



REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

COMPASS COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



Tennessee Charter
School Center



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGE

Chronic absenteeism, defined by the Tennessee Department of Education as a student missing 10% or more of enrolled school days for any reason, has become a significant barrier to educational success, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. With disruptions to in-person learning and heightened health concerns, schools saw a sharp rise in student absences. Though significant gains have been made to reduce Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism rate, it remains high at 18.9% in 2024.

EXAMINING THE SOLUTION

This report, the fifth case study in the Tennessee Charter School Center’s “Success Stories” series, examines how two public charter schools, Compass Community School Berclair and Compass Community School Hickory Hill, implemented replicable strategies to achieve remarkable reductions in chronic absenteeism. Berclair’s chronic absenteeism rate dropped from 55.5% in 2021-2022 to 7% in 2023-2024 (a 48.5-point decline, Tennessee’s highest decrease), and Hickory Hill’s rate fell from 35.6% in 2021-2022 to 6.8% in 2023-2024. Both schools now boast some of the lowest chronic absenteeism rates in the state. This case study seeks to uncover the strategies that drove these extraordinary outcomes, providing a roadmap for other schools facing similar challenges.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS – POLICIES AND PRACTICES DRIVING SUCCESS:

Through this study, several practices were identified that helped drive such impressive reductions in chronic absenteeism. For instance, **structured interventions** played a critical role: attendance teams at both schools convened regularly to analyze data, categorize students into tiers based on absence patterns, and develop targeted interventions. Daily outreach by office staff to parents of absent students facilitated immediate follow-up, identifying absence reasons and encouraging attendance when possible.

Fostering an engaging school culture ensured students felt valued and motivated to attend, achieved through daily community meetings, personalized greetings for each student, and consistent emphasis on core values. Educating staff and parents was equally vital—staff were trained on the academic consequences of chronic absenteeism, while parents were informed through letters, family meetings, and community events about the importance of regular attendance. Lastly, the **charter model’s flexibility** allowed these small schools to implement strategies consistently, enabling rapid problem-solving and staff collaboration to share best practices effectively.

INTRODUCTION

In this installment of the Tennessee Charter School Center’s “Success Stories” series, we turn our attention to an often overlooked but critical indicator of student success: chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism, defined as a student missing 10% or more of the school year—typically 18 days or more in a 180-day school calendar—for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences, is a key measure of engagement that profoundly impacts academic outcomes.¹ Consistent attendance drives success in core subjects like reading and math, with research showing that chronically absent students fall behind as early as kindergarten and face higher dropout risks by high school, particularly in underserved communities where transportation or health challenges amplify the issue.

Examining Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism data over the last three school years (2021-2022 – 2023-2024)², two schools within the Compass Community Schools network—Compass Community School, Berclair Campus and Compass Community School, Hickory Hill Campus—stood out. Not only did these schools achieve reductions in chronic absenteeism rates that rank in the top 1% statewide, with Compass Berclair posting the highest reduction in Tennessee at 48.5 percentage points, but they also had some of the state’s lowest chronic absenteeism rates in 2024, at 7% and 6.8%, respectively. Additionally, both of these schools earned TVAAS scores of 5 during during the 2023-2024 school year underscoring the important connection between attendance and achievement. These remarkable outcomes begged the question: What are these schools doing that is driving this success?

Compass Berclair and Compass Hickory Hill are part of Compass Community Schools, a network of public charter schools serving students across Tennessee. In 2023, the network launched a partnership with the Hyde Family Foundation, a Memphis-based organization dedicated to improving education and community outcomes. This collaboration aimed to address chronic absenteeism—a persistent challenge exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—through a multi-faceted approach. The Hyde Foundation provided funding and strategic support, enabling Compass schools to join an Attendance Works cohort, a national initiative offering evidence-based tools and training to improve attendance. The partnership also equipped the network with advanced attendance-tracking software, professional development for staff, and resources to engage families and students directly. While this network-wide effort yielded impressive results across all Compass campuses, the achievements at Berclair and Hickory Hill stand out as exceptional. In 2021-2022, Compass Berclair reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 55.5%, which plummeted to 7% by 2023-2024. Similarly, Compass Hickory Hill reduced its rate from 35.6% to 6.8% over the same period. These figures represent not just incremental progress but transformative change, far surpassing typical improvements across the state.

1. Attendance Works. (2023). Chronic absence: What it is and why it matters. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/>

2. Chronic Absenteeism, School-Level, 2022-2024, <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>, (Accessed February 2025)



INTRODUCTION

Through this case study—the fifth in our series—we aim to uncover the policies and practices that have driven these extraordinary reductions in chronic absenteeism. Specifically, we seek to answer three questions:

01

What strategies have Compass Berclair and Compass Hickory Hill implemented to boost attendance among their students?

