



# Chronic Absenteeism in Tennessee's Early Grades

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February 2016

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Although the average daily attendance rate for Tennessee students is 95 percent, almost 45,000, or 10 percent, of Tennessee K-3 students missed at least a month's worth of school days during the 2014-15 school year. These "chronically absent" students present a particular problem for schools that are charged with developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills, as missing so many days means an uphill battle to help students regain lost ground. Chronic absenteeism is a challenge faced by most Tennessee schools. In fact, the vast majority of the approximately 900 elementary schools in Tennessee have at least 5 percent chronically absent students. This report details the landscape of chronic absenteeism in the early grades of Tennessee public schools by documenting which students are most likely to be chronically absent and how chronic absenteeism relates to student achievement.

### Central Findings

- Almost all elementary schools serve chronically absent students, even schools with the highest average daily attendance rates.
- Chronic absenteeism is particularly prevalent for economically disadvantaged students. Economically disadvantaged students are three times more likely to be chronically absent in elementary schools than their non-economically disadvantaged peers.
- On average, by the end of third grade, a student who is chronically absent in kindergarten misses 80 days of school, while a student who is not chronically absent misses 30 days of school. This 50-day gap means that a chronically absent student misses more than a quarter of a school year more than his or her non-chronically absent peers over those first four years in public school—making it more difficult to help these students reach proficiency in the classroom.
- A student who is chronically absent in third grade is significantly less likely to be reading on grade level (as measured by the TCAP English language arts exam) than a demographically similar peer who is not chronically absent.

The department hopes to shed light on this problem and provide information on identifying chronically absent students in order to target support and empower districts to address this critical challenge.

## INTRODUCTION

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For students to succeed in school, they must attend school. It is especially important for students to be present in the early grades, as this is when they develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills that serve as the building blocks for their success in later grades. Student attendance is an often-overlooked measure that can play a significant role in addressing student deficiencies.

Missing a lot of school in the early grades has been documented as having both immediate negative impacts (e.g., engagement, literacy, and early grades achievement)

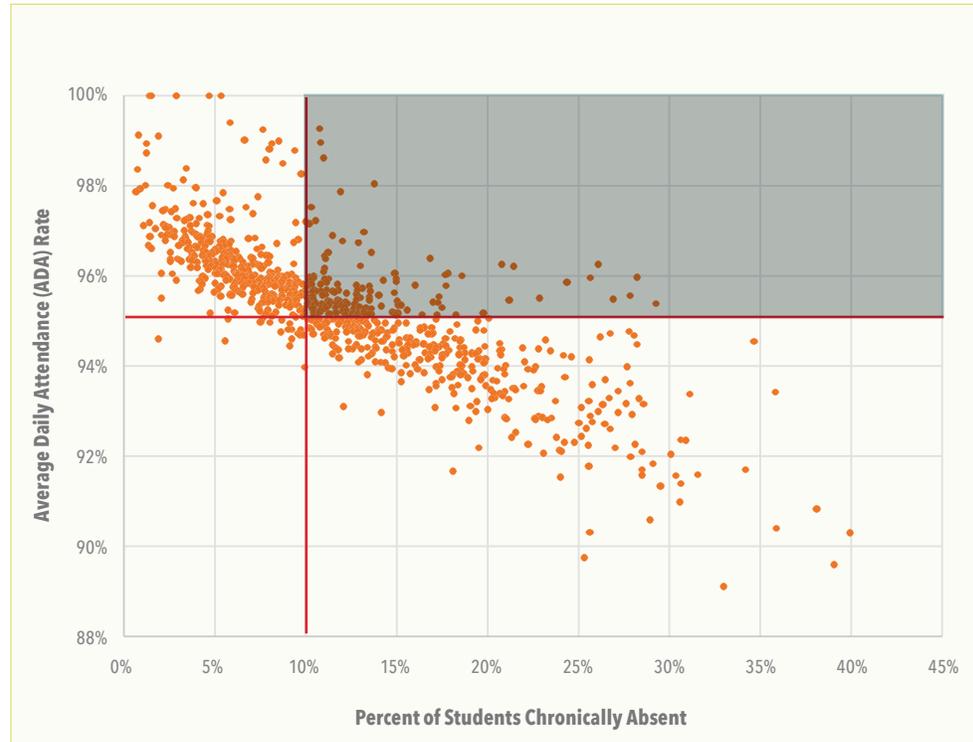
and long-term negative impacts (e.g., graduation and postsecondary success).<sup>1</sup> Thus, students who are frequently absent are of particular concern. However, high overall daily attendance rates often mask the problem of chronic absenteeism.

This report highlights the issue of chronic absenteeism for Tennessee early grades students. It is organized around six questions:

- 1 What is chronic absenteeism?
- 2 What does chronic absenteeism look like in Tennessee's early grades?
- 3 Which students are more likely to be chronically absent?
- 4 What factors can predict whether a student will be chronically absent?
- 5 To what extent is chronic absenteeism related to student achievement in third grade?
- 6 What can districts and schools do to reduce chronic absenteeism?

## WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

For many years, Tennessee has publicly reported schools' average daily attendance (ADA) rates, which is the percentage of enrolled students attending school on a given day. However, this rate does not tell the whole story about student attendance. Specifically, this rate ignores the frequency with which certain students miss school. In Tennessee, we classify a student as chronically absent if she or he misses at least 10 percent of the school year.<sup>2</sup> In Tennessee, the ADA rate is approximately 95 percent in 2014-15; yet, 10 percent of K-3 students are chronically absent. This means that approximately 45,000 students in grades K-3 are missing at least 18 days of school, almost a full month, annually across the state.



