Lawrence County Families,

Recently, the Lawrence County School System (LCSS) released updates to our Student Attendance Policy in advance of the 2025–2026 school year. While the intention behind this early release was to provide families with adequate notice and to assist local healthcare providers in understanding the changes, we recognize that some may have misunderstood the language in the policy and focused solely on a potential worst-case scenario. We understand the concerns that have been expressed by some members of our community and want to take the opportunity to provide clarity, correct misinformation, and reemphasize our purpose: to support students and families while meeting the legal responsibilities required by the State of Tennessee.

Clarifying the Facts

Tennessee's Compulsory Attendance Law requires all children between the ages of 6 and 17 attend school. Parents or guardians are responsible for ensuring their children attend school and school districts must report a child's attendance to the state. All public school districts in Tennessee are required to report student attendance using only two categories: "Present" or "Absent." LCSS does not have the authority to change this requirement. Whether an absence is accompanied by a doctor's note or a parent explanation, it is still reported to the Tennessee Department of Education as "Absent." A note from a doctor or parent helps explain the absence at the school level, but it does not remove the absence from state reporting. This means:

- A student who misses 18 days (10%) or more in a school year—regardless of the reason—is designated by the state as chronically absent.
- This classification is tied to state definitions and is not determined by LCSS.

The state does allow the district to exempt absences based on specific criteria, including:

- Death in the family,
- Religious observances,
- Chronic illness verified by a licensed medical provider practicing in Tennessee, *Pregnancy related issues (physician visits, birth) are considered chronic illness,*
- Summons, subpoena, or court order,
- Circumstances which in the *judgment of the principal* create emergencies over which the student has no control,
- School endorsed activities,
- Military events including deployment, return, special recognitions, and the like.

The Real Problem: 1,100 Chronically Absent Students

In the 2024–2025 academic year, over 1,100 LCSS students were identified and reported as chronically absent, missing at least 18 days of school. On average, a month of school is 19 days; therefore, students missing 18 days have lost the equivalent of one month of instruction.
If we look deeper: seven (7) hours (average school day) × 18 days = 126 hours of academic engagement and social interaction missed. Some students missed 20–45 days and were not listed as having a chronic illness. In many cases, families were simply unaware of how quickly

absences accumulated and may not realize their child was included on the chronic absentee list since they turned in a doctor's note. Again, excluding the aforementioned state exceptions, any time a student is absent – regardless of reason – they are reported as "Absent."

This is the primary reason we have early intervention points in the policy. We want parents to be aware of the number of absences a student accrues throughout the school year and hope to work together to decrease the number of absences. The policy is designed to intervene and discuss absenteeism with the student/family at specific intervals.

- At 3 absences: Intervention includes a phone call or discussion with the student and/or family informing them of absences and determining if a potential concern exists. This is an early checkpoint—not a referral or threat. It's a chance to make sure families are aware of the number of absences and discuss supports provided by school officials as needed.

- At 5 absences: Schools will intervene once again and an attendance contract ***may*** be developed. Most students will not require an attendance contract, especially if they have simply missed for illness or medical appointments, but this check-in allows an early opportunity to interact with students who simply do not want to attend school.

- At 8 absences: If the student is not adhering to the attendance contract, the family ***may*** be petitioned to court (not applicable to those with a known chronic illness, previously discussed extenuating circumstances, state exemptions, special needs, or the like).

- At 18 absences: The student is deemed chronically absent by state guidelines.

We encourage parents to review the attendance policy as additional interventions are noted absences occurring at 10, 12, 14, etc.

Some may interpret these interventions as excessive or rigid, which is not the intent. These interventions are meant to help—not to scare or penalize. If a student has missed days due to an acute illness, ongoing medical issue, family emergency, etc., the tiered approach allows for open communication, cooperation among school and family, and the family **would not** be referred to truancy court. Conversely, if a student is chronically absent without a valid reason and has agreed to an attendance contract and it is not followed, the school is left no choice but to petition to court. This is why early communication, intervention, and action must occur. This is not about punishment, but about helping students stay engaged and successful.

