

SAVANNAH-CHATHAM COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION
Internal Audit Department



TO: Board of Education

THROUGH: S. Denise Watts, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools
Derrick Butler, Chief Academic Officer
Raymond Barnes, Ed. D., Chief of Schools

FROM: Leah Underwood, Senior Director, Internal Audit

DATE: February 6, 2025

SUBJECT: Report on Student Attendance

We have completed our Audit of Student Attendance. Our audit report is presented in the sections listed below:

- I. AUDIT RATINGS**
- II. AUDIT OBJECTIVES**
- III. AUDIT SCOPE**
- IV. BACKGROUND**
- V. AUDIT OBSERVATIONS**

Management's response to our report is attached in its entirety. In addition, the specific action that management has agreed to take in response to each recommendation is included in the Management Action Plan response section of the report, along with who is responsible for the action and when it will be completed.

I. AUDIT RATINGS

We performed the Audit of Student Attendance to evaluate the risks within the District's processes relating to monitoring student attendance and addressing absenteeism. Based on the information reviewed over the course of this audit, the Internal Audit Department has determined an overall rating of the audit as Needs Improvement, with risks identified in the following areas:

- Implementation of Attendance Procedures
- Documentation of Procedures for Monitoring Student Attendance
- Identifying Factors that Contribute to Student Absences

Needs Improvement

II. AUDIT OBJECTIVES

Our audit was designed to meet specific objectives. Within those objectives, we focused on areas where we identified opportunities for improvement in the area of Student Attendance within the District. The objectives of our audit were as follows:

1. Review the District's policies and procedures related to in-person and virtual student attendance to determine compliance with Federal, State, and Local guidelines.
2. Review the District's procedures for monitoring student attendance and systems for supporting school attendance teams.
3. Identify factors that influence student attendance and procedures for addressing absenteeism.

III. AUDIT SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Audit of Student Attendance was approved by the Board's Audit Committee at the beginning of the Fiscal Year 2025. We conducted this audit by reviewing guidelines established by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), as well as policies and procedures established by the District. We also reviewed the Chatham County Student Attendance & School Climate Protocol, which was developed collaboratively by Chatham County Superior Court, the District, and other local government agencies.

Our fieldwork was conducted between August-October of 2024 and focused on a judgmental sample of 12 schools within the District: three elementary, two K8, two middle, four high schools, as well as the District's virtual school serving grades 1-12. The distribution of schools in the sample was intended to provide a cross-sectional view of student attendance throughout the District, with an additional emphasis on high schools because of increased concerns related to

attendance within that grade band. We interviewed principals, social workers, school counselors, information specialists, and other school-level staff from each of the schools in our sample; we also interviewed District-level leadership as well as representatives from other school districts within the State. In addition to interviews, we reviewed documentation, student attendance data, and various policies and procedures related to attendance.

Internal Audit conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that the audit be planned and performed to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions based on the audit objectives. Internal Audit believes that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for the findings and conclusions based on the audit objectives.

We assessed the reliability of data from the data sets we used through discussions with knowledgeable management, reviewing key documents, and conducting tests with the data. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes.

Details of each area evaluated and recommendations for strengthening the internal controls in that area are listed in the audit condition section of the report. At the end of each section, we have identified the priority goals that are most likely affected by the observations identified. Internal Audit has made recommendations to help support the achievement of these goals.

The Way Forward 2026

- I. Students: Student Growth and Achievement for Choice-filled Futures
- II. Stakeholders: Quality Family and Community Engagement Experiences
- III. Employees: Talent Management for Optimal Employee Performance
- IV. Stewardship: Efficient, Effective, and Equitable Resource Stewardship

IV. BACKGROUND

Student attendance is viewed as an important indicator of students' educational opportunities. Frequent absences can deprive students of learning time in the classroom and may result in decreased academic performance. Attendance data is among the indicators used by GaDOE to calculate College and Career Performance Ready Index (CCRPI). GaDOE uses student attendance in its calculations, defined as students being marked absent less than 10% of enrolled days, with no distinction made between excused and unexcused absences.

