

June 2023

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### Introduction

Chronic absenteeism is at the forefront of current national conversations about student attendance. According to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), research suggests that chronic absenteeism puts students at risk for numerous negative long-term outcomes such as reduced literacy and increased dropout rates.<sup>A</sup>

**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) in one school year.

**54%** of survey respondents said student attendance was their *biggest* challenge in 2021-22. **34%** called it a *major* challenge.

Source: 2022 Tennessee Educator Survey

A 2022 survey of Tennessee teachers found 54 percent of respondents cited student attendance as the *biggest* challenge they experienced for the 2021-22 school year. Thirty-four percent of respondents indicated that student attendance was a *major* challenge while teaching in the 2021-22 school year, up from 21 percent the previous year.

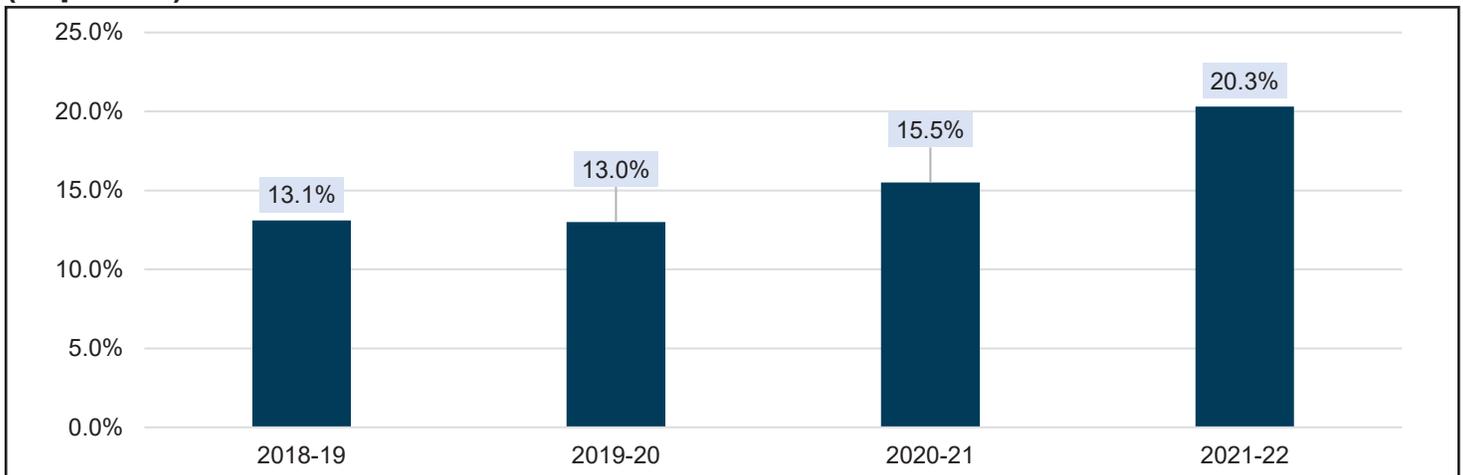
In 2021, the Comptroller’s Office of Research and Education Accountability released a comprehensive report on student attendance in Tennessee, which included an analysis of attendance data through the 2018-19 school year (the last school year before the COVID-19 pandemic). The pandemic’s impact on subsequent school years has been significant, affecting chronic absenteeism rates, which have risen, and disrupting the collection of attendance data and related accountability measures.

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See p. 4 for more about the effects of the pandemic on chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure for districts and schools.

### Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism rate rose by 7 percentage points (55 percent) between 2019 and 2022.

**Exhibit 1: The overall chronic absenteeism rate for Tennessee rose by 7 percentage points (55 percent) between 2019 and 2022**



Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

<sup>A</sup>Truancy is another component of student attendance. Truancy includes *unexcused* absences only; a student in Tennessee is considered truant when he or she accrues five *unexcused* absences. Parents of students who are excessively truant may face legal repercussions in accordance with Tennessee state law. Because of the variation among districts and schools regarding attendance policies, including the coding of absences as *excused* or *unexcused*, reliable truancy data does not exist in the state. For more information on truancy in Tennessee, see OREA’s 2021 report *Student Attendance in Tennessee* (<https://tncot.cc/attendance>).

Exhibit 1 shows a statewide chronic absenteeism rate of 13.1 percent for the 2018-19 school year, and a slight decrease to 13.0 percent in 2019-20. In 2020-21, as districts navigated pandemic-related requirements and guidelines, the statewide rate rose to 15.5 percent. By the end of the 2021-22 school year, the statewide chronic absenteeism rate reached 20.3 percent, an increase of 7 percentage points (55 percent) since 2019.

Tennessee is not alone in this increase. Chronic absenteeism also increased on the national level over the same period and has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Data reported by the USDOE shows at least 10.1 million students were chronically absent during the 2020-21 school year, up from around 8 million students prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of chronically absent students is likely underreported due to inaccurate reporting, according to the research group Attendance Works. The USDOE has cautioned against using federally reported data from 2019-20 and 2020-21 due to collection and reporting disruptions related to the pandemic.

### Chronic absenteeism has increased in most Tennessee districts

Overall, 133 school districts saw increases in chronic absenteeism of between 0.05 and 32.1 percentage points between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years. Perry County saw the greatest increase in chronic absenteeism during this period, increasing from 9.9 to 42 percent.