**Figure 1.** Comparing average daily attendance (ADA) and chronic absenteeism rates in Tennessee elementary schools

Figure 1 displays how ADA rates compare to chronic absenteeism rates in Tennessee elementary schools. Each point represents an elementary school. The vertical axis represents the ADA rate and the horizontal axis displays the percent of students who are classified as chronically absent. The figure shows that when the ADA rate

is higher the percent of students who are chronically absent is lower. However, many elementary schools (in the shaded area above) have greater than 95 percent ADA, but more than 10 percent of students who are chronically absent.

## The Consequences of Chronic Absenteeism

Studies from around the country have explored the consequences of chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism is related to higher numbers of disciplinary incidents, higher disengagement, and lower academic achievement—both in the short and long term—which decrease the likelihood that a student graduates high school on time and enrolls in postsecondary.<sup>3</sup> In kindergarten, being chronically absent may lead to worse academic performance in first grade, which results in a smaller likelihood of reading at grade level by third grade.<sup>4</sup> For economically disadvantaged students, missing school is particularly harmful to literacy development, even more so than for non-economically disadvantaged students.<sup>5</sup>

A variety of non-school issues, including students' chronic health conditions and housing instability, often lead to chronic absenteeism; however, schools can play a role in reducing the likelihood of a student being chronically absent. Schools and educators can use data to identify students more likely to be chronically absent, establish communication systems, and employ existing support services—family resource centers and healthy school teams—to involve community stakeholders in the development of a comprehensive strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism.<sup>6</sup>

## WHAT DOES CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM LOOK LIKE IN TENNESSEE'S EARLY GRADES?

It is a common misconception that missing school is only harmful when many consecutive days are missed. Chronic absenteeism is not necessarily marked by students missing school for large chunks of time but could also be the result of missing sporadically over the course of the year. Figure 2 shows that chronically absent K-3 students tend to miss school throughout the school year, rather than in large chunks.<sup>7</sup> A student who misses two days every month would be identified as chronically absent by the end of the year; this time missed, although spread throughout the year, would add up to a month of lost learning time.

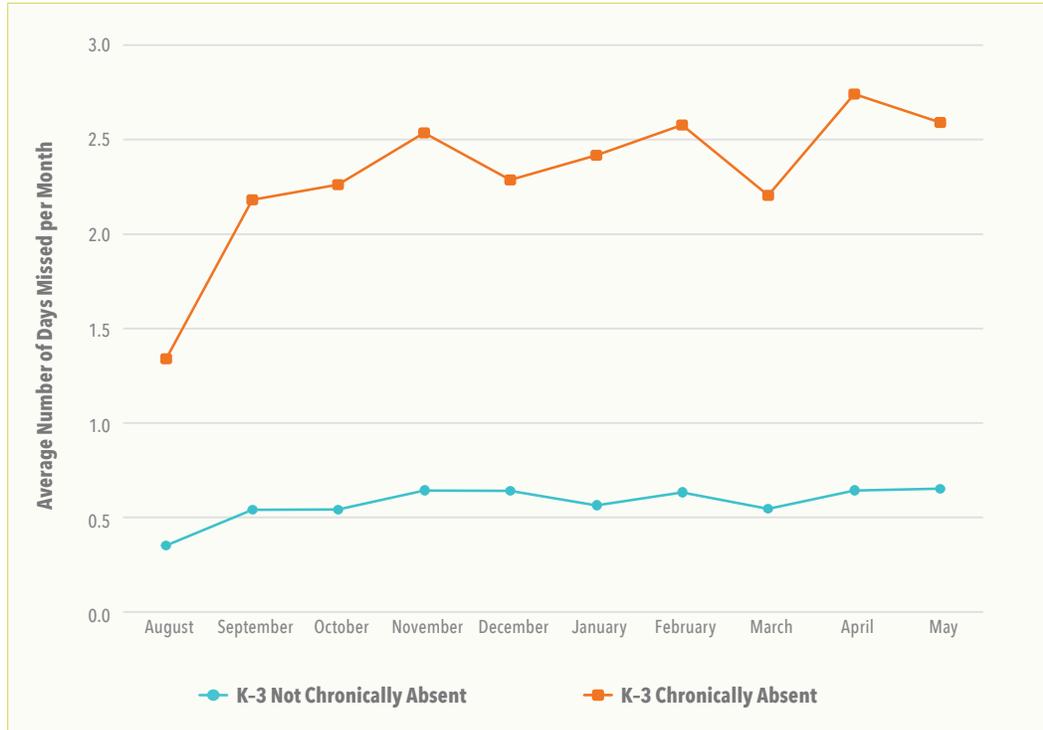


Figure 2. Average days missed in each month for K-3 students

*Almost all of Tennessee's elementary schools have some chronically absent students.*

Almost all of Tennessee's elementary schools have some chronically absent students. In the vast majority of the approximately 900 elementary schools in Tennessee, at least five percent of the student body was chronically absent.

Figure 3 displays the number of students who are chronically absent in each of Tennessee's elementary schools. Interestingly, there are a subset of elementary schools that educate a larger