In the State of Georgia, children are required to be enrolled in school between their sixth and sixteenth birthdays, with families having the option of enrolling their children in public schools, private schools, or home study programs. In addition to the State's Compulsory Attendance Law, there are multiple regulations in place that require children to attend school regularly:

- GaDOE policy 160-5-1-.10 requires Districts to adopt policies and procedures to address truancy. This policy also establishes criteria for

districts to use to determine if a student's absence should be considered excused or unexcused; according to this policy, children are considered truant when they exceed five (5) unexcused absences during a school year.

- Georgia Code 20-2-690.1 also defines truancy as more than five (5) unexcused absences.
- Georgia Code 15-11-381 defines truancy as having ten (10) or more days of unexcused absences from school in the current academic year.

In addition to State regulations that require children to attend school, Georgia Code 20-2-690.2 requires the Superior Court in each county to establish a Student Attendance and School Climate Committee whose purpose is to ensure coordination and collaboration among local officials and agencies on issues related to student attendance. Several members of the local school District are listed as required members of this committee; school district participation is also required by GaDOE policy 160-5-1-.10.

The District has multiple policies and procedures in place related to student attendance. Board Policy JBA: Compulsory Attendance Ages formally outlines the District's attendance policy. This policy includes references to the State's Compulsory Attendance Law and the District's intent to comply with Chatham County's Truancy Reduction Protocol. The District's policies on grading practices, promotion and retention, and graduation requirements also include some components that incorporate student attendance as criteria. The District's Student Code of Conduct describes potential discipline for excessive unexcused absences, which ranges from a parent conference to referral to juvenile court.

Student attendance has decreased over the past several years and is well below attendance figures from before the COVID-19 pandemic began. This change can be seen throughout the State, but the increase in absenteeism has been more pronounced within the Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools. Prior to the pandemic, SCCPSS attendance data compared favorably to a comparison group of seven other similar school districts within the State. In 2018 and 2019, SCCPSS had the highest attendance among the comparison group for middle and high schools and the second highest attendance for elementary schools. In 2023, SCCPSS experienced a 14% drop in attendance compared to 2019 for elementary school, an 18% drop for middle school, and a 34% drop for high school. Among the comparison group, SCCPSS had the highest decrease for high school (more than double the second highest), second highest drop for middle school, and fourth highest for elementary school.

No prior audits have been performed by Internal Audit relating specifically to Student Attendance.

V. AUDIT OBSERVATIONS

Observation 1. Implementation of Attendance Procedures

(Goal: STUDENTS)

There are multiple areas where policies and procedures related to student attendance are implemented inconsistently. Procedural integrity with attendance procedures is an important component of effectively recording and monitoring student attendance because it will allow the District to ensure the accuracy of student attendance and evaluate the effectiveness of steps taken by the District to address student absences and promote attendance.

Policy Review

To determine the District's compliance with Federal, State, and Local guidelines, we compared the District's policies and procedures related to student attendance with guidance established at the Federal, State, and Local levels.

In this review, we found that:

- There is conflicting language in State law and GaDOE policy related to how truancy is defined, with some sources indicating more than five unexcused absences and another source indicating ten or more unexcused absences. The Chatham County Student Attendance and School Climate Protocol (SASCP) defines truancy using the ten-day criteria from Georgia Code 15-11-381. District policy JBA uses the ten-day definition based on recommendations of the Chatham County Juvenile Court.
- District policy aligns with State and GaDOE guidance in all other areas included in this review.

In addition to reviewing policies to determine compliance with Federal, State, and Local guidelines, we conducted control tests to determine how consistently procedures were implemented across schools. These tests included a review of procedures implemented within the District when students accrue multiple absences as well as a review of school attendance data on District e-Learning days compared with in-person learning days.

Five-Day Due Process Letters

The first control test involved reviewing Five-day Due Process Letters that are sent to parents after students have accrued five (5) unexcused absences. According to Board regulation JBA-R(1) and the Chatham County Student Attendance & School Climate Protocol, schools are required to send these letters to parents on school letterhead, with a copy being kept in the student's file.

