



*House of Representatives
Study Committee on Student Attendance
in PreK-12 Education*

Final Report

**Chairman Chris Erwin
Representative, 32nd District**

**The Honorable Sandy Donatucci
Representative, 105th District**

**The Honorable Matt Dubnik
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**The Honorable Lydia Glaize
Representative, 67th District**

**The Honorable Rick Townsend
Representative, 179th District**

**The Honorable Will Wade
Representative, 9th District**

2025

Prepared by the House Budget and Research Office

Introduction

The House Study Committee on Student Attendance in PreK-12 Education was established through the passage of House Resolution 711 to examine the growing issue of chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days, which has become a critical barrier to student achievement, literacy, and long-term workforce readiness. With Georgia's chronic absenteeism rate reaching 21.7 percent in 2024, and rates as high as 35.4 percent in Atlanta Public Schools and 38.1 percent in Decatur County Schools, the issue demands urgent attention. Absenteeism stems from a range of factors, including health challenges, family instability, socioeconomic hardship, and school climate concerns. Recognizing that evidence-based academic programs cannot succeed without consistent student attendance, the committee was charged with conducting a comprehensive review of the causes, needs, and challenges associated with chronic absenteeism and developing recommendations to improve student attendance statewide.

Meetings:

The House Study Committee on Attendance in PreK-12 Education held three meetings during the 2025 interim. The committee heard from school officials, policy experts and advocates, and constituents to evaluate the current state of absenteeism in Georgia.

July 22, 2025 - Georgia State Capitol

The following individuals presented at the meeting: Dr. Garry McGiboney of Health Security Dynamics; Justin Hill, Deputy Superintendent for Whole Child Supports, Georgia Department of Education; Carol Lewis, President, Communities In Schools; Frederick Stanley, Program Manager, Communities In Schools.

Topic: Understanding the Impact of Chronic Absenteeism.

September 22, 2025 - Georgia State Capitol (Joint meeting with Senate Study Committee on Combatting Chronic Absenteeism in Schools)

The following individuals presented at the meeting: Chief Judge Ann B. Harris, Cobb Superior Court; Judge Wayne Grannis, Cobb County Juvenile Court; MJ Kim, Director of Policy, Research, and Evaluation, Governor's Office of Student Achievement; Christy Doyle, Sr. Director, Office of Children, Young Adults, and Family, Georgia Apex; Dimple Desai, Senior Policy Analyst, Voices for Georgia's Children; Darlene Lynch, Legal and Policy Director, Georgia Appleseed; Melanie Bales, Director, Georgia Association of School Nurses; Lynne Meadows, Data Coordinator, Georgia Association of School Nurses; Polly McKinney, Advocacy Director, Voices for Children; Uzma Azhar, Senior Policy Analyst, Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network; Kristine Steinmann, Executive Director, Georgia Alliance of Boys and Girls Clubs; Kim Nelson, Chief Program Officer, YMCA of Metro Atlanta; Kwame Johnson, CEO, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta; Pierre Gaither, COO, Big Brothers Big Sisters

of Metro Atlanta; Dewonda Chambers, Assistant Principal, Lithonia Middle School; Betsy Fitzgerald, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Heart of Georgia.

Topic: Combatting Chronic Absenteeism

November 5, 2025 - Coverdell Legislative Office Building

The following individuals presented at the meeting: Dr. Juliana Chen, Chief Medical Officer, Cartwheel; Jillian Kelton M. Ed, Director of District Engagement, Cartwheel; Cory S. Lowe, President, The School Social Workers Association of Georgia.

Topic: Impact of Social Workers and Telehealth

The Current State of Absenteeism in Georgia

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as one of the most significant threats to Georgia's educational progress and long-term economic health. Defined as a student missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, absenteeism in Georgia has escalated sharply since the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the statewide chronic absenteeism rate held relatively steady at roughly 13 percent. Following pandemic-related disruptions, however, the rate surged to more than 24 percent, and while there has been modest recovery, the statewide rate for the 2024 school year remains at a crisis level of 21.7 percent. This represents more than 360,000 students who are persistently missing instruction essential for academic success.

Throughout the committee's research, it became increasingly clear that chronic absenteeism affects student populations unevenly. Dr. Garry McGiboney presented data showing the issue is particularly acute in the earliest and latest grades. He reported that 28 percent of Pre-K students and over 33 percent of 12th-grade students miss three or more weeks of school each year. These patterns suggest that state intervention strategies must focus on both the formation of early attendance habits and the prevention of disengagement as students approach graduation.

Significant disparities also exist by race and ethnicity. Testimony revealed that Black and Hispanic students have higher absenteeism rates than their White and Asian peers, with pre-existing gaps widening in the years following the pandemic. Economic status is another major factor. Students who are economically disadvantaged have substantially higher absenteeism rates, with testimony indicating that low-income students miss roughly three times as many school days as their non-disadvantaged peers. Students with disabilities are another group who have consistently higher absenteeism rates than their non-disabled peers, both before and after the pandemic.