02

What challenges have their leadership teams encountered, and how have they overcome them?

03

How has the charter school model facilitated their success in addressing chronic absenteeism?

To answer these questions, we conducted interviews with a diverse group of leaders and staff from both campuses, including the principals of Compass Berclair and Compass Hickory Hill, a school counselor, a dean of students, an office staff member, and Compass Community Schools’ Director of Student Services and Title IX Coordinator. Their insights, combined with an analysis of chronic absenteeism data, shed light on the success factors behind these schools’ achievements. By sharing the stories of these exceptional schools, we hope to illuminate pathways for schools across Tennessee to address chronic absenteeism and ensure all students have the opportunity to thrive.

It’s important to note that the results achieved by these schools (and the rest of the Compass Community School network) were accomplished without adding staff members, suggesting that these results can be replicated at other schools. What’s more, much of what we describe in this report reflects processes and resources that Attendance Works have made available, for free, on their website. School leaders looking to tackle chronic absenteeism can dive into these resources at www.attendanceworks.org.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The remarkable reductions in chronic absenteeism at Compass Community School, Berclair Campus and Compass Community School, Hickory Hill Campus are no accident. These outcomes stem from a deliberate, multi-pronged approach to attendance that combines clear communication, structured interventions, and a vibrant school culture. Through their partnership

with the Hyde Foundation and Attendance Works, these schools have implemented policies and practices that not only address the root causes of absenteeism but also foster an environment where students and families feel compelled to show up. Below, we explore the key strategies driving their success.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES

GETTING CLARITY, SHARING KNOWLEDGE

At the heart of Compass Berclair and Hickory Hill’s approach is a commitment to educating their communities about chronic absenteeism. This begins with staff training to distinguish between truancy (unexcused absences) and chronic absenteeism (missing 10% or more of the school year, regardless of reason). “We had to help our team see that hours of instruction matter, even if there’s a legitimate excuse,” explained one principal. This understanding shifted their focus to total missed time and its impact on learning. The schools then launched campaigns to share this insight with parents, many of whom assumed a doctor’s note or explanation made an absence “ok.” “Parents thought that if their child had a note, that was enough,” the principal added. “We had to explain that any missed school results in lost learning for their child.”

To reinforce this message, both schools use communication tools associated with different tiers of absence. For example, letters are sent home when a student misses 3, 5, or 8 days, escalating to a mandatory family conference. These meetings, led by someone from the attendance team (see below), are supportive rather than punitive, focusing on identifying barriers—such as transportation or health issues—and connecting families to resources.

Community events further amplify this effort, with interpreters on hand to engage the schools’ large Hispanic populations (94% at Berclair, 81% at Hickory Hill). Parents also receive guidance on distinguishing true illness from minor ailments, using Attendance Works resources to clarify when students can still attend. Daily morning calls to absent students’ families, a long-standing practice, reinforce this message while building trust. “It shows we notice and care,” noted a counselor, fostering a sense of accountability and belonging.

PROCEDURES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Both schools rely on structured protocols to track and address absenteeism, led by attendance teams comprising at least the principal, one office staff member, and guidance counselor. Meeting regularly, these teams review data through Everyday Pro, a software tool that offers detailed attendance analytics. This allows them to categorize students into tiers, similar to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Tier 1 students (no risk) benefit from universal supports that are provided to all students (e.g., community events, handouts to families, school culture-building). Tier 2 students (10%–19% missed days) receive tailored letters highlighting the impact of their absences, while Tier 3 students (20% or higher) trigger more hands-on interventions that can include family meetings or allowing students to participate in incentive programs for consecutive days of attendance.

The protocol clearly assigns staff to specific roles for when students are absent. Office staff handle daily family calls, gathering insights into why students are absent, while counselors/deans/etc. dive deeper with Tier 2 and 3 students to uncover patterns, such as recurring health or logistical issues. “Everyday Pro lets us drill down into attendance codes and spot trends across groups of students,” says Compass’s Director of Student Services. For moderate concerns, the dean of students or counselor lead family meetings; the principal steps in only for severe cases. This division of responsibilities ensures efficiency while maximizing support.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES

A SCHOOL CULTURE WHERE KIDS WANT TO SHOW UP

While attendance teams manage formal interventions, teachers play a pivotal role in creating a culture that gets students to school. “The real important pieces are the universal supports—we do a lot to establish school and classroom culture,” shared one principal. During the first two weeks of school, teachers invest heavily in setting expectations, routines, and unpacking the Compass core values—respect, wisdom, courage, and servant leadership. Daily morning meetings, inspired by the Responsive Classroom model, provide structured opportunities for students to share, connect, and regulate emotions. On Mondays, these gatherings expand schoolwide, reinforcing a sense of community. “It’s about making sure every student feels seen,” the principal adds.

