisor in the review of attendance data, enforcement of attendance policies, and other attendance-related responsibilities. Larger school districts are more likely to employ multiple support staff, while smaller districts may rely solely on the attendance supervisor to complete all aspects of the job.

Attendance support staff may also be present at the school level. On the OREA survey, principals reported that attendance support staff at the school level may include social workers, licensed counselors/mental health professionals, school counselors, nurses, and Communities in Schools coordinators.<sup>e</sup>

Principals indicated that the support staff with the highest rates of full-time availability are school counselors (79 percent of respondents) and nurses (73 percent of respondents). Some respondents emphasized that a staff member’s availability affects his or her ability to measurably impact student attendance.

<sup>d</sup>The progressive truancy intervention plan, as described in TCA 49-6-3007, requires districts to move students through three tiers of interventions aimed at addressing attendance barriers before referring them to juvenile court, if necessary.

<sup>e</sup> See pages 52-53 for more information about Communities in Schools.

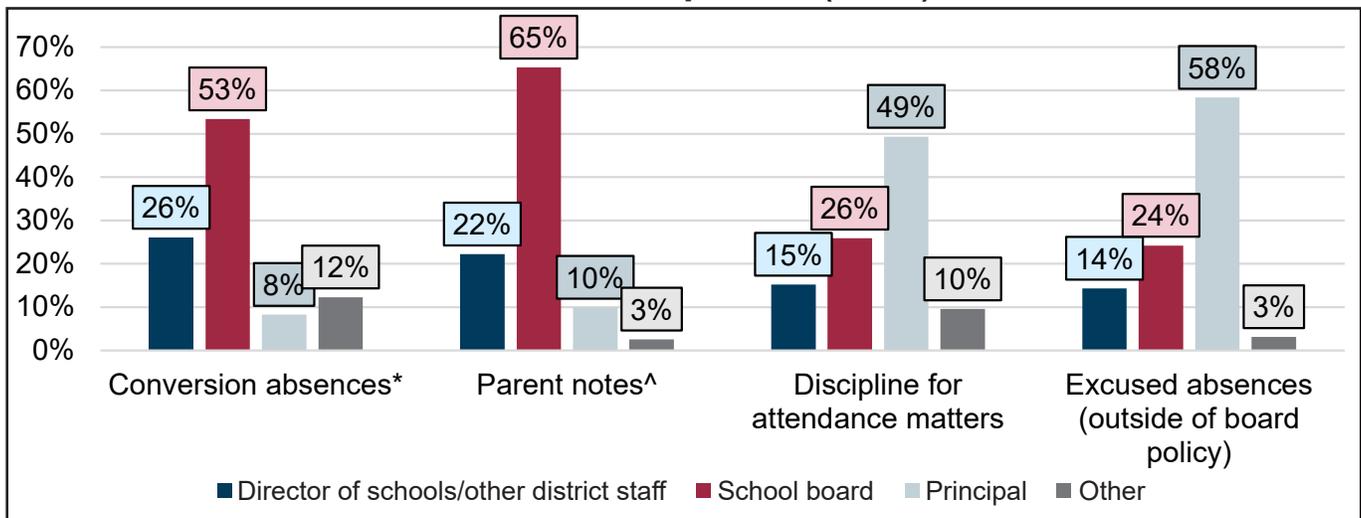
## Local attendance policies

Attendance policies and procedures vary widely across the state and, in some cases, among schools within a district. OREA reviewed the attendance policy posted on the website of each district in Tennessee. The website of some districts included multiple attendance policies, and in some cases the posted attendance policy had not been updated to incorporate the progressive truancy intervention plan requirement established by a 2017 state law. (See page 31 for more information on the progressive truancy intervention plan.) Through interviews with attendance supervisors, OREA found that, for some districts, the attendance policy posted online differs from the policy in use.

Of the nearly 150 local board policies pulled from district websites and reviewed by OREA, 128 used the model policy provided by the Tennessee School Boards Association (TSBA).<sup>F</sup> Of those 128 districts, some posted other attendance policies on their websites in addition to the TSBA model policy.

Depending on the district, specifications within attendance policies are determined at either the district or school level. Some districts grant principals discretion to set policy at the school level, while other districts set blanket policies that every school in the district is expected to follow. Most principals who responded to the OREA survey indicated they have discretion to implement school-specific procedures regarding excused absences (i.e., determining what absences are excused outside of what is specified in district policy and what discipline will be issued for attendance offenses).

**Exhibit 3: Who determines certain attendance policies? (n=545)**



Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

\* Conversion absences are absences formed through the accrual of a set number of tardies and/or early dismissals.

<sup>^</sup> Parent notes are notes provided by parents to excuse their child's absence from school for such reasons as illnesses that do not require a visit to the doctor, family emergencies, and vacations. School districts have different policies regarding parent notes. In most districts, students are allowed to provide a limited number of parent notes to excuse absences for medical or personal reasons. Such policies are usually set at the district level with varying allowances for principal discretion.

Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

## Excused versus unexcused absences

The designation of absences as *excused* or *unexcused* determines whether a student is chronically absent, truant, or both. Tennessee law allows for excused and unexcused absences to be defined primarily by school districts, and, in some cases, at the school level. The law does not define the term “unexcused absence.” As for excused absences, the law specifies three circumstances for which districts are required to excuse a student’s absence from school: (1) absences for work as an election official; (2) absences for court-related matters; and (3) absences related to a parent’s service in the U.S. Armed Forces. (See Exhibit 4.)

<sup>F</sup> This figure includes all 141 county, municipal, and special school districts, five state special schools (Alvin C. York Institute, Tennessee School for the Blind, Tennessee School for the Deaf-Knoxville, Tennessee School for the Deaf-Nashville, and West Tennessee School for the Deaf), the Achievement School District (ASD), the State Board of Education (SBE), and the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services (DCS). The five state special schools, ASD, SBE, and DCS are treated as school boards in terms of creating their own policies for the school(s) within their jurisdiction.

In 2020, Public Chapter 743 required public schools to excuse students from school for released time courses in religious moral instruction for up to one hour each day upon the request of a student’s parent, regardless of whether the school district has adopted such a policy.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, principals may excuse up to 10 absences for participation in extracurricular activities that are not school-sponsored (e.g., travel sports teams, dance competitions, etc.). The law also mandates that students serving as pages in the General Assembly are counted as present in school and not assigned an excused or unexcused absence.

**Exhibit 4: Absences counted as excused or present by Tennessee state law**

<b>TCA</b>	<b>Excused absences required by law</b>
<b>2-4-103(e)</b>	A county election commission may appoint as an election official any qualified person who has reached the age of 16. High school students are entitled to an excused absence when serving as a poll official as well as compensation.
<b>49-2-130</b>	Upon the request of a student’s parent, school districts are required to excuse a student from school to attend a released time course in religious moral instruction for up to one hour during each school day, regardless of whether the district has adopted such a policy as long as other requirements specified in law are met.
<b>49-6-3002(c)(1)</b>	Absences for court-related matters must be excused and makeup work allowed.
<b>49-6-3019</b>	A student whose parent is in the U.S. Armed Forces is allowed: 1.) an excused absence for one day when the member is deployed; 2.) an additional excused absence for one day when the service member returns from deployment; 3.) excused absences for up to 10 days for visitation when the member is granted rest and recuperation leave and is stationed out of the country; and 4.) excused absences for up to 10 days cumulatively within the school year for visitation during the member’s deployment cycle.
<b>TCA</b>	<b>Excused absences allowed by law</b>
<b>49-6-3022</b>	Principals may excuse up to 10 absences for participation in non-school-sponsored extracurricular activities if the student provides documentation of proof of participation and submits a written request no later than seven business days prior to the absence.
<b>TCA</b>	<b>Absences counted as present according to law</b>
<b>49-6-3018</b>	Children who serve as pages of the General Assembly during the school year shall be counted as present, as neither an excused nor unexcused absence, in the same manner as an educational field trip.

Note: Students who are absent for certain reasons may also be counted as present per State Board of Education policy.  
 Source: *Tennessee Code Annotated*.

The State Board of Education (SBE) requires districts to adopt firm but fair policies that are in accordance with the SBE’s School Attendance Policy 4.100, state law, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.<sup>3</sup>

The TDOE Attendance Manual, last updated in 2020, echoes the specifications found in state law and SBE rule.<sup>4</sup> Under SBE authority, the manual lays out which students should be counted present even when missing traditional instruction time: students serving in-school suspension (and receiving educational services); homebound students receiving homebound services; alternative school or program students; students serving as pages for the General Assembly; and students participating in school-sponsored events. The manual instructs districts to adopt a policy regarding excused and unexcused absences in compliance with SBE’s School Attendance Policy 4.100, but no standard definitions are supplied.

<sup>6</sup> Released-time courses for religious moral instruction take place during the school day but must not be funded by taxpayer funds or occur on school property. A released time program operated in Knox County during the 2018-19 school year. Participating students left school for an hour per week, usually missing art or music classes, and were transported to a church for religious activities and instruction.

The TSBA attendance policy template complies with SBE requirements with more specifications about excused absences, though the term is not explicitly defined. The TSBA template states that “absences shall be classified as either excused or unexcused as determined by the principal/designee.” The reasons for excusing an absence listed in the TSBA template mirror those listed in the attendance policies of most schools. These reasons include:

- personal illness/injury,
- illness of immediate family member,
- death in the family,
- extreme weather conditions,
- religious observances,
- pregnancy,
- school-endorsed activities,
- summons, subpoena, or court order, or
- circumstances which in the judgment of the principal create emergencies over which the student has no control.

### Parent notes

Most districts allow a limited number of parent notes to excuse absences for such reasons as vacations, family emergencies, or illnesses that do not require a visit to the doctor. Students may excuse no more than five absences per year with a parent note in most of the districts and schools represented on the OREA surveys. Some districts and schools allow students to excuse up to 10 absences per year (or in some cases five per semester) with a parent note. Four attendance supervisors said that in each of their districts the number of parent notes allowed is decided by principals at the school level. In other districts, the number of parent notes allowed is set at the district level and varies by grade level. In these districts, the upper grades are allowed fewer notes than the lower grades; three of these districts do not accept parent notes for middle and/or high school students.

Districts allow varying numbers of parent notes to excuse absences for vacations, family emergencies, minor illnesses, and more.

Two-thirds of attendance supervisors and principals cited excessive parent notes as a *common* factor in their students' chronic absenteeism.

It is possible for students to reach the level of chronic absenteeism with all or most of their absences excused by parent notes. The majority of respondents on OREA surveys, over two-thirds of attendance supervisors and principals (395 respondents), indicated it was common for chronically absent students to have an excessive number of absences excused by parent notes. In some cases, students may accrue enough unexcused absences to start the progressive truancy intervention plan (PTIP)<sup>H</sup> but are allowed by school officials (or potentially juvenile court judges) to bring in retroactive notes to excuse absences that were previously unexcused.

Some districts vary parent note policies by grade level.

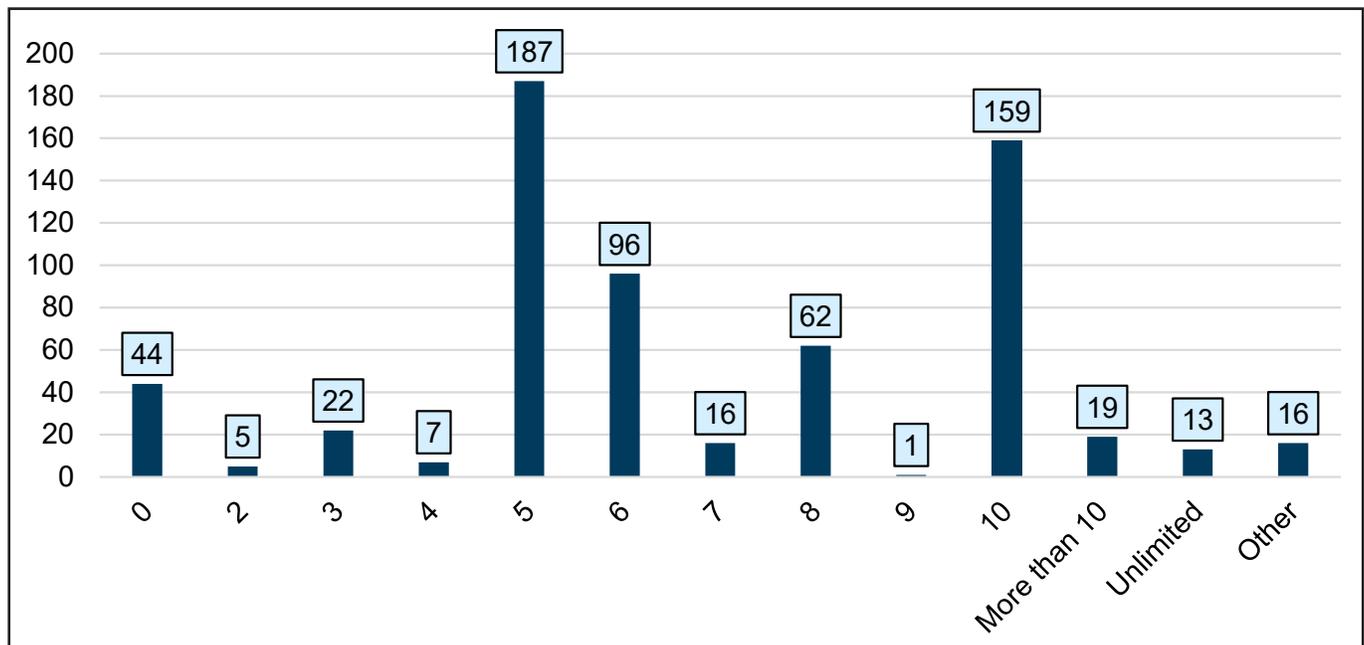
*"Elementary schools are allowed five per semester. Secondary schools are allowed three per semester. We are planning to change our policy for elementary to be the same as our secondary policy."*

Respondent to OREA survey of attendance supervisors, Dec. 2019

Some districts plan to adjust their parent note policies to limit the number that may be used per year to curb excessive use by parents. Other districts with the same issue indicated they may no longer accept parent notes for students at certain grade levels, while others are considering no longer accepting parent notes.

<sup>H</sup> The progressive truancy intervention plan, as described in TCA 49-6-3007, requires districts to move students through three tiers of interventions aimed at addressing attendance barriers before referring them to juvenile court, if necessary.

**Exhibit 5: Number of parent notes allowed by district, according to attendance supervisors and principals (n=647)**



Note: This chart combines survey results from attendance supervisors and principals. The survey responses differed slightly between the two groups but may be explained by factors relative to grade level, principal discretion, etc.  
 Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

### Conversion absences

Repeatedly arriving late to school and/or leaving early results in missed instructional time for students. Some districts and schools discourage students' late arrivals and early departures by converting a set number of late arrivals to school (or tardies) and/or early dismissals to absences (hereafter referred to as conversion absences<sup>1</sup>). For example, a district may assign one unexcused absence to a student who accumulates five unexcused tardies.<sup>2</sup>

**Conversion absences** are absences that result from the accrual of a set number of tardies and/or early dismissals, as determined by district or school policy.

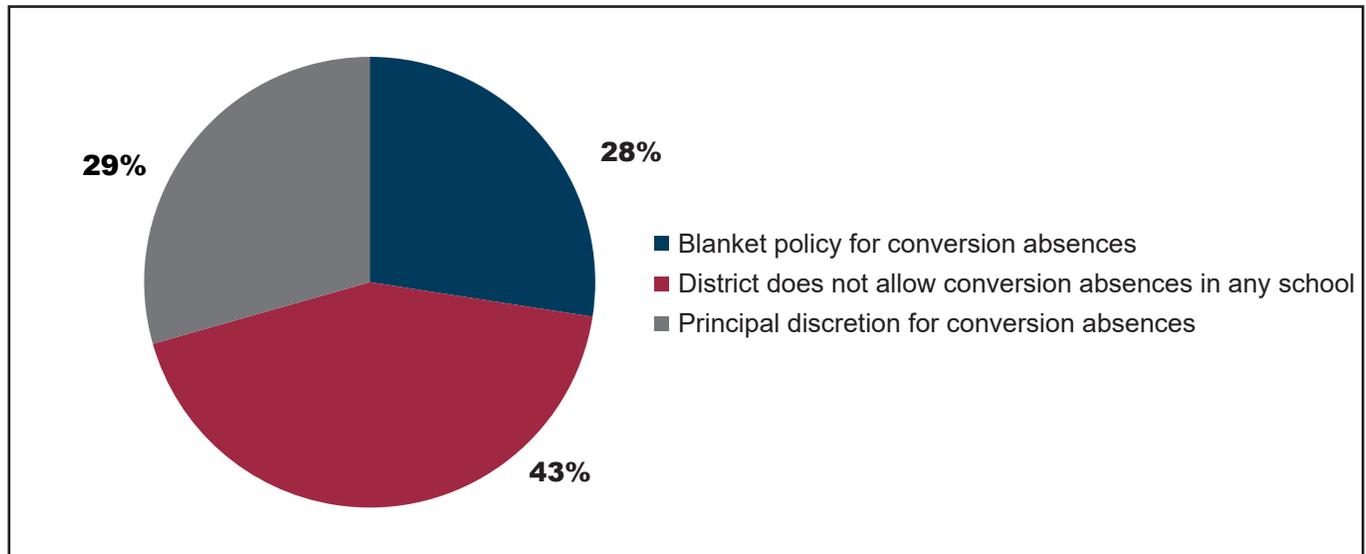
On OREA surveys, 43 percent of supervisors (each representing a different district) and 57 percent of principals indicated their districts neither allow conversion absences nor do they allow principals to institute such policies. Where such policies are allowed, implementation varies from district to district and often from school to school. Twenty-eight supervisors (27 percent) said that all schools in their districts follow a blanket policy for conversion absences. Another 29 percent of supervisors (30 respondents) stated their districts do not have a blanket policy, leaving such decisions to principals. In such cases, conversion absences may be issued in some but not all of a district's schools.

Some districts convert tardies into either excused or unexcused absences. Sixty-four percent of supervisors and 35 percent of principals who indicated their districts' policies permit conversion absences indicated that only those tardies and early dismissals that are *unexcused* are converted, and then only to *unexcused* absences. Eighteen percent of supervisors (six respondents) and 30 percent of principals (71 respondents) stated that *unexcused* tardies and/or early dismissals are converted to *unexcused* absences while *excused* tardies and/or early dismissals are converted to *excused* absences. Some respondents indicated that *all* tardies and early dismissals, whether excused or unexcused, are converted to *unexcused* absences.

<sup>1</sup> OREA uses the term *conversion absences* to refer to absences that result from the accrual of a set number of tardies and/or early dismissals, as determined by district or school policy.

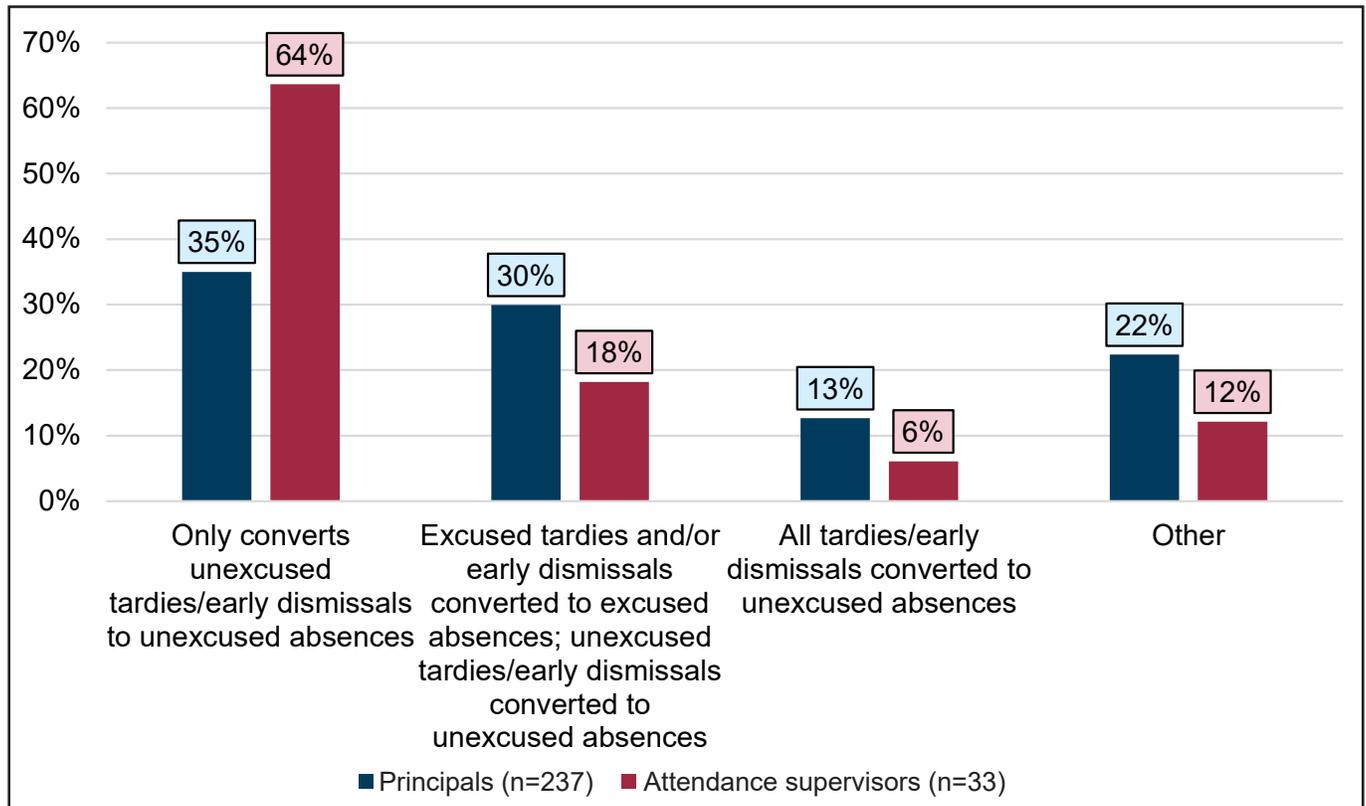
<sup>2</sup> According to the TDOE Attendance Manual, students in grades pre-k through 12 must be present for at least 50 percent of the scheduled school day to be counted present for state reporting purposes, including on abbreviated school days.

**Exhibit 6: District policy regarding the conversion of tardies and/or early dismissals to absences (n=102)**



Source: OREA survey of attendance supervisors, December 2019.

**Exhibit 7: How districts convert tardies/early dismissals to absences**



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

For districts and schools that permit conversion absences, the conversion threshold varies from three to five tardies/early dismissals or a prescribed number of minutes (e.g., 420 minutes, or seven hours) to be converted to one absence.<sup>k</sup>

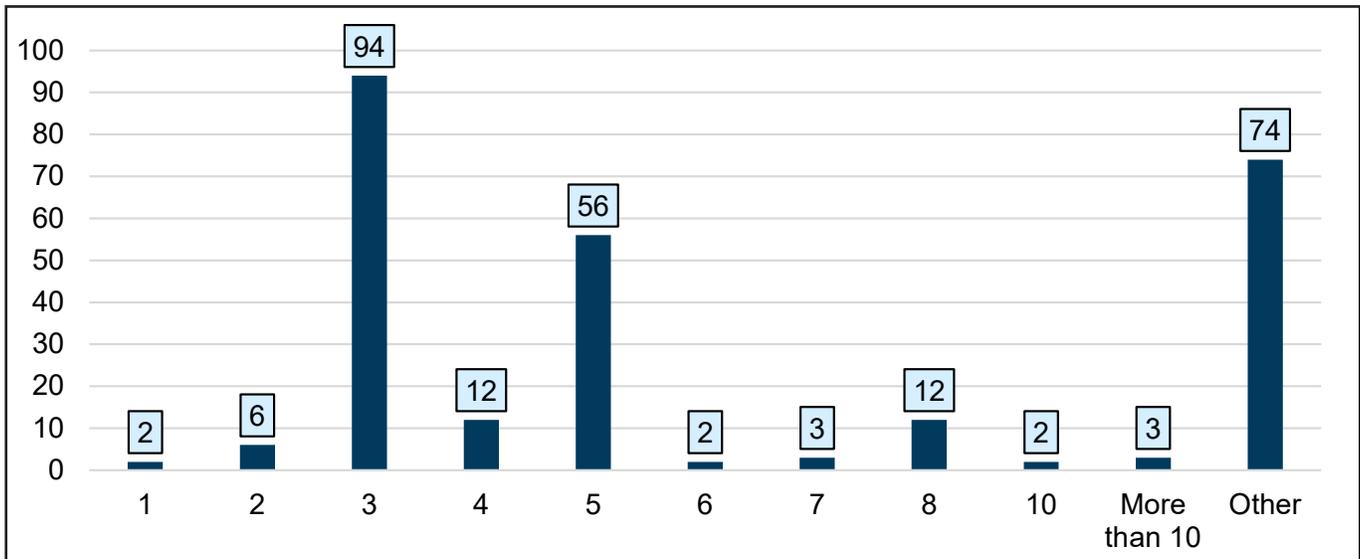
Some districts use a prescribed number of minutes for conversion absences.

*“A student in school for less than 221 minutes, whether tardy or early dismissals, would be counted as absent unexcused.”*

Respondent to OREA survey of principals, Dec. 2019

<sup>k</sup> Typical school days run approximately seven hours, or 420 minutes, in accordance with the requirements outlined in SBE rule 0520-01-03-.02. Law and rule require a minimum of 6.5 hours, but most districts extend the school day to seven hours.

**Exhibit 8: Number of tardies and/or early dismissals that equal an absence, according to attendance supervisors and principals (n=266)**



Note: This chart combines survey results from attendance supervisors and principals. The survey responses differed slightly between the two groups but may be explained by factors relative to grade level, principal discretion, etc.  
 Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

In interviews and survey comments, however, a few school officials questioned the legality of conversion absences, due in part to the absence of any law regarding this practice.

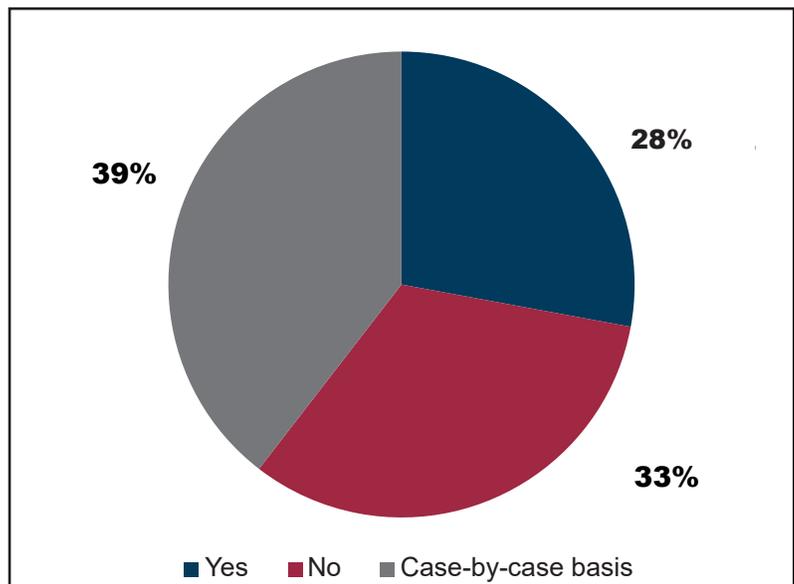
Some school officials expressed concern about the use of conversion absences.

*“We were under the impression that this was an illegal practice.”*

Respondent to OREA survey of attendance supervisors, Dec. 2019

One concern raised by some attendance supervisors and principals was whether juvenile court judges would frown upon a student being classified as truant based in part on conversion absences. When surveyed by OREA, juvenile court judges were split nearly into thirds regarding this practice, with most (39 percent) stating they consider conversion absences on a case-by-case basis.

**Exhibit 9: Judges counting conversion absences in truancy cases (n=43)**



Source: OREA survey of juvenile court judges, February 2020.

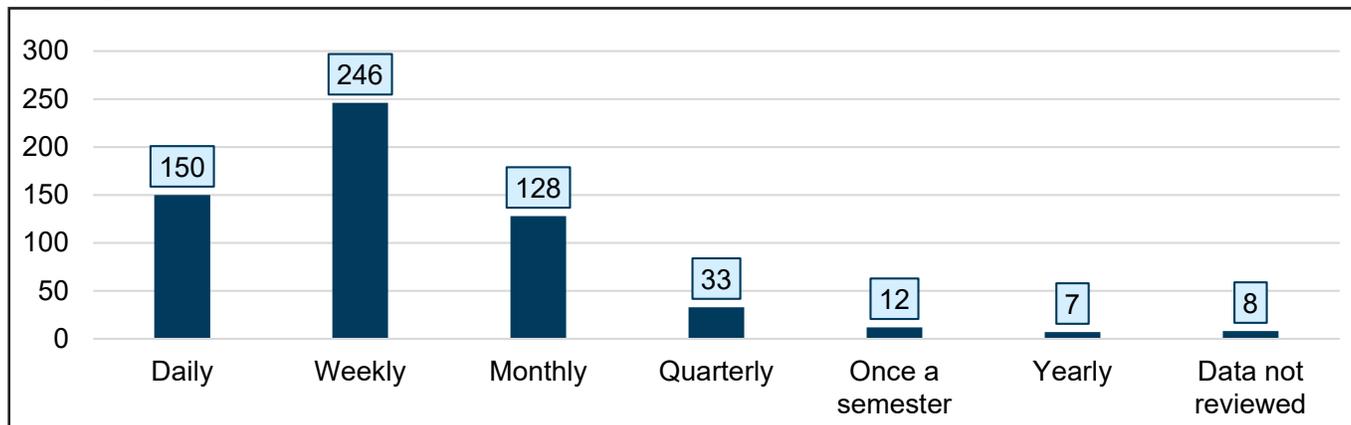
One judge considers conversion absences only for students who have already accumulated five unexcused absences, none of which were based on conversion absences. Another judge stated that if the school uses conversion absences according to the attendance policy sent to parents at the beginning of the school year, then the court accepts these absences. Other judges indicated they take conversion absences into consideration when considering truancy cases, but they are not included in the actual truancy petition (i.e., they are considered problems or early warning signs but not actually applied to the number of unexcused absences that bring the case to court). Two judges commented that they do not interpret the law as allowing such absences to count in truancy cases. (See more about truancy on page 31.)

## Review of attendance data

School officials, including attendance supervisors and principals, use attendance data to identify and analyze student absenteeism problems, determine what intervention plans should be implemented, and evaluate the effectiveness of the plans. TDOE recommends that districts review data regularly to identify trends in student attendance.

On surveys distributed by OREA, principals and attendance supervisors were asked how frequently they review attendance data in their school or district. The majority of respondents to both surveys review attendance data at least *weekly*.

**Exhibit 10: Frequency of attendance data review for attendance supervisors and principals (n=584)**



Note: This graph combines the attendance supervisor and principal survey results because the trends between the two surveys were consistent with one another. Ninety-nine supervisors and 485 principals responded to this question. Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

Districts must use one of five vendors contracted by TDOE for managing their student data through a student information system (SIS).<sup>L</sup> All vendors must provide consistent reporting on core data, but they also offer districts optional data packages that allow for the tracking of specific attendance issues and data trends. SIS packages vary by cost and function and can be customized to fit a district's specifications and needs. An SIS may, for example, autogenerate an attendance intervention once a student reaches a certain number of unexcused absences or send a message to parents whenever their child misses class.

### Data misreporting

The effectiveness of data review as a tool is dependent on data quality, however. Data misreporting can lead to overlooked problem areas and missed opportunities for improvement.<sup>M</sup>

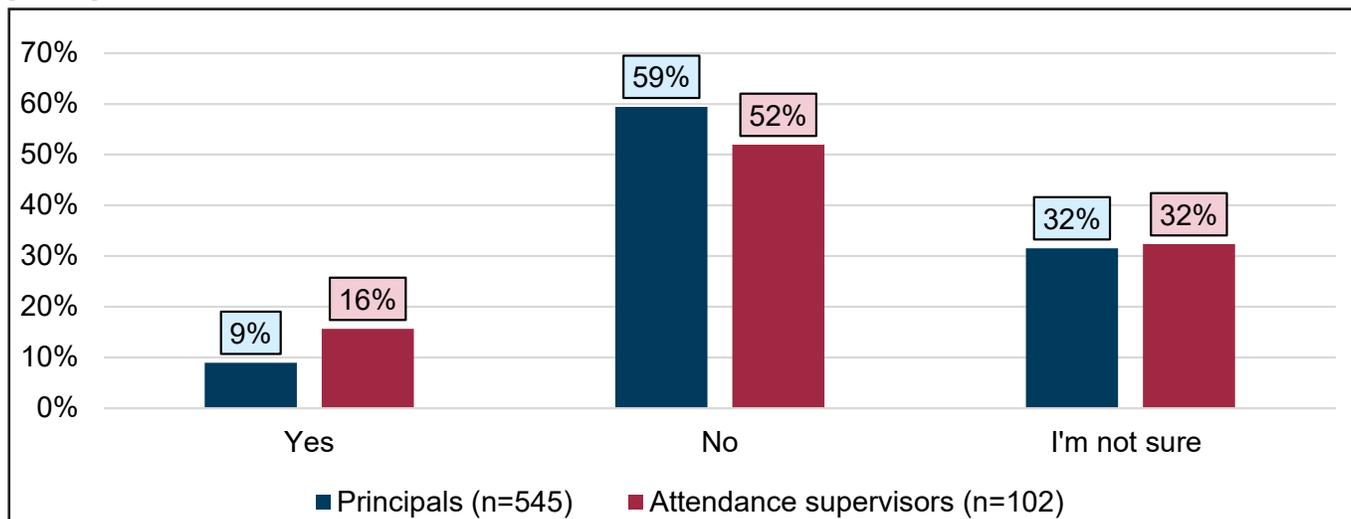
Over the course of interviews with attendance supervisors and other district representatives, OREA learned that in some districts over the past few years, student attendance data may have been misreported unintentionally as a result of incorrect coding in the student information system, settings, or other issues. Sixteen attendance supervisors (9 percent, each representing a different district) and 49 principals (16 percent) indicated that data misreporting had occurred in their districts within the past four years. OREA did not determine at what level (school, district, or state) the data misreporting took place.