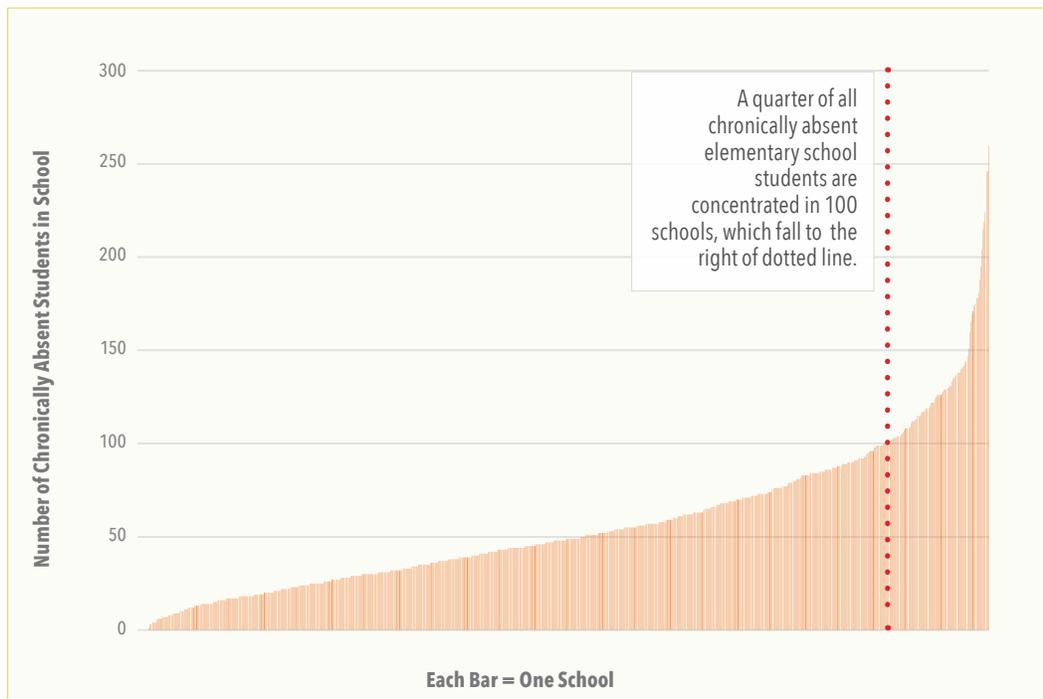


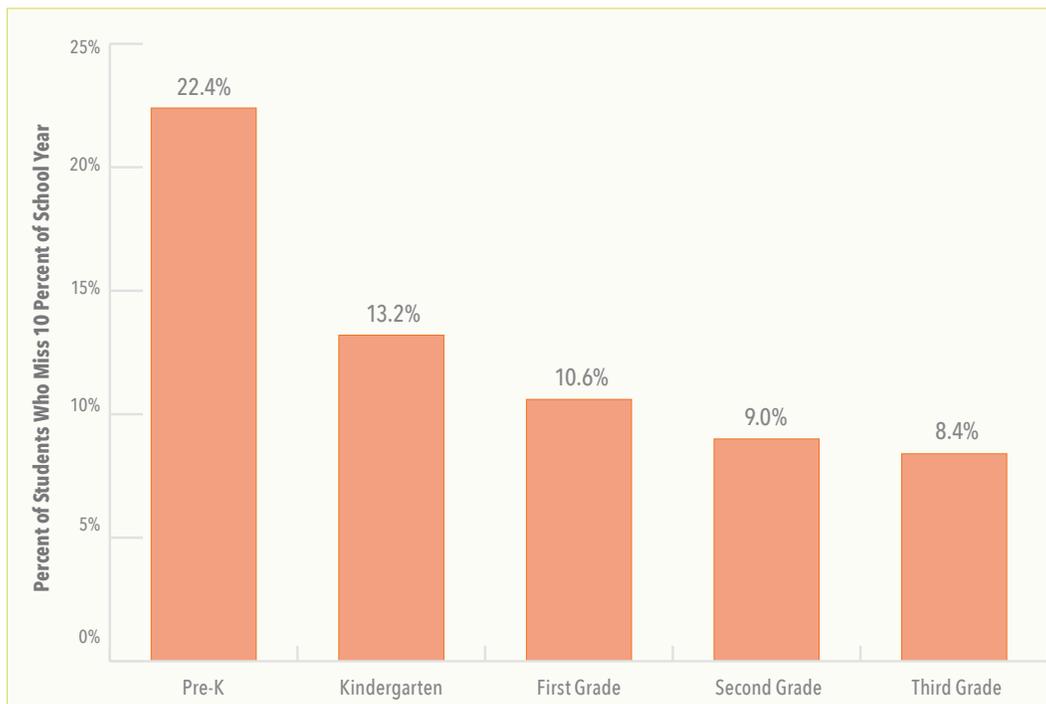
Figure 3. Number of chronically absent students in Tennessee elementary schools

*A sizable percentage of students continue to miss school regularly as they enter tested grades.*

portion of chronically absent students: One-quarter of the chronically absent students are concentrated within 100 elementary schools, which are depicted to the right of the red dotted line in Figure 3. Thus, while chronic absenteeism is prevalent across the state, a relatively small number of elementary schools serve a large percentage of the chronically absent students.

As Figure 4 shows, chronic absenteeism rates differ across grades throughout elementary school. In the 2014-15 school year, about 13 percent of kindergarteners were chronically absent, but that number dropped to about 8 percent in

the third grade. In Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program, more than 20 percent of students were chronically absent.<sup>8</sup> While the percentage of students declines in each grade between kindergarten and third grade, a sizable percentage of students continue to miss school regularly as they enter tested grades.