**Exhibit 2: The 10 districts with the greatest increase in chronic absenteeism | 2019-2022**

District	2018-19	2021-22	District	2018-19	2021-22
Perry County	9.9%	42.0%	TN School for the Blind	34.1%	56.7%
West TN School for the Deaf	18.8%	45.8%	Achievement School District	28.4%	50.4%
Stewart County	8.3%	32.3%	Tipton County	7.5%	28.6%
Haywood County	15.5%	39.1%	Dickson County	7.6%	27.0%
DeKalb County	12.7%	35.5%	Grainger County	20.0%	38.5%

Note: Due to data suppression rules, chronic absenteeism rates for the Department of Children’s Services Education Division are not available for any year, and the rate for Bradford Special School District is not available for 2021-22. Both districts are included in state rates.  
Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

The Tennessee School for the Blind and the Achievement School District each posted a chronic absenteeism rate of over 50 percent for the 2021-22 school year with rates of 56.7 and 50.4 percent, respectively.

**Exhibit 3: The 10 districts with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism | 2021-22**

District	% chronically absent	District	% chronically absent
TN School for the Blind	56.7%	Grainger County	38.5%
Achievement School District	50.4%	Lake County	35.5%
West TN School for the Deaf	45.8%	DeKalb County	35.5%
Perry County	42.0%	Sequatchie County	32.7%
Haywood County	39.1%	Stewart County	32.3%

Note: Due to data suppression rules, chronic absenteeism rates for the Department of Children’s Services Education Division are not available for any year, and the rate for Bradford Special School District is not available for 2021-22. Both districts are included in state rates.  
Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

## Chronic absenteeism has decreased in a few Tennessee districts

Since 2018-19, 12 school districts have experienced a *decrease* in chronic absenteeism, with decreases ranging from 0.01 to 7.1 percentage points. Blount County saw the greatest decrease during this period, dropping from 8.5 percent in 2019 to 1.3 percent in 2022.

**Exhibit 4: Twelve school districts experienced a decrease in chronic absenteeism between 2019 and 2022**

District	2018-19	2021-22	District	2018-19	2021-22
Blount County	8.5%	1.3%	Trenton	10.5%	9.2%
Macon County	11.7%	8.7%	South Carroll	4.2%	3.1%
Dayton	8.4%	5.6%	Hancock County	16.9%	16.3%
Carter County	23.5%	21.3%	Alamo	6.6%	6.2%
Bells	5.5%	3.5%	Huntingdon	5.2%	4.9%
Collierville	7.4%	6.0%	Obion County	13.834%	13.828%

Note: Due to data suppression rules, chronic absenteeism rates for the Department of Children’s Services Education Division are not available for any year, and the rate for Bradford Special School District is not available for 2021-22. Both districts are included in state rates.  
Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

In 2021-22, all but one of the 10 districts with the lowest rates of chronic absenteeism were city or special school districts. Blount County had the lowest rate of chronic absenteeism for that year.

**Exhibit 5: Ten districts with the lowest rates of chronic absenteeism | 2021-22**

District	% chronically absent	District	% chronically absent
Blount County	1.3%	Dayton	5.6%
South Carroll	3.1%	Collierville	6.0%
Bells	3.5%	Alamo	6.2%
Huntingdon	4.9%	Franklin SSD	6.3%
McKenzie	5.3%	Lakeland	7.2%

Note: Due to data suppression rules, chronic absenteeism rates for the Department of Children’s Services Education Division are not available for any year, and the rate for Bradford Special School District is not available for 2021-22. Both districts are included in state rates.  
Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

## Tennessee uses chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure for districts and schools

The state’s annual report card reports chronic absenteeism rates at the district and school levels. The report card also includes a Chronically Out of School indicator (COSI), which is based on multiple measures such as the percentage of students who are chronically absent and the reduction in chronic absenteeism for students who were chronically absent in the prior year.

<b>4</b>	Top quintile of statewide performance
<b>3</b>	Fourth quintile of statewide performance
<b>2</b>	Third quintile of statewide performance
<b>1</b>	Second quintile of statewide performance
<b>0</b>	Bottom quintile of statewide performance



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Each district and school receives a COSI score of 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 based on attendance for all students and student subgroups. The highest COSI score is a 4, which indicates the district or school is in the top 20 percent of all districts. The COSI is calculated differently for districts than it is for schools.

## **Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Tennessee schools closed their doors in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result, attendance data for that year is incomplete. The state waived school accountability measures for the 2019-20 school year, including those based on chronic absenteeism rates.

Attendance data for the 2020-21 school year is considered unreliable because districts were navigating guidelines for COVID-19 exposures, quarantine requirements, and – in some cases – virtual or hybrid schooling. As noted earlier, the USDOE has cautioned against using federally reported data from 2019-20 and 2020-21 due to collection and reporting disruptions related to the pandemic.

A 2021 state law<sup>B</sup> revised statewide accountability requirements to address the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the multiple revisions, the law stated that districts and schools would not be issued letter grades or any other summative ratings (e.g., assigned a COSI) if they achieved a 2021 TCAP participation rate of at least 80 percent. All Tennessee districts met the 80 percent TCAP participation rate threshold and were held harmless on the COSI as well as other accountability measures.

TDOE restored the accountability functions of the COSI beginning with the 2021-22 school year.

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<sup>B</sup> Public Chapter 2 of the 1st Extraordinary Session (2021).

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