<sup>L</sup> There are currently five student information system (SIS) vendors contracted by TDOE as options for managing the student data of the state's school districts: Follett Schools Solutions (Aspen), Infinite Campus, PowerSchool, Skyward, and Edupoint Educational Services (Synergy). All districts must use one of the state-approved contracts, but they can choose state-hosting or vendor-hosting for their SIS packages.

<sup>M</sup> The 2020 Accountability Protocol, the latest version of a document published annually by TDOE, describes how chronic absenteeism rates are calculated. The 2020 Accountability Data Appeals Guidance describes the appeals process and opportunities districts have to check and appeal their data.

Misreported data reduces the accuracy of attendance data and affects attendance-related accountability measures. See page 30 for more information on these measures.

**Exhibit 11: Data misreporting in last four years, according to attendance supervisors and principals**



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

Data misreporting has also been an issue on the national level. The authors of the 2018 *Data Matters* report from Attendance Works<sup>N</sup> note that data misreporting has been a problem since national chronic absenteeism data was collected for the first time by the federal Office for Civil Rights during the 2013-14 school year. The authors attributed problems with the consistency and accuracy of attendance data to the degree of variation in attendance policies in school districts across the country, specifically what counts and does not count as an absence. The second time data on chronic absenteeism was collected from the nation’s school districts (during the 2015-16 school year), Attendance Works found a greater awareness among districts of the data collection protocols established by the federal Office for Civil Rights, which likely led to better and more consistent reporting. When data from 2013-14 was compared to the 2015-16 data, researchers found the number of chronically absent students nationwide rose by roughly 790,000 students.<sup>5</sup>

In some cases, schools that had reported no chronically absent students for the 2013-14 school year saw a significant increase in the number of such students for the 2015-16 school year. The report’s authors hypothesized such changes were likely the result of improved data reporting. Turning back to Tennessee data with this in mind, OREA identified 23 schools<sup>O</sup> that reported a chronic absenteeism rate of zero percent for at least one of the three school years examined (2017, 2018, and 2019). For most of these schools, the chronic absenteeism rate was zero for a single year; the rate for the other two years was not zero but was still well below the state rate. Two schools reported no chronically absent students for two years and a rate below 1 percent for the third year. One district had nine schools that reported a rate of zero percent in 2018, contributing to the district’s reported rate of 0.7 percent that year. According to the district’s attendance supervisor, the reported rates were incorrect, the result of a possible miscalculation issue. In another Tennessee district, data misreporting was primarily responsible for a significant drop in chronic absenteeism rates after the 2016-17 school year.

Three Tennessee districts with misreported data each explained that data miscoding in previous school years had affected their rates, but in each case, the issues were caught and remedied with improved record keeping practices, specified training for personnel, or increased efficiency. Several school officials told OREA in interviews and surveys that to prevent future issues, they provided additional training for attendance clerks and other individuals who work with data daily.

<sup>N</sup> Attendance Works is a national nonprofit agency whose mission is to advance student success and help close equity gaps by reducing chronic absenteeism.

<sup>O</sup> This number includes only traditional schools, i.e., schools that are not virtual, adult, etc.

## Chronic absenteeism as a national focus

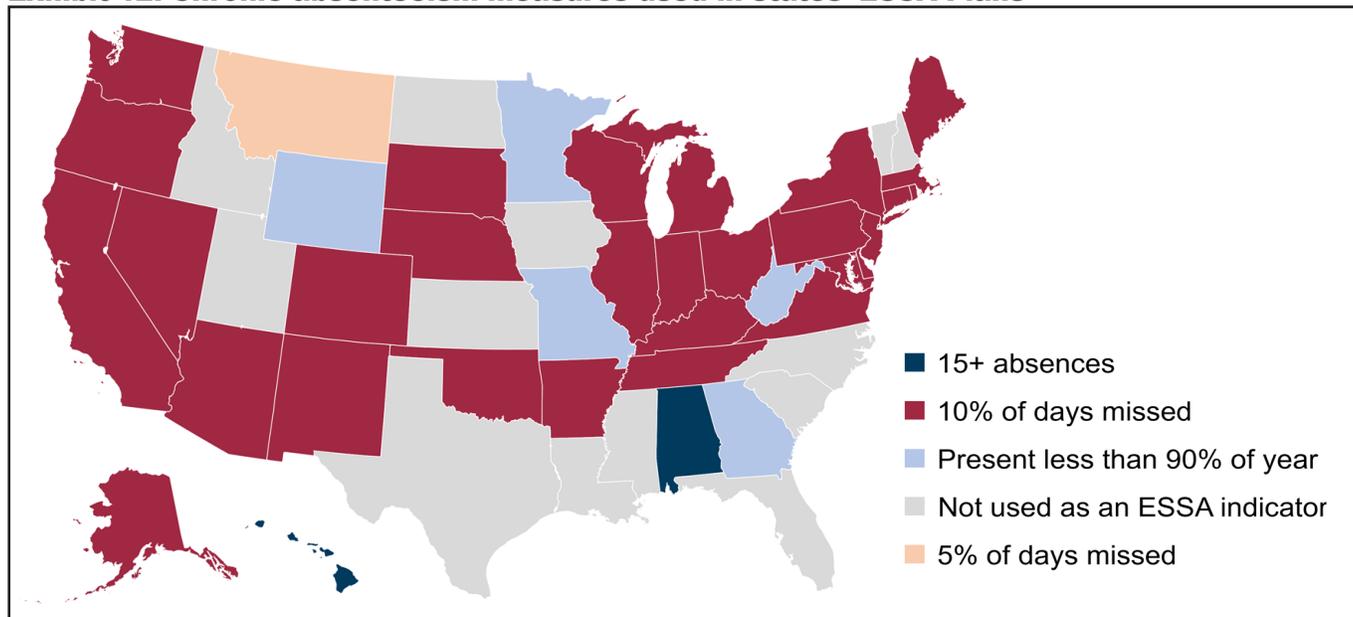
Chronic absenteeism is at the forefront of current national conversations about student attendance. Adopted in 2015, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires all states to include chronic absenteeism rates on their school report cards. Additionally, states are required to measure five accountability indicators annually. The first four metrics are academic indicators: math and reading achievement, graduation rates for secondary schools, English language proficiency for English language learners, and an additional academic indicator for postsecondary schools.

Each state must also choose at least one additional indicator for School Quality or Student Success (SQSS) to measure on an annual basis. Tennessee, along with 35 other states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico), has chosen to measure chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator. (Tennessee is one of nine states that lists chronic absenteeism as its only SQSS indicator for all grade levels.) ESSA requires all states, even those that have not chosen chronic absenteeism as their SQSS indicator, to report chronic absenteeism data to the federal government and allows federal spending on training to reduce absenteeism. Since chronic absenteeism was first added to the state's ESSA plan, TDOE has led training focused on chronic absenteeism in the form of at least one major statewide conference, numerous presentations to attendance supervisors, and a series of regional training events for school administrators. The department has also created chronic absenteeism resources for districts, including FAQs, toolkits, additional resources for vulnerable student groups, and school climate resources, which provide methods to assess reasons for chronic absenteeism in schools.

ESSA does not provide a standard definition of chronic absenteeism, allowing states to set their own parameters for the measure. Of the 36 states that chose chronic absenteeism as the SQSS in their ESSA plan, 27 states, including Tennessee, define chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of instructional days over the course of the school year.<sup>6</sup> This is the most common definition of chronic absenteeism, used by Attendance Works as its working definition of the term. Research suggests that missing 10 percent or more of instructional days may put students in danger of academic and social consequences. In Tennessee, districts operate on a 180-day academic calendar, so a student who is enrolled for the entire school year becomes chronically absent once he or she accrues 18 absences.<sup>7</sup>

Some states use other definitions for chronic absenteeism, as shown in Exhibit 12.

**Exhibit 12: Chronic absenteeism measures used in states' ESSA Plans**



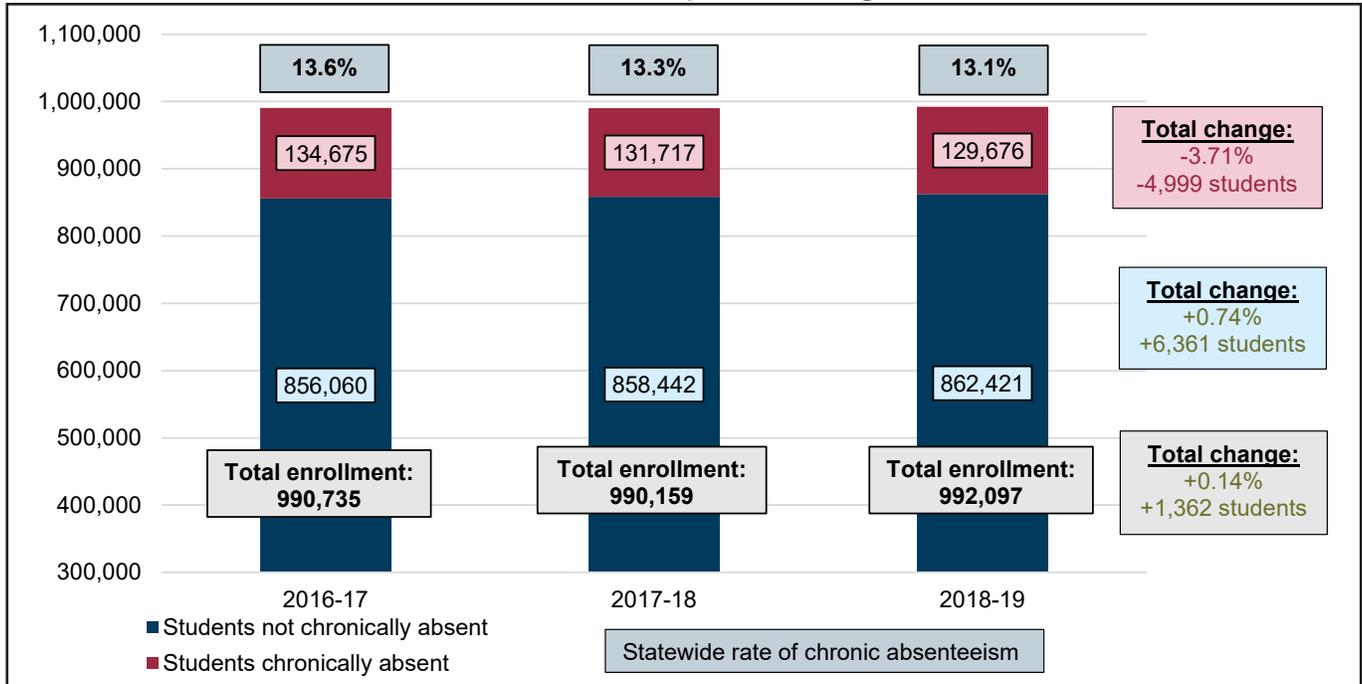
Source: FutureEd, 2017.

# Measuring chronic absenteeism in Tennessee

In Tennessee, the chronic absenteeism rate is measured based on a student’s total number of days enrolled in a district.<sup>p</sup> If the chronically absent student is enrolled in a district for at least half of the instructional days in the school year, he or she is counted in the district’s chronic absenteeism rates. The same threshold is used to calculate school-level chronic absenteeism rates.<sup>q</sup> If a chronically absent student is not enrolled in any district for at least half of the school year but is enrolled in a public school or schools in the state for at least 45 instructional days, the student’s chronic absenteeism is factored into the state rate but not that of any district.

Though TDOE started collecting chronic absenteeism data around 2013, chronic absenteeism rates were first included on the State Report Card in 2018. Between the 2017 and 2019 school years, Tennessee’s overall chronic absenteeism rate dropped by 3.71 percent, a difference of nearly 5,000 students, while total enrollment increased by just over 1,300 students (an increase of 0.14 percent). In 2017, there were 134,675 chronically absent students in Tennessee, accounting for 13.6 percent of the total K-12 student population. The statewide rate of chronic absenteeism decreased slightly to 13.3 percent in 2018 and to 13.1 percent in 2019.

**Exhibit 13: Chronic absenteeism in Tennessee | 2017 through 2019**



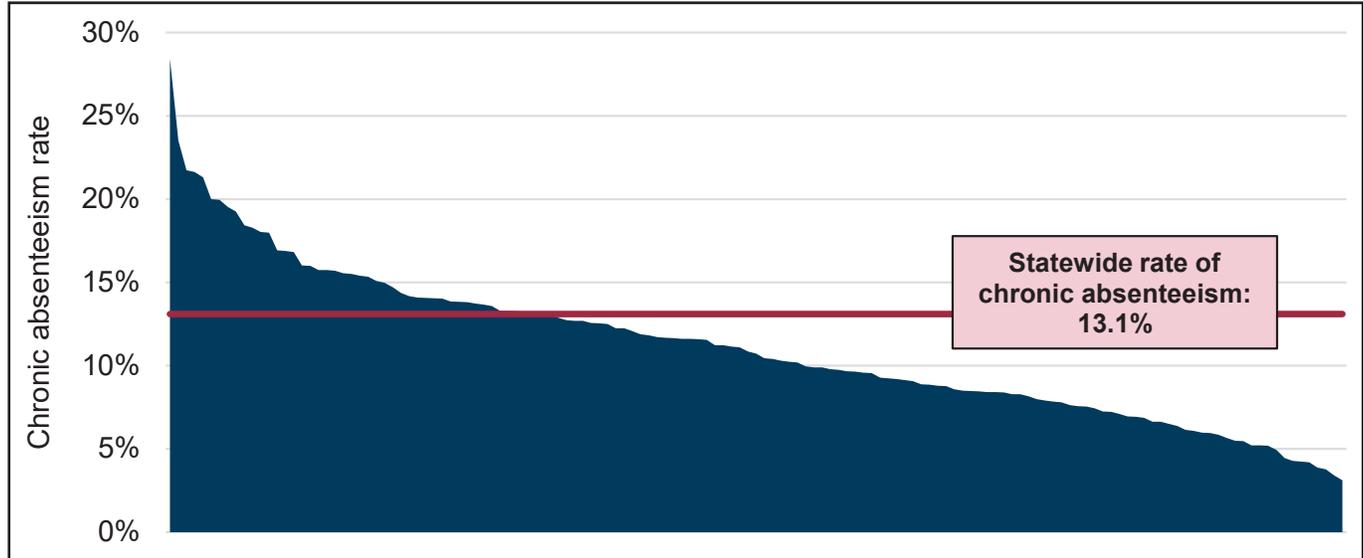
Note: This analysis was done using publicly available suppressed state-level data. Enrollment numbers include students who may not have been enrolled in a district long enough to be counted in district-level chronic absenteeism data.  
 Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

In 2019, nearly 70 percent of Tennessee school districts posted chronic absenteeism rates that were at or below the state rate of 13.1 percent. Forty-four percent of the remaining districts were within 2 percentage points of the state rate.

<sup>p</sup> All research, including survey data, reflects procedures and policies in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>q</sup> Note: Students who are enrolled in two schools or districts for exactly 50 percent of the school year will count for both schools and both districts for accountability purposes.

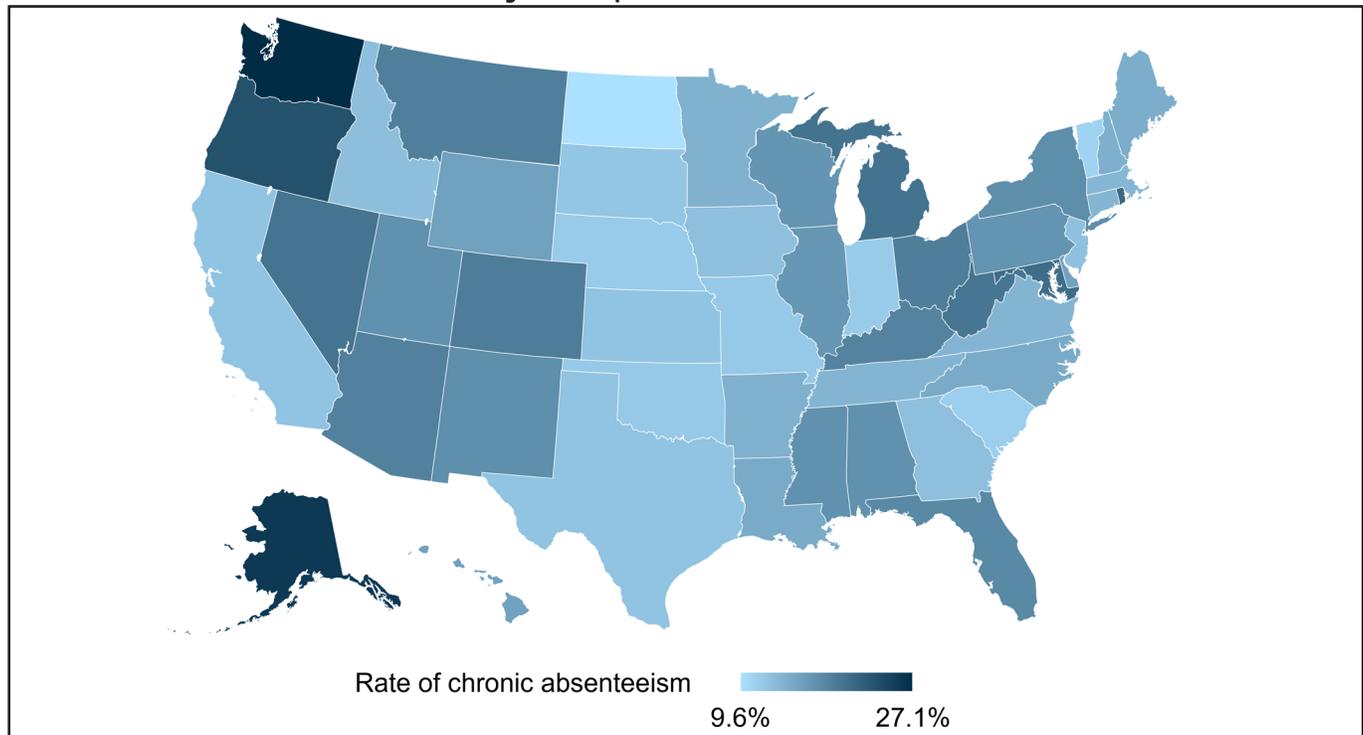
**Exhibit 14: Chronic absenteeism in Tennessee districts | 2018-19**



Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

In 2015-16, the last time national chronic absenteeism data was collected and reported by the federal Office for Civil Rights (OCR), Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism rate of 13.8 percent ranked 18th lowest of all states and fell below the nationwide average of 15.9 percent. The OCR defined a chronically absent student as one who missed 15 or more days from school, a stricter threshold than the definition currently used by most states (including Tennessee), i.e., 10 percent or more days in the instructional school year. That year Washington had the highest rate at 27.1 percent, while North Dakota’s rate of 9.6 percent was the lowest.

**Exhibit 15: Chronic absenteeism by state | 2015-16**



Note: These rates are based on defining chronic absenteeism as missing 15 days of school. The definition of chronic absenteeism used by Tennessee is missing at least 10 percent of instructional days (typically 18 days).

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights.



Free and reduced-price *breakfast* may be offered by schools in addition to lunch. Sixty percent of attendance supervisors (59 respondents) and 49 percent of principals (226 respondents) responding to OREA surveys reported that their students have access to free breakfast at their schools. Approximately 65 percent of Tennessee students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches also eat breakfast at school, ranking the state above the national average of 57 percent. On average, students who eat school breakfast attend 1.5 more days of school and are more likely to graduate high school than their peers who do not eat breakfast.

In most schools, breakfast is offered before the school day begins and students must arrive early to participate. To increase student participation in school breakfast programs, the coordinated school health department at TDOE encourages schools to institute alternative breakfast models such as Breakfast in the Classroom (served in the classroom as the school day begins), Second Chance breakfast (served after first period in either the cafeteria or mobile classes throughout the school), or Grab and Go breakfast (served at easy to access locations and eaten in the classroom). TDOE reports that the average participation rate for school breakfast programs in Tennessee goes up to 90 percent when an alternative breakfast model is used.

On the OREA surveys, 45 percent of attendance supervisors (45 respondents) and 28 percent of principals (130 respondents) indicated alternative breakfast models are used in their districts and schools.

### ***Family resource centers***

Family resource centers (FRCs) are often used as tools to address student absenteeism and target many of the factors that commonly affect economically disadvantaged students. FRCs provide or assist students and families with obtaining essential goods and services, such as food, clothing, and housing. The centers, operating in 79 school districts within 65 counties, may be run directly by the district or in partnership with another organization.<sup>9</sup> All centers are to collaborate with other state and local agencies, churches, and/or nonprofits to help students and their families meet a variety of needs.

Each FRC identifies focus areas and sets specific goals based on the needs of the students and families in the school district. As of November 2020, 51 of the state's 102 FRCs had identified student attendance and truancy as a primary focus. Over half of attendance supervisors (55 respondents, each representing different districts) and 31 percent of principals (143 respondents) indicated on the OREA surveys that they have used their FRC for help with issues that affect student attendance, such as by securing transportation for students, meeting family health needs such as chronic lice infestation, and assisting with hotel arrangements for families who need housing.

### ***Reduced public assistance***

A Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) rule requires school attendance, including kindergarten, of all school-age children who receive need-based public assistance through the state's Families First program, unless good cause is established for nonattendance.<sup>10</sup> Parents of school-age children must provide verification of school enrollment (e.g., enrollment documents, a copy of the child's most recent report card).<sup>5</sup> The maximum penalty for failure to comply with the school attendance requirement is a 20 percent reduction in public assistance benefits. This penalty is to be assessed whenever verification of school attendance is not provided and/or a child is found truant without a good cause for missing school.

Data provided by DHS in July of 2020 show that the benefits for approximately 1,000 families were reduced in 2018 and 2019 because they did not meet the student attendance requirements.

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<sup>5</sup> If parents choose to homeschool, they are not exempt from the Families First Employment and Training participation requirement (i.e., participating in the TANF workforce development and employment program).

**Exhibit 17: Reduced DHS public assistance for school attendance | 2015 through 2020 (partial)**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>January</b>	297	74	62	59	103	130
<b>February</b>	33	73	72	83	62	76
<b>March</b>	52	96	71	65	83	100
<b>April</b>	48	75	65	78	102	59
<b>May</b>	53	80	60	57	81	29
<b>June</b>	67	74	62	84	90	17
<b>July</b>	47	45	57	77	109	–
<b>August</b>	26	58	69	121	118	–
<b>September</b>	47	106	60	126	104	–
<b>October</b>	73	64	86	141	116	–
<b>November</b>	156	99	69	106	108	–
<b>December</b>	86	97	79	82	83	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>985</b>	<b>941</b>	<b>812</b>	<b>1,079</b>	<b>1,159</b>	–

Source: Department of Human Services.

An individual under the age of 20 without a high school diploma who is the head of a household and has a child who is at least 16 weeks of age must work toward attaining a high school diploma or its equivalent or risk a 20 percent reduction in public assistance benefits.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Students with disabilities***

From 2017 to 2019, students with disabilities were 1.45 times more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities (18.3 percent vs. 12.6 percent). This was on par with OCR attendance data from the 2015-16 school year, which showed that students with disabilities were 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities.<sup>12</sup> Students with disabilities made up 13 percent of the total student population in the state and nearly 18 percent of all chronically absent students from 2017 to 2019.

Respondents to the OREA survey of principals indicated students with disabilities face additional barriers to attendance because of physical or mental limitations that make a typical school day difficult to navigate.<sup>13</sup> Over a third of principals stated that students with disabilities tend to miss more school because of chronic health issues and frequent doctor’s appointments. A few principals mentioned that some students with disabilities may experience school-related anxiety that can affect their attendance.

<sup>11</sup> OCR data is based on missing 15 days of school, while Tennessee defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of instructional days (typically 18 days).

<sup>12</sup> Students with disabilities may have a modified attendance schedule in their IEP or modified 504 plan if they are unable to follow the typical school schedule. (See pages 45-47 for more information.)



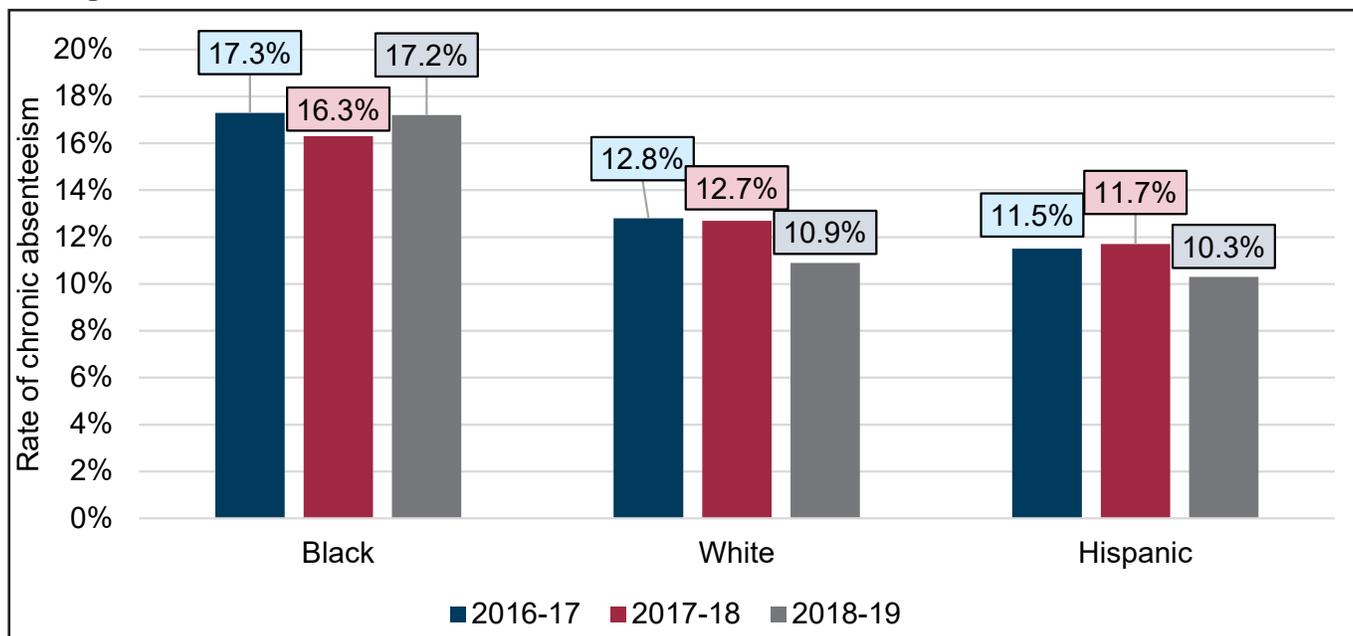
## Racial groups

Black students had higher chronic absenteeism rates than either White or Hispanic students for 2017 through 2019. Analysis of students by race showed that the number of chronically absent Black students decreased by over 1,300 students from 2017 to 2019, however. But since the total population of Black students decreased by a greater amount over the time period, the chronic absenteeism rate for Black students stayed relatively the same.

In spite of a population increase of over 9,300 students, the number of Hispanic chronically absent students decreased by just over 180, which resulted in a net decrease of chronic absenteeism for Hispanic students over the time period.

The chronic absenteeism rate for White students decreased by nearly 15 percent during the time period, as the number of those who were chronically absent declined by over 15,000 at the same time the total population of such students decreased by almost 30,000.

**Exhibit 20: Chronic absenteeism (CA) rate of Black, White, and Hispanic students | 2017 through 2019**



	2016-17		2017-18		2018-19		Change in CA students		Change in all students	
	CA	Total	CA	Total	CA	Total	Number change	Percent change	Number change	Percent change
<b>Black</b>	41,093	237,946	38,687	237,892	39,781	231,423	-1,312	-3.19%	-6,523	-2.74%
<b>White</b>	80,521	627,192	79,198	621,207	64,967	597,244	-15,554	-19.05%	-29,948	-4.77%
<b>Hispanic</b>	11,210	97,298	11,924	101,718	11,028	106,633	-182	-1.62%	+9,335	+8.75%

Attendance data for Black and Hispanic students is used in accountability measures by TDOE along with data for Native American students (not shown in the Exhibit 20). When the data for these student subgroups is broken down further, as shown in Exhibit 21, Black students and Native American students had chronic absenteeism rates above the statewide rate for the three years reviewed. All other groups were below the statewide rate for chronic absenteeism.

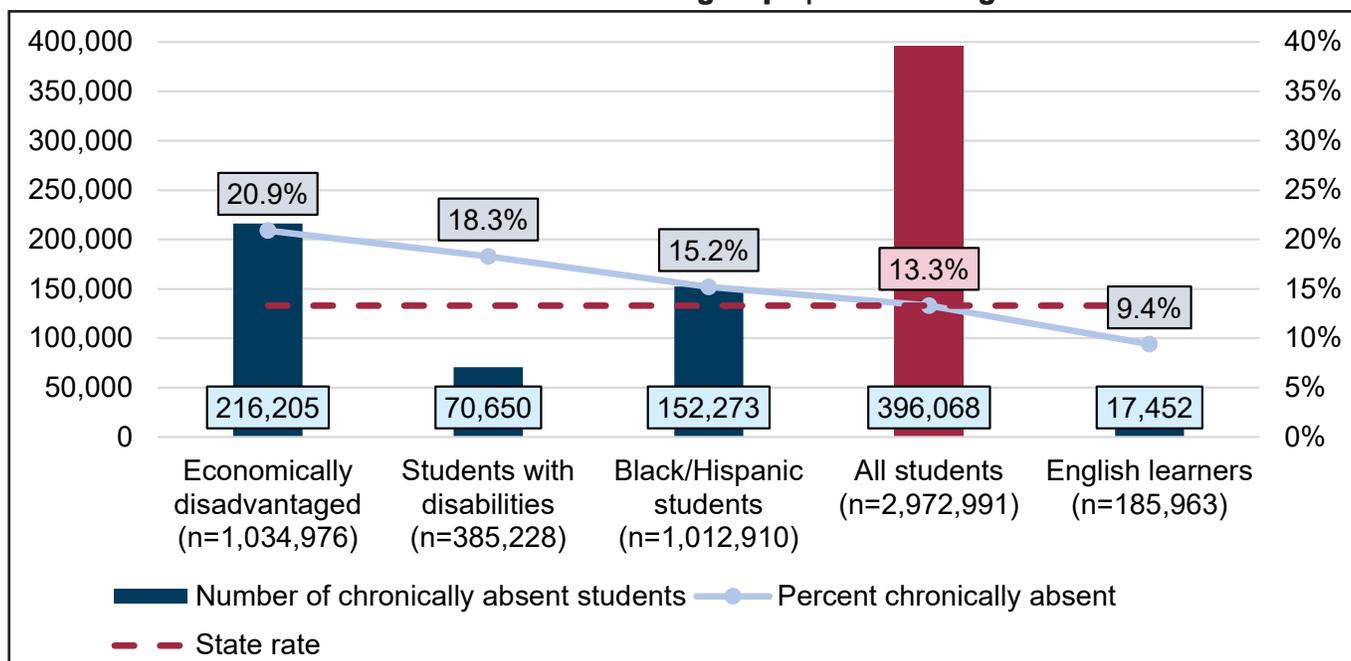
**Exhibit 21: Chronic absenteeism by race | 2017 through 2019**

	Average number of CA students per year	Percent CA
<b>Black</b>	39,854	16.9%
<b>Native American</b>	535	15.4%
<b>State Rate</b>	<b>132,023</b>	<b>13.3%</b>
<b>White</b>	74,895	12.2%
<b>Hispanic</b>	11,387	11.2%
<b>Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</b>	189	10.1%
<b>Asian</b>	1,064	4.6%

Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

Between 2017 and 2019, English learners was the only student subgroup with a chronic absenteeism rate below the state rate of 13.3 percent. The chronic absenteeism rates of economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and Black or Hispanic students were all above that of the state.<sup>w</sup>

**Exhibit 22: Chronic absenteeism of student subgroups | 2017 through 2019**



Note: Black and Hispanic students are used in measures by TDOE along with Native American students (not shown here).

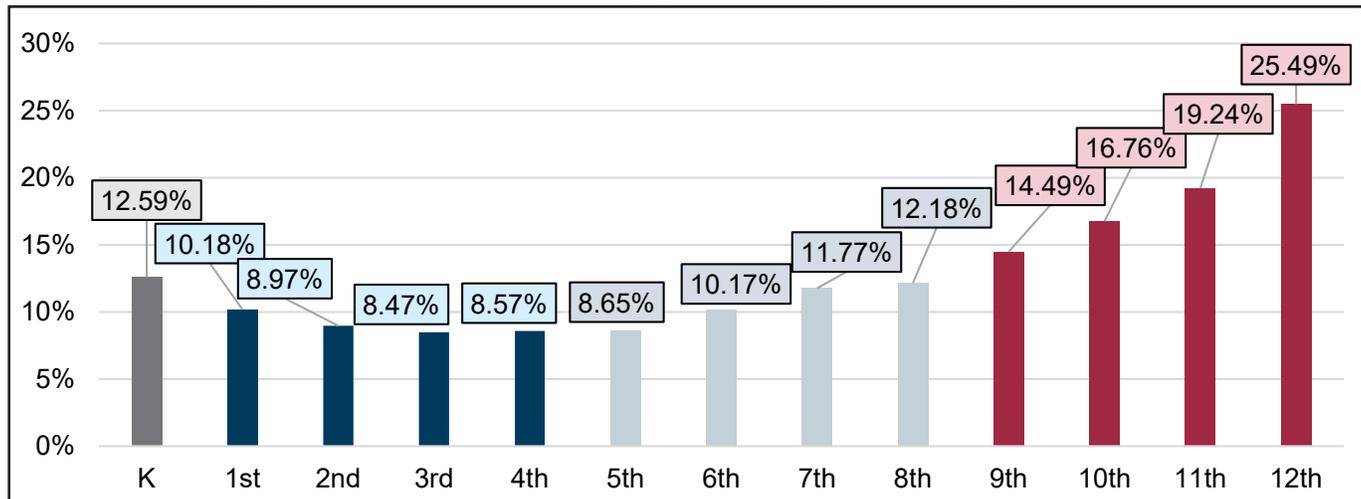
Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

### Grade levels

In Tennessee, the four high school grades had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in 2017, 2018, and 2019, followed closely by kindergarten and 8th grade. Chronic absenteeism rates for students in grades 2 through 5 stayed under 10 percent for all three years; the lowest rates of chronic absenteeism were found in grades 3 through 5. The rate steadily increased through middle school and, more rapidly, in high school. Chronic absenteeism rates for 9th through 12th grade students were above the state rate for each of the three years examined. On average, seniors were 67 percent more likely to be chronically absent than 3rd graders, who were the least likely to be chronically absent.