**Figure 4.** Rates of chronic absenteeism for grades Pre-K-3 in 2014-15 in Tennessee elementary schools

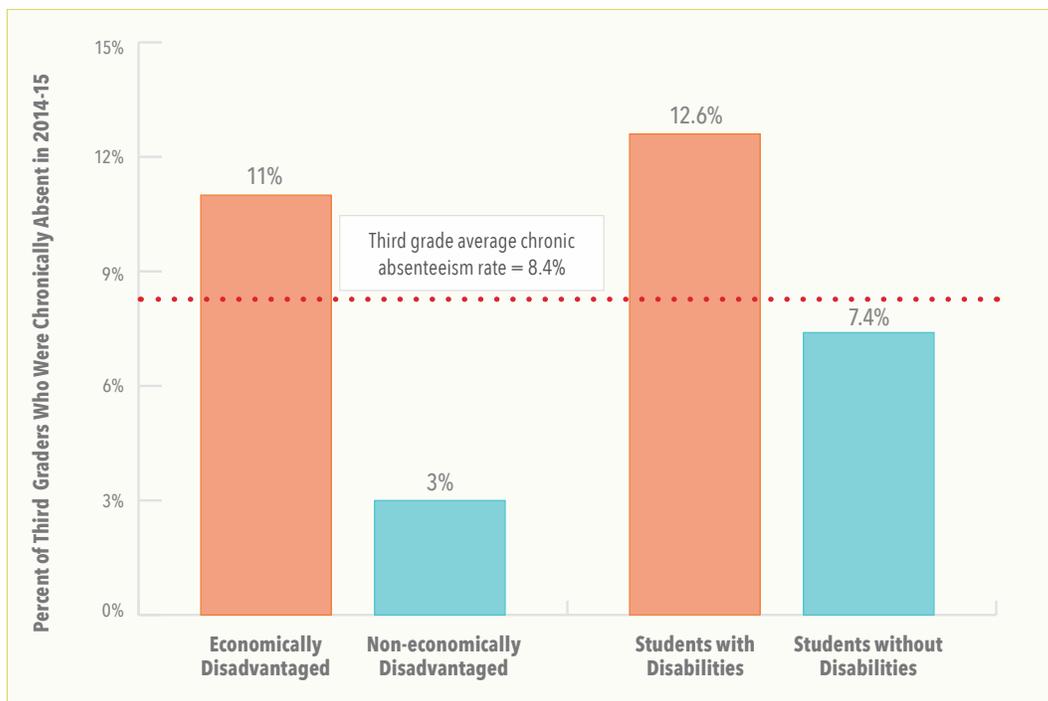
## WHICH STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE CHRONICALLY ABSENT?

Our most disadvantaged students are missing a lot of potential learning time. Efforts to catch up historically underserved students are hindered by high rates of chronic absenteeism. While this section delves into chronic absenteeism for third graders in the 2014-15 school year, patterns are consistent across elementary school grades.

Figure 5 shows differences in chronic absenteeism rates for 2014-15 third graders. While around three percent of non-economically disadvantaged (ED) students are chronically absent in third grade, around 11 percent of ED students are chronically absent. This means that ED students are three times more likely to be chronically absent. Students with disabilities (SWD) are also more likely to be chronically absent; over 12 percent of students who are classified as having a disability are chronically absent relative to seven

percent of non-SWD students. Differences in chronic absenteeism rates across racial/ethnic groups in third grade reveal that black students are more likely than the average student to be chronically absent: 12 percent of black students were chronically absent compared to just under eight percent of white students, five percent of Hispanic students, and 3 percent of Asian students.

*Economically disadvantaged students are three times more likely to be chronically absent than non-economically disadvantaged students*

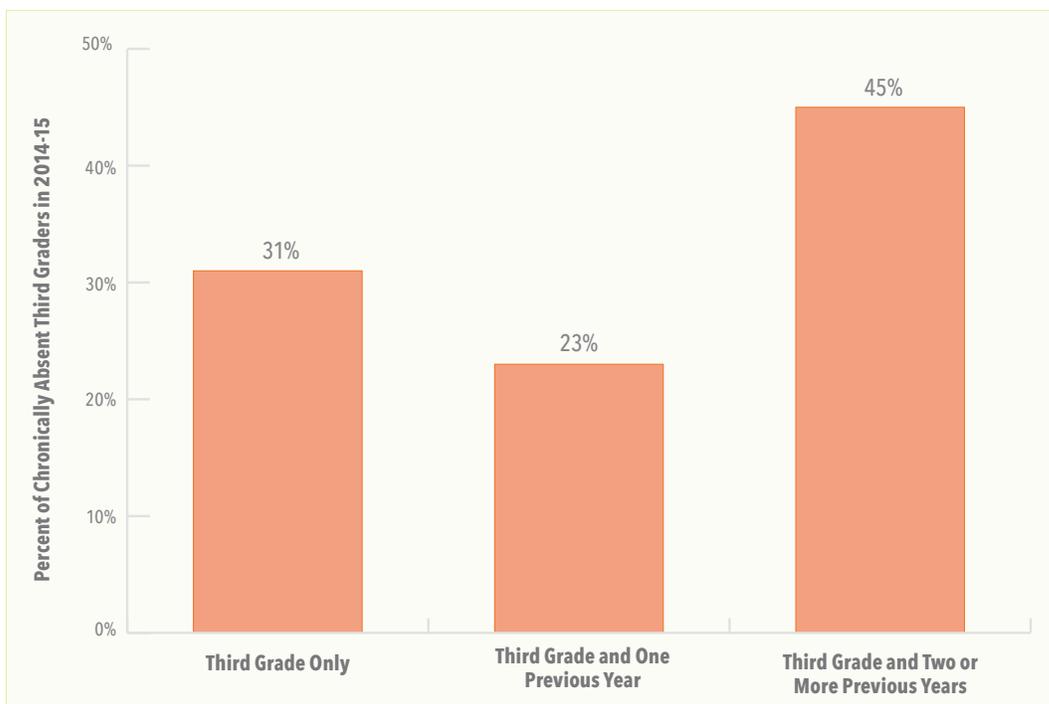


**Figure 5.** Rates of chronic absenteeism for subgroups of third graders in the 2014-15 school year

Figure 6 illustrates that students who are chronically absent in a particular school year were more likely to have been chronically absent in a prior year. Over two-thirds of the students who were chronically absent in third grade in the 2014–15 school year were chronically absent during at least one prior school year and almost half were chronically absent in two or more previous school years. This suggests that students who were previously chronically absent are more likely to be chronically absent again. For example,

chronically absent students in third grade have missed, on average, 80 school days between kindergarten and third grade relative to non-chronically absent peers, who have missed 30 days on average, over the same four-year span. This difference amounts to 50 days of learning over 4 years, which is equivalent to over a quarter of a school year—suggesting that the cycle of missing school begins early and results in a large loss of instructional time.