Using data from PowerSchool, we identified a judgmental sample of 53 students who had accrued at least five (5) unexcused absences during the first semester of the 2023-24 school year. For each of the students in our sample, we requested a copy of the Due Process Letter that was kept in the student's file. In this review, we found that:

- The schools in our sample did not keep copies of the Five-Day Due Process Letters for the majority of students in our sample. We were provided with copies of the letters for 2 out of 53 students in our sample (3.8%), and we were provided with some evidence that a letter had been sent (but without a copy of the letter) for an additional five students (9.4%).

We were not provided with any record of a letter being sent for 46 of the 53 students in our sample (86.8%).

- Of the 12 schools in our sample for this audit, 11 did not provide letters for any of the requested students, and 8 of the 12 were not able to provide any evidence that letters had been sent for the students in our sample.

District e-Learning Days

Another control test control test involved reviewing school attendance data on District e-Learning days during the first few months of the 2024-25 school year and comparing these data with in-person attendance data from the same day of the week prior to and after the e-Learning day. The District has several e-Learning days planned in its calendar for the 2024-25 school year, with additional days added when necessary due to inclement weather. On these days, students participate asynchronously by engaging in learning tasks posted by the teacher on the District's online learning platform. Students are considered present for the day/block once participation has been confirmed by the teacher.

Between 8/1/2024 and 10/10/2024, the District had five (5) e-Learning days, with four (4) resulting from weather-related school closures and one (1) being a scheduled e-Learning day. Two of the schools in our sample (Southwest ES and Jenkins HS) had an additional weather-related e-Learning day. In this review, we found that:

- Of the 11 in-person schools in our sample, 10 had significantly fewer absences on e-Learning days, particularly on inclement weather e-Learning days. Schools recorded fewer than 10 absences on 79% of e-Learning days, with zero absences recorded on 25% of those days.
- One school had a noticeable increase in absences on two e-Learning days, with student absences on the other three e-Learning days falling close to the range occurring on in-person learning days.
- The District's virtual school saw decreased absences on weather-related e-Learning days.
- Six schools had students recorded as absent on 9/30/2024, when SCCPSS schools were closed and there was no requirement for virtual/remote learning.

We were unable to determine the degree to which changes in barriers to attendance on e-Learning days (e.g., transportation not being a factor) and/or a lack of fidelity in procedures for recording attendance on these days contributed to the shifts in attendance patterns on District e-Learning days.

Teacher Attendance Tracking

We also reviewed data from Power School indicating the percentage of teachers who did not record attendance for a particular date. Within the District, student attendance is recorded each day in PowerSchool. In elementary and K8 schools, it is recorded once per day by the student's homeroom teacher, while attendance in middle and high schools is recorded by the classroom teacher during each block throughout the school day. When a student is marked absent, the parents

should receive an automated notification alerting them of their child's absence, with parents of secondary students potentially receiving multiple notifications per day because of how attendance is recorded.

For this review, a PowerSchool SIS Teacher Portal Attendance Report was generated for each school for each day during a two-week period in September 2024. In this review, we found that:

- At the Elementary/K8 level, over 90% of the teachers from the schools in our sample recorded attendance on at least 9/10 days, with 66% (128 out of 194) recording attendance each day.
- Elementary/K8 teachers from the schools in our sample combined to record attendance on 94.7% of possible days (1,837 of 1,940) across the two school weeks from 9/9/2024-9/20/2024. The mean number of days missed per teacher was 0.53 during this period.
- At the Middle and High School levels, 64.9% of teachers missed recording attendance in five or fewer blocks, with 37.2% (149 out of 401) recording attendance for all blocks during the two-week period. (Note: in many cases, teachers have more than one section of students in the same class and are required to record attendance for each section separately. Attendance for a schedule block was considered missing if it was not recorded for all sections in the class during the block).
- Middle and High School teachers missed recording attendance for a combined 2,398 blocks, with an average of 6.0 missed blocks per teacher.