<sup>w</sup> See Appendix C for a more detailed breakdown of the chronic absenteeism of student subgroups.

**Exhibit 23: Average chronic absenteeism by grade level | 2017 through 2019**



Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

From 2017 to 2019, the chronic absenteeism rate of all grade levels decreased with one exception: the chronic absenteeism rate rose by 3 percent for 8th grade. The rate for 12th grade declined from 26.44 percent in 2017 to 23.81 percent in 2019, though the chronic absenteeism rate for 12th graders remained the highest of all grades.

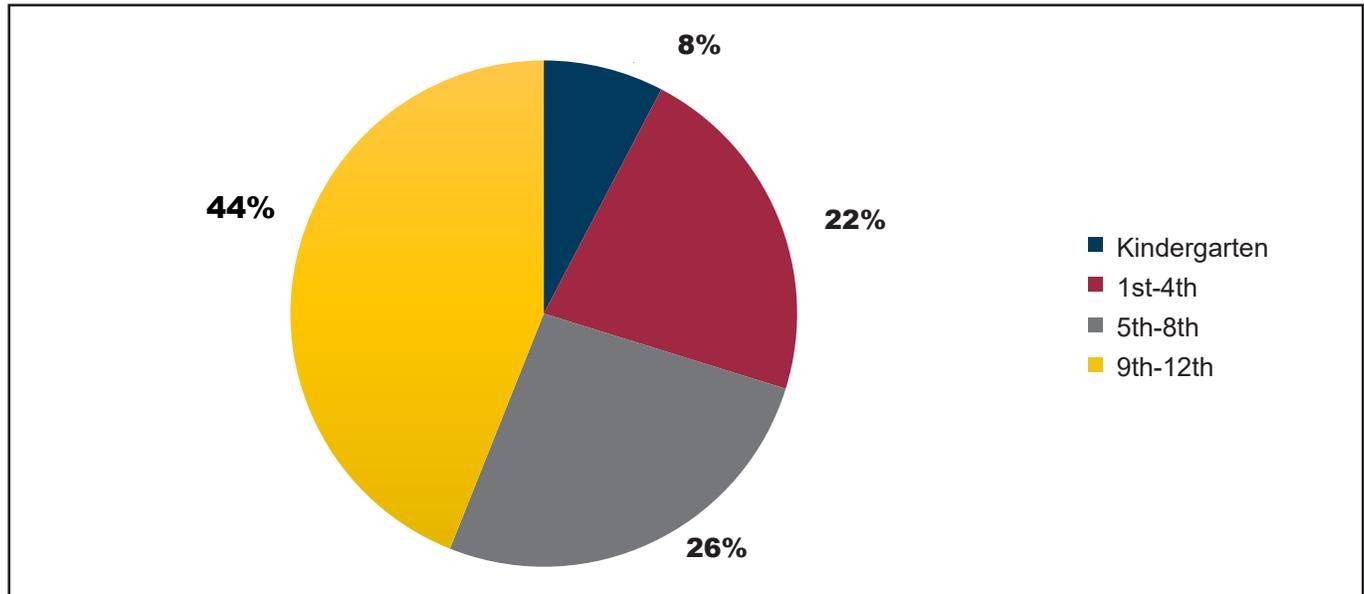
**Exhibit 24: Chronic absenteeism by grade level | 2017 through 2019**

	2016-17 CA rate	2017-18 CA rate	2018-19 CA rate	3-year trend in total # of students	3-year trend in total # of CA students	3-year trend of CA rate
<b>Kindergarten</b>	12.68%	12.57%	12.53%	+1,198	+37	-1.18%
<b>1st grade</b>	10.44%	10.27%	9.83%	+1,028	-354	-5.87%
<b>2nd grade</b>	9.14%	8.96%	8.80%	-330	-278	-3.69%
<b>3rd grade</b>	8.70%	8.46%	8.27%	-3,449	-618	-4.95%
<b>4th grade</b>	8.73%	8.58%	8.41%	-3,389	-542	-3.75%
<b>5th grade</b>	8.67%	8.63%	8.64%	+975	+64	-0.31%
<b>6th grade</b>	10.21%	10.31%	10.00%	+3,702	+209	-2.05%
<b>7th grade</b>	11.74%	11.98%	11.60%	+2,843	+234	-1.18%
<b>8th grade</b>	11.98%	12.21%	12.35%	+1,411	+449	+3.00%
<b>9th grade</b>	14.94%	14.40%	14.14%	-32	-624	-5.39%
<b>10th grade</b>	16.72%	17.33%	16.23%	-1,582	-610	-2.91%
<b>11th grade</b>	19.48%	19.44%	18.81%	-1,296	-707	-3.42%
<b>12th grade</b>	26.44%	26.22%	23.81%	+902	-1,520	-9.93%

Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

During the 2017, 2018, and 2019 school years, nearly half of all chronically absent students in Tennessee were high school students. Twenty-six percent of all chronically absent students were middle schoolers, and 22 percent were 1st through 4th graders. The remaining 8 percent were kindergarten students. Kindergarten students accounted for over 25 percent of all chronically absent elementary school students.

**Exhibit 25: Average percentage of chronically absent students per grade | 2017 through 2019**



Note: The number of students per grade level is a three-year average for 2017 through 2019.  
Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

On the OREA survey of principals, respondents offered insight as to why certain grades may be more or less likely to be chronically absent. In kindergarten, students are adjusting to a new schedule and an unfamiliar environment and attendance is inconsistent for some students as a result. In addition, some younger students are exposed to new germs upon entering kindergarten, leading to a higher number of absences due to illness, according to principals.

In the higher grades, especially high school, principals stated that some students start to miss more school as they develop a more independent life outside of school (e.g., driving themselves, getting a job, etc.). Several principals specifically mentioned that high school seniors' attendance rates may decline because of decreased parental supervision and an easier class schedule. In addition, truancy laws no longer apply to students who reach the age of 18, which occurs for some students during their senior year.

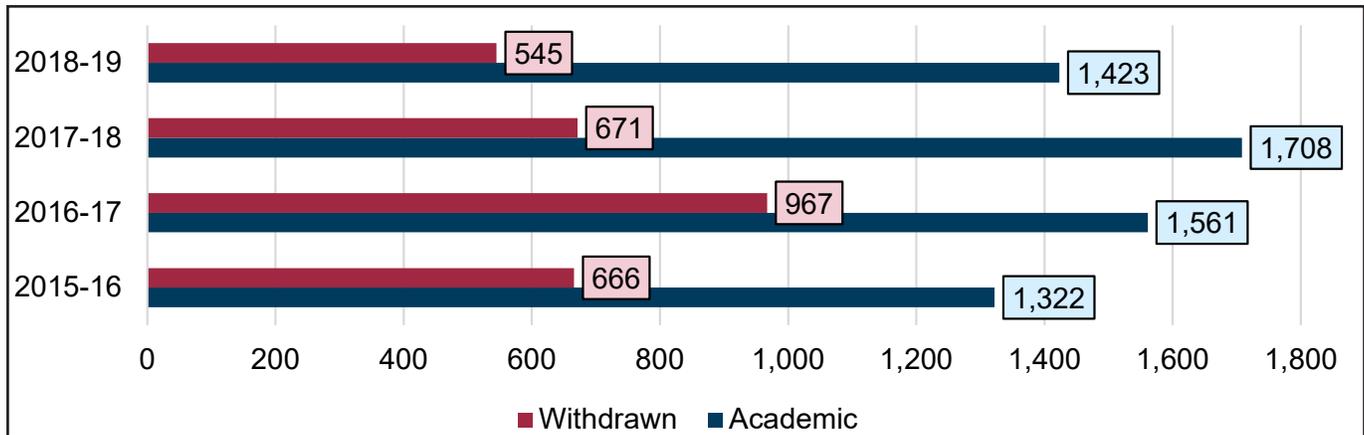
*“Seniors play the system for truancy. They learn and push the envelope on the laws for school truancy. Once students get close to or past 18 years old, they will miss at their will, often do not correct when attendance becomes a problem. I would like to see this law changed. If a student turns 18 during their senior year, they must comply with compulsory attendance laws.”*

Respondent to OREA survey of principals, Dec. 2019

Some districts schedule graduation ceremonies before the final day of school (i.e., before the 180th instructional day of the school year), and students who discontinue attending classes after graduation are counted as absent for any days remaining in the school year and may still be identified as chronically absent. For example, high school graduation ceremonies were held early in one Tennessee school district in 2019, and the chronic absenteeism rate for the school district's 12th graders increased thereafter as graduating seniors were absent for the eight days remaining in the school year.



**Exhibit 27: License suspension for excessive truancy (i.e., withdrawn) vs. lack of academic progress**



Note: Suspension data include any student aged 15-17 regardless of whether the student has been issued any type of driver license. The law requires the department to suspend the offender’s ability to obtain as well as retain a license.  
 Source: Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security.

The number of driver licenses reinstated includes students who have reached age 18 and are thus no longer subject to compulsory education laws. The reinstatements for 2015 through 2019 are broken down by reason in Exhibit 28.

**Exhibit 28: Types of compliance for license reinstatement for 2015 through 2019**

Reason for reinstatement	# of reinstatements
<b>18 years of age</b>	708
<b>Diploma or GED</b>	163
<b>HiSET (i.e., passed the state’s high school equivalency exam)</b>	9
<b>Home school form</b>	58
<b>Online school</b>	49
<b>Satisfactory attendance</b>	1,432
<b>Satisfactory academic progress</b>	794
<b>Truancy exemption</b>	46
<b>Total number of reinstatements</b>	<b>3,259</b>

Source: Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security.

Attendance supervisors and principals were asked to rate the effectiveness (e.g., preventing future unexcused absences) of the law. Of the respondents whose districts or schools serve students of driving age, most found the law to be *somewhat effective*, including 63 percent of attendance supervisors (58 of 92 respondents) and 46 percent of principals (83 of 179 respondents). In their comments, some attendance supervisors indicated the threat of losing a driver license is effective with their students and that they make a point to remind students of this possibility. Others stated that most truant students in their district are unfazed by the law because they either do not care enough about having a license or are content to wait until they reach age 18 and are no longer subject to possible

Implementation of the law varies by district.

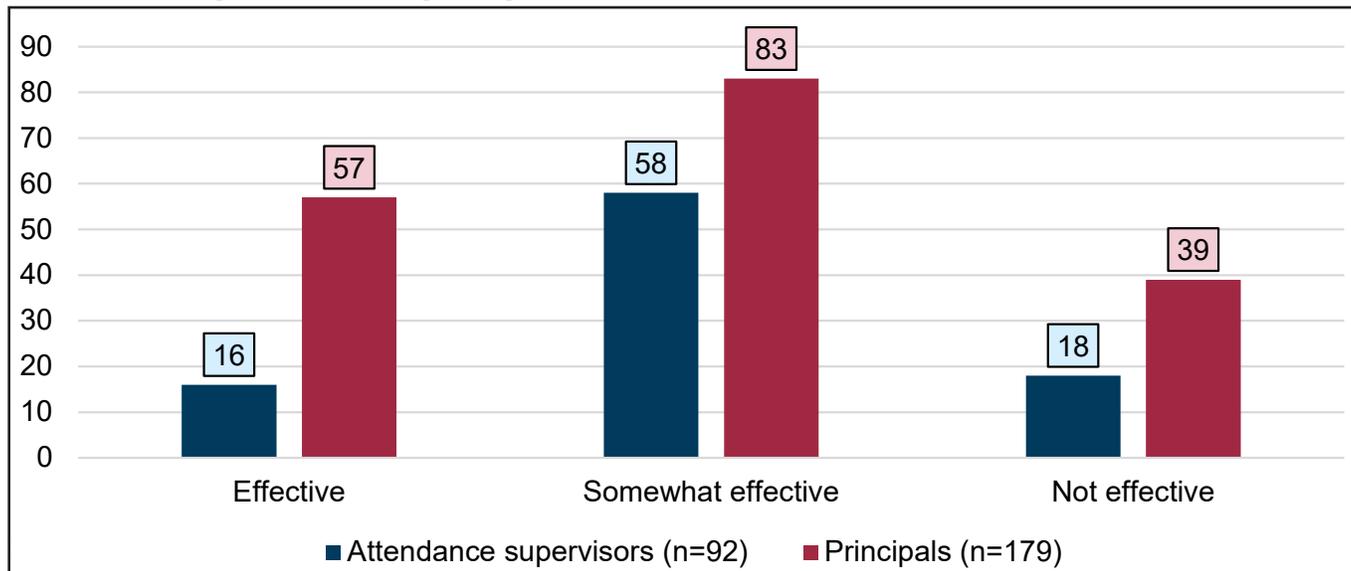
*“My director does not want me pulling licenses and my general sessions judge will only pull them in rare circumstances. I feel there is lack of support for this in my district.”*

-Respondent to OREA survey of principals, Dec. 2019

license suspension and revocation based on school attendance. Some respondents thought the number of days students must miss before the penalty can be triggered is too lenient. One respondent suggested aligning the specifications of this law with the newest attendance laws to strengthen its effectiveness (i.e., decrease the definition of withdrawal to five unexcused absences to align with the progressive truancy intervention plan).

Some attendance supervisors and principals indicated they were unaware of the law’s existence or do not implement it in their district for an unspecified reason.<sup>AC</sup>

**Exhibit 29: Effectiveness of suspending licenses for excessive truancy, according to attendance supervisors and principals**



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

In 2020, the Department of Safety and Homeland Security created a COVID-19 Proof of School Attendance Affidavit for students unable to provide proof of school attendance and academic progress due to school closures. When completed with a notarized parent signature, students could submit this form in lieu of documentation from the school.

***Directors of schools may enter a place of employment***

State law gives directors of schools the right to enter any office, factory, or business employing children zoned to attend schools within the school district.<sup>15</sup> The employer must produce certain documents that allow the student to work in the place of employment during the school day.<sup>AD</sup> Sixty-eight respondents (67 percent) to OREA’s survey of attendance supervisors said that to their knowledge no one in their districts had entered a place of employment to confirm that compulsory education laws were being followed. One attendance supervisor stated school officials have used this law for students with jobs who frequently miss school and that the tool is useful.

**Chronic absenteeism by district**

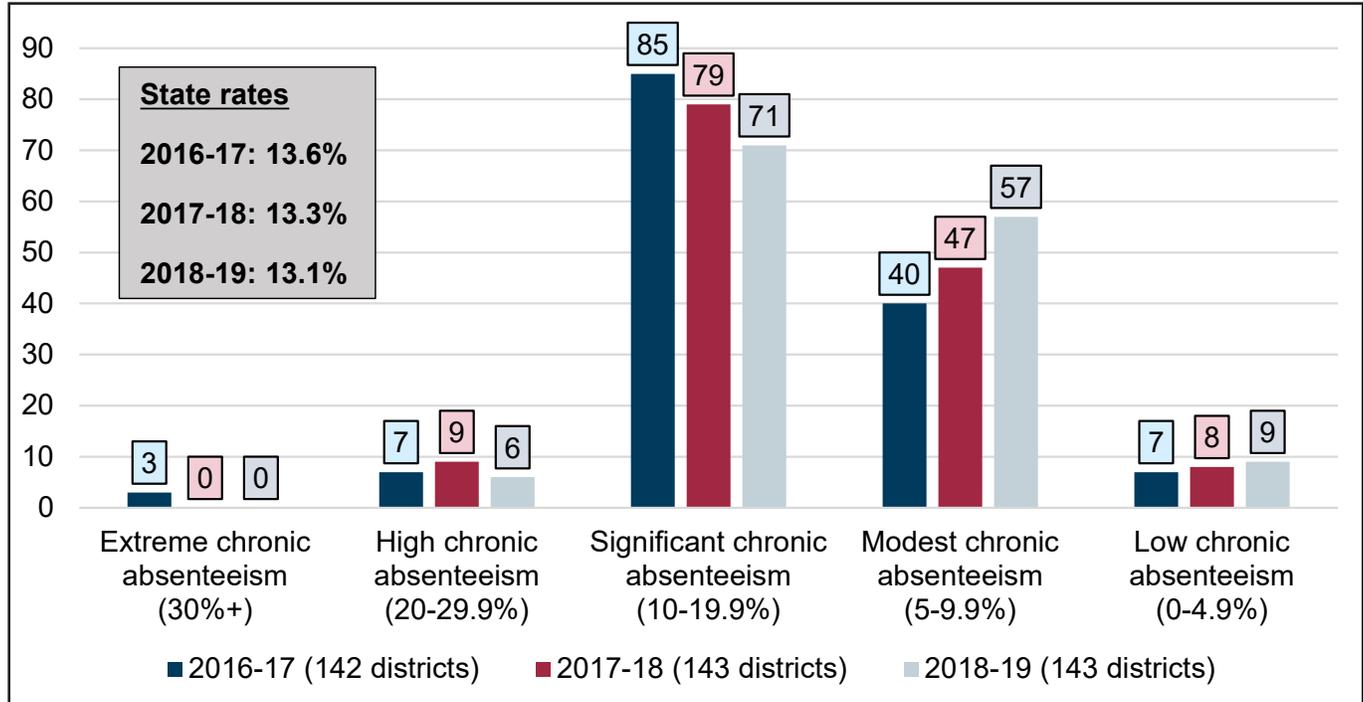
OREA sorted school districts by chronic absenteeism rate using the levels defined by Attendance Works in its 2018 *Data Matters* report. Districts with a rate of 30 percent or higher are considered to have *extreme* chronic absenteeism; in 2017, three Tennessee districts were in this category, but no districts had a rate this high in 2018 or 2019. The next highest category, *high* chronic absenteeism, captures schools with rates between 20 and 29.9 percent. The number of Tennessee districts in this category rose from seven to nine districts from

<sup>AC</sup>Ten attendance supervisors and 360 principals were filtered out of the results because their school or district does not serve students ages 15 to 17.

<sup>AD</sup> TCA 49-6-3008 was first enacted in 1947 and has remained largely unaltered over the past 74 years.

2017 to 2018, but then dropped to six districts in 2019. The biggest changes over the time period examined occurred in the *significant* and *modest* chronic absenteeism categories. The number of districts with *significant* chronic absenteeism (between 10 and 19.9 percent) decreased by 14 districts between 2017 and 2019, while the number of districts with *modest* chronic absenteeism (between 5 and 9.9 percent) increased by 17. Attendance Works identifies schools with chronic absenteeism rates of 0 to 4.9 percent as having *low* chronic absenteeism; the number of districts in this category increased from seven in 2017 to nine in 2019.

**Exhibit 30: District chronic absenteeism rates | 2017 through 2019**



Note: OREA used level breaks and terminology found in the Data Matters report published by Attendance Works in 2018.  
 Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

The state’s urban school districts – Metro Nashville, Hamilton County, Knox County, and Shelby County (including all ASD schools) – had an overall chronic absenteeism rate of 16.12 percent based on the 2017, 2018, and 2019 school years. Over the three-year period, a larger proportional share of students in these urban districts were chronically absent than in county districts, municipal districts, and special school districts.

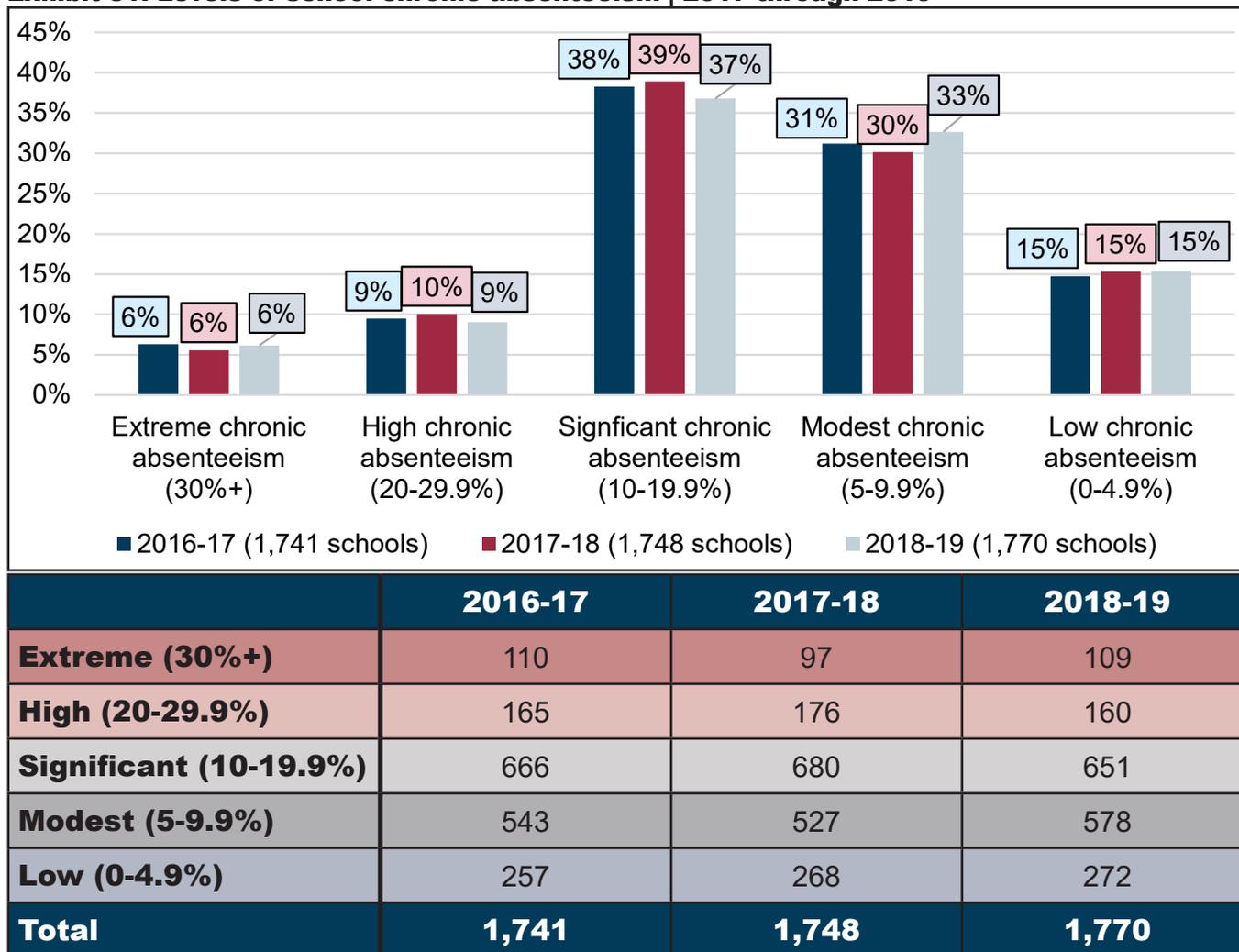
The chronic absenteeism rate in the state’s big four urban school districts rose from 15.84 percent in 2017 to 16.76 percent in 2019, an increase of almost 3,000 students, while the total student population was relatively static.

During the fall of 2019, OREA contacted districts with notable decreases in their chronic absenteeism rate to ask about the possible reasons behind the trends. Officials in three such districts – Rhea County, Cannon County, and Stewart County – cited new strategies aimed at encouraging student attendance to explain the decrease in their rates. The Cannon County attendance supervisor, whose district saw a nine-point decrease from 2017 to 2019, specifically cited setting attendance goals, holding celebrations when attendance goals were met, implementing the progressive truancy intervention plan (PTIP), and creating a truancy board. Stewart County officials attributed their seven-point decrease to a sharper focus on chronic absenteeism, greater involvement in student attendance matters from other school personnel beyond the attendance supervisor, and improved communications with parents as contributing factors to reducing chronic absenteeism in the district. Rhea County’s attendance supervisor credited strategies similar to those used in Cannon County and Stewart County for the district’s seven-point decrease.

## Chronic absenteeism by school

Using the categories established by Attendance Works, OREA sorted all schools by their chronic absenteeism rates for each school year from 2017 through 2019. Approximately 100 schools fell into the category of *extreme* chronic absenteeism (30 percent or higher) each year from 2017 to 2019. Most Tennessee schools (around 670 each year) had a chronic absenteeism rate between 10 and 19.9 percent, placing them in the *significant* chronic absenteeism category. The schools in the *significant* category collectively served over 1.1 million students during the three-year period examined. A large number of schools each year (approximately 550 schools each year) were at the level of *modest* chronic absenteeism, with rates of 5 to 9.9 percent. An average of 265 Tennessee schools had *low* chronic absenteeism each year between 2017 and 2019.

**Exhibit 31: Levels of school chronic absenteeism | 2017 through 2019**



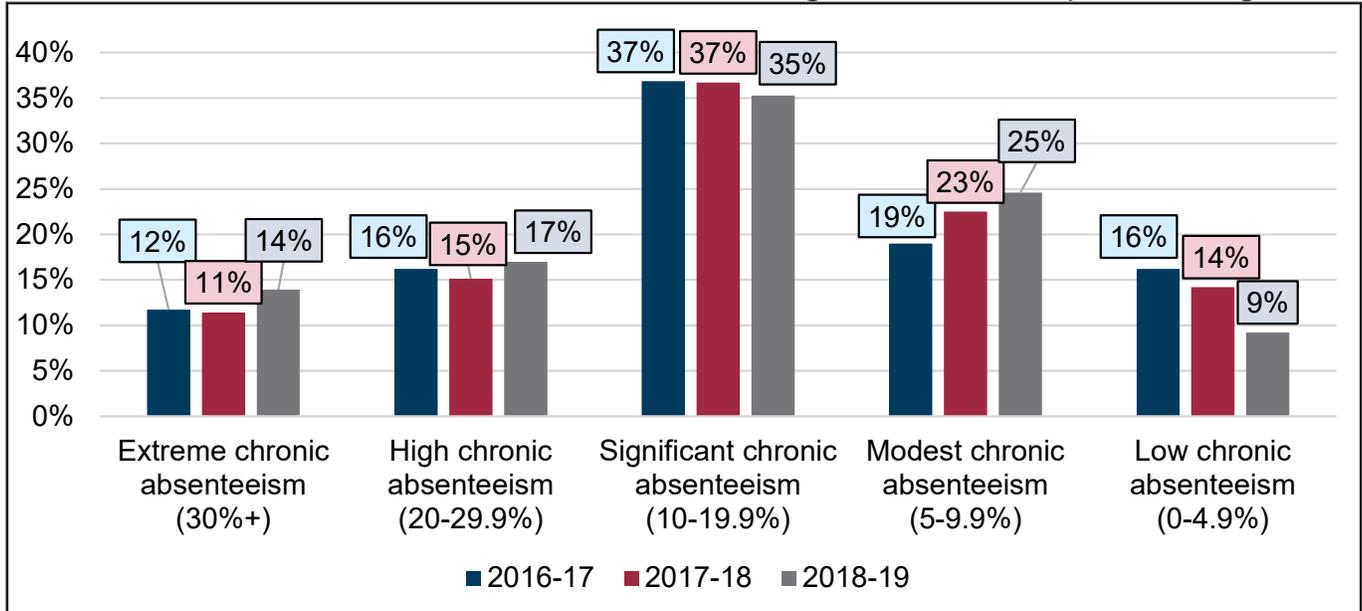
Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

OREA used level breaks and terminology found in the Data Matters report published by Attendance Works in 2018.

Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

Most schools in the state's big four urban districts (nearly 200 of approximately 550 schools) fell into the *significant* chronic absenteeism category for each of the three years. The number of schools in the *extreme* chronic absenteeism category increased by 15 in 2019. The *low* chronic absenteeism category encompassed fewer schools over the three-year period, falling from 87 schools in 2017 to 51 schools in 2019.

**Exhibit 32: Chronic absenteeism levels of schools in large urban districts | 2017 through 2019**



	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
<b>Extreme (30%+)</b>	63	62	77
<b>High (20-29.9%)</b>	87	82	94
<b>Significant (10-19.9%)</b>	198	199	195
<b>Modest (5-9.9%)</b>	102	122	136
<b>Low (0-4.9%)</b>	87	77	51
<b>Total</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>542</b>	<b>553</b>

Note: Large urban districts include the Achievement School District, Davidson County, Hamilton County, Knox County, and Shelby County.  
 Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

## Chronically Out of School Indicator

The Chronically Out of School Indicator measures year-to-year changes in chronic absenteeism, but a district or school’s chronic absenteeism rate alone is not necessarily indicative of its indicator rate. This is because the indicator is based on the attendance of all students from year-to-year as well as that of student subgroups.<sup>AE</sup> For example, a school’s overall chronic absenteeism rate may be 7 percent – below the statewide average – but if the rate for a particular student subgroup, such as economically disadvantaged students, is high and/or if the school’s overall rate of 7 percent is unchanged from the previous year, the school’s indicator rate may be lower.

The Chronically Out of School Indicator is based on multiple measures:

Measure 1: the percentage of students who are chronically out of school.

Measure 2: the percentage of students who are chronically out of school compared to an established target.

Measure 3: a student-level comparison that measures the reduction in chronic absenteeism for students who were chronically absent in the prior year, which is then compared to statewide numbers for districts only.

For *schools*, the indicator score is calculated based on Measure 1 or Measure 2, whichever the school scores best on.

<sup>AE</sup> Note: Students who are enrolled in two schools or districts for exactly 50 percent of the school year will count for both schools and both districts for accountability purposes.

For *districts*, the score is calculated by averaging Measure 1 or Measure 2, whichever the district scores best on, with Measure 3. Districts receive points for Measure 1 based on the percentage of students who are chronically absent and for Measure 2 by comparing performance to targets. Districts receive points for Measure 3 based on the number of improved or resolved cases of chronically absent students. The most points (four) are awarded to districts that score in the top one-fifth of districts in the state on each measure. Scoring continues in this manner through the remaining quintiles of statewide performance, as shown in Exhibit 33.<sup>AF</sup>

**Exhibit 33: Scoring for Chronically Out of School Indicator**



Districts and schools are assessed on the performance of all students and of student subgroups for each measure used in the indicator calculation.

Rates for the indicator were not calculated for the 2019-20 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In survey comments and interviews with OREA, several school officials expressed frustration with the use of the indicator in cases where a school’s low score was seen as largely the result of student absenteeism because of illness and medical appointments.

## Progressive truancy intervention plan

A 2017 state law requires school districts to implement a progressive truancy intervention plan (PTIP) for all truant students.<sup>AG,AH</sup> For the purposes of the PTIP, the law<sup>16</sup> classifies a student as truant upon accruing five unexcused absences.<sup>AI</sup> (For more about how absences are determined to be unexcused, see pages 6-8.) Once a student has accrued five unexcused absences, districts must implement a progressive truancy intervention plan. The purpose of the plan is to: (1) reduce truancy by addressing the root causes of students’ unexcused absences, and (2) reduce the number of truancy cases referred to juvenile court by effectively addressing such cases through the school system.

The PTIP includes punitive and nonpunitive measures in a tiered system, with the interventions becoming progressively more intense if earlier measures are unsuccessful.

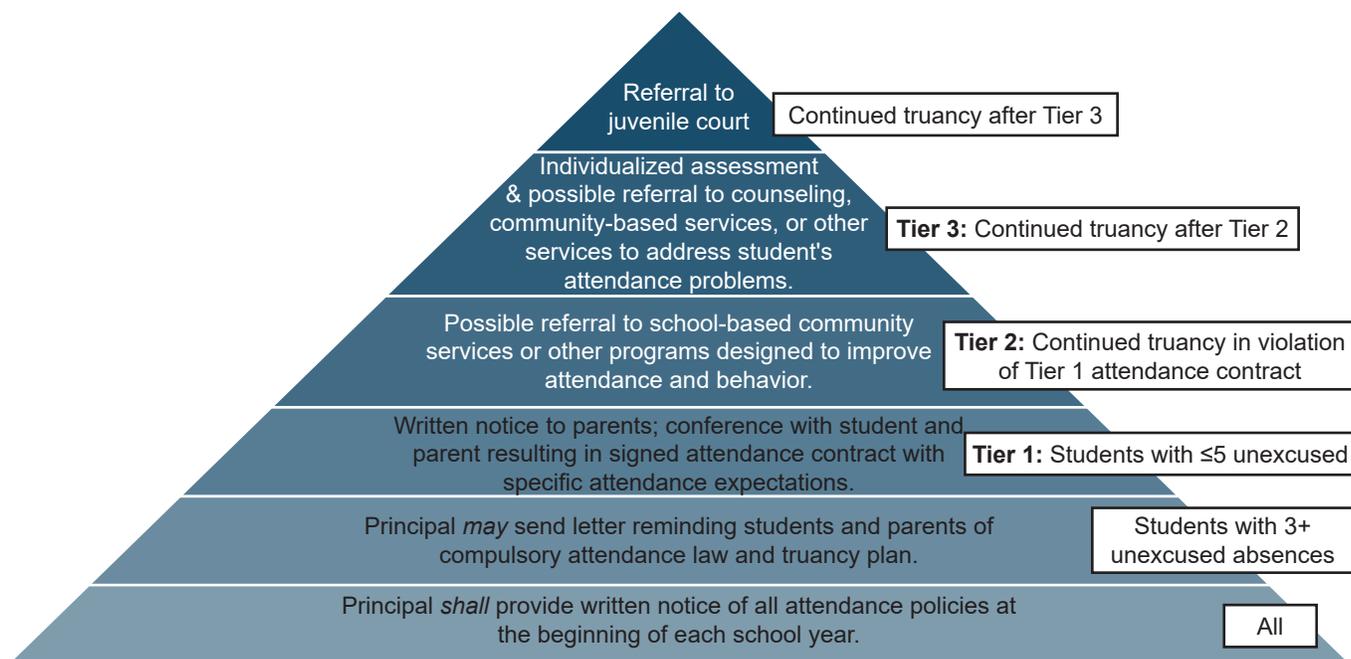
<sup>AF</sup> See Appendix B for more details on State Report Cards and how the Chronically Out of School Indicator score is calculated.

