

MISSISSIPPI

*How Chronic Absenteeism Hurts
Students and Taxpayers*

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Executive Summary

School attendance is one of the most important predictors of whether a student graduates from high school.¹ Despite the well-documented effects of dropping out of school, chronic absenteeism (when a student is absent at least 10% of a school year) in K-12 schools across the country has skyrocketed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Nationwide, roughly 16 million K-12 students were chronically absent during the 2021-2022 school year.² Over 120,000 of these students were from Mississippi.³ **Nearly 1-in-4 Mississippi K-12 students missed at least 18 days or over 3.5 weeks of class last year.**⁴

Further, Mississippi's chronic absenteeism rate has surged—increasing faster than her border states since 2019.⁵ The effects of this absenteeism epidemic will be debilitating for Mississippi's economy in the future and cost Mississippi taxpayers.⁶ Chronic absenteeism can lead to higher levels of incarceration, increase dependence on social services, and dampen the economic prospects of entire communities.⁷

State leaders should act now to address Mississippi's crisis-level absenteeism. This report concludes with several recommendations for improving school attendance, like linking school attendance to eligibility for a driver's license and including school attendance in how we measure the performance of our schools.

Background: School Attendance in Mississippi

Widespread data on chronic absenteeism has only become available since the federal government imposed mandatory chronic absenteeism reporting on state education departments as part of the December 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act.⁸ Long before that, though, Mississippi law, like most other states, has required children to be enrolled in and attend school.⁹ Individual school districts are responsible for collecting and reporting attendance data. School Attendance Officers (often called "Truancy Officers") who work for the Mississippi Department of Education's (MDE) Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement are responsible for enforcing the law. In Mississippi, school district officials only report students or parents/guardians to MDE for attendance issues after the student accumulates five or more unexcused or "unlawful" absences during a school year.¹⁰ Neither school district personnel nor School Attendance Officers (SAOs) are statutorily required to act when absences are excused by school district personnel. Regardless, all prolonged absences can produce negative outcomes for students.¹¹

¹ See [report](#).

² See [report](#).

³ See [report](#).

⁴ See [report](#).

⁵ Statement is based on data provided by respective education agencies in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

⁶ See [report](#).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See [resource](#).

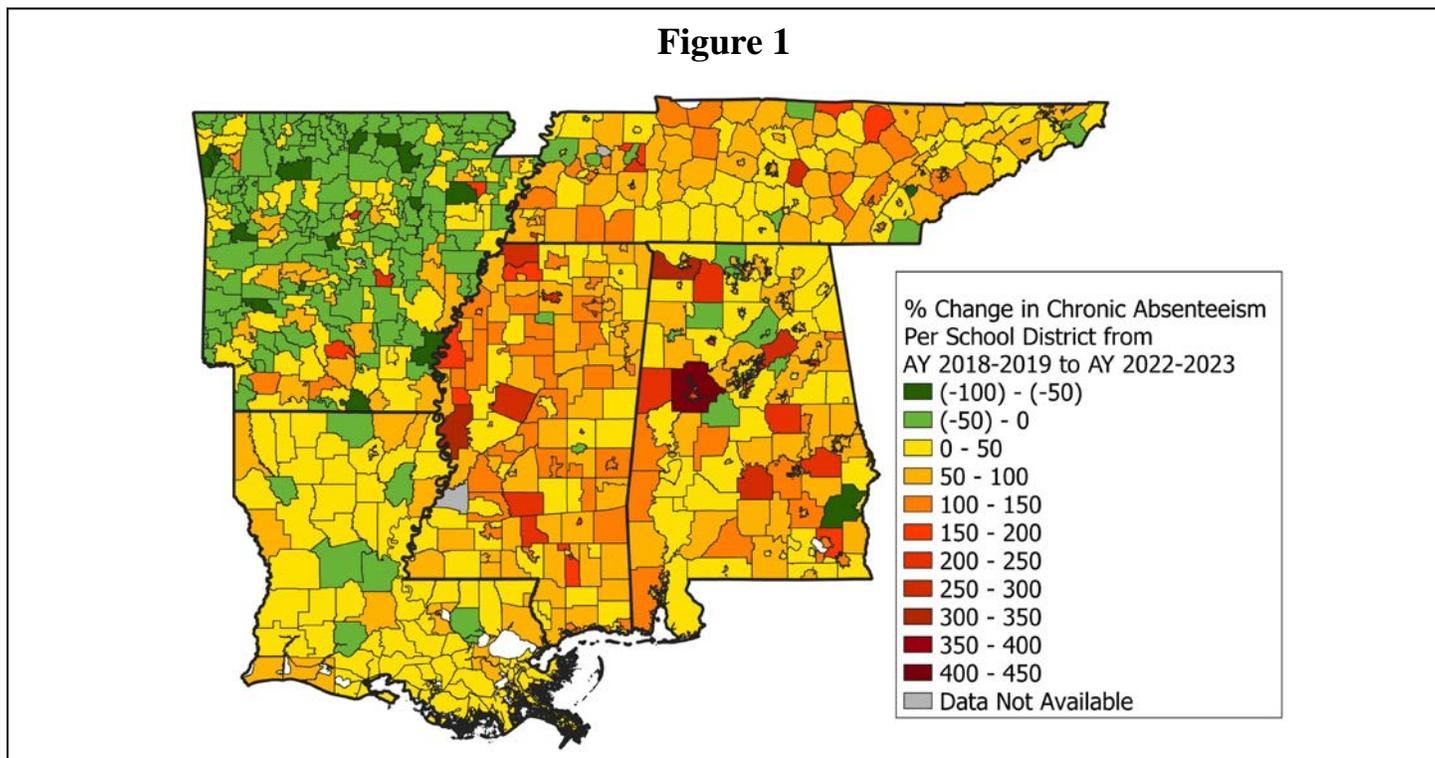
⁹ See [Miss. Code Ann. § 37-13-91](#)