Attendance Waivers

During interviews with school staff, we also asked about the use of attendance waivers. Attendance waivers are referenced in Board policy JBA and require students who exceed a set number of absences over the course of a school year to submit a waiver request to the School Attendance Committee (SAC) in order to be promoted to the next grade at the end of the school year. Responses provided during interviews indicated that attendance waivers were not used across the majority of schools. Of the 12 schools in our sample, only one described actively using attendance waivers, with two other schools indicating an intent to use them during the 2024-25 school year.

Summary

Based on our findings, we can conclude that there are several areas for improvement relating to compliance with attendance policies and procedures within the District, including procedures used to track student attendance on in-person and e-Learning days, the documentation schools keep regarding student absences, and use of attendance waivers. Inconsistency in recording student attendance creates the risk that students may not be accurately identified as frequently absent (i.e., identified too early or too late). Inaccuracy in recording attendance could also interfere with the District's ability to evaluate interventions and strategies intended to address absences and promote attendance. Not retaining documentation as required could also interfere with the District's attempts to address student absences, as documentation of previous patterns of

attendance issues and communication with families may be helpful in dealing with current issues for an individual student.

Recommendations

- 1.1 Create an online review video/module for school staff related to documentation requirements related to student attendance.
- 1.2 Develop written procedures for monitoring teachers' recording of attendance on District e-Learning days to ensure compliance with established procedures.
- 1.3 Identify strategies to increase the frequency of recording attendance at secondary schools within the District.
- 1.4 Review the current use of attendance waivers within the District to determine if the implementation of procedures aligns with Board policy.

Management's Corrective Action

- 1.1 Create a video providing instructions for recording student attendance. The video will be added to the KnowBe4 training modules for teachers and administrators
 - **Persons Responsible:** Director of Student and Family Services, Senior Director of Information Technology- Student Information Systems, and Director of Teacher/Support Staff Professional Learning
 - **Anticipated Completion Timeline:** July 2025
- 1.2 Update existing e-Learning day procedures for SY24-25 to include how we will monitor the recording of attendance and to clarify the options for attendance recording. Establish NEW procedures for SY25-26 based on new model of e-Learning (Remote Learning) days.
 - **Persons Responsible:** Chief Academic Officer, Senior Director of Information Technology- Student Information Systems, Executive Director of Student Support Services, Chief of Schools
 - **Anticipated Completion Timeline:** February 2025 and July 2025
- 1.3 Utilize the district attendance "boots on the ground" visits to provide tiered support to high schools based on current attendance data. The tiered support will focus on key strategies and protocols for improving attendance and attendance process such as attendance taking. School Support Officers will continue to provide principal support through regular attendance data conversations based on each school's attendance improvement plan and procedures.
 - **Persons Responsible:** District Attendance Support Team, Secondary Network Superintendents, School Support Officers
 - **Anticipated Completion Timeline:** May 2025
- 1.4 Finalize the comprehensive review of Attendance Policy JBA and Regulation JBA-R(1) and make proposed revisions that ensure clarity around the continuation, discontinuation, and/or procedural implementation of attendance waivers and/or attendance procedures to ensure consistency across K-12

schools.

- **Persons Responsible:** Executive Director of Student Support Services, Chief Academic Officer, Chief of Schools, Network Superintendents, Director of Student and Family Services, District Attendance Support Team
- **Anticipated Completion Timeline:** April 2025

Observation 2. Documentation of Procedures for Monitoring Student Attendance (Goals: STUDENTS)

The focus of our audit included a review of the District's procedures for monitoring student attendance. Over the course of the audit, we identified several instances in which documentation of procedures used within the District were documented inconsistently. Consistent documentation of attendance procedures is critical because it will allow the District to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and interventions used to promote student attendance and address absenteeism. Inconsistent documentation could lead to uncertainty as to whether an intervention is ineffective or if it has not been implemented with fidelity.