<sup>AG</sup> All research, including survey data, reflects procedures and policies in place *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>AH</sup> In 2016, the General Assembly created the Juvenile Justice Realignment Task Force to study new approaches to the administration of juvenile justice. The task force’s final report recommended revising Tennessee’s truancy laws, implementing school-based strategies to reduce student court referrals, and encouraging more partnerships between juvenile courts and school districts, among other recommendations. Based on these recommendations, the General Assembly passed Public Chapter 379 (2017), which requires school districts to implement a progressive truancy intervention plan (PTIP) for all truant students.

<sup>AI</sup> School districts may implement the PTIP prior to a student’s accrual of five unexcused absences. In addition, state law allows the director of schools or the school district’s attendance supervisor to send a written notice to the parents of students with three unexcused absences.

## Exhibit 34: Progressive truancy intervention plan



Source: OREA analysis of TCA 49-6-3007 and 3009.

According to the law, the director of schools or the district attendance supervisor *may* send a written notice to the parents of students with three unexcused absences. On OREA surveys, 74 percent of districts and 77 percent of schools represented by respondents indicated such notices are sent to parents.

### ***Tier 1 | Must be implemented once a student accrues five unexcused absences***

State law requires the director of schools or the school district's attendance supervisor to serve (or cause to be served) written notice to the parents of a student who has accumulated five unexcused absences. In some districts, parents may submit notes to excuse the absences that led to the written notice. If parents do not submit such notes after receiving the written notice, however, the PTIP is then activated.<sup>A)</sup>

At Tier 1, schools must organize a conference with the student, parent or guardian, and school administration to discuss an attendance contract that all parties must agree to and sign. The attendance contract must include specific expectations for the student, the period for which the contract is in effect, and the penalties if the student continues to be truant.

*"It helps all involved to be aware of student's absences and to constantly remind them of good attendance benefits."*

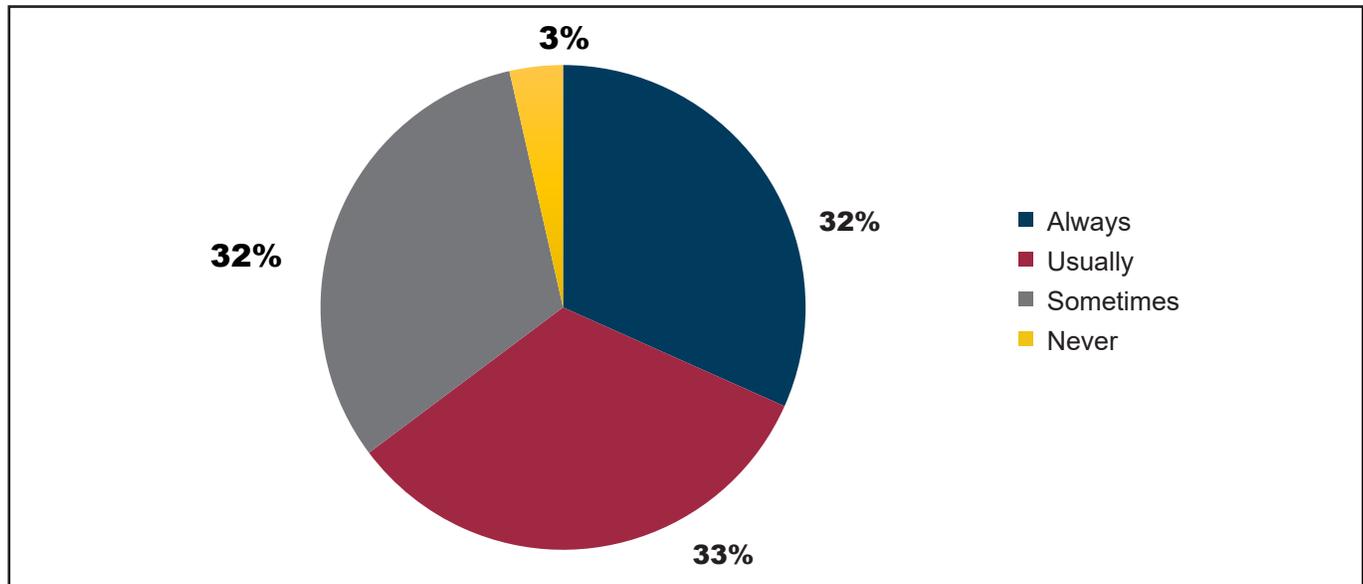
Respondent to OREA survey of principals, Dec. 2019

The law requires school administrators to hold regular follow-up meetings with the student and the parents to discuss the student's progress during Tier 1.<sup>17</sup> On OREA surveys, most respondents, including 35 attendance supervisors (34 percent) and 179 principals (33 percent), stated that such follow-up meetings *usually* occur.

Given difficulties in getting some parents to attend a formal, face-to-face meeting and other scheduling challenges, the Tier 1 follow-up meetings may take the form of a conversation by phone or a brief exchange between school officials and parents in the pick-up line after school is dismissed. Based on survey comments, school officials typically hold follow-up meetings for Tier 1 only if attendance has not improved.

<sup>A)</sup> The PTIP must be implemented by five unexcused absences, but some district policies call for implementation once a student has accumulated three unexcused absences. Districts with policies that call for earlier implementation of the PTIP may not implement the plan until a student has accumulated more than three unexcused absences, however, according to survey respondents. Reasons for delayed implementation in these districts included problems scheduling PTIP meetings, uncooperative parents, and a lack of personnel and resources.

**Exhibit 35: Frequency of follow-up meetings occurring during Tier 1, according to attendance supervisors and principals (n=647)**

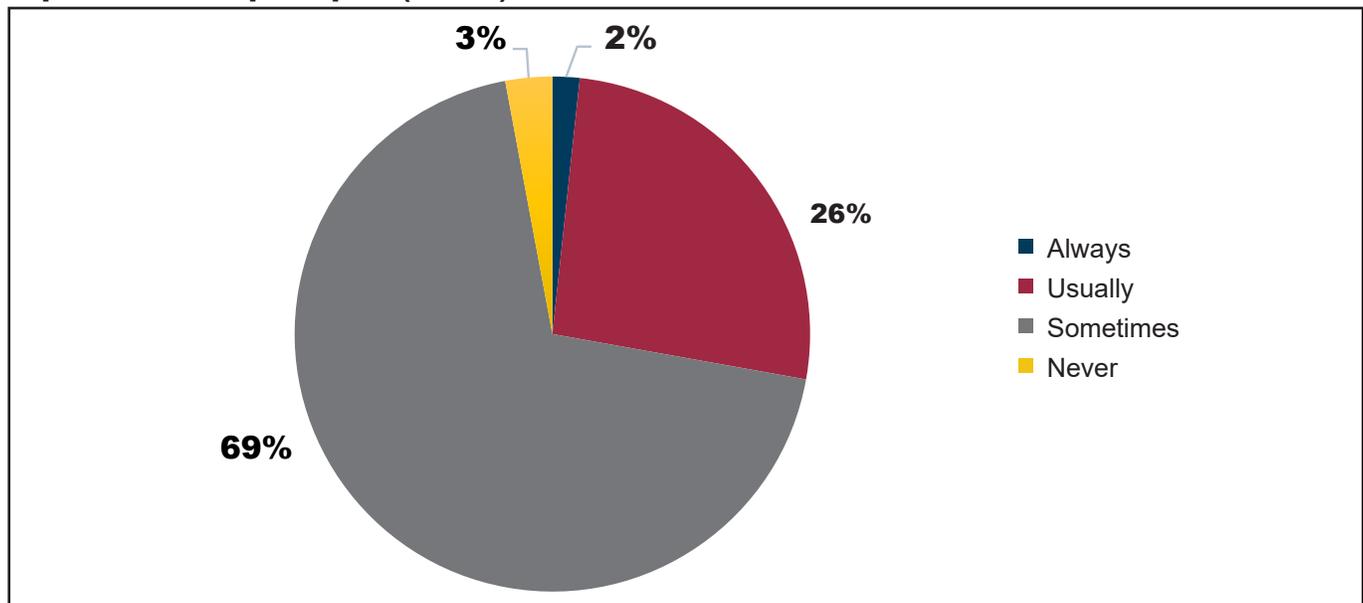


Note: This graph combines the attendance supervisor and principal survey results because the trends between the two surveys were consistent with one another.  
 Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

In cases where a student’s attendance has not improved after implementation of the Tier 1 attendance contract, school administrators might move directly to Tier 2 without a Tier 1 follow-up meeting or meetings.

If attendance problems continue, students progress to the next tier of the PTIP. On OREA surveys, almost half of attendance supervisors (50 of 102) said that students *sometimes* move from Tier 1 to Tier 2 compared to 73 percent of principals (398 of 545). In some cases, lack of progression may be due to the amount of time it takes to move through the process as opposed to actual improved attendance.

**Exhibit 36: Progression of students from Tier 1 to Tier 2 of the PTIP, according to attendance supervisors and principals (n=647)**



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

## Tier 2 | Implemented if student violates the attendance contract signed in Tier 1

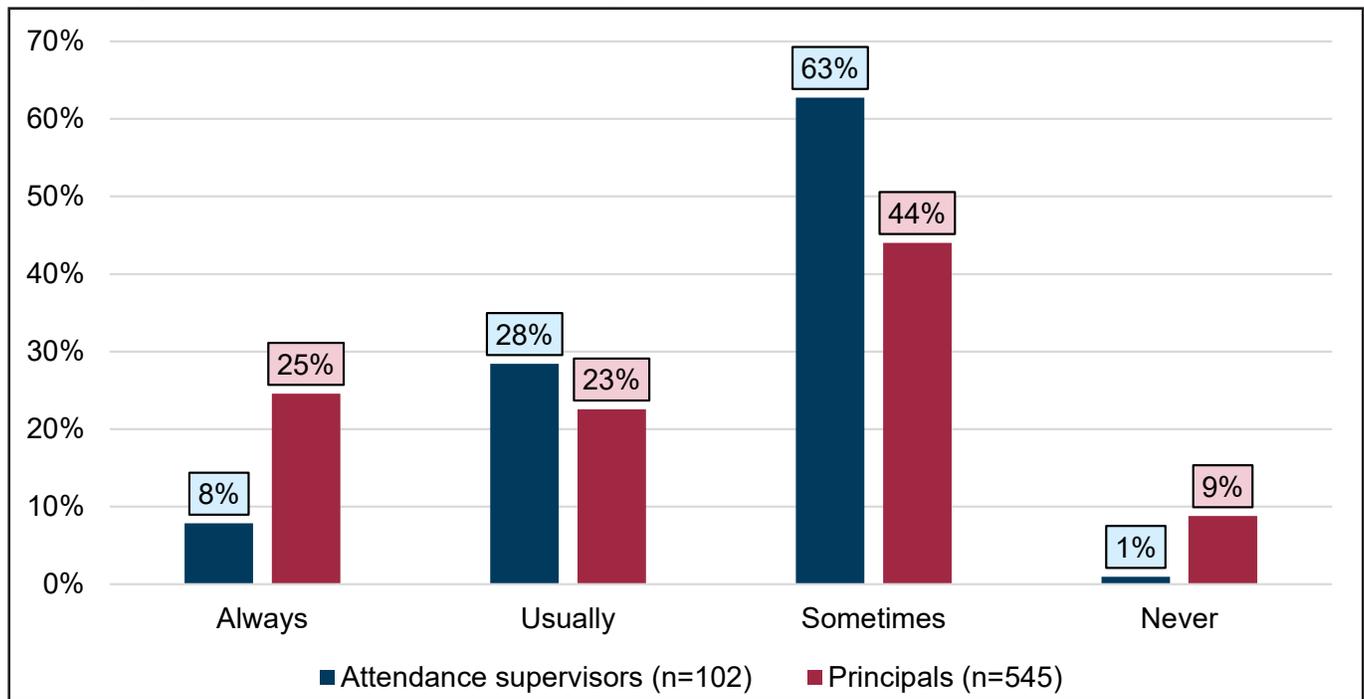
State law requires schools to initiate Tier 2 of the PTIP upon a student's accrual of additional unexcused absences in violation of the Tier 1 attendance contract. In most districts, Tier 2 is implemented once a student has accrued between 5 and 8 unexcused absences.

For Tier 2, school employees must complete an individualized assessment of the student to pinpoint the reasons for continued unexcused absences. School officials may then refer the student to counseling, community-based services, or other in-school or out-of-school programs aimed at addressing the student's attendance problems. The majority of survey respondents, 64 attendance supervisors (63 percent) and 240 principals (44 percent), estimated that students in their districts who reach Tier 2 of the PTIP are *sometimes* referred to services to address attendance problems.

*"We have found it more effective to place the students and parents into the juvenile court at five unexcused [absences]. It generally stopped the issue with less time spent on the administration of the tiers."*

Respondent to OREA survey of principals, Dec. 2019

### Exhibit 37: Frequency of Tier 2 students referred to services for attendance problems, according to attendance supervisors and principals

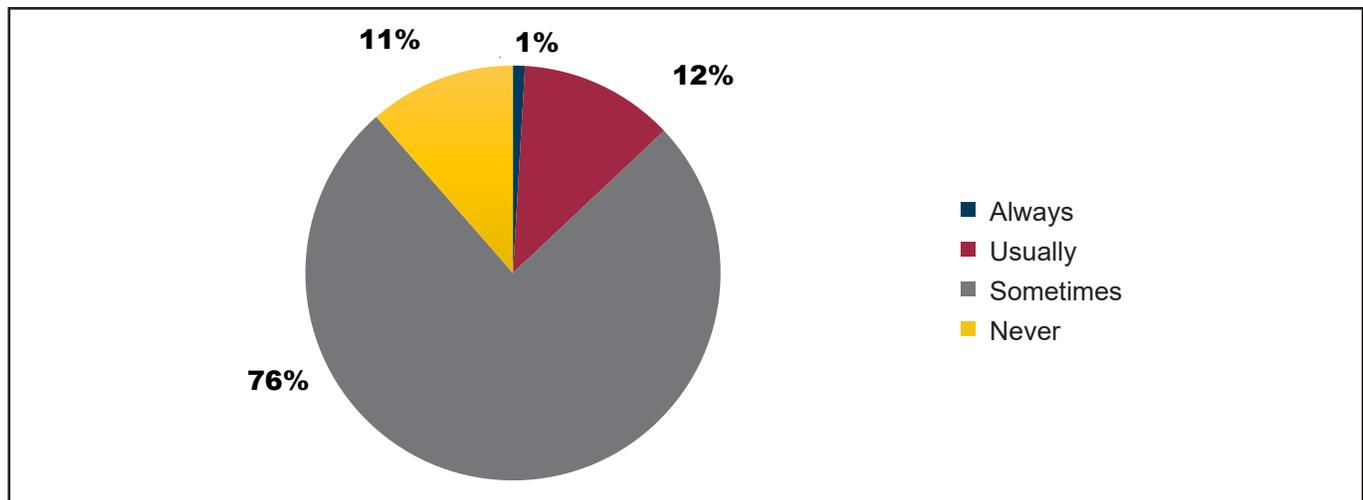


Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

Students whose attendance issues persist will progress to the next tier of the PTIP. On OREA surveys, 82 attendance supervisors (80 percent) and 407 principals (75 percent) indicated students who reach Tier 2 *sometimes* progress to Tier 3.

**Exhibit 38: Progression of students from Tier 2 to Tier 3 of the PTIP, according to attendance supervisors and principals (n=647)**



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

**Tier 3 | Implemented if student continues to accrue unexcused absences after Tier 2**

Students who continue to accumulate unexcused absences despite the Tier 2 interventions progress to Tier 3 of the PTIP. In most districts, Tier 3 is implemented once a student has accrued 10 or more unexcused absences. Tier 3 ensures that schools attempt at least one more intervention before then referring the student to juvenile court if unexcused absences continue to be accrued.

Tier 3 may consist of one or more of the following:

- school-based community services,
- participation in a school-based restorative justice program,
- referral to a school-based teen court, or
- Saturday or after school courses designed to improve attendance or behavior.<sup>18</sup>

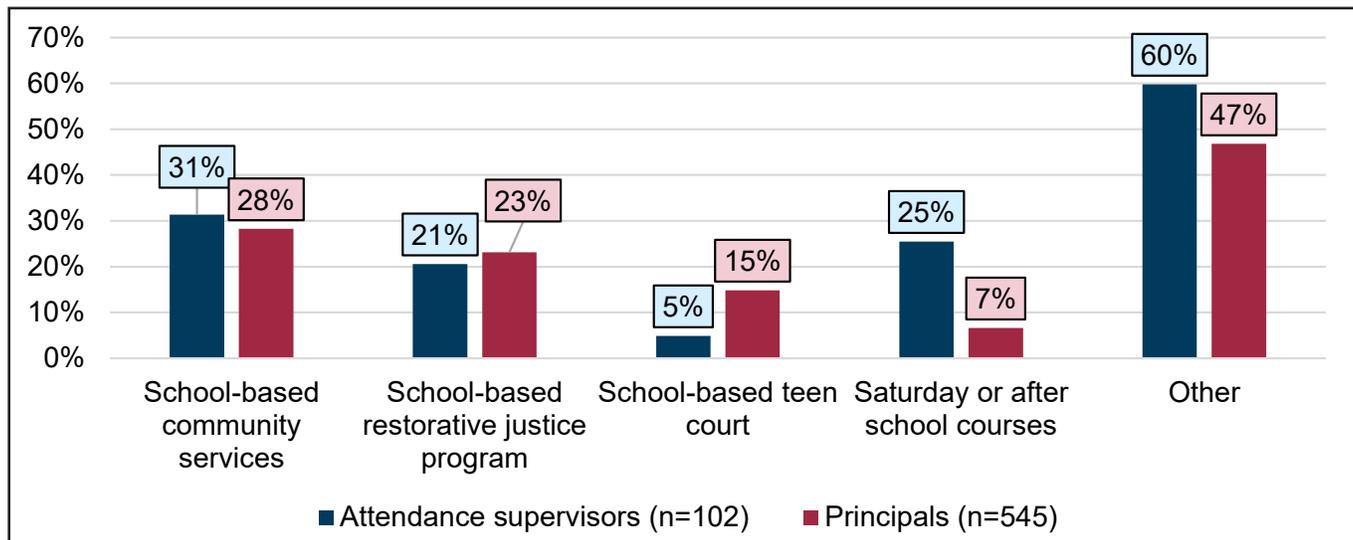
*“[The progressive truancy intervention plan] appears to be a necessary evil that since state law mandates it school districts must comply. This ties the hands of districts that have a great working relationship with juvenile courts and juvenile staff.”*

Respondent to OREA survey of attendance supervisors, Dec. 2019

OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals asked respondents to indicate which services they use for students in Tier 3. Thirty-two supervisors and 154 principals (around 30 percent of each) stated school-based community services (e.g., mental health services) are used for students who reach Tier 3.

Most respondents, however, including 61 supervisors (60 percent) and 255 principals (47 percent), selected *Other*. Sixteen attendance supervisors and 38 principals who selected this response indicated a truancy board is used for students who reach Tier 3. Composed of school officials, mental health professionals, and/or other parties (e.g., DCS representatives), truancy boards review truancy cases and typically prescribe and coordinate a multidisciplinary program designed to improve student attendance and academic achievement. Sixty percent of juvenile court judge respondents (25 judges) to the OREA survey indicated truancy boards are used in their counties. Some truancy boards are run by the school system, while others are managed by the court or through a partnership between the court and the school system, according to survey respondents.

### Exhibit 39: Usage of services for Tier 3, according to attendance supervisors and principals



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

Two attendance supervisors and nine principals who selected *Other* indicated Tier 3 students are referred to campus court, a nonpunitive extension of the district juvenile court. Almost all of these responses were from Bradley County, where the campus court is a partnership among Cleveland City Schools, Bradley County Schools, and the juvenile court. Campus court meetings include mediators who provide information to families about the various resources available to address attendance barriers. School officials also attend campus court meetings with all applicable student records. If all the necessary parties agree on a plan, the mediator presents a pretrial agreement for approval. If an agreement is not reached, the mediator ends the hearing and a truancy petition is then filed in juvenile court.<sup>AK</sup>

SBE rule encourages districts to develop truancy boards, youth courts, or other alternative programs to serve as an intervention for students with excessive absences. These may be in addition to or a part of the PTIP.

Several principals stated that implementing the PTIP consumes a large portion of their time and resources, especially the coordination of PTIP meetings (involving parents, counselors, attendance supervisors, and other individuals) for multiple truant students. Many survey respondents expressed the desire for a more efficient system that would lighten their workloads and also indicated additional resources and manpower are needed to implement the PTIP.

## Legal action after the progressive truancy intervention plan

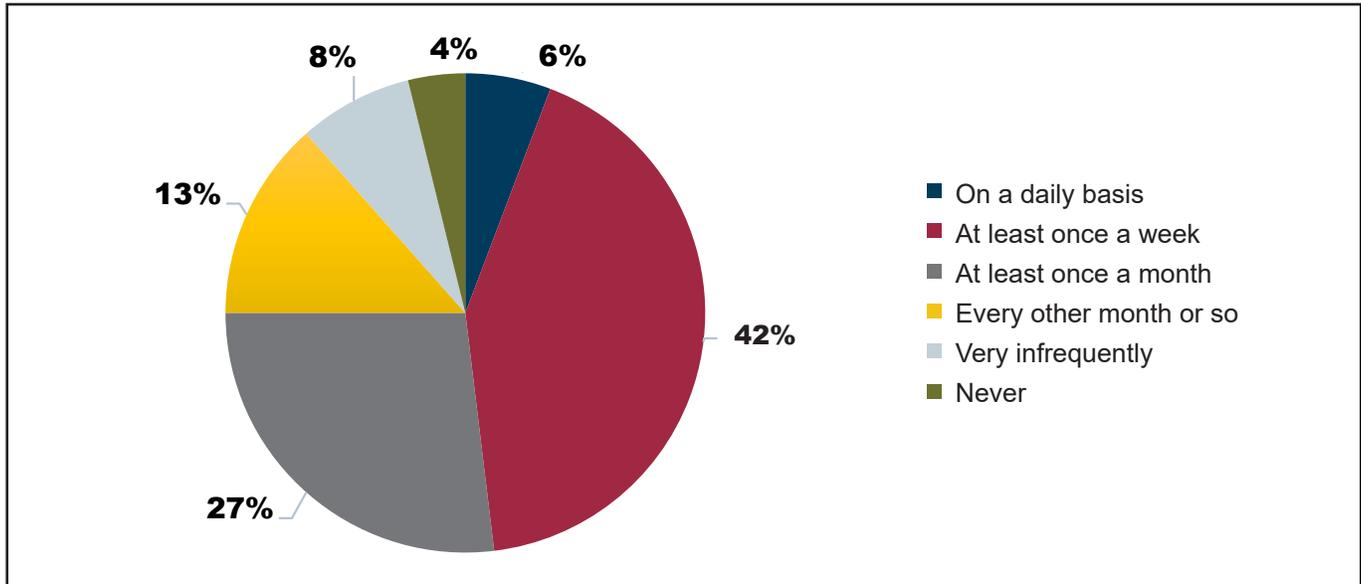
If all three tiers of the PTIP have been completed and a student continues to accrue unexcused absences, the director of schools, after providing parents with a written notice, shall report the truant student to juvenile court.<sup>19</sup>

Depending on the district, truancy cases may be heard on a dedicated truancy docket. Just over half (53 percent) of juvenile court judges who responded to the OREA survey stated that their court has a separate docket that deals exclusively with truancy cases. Larger counties are more likely to have a dedicated truancy docket to handle a higher number of truancy cases.

Of the 52 juvenile court judges who responded to this question on the OREA survey, 42 percent stated they hear truancy cases at least once a week. Twenty-seven percent hear truancy cases at least once a month, and 13 percent indicated they hear a truancy case approximately every other month.

<sup>AK</sup> OREA learned from interviews and surveys that school officials sometimes use the PTIP for their chronically absent students to address factors leading to excessive absences, but there are no legal repercussions for chronically absent students with few, if any, unexcused absences. See pages 14-31 for information on chronic absenteeism.

**Exhibit 40: Frequency of hearing truancy cases in juvenile courts**



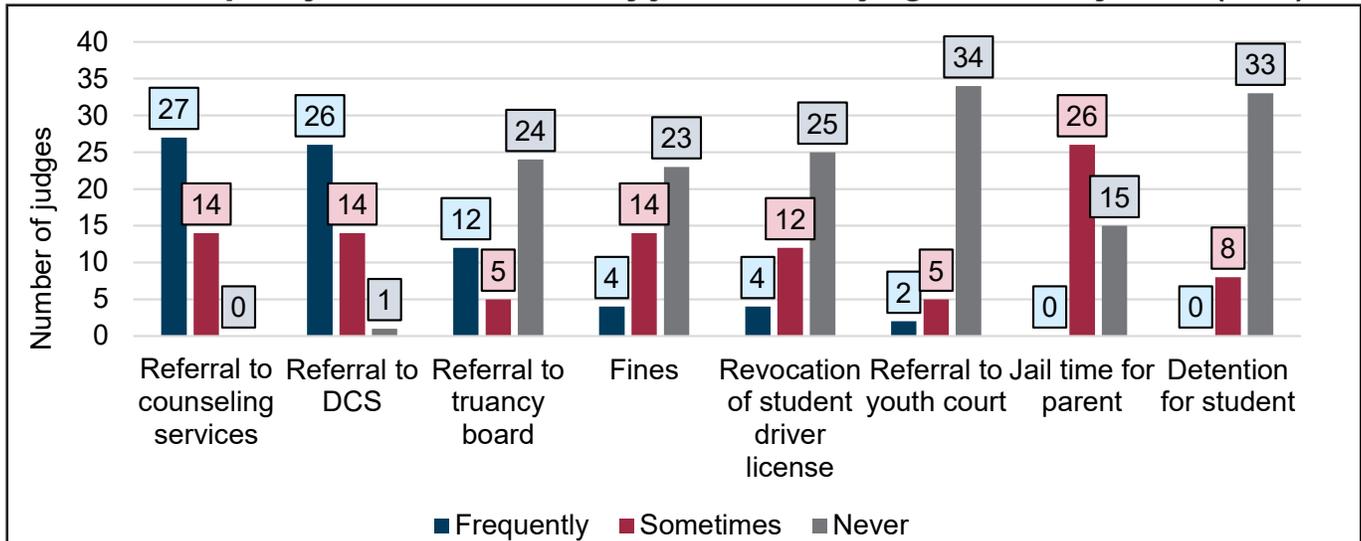
Source: OREA survey of juvenile court judges, February 2020.

**Measures taken by juvenile court judges in truancy cases**

Juvenile court judges vary in how they respond to the truancy cases brought before them. According to state law, each truancy case must be dealt with in such a manner as the judge deems to be in the best interest of the student.

Most survey respondents (27 judges) indicated that they frequently refer truant students and/or their parents to counseling services. Twenty-six judges stated that they frequently refer truancy cases to DCS.

**Exhibit 41: Frequency of measures taken by juvenile court judges in truancy cases (n=41)**



Source: OREA survey of juvenile court judges, February 2020.

**Charges against parents**

Juvenile court judges may also penalize parents based on their children’s truancy. Parents who violate the provisions of the PTIP commit educational neglect, a Class C misdemeanor that includes a penalty of no greater than 30 days of jail time.<sup>20</sup>

The law specifies that each school day a student is unlawfully absent constitutes a separate offense, meaning each unexcused absence can result in a separate Class C misdemeanor.

Out of 41 respondents who answered this question, 26 judges stated they *sometimes* assign jail time to parents of truant students. These judges indicated that if jail time is assigned, the sentence may be as little as one day or as much as 30 days depending on the severity of the case, and that they may suspend the sentence. Nineteen of the judges who have ordered jail time for parents (47 percent of total respondents) rated it as an *effective* way of reducing future truancy.

In addition to jail time, judges may also impose a fine not to exceed \$50 on parents who violate the provisions of the PTIP and commit educational neglect. Over half of the judges who responded to OREA's survey (23 of 41 respondents) indicated they *never* impose fines on parents. One judge noted that imposing fines would add to the problems of families that are already struggling financially. By contrast, two judges stated court-imposed fines are an *effective* way of reducing future truancy.

State law also permits judges to assess a fine of up to \$50 against the parent of a student adjudicated to be unruly because the student has accumulated five or more days of unexcused absences during a school year. In these cases, the judge may require five hours of community service for the parent instead of a fine. Thirteen judges who responded to the OREA survey indicated they have required community service for parents in truancy cases, and over half of those who have used this consequence rated it as *effective* in reducing future truancy.

Seventy-one percent of judges on the OREA survey (30 respondents) indicated their counties handle truancy cases differently based on the age of the student, with some judges using a specific age threshold. For example, one judge stated that the preferred procedure in their court is that a dependent and neglected petition be filed against parents for educational neglect for students under age 12. Fourteen judges indicated they follow a similar practice. Some judges order DCS investigations for truant elementary school students. Eleven judges rated referring truancy cases to DCS as an *effective* measure for reducing future truancy. In some truancy cases involving older students, judges impose consequences on the *students* instead of the parents. Twenty-nine judges have assigned community service to truant students, and 10 find it to be an *effective* preventive measure.

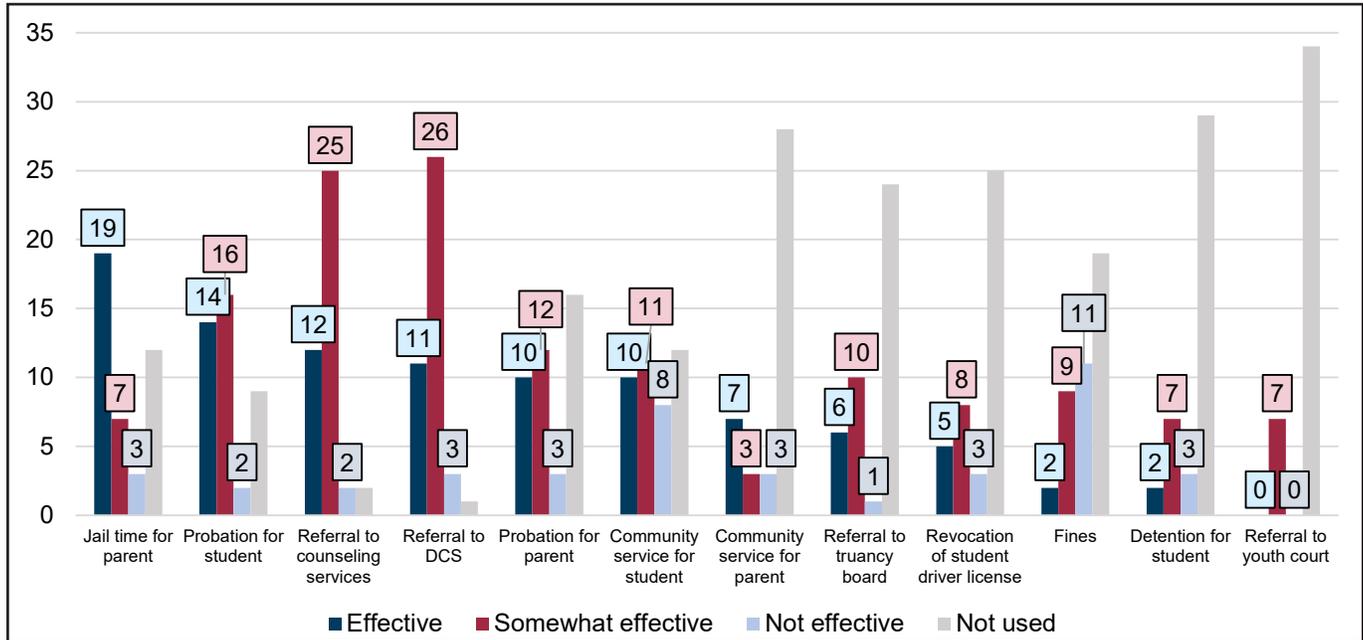
In cases of severe truancy, charges may be brought against parents for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, a Class A misdemeanor that carries a penalty of imprisonment for no greater than 11 months and 29 days, a fine not to exceed \$2,500, or both.<sup>AL</sup> According to some judges, the stiffer penalties for a Class A misdemeanor are more effective with some parents than the lesser penalties for educational neglect, a Class C misdemeanor that carries with it the penalty of a fine up to \$50, up to 30 days of jail time, or both.<sup>21</sup> One judge emphasized that arresting and imprisoning some parents because of their child's severe truancy has been effective in conveying to them the seriousness of the matter. The attendance supervisor in this judge's district indicated this strict approach has resulted in very few repeat offenders.

Judges may order other consequences for truancy cases and these measures vary in effectiveness, according to survey respondents. Placing parents and/or students on probation was rated as *effective* in truancy cases by some respondents. Fourteen judges considered probation to be an *effective* disciplinary action for truant students, while 10 judges found probation to be *effective* for the parents of truant students. In these cases, the individual placed on probation reports to a probation officer for regular check-ins while also completing any intervention programs assigned by the court.

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<sup>AL</sup> As defined in TCA 37-1-156(a)(1), any adult who contributes to or encourages the delinquency or unruly behavior of a child, whether by aiding or abetting or encouraging the child in the commission of an act of delinquency or unruly conduct or by participating as a principal with the child in an act of delinquency, unruly conduct or by aiding the child in concealing an act of delinquency or unruly conduct following its commission, commits a Class A misdemeanor.

**Exhibit 42: Effectiveness of court-ordered consequences, according to juvenile court judges (n=41)**



Source: OREA survey of juvenile court judges, February 2020.