*Students who were chronically absent in prior school years are more likely to be chronically absent in the current school year.*



**Figure 6.** Of chronically absent third graders in the 2014-15 school year, percent who were chronically absent in prior school years

## CAN CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM BE IDENTIFIED EARLY IN THE SCHOOL YEAR?

Two factors stand out as being particularly relevant when predicting the likelihood of a student being chronically absent in a given year: 1) whether he or she was chronically absent in the previous year and 2) whether he or she misses multiple school days in the first month of the school year. If a student was chronically absent in the previous school year, he or she is 10 times more likely than a non-chronically absent student to be chronically absent in the following year.

As illustrated in Figure 7, attendance in the first few weeks of school can also predict the likelihood that a student will be chronically absent that year. Students who miss at least three days of school in August are five times more likely to be chronically absent than students who do not miss three days of school in August. Schools can leverage this information to identify students who are most likely to be chronically absent and target appropriate supports.

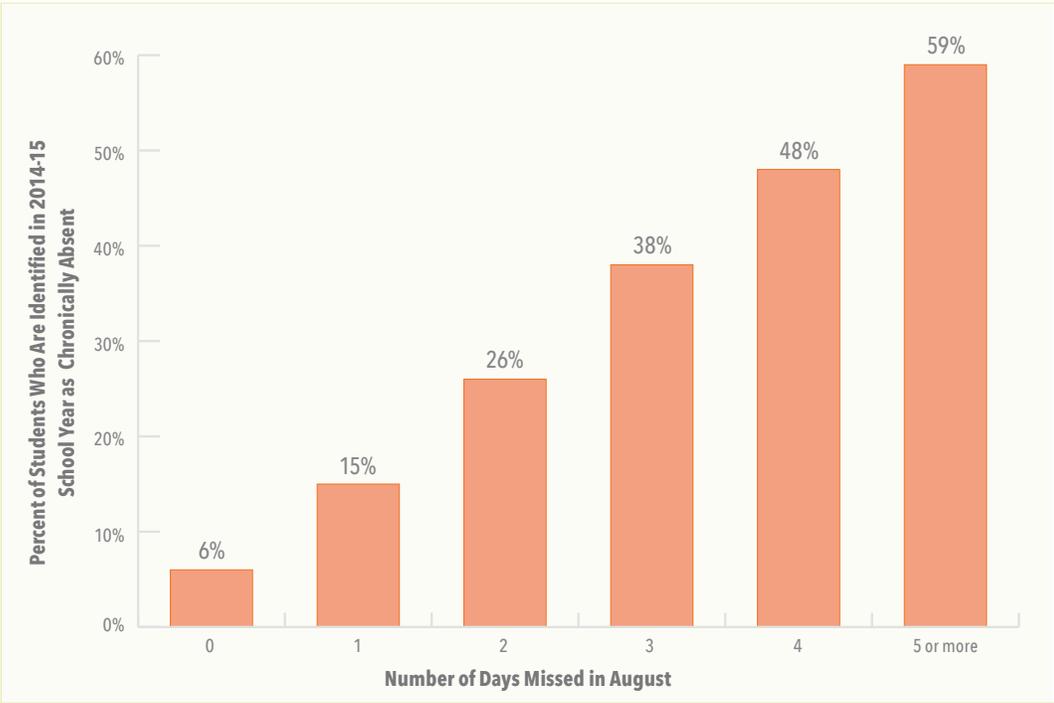


Figure 7. Percent of students chronically absent in K-3 grouped by the number of days missed in August

## WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM ON THIRD GRADE ACHIEVEMENT?

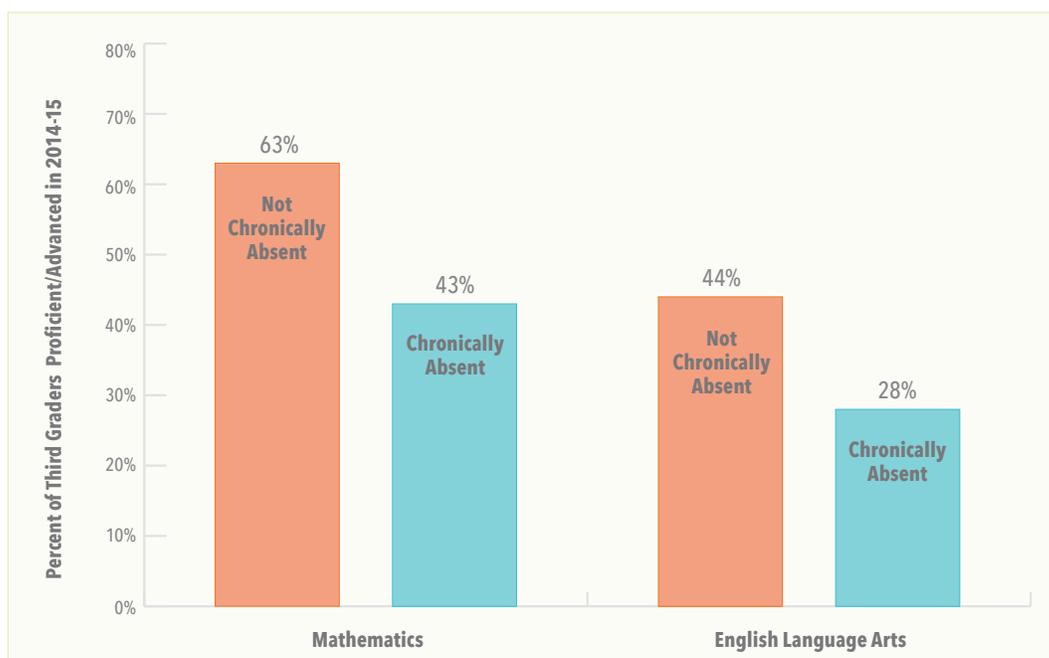
Third grade students in the 2014–15 school year who were chronically absent were less likely to be proficient in English language arts (ELA) and math. As shown in Figure 8, in third-grade math, 66 percent of non-chronically absent students were on grade level in math relative to 43 percent of chronically absent students. In ELA, 44 percent of non-chronically absent third graders were on grade level, while 28 percent of chronically absent students were on grade level.