Identification of Procedures

Each school within the District has a School Attendance Committee (SAC) whose role is to monitor student attendance and address frequent student absences. These committees are described in the Chatham County Student Attendance & School Climate Protocol (SASCP), with membership determined by the Principal. District guidance says that membership should include a school administrator (Principal or Assistant Principal), School Counselors, Social Workers, Information Specialists and/or Attendance Clerks, and School Nurses (schedule permitting). Other school staff may also participate as needed or as deemed appropriate by the Principal. SACs are expected to meet weekly, review attendance data, discuss actions to be taken to address attendance concerns, and record the events of the meetings.

To determine the procedures used within the District for monitoring student attendance, we interviewed staff from within the District involved in monitoring student attendance to identify procedures used by School Student Attendance Committees. Staff responses during interviews indicated that:

- There was consistency across schools related to composition of their Student Attendance Committees, procedures implemented by Student Attendance Committees, procedures for recording attendance, procedures for notifying parents, and the steps taken by Student Attendance Committees to address absenteeism.
- There was some variability in the responses provided relating to training/guidance provided to staff regarding student attendance. Training and guidance procedures discussed during staff interviews included reviewing attendance procedures at the beginning of the school year (10 schools), reviewing attendance procedures throughout the year (7

schools), training occurring during PowerSchool training for teachers (5 schools), establishing written procedures for attendance (2 schools), providing frequent email reminders (2 schools), and utilizing mentors to provide guidance (1 school). Some schools provided multiple responses to this question.

Addressing Unexcused Absences

In addition to interview questions, we conducted several control tests to review procedures used in monitoring student attendance and addressing absenteeism. One test involved reviewing procedures and strategies used by School Attendance Committees for students who had accrued at least 10 unexcused absences during the 2023-24 school year. The Chatham County SASCP prescribes a series of steps schools are expected to take as students accrue multiple absences, with additional steps listed but not required. These steps include attempts to contact parents, multiple letters related to student absences, and procedures for referring cases to Juvenile or State Court.

We attempted to determine compliance with these procedures by reviewing documentation of the steps implemented by schools for a sample of students who had accrued at least 10 unexcused absences during the 2023-24 school year. We identified a judgmental sample of 54 students who had accrued at least 10 unexcused absences prior to 4/1/2024. For each of the students in our sample, we requested documentation from School Attendance Committees indicating what steps had been implemented to address absenteeism. In this review, we found that:

- There was no written procedure found that requires schools to maintain this information. As a result, some schools did not maintain records from the previous school year indicating what actions were taken to address absences.
- Information that was available described multiple interventions/strategies were used for 41% of the students in our sample (22 out of 54).
- For an additional 26% of students (14 out of 54), the information we received was limited and/or indicated that only one intervention/strategy was used to address absences.
- Schools did not have information available for 33% of the students in our sample (18 out of 54).

School Attendance Committee Meeting Documentation

To determine how consistently procedures are implemented by the School Attendance Committees at different schools, we attempted to review meeting minutes from the 2023-24 school year. School Attendance Committees are required to meet weekly and keep documentation of what is discussed during each meeting; documentation can be kept in the form of meeting minutes or an attendance tracking spreadsheet. The majority of schools in our sample did not have this information available from the 2023-24 school year; because of this, we adjusted the scope of our review to meetings held from August-October 2024. We asked the SAC at each of the schools in our sample to provide documentation from their weekly meetings that would have occurred between August 19 and November 1, 2024. This period included a school week disrupted

by a weather-related school closure (week of 9/30/2024) and a District-wide no-meeting week (week of 10/21/2024). In reviewing the documentation provided, we found that:

- Full documentation (meeting notes/minutes, date, and attendees) was provided for 36.5% of possible meetings (44/126).
- Incomplete documentation (e.g., missing attendees, only brief meeting notes) was provided for 19.8% of possible meetings (25/126).
- No documentation was available for 43.7% of meetings that would have occurred over this period. One school used the same electronic document for meetings each week and updated the date and attendees, so it was not possible to determine information about meetings other than the one currently listed on the document.
- Although schools were not required to meet during the District-wide no-meeting week or during the weather-related closure, six schools still provided documentation for meetings held during these weeks.
- One school had three separate SACs, with each focusing on a different group of students. This was done to improve efficiency by reducing the pool of students to focus on at meetings. Each of the school's committees included the required members (administrator, IS, Counselor, and Social Worker).