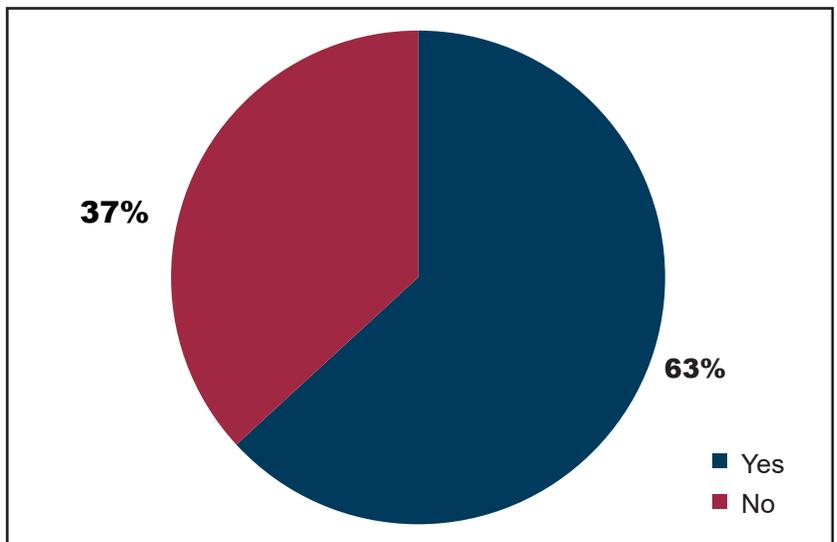
Philosophies about how truancy cases should be handled and how truancy laws should be interpreted may be more or less aligned between school officials and juvenile court judges. Some attendance supervisors expressed great appreciation for judges who were tough on truancy cases. These supervisors thought the credible threat of going to court for truancy problems and facing a tough judge gave the supervisors leverage when working with parents and students on improving student attendance.

Other supervisors were frustrated with judges who dismiss truancy cases or frequently use consequences, such as probation, the supervisors considered insufficient. These supervisors believed students and parents would take attendance matters more seriously if they feared tougher consequences in court.

Regarding the interpretation of truancy laws, 63 percent of juvenile court judges who responded to the survey indicated they will not hear a truancy case unless they have received proof from the school district that all tiers of the PTIP have been implemented.

This interpretation of the law may be based on *TCA 49-6-3009(g)*, which states that schools may report a truant student to juvenile court after PTIP interventions have failed. State law requires that truancy referrals be dismissed if the judge finds the school district did not implement the PTIP to meaningfully address the student’s attendance problems. Five attendance supervisors and five principals indicated that the judges in their districts would not hear the cases unless each tier of the PTIP was documented as complete.

**Exhibit 43: Juvenile court judges requiring proof of PTIP implementation (n=38)**



Source: OREA survey of juvenile court judges, February 2020.

## Working relationship between attendance supervisors and judges

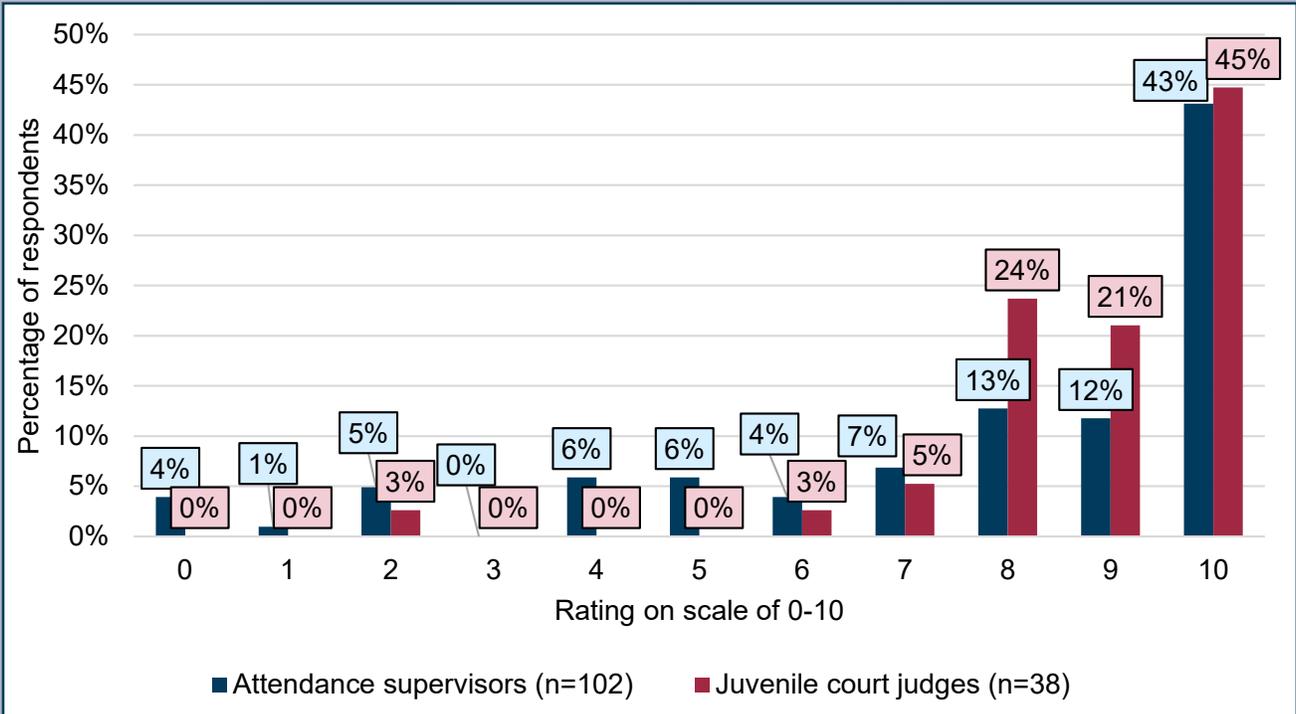
Attendance supervisors and other stakeholders stated in interviews with OREA that the quality of the relationship between the school system and the local juvenile court judge is an important factor in effectively addressing truancy.

Attendance supervisors and juvenile court judges have a similar perception of their working relationship with the other party regarding truancy matters, according to OREA survey results. "Working relationship" was defined on the survey as having an open line of communication and feeling comfortable talking to him or her about student attendance issues. A 0-10 rating scale was used, with a 0 signifying "we don't work together at all" and a 10 signifying "we work extremely well together."

Forty-three percent of attendance supervisors rated their working relationship with their juvenile court judges as a 10 out of 10. As for juvenile court judges, 45 percent (17 respondents) rated their working relationships with schools as a 10 out of 10.

A minority of respondents assigned a low rating to the working relationship between the two parties. Ten attendance supervisors rated their working relationship with the juvenile court judges as a 2 or lower out of 10. One judge rated the working relationship with the schools as a 2 out of 10.

### Exhibit 44: Working relationship of schools and juvenile court judges



Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

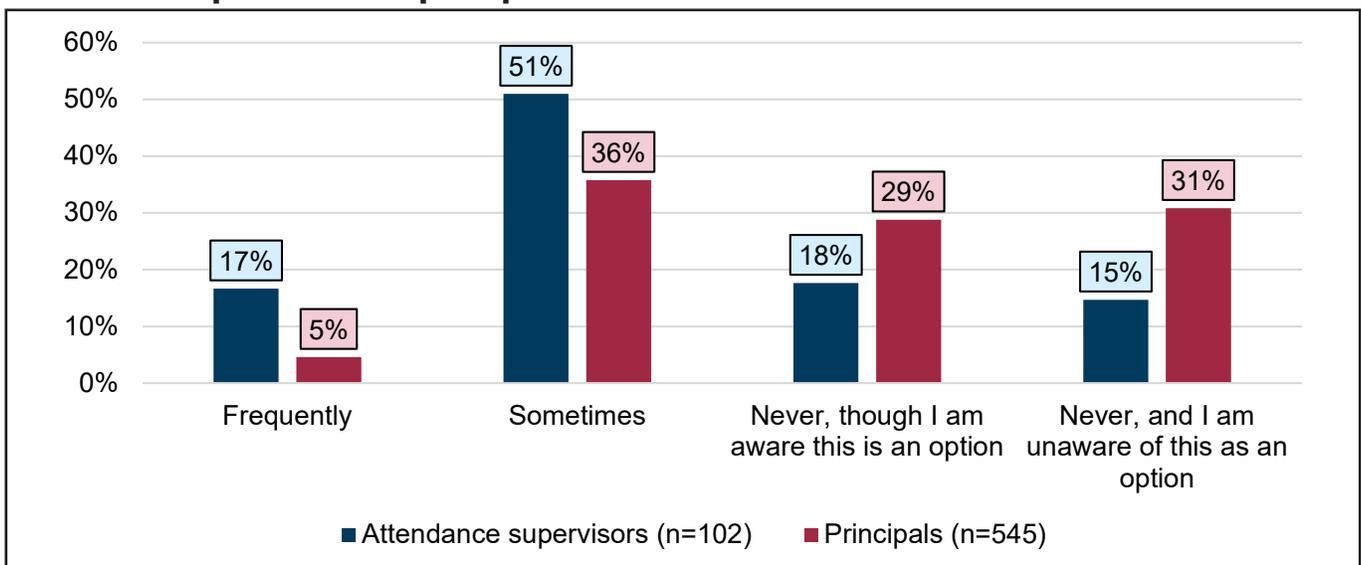
Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and juvenile court judges, 2019-20.

## Skipping tiers due to lack of parent cooperation

Parents are essential to the successful implementation of the PTIP, but not all parents cooperate with school officials in addressing truancy problems. Several attendance supervisors and principals indicated that contacting parents can be difficult and that parents may not attend PTIP meetings about their child's attendance. Since the PTIP was first implemented in 2018, state law has allowed the director of schools or a designee to report a student's unexcused absences to the appropriate juvenile judge if attendance does not improve and if school officials can document that the student's parents are unwilling to participate in the PTIP.

On OREA's surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, 52 supervisors (51 percent) and 195 principals (36 percent) stated they *sometimes* skip the tiers of the PTIP due to parents' unwillingness to cooperate with the process. Fifteen supervisors (15 percent) and 168 principals (31 percent) responded that they *never* skip tiers for uncooperative parents because they were unaware this was an option.

**Exhibit 45: Frequency of skipping tiers due to lack of parent cooperation, according to attendance supervisors and principals**



Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

A 2020 state law (Public Chapter 748) clarifies that district and school officials can skip PTIP tiers in cases where a student's parents are uncooperative. The new law expressly states that school officials may refer uncooperative parents to court without having to complete the PTIP tiers. A parent's failure or refusal, on multiple occasions, to attend conferences, return phone calls, attend follow-up meetings, enter into an attendance contract, or actively participate in any of the tiers of the PTIP are specified in the 2020 law as examples of a parent's unwillingness to cooperate.

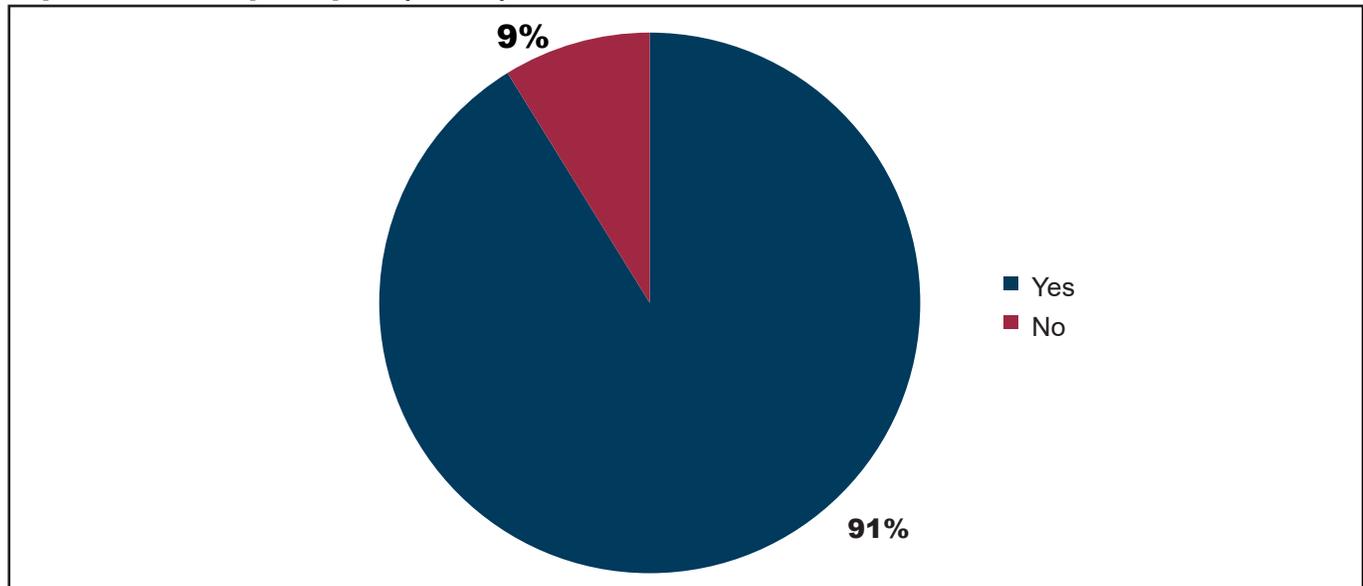
## Restarting PTIP tiers at the beginning of each year

Ninety-one percent of all attendance supervisors and principals who responded to the OREA surveys restart the PTIP tiers at the beginning of each school year for *all* students. A few attendance supervisors indicated the juvenile court judge that hears truancy cases from their school district interprets state law as requiring the PTIP to restart for all students at the beginning of each school year. *TCA 49-6-3007(e)*, when referring to the notice school officials must send to parents at the beginning of the school year regarding the PTIP, states, "The written notice must inform the parent, guardian, or other person having control of a student that a student who accumulates five days of unexcused absences during the school year is subject to the district's progressive truancy interventions." While not explicit in law, TDOE guidance is for districts to restart the tiers of the PTIP for all students at the beginning of each new school year.

Eleven principals of schools where the PTIP must be restarted at the beginning of each school year were critical of the practice, stating that it delays responding sooner with more intense interventions for students with attendance problems that span multiple school years. Some districts and schools that restart the PTIP at the beginning of each school year expedite the PTIP process for students with truancy problems in the previous year, however, especially students who reached Tier 3 of the PTIP during the previous school year or are still under a court order.

Other districts and schools do not restart the PTIP each year for all students and instead continue with whatever tier of the PTIP a student reached at the end of the last school year.

**Exhibit 46: Restarting the PTIP at the start of each year, according to attendance supervisors and principals (n=647)**



Note: This graph combines the attendance supervisor and principal survey results because the trends between the two surveys were consistent with one another. Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

## Top factors among chronically absent and/or truant students

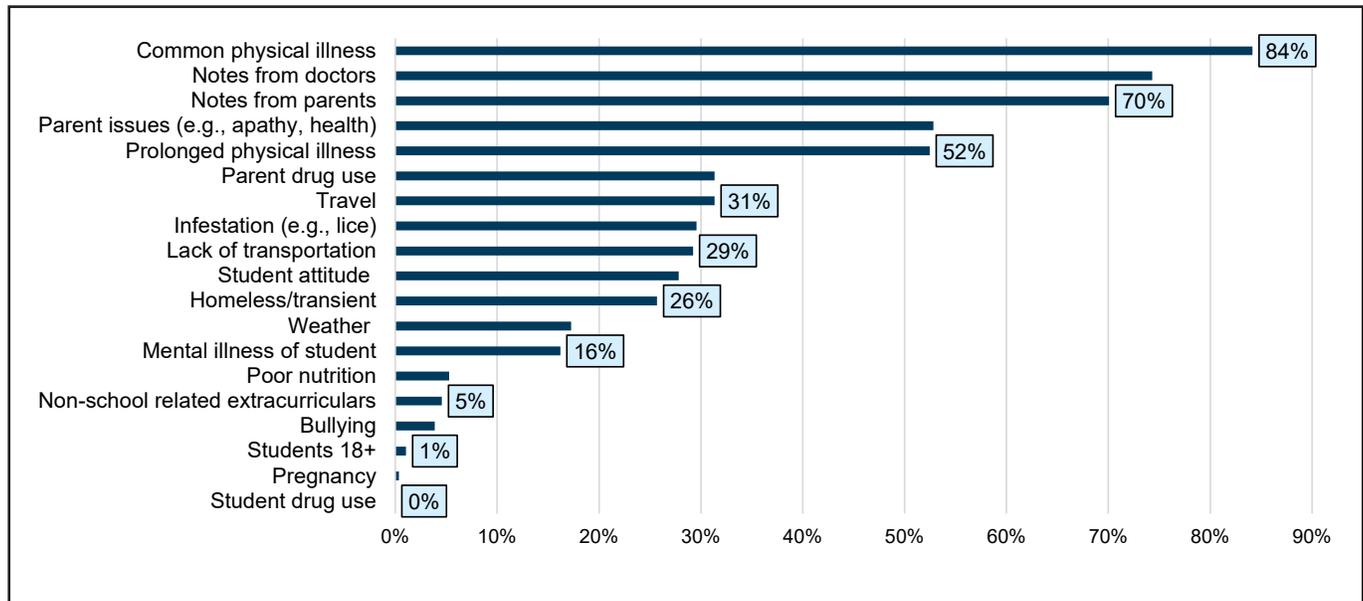
There are many factors that may prevent a student from attending school or hinder a school’s ability to intervene when a student struggles with attendance.<sup>AM</sup> In some cases, as with family vacations or oversleeping, the student or parent has a greater degree of control and can make changes to improve attendance. In other cases, such as for students with chronic health conditions, the students, parents, and school officials may have much less ability to control the effects on school attendance.

On OREA’s surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, respondents were asked to rate various potential contributors to their students’ chronic absenteeism or truancy as *common*, *neither common nor uncommon*, or *uncommon*. Typical physical illnesses (e.g., flu, common cold, etc.) received the highest number of *common* ratings on both surveys.

Of the issues among chronically absent and/or truant students in grades K-8, 84 percent of principals (239 of 284 respondents) said that typical physical illness was a *common* factor.

<sup>AM</sup> Note: All research, including survey data, reflects procedures and policies in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

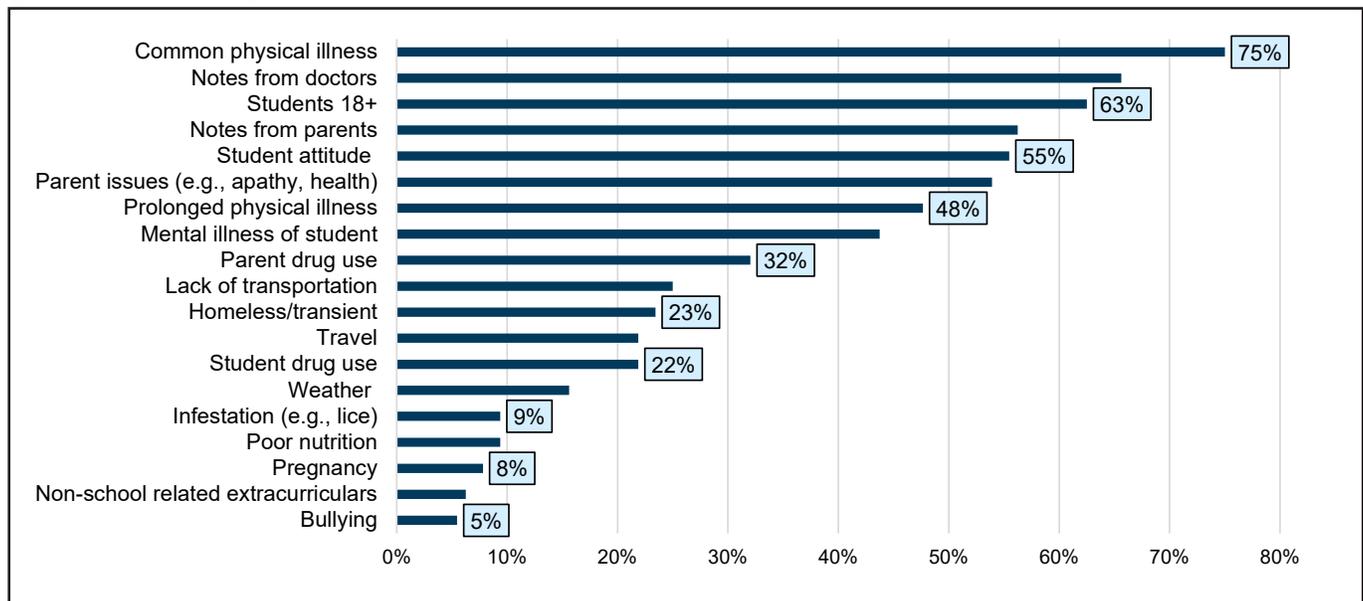
**Exhibit 47: Contributions to chronic absenteeism and/or truancy rated as common by principals | K-8th grades (n=284)**



Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

Common physical illness also received the most *common* ratings from the principals of students in grades 9-12. Almost 63 percent (80 of 128 respondents) indicated that students who are 18 and over – and therefore no longer subject to compulsory education laws – is a *common* factor in the chronic absenteeism and/or truancy status of students.

**Exhibit 48: Factors in chronic absenteeism and/or truancy rated as common by principals | grades 9th-12th grades (n=128)**



Note: This grouping includes 99 HS principals and 29 principals of K-12 schools.

Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

Absences for common physical illnesses may be excused by a doctor’s note in every Tennessee district, and a parent note may be accepted in some cases in lieu of a doctor’s note to excuse the absence. Though excused, these absences still count when determining whether a student is chronically absent. Several survey respondents expressed frustration that student absences associated with common physical illnesses excused by doctor’s notes count against the district from an accountability standpoint. An accrual of at least 18 absences for any combination of these reasons would lead to a student’s designation as chronically absent. If notes are

not provided, students accrue unexcused absences that may eventually lead to truancy. (See pages 6-11 for information on district and school policies on parent notes.)

Schools are not legally required by state law to excuse absences based on doctor's notes but are mandated by SBE rule to create policies that address the excusing of absences for reasons including injury, illness, pregnancy, hospitalization, etc. The rule does not explicitly state that schools must excuse absences that are accompanied by doctor's notes, but most districts will record an absence as excused when presented with a doctor's note. All districts allow an unlimited amount of doctor's notes with varying degrees of specifications.

Another perspective on doctor's notes emerged during OREA interviews with attendance supervisors. Many supervisors interviewed expressed frustration with students and parents who obtain an excessive number of notes from doctors' offices and walk-in clinics to use for excused absences. A few attendance supervisors used the term "doctor shopping" to refer to the practice of families obtaining notes from multiple doctors and walk-in clinics so that no single office or clinic is aware of a student's total number of absences. Five attendance supervisors indicated the note practices of urgent care clinics were more of an issue in their district than doctors' offices. One supervisor stated that families that are unable to obtain additional notes from a pediatrician may visit an urgent care clinic where it is easier to obtain one.

One supervisor mentioned a student who missed 90 days over the course of one school year, with 81 of those absences excused by a doctor's note. (The remaining nine absences were excused by parent notes.) In such a case, the student would be chronically absent but not truant. In addition, four different attendance supervisors said that forging doctor's notes had been an issue in their districts.

Some districts have communicated with area doctors about tightening their issuance of doctor's notes. Fifteen supervisors (15 percent) stated area doctors tightened their policies for issuing notes in response. In one school district, doctors agreed to stop backdating notes (e.g., the doctor ceased writing a note on Friday to excuse the preceding Monday through Thursday). Similarly, another district now requires that doctor's notes specify the date and duration of a visit (e.g., a note from a dentist must state, "Student was seen on March 21, 2019, from 12 pm to 1 pm.").

Another 37 supervisors (38 percent) indicated their communications with local doctors led to varying results (i.e., some doctors tightened their policies while others did not). Twenty-one supervisors (21 percent) stated their communications with doctors did not lead to any change in area doctors' practices. The remaining 26 respondents (26 percent) had not communicated with area doctors' offices. In districts with large numbers of doctor offices and urgent care clinics, school officials may lack the necessary time and staff to communicate with each one about student attendance and note practices.

## **Prolonged or chronic physical illnesses**

Students with prolonged or chronic physical illnesses (e.g., asthma, cancer, diabetes, etc.) may accumulate a high number of absences.<sup>AN</sup> These students may be placed on homebound instruction, during which they are not counted as absent and cannot be penalized for grading purposes or denied course completion per state law.<sup>AO</sup>

Without a designation of homebound instruction status, a student's absences accrue as normal. Even if the absences are excused by doctor's notes, such students will be classified as chronically absent once they have missed at least 10 percent of the instructional days in a school year.

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<sup>AN</sup> Asthma is the most common chronic illness among children in Tennessee.

<sup>AO</sup> SBE Rule 0520-01-02-.10 defines homebound instruction as instruction provided at home or at a hospital or related location for students who are unable to attend the regular instructional program due to a medical condition. A student is eligible for homebound instruction if the student has obtained certification by the student's treating physician that shows the student has a physical or mental condition that will require the student's absence from school for more than 10 consecutive instructional days over the period of the school year.

On OREA surveys, nearly half of principals (240 of 485 respondents) and 63 percent of attendance supervisors (62 respondents, each representing a different district) rated prolonged physical illness as a *common* factor for the chronically absent and/or truant students in their school.

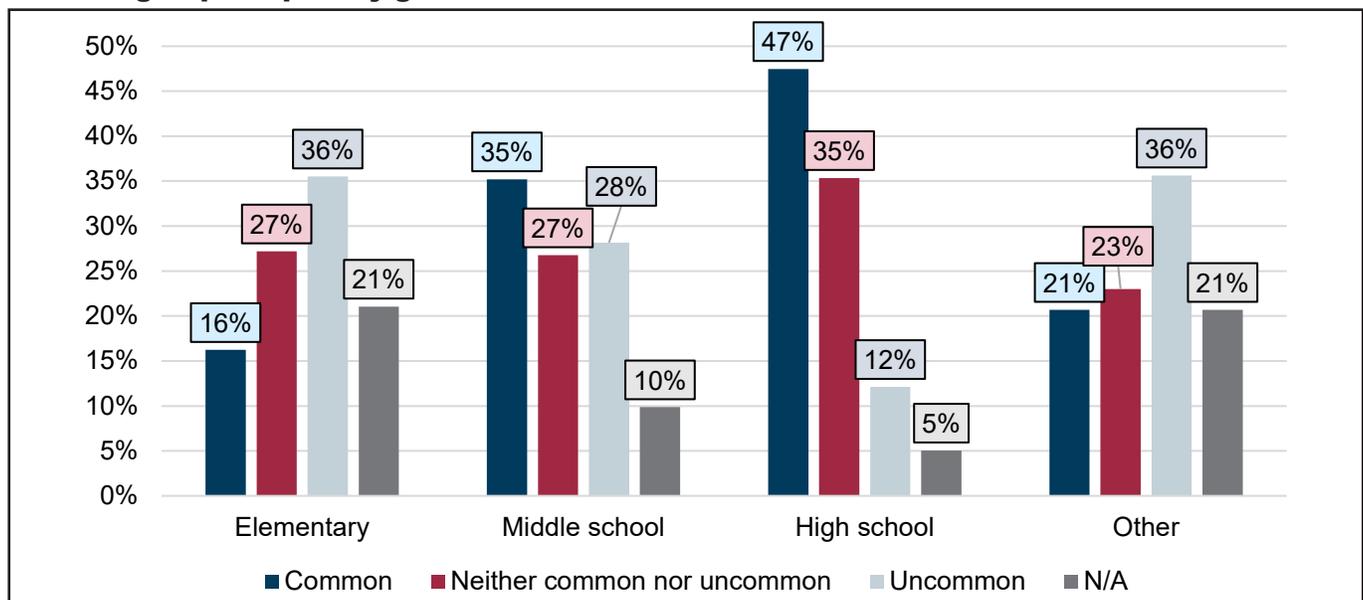
## Mental health

Students who miss school for the symptoms or treatment of mental health problems are at risk for chronic absenteeism and truancy. Mental health issues include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other conditions.

On OREA’s survey of principals, 26 percent (127 respondents) rated mental illness as a *common* factor among chronically absent and/or truant students, while 30 percent said it was *uncommon*. Over half of attendance supervisors (52 respondents) indicated that mental illness is a *common* factor for students with attendance problems in their districts, while 17 percent (17 respondents) indicated it was *uncommon*. One attendance supervisor characterized mental health problems as an “epidemic” in his district.

Based on principals’ survey responses, mental illness is more likely to be a factor among chronically absent and/or truant students in high school, as shown in Exhibit 49.

**Exhibit 49: Mental illness as a factor among chronically absent and/or truant students, according to principals by grades served**



Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.  
 Other includes responses from principals who serve K-8 or K-12 schools.  
 Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

## Alternative attendance plans

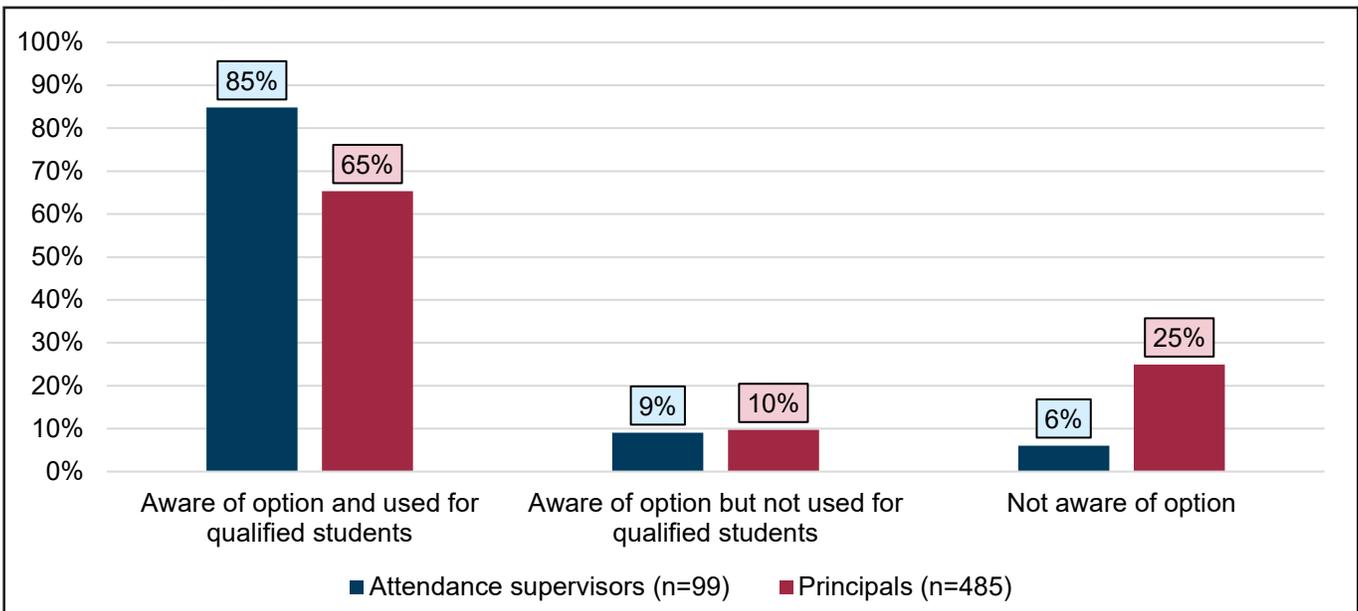
One option for students with a prolonged or chronic illness who do not qualify for homebound education status is an alternative attendance plan. This option is available for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or who have a Section 504 plan. (See Section 504 and IDEA.) According to the TDOE Attendance Manual, students receiving special education services may attend part-time days, alternating days, or for a specific amount of time as indicated in their IEP or 504 plan. Students with an alternative attendance plan remain enrolled and are counted as present in their school’s student information system for the days or time they are allowed to miss.

Not all school officials are aware of the alternative attendance plan option. A quarter of principals (121 respondents) were unaware of this option, as were six attendance supervisors (6 percent). The majority of OREA survey respondents, including 84 attendance supervisors (85 percent) and 317 principals (65 percent), however, were aware of the option and use it, while close to 10 percent each of principals (47 respondents) and supervisors (nine respondents) were aware of the option but stated they were not currently using an alternative attendance plan with any students.

**Section 504 and IDEA**

Tennessee students with disabilities can receive services and accommodations under two federal programs: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and/or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA is a federal law that ensures education for all eligible students with disabilities (e.g., a student with an intellectual disability who requires a significant level of special education services). Section 504 ensures that no otherwise qualified student with a disability is excluded from access or participation in any federally funded program or activity because of a disability (e.g., a student with a broken arm wearing a cast may have a 504 plan to ensure accommodations for the ability to write).

**Exhibit 50: Attendance supervisor and principal awareness of using alternative attendance plans for qualifying students**



Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

Some school officials were unclear about how students on an alternative attendance plan should be coded in their districts' student information systems for the days or hours they are not in school. On the surveys, 51 supervisors (61 percent) and 151 principals (47 percent) stated that students with alternative attendance plans are counted as *present* for the time they miss. Fourteen supervisors (16 percent) stated such students are counted as *absent* in their districts, and over half of principals (53 percent or 171 respondents) gave the same response. Of the 19 responses in the *Other* category (23 percent), 15 attendance supervisors indicated they were unsure whether such students are counted as present or absent in their districts, and the remaining four respondents stated it varies by school in their districts.



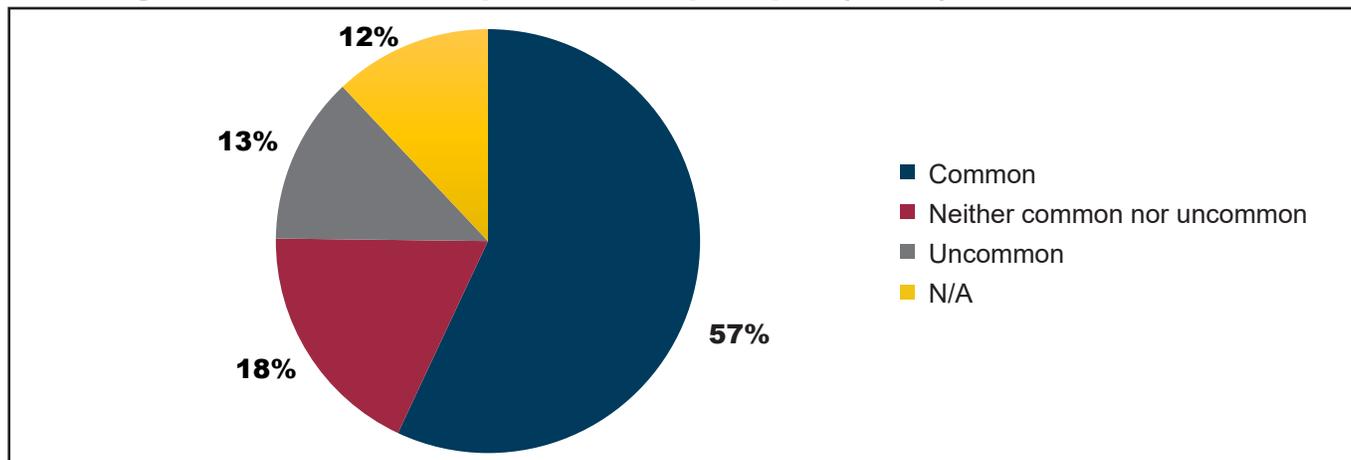
## Students 18 and over

According to Tennessee’s compulsory attendance laws, children ages six through 17 are required to attend public or nonpublic school. Once a student reaches age 18, he or she is no longer subject to the compulsory attendance laws – however, these students’ absences are still factored into the chronic absenteeism rate used for district and school accountability. Regarding truancy, schools may continue implementing the progressive truancy intervention plan with such students, though the threat of going to court no longer applies since the student is no longer a juvenile.