To further examine the relationship between achievement and chronic absenteeism, we limited the analysis to students who scored proficient on the second grade assessment (SAT-10) in the 2013-14 school year.<sup>9</sup> By limiting the comparison to students who scored similarly in second grade, we have more confidence that being chronically absent in third grade is driving the difference in achievement results at the end of

that school year. Of proficient second grade students on the 2014 SAT-10 reading strand, 57 percent of non-chronically absent third graders were proficient or advanced on the TCAP ELA relative to 48 percent of chronically absent students. Using a similar method to estimate third grade TCAP math achievement, 80 percent of non-chronically absent students were proficient, whereas 68 percent of chronically absent students were proficient. We also compared students who started at other levels in second grade and concluded that regardless of how the student performed in second grade, chronically absent students were less likely to score proficient or higher on the third grade TCAP.

We also looked at the compounding impact of multiple years of chronic absenteeism on student achievement. The performance of students relative to the number of years

*Third grade students who were chronically absent were less likely to be proficient in English language arts and math.*



**Figure 8.** Third grade TCAP achievement for chronically and non-chronically absent students

that the student was chronically absent before third grade is shown in Figure 9. While 47 percent of non-chronically absent students were proficient in ELA in third grade, only 28 percent of students who were chronically absent in multiple years were proficient. Essentially, as we look at the absences of students each year from kindergarten through

third grade, we find that each year a student is chronically absent the likelihood decreases that the student is on grade level in math or ELA by 12 and 17 percent, respectively. This compounding impact of chronic absenteeism reinforces that attendance is important at all grade levels.

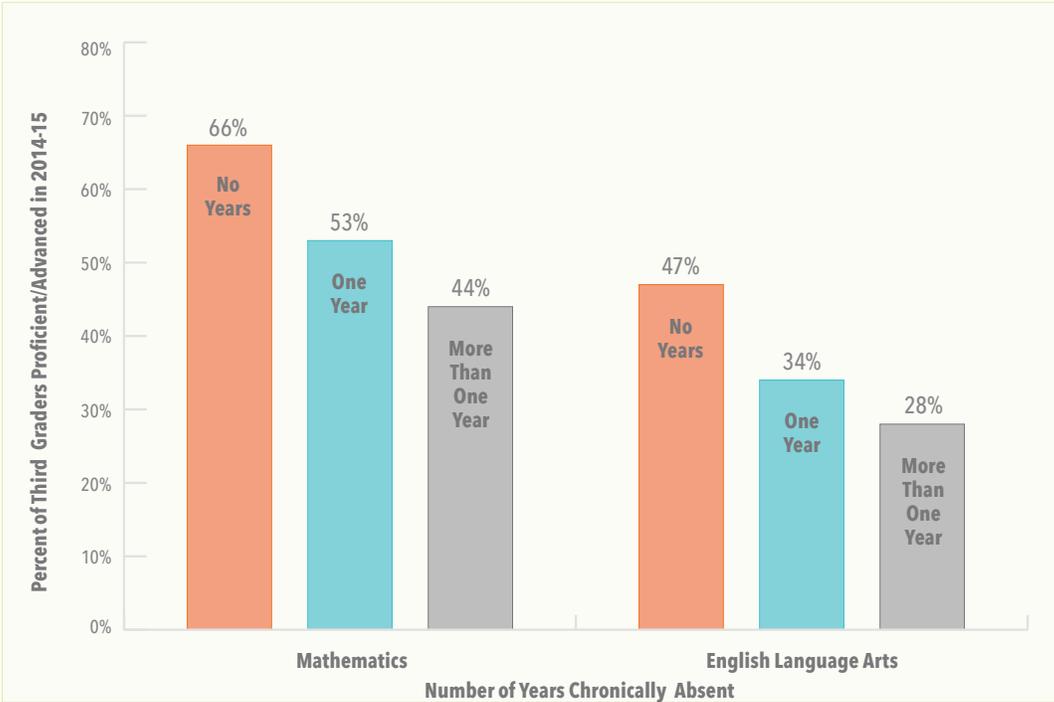


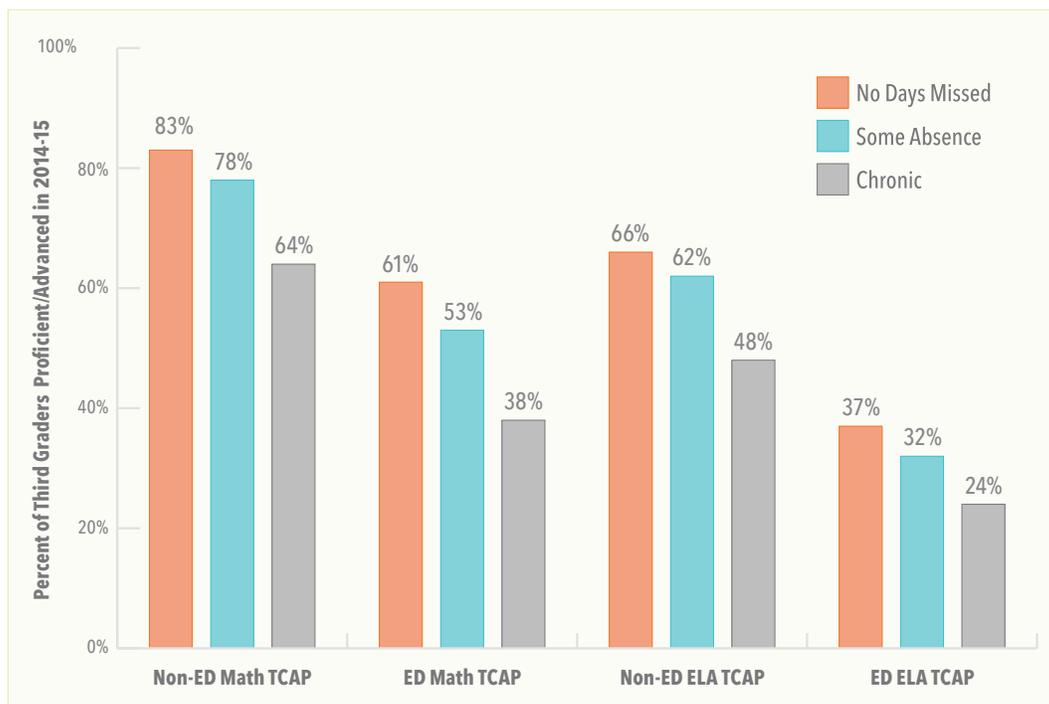
Figure 9. Third grade proficiency grouped by the number of school years chronically absent