Summary

Based on our findings, we can conclude that there are some areas of improvement in how procedures for monitoring attendance are documented. One area involves the documentation of SAC meetings from the 2024-25 school year. Inconsistent documentation creates challenges in determining whether meetings occurred, who participated, and what was discussed, which can all affect the efficiency of the SACs. The school staff who comprise the SAC typically have many other responsibilities within the school and as a result have a limited amount of time to meet each week, so maximizing the efficiency of these meetings is critical. Inconsistent documentation can result in SACs revisiting or working to clarify information that was discussed in previous meetings, and canceled meetings can result in an increased amount of information to discuss at the subsequent meetings. Another area of note was SAC documentation from previous years. While we found no procedure requiring these records to be retained, this information could be valuable to SACs. Records of meetings from the previous school year could include information about the reasons for frequent student absences, communication with families, and effective strategies. Finally, we received varying responses related to training provided related to attendance. Inconsistent training received by school staff could result in a lack of fidelity with attendance procedures and inaccurate attendance data.

Recommendations

2.1 Create procedures to review School Attendance Committee meeting documentation to ensure that meetings consistently occur according to District policy and to provide feedback on SAC efficiency.

2.2 Review procedures related to SAC documentation to determine whether

records should be retained past the current school year, and if so, what the time frame should be.

- 2.3** Ensure that guidance related to recording and monitoring student attendance is provided to teachers and school staff consistently throughout the District.

Management's Corrective Action

- 2.1** An updated template for recording school attendance team meeting minutes will be developed for required use by all school-based teams at the beginning of each school year. District “boots on the ground” support teams will also check for meeting minutes during their visits as part of the tiered support protocol. Utilize the district attendance support team to enhance support through social worker guidance, school support officer leader coaching, development of additional attendance tools, and “boots on the ground” support visits that focus on using an existing school attendance team effectiveness rubric to guide school attendance teams’ continual improvement in documenting meeting minutes and other priority meeting components.

- **Persons Responsible:** Director of Student and Family Services, School Support Officers, District Attendance Support Team
- **Anticipated Completion Date:** July 2025

- 2.2** Update the Student Records Manual to outline the record retention protocol for social worker referrals and reports as a method of maintaining documentation of attempts to address concerns. Additionally, all school-based attendance team meeting templates will include a section for documenting the interventions attempted/implemented for each student.

- **Persons Responsible:** Director of Student and Family Services
- **Anticipated Completion Date:** June 2025

- 2.3** Develop a consolidated attendance training schedule to ensure schools are aware of the available professional learning (both in person, virtual, and asynchronous) around attendance improvement and processes. *In collaboration with the Student Information Systems Department, a video providing instructions for recording student attendance will be created for SY 25-26. The video will be added to the KnowBe4 training modules for teachers and administrators.*

- **Persons Responsible:** Director of Student and Family Services, Senior Director of Information Technology- School Information Systems, Director of Teacher/Support Staff Professional Learning
- **Anticipated Completion Date:** July 2025

Observation 3. Identifying Factors that Contribute to Student Absenteeism (Goals: STUDENTS, STAKEHOLDERS)

Chronic Absenteeism has increased significantly over the past several years across the State as schools have returned to full-time in-person instruction following the pandemic. It is critical for school districts to ensure that students have access to learning opportunities and to address the impacts of the pandemic; this could include identifying factors that have contributed to this decrease, implementing procedures to address barriers to school attendance, and actively promoting school attendance. The Chatham County SASCP lists actions that the District is required to take as students accumulate absences, specifically unexcused absences; this document also outlines several proactive steps the District may take to address student attendance, including mentors, attendance contracts, and incentives to promote attendance.