According to the TDOE Attendance Manual, any student, including one who is age 18 or older, who accrues 10 consecutive days of unexcused absences is considered a dropout after all requirements for truancy intervention have been followed by the school and district. The number of dropouts counts against schools and districts relative to graduation rates, another accountability measure in Tennessee’s ESSA plan.<sup>AP</sup>

Nearly 64 percent of supervisors (63 of 99 respondents to this question) and 53 percent of principals (84 of 159 respondents) indicated that aging out of compulsory attendance laws (i.e., students who turn 18 while still enrolled in high school) is a *common* issue among their chronically absent students.<sup>AQ</sup>

**Exhibit 53: Students age 18 and over as a factor among chronically absent students, according to both attendance supervisors and principals (n=258)**



Note: Almost 64 percent of supervisors and 53 percent of principals selected *common*. Seventeen percent of principals and 6 percent of supervisors selected *uncommon*.  
Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

## Student attitude

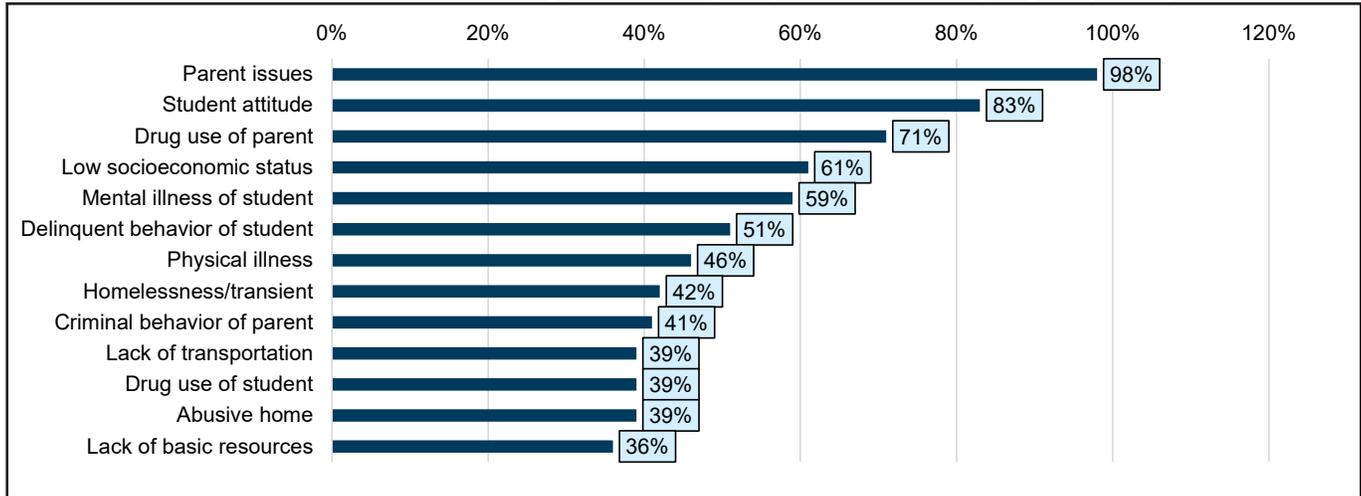
Attendance problems may also result from student attitudes about school based on feedback from attendance supervisors and principals. Forty-four percent of principals indicated that student attitude (e.g., apathy, not feeling connected at school) is a *common* factor for students with poor attendance.

Juvenile court judges were also surveyed about the most common factors in their truancy cases. The overwhelming majority of judges, 98 percent, cited issues with parents (e.g., uncooperative attitude, drug use, lack of economic resources) as a common factor. Issues with students’ attitudes (e.g., apathy toward school, delinquent behavior) were also rated as common by 83 percent of judges who responded to the survey.

<sup>AP</sup> The Ready Graduate indicator, the graduation-related indicator of the state’s ESSA plan, accounts for 25 percent of the overall score for high schools. Academic achievement, academic growth, English language proficiency, and chronically out of school make up the remaining 75 percent.

<sup>AQ</sup> Of the 485 respondents to this question on the survey of principals, 344 stated that this issue was *N/A* (i.e., not applicable) for their schools. Of those responses, all but 18 principals selected *N/A* because their school does not serve students who are 18 or older (i.e., no juniors or seniors), leaving a total of 159 principals whose schools serve this age group. Over half of these principals (84 respondents) said that being 18 or older is a *common* factor among their chronically absent students.

**Exhibit 54: Common factors in truancy, according to juvenile court judges (n=41)**

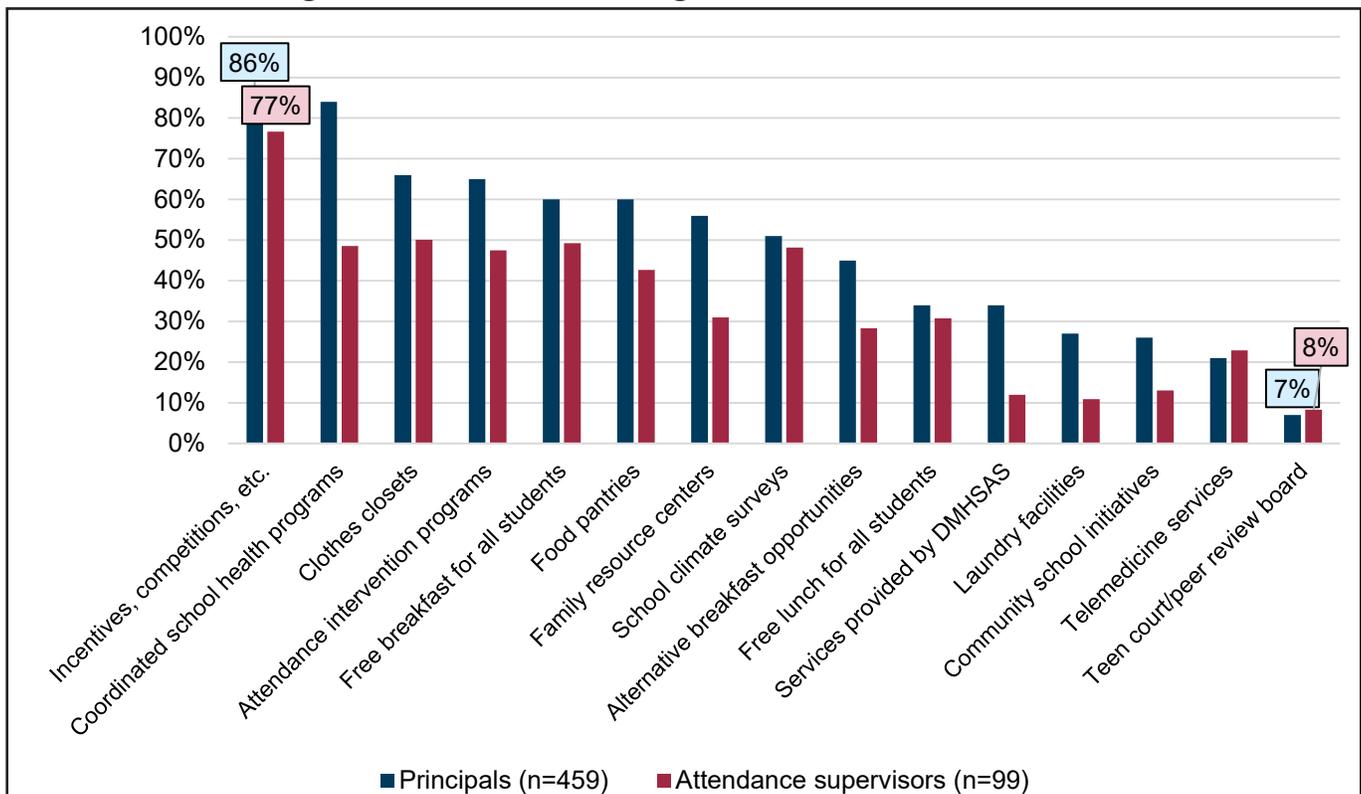


Source: OREA survey of juvenile court judges, February 2020.

## Tools for addressing student attendance

OREA was asked to describe to legislators any tools that school districts use to address both chronic absenteeism and truancy among their students.<sup>AR</sup> Some school districts have greater access to resources to fund and support programs and services that can improve student attendance. On OREA’s surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, respondents indicated which tools they use to address student attendance in their districts and schools. The following section describes some of these tools.

**Exhibit 55: Percentage of school officials using tools to combat issues of student attendance**



Note: DMHSAS stands for the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

Source: OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, December 2019.

<sup>AR</sup> Note: All research, including survey data, reflects procedures and policies in place *prior* to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Coordinated School Health

Coordinated School Health (CSH) is a framework developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) designed to improve student health, promote a healthy school environment, and encourage family and community involvement. CSH addresses eight components of health: health education; physical education and physical activity; health services; school counseling, psychological, and social services; nutrition; healthy school environment; staff wellness; and student, family, and community involvement. Healthier students are more likely to attend school and succeed academically.

Each school district is authorized to implement a CSH program and employ a school health coordinator to oversee the district's program. CSH programs are partially funded by an annual appropriation from the General Assembly which is distributed to school districts in the form of a CSH grant. All school districts in Tennessee employ a school health coordinator who works to fulfill the requirements of the CSH grant. Some schools have additional health-related staff members who assist the school health coordinator. On OREA's surveys, 83 attendance supervisors (84 percent) and 223 principals (49 percent) indicated CSH programs are used to address student attendance problems.

### Exhibit 56: Eight components of Coordinated School Health

School health component	Link to attendance
<b>Health education:</b> <i>a planned, sequential, preK-12 curriculum and program that addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of health</i>	The understanding of basic health concepts and the development of personal and social skills empowers students to promote and enhance their health, leading to better attendance.
<b>Physical education and physical activity:</b> <i>a planned, sequential, preK-12 curriculum program that follows national standards in providing developmentally appropriate, cognitive content and learning experiences in a variety of physical areas</i>	Physical activity keeps children healthy and alert for learning.
<b>Health services:</b> <i>provided and/or supervised by school health nurses to assess, protect, and promote the health of students</i>	Students whose health needs can be met by a school nurse may avoid a trip to a doctor or being sent home from school, which means less instructional time in school is missed.
<b>School counseling, psychological, and social services:</b> <i>provided to assess and improve the mental, emotional, and social health of every student</i>	Students feel heard and supported, alleviating some of the stresses that might otherwise cause them to stay home.
<b>Nutrition:</b> <i>services assure access to a variety of nutritious, affordable, and appealing meals in school that accommodate the health and nutrition needs of all students</i>	Students with food insecurity have been known to miss school more frequently. Participating in school nutrition programs can decrease student risk for food insecurity.
<b>Healthy school environment:</b> <i>relates to the quality of the physical and aesthetic surroundings; the psychosocial climate, safety, and culture of the school; school safety and emergency plans; and the periodic review and testing of the factors and conditions that influence the environment</i>	Healthy school environments are sanctuaries of comfort and stability for students with unstable home lives.
<b>Staff wellness:</b> <i>wellness opportunities such as health assessments, health education, and physical fitness activities provided to all school staff to improve their health status</i>	Teachers who attend school regularly reinforce the importance of attendance in the minds of their students.
<b>Student, family, and community involvement:</b> <i>active solicitation of family involvement and engagement of community resources, expertise, and services to respond effectively to the health needs of students and families</i>	When parents feel connected to a school and have a trusting relationship with the staff, they are more likely to make attendance a priority for their children.

Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

## School nurses

School nurses were identified by several attendance supervisors as important players in efforts to address student absenteeism, and multiple principals described school nurses as “vital” in their efforts to reduce student absenteeism. As described on pages 42-47, student health issues commonly factor into student absences. Some physical illnesses can be treated by a school nurse, which can mean less instructional time in school is missed if the student is not sent home from school or released to visit the doctor. According to health services data collected by TDOE for the 2018-19 school year, 87 percent of visits to the school nurse resulted in a return to class. Additionally, students with asthma or diabetes may receive regular treatment from school nurses that enables them to attend school on a regular basis.

Specific to truancy, school nurses may help implement districts’ progressive truancy intervention plans, such as by attending Tier 1 conferences and completing the individual assessments of students called for as part of Tier 2. School nurses may also contact doctors’ offices and clinics to verify dates and times for notes used to excuse student absences and to discuss chronic absenteeism and other matters related to student attendance.

The BEP generates funding for one school nurse for every 3,000 students in a district, with a minimum of one school nurse position funded for each district. Tennessee school districts employed approximately 1,734 nurses for the 2018-19 school year.

## Incentives and competitions

Attendance supervisors and principals were asked on the OREA survey to identify the tools they use most often to encourage student attendance. The tool selected most often by supervisors and principals was the use of incentives, competitions, and other programs that promote student attendance. Through such programs, school officials hope to reach students who might attend school more often to win prizes and recognition. Attendance supervisors interviewed by OREA indicated the positive impact of incentives and competitions on student attendance can be temporary, however, and may be less effective with students who have more significant attendance problems.

In an interview with OREA, officials from Bristol City Schools shared information about their 2018-19 citywide “Be Present!” campaign, a community initiative inspired by Publishers Clearing House. Using a family resource center grant, the district purchased promotional signs to post throughout Bristol and produced videos for social media starring the Prize Patrol (portrayed by two coaches from King University). Local businesses donated prizes that were awarded to the schools with the largest percentage increase in attendance over the past year. The prizes were presented by the Prize Patrol at a celebratory pep rally. The chronic absenteeism rate of Bristol City Schools was 9.97 percent for 2018-19, compared to rates of 11.15 percent and 11.68 percent for the two previous school years. School officials cited community involvement as one key factor in the success of the “Be Present!” campaign.

An attendance initiative in Coffee County Schools catered to the interest of students in selfies and social media. In December 2017, the district launched its Get Your Selfie to School campaign, giving promotional T-shirts to teachers and students and placing yard signs in front of every school in the district. Students with improved attendance were eligible for having a photo taken of them next to the promotional yard sign at their school. Teachers were given selfie sticks to use for group selfies of their class on days when all students were present. To further incentivize the program for the 2018-19 school year, each school was given an iPad to award to the student with the most improved attendance from the previous year. Most of the funding for this campaign came from a grant that Coffee County Schools no longer receives, so the initiative has since been scaled back.

## Community school initiatives

Community school initiatives are another tool used by school officials to address absenteeism. Students and families are connected to a broad range of services, including food and clothing assistance, mental health treatment, and academic enrichment, through community school initiatives, which aim to meet the educational, physical, and emotional needs of economically disadvantaged students, families, and communities.

On OREA surveys, 60 principals (13 percent) and 26 attendance supervisors (26 percent) stated they have used community school initiatives to address student attendance in their schools.

### ***Communities in Schools (CIS)***

One community school model operating on a national level is Communities in Schools (CIS). A nonprofit organization founded in 1977, CIS was serving 1.56 million students in 2,300 schools nationwide as of 2018. CIS first came to Tennessee in 2012, beginning with a pilot program in four Nashville schools before expanding to Memphis in 2014. As of the 2019-20 school year, CIS has expanded to 17 schools in Metro Nashville and 27 schools in Shelby County and the Achievement School District. While the national organization (including CIS of Memphis) focuses primarily on students at risk of dropping out of school, CIS of Tennessee chose to focus on chronic absenteeism.<sup>AS</sup> Over the past year, CIS of Tennessee has shifted its focus to address more explicitly whole child needs, including social and emotional development, basic needs supports, and more, all of which are contributors to chronic absenteeism.

CIS hires, trains, and pays for a site coordinator at each of its 38 partner schools in Tennessee.<sup>AT</sup> (The principal at each CIS partner school may provide input in the final phase of the site coordinator hiring process.) When beginning work at a partner school, CIS site coordinators conduct a needs assessment, collect data, interview school officials, recognize what the school is doing well, and identify issues that may lead to chronic absenteeism. They then work with school staff to write a school support plan that includes a road map of services the site coordinator will ensure are provided over the course of the school year.

The CIS model involves three levels of services that site coordinators tailor to fit the needs of their schools. All Tier 1 services are available to every student, and these services address issues that are associated with student absenteeism, such as lack of clothing, food, and health checkups and screenings. In Tier 2, site coordinators build caseloads of 10 percent of the student body (up to 50 students) who have been identified as high risk and work with them in small groups based on their specific needs (e.g., grief support, tutoring, etc.). Students in Tier 3 receive more individualized supports aimed at removing their specific barriers to attending school.

CIS has reported successful results in some schools. For example, the organization points to a decrease in the absenteeism rate from 24 percent to 7 percent at Wooddale Middle School, an Achievement School District charter school in Memphis, in 2017 following the implementation of various incentives designed to increase student attendance. In 2018-19, 13 of the 17 CIS schools in Nashville reduced their schoolwide chronic absenteeism rate by at least 2 percent.

### **Telemedicine or telehealth services**

Telemedicine or telehealth services also provide students with access to healthcare at school and may keep them in attendance for more of the day. Telemedicine services have grown in popularity in recent years not only in rural communities with limited access to hospitals and clinics but also in schools. Telemedicine services enable school nurses to consult with a doctor to treat more complex student health conditions while remaining onsite at the school.

On OREA surveys, 105 principals (23 percent) and 21 attendance supervisors (20 percent) stated their schools have telemedicine services available for students.

TCA 56-7-1002 requires school clinics using such services to be staffed by a healthcare services provider and held to the same regulations as traditional medical services.

<sup>AS</sup> CIS of Tennessee and CIS of Memphis operate independently of one another, with CIS of Tennessee managing all CIS schools outside of Memphis.

<sup>AT</sup> See Appendix D for a list of CIS partner schools.

Following a 2019 report by the Tennessee Educational Equality Coalition (TEEC) that argued Tennessee’s rural schools are overlooked relative to their urban counterparts, the General Assembly appropriated funding to assist with an expansion of the CIS model to the state’s rural areas, specifically to 15 economically distressed counties. (The General Assembly appropriated \$4.5 million in grant funding, to be awarded in annual installments of \$1.5 million for three years, beginning with the 2019-20 school year.) CIS site coordinators have been placed in 23 high schools within the 15 selected counties, as shown in Exhibit 57.

**Exhibit 57: Communities in Schools – Rural Expansion**

West	Middle	East
<u>Hardeman County</u>	<u>Bledsoe County</u>	<u>Cocke County</u>
Bolivar Central HS	Bledsoe County HS	Cocke County HS
Middleton HS	<u>Clay County</u>	Cosby HS
<u>Lake County</u>	Clay County HS	<u>Hancock County</u>
Lake County HS	<u>Fentress County</u>	Hancock County HS
<u>Lauderdale County</u>	Clarkrange HS	<u>Morgan County</u>
Halls HS	Alvin C. York Institute	Wartburg Central HS
Ripley HS	<u>Grundy County</u>	Coalfield School
<u>McNairy County</u>	Grundy County HS	Oakdale School
McNairy Central HS	<u>Jackson County</u>	Sunbright School
Adamsville Senior HS	Jackson County HS	<u>Scott County</u>
<u>Wayne County</u>	<u>Van Buren County</u>	Scott HS
Wayne County HS	Van Buren County HS	

Note: Perry County ranked in the top 15 economically distressed counties in Tennessee for 2019 but was not included because of the support provided to students in Perry County Schools through the Ayers Foundation; Wayne County was selected for the CIS grant in place of Perry County.

School districts choose whether to share data with CIS, and all but a few schools in the rural expansion allowed full data access for the CIS coordinators. The remaining coordinators were able to periodically procure data from school employees. The overall goal for the first year of the program (the 2019-20 school year) was that chronic absenteeism would be reduced by 2 percent in each participating high school. A CIS representative stated that while the attendance of case-managed students did improve, most schools did not improve their overall attendance due to data limitations and challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. When Tennessee schools closed, CIS pivoted from the school buildings to providing critical support remotely. Using informal needs assessments collected from families, CIS identified the social, emotional, and physical needs of students and worked to address them in a variety of ways (e.g., securing housing for homeless families, delivering food and other supplies to homes, and connecting families with mental healthcare providers). Moving forward, CIS plans to measure and report on the socioemotional and basic needs services they provide in addition to attendance.

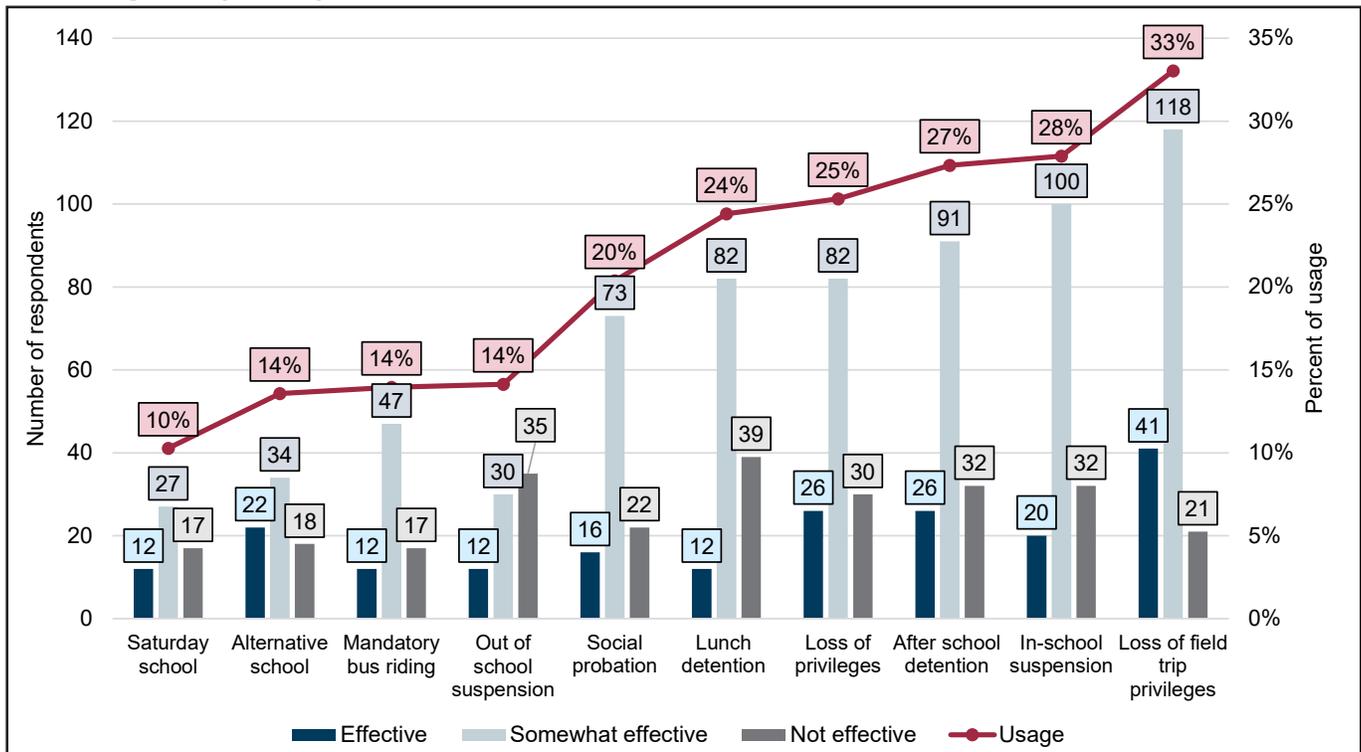
**Other forms of student outreach**

Coffee County Schools uses a program called “Check In/Check Out.” Through this program, students who are at risk for chronic absenteeism are assigned teacher mentors with whom they meet every day. Students check in with their mentors in the morning and check out with them in the afternoon. These check-ins provide participating students with a predictable source of one-on-one daily interactions with a mentor who cares about them. Students may reveal personal issues that contribute to missing school through these interactions, which school officials may be able to then address.

## Discipline

School officials may use various disciplinary measures in their efforts to improve student attendance. The loss of field trip or other privileges, as well as the use of in-school suspensions and detention during lunch or after school are the most common disciplinary measures used to address attendance issues, based on survey responses from principals. (See Exhibit 58.) Imposing a loss of field trip privileges (or establishing good attendance as a condition for field trip participation) was rated *somewhat effective* or *effective* more often than other disciplinary measures.

**Exhibit 58: Use and effectiveness of disciplinary measures for attendance issues within the last five years (n=545)**



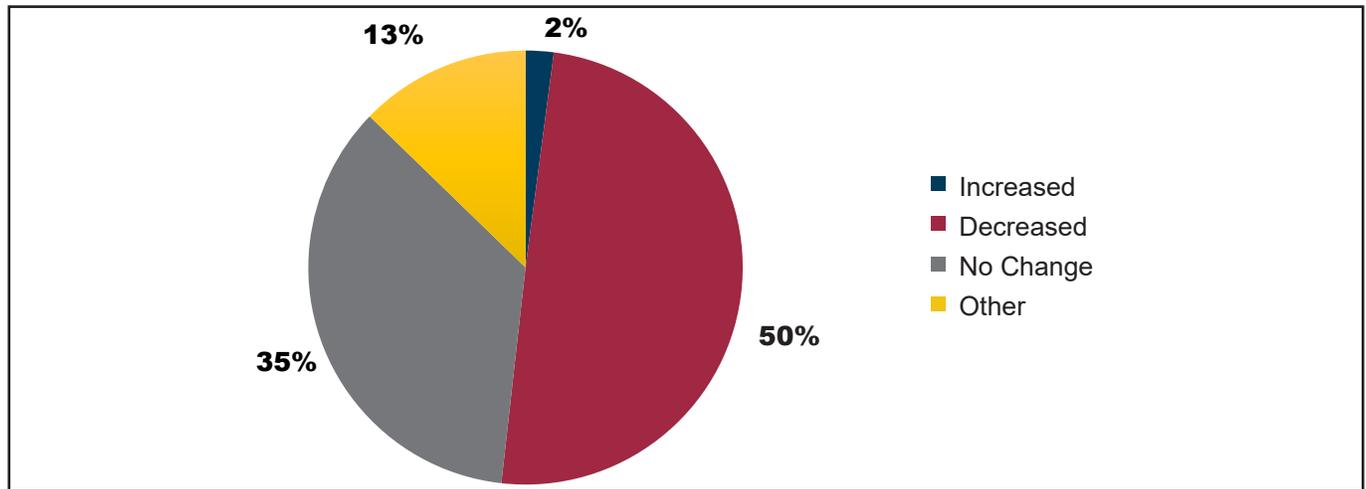
Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

Elementary-aged children are usually truant for different reasons than older students, and parents typically bear more responsibility when younger students miss school. For this reason, school officials usually do not employ punitive measures against younger students who repeatedly miss school, focusing instead on intervening with parents. According to OREA surveys, principals increase their use of disciplinary measures as students get older. For example, 67 percent of high school principals indicated using in-school suspension as a penalty for poor attendance compared to 36 percent of middle school principals and 8 percent of elementary principals. For each disciplinary measure presented on the survey, usage was significantly higher among principals with older students.

### **Change in use of out-of-school suspension since chronic absenteeism measured**

Some districts and schools have reduced the use of out-of-school suspension in recent years. Students are marked as absent while serving an out-of-school suspension, which means these missed days count toward the chronic absenteeism rate used for district and school accountability. On the OREA survey of principals, half of respondents stated their use of out-of-school suspension has *decreased* since chronic absenteeism was added to the accountability system. Thirty-five percent of principals, however, indicated there has been *no change* in their use of out-of-school suspension during this period.

**Exhibit 59: Changes in use of out-of-school suspension since chronic absenteeism measured (n=479)**



Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

## **Student attendance and COVID-19**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the General Assembly passed Public Chapter 652 (2020), which cancelled the TN Ready testing for the 2019-20 school year and specified that no penalty against schools, teachers, and students on certain accountability measures would result from the cancellation. The law also waived the state mandate of 180 instructional days.

In advance of the 2020-21 school year, numerous Tennessee districts submitted hundreds of requests to the Tennessee Department of Education for one-year waivers to state mandates, including many related to student attendance. Three districts requested that chronic absenteeism accountability be waived for the year, and the department recommended that these requests be denied by the State Board, stating there was no state law or rule to be waived. Because district and school accountability for chronic absenteeism rates is a component of Tennessee’s approved plan for meeting the requirements of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, any waiver would instead be granted by the U.S. Department of Education.

## Conclusions

### **Variation in policies and practices at the district and school levels, especially for parent notes and conversion absences, results in the inconsistent classification of absences as excused or unexcused across the state.**

State law specifies three circumstances for which absences must be excused (court appearances, visitation with a military parent, and working as an election official).<sup>AU,AV</sup> Beyond those circumstances, each district determines through its own policies whether an absence will be excused. In addition, some districts grant principals discretion to set the attendance policy for their school. In these cases, a school's attendance policy regarding unexcused absences and other attendance matters may differ among schools within the same district.

Local variation is particularly pronounced with parent note policies and conversion absence policies. This variation means absences classified as unexcused in one district may be classified as excused in another district; thus, a student who has been absent for five days might be considered truant in one district (all five absences are unexcused and the PTIP is initiated, which may result in possible court involvement), but not in another (two of the five absences are unexcused, while the other three absences are excused).

For example, District A may allow more parent notes (or set no limit on the number of parent notes) while District B may allow relatively few parent notes (e.g., five notes per semester). Continuing with the example, after five parent notes have been supplied to excuse five absences in District B, any additional absences will be recorded as unexcused. In District A, however, a student may have few if any missed days recorded as unexcused if a parent note has been provided. This situation makes comparing district truancy rates, which are based on the number of unexcused absences, problematic. In districts where principals have discretion to set their own attendance policies, the challenge of analyzing truancy rates is even greater given possible variation among schools in the same district.

Even tracking unexcused absences in the *same* district over time can prove problematic without knowing whether the district's parent note policy changed over the time period examined. Some districts represented in OREA surveys and interviews indicated they were in the process of changing their parent note policies to allow fewer notes per year in an effort to curb what they considered excessive use by parents. Other districts are considering no longer allowing parent notes, at least at certain grade levels.

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<sup>AU</sup> All research, including survey data, reflects procedures and policies in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>AV</sup> See page 7 for further explanation.

**Exhibit 60: Local variation with the progressive truancy intervention plan**

# Local Variation with the Progressive Truancy Intervention Plan

## STUDENT IN DISTRICT A



District A attendance policies are stricter than required by state law. The district implements the PTIP at three unexcused absences.

Districts A & B both adhere to state law.

## STUDENT IN DISTRICT B



District B attendance policies adhere to but do not exceed state law. The district implements the PTIP at five unexcused absences.

### Attendance Timeline

Students in District A are allowed five parent notes a year to excuse absences. No parent notes allowed beyond five. Resulting unexcused absences trigger Tier 1.

**TOTAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCES: 3**



Each student submits 8 parent notes for absences.

Students in District B are allowed 10 parent notes a year to excuse absences. No parent notes allowed beyond 10.

**TOTAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCES: 0**



**TIER 1 OF PTIP**



**NO TRUANCY INTERVENTION**

Five unexcused tardies equal one unexcused absence in District A. The accrual of additional unexcused absences violates the Tier 1 attendance contract, triggering Tier 2.

**TOTAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCES: 5**



Each student accrues 10 unexcused tardies.

Tardies and early dismissals are not converted to absences in District B.

**TOTAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCES: 0**



**TIER 2 OF PTIP**



**NO TRUANCY INTERVENTION**

Student misses two days for stomach virus, does not obtain a doctor note, and is not allowed more parent notes per District A policy. Resulting unexcused absences trigger Tier 3.

**TOTAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCES: 7**



Each student misses 2 days for illness.

Student misses two days for stomach virus and uses parent note to excuse absences, as allowed by District B policy.

**TOTAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCES: 0**



**TIER 3 OF PTIP**



**NO TRUANCY INTERVENTION**

## ***Parent note policies***

Parent notes are provided by parents to excuse their child's absence from school for such reasons as illnesses that do not require a visit to the doctor, family emergencies, and vacations. Parent notes are not explicitly addressed in state law, SBE rule, or TDOE guidance; parent note policies and practices are instead entirely determined at the district level (and in some cases at the school level).

According to OREA surveys, most districts allow five to 10 absences per year to be excused with parent notes. The most common response given by attendance supervisors and principals to OREA's survey was that five parent notes are allowed per school year. The second most common response was 10 parent notes per school year, with some of these districts setting a limit on the number allowed per semester (e.g., five parent notes per semester). A small number of districts allow an unlimited number of parent notes, and some districts allow none.

Each district's attendance policy determines whether parent notes to excuse absences will be accepted, the circumstances under which parent notes will be accepted, and the number of parent notes allowed to excuse absences. A district's parent note policy may also differ by grade level, with some districts accepting fewer parent notes to excuse the absences of students in the upper grades (i.e., high school students).

A bill introduced in the Tennessee General Assembly in 2012 included language limiting parent notes by grade band (10 per year for grades K-5 and four per semester for grades 6-12) and requiring doctor or school nurse notes for illnesses.<sup>AW</sup> The sponsor of the bill cited inconsistent policies across the state that result in students being treated differently from district to district as one reason for the proposed legislation. According to the bill's fiscal note, the proposed changes would have increased truancy cases and resulted in more educational neglect investigations performed by the Department of Children's Services, increasing costs.<sup>AX</sup> School districts would also incur additional costs according to the fiscal note. Ultimately, the bill failed to progress due in part to the fiscal note.