The consequences of student absences

Chronic absenteeism has direct and measurable academic, economic, and public safety consequences. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement presented evidence showing a strong negative correlation between a school's chronic absenteeism rate and its proficiency rates

in English, Language Arts, and Math. As absenteeism increases, student performance declines. Statistics also showed that a statewide reduction in chronic absenteeism by just five percentage points would result in a projected 6.6 percent increase in third-grade ELA proficiency, moving thousands of students toward a critical early literacy benchmark.

Superior Court Judge Harris discussed the strong link between chronic absenteeism, high school dropout rates, and adverse life outcomes. High school dropouts face significantly higher unemployment rates, earn an average of \$8,000 less annually than high school graduates, experience poorer health outcomes, and have a life expectancy roughly eight years shorter. Judge Harris also highlighted public safety implications, noting that high school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested and that approximately 70 percent of Georgia's prison population consists of individuals who did not complete high school.

Economically, chronic absenteeism imposes substantial costs on the state. The School Social Workers Association of Georgia estimated that Georgia loses over \$2 billion annually in future productivity as a result of chronic absenteeism. The financial calculus strongly favors early educational support. It costs the state approximately \$10,000 per year to educate a student compared to about \$30,000 annually to incarcerate an adult. This comparison underscores the fiscal benefits of investing in attendance-related interventions.

Root causes behind student absences

Mental and physical health issues are among the most significant contributors to chronic absenteeism. Mental health provider Cartwheel identified anxiety as the leading cause of school avoidance, explaining that symptoms often appear before age 14. Students with mental health disorders are twice as likely to miss school, and untreated conditions including depression, trauma, and anxiety can lead to more suspensions and missed days. Communities In Schools Georgia added that many students continue to grapple with pandemic-related trauma, including loss of loved ones, displacement, or abusive home environments.

The Georgia Association of School Nurses emphasized that asthma, diabetes, and other poorly managed health conditions remain persistent barriers to student attendance, with the lack of access to health services compounding these issues. School nurses often serve as de facto primary care providers because many children lack a medical home, and parents commonly direct students to "see the school nurse in the morning," making nurses vital in detecting early warning signs of chronic absenteeism.

Economic hardship, unstable living conditions, and family responsibilities are also factors that directly affect student attendance. Data from the Georgia Department of Education shows that Title I schools have an absenteeism rate of 23.7 percent, compared to 15.4 percent in non-Title I schools. The lack of clean clothes, food insecurity, and housing instability directly contribute to students staying home, making these children especially vulnerable. Transportation further complicates matters. In many underserved communities, missing the bus often means missing the

entire school day. On top of these vulnerabilities, family obligations often pressure students to choose between school and caregiving or work. Some care for younger siblings when parents are at work; others take jobs to support their households. Fatigue from work or family duties is a frequent cause of absences, especially in high school students. Surveys of dropouts conducted by the Georgia Department of Education found that employment, pregnancy, and family caregiving responsibilities were common contributors to their poor attendance, ultimately leading them to drop out. In some cases, parents remain unaware of the severity of their children's absences until the school intervenes. Chief Judge Harris described a “parental ignorance issue” where parents only realize their child has missed excessive school when contacted by the school.

A school’s climate and disciplinary practices also substantially influence student attendance. Data consistently shows that when students feel respected and connected, attendance improves. Unfortunately, 13 percent of Georgia schools are rated at the lowest climate levels, underscoring persistent challenges in building a welcoming environment. Zero-tolerance policies and long-term suspensions remove students from class for certain infractions, with some receiving multiple-semester expulsions. In the past year, out-of-school suspension affected 134,000 students. Moreover, delays in school enrollment often related to demands such as legal or psychological records leave students out of school for weeks, exacerbating poor attendance.

Current intervention methods

In response to the rise in absenteeism, schools, communities, and state agencies have implemented a range of interventions aimed at improving attendance. While these efforts demonstrate promise, there is a need for greater coordination, consistency, and statewide support.

To improve transparency and guide local decision-making, the Georgia Department of Education has created a public-facing dashboard that displays chronic absenteeism rates by district, school, and student subgroup. This tool enables district leaders to conduct data analysis to identify trends and target resources. Some districts have also implemented early warning systems that flag students after only a few absences.

Under O.C.G.A. 20-2-81, local school systems seeking flexibility must establish performance goals and measurable benchmarks to evaluate improvement and achievement. These measures provide districts with reliable data supporting informed decision-making and continuous improvement. Because chronic absenteeism is strongly linked to academic performance, school climate, and overall system effectiveness, performance measures can be strengthened by incorporating attendance-related data. Including metrics that capture student attendance can help districts more accurately monitor progress, identify emerging challenges, and implement timely, evidence-based interventions that support student learning.