Support Systems

One focus of our audit was a review of systems for supporting school attendance teams. To identify systems in place to support school attendance teams, we interviewed staff from within the District involved in monitoring student attendance with questions focused on support provided to SACs. Staff responses during interviews indicated that there was variability in the support provided by District-level staff to each school's Student Attendance Committees. Responses included an increased emphasis on student attendance throughout the District (5 schools), as-needed support being available (4 schools), support being provided through the School Social Worker (3 schools), discussion of attendance at District leadership meetings (2 schools), and District Administrators setting clear expectations (1 school). Two schools responded that there was no specific support available to SACs. Some schools provided multiple responses to this question.

Contributing Factors

To identify factors that contribute to student absences within the District, we interviewed staff from multiple schools involved in monitoring student attendance. A survey was also distributed to teachers within the District, which included questions related to factors that contribute to absenteeism. Finally, we examined data collected by the District during attendance sweeps that provided family perspectives on student absences. In this review, we found that:

- During our interviews, seven factors were discussed by staff from at least one-third of the schools in our sample: parent engagement/motivation (9 schools), Students caring for other family members/siblings (6), transportation (4), transportation for choice/admin. placed students (4), outdated illness guidelines (4), and attendance policies not enforced consistently (4).
- Some barriers discussed during interviews were common among schools within the same grade bands. For Elementary/K8 Schools, issues mentioned by at least one-third of schools included parent engagement/motivation (4 schools), outdated illness guidelines (3),

- students living outside of school zone (2), and transportation for choice/admin. placed students (2). For Middle and High Schools, common barriers discussed included students caring for younger siblings/children (6), student engagement/motivation (6), parent engagement/motivation (5), transportation (4), availability of online options (3), attendance policies not enforced consistently (3), and student mental health (3).
- When asked what factors have contributed to student absences, District teachers responding to an internal control questionnaire (286 total responses, 11% response rate) indicated that student illnesses (67%), parenting decisions (44%), student motivation (30%), family lack of transportation (29%), issues with District transportation (20%), family dynamics/caring for younger siblings (19%), bullying/mental health (8%), lack of academic success (8%), and other (5%). Teachers were able to select more than one option in their response.
 - During an Attendance Sweep conducted in September 2024, 62 responses were provided from families relating to the reason that their child(ren) had missed school; only one response was recorded for each family. Reasons provided by at least 10% of families included illness (24.2%), transportation issues (22.6%), and the child's refusal to go to school (12.9%). There were 12 other reasons that were provided by at least one family.
 - Some of the factors listed as contributing to student absences were under the direct control of the District (e.g., transportation, enforcement of attendance policies), while others were more directly affected by external factors (e.g., parent engagement/ decisions, caring for younger siblings).

Protocols to Address Absenteeism

In addition to identifying factors that contribute to student absences, we attempted to identify procedures used within the District to address absenteeism. To do this, we interviewed staff at the school and District level, with interview questions focusing on strategies and interventions used to address student attendance. A survey was also distributed to teachers within the District, which included questions related to factors that contribute to absenteeism. Finally, we conducted a review of information distributed by the District focused on student attendance and absenteeism. In this review, we found that:

- During interviews (conducted Sept.-Oct. 2024), one intervention/strategy to promote attendance at the school level was mentioned by at least one-third of the schools in our sample, with student-specific rewards being mentioned by 11 schools. Six (6) schools also mentioned that they were still considering ways to incentivize attendance.
- Some strategies discussed during interviews were common among schools within the same grade bands. For Elementary/K8 Schools, strategies mentioned by at least one-third of schools included student-specific incentives (5), class/grade incentives (2), providing information to families (2), and signage within the school (2). Three (3) schools also mentioned still considering strategies. For Middle and High Schools,

common strategies discussed included student-specific incentives (6) and preventative strategies (3). Three (3) schools also mentioned still considering strategies.