Connecticut addressed local variation in parent note policies by requiring all schools to follow a uniform policy. In 2011, the Connecticut General Assembly passed legislation requiring the State Board of Education to define excused and unexcused absences. The state established two levels for excused absences based on the number of days missed, with parent note policies differing by level. At Level 1, which covers a student's first nine absences, parents may submit notes to excuse absences for any reason. Starting with the tenth absence, however, the student moves to Level 2, at which point absences are excused only for specified reasons, including student illness (and only with a valid doctor's note), observance of a religious holiday, or a death in the family. Unless these criteria are met, the absence is classified as unexcused.<sup>AY</sup>

## ***Conversion absence policies***

In addition to parent note policies, there is also variation in conversion absence policies across districts. Under a conversion absence policy, a district converts a specified number of tardies and early dismissals into an absence; for example, a district may assign a student one unexcused absence for every five unexcused tardies. Conversion absence policies are not explicitly addressed in state law, SBE rule, or TDOE guidance; conversion absence policies and practices are instead entirely determined at the district level (and in some cases at the school level).

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<sup>AW</sup> In addition to addressing parent notes, HB 3611 (2012) also defined unexcused absences, defined two classifications of truancy (habitually truant and chronically truant), specified the conversion of five tardies/early dismissals to one absence, set and clarified the use of consequences for truant students and parents, and clarified the definition of educational neglect.

<sup>AX</sup> The bill's fiscal note estimated that HB 3611 would result in 49 DCS cases not already in state custody to be taken into state custody. The increased load would require the hiring of three new employees in addition to increased costs for housing expenditures.

<sup>AY</sup> Absences for disciplinary reasons (e.g., out of school suspension) are also classified as unexcused.

Over half of attendance supervisors responding to an OREA survey indicated their districts allow conversion absences either through district policy or through discretion given to principals at the school level.<sup>AZ</sup> Most districts and schools represented on the OREA surveys convert three to five unexcused tardies or early dismissals to one unexcused absence. In these districts and schools, a student's PTIP status may be determined in part by the number of conversion absences.

Forty-three percent of attendance supervisors and 57 percent of principals who responded to the OREA survey indicated conversion absences were not allowed in their districts, and that principals were not allowed to institute such policies at the school-level. Some respondents stated a conversion absence policy has not been adopted in their district or school because of local questions about the legality of the practice. These respondents noted that the absence of any law addressing conversion absences has deterred the implementation of such a policy in their districts.

Juvenile court judges who responded to OREA's survey were split regarding conversion absences, with 12 judges that consider conversion absences when making decisions in truancy cases, 14 judges that do not,<sup>BA</sup> and 17 judges indicating that conversion absences may or may not be considered in truancy cases depending on case specifics.

A bill introduced in the Tennessee General Assembly in 2012 included language specifying that five tardies/early dismissals would convert to one absence, with the conversion absence classified as excused or unexcused based on whether the converted tardies/early dismissals were excused or unexcused.<sup>BB</sup>

### **Variation in local policies and practices and the inconsistent classification of absences as excused or unexcused across the state makes analyzing and comparing district truancy data problematic. This prevented OREA from fully evaluating the effectiveness of the progressive truancy intervention plan (PTIP).**

As explained above, local variation in district and school policies and practices results in the inconsistent classification of absences as excused or unexcused across the state. In addition to the inconsistent classification of absences, the number of unexcused absences a student must have accrued to be considered truant also varies by district.<sup>BC</sup>

The state does not calculate truancy rates by district and school. TDOE collects attendance data from districts several times each school year, and this data is used to calculate chronic absenteeism rates, which are based on excused absences as well as unexcused absences, and for other attendance-related purposes. The unexcused absence data is not, however, currently used to calculate truancy rates. In addition, state law does not define "truancy," and there is no uniform definition of "unexcused absence" used by all districts.

Taken together, the differences among districts pose significant challenges to comparing district truancy data, identifying promising initiatives to reduce truancy, and verifying the effectiveness of local policies and practices. These issues also prevented OREA from fully evaluating the effectiveness of the PTIP because a student's number of unexcused absences determines (1) when the PTIP is first implemented, and (2) the pace of a student's progression through the PTIP tiers. State law requires all districts to implement the first tier of the PTIP once a student accumulates at least five unexcused absences, but districts may implement the first

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<sup>AZ</sup> See pages 9-11 for more information on conversion absences.

<sup>BA</sup> Two juvenile court judges commented that they do not interpret state law as allowing conversion absences to count in truancy cases.

<sup>BB</sup> In addition to language addressing the conversion of tardies/early dismissals to an absence, HB 3611 (2012) also defined unexcused absences, defined two classifications of truancy (habitually truant and chronically truant), set a parent note policy, set and clarified the use of consequences for truant students and parents, and clarified the definition of educational neglect.

<sup>BC</sup> See pages 6-8 for more information on how policy variations impact whether a student is classified as truant.

tier earlier. Nearly a third of attendance supervisors who responded to OREA's survey indicated Tier 1 begins at three unexcused absences in their districts.<sup>BD</sup> Students in these districts may be considered truant (for PTIP purposes) at three unexcused absences and, as a result, may progress to the higher PTIP tiers and possible referral to juvenile court based on a lower or higher total number of unexcused absences than students in other districts.<sup>BE</sup> In addition, in some districts, principals use their discretion to begin implementation of the PTIP at a different threshold than district policy; 12 percent of principal respondents to the OREA survey indicated that their schools start the PTIP either earlier or later than what is specified by their district, adding further variation.

### **Variation at the court level**

If the interventions implemented or initiated by schools and districts through the PTIP are ineffective in addressing a student's truancy, the student and the student's parents must be referred to juvenile court. Truancy-related court referrals and the outcomes of truancy cases are important measures of the PTIP's effectiveness, but the degree of variation among juvenile courts in the tracking of truancy cases is another barrier to fully evaluating the PTIP. Responses to OREA's survey of juvenile court judges indicated courts differ in how truancy cases and offenses are classified and tracked.<sup>BF</sup> For example, a single truancy *case* in one court might include multiple truancy *offenses*. In another court, however, the same number of truancy *offenses* might be recorded as multiple truancy *cases* (e.g., two truancy offenses would be recorded as a single truancy case in one court, while two truancy offenses in another court would be recorded as two truancy cases).

### **Qualitative data used by OREA to evaluate the PTIP**

Given all the challenges described above, OREA turned to qualitative data (e.g., interviews, surveys) to gauge school and court officials' perceptions of PTIP effectiveness and various truancy-related trends, such as progression through the tiers and referrals to juvenile court. Sixty-eight percent of attendance supervisors and 65 percent of principals rated the PTIP as *somewhat effective* at preventing future unexcused absences among their students.

Regarding perceptions of the number of students referred to juvenile court, the most common response from attendance supervisors, selected by 41 respondents (40 percent), was that the number of court referrals for truancy in their districts had *significantly decreased* after one full year of PTIP implementation. Most principals who responded to the survey, however, perceived no change in the number of court referrals. An almost even percentage of respondents (29 percent of attendance supervisors and 27 percent of principals) indicated that court referrals had *slightly decreased* since the implementation of the PTIP. Most juvenile court judges who responded to OREA's survey reported a decrease in their truancy caseload after one full year of PTIP implementation in school districts, with the majority reporting a *slight to significant decrease* in truancy cases.

### **State law does not address whether the PTIP should restart each school year for all students.**

The majority of districts represented on the OREA attendance supervisor survey restart the PTIP each school year for all students regardless of a student's attendance history the previous school year (i.e., a student who reached Tier 3 of the PTIP the previous school year will begin the next school year with zero unexcused absences).<sup>BG</sup> Some attendance supervisors stated they interpret state law as requiring that the PTIP tiers restart for all students, and a few indicated the juvenile court judge who hears their school district's truancy cases interprets state law as requiring that the PTIP restart for all students.

<sup>BD</sup> The actual implementation of the PTIP in some districts occurs later than called for in local policy, however. Reasons for delayed PTIP implementation noted by survey respondents included problems scheduling PTIP meetings, uncooperative parents, and a lack of manpower and resources.

<sup>BE</sup> Twenty-seven principals indicated their school's threshold for Tier 1 is six unexcused absences. State law requires that Tier 1 be implemented once a student accrues five unexcused absences.

<sup>BF</sup> Fifteen judges (39 percent of survey respondents) were unsure if and how truancy data is tracked in their court. One judge indicated that truancy data is not tracked in their court.

<sup>BG</sup> Some districts and schools that restart the PTIP for all students may expedite the PTIP process for some students, especially those who reached Tier 3 of the PTIP or that remain under a truancy-related court order.

But 11 percent of attendance supervisors who responded indicated their districts do not always restart the PTIP for all students. Some students in these districts may instead begin a new school year by continuing with wherever they left off with the PTIP process at the close of the previous school year.

TDOE guidance is for districts to restart the tiers of the PTIP for all students at the beginning of each new school year.

## **State chronic absenteeism rates have remained steady since chronic absenteeism was first included as an accountability measure on the State Report Card.**

In 2017, there were 134,675 chronically absent students in Tennessee, accounting for 13.6 percent of the total K-12 student population. The statewide rate of chronic absenteeism remained steady over the following two years, dropping slightly to 13.3 percent in 2018 (the first year chronic absenteeism was included as an accountability measure on the State Report Card), and to 13.1 percent in 2019. (Chronic absenteeism rates were not calculated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

Most Tennessee schools have *modest* to *significant* chronic absenteeism based on categories created by Attendance Works, a national nonprofit. If these categories are used, around 670 schools had a chronic absenteeism rate in the *significant* category, with rates between 10 and 19.9 percent, from 2017 to 2019. Around 550 schools per year had *modest* chronic absenteeism rates of between 5 and 9.9 percent. The fewest number of schools fell into the more acute categories, with approximately 100 schools at the level of *extreme* chronic absenteeism (30 percent or higher) and approximately 167 schools with *high* chronic absenteeism (20-29.9 percent) during the three-year time frame.

## **Students who are economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.**

Between the 2017 and 2019 school years, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students who were chronically absent was 20.9, as compared to 9.3 percent of students not economically disadvantaged. Attendance supervisors and principals who responded to OREA's survey indicated factors such as a lack of basic resources (food, clothing, and shelter), frequent changes of address, and a lack of transportation negatively affect the school attendance of economically disadvantaged students.

During this same time frame, students with disabilities were nearly 1.45 times more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities. According to attendance supervisors and principals, these students tend to miss more school because of physical or mental limitations that hinder their ability to navigate the typical school day. These students may also miss school more often than their peers because of frequent doctor's appointments.

Examining chronic absenteeism rates by minority group shows Black students had higher chronic absenteeism rates than either White or Hispanic students during the 2017, 2018, and 2019 school years. Hispanic students were chronically absent at a lower rate than both Black and White students during this period.

## **High school students, especially seniors, are more likely to be chronically absent than students in other grades.**

High school students had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism in 2017, 2018, and 2019. During this time frame, 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 about 15 percent of freshmen.

Attendance supervisors and principals who responded to OREA's surveys and participated in interviews for this project explained that it becomes especially difficult to encourage school attendance among high school students once they reach age 18. High school students in Tennessee are not legally required to attend school after reaching age 18. Because these students are not required to attend school, they can no longer be classified as truant and are no longer subject to the PTIP interventions, though they are still factored into the chronic absenteeism rates of their schools and districts. Some school officials recommended the state's compulsory education laws be extended to include 18-year-olds, expressing frustration that their districts and schools are penalized for the absences of students who are legally no longer required to attend school.

In some states, the compulsory education laws apply to students who are 18 or older. The compulsory education laws in Texas apply to students through age 19, and students who are 18 in Kentucky can still be classified as truant.

## **Accountability for chronic absenteeism and for truancy are different. Districts and schools are held accountable for chronic absenteeism rates, while students and parents are held accountable for truancy rates.**

Districts and schools are graded based on their chronic absenteeism rates, but truancy rates are not part of the state's K-12 accountability system for districts and schools.<sup>BH</sup> For students and parents, however, there are consequences attached to truancy status, such as possible referral to juvenile court. By contrast, school officials cannot refer students to juvenile court based on chronic absenteeism status alone or based on a student's number of *excused* absences.

The focus on chronic absenteeism has also caused some school officials to change their policies and practices for parent notes and doctor's notes, both of which are used to excuse student absences. On the OREA surveys of attendance supervisors and principals, most respondents indicated that common physical illness was the most likely contributor to the chronic absenteeism of their students. All absences, regardless of reason, factor into the chronic absenteeism rate that districts and schools are graded on, and some school officials took exception to being held accountable for medical-related absences in certain cases. In response, some districts and schools have set limits on the number of parent notes that can be used to excuse absences for illness, requiring doctor's notes for some or all medical-related absences.<sup>BI</sup> Other districts have asked healthcare providers in their area to change their doctor's note policies to encourage school attendance, such as by specifying on the note that a student should return to school after the medical appointment, if applicable, rather than miss the entire day of school.<sup>BJ</sup> Not all healthcare providers may wish to change their practices in response to school officials' requests, however. Ensuring that school district communications about student absenteeism and doctor's note practices reach all healthcare providers, especially in urban areas of the state with a substantial number of providers to contact, can be a challenge for school officials.

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<sup>BH</sup> In accordance with the state's ESSA plan, all Tennessee schools and districts receive a grade on the State Report Card for chronic absenteeism in the form of the Chronically Out of School Indicator. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these indicator scores were not issued for the 2019-20 school year.

<sup>BI</sup> OREA did not identify any districts or schools that place a limit on the number of doctor's notes that can be used to excuse a student's absence.

<sup>BJ</sup> Some doctor's offices limit the number of notes they will provide to certain students (i.e., those considered to have obtained an excessive number of notes).

The relatively recent emphasis on chronic absenteeism and establishment of the Chronically Out of School Indicator used for district and school accountability has also prompted some districts to use a PTIP-type process for chronically absent students. While the student may not be referred to court for excused absences, the interventions used in the PTIP could address the barriers faced by chronically absent students as well as truant students. A student with anxiety or depression who brings in parent notes to excuse missed school days could benefit from the therapeutic components of the PTIP, for example.

## **Confusion exists among some school officials about how to use alternative attendance plans for qualified students as part of an IEP or Section 504 plan.**

Students who miss a large number of school days due to chronic illness and frequent doctor visits may qualify for an alternative attendance plan as part of an IEP or Section 504 plan. Students with an alternative attendance plan remain enrolled and are counted as present in their school's student information system for the days or time they are allowed to miss; thus, these students do not become chronically absent or truant for the approved days missed.

Although most school officials who responded to OREA surveys are aware of alternative attendance plans, a quarter of principals who responded were unaware of this option for qualified students. Even school officials who are aware may not implement the option correctly. Over half of principals and approximately 17 percent of attendance supervisors who registered on the survey that they were aware of such plans indicated students who were on the plans were counted as absent for the time they missed.<sup>8K</sup> TDOE indicates that students on an alternative attendance plan should instead be counted as *present* for the time they miss.<sup>8L</sup>

## **Policy options**

### **The General Assembly may wish to require additional reporting by districts and schools of PTIP data and other attendance-related data.**

There is a considerable degree of variation among districts and schools regarding PTIP implementation, parent note policies, conversion absence policies, and other attendance-related matters.<sup>8M</sup> School officials have used the flexibility granted them by the state to tailor policies and procedures to fit local conditions, but the current degree of variation among districts and schools poses significant challenges to analyzing truancy-related data, such as truancy rates, and evaluating the PTIP. Enhanced reporting from districts and schools would provide the data needed for this purpose. Additionally, more data would enable the state to better evaluate pilot programs such as the rural expansion of Communities in Schools.

Districts already collect and report some attendance-related data to the state (e.g., unexcused absences, excused absences, and chronic absenteeism rates), but the current level of reporting is inadequate for a sound analysis and comparison of district truancy rates and a full evaluation of the PTIP. State law does not require school officials to collect and report PTIP data at the school and district levels.

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<sup>8K</sup> It is possible that some of these answers were the result of respondent error.

<sup>8L</sup> Students on an alternative attendance plan may be counted as *absent* if they do not abide by the specifications of the plan.

<sup>8M</sup> All research, including survey data, reflects procedures and policies in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The General Assembly could require districts and schools to report the following information annually:

### ***Number of unexcused absences required for Tier 1 of the PTIP***

Districts (and schools in some cases) differ on the number of unexcused absences a student must accrue before the PTIP is initiated. State law requires all districts to implement the first tier of the plan once a student accumulates *at least five* unexcused absences, but districts may implement the first tier earlier. Nearly a third of attendance supervisors who responded to OREA's survey indicated Tier 1 begins at *three* unexcused absences in their districts, for example.<sup>BN</sup> In addition, in some districts, principals have discretion to begin implementation of the PTIP at a different threshold from their district's attendance policy; 12 percent of principal respondents to the OREA survey indicated the unexcused absence threshold for triggering the PTIP used in their school differed from that of their district.

Further, the points at which the successive tiers of the PTIP begin are determined in part by when the plan is first initiated at Tier 1. For example, districts implement Tier 2 after a student violates the attendance contract created during Tier 1, and if the student continues to accrue additional unexcused absences after Tier 2 has been reached, Tier 3 is then implemented. In districts and schools that begin Tier 1 at a lower level of unexcused absences (e.g., three unexcused absences as opposed to five), students may progress to the higher PTIP tiers and possible referral to juvenile court based on a lower or higher number of unexcused absences than students in other districts.

### ***Number of students who move through each tier of the PTIP***

Districts and schools are not currently required to track the number of students who move through each tier of the PTIP each school year. Over 60 percent of attendance supervisors and 50 percent of principals who responded to OREA's survey indicated this data is not tracked.<sup>BO</sup>

Reporting the number of students who move through the PTIP tiers would provide useful data for evaluating the effectiveness of the plan in reducing truancy and lowering the number of students referred to juvenile court.

### ***Number of students referred to court for truancy and their number of unexcused absences***

One reason for the PTIP's creation was to reduce the number of students referred to court for truancy. To measure the PTIP's success at accomplishing this goal, schools could begin reporting the number of students referred to court for truancy each year and the number of unexcused absences accrued by such students.

Data on the number of unexcused absences accrued by students who are ultimately referred to court could be compared to district PTIP thresholds to gauge how long it takes students to progress through the plan. Even if districts specify a certain number of unexcused absences as a threshold for each tier in their policies, students may accrue additional unexcused absences between each tier due to factors such as a lack of parent cooperation with the implementation of the PTIP.

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<sup>BN</sup> The actual implementation of the PTIP in some districts occurs later than called for in local policy, however. Reasons for delayed PTIP implementation noted by survey respondents included problems scheduling PTIP meetings, uncooperative parents, and a lack of manpower and resources.

<sup>BO</sup> Thirty-seven attendance supervisors and 270 principals who completed the OREA surveys indicated they track the number of students by PTIP tier and provided OREA with PTIP data for the 2018-19 school year. Data from these districts and schools shows that, in general, the number of students decreases at each successive tier of the PTIP. A common theme in survey responses was that fewer students reach the higher PTIP tiers because of the amount of time required to complete the lower-level tiers.

### ***Number of times PTIP tiers were skipped due to lack of parent cooperation***

State law allows school officials to refer truancy cases to juvenile court before completing the PTIP when parents do not cooperate in the implementation of the plan. In addition to gauging the frequency of this practice following the passage of a 2020 state law that clarified districts' ability to skip PTIP tiers in such circumstances, this data would provide more insight into the degree of parental involvement in plan implementation.

### ***Number of students in the PTIP based on absences from the previous school year***

State law does not specify whether the PTIP should restart each school year for all students. Nearly 90 percent of attendance supervisors on the OREA survey reported that their districts restart the PTIP for all students, but the remaining respondents indicated this is not the case in their districts. In such cases, it is unclear the extent to which a student's truancy status is based on unexcused absences in the current school year versus unexcused absences from the previous school year. Having districts report the number of students who are in the PTIP based on unexcused absences from the previous school year would help produce a more precise calculation of truancy rates.

### ***Parent note policy***

Knowledge of the parent note policy used in each district and school is essential for making sound comparisons of truancy rates among districts and schools and fully evaluating the PTIP. More student absences will be classified as unexcused in districts and schools with tighter limits on parent note policies. By contrast, fewer student absences will be classified as unexcused in districts with minimal or no limits on parent notes.

### ***Conversion absence policy***

Knowledge of the conversion absence<sup>BP</sup> policy used in each district and school is essential for making sound comparisons of truancy rates among districts and schools and fully evaluating the PTIP. Students who are frequently late to school or that leave early are more likely to enter the PTIP if they attend a school that converts tardies and early dismissals to unexcused absences.

District conversion absence policies can also be considered when evaluating chronic absenteeism rates. In districts that issue conversion absences and factor them into chronic absenteeism rates, the number of chronically absent students may be higher than in districts that do not issue conversion absences.

In addition, the PTIP is relatively new: at the time of this report's publication, only one year of attendance data (for the 2018-19 school year) under the PTIP was available. Enhanced reporting over multiple years will better position the state for an analysis of district truancy rates, including the identification and verification of effective policies and practices, as well as a fuller evaluation of the PTIP's effectiveness in reducing truancy rates and lowering the number of court referrals.

## **The General Assembly may wish to clarify certain aspects of the PTIP given confusion on the part of some districts, schools, and juvenile courts.**

Through interviews and surveys of school and court officials, OREA learned of opportunities to clarify certain aspects of the PTIP. In some districts, school officials operate with certainty that a PTIP-related practice is mandated by law, while school officials in other districts believe the same PTIP-related practice is not allowed.

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<sup>BP</sup> Conversion absences are absences that result from the accrual of a set number of tardies and/or early dismissals, as determined by district or school policy. See pages 9-11 for more information on conversion absences.

The practice of restarting the PTIP each year for all students is one example. State law does not specify if the PTIP is to be restarted at the beginning of each school year, and differences among districts regarding this practice are based in part on how the law's lack of specificity is interpreted. TDOE guidance is for districts to restart the PTIP at the beginning of each new school year.

In other cases, such as when to begin the PTIP, the General Assembly has expressly granted flexibility in state law to school districts so that implementation of the PTIP can be tailored to local conditions. State law requires all districts to implement the first tier of the PTIP once a student accumulates at least five unexcused absences, but districts may implement the plan earlier. Some districts begin PTIP implementation once a student accumulates three unexcused absences, for example. In these districts, students are therefore considered truant (for PTIP purposes) at three unexcused absences and, as a result, may progress to the higher tiers of the plan and possible referral to juvenile court based on a lower or higher number of unexcused absences than students in districts and schools that begin the PTIP at five unexcused absences.

For other practices, the law is silent, and some local officials are unsure whether certain practices are allowed. For example, the law does not refer to conversion absences, the practice of converting tardies and early dismissals to an absence. Some districts convert tardies and early dismissals to absences while other districts do not.

The General Assembly recently clarified one aspect of the PTIP: whether districts may refer truancy cases to juvenile court *before* completing the PTIP under certain conditions. A 2020 law clarifies that this practice is allowed if parents are uncooperative. Before this law's passage, however, some districts were uncertain whether skipping PTIP tiers was permissible in such cases. Prior to passage of the 2020 law, a director of schools could refer a student with continuing attendance problems to juvenile court prior to completing the PTIP if documentation could be provided that the student's parents were unwilling to participate in the PTIP. Seventeen attendance supervisors and 168 principals who responded to OREA surveys nevertheless indicated PTIP tiers had not been skipped in their district or school because they were unaware doing so was an option. The 2020 law expressly states that school officials may refer truancy cases to court before all PTIP tiers are completed in such cases and defines the term "uncooperative parents."

The General Assembly could clarify other aspects of the PTIP, including:

### ***Restarting tiers for all students each year***

Currently, state law does not explicitly state whether the PTIP must be restarted for all students at the beginning of each school year, and local practices differ based on interpretations of the law. Most districts represented on the OREA survey restart the PTIP for all students every year (i.e., all students start each school year with zero unexcused absences), but 11 percent of attendance supervisors indicated their districts do not always restart the plan for all students. Some students in these districts may instead begin a new school year by continuing with wherever they left off with the PTIP at the close of the previous school year.

The General Assembly could amend state law to clarify whether restarting the PTIP at the beginning of a new school year for all students (effectively starting all students with zero unexcused absences at the outset of each school year) is permissive or mandatory.

### ***Conversion absences***

On the OREA survey of attendance supervisors, over half of respondents (each representing a different district) indicated tardies/early dismissals are converted to absences in their district, either through a districtwide policy that applies to all schools or a policy that delegates the decision to school principals.<sup>BQ</sup> Some

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<sup>BQ</sup> Conversion absences are absences that result from the accrual of a set number of tardies and/or early dismissals, as determined by district or school policy. See pages 9-11 for more information on conversion absences.

survey respondents, however, stated a conversion absence policy has not been adopted in their district or school because of local questions about the legality of the practice. These respondents noted that the absence of any law expressly allowing conversion absences has deterred the implementation of such a policy in their districts and schools.

The General Assembly could amend state law to clarify whether conversion absences are prohibited, permissive, or mandatory. Further specification might also be provided as to the number of tardies or early dismissals a student must have accrued to equal one conversion absence and how to classify conversion absences (as excused or unexcused), or these decisions could be left to school districts.

## **The General Assembly may wish to make certain attendance-related policies more uniform for all districts and schools.**

A considerable degree of variation currently exists among districts and schools regarding parent notes and conversion absences, neither of which is explicitly addressed in state law, SBE rule, or TDOE guidance. A bill introduced in the General Assembly in 2012 addressed parent notes and conversion absences along with other attendance-related matters. The sponsor of the bill cited inconsistent policies across the state that result in students being treated differently from district to district as one reason for the proposed legislation.

### ***Parent notes***

The 2012 bill limited parent notes by grade band (10 per year for grades K-5, and four per semester for grades 6-12) and required doctor or school nurse notes for illnesses.<sup>BR</sup>

If the General Assembly were to address parent notes in state law, the following questions might be considered:

1. How many parent notes would be allowed for excused absences per student each year?
2. Should parent notes excuse absences for any reason or will reasons be limited to those specified in law?
3. Should the parent note policy vary by grade band (e.g., fewer parent notes allowed for high school students)?
4. Should a doctor's note be required to excuse some or all absences, if any, for illness?

The state of Connecticut offers another option to consider if the General Assembly chooses to bring about more uniformity in district and school attendance policies. In 2012, Connecticut created a two-level system for excused and unexcused absences used by all the state's schools. At the first level, a student may excuse up to nine absences by submitting a parent note for any reason deemed acceptable by their parents. Starting with the tenth absence, students move to the second level, which limits the reasons for which parent notes may be submitted and requires a doctor's note for medical absences. The policy considers any absence that does not follow the guidelines, including absences for medical reasons, to be unexcused.

### ***Conversion absences***

The 2012 bill introduced in the General Assembly also addressed conversion absences, specifying that five tardies/early dismissals would convert to one absence, and that the absence would be classified as excused or unexcused based on the classification of the tardies/early dismissals.<sup>BS</sup>

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<sup>BR</sup> In addition to addressing parent notes, HB 3611 (2012) also defined unexcused absences, defined two classifications of truancy (habitually truant and chronically truant), specified the conversion of five tardies/early dismissals to one absence, set and clarified the use of consequences for truant students and parents, and clarified the definition of educational neglect.

<sup>BS</sup> In addition to addressing tardies/early dismissals, HB 3611 (2012) also defined unexcused absences, defined two classifications of truancy (habitually truant and chronically truant), set a parent note policy, set and clarified the use of consequences for truant students and parents, and clarified the definition of educational neglect.

If the General Assembly were to address conversion absences in state law, the following questions might be considered:

1. Should conversion absences be allowed/required?
2. How many tardies/early dismissals would equal one absence?
3. Should a limit be placed on the number of conversion absences assigned to a student?
4. Should conversion absences be factored into a student's chronic absenteeism status?
5. Should conversion absences based on unexcused tardies or early dismissals be factored into a student's PTIP status?

A more uniform parent note policy and/or conversion absence policy in Tennessee would make the classification of excused and unexcused absences more consistent across the state but would reduce the flexibility of districts and schools to tailor such policies to fit local conditions.

## **TDOE may wish to begin calculating truancy rates for districts and schools, taking into account local policy and practice variations.**

TDOE already collects unexcused absence data by district, school, and student. This data is used primarily for general attendance tracking purposes and for calculating chronic absenteeism rates. The state does not calculate truancy rates by district and school, however.

Any future calculations of truancy rates should account for certain factors. First, there is no uniform definition of "unexcused absence" used by all districts. What is considered an unexcused absence in one district may have been excused in another with a parent note, for example. A second factor to consider is the number of unexcused absences a student must accrue to be considered truant. Although "truancy" and "truant student" are not defined in state law, five unexcused absences is used as a truancy-related threshold multiple times in state law and could be used to calculate truancy rates. Five unexcused absences is the threshold specified in state law at which schools must initiate the PTIP.<sup>BT</sup>

Truancy rates for each district and school that account for local policy and practice variations, such as parent notes and conversion absences, would enable policymakers and researchers to track trends in truancy rates, compare districts' rates, identify promising initiatives, and verify the effectiveness of local policies and practices designed to reduce truancy. In addition, such data would allow for a fuller evaluation of the PTIP.

## **Juvenile courts may wish to adopt a uniform definition of truancy case and a more uniform method for tracking truancy cases and actions taken.**

Currently, a single truancy *case* in one court might include multiple truancy *offenses*. In another court, however, the same number of truancy *offenses* might be recorded as multiple truancy *cases* (e.g., two truancy offenses would be recorded as a single truancy case in one court, while two truancy offenses in another court would be recorded as two truancy cases).

In addition to adopting a uniform definition of "truancy case," a more uniform method for tracking the number of court referrals received by each court, both overall and by student, and the actions taken by the court (e.g., dismissal, warning, disciplinary action) might be adopted and used by the courts. OREA learned through interviews that judges take a variety of actions in truancy cases, including fines, jail time for parents, referral to counseling services, referral to DCS, among others.<sup>BU</sup>

<sup>BT</sup> The five unexcused absence threshold is also mentioned in law as when a student is adjudicated to be unruly and the parents fined or assigned community service.

<sup>BU</sup> See pages 38-39 for more information on survey respondents' ratings of the effectiveness of these actions.

Juvenile courts might also clarify the reason(s) for which a truancy case is dismissed. According to *TCA 49-6-3009(i)*, a court shall dismiss a complaint or referral made by a school district if it is not accompanied by a statement certifying that the school applied the PTIP but the interventions failed to meaningfully address the student's attendance. On the OREA survey of juvenile court judges, 63 percent of respondents indicated that they require proof from the school district that all tiers have been completed before they will hear a truancy case. Districts may, however, refer truancy cases to juvenile court before PTIP completion if parents refuse to cooperate with the plan.

A uniform definition of "truancy case" used by all courts and a more uniform method for tracking truancy cases and actions taken by the courts would bring more consistency to the truancy data from the state's juvenile courts and enable a fuller evaluation of the PTIP. Based in part on results from a 2019 survey of juvenile court judges and court administrators, the Governor's Juvenile Justice Reform Implementation Council<sup>BV</sup> concluded there was a need for clear data collection expectations and improved technology within the court system, including uniform definitions, collection parameters, and new case management systems. This conclusion was consistent with a 2018 report from the AOC, DCS, and Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth that concluded state officials are not receiving quality, uniform data concerning the juvenile justice system because of inconsistent data and a lack of case management systems that can electronically report current data to the AOC.

## **Schools districts may wish to share best practices for addressing student attendance issues.**

From school laundromats and clothes closets to prizes and competitions, school officials across Tennessee have implemented a number of initiatives to address chronic absenteeism and truancy. Some methods that have proven successful in one district may find similar success in another. For example, some school officials indicated in their survey responses that they start students on the PTIP (or an alternate version of it) for chronic absenteeism in addition to truancy. Other school districts may want to consider such an approach.

Another opportunity for school districts to share best practices concerns alternative attendance plans for qualifying students. While the TDOE Attendance Manual contains guidelines for the use of alternative attendance plans, some confusion still exists among school officials, with some unaware of the option and others who may not be implementing it correctly. Proper implementation of this option for qualifying students could lower the chronic absenteeism rate of schools and districts with a high number of such students.

Groups such as the Tennessee Data and Attendance Supervisors Conference (TDASC) provide district and school officials with opportunities for networking, collaboration, and sharing best practices for improving student attendance.

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<sup>BV</sup> The Governor's Juvenile Justice Reform Implementation Council was established in 2019 to assist in ensuring the successful implementation of the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> State Board of Education, Chapter 0520-01-02-.17(5)(a), Revised Nov. 2020.

<sup>2</sup> TCA 49-6-3001(c)(2)(B) and 3005(a)(1-5).

<sup>3</sup> State Board of Education, Chapter 0520-01-02-.17, Revised Nov. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Student Membership and Attendance and Procedures Manual*, 2020, [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/331958\\_membership\\_attendance\\_manual.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/331958_membership_attendance_manual.pdf) (accessed Feb. 12, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Hedy N. Chang, Lauren Bauer, and Vaughan Byrnes, *Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success*, Attendance Works, Sept. 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Bauer, Patrick Liu, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Jay Shambaugh, *The Hamilton Project: Reducing Chronic Absenteeism under the Every Student Succeeds Act*, Brookings, April 2018.

<sup>7</sup> TCA 49-6-3004.

<sup>8</sup> Hedy N. Chang, Lauren Bauer, and Vaughan Byrnes, *Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success*, Attendance Works, Sept. 2018.

<sup>9</sup> TCA 49-2-115(a).

<sup>10</sup> Tennessee Department of Human Services, Chapter 1240-01-47-.15, Revised Dec. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Tennessee Department of Human Services, Chapter 1240-01-47-.15(2-3), Revised Dec. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Education, “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools,” <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html> (accessed Dec. 9, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> TCA 49-6-3017.

<sup>15</sup> TCA 49-6-3008.

<sup>16</sup> TCA 49-6-3007(e)(4)(B).

<sup>17</sup> TCA 49-6-3009(d)(1)(C).

<sup>18</sup> TCA 49-6-3009(d)(3).

<sup>19</sup> TCA 49-6-3009(g).

<sup>20</sup> TCA 49-6-3009(a); TCA 40-35-111(e)(3).

<sup>21</sup> TCA 37-1-156(a)(1); TCA 40-35-111(e)(1).

# Appendix A: Methodology

During the summer and fall of 2019, OREA conducted a total of 52 interviews with individuals with roles relative to student attendance. OREA met with representatives from 27 school districts, six juvenile courts, two nonprofit agencies, and nine state agencies to gain insight about student attendance in Tennessee. Interviews were conducted over the phone, through email, or in person.