What LCSS Is Asking of Families

We **ARE NOT** asking families to send children to school when they are sick. That would be irresponsible.

We **ARE NOT** asking anyone to disregard a physician's directions. We have communicated with local health providers and asked for their assistance in helping our students return to school when healthy.

We **ARE** asking families:

- to ensure students attend school when they are well, even if they "don't want to go" or "don't feel like it today."
- to communicate early if your child has an ongoing medical condition.
- to send students before or after medical appointments, if possible. Examples:
    - If a student has a 10:00 dental appointment within the county, send the student to school in the morning and return them after the appointment.
    - If a student has a 2:00 appointment with their medical provider for a routine visit, send them to school that morning and check them out prior to the appointment.
    - If your child's medical providers require travel outside of the county, communicate this with the school. It is understood and expected that extra time away is needed in those instances.
- to schedule appointments outside school hours when feasible.
- to avoid scheduling vacations or extended weekends during instructional time.
    - During the August – May academic year, students are scheduled to attend school 180 days.
    - Built into the calendar are 35 holiday/in-service days/breaks (Labor Day, Fair Day, Veterans Day, MLK Day, Presidents' Day, Good Friday and 4 teacher in-service days. Additionally students are out of school for 5 days for Fall Break, 5 days for Thanksgiving Break, 10 days for Christmas Break and 5 days for Spring Break).

Clearing Up a Misconception

Some have suggested that the revised attendance policy is about increasing funding. This is not true. Daily attendance does not impact funding for LCSS or any public school district in Tennessee. School funding in Tennessee is based on enrollment, not on the number of students present on a given day.

For example:

- If LCSS has 2,000 students absent on Monday and only 1,000 absent on Tuesday, our funding remains the same for both days.

The revised attendance policy is solely about improving student success—not district finances.

Early Notification, Intervention and Prevention of Chronic Absenteeism

We wanted the community to be aware of this policy change before the school year began to:

- be transparent with families and providers.
- allow time to ask questions or seek clarification.
- support preventative action before students fall into chronic absenteeism.

As of now, no student in LCSS is chronically absent for the 2025–2026 academic year. This policy is about early intervention to avoid long-term attendance issues. However, experience has informed the development of this policy, and we recognize that some families will face greater challenges than others in ensuring consistent student attendance. When chronic absenteeism persists and families are unwilling to comply with Tennessee's Compulsory Education Law, the policy does include punitive actions. These measures are not our first step—they are our last resort.

Support for Students with Medical Needs

To serve students with ongoing health conditions, we have introduced the **Chronic Illness Verification Form**. This form allows school staff to work with families and document recurring health-related needs appropriately. We encourage parents of students with long-term or recurring health conditions to speak with their school nurse or principal to begin this process.

Examples of how the policy could be implemented during the 2025 – 2026 academic year

Student A is in the 6th grade:

- Missed three (3) days of school by August 22nd and provided a physician note stating a strep throat diagnosis.
- A review of the educational record shows the student missed 19 days in 5th grade (appeared on the Chronic Absentee List) and has missed 98 days since 1st grade with several doctor and parent notes, including days for family vacations.
  ➡ *Intervention needed* – the physician's note would be documented and the school would communicate with the parent about the current number of absences and discuss the student's chronic absentee history. No additional action taken at this time.

Student B is in the 9th grade:

- The student provided a note to the school in early August stating the need to attend Physical Therapy sessions for the next 8 weeks.
- A review of the educational record shows the student missed 20 days in 8th grade due to surgery and recovery for an injury (appeared on the Chronic Absentee List). In previous years the student typically missed 4-5 days per year, mostly for acute illnesses
  ➡ *No intervention needed*—this is an on-going medical event and parents communicated with the school from the start.