*While 47 percent of non-chronically absent students were proficient in third grade, only 28 percent of students who were chronically absent in multiple years were proficient.*

Chronic absenteeism can be particularly harmful for economically disadvantaged students. In Figure 10, the percentage of students who scored proficient or advanced on TCAP math and ELA is computed for economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students at different levels of absenteeism. Students who are non-ED, but have high levels of absenteeism, perform similarly to students who are ED and miss very little school. In ELA, the difference between ED and non-ED is particularly troubling. Non-ED chronically absent students were more likely to be proficient than ED students who attended school

regularly. Just 24 percent of chronically absent ED students were on grade level in third grade, suggesting that both non-chronically absent ED peers as well as the chronically absent non-ED students were almost 50 percent more likely to be proficient in third grade. Overall, the achievement gap between non-ED and ED students is stark and persistent. Chronic absenteeism does not drive the achievement gap, but it contributes to its magnitude. Nonetheless, these results confirm that all students suffer when they miss school, but when the most disadvantaged students are chronically absent, their disadvantage is magnified.

*Chronic absenteeism does not drive the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students, but it contributes to its magnitude.*



**Figure 10.** Attendance in third grade, economic disadvantage, and proficiency rates

## WHAT CAN DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS DO TO REDUCE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Chronic absenteeism in the early grades poses a significant challenge for students, teachers, and schools. When learning time is lost, student achievement suffers.

To address chronic absenteeism, districts and schools should establish procedures for strategic use of attendance

data and outline steps for monitoring and supporting students who are most likely to be chronically absent.

Districts can use school-level data to identify which schools have a high percentage of chronically absent students.

Recommendations for helping reduce chronic absenteeism are listed below.

### 1 Understand student attendance history and monitor absenteeism patterns regularly

Schools should be aware of who has been chronically absent in previous years and monitor who is absent at regular intervals (at least quarterly). Student attendance patterns in August can provide signals on student attendance patterns for the rest of the year. Focus on students from historically underperforming subgroups for whom the likelihood of missing school is greater and its impact is more profound in harming academic performance.

### 2 Communicate the importance of attendance and negative impact of chronic absenteeism with parents

Schools should decide which staff members are responsible for reaching out to parents, when parents will be contacted, and when follow up will occur. Of utmost importance is the knowledge of existing student and family supports— such as family resource centers and healthy school teams— to involve community stakeholders in the development of a comprehensive strategy to promote student attendance.<sup>9</sup> Strong relationships with families beginning when students enter elementary school are essential to reducing chronic absenteeism.

### 3 Support chronically absent students by intervening early

Schools should target students whose attendance data indicate they may be at risk for being chronically absent. This outreach includes involving key school personnel and students' families. Ideas for intervention include identifying means of fortifying positive connections to support students' and families' engagement with school. Early intervention is key to promoting better attendance patterns and addressing the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism.

These recommendations align with suggestions by Attendance Works which proposes a tiered intervention process. This framework, as seen in Figure 11, can be adapted to a school's individual context. Tier I outlines general attendance strategies for all students, while Tiers II and III increase the intensity of supports depending on the student attendance patterns. The first two recommendations above are aimed at all students (Tier I) and recommendation three targets supports at students who have missed a large number of school days (Tier II and III).

While chronic absenteeism is a challenge for all schools, there are ways of addressing and potentially mitigating the problem. First, schools must understand the scope

of chronic absenteeism. To this end, this report presents which students are most likely to be chronically absent and how chronic absenteeism can have impacts on student achievement. Nonetheless, because chronically absent students likely face a variety of other challenges that contribute to their absenteeism, achievement differences between chronically absent students and their peers are likely not the result of the absences alone. By monitoring data and developing strategic plans around chronic absenteeism and its root causes, elementary schools can reduce the likelihood a student is chronically absent and integrate chronically absent students back into school, thus improving trajectories for early grades students.