This culture begins the moment students arrive. For example, Compass’s motto, “supportive upon arrival,” can be seen starting in one school’s car line, where staff greet students by name amid music and playful costumes. Inside, teachers line the hallways, welcoming students at classroom doors as they grab breakfast. These small, intentional acts—rooted in the network’s commitment to connection—create an environment where students want to be. At one school, the counselor hosts informal lunchtime chats with at-risk students, blending education on attendance with personal connection. Together, these efforts transform school into a place of belonging, not just obligation, ultimately making students want to attend school.



BREAKOUT: WHAT ARE COMMUNITY MEETINGS?³

Community meetings, commonly known as Morning Meetings in the Responsive Classroom framework, are a structured daily ritual designed to build connection and set a positive tone in schools. Developed by the Center for Responsive Classroom, this evidence-based approach aims to foster social-emotional skills and a sense of belonging among students. Typically lasting 15–30 minutes, these meetings occur at the start of each school day and include four key components: a greeting, where students and teachers acknowledge one another by name; sharing, where students voice thoughts or experiences; a group activity, like a quick game to boost engagement; and a message, often linking to the day’s goals or values.

Rooted in research showing that strong relationships improve academic outcomes, community meetings help students feel seen and valued, while giving educators a platform to reinforce expectations—like the importance of attendance. It’s about creating a space where every child knows they matter. Used in thousands of schools nationwide, this practice equips students with the emotional tools to thrive, making it a powerful lever for building school culture.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

SHIFTING THE ATTENDANCE MINDSET

A pervasive challenge at both campuses was a belief among families that in-person attendance at school was not necessary, a perception heightened post-COVID-19. Additionally, given the large Hispanic populations at both schools, many families scheduled extended visits to their countries of origin which often overlapped with the school calendar. These trips could result in students missing weeks of instruction at a time. “Absences were most common around school breaks when families would be traveling,” shared one principal.

To shift this mindset, both schools leaned heavily on the education efforts outlined earlier. Robust outreach campaigns emphasized the critical link between attendance and academic success and distinguishing truancy (unexcused absences) from chronic absenteeism (missing 10% or more of the year, regardless of reason). Staff held family meetings

and community events—often with interpreters—to explain how even excused absences can negatively impact student learning. For the travel-specific challenge, leadership took a proactive approach: they released the school calendar as early as possible and urged families to plan trips around scheduled breaks. This clear communication has begun to build a culture that supports school attendance throughout the community.



3. Center for Responsive Classroom, 2023, responsiveclassroom.org

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

BALANCING INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Even with a strong school culture and educational outreach, some students still struggle to attend school regularly. The schools' focus on intrinsic motivation—building connection through morning meetings, personal greetings, and a sense of belonging—worked for many students, but not all. To bridge this gap, leadership introduced some extrinsic motivators, particularly for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students. For these students, regular attendance gives them opportunities to participate in special events, win small prizes, or earn free time/no uniform days, etc. Although this has worked for many students, there is still work to be done.

THE ROLE OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL

SMALLER NETWORK

The most significant advantage of the charter model lies in its ability to foster a small, interconnected community across the Compass network. Unlike larger districts, where aligning dozens or hundreds of schools can be unwieldy, Compass's six campuses make implementing programs like the one described here more manageable. "I came from a larger district, and we just couldn't get all the schools connected or on the same page to the degree we can in a smaller network like this," shared one leader. The size and flexibility of the network allowed them to implement their shared attendance strategy with fidelity across the network, ensuring every campus benefited from shared resources and goals.

This community model also cultivates smaller "communities of practice" among staff. Principals, counselors, and office teams across Compass schools meet regularly to share best practices and troubleshoot challenges like transportation barriers. These exchanges, facilitated by the network's manageable size, accelerate problem-solving and innovation.

CONCLUSION

The success of Compass Berclair and Hickory Hill demonstrates that a multi-faceted approach—blending targeted education, data-driven interventions, and a vibrant, inclusive school culture—can significantly reduce chronic absenteeism. By addressing both practical barriers and engagement from both students and families, these schools have not only achieved standout results but also set a compelling, replicable example for Tennessee schools. Their story underscores the power of intentional strategies and the charter model's agility, offering a roadmap for others who hope to improve attendance, strengthen community ties, and ultimately improve academic outcomes.