Student C is in the 11th grade:

- The student missed three (3) days of school by September 5th with no documentation provided. The school met with the student who reported "I just didn't feel like coming to school those days." The school talked with the student about the importance of attending school and notified the parents to confirm they were aware of the absences.
- A review of the education record shows the student has not appeared on the Chronic Absentee List in past years and typically misses 5-7 days a year.

- In late September, the student missed school the Thursday prior to Fair Day and the Monday after Fall Break (now at 5 total absences). The student was spoken to again and reported "our family scheduled a vacation during Fall Break that lasted 14 days". The student and family are counseled regarding the number of absences accrued. School officials determined an attendance contract is not needed at this time, as the student and family assure the school no additional vacations or absences are anticipated.
- In November, the student is diagnosed with the flu and misses five (5) days of school. The family contacts the school on the day the student is diagnosed to report illness. The student is now at 10 total absences for the year. The school may meet with the family again to discuss a potential attendance contract in an attempt to keep the student from becoming chronically absent for the year.
  → *Intervention occurred* based on the number of absences, but no referral to court—school was aware of illness and communication occurred throughout.

Student D is in 3rd grade:

- Student has a chronic medical condition requiring multiple medical appointments. The student also has a weakened immune system and experiences numerous illnesses throughout the year. The parent reached out to the school in July to obtain a Chronic Illness Verification Form to have completed by their medical provider.
- A review of the education record shows the student has routinely missed between 30-45 days each year, appearing on the Chronic Absentee List annually.
- → *Intervention may occur to determine how the school can assist the family and student* due to necessary absences but *no court referral*—school continues to support the family.

Student E is in the 12th grade:

- By the end of the 1st nine (9) weeks, the student has missed 10 days of school (1 illness noted for 3 days and an additional 7 absences). The school began the intervention process after three (3) absences, met with the student/family at five (5) absences and instituted an attendance plan at eight (8) absences.
- A review of the education record shows the student missed 22 days during the 11th grade year and appeared on the Chronic Absentee List three (3) of the last five (5) years with a mixture of documented and undocumented absences.
- The student complied with the attendance contract until Christmas Break. In January the student missed a week of school stating "I'm just ready to be done with school." This is not an unusual response from seniors in the spring semester.
  → *Intervention occurred* and an attendance contract was developed. After improvement, absences increased again. This case ***could*** result in a court petition based on student disregard and lack of communication. The school retains flexibility in its decision with truancy court, and has the option to limit participation in senior activities.

In the scenarios provided, only one student was possibly referred to truancy court. Even with these interventions and communication between parents and school officials, a student amassing 18 absences would be included on the Chronic Absentee List generated by the state since districts can only report students as "present" or "absent."

Our Focus Is Support

This policy is about helping students thrive, no matter what challenges or circumstances they face. LCSS focuses on intervention across all aspects of the educational experience.

- When our students experience academic difficulty, our teachers intervene. Schools offer interventionists, individualized instruction, and tutoring.
- If our students experience a health issue, there's a school nurse on-site.
- For trauma or mental health concerns, schools have social workers and school-based therapists.
- When a student falls behind in attendance, we must also intervene. Every absence is a missed opportunity to learn, connect, and grow.

We understand that change often brings questions and heightened emotions. While we cannot prevent all misunderstandings, we remain committed to open, honest communication with our families. Our goal is for every student to succeed. ***Attendance plays a critical role in student success.***

We ask for your patience, cooperation, and understanding as we work together to improve school attendance and academic outcomes. The Board of Education, County Commission, and taxpayers of Lawrence County have made tremendous investments in our students' futures including mental health resources, intervention programs, and instructional and learning opportunities.

The intent of the revised attendance policy is not punitive, but supportive. Just as we would intervene to help a student falling behind academically, we must also act when chronic absenteeism threatens their educational success.

Thank you for your continued partnership in making Lawrence County Schools a safe and supportive learning environment for every student.

If you have questions, concerns, or special circumstances, please reach out to the central office or your school. Our principals, social workers, counselors, and staff are ready to help.

Sincerely,

Mr. Michael Adkins, Ed. S.
Director of Schools
Lawrence County School System