¹⁰ Ibid.

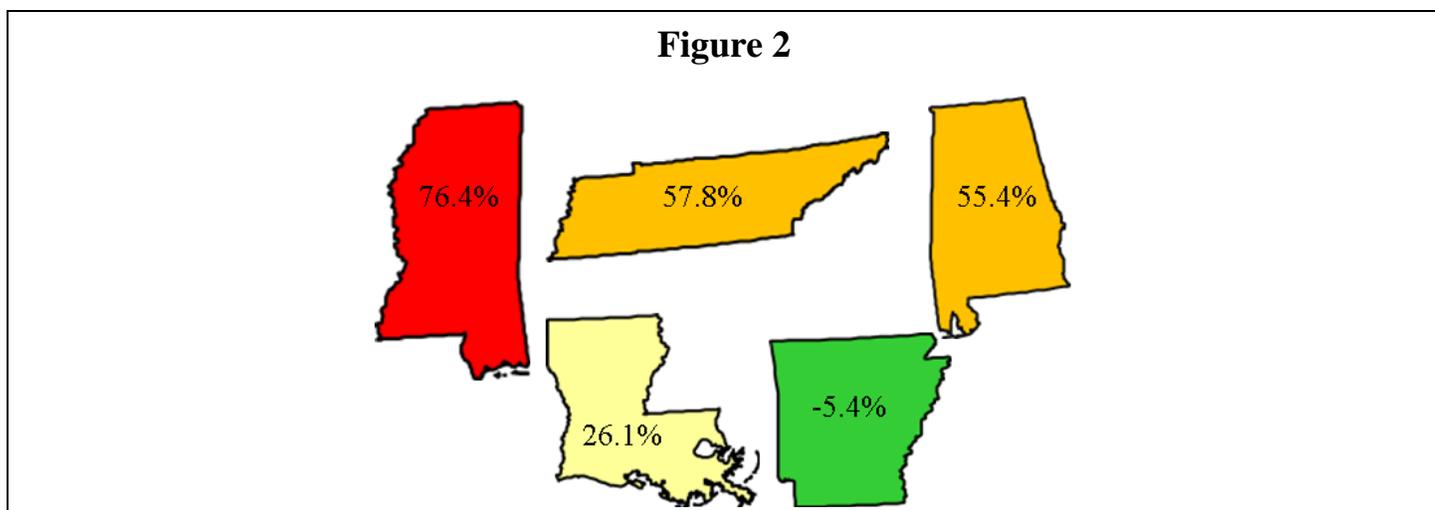
¹¹ See [resource](#).

Comparing to other states

Figure 1 illustrates the percent change in chronic absenteeism rates for each school district in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee between Academic Years (AY) 2019 and 2023.^{12,13}



In AY 2019, Mississippi school districts compared favorably to districts in border states with a 14% average district-wide chronic absentee rate. By AY 2023, Mississippi school districts outpaced those in border states with a 24.7% average chronic absenteeism rate—a 76.4% increase. Figure 2 shows Alabama’s average district-level chronic absenteeism rate increased by 55.4% while those in Louisiana and Tennessee saw 26.1% and 57.8% average growth, respectively. Only Arkansas saw an average district-level decrease at -5.4%.