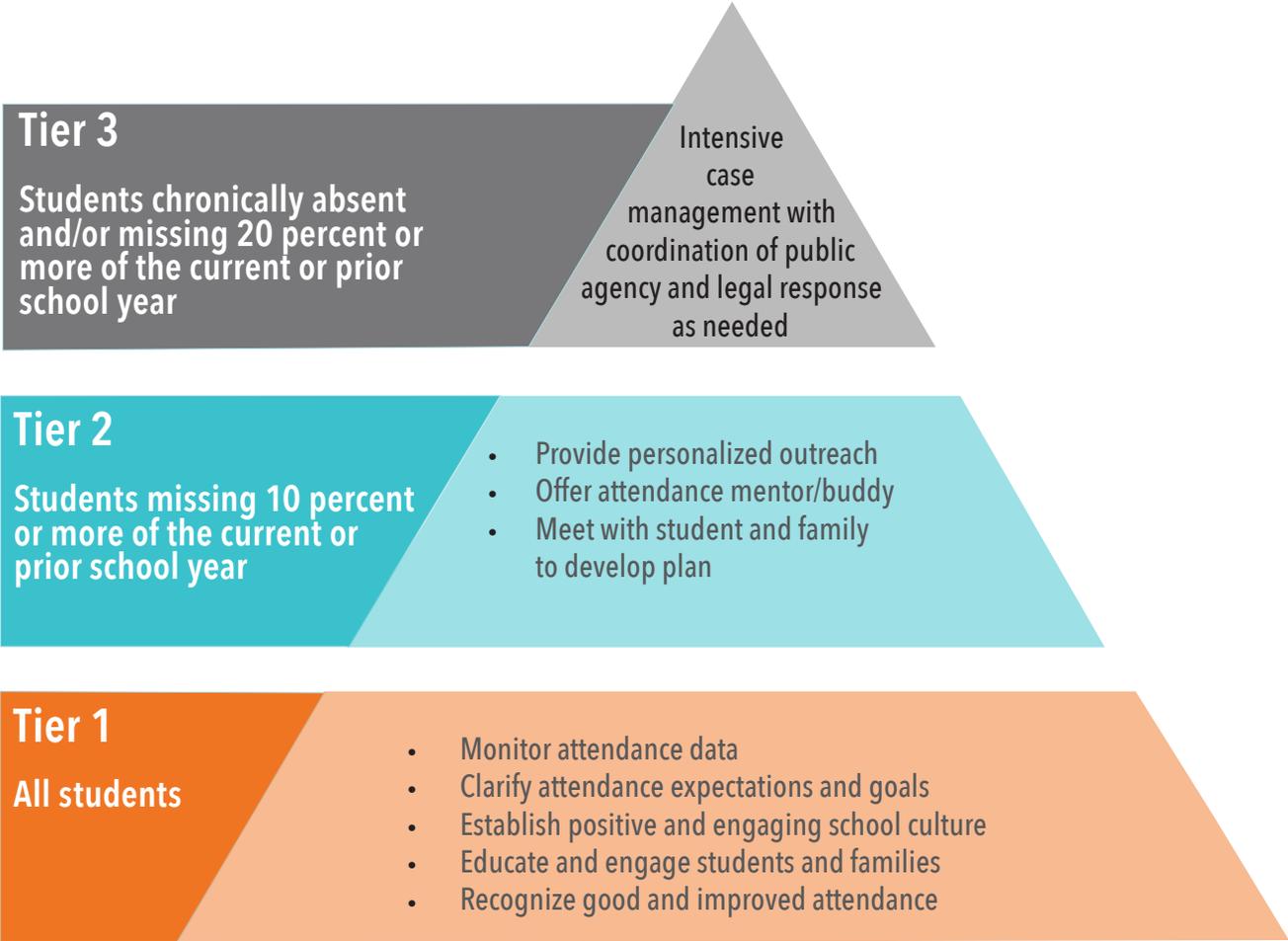


Figure 11. Three tiers of intervention to reduce chronic absenteeism<sup>10</sup>

## OTHER RESOURCES

The Tennessee Department of Education has developed a close partnership with Attendance Works to support the U.S. Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice, and Department of Housing and Urban Development's joint initiative—Every Student Every Day: A National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism—which seeks to support coordinated community action that addresses the underlying causes of local chronic absenteeism. The Tennessee Department of Education encourages LEAs to work with schools to set

targets around reducing chronic absenteeism, beginning in 2016-17 with a plan to reduce chronic absenteeism by 10 percent per year. For the level of chronic absenteeism in your school or district, please visit our Data Downloads page ([www.tn.gov/education/topic/data-downloads](http://www.tn.gov/education/topic/data-downloads)). For resources on how superintendents, schools, and community partners can work collectively, please see Every Student, Every Day: Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/toolkit.pdf>).

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Page, A., Petteruti, A., Walsh, N., Ziedenberg, J. (2007). *Education and public safety*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Center.
2. Many states do not report on chronic absenteeism and those that do have varying definitions ranging from defining chronic absenteeism as missing anywhere from 15 to 40 days. For examples on how other states report and monitor chronic absenteeism, see Harris, K. (2015). [In school and on track: Attorney General's 2015 report on California's elementary school truancy and absenteeism crisis](#). Accessed February 2, 2015.
3. Gottfried, M.A. (2009). Excused versus unexcused: How student absences in Elementary school affect academic achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31(4), 215-229. Gottfried, M. A. (2011). Absent peers in elementary years: The negative classroom effects of unexcused absences on standardized testing outcomes. *Teachers College Record*, 113(8).
4. Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J.A., Pareja, A.S., and Allensworth, E.M. (2013). *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Reform.
5. Ready, Douglas D., 2010. "Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure". *Sociology of Education*, 83:4. Pgs. 271-286.
6. Balfanz, R. & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for School Organization of Schools.
7. The dip in March in the number of days missed on average is due to the tendency of many school districts to have extended breaks for a spring break.
8. In Voluntary Pre-K, attendance is not compulsory. Participation is voluntary and parents can withdraw their child at any time. Excessive unexcused absences could result in dismissal from the program. The percentage of students is limited to pre-K students who were enrolled for 45 days in the 2014-15 school year.
9. The SAT-10 is a norm-referenced achievement test. Proficiency levels on the SAT-10 are not set by the Tennessee Department of Education and do not align with Tennessee State Standards. The level is used to give a general measure of achievement prior to third grade.
10. Attendance Works provides tools with examples of interventions at each tier: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/tools/schools/3-tiers-of-intervention/>