**Exhibit 1: Interviews conducted by OREA**

State agencies	Juvenile Courts
Dept. of Children’s Services	Davidson County
Dept. of Education	Hamilton County
Dept. of Mental Health and Substance Abuse	Henry County
Dept. of Safety and Homeland Security	Jackson-Madison County
Administrative Office of the Courts	Montgomery County
State Board of Education	Shelby County
Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth	
Other agencies	
Communities in Schools	
International Association for Truancy and Dropout Prevention	
Tennessee Data and Attendance Supervisors Conference	
Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents	
Tennessee School Boards Association	

## Surveys

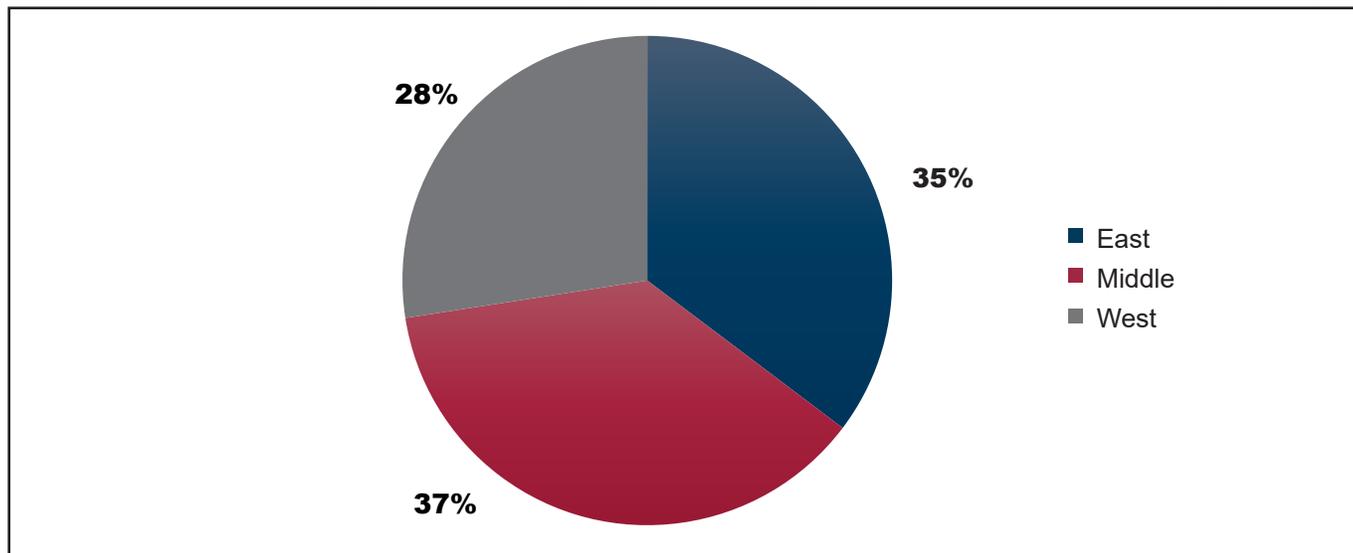
In December of 2019, OREA distributed online surveys to every district attendance supervisor and public school principal in Tennessee. Additionally, OREA distributed an online survey to every juvenile court judge in Tennessee.

### *Survey of attendance supervisors*

On OREA’s December 2019 survey of attendance supervisors, the original 169 respondents were first asked to verify their role of attendance supervisor, and any respondent who selected “no” was disqualified from the survey. From that point, analysts filtered out incomplete surveys, using the end of the section on the Progressive Truancy Intervention Plan to be the cutoff point. If respondents answered questions through that section, the survey was included in the final data set, even if they stopped answering questions before the end of the survey. Using this guideline, the final data set included responses from 102 attendance supervisors, each representing a unique district.

The districts that participated in OREA’s survey of attendance supervisors are spread almost evenly across the state with 28 representing a West Tennessee district, 38 from Middle Tennessee, and 36 from East Tennessee.

**Exhibit 2: Attendance supervisor survey respondents by Tennessee Grand Division (n=102)**



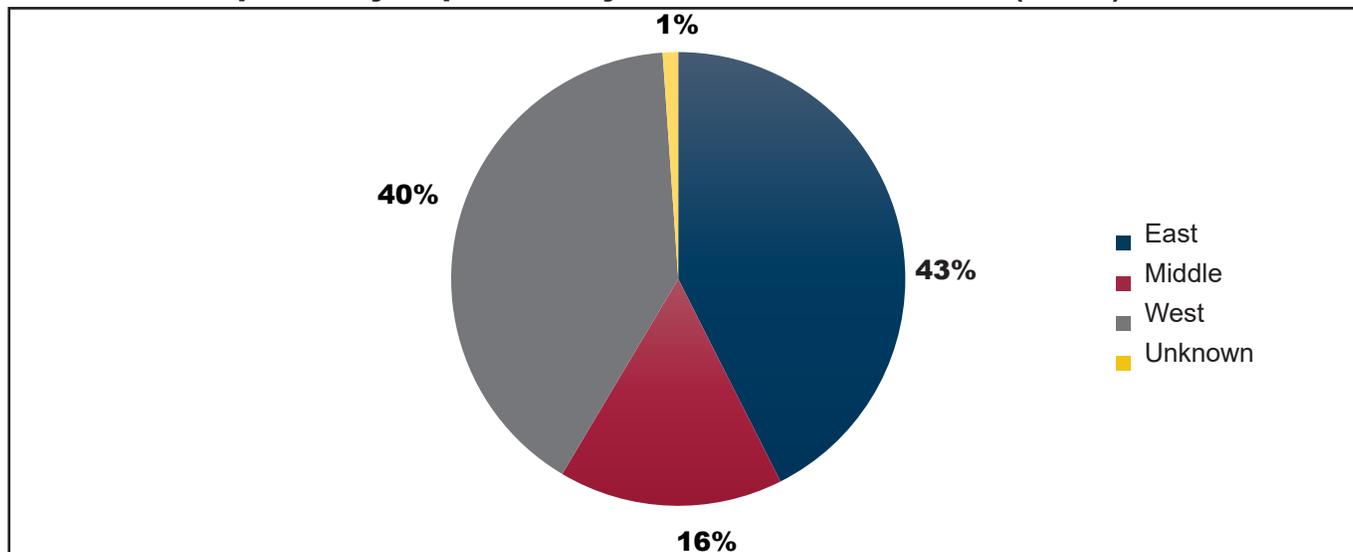
Source: OREA survey of attendance supervisors, December 2019.

### **Survey of principals**

On OREA’s survey of principals, the original 768 respondents were first asked to verify their role of principal, and any person who selected “no” was disqualified from the survey. As with the attendance supervisors, analysts filtered out incomplete surveys, using the end of the section on the progressive truancy intervention plan as the cutoff point. If respondents answered questions through that section, the survey was included in the final data set, even if they stopped answering questions later in the survey. Using this guideline, the final data set included 545 usable responses to the survey of Tennessee principals.

The final 545 surveys included 232 principals from East Tennessee (43 percent), 220 from Middle Tennessee (40 percent), and 87 from West Tennessee (16 percent). Six principals (1 percent) did not indicate their LEA and could not be sorted by Grand Division.

**Exhibit 3: Principal survey respondents by Tennessee Grand Division (n=545)**



Source: OREA survey of principals, December 2019.

In total, 130 school districts participated in the attendance study through the survey, interviews, or both.

**Exhibit 4: District participants in OREA attendance study**

<b>District</b>	<b>Attendance supervisors</b>	<b>Principals</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Alamo City	1	0	0
Alcoa City	1	2	0
Alvin C. York Institute	1	1	0
Anderson County	1	9	0
Arlington City	1	1	0
Athens City	1	4	0
Bartlett City	1	7	0
Bedford County	1	1	0
Bells City	1	0	0
Benton County	1	2	1
Bledsoe County	1	3	1
Blount County	0	2	0
Bradley County	0	14	0
Bristol City	1	6	1
Campbell County	0	1	0
Cannon County	1	2	1
Carroll County	1	0	0
Cheatham County	0	1	0
Chester County	0	4	0
Claiborne County	1	8	0
Cleveland City	1	4	0
Clinton City	1	0	0
Cocke County	1	2	1
Coffee County	1	3	1
Collierville City	1	0	0
Crockett County	1	4	0
Cumberland County	1	5	1
Davidson County	1	6	0
Decatur County	0	1	0
DeKalb County	1	1	0
Dickson County	1	6	0
Dyer County	0	1	1
Dyersburg City	1	2	1
Elizabethton City	1	0	0
Fayette County	1	0	0
Fentress County	1	0	1
Franklin County	1	0	0
Franklin SSD	1	0	0

<b>District</b>	<b>Attendance supervisors</b>	<b>Principals</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Germantown City	1	4	0
Gibson County SSD	1	5	0
Giles County	1	4	0
Grainger County	0	3	1
Greene County	0	7	0
Greeneville City	1	3	1
Grundy County	1	6	0
Hamblen County	1	0	1
Hamilton County	0	2	1
Hancock County	1	2	0
Hardeman County	1	4	0
Hardin County	1	7	0
Hawkins County	1	13	1
Haywood County	1	2	1
Henderson County	0	3	0
Henry County	1	4	1
Hickman County	1	2	0
Houston County	1	3	1
Humboldt City	1	2	0
Humphreys County	1	6	0
Jackson County	1	1	0
Jackson-Madison County	0	0	1
Jefferson County	1	11	0
Johnson City	1	5	0
Johnson County	1	9	0
Kingston City	1	0	0
Knox County	0	39	0
Lake County	1	3	0
Lakeland City	1	0	0
Lauderdale County	1	5	0
Lawrence County	1	7	1
Lebanon SSD	1	3	0
Lenoir City	1	2	0
Lexington City	1	1	0
Loudon County	2	8	0
Macon County	1	7	0
Manchester City	1	1	0
Marion County	1	4	0

<b>District</b>	<b>Attendance supervisors</b>	<b>Principals</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Marshall County	1	9	0
Maryville City	1	0	0
Maury County	1	17	0
McMinn County	1	6	0
McNairy County	0	1	1
Meigs County	1	2	0
Milan SSD	1	2	0
Monroe County	0	9	0
Montgomery County	0	15	1
Moore County	1	3	0
Morgan County	1	3	0
Murfreesboro City	0	10	0
Newport City	1	0	0
Not selected	0	6	0
Oak Ridge City	0	4	0
Obion County	1	6	1
Oneida SSD	0	2	0
Overton County	1	6	0
Paris SSD	1	1	0
Perry County	0	2	0
Pickett County	1	2	0
Polk County	0	4	0
Putnam County	1	8	0
Rhea County	1	0	1
Richard City	1	0	0
Roane County	1	3	0
Robertson County	0	11	1
Rogersville City	1	1	1
Rutherford County	1	25	0
Scott County	1	1	0
Sequatchie County	1	1	0
Sevier County	1	19	0
Shelby County	1	2	3
Smith County	1	10	0
South Carroll SSD	1	0	0
Stewart County	1	3	1
Sullivan County	1	1	0
Sumner County	0	3	1

<b>District</b>	<b>Attendance supervisors</b>	<b>Principals</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Sweetwater City	0	1	0
TN School for the Deaf	1	1	0
Tipton County	1	8	1
Trenton SSD	1	2	0
Tulahoma City	1	1	0
Unicoi County	0	5	0
Union County	1	8	0
Van Buren County	1	0	0
Warren County	1	6	0
Washington County	0	4	0
Wayne County	0	7	0
Weakley County	1	1	1
West Carroll SSD	0	2	0
West TN School for the Deaf	0	1	0
White County	1	0	0
Williamson County	1	6	0
Wilson County	1	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>545</b>	<b>33</b>

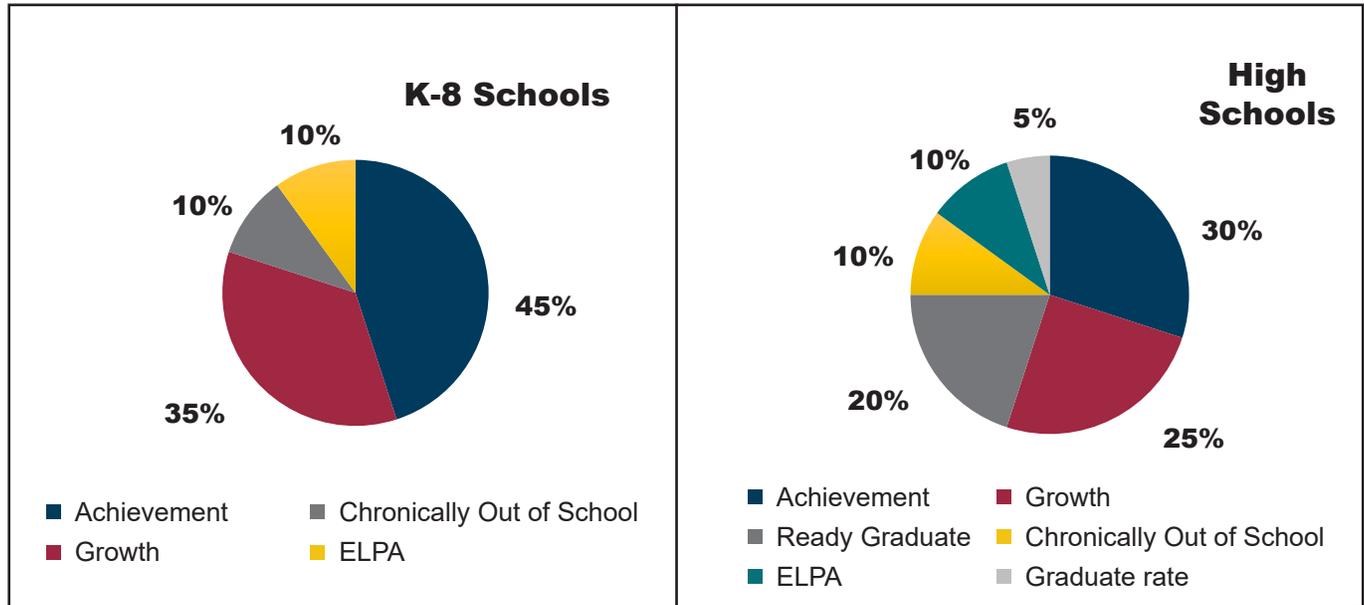
### ***Survey of juvenile court judges***

In February of 2020, OREA distributed surveys to each of Tennessee’s juvenile court judges with the help of the Administrative Office of the Courts. Fifty-two judges started the survey, and those whose courts do not handle truancy cases were disqualified, leaving 43 usable responses.

# Appendix B: Chronically Out of School Indicator

The Chronically Out of School Indicator accounts for 10 percent of a school’s overall score on the State Report Card.

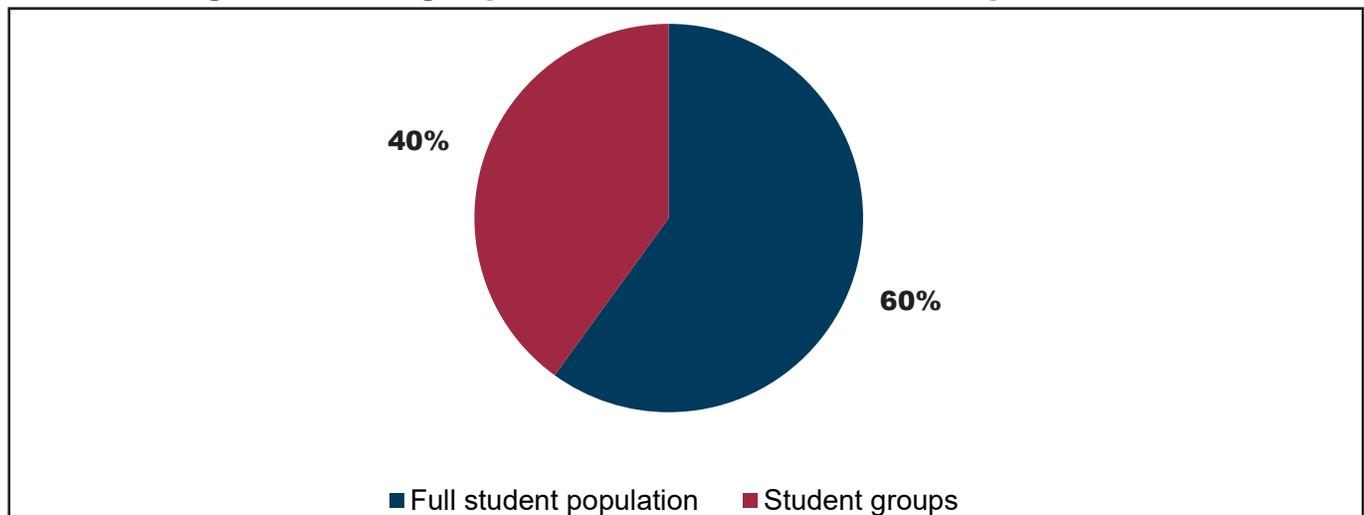
**Exhibit 1: Indicators for annual Tennessee school report cards**



Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

Within each indicator of the report card, the performance of student groups is considered as well as the overall school population. Certain student subgroups (Black, Hispanic, or Native American students, economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities) are weighted at 40 percent, while the full population (all students) makes up the other 60 percent of the rating. Scores are determined by how well a school performed during that particular school year as well as any improvements shown from the previous year.

**Exhibit 2: Weight of student groups in each indicator of the state report card**



Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

The Chronically Out of School Indicator measures how many students who were chronically absent in the previous year are not chronically absent in the current school year. Schools receive the most points for the highest number of improved or resolved cases of chronically absent students. The numeric score is based on how the school compares with other schools across the state, as shown in Exhibit 3.

**Exhibit 3: Calculation of the chronically out of school indicator by measure**

<b># of points received</b>	<b>Absolute performance pathway (Schools and districts)</b>	<b>AMO target (Schools and districts)</b>	<b>Value-added goal (Districts only)</b>
<b>4</b>	CA rate is greater than or equal to 8%	CA rate less than or equal to the double AMO target	Percent of students CA in prior year and not CA in current year is in top quintile of statewide performance
<b>3</b>	CA rate is greater than 8% and less than or equal to 11.5%	CA rate less than or equal to AMO target but greater than the double AMO target	Percent of students CA in prior year and not CA in current year is in fourth quintile of statewide performance
<b>2</b>	CA rate is greater than 11.5% and less than or equal to 16.5%	Lower bound of the confidence interval of the CA rate decreases compared to the previous year but fails to meet the AMO target	Percent of students CA in prior year and not CA in current year is in third quintile of statewide performance
<b>1</b>	CA rate is greater than 16.5% and less than or equal to 25%	Lower bound of the confidence interval of the CA rate decreases compared to the previous year but fails to meet the AMO target	Percent of students CA in prior year and not CA in current year is in second quintile of statewide performance
<b>0</b>	CA rate is greater than 25%	Lower bound of the confidence interval of the CA rate is greater than or equal to the prior year's CA rate	Percent of students CA in prior year and not CA in current year is in bottom quintile of statewide performance

Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

# Appendix C: Chronic absenteeism of student subgroups

**Exhibit 1: Chronic absenteeism of student subgroups, average by year | 2017 through 2019**

	<b>Average chronically absent per year</b>	<b>Average not chronically absent per year</b>	<b>Average total enrollment per year</b>	<b>Percentage of all students in TN</b>	<b>Percentage of all CA students in TN</b>
<b>Economically disadvantaged</b>	72,068	272,924	344,992	<b>34.8%</b>	<b>54.6%</b>
<b>Black/Hispanic Students</b>	51,241	286,396	337,637	<b>34.1%</b>	<b>38.8%</b>
<b>Students with disabilities</b>	23,550	104,859	128,409	<b>13.0%</b>	<b>17.8%</b>
<b>English learners</b>	5,817	56,170	61,988	<b>6.3%</b>	<b>4.4%</b>

Note: The combined numbers of Black and Hispanic students are used in accountability measures by TDOE along with Native American students (not shown here).  
 Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

# Appendix D: Communities in Schools

**Exhibit 1: Communities in Schools 2020-21 Partner Schools**

CIS Memphis			CIS Nashville		
Belle Forrest ES	Kirby MS	Riverview K-8	Amqui ES	Ida B. Wells ES	Tom Joy ES
Dunbar ES	Melrose HS	Southern Avenue Charter	Apollo MS	J. T. Moore MS	Warner Arts Magnet ES
Georgian Hills ES	Memphis College Prep	Southwest TN Community College	Bellevue MS	KIPP Academy Nashville	Whites Creek HS
Hamilton HS	MLK Prep	Trezevant HS	Bellshire Design Center	KIPP Nashville College Prep	
Humes Preparatory Academy MS	Oakhaven HS	Westside MS	Cumberland ES	KIPP Nashville Collegiate HS	
Journey Hanley ES	Promise Academy ES	Wooddale MS	Glengarry ES	Paragon Mills ES	
KIPP Memphis Academy	Raleigh-Egypt HS	Wooddale HS	Goodlettsville MS	Shwab ES	

Source: Communities in Schools-Tennessee and Communities in Schools-Memphis.

# Appendix E: Driver license suspensions by county

**Exhibit 1: Implementation of TCA 49-6-3017 by county**

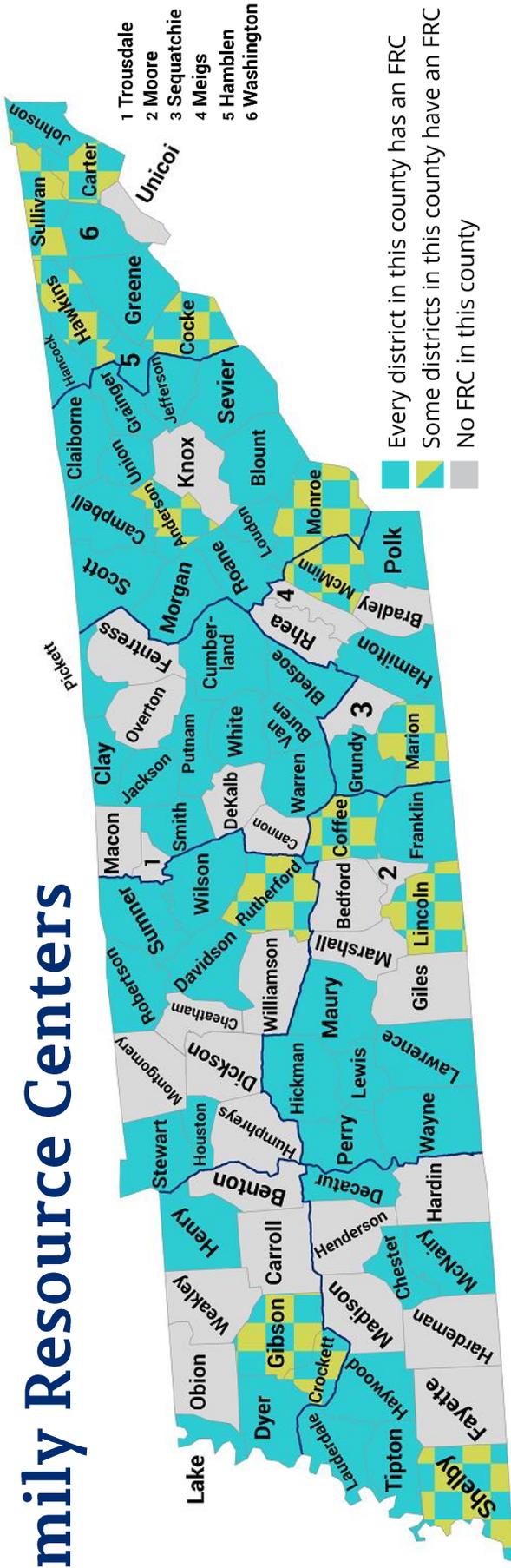
County	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	County	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Anderson	53	103	133	Lauderdale	0	0	1
Bedford	9	18	1	Lawrence	0	1	2
Benton	1	1	0	Lewis	0	0	0
Bledsoe	0	0	1	Lincoln	40	1	1
Blount	88	72	162	Loudon	37	47	27
Bradley	3	3	0	Macon	2	2	4
Campbell	12	114	34	Madison	154	172	177
Cannon	0	3	0	Marion	1	9	12
Carroll	1	2	2	Marshall	2	9	4
Carter	7	6	1	Maury	7	99	72
Cheatham	1	1	0	McMinn	9	48	17
Chester	2	2	1	McNairy	0	0	0
Claiborne	15	38	22	Meigs	0	3	0
Clay	0	0	0	Monroe	4	3	2
Cocke	19	36	41	Montgomery	21	5	5
Coffee	67	31	47	Moore	2	2	1
Crockett	1	0	0	Morgan	1	1	4
Cumberland	4	3	0	Obion	3	53	33
Davidson	40	28	24	Overton	0	2	1
Decatur	0	1	0	Perry	0	4	6
DeKalb	3	1	0	Pickett	0	0	0
Dickson	32	14	1	Polk	0	0	3
Dyer	2	3	2	Putnam	9	16	8
Fayette	23	10	0	Rhea	0	1	0
Fentress	0	0	1	Roane	7	9	8
Franklin	26	11	9	Robertson	29	13	44
Gibson	21	12	13	Rutherford	184	183	161
Giles	2	2	1	Scott	2	5	1
Grainger	1	1	0	Sequatchie	5	12	17
Greene	40	30	22	Sevier	6	12	6
Grundy	1	1	0	Shelby	313	64	8
Hamblen	20	26	17	Smith	2	3	2
Hamilton	55	64	13	Stewart	7	6	11
Hancock	0	0	0	Sullivan	173	209	152
Hardeman	2	1	1	Sumner	7	8	10

<b>County</b>	<b>2016-17</b>	<b>2017-18</b>	<b>2018-19</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>2016-17</b>	<b>2017-18</b>	<b>2018-19</b>
Hardin	0	0	0	Tipton	9	20	4
Hawkins	75	70	64	Trousdale	3	0	0
Haywood	0	0	1	Unicoi	2	3	0
Henderson	3	0	2	Union	3	5	1
Henry	12	17	10	Van Buren	1	1	0
Hickman	6	2	0	Warren	33	44	43
Houston	7	2	1	Washington	96	70	44
Humphreys	1	0	3	Wayne	0	0	0
Jackson	0	0	1	Weakley	13	25	0
Jefferson	7	4	1	White	2	0	2
Johnson	5	1	0	Williamson	84	54	86
Knox	473	366	267	Wilson	92	43	64
Lake	0	2	1				

Source: Tennessee Department of Safety.

# Appendix F: Family resource centers map

## Family Resource Centers



### Northwest

Crockett Co.  
 Dyer Co.  
 Dyersburg City (Dyer)  
 Henry Co.  
 Humboldt City (Gibson)  
 Lake Co.  
 Paris SSD (Henry)  
 Trenton SSD (Gibson)

### Mid Cumberland

Houston Co.  
 Lebanon SSD (Wilson)  
 Metro-Nashville (Davidson)  
 Murfreesboro City (Rutherford)  
 Robertson Co.  
 Stewart Co.  
 Sumner Co.  
 Wilson Co.

### Upper Cumberland

Bledsoe Co.  
 Clay Co.  
 Cumberland Co.  
 Jackson Co.  
 Pickett Co.  
 Putnam Co.  
 Smith Co.  
 Van Buren Co.  
 Warren Co.  
 White Co.

### East TN

Alcoa City (Blount)  
 Anderson Co.  
 Blount Co.  
 Campbell Co.  
 Claiborne Co.  
 Grainger Co.  
 Jefferson Co.  
 Lenoir City (Loudon)  
 Loudon Co.  
 Maryville City (Blount)  
 Monroe Co.  
 Morgan Co.

### First TN

Bristol City (Sullivan)  
 Carter Co.  
 Cocke Co.  
 Greene Co.  
 Greeneville City (Greene)  
 Hamblen Co.  
 Hancock Co.  
 Hawkins Co.  
 Johnson City (Washington)  
 Johnson Co.  
 Kingsport City (Sullivan)  
 Washington Co.

### Southwest

Chester Co.  
 Decatur Co.  
 Haywood Co.  
 Lauderdale Co.  
 McNairy Co.  
 Millington Municipal (Shelby)  
 Shelby Co.  
 Tipton Co.

### South Central

Coffee Co.  
 Franklin Co.  
 Hickman Co.  
 Lawrence Co.  
 Lewis Co.  
 Lincoln Co.  
 Manchester City (Coffee)  
 Maury Co.  
 Perry Co.  
 Wayne Co.

### Southeast

Athens City (McMinn)  
 Grundy Co.  
 Hamilton Co.  
 Polk Co.  
 Richard City (Marion)



# Appendix G: SBE Attendance Policy 4.100

<b>TENNESSEE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION</b>	
<b>SCHOOL ATTENDANCE POLICY</b>	<b>4.100</b>

SOME OF THE REQUIREMENTS IN THIS POLICY MAY BE SUPERSEDED BY EMERGENCY RULES DEVELOPED IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY. PLEASE REFER TO THE EMERGENCY RULES PASSED ON FINAL READING ON [APRIL 9, 2020](#) FOR MORE INFORMATION.

## 1. Compulsory Attendance

- a. The compulsory attendance law requires all children in Tennessee to attend school between six (6) and seventeen (17) years of age, both inclusive. T.C.A. §§ 49-6-3001 and 49-6-3005 provide that the following children may be exempt from the compulsory attendance law:
  - i. Children mentally or physically incapacitated to perform school duties, with the disability attested to by a duly licensed physician in all cases;
  - ii. Children who have completed high school and hold a high school diploma or other certificate of graduation;
  - iii. Children enrolled and making satisfactory progress in a course of instruction leading to a high school equivalency diploma;
  - iv. Children temporarily excused from attendance in school under rules and regulations promulgated by the State Board of Education, which rules and regulations shall not be in conflict with T.C.A. § 50-5-103 or any other law governing child labor in this state;
  - v. Children participating in a program of hospital or homebound instruction administered or approved by the LEA;
  - vi. Children six (6) years of age or under whose parent or guardian have filed a notice of intent to conduct a home school as provided by T.C.A. § 49-6-3001 or who are conducting a home school as provided by T.C.A. § 49-6-3050;
  - vii. Children enrolled in a home school who have reached seventeen (17) years of age; and
  - viii. Children who have attained their seventeenth (17<sup>th</sup>) birthday and whose continued compulsory attendance, in the opinion of the local board of education in charge of the school to which the children belong and are enrolled, results in detriment to good order and discipline and to the instruction of other students and is not of substantial benefit to the children.

## 2. Excused Absences

- a. A school principal may excuse a student from school attendance to participate in a non-school-sponsored extracurricular activity if the following conditions are met:

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4.100

- i. The student provides documentation to the school as proof of the student's participation in the non-school-sponsored extracurricular activity;
  - ii. The student's parent, custodian, or other person with legal custody or control of the student, prior to the extracurricular activity, submits to the principal or the principal's designee a written request for the excused absence. The written request shall be submitted no later than seven (7) business days prior to the student's absence; and
  - iii. The principal or the principal's designee approves, in writing, the student's participation in the non-school-sponsored extracurricular activity.
- b. The principal may limit the number and duration of non-school-sponsored extracurricular activities for which excused absences may be granted to a student during the school year.
- c. The principal shall excuse no more than ten (10) absences each school year for students participating in non-school-sponsored extracurricular activities.
- d. If a student is absent pursuant to a summons, subpoena, court order, or other legal requirement, then the student's absence shall be an excused absence, and the student shall be afforded the opportunity to complete all assignments missed. This does not apply to absences related to a criminal or delinquent act pursuant to T.C.A. § 37-1-134 and T.C.A. § 37-1-1114(c).
- e. If a student misses a class or day of school because of the observance of a day set aside as sacred by a recognized religious denomination of which the student is a member or adherent, where such religion calls for special observances of such a day, then the student's absence shall be an excused absence and the student shall be afforded the opportunity to complete all assignments missed without imposition of any penalty because of the absence.
- f. If a student's parent or legal guardian is a member of the United States armed forces, including a member of a state National Guard or a reserve component called to federal active duty, a public school principal shall give the student:
  - i. An excused absence for one (1) day when the member is deployed;
  - ii. An additional excused absence for one (1) day when the service member returns from deployment;
  - iii. Excused absences for up to ten (10) days for visitation when the member is granted rest and recuperation leave and is stationed out of the country;

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- iv. Excused absences for up to ten (10) days cumulatively within the school year for visitation during the member's deployment cycle. The student shall provide documentation to the school as proof of the service member's deployment; and
  - v. The opportunity to make up school work missed and shall not have their class grades adversely affected for lack of class attendance or class participation due to the excused absence.
- g. Local boards of education may adopt a policy that excuses a student from school to attend a released time course in religious moral instruction for up to one (1) class period during each school week in compliance with T.C.A. § 49-2-130.
- 3. Students Counted as Present**
- a. Students serving in-school suspension and receiving educational services shall be counted as present.
  - b. Students receiving homebound instruction shall be counted as present.
  - c. Students who serve as pages for the General Assembly during the school year, either at regular or special sessions, shall be credited as present. The student's participation as a page shall not be counted as an absence, either excused or unexcused.
  - d. Students participating in school-sponsored events shall be counted present provided the events or activities are school directed, related to an instructional activity, and have prior approval of the local board of education.
  - e. LEAs may adopt a policy allowing high school students participating in postsecondary school visits to be counted as present. Students shall only be counted present the day of the postsecondary visit and shall not be counted during any travel days. If an LEA adopts such a policy, the policy shall include:
    - i. The number of days a student may be counted present for postsecondary school visits;
    - ii. A requirement of prior notice from a parent or legal guardian specifying the date of the postsecondary school visit;
    - iii. A specific procedure for documenting that a student visit to a postsecondary school occurred, such as a signed letter or form from a campus official of the postsecondary institution;
    - iv. A requirement for students to complete all school work missed during a postsecondary school visit;

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- v. A provision specifying that postsecondary school visits are not required of any student; and
- vi. A provision specifying that the student's parent or guardian, not the district, are solely responsible for facilitating postsecondary school visits and for ensuring the safety of students during the visit.

## **Appendix H: TDOE Attendance Manual**

[https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/331958\\_membership\\_attendance\\_manual.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/331958_membership_attendance_manual.pdf)

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