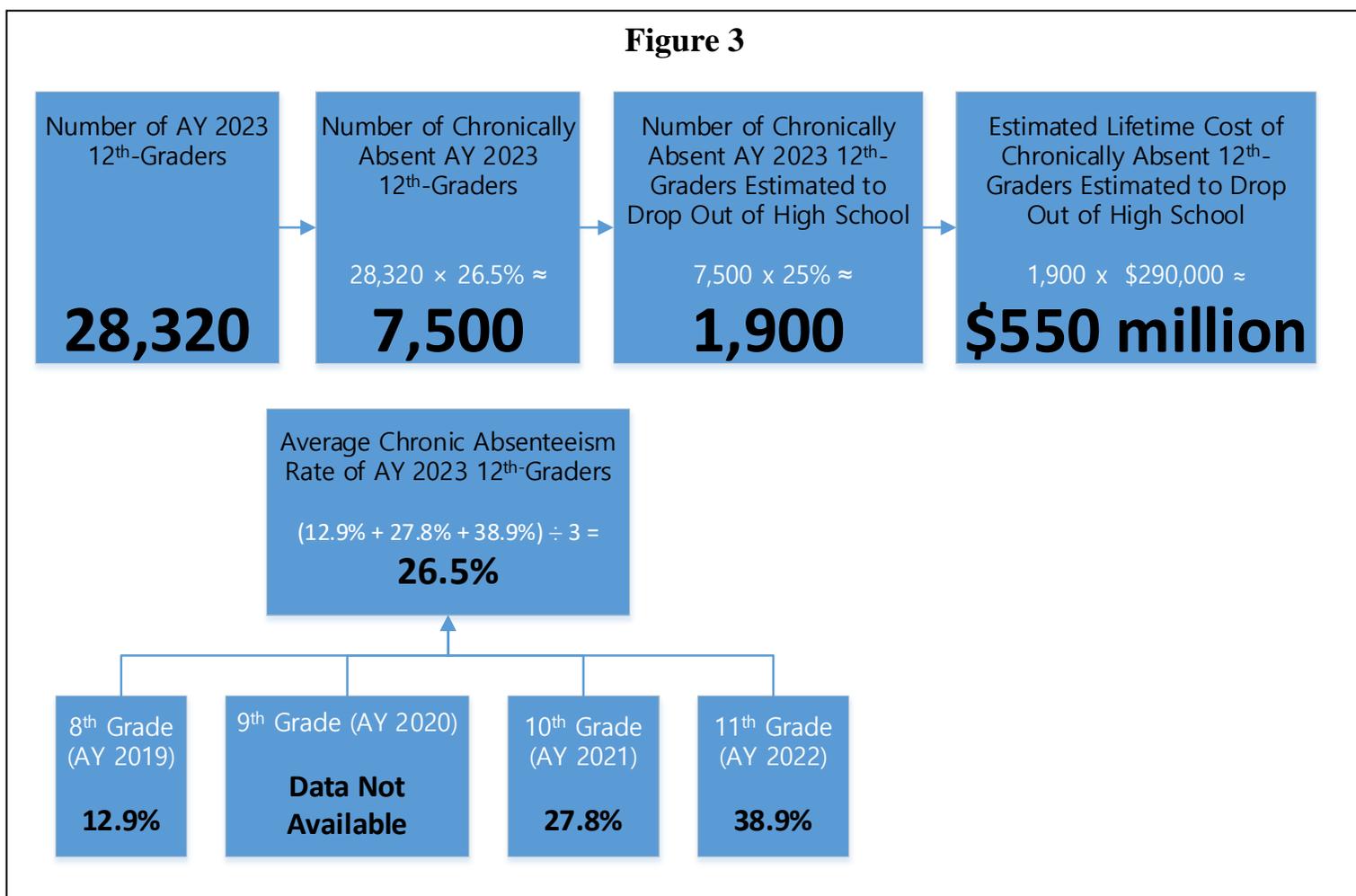


¹² Calculations are from data provided by respective education agencies in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

¹³ Data from the Claiborne County School District (MS) for AY 2019 and Bradford School District (TN) for AY2023 were not available.

Taxpayer Impact

The most direct economic impact of chronic absenteeism for students comes from the increased chance of dropping out of school.¹⁴ High school dropouts are then more likely to earn significantly less income per year than graduates, and high school dropouts are also more likely to be arrested and/or rely on welfare programs.^{15, 16} For these reasons, data show high school dropouts cost the local economy nearly \$300,000 over their lifetime.¹⁷ This relative loss of economic activity translates to both lost revenue for the state and local governments but also lost revenue for private businesses. By combining previous research with publicly available data, analysts estimate **students who were chronically absent before dropping out of school in AY 2023 alone will cost the Mississippi taxpayers \$550 million over time.**¹⁸ Figure 3 shows this calculation.¹⁹



¹⁴ See [resource](#).

¹⁵ See [resource](#).

¹⁶ See [research](#).

¹⁷ See [research](#).

¹⁸ Calculation made by combining previous [research](#) with projections made using MDE data.