School nurses represent an essential, yet significantly under-resourced, component of Georgia’s attendance strategy. With health issues among the most frequent drivers of absenteeism, nurses serve as the frontline clinicians who identify health-related patterns and intervene early. Licensed

school nurses often spot attendance concerns before they escalate by monitoring frequent clinic visits, recurring vague complaints, or sudden changes in student behavior. Their day-to-day interactions with students give them a unique vantage point to detect subtle indicators of underlying physical, mental, or social concerns. Nurses can develop individualized healthcare plans for students and act as a critical bridge between families, healthcare providers, and school personnel. Because many students lack a consistent medical home, parents frequently rely on school nurses as their child's primary point of care, prompting some experts to describe nurses as part of a "hidden healthcare system" within schools. Beyond physical health, school nurses are trained to recognize signs of anxiety, depression, trauma, and school avoidance. They collaborate closely with school social workers, counselors, and mental health partners to ensure students receive timely support and are connected to appropriate services as needed.

Despite the clear benefits provided by school nurses, only 37 percent of Georgia schools have a full-time licensed nurse on-site each day. Expanding the school nursing workforce remains one of the most impactful and cost-effective strategies available to the state in reducing preventable absences and supporting student well-being.

School social workers are another critical asset to Georgia's attendance strategy, serving as trained clinicians and case managers who address the non-academic barriers such as housing instability, food insecurity, transportation challenges, and family stress. Through regular contact with students and families, they identify emerging concerns early and intervene with individualized support plans, home visits, and referrals to community services. Their work is strengthened through partnerships with organizations like Communities In Schools of Georgia, which provides integrated student supports to nearly 119,000 students each year and reports that 72.4 percent of chronically absent students improved attendance through targeted outreach, case management, and connections to essential resources such as clean clothes, food, temporary housing, mental health care, and childcare. Despite their critical role, Georgia's current average ratio of 1 school social worker per 1,100 students is far below the nationally recommended 1:250. The School Social Workers Association of Georgia presented data showing that increasing staffing levels could reduce chronic absenteeism by 20 to 30 percent statewide.

Georgia has expanded mental and behavioral health interventions to address the growing role that anxiety, trauma, depression, and other mental health concerns play in school avoidance. The Georgia Apex Program now operates in nearly 870 schools, embedding mental health clinicians on campus and providing tiered supports ranging from universal prevention to intensive one-on-one therapy. School leaders emphasized that locating services where students already are reduces stigma, accelerates early identification, and enables timely intervention. To further address wait times and access barriers, districts are increasingly partnering with virtual providers such as Cartwheel Care, which offers weekly therapy, parent coaching, and psychiatric services even during evenings and weekends, eliminating transportation and scheduling challenges that often prevent families from seeking care. Cartwheel presented data showing that students receiving targeted virtual support experienced substantial improvements in attendance, including a 44

percent reduction in chronic absenteeism in one evaluation. These clinical resources are complemented by a continuum of community-based supports. Youth-serving organizations, including the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs of Georgia, operate after-school, weekend, and summer programs that provide academic enrichment, mentorship, transportation, and consistent relationships with trusted adults are factors that have been shown to reduce school absences. Similarly, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Georgia's Level Up program embeds full-time professional mentors inside schools, helping students build stronger connections to school, address barriers, and improve attendance. Collectively, these mental health partnerships, out-of-school-time programs, and mentorship models play an increasingly important role in preventing school avoidance and supporting students' overall well-being.

Study Committee Recommendations

The House Study Committee on Student Attendance in PreK–12 Education has conducted an extensive review of the causes, impacts, and current interventions related to chronic absenteeism across Georgia’s public schools. The following recommendations are intended to address the challenges identified during the committee’s hearings and to strengthen efforts to improve student attendance statewide, while balancing the needs of students, families, educators, and local school systems:

Expand Access to School Nurses

- Increase the number of full-time licensed school nurses so that every Georgia school has dedicated daily coverage.
- Establish a statewide staffing goal for full-time nurses in every school.
- Prioritize districts with high chronic absenteeism or high health-need populations.

Prioritize School Social Workers

- Expand the school social worker workforce to move closer to the nationally recommended 1:250 student to school social worker ratio.
- Set a multi-year plan for increasing school social worker positions statewide.
- Leverage partnerships with community-based organizations to align case management and resource delivery.
- Ensure school social workers have manageable caseloads, so they can conduct proactive outreach rather than crisis-only support.

Leverage Telehealth to Address Mental Health Needs

- Expand district partnerships with telehealth providers to increase access to mental and behavioral health care.
- Encourage coordination between telehealth providers and existing school teams (nurses, counselors, school social workers) to ensure students receive cohesive support.

Increase Judicial Involvement and Accountability

- Strengthen judicial engagement in poor attendance protocols to reinforce early intervention and parental accountability.
- Encourage courts to participate in local attendance review teams.
- Develop clear, graduated intervention steps that involve judicial partners only when appropriate.
- Train judicial and school leaders on effective, non-punitive approaches that prioritize keeping students in school.
- Encourage the use of incentive-based support systems to improve student attendance rates.

Performance Measures for Charter and Strategic Waiver School Systems

- Student attendance, including chronic absenteeism rates, should be incorporated as a required performance measure in each school system's performance contract to ensure consistent monitoring of student engagement, timely intervention, and improved progress toward annual performance goals as outlined in O.C.G.A. 20-2-81.

Speaker Burns, these are the findings of your Study Committee on Student Attendance in PreK-12 Education.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Erwin".

**The Honorable Chris Erwin
Representative, 32nd
Chair**