- An internal control questionnaire distributed to teachers asked how much attention their school placed on student attendance; 54% indicated a lot of attention, 38% indicated some attention, and 8% indicated little/no attention. When asked about strategies to recognize/reward students with good attendance, 46% indicated that their school had something in place, with 26% indicating that there was not anything in place, and 27% responding that they were unsure.
- Student Attendance is a consistent topic of discussion at District-wide leadership meetings, where information is shared with Principals with the intent of them presenting it to their school staff.
- The District's Communications Department has launched an *Attendance Matters* campaign in an effort to promote student attendance. This campaign consists of videos, articles, and other content that are distributed to students and the community through a variety of platforms, including the District website and social media.

Summary

Based on our review, we can conclude that student attendance and absenteeism is a complex issue with many contributing factors. Some of these factors are common across different grade bands, while others seem to apply to specific ages groups. Additionally, some of the barriers that contribute to student absences result from internal factors that are under the direct control of the District, while other barriers are the result of external factors that are not easily influenced by the District. The District has utilized multiple strategies to address student absences and promote student attendance, with an increased emphasis on the issue beginning toward the end of the 2023-24 school year.

Recommendations

- 3.1** Identify methods to formally integrate input from external stakeholders (e.g., parents, community partners) into systems currently in place to identify and address factors that contribute to student absenteeism.
- 3.2** Establish systems to provide School Attendance Committees with formal support and supervision from District-level staff.

Management's Corrective Action

- 3.1** Participate in the Spring Chatham County Student Attendance and School Climate Protocol meeting to highlight concerns and to seek input on additional ways to address absenteeism.
 - **Persons Responsible:** District Attendance Support Team, Director of Student and Family Services
 - **Anticipated Completion Timeline:** April 2025
- 3.2** Utilize the district attendance "boots on the ground" visits to provide tiered

support to schools based on current attendance data. The tiered support will focus on key strategies and protocols for improving attendance. Additionally, the district attendance support team will enhance the district attendance toolkit and ensure schools access and implement attendance improvement strategies focused on building relationships, student engagement, and positive incentives. School support officers will continue to provide principal support through regular attendance data conversations based on each school's attendance improvement plan and procedures.

- **Persons Responsible:** Director of Student and Family Services, School Social Workers, School Support Officers, District Attendance Support Team
- **Anticipated Completion Timeline:** May 2025

APPENDIX A – Audit Rating Definitions

Audit Rating	Definition
Unsatisfactory High	<p>Design of controls and/or program: Design of controls is ineffective in addressing key risks.</p> <p>Documentation and communication: Non-existent documentation and/or communication of controls/policies/procedures</p> <p>Operations/implementation: Controls are not in operation or have not yet been implemented.</p> <p>Compliance: Significant breaches of legislative requirements and/or departmental policies and guidelines</p> <p>Risk management: Risks are not being managed.</p> <p>Academics: Neither Staffing patterns nor curriculum/materials are sufficient to implement with fidelity</p>
Needs Improvement Medium	<p>Design of controls and/or program: Design of controls only partially address key risks.</p> <p>Documentation and communication: Documentation and/or communication of controls/policies/procedures is incomplete, unclear, inconsistent, or outdated.</p> <p>Operations/implementation: Controls are not operating consistently and/or effectively or have not been implemented in full.</p> <p>Compliance: Breaches Federal, State, or local policies and guidelines have occurred</p> <p>Risk management: Risks are not effectively managed which could result in failure to ensure school objectives are met.</p> <p>Academics: Either staffing patterns or curriculum/materials are insufficient to implement with fidelity</p>
Satisfactory Low	<p>Design of controls and/or program: Design of controls is largely adequate and effective in addressing key risks.</p> <p>Documentation and communication: Controls/policies/procedures have been formally documented and are up to date but are not proactively communicated to relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>Operations/implementation: Controls are largely operating in a satisfactory manner and are providing some level of assurance.</p> <p>Compliance: No known breaches of legislative requirements and/or departmental policies and guidelines have occurred</p> <p>Risk management: Risks are largely effectively managed.</p> <p>Academics: Both staffing patterns and curriculum/materials are available to implement with fidelity</p>