¹⁹ See [reference](#) to "Number of Chronically Absent AY 2023 12th-Graders Estimated to Drop Out of High School."

Potential Problems Ahead

Mississippi's new school funding formula may undermine efforts to address the school attendance problem. Prior to the 2024 Legislative session, Mississippi's education funding mechanism included an attendance-based component. State appropriations for each school district were allocated based on the district's average daily attendance (ADA). The more students who were counted as "in attendance" at a school, the larger the school's appropriation from the state.

In 2024, the Mississippi Legislature passed and the Governor signed the Mississippi Student Funding Formula (MSFF). This new formula uses school district enrollment data—not attendance—to determine state funding for school districts. The new formula may erode the incentive districts had to ensure students attend classes.

Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is bad for students, families, communities, and taxpayers. When students don't attend K-12 classes, they risk their future success due to the link between school attendance and graduation.²⁰ If Mississippi could reduce its chronic absentee rate to AY 2019 levels, taxpayers would save billions. **For example, a sustained return to a 13% statewide chronic absentee rate would mean over 40,000 more children attending school more consistently each year. This would increase the graduation rate, eventually saving taxpayers over \$1 billion on incarceration, social services, etc. for students who drop out of high school over the next 4 years alone.**

While no single legislation or policy can entirely fix Mississippi's chronic absenteeism problem, research shows several initiatives can improve school attendance. Analysts have compiled several recommendations for school districts and lawmakers to consider:

- *Implement an Attendance Component in Mississippi's School Accountability Ratings*
- *Bolster Driver's License Requirements for Minors*
- *Expand Access to JROTC Programs*
- *Continue Prioritizing Enrollment in Meaningful Career and Technical Programs*

These proposals are further described below.

²⁰ See previous note(s).^{15, 16}

Implement an Attendance Component in Mississippi's School Accountability Ratings

The federal government requires each state to evaluate the performance of its respective public schools, but states are granted broad discretion to determine the criteria they use in these evaluations.²¹ Families can use these performance ratings when choosing where to live or send their children to school. In Mississippi, the MDE uses an A, B, C, D, or F grading scale based on things like standardized test scores and graduation rate(s). Despite most other states using an attendance-based metric in their school accountability systems, Mississippi's school accountability system does not use an attendance-based metric.²² **Mississippi's school accountability system could be amended to include an attendance-based metric similar to those used by at least 36 other states.**^{23, 24}

Since School Attendance Officers report to the MDE, local school districts do not have authority over them. During the 2024 Mississippi Legislative session, lawmakers filed legislation to transfer School Attendance Officers from the MDE to local school districts, but the effort failed.²⁵ If Mississippi implements an attendance-based component in its school district accountability ratings, and school districts had an incentive to increase attendance to boost their accountability ratings, school districts would also have a strong incentive to use SAOs aggressively to combat absenteeism. **Under those circumstances, SAOs should be assigned as school district employees, not MDE employees.**

Bolster Driver's License Requirements for Minors

Some states impose enrollment- or attendance-based requirements for minors to be eligible for a driver's license.²⁶ However, Mississippi law only requires school enrollment for minors.²⁷ Minor students must actually attend school to earn and keep driving privileges in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Alabama.²⁸ **Passing a law to link driving privileges with school attendance could improve school attendance.**

Expand Access to JROTC Programs

Students enrolled in Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) throughout high school are more likely to attend school than their non-JROTC peers.²⁹ Additionally, JROTC participants are more likely to complete high school and less likely to face disciplinary actions.³⁰ **Expanding JROTC programs in Mississippi high schools will likely reduce absenteeism while improving graduation rates and classroom behavior.**

²¹ See MDE [resource](#).

²² See [resource](#).

²³ See [report](#).

²⁴ See [report](#).

²⁵ See [HB 73](#) from 2024 Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature.

²⁶ See [Miss. Code Ann. § 63-1-9](#).

²⁷ See [Miss. Code Ann. § 63-1-10](#).

²⁸ See Louisiana [law](#), Tennessee [law](#), and Alabama [law](#).

²⁹ Claim is based on analysis of MDE data.

³⁰ See [report](#) and previous note.²²

Continue Prioritizing Enrollment in Meaningful Career and Technical Programs

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs aim to produce workers to fill the roughly 30 million available good-paying jobs in the United States that do not require a college degree.³¹ Despite emphasis on trades, students enrolled in CTE programs are just as likely to attend college as their peers.³² International research shows nations enrolling a large proportion of high school students in CTE programs have significantly higher school attendance rates.³³ **By prioritizing enrollment in quality CTE programs with real job prospects in our state, Mississippi could see improved school attendance and improved long-run economic growth.**

³¹ See [resource](#)

³² See [report](#).

³³ See [research](#).