

Berrien County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee Protocol

Last Updated: March 23, 2026

Approved by Committee: March 26, 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Mission.....	2
Vision.....	2
Commitment Statement.....	2
Confidentiality.....	3
Committee Members.....	3
Relevant Law.....	4
Determining the Cause of Nonattendance.....	4
Investigation and Referral Documentation.....	4
Required Notifications Under Georgia Law.....	5
Progressive Parental Involvement Process.....	5
Excused Absences.....	6
Unexcused Absences.....	6
School Intervention Process.....	7
Court Intervention Process.....	8
Data Review and School Climate Accountability.....	8
Signatures.....	10

Introduction

Georgia law mandates that all children between the ages of six and sixteen are subject to the compulsory school attendance pursuant to O.C.G.A § 20-2-690.1. Regular school attendance is essential to academic achievement, graduation rates, positive school climate, and long term student success.

Every child in Georgia holds a fundamental constitutional right to receive an adequate education. In Spring 2026, the Superior Court of Berrien County, Georgia, convened the statutorily required Berrien County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee (hereinafter referred to as “the Committee”). The Committee’s statutory mandate is to develop a protocol outlining procedures for identifying, reporting, investigating, and addressing alleged violations of the compulsory school attendance law (O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.1). This directive also includes identifying and supporting prevention, intervention, and school climate initiatives of community partners throughout Berrien County, aimed at assisting students and families in achieving attendance goals.

The Committee functions in an advisory and collaborative capacity and does not adjudicate individual cases or impose discipline, but instead supports proactive intervention-focused strategies designed to remove barriers to attendance and strengthen overall school climate.

Mission

The Committee’s mission is to foster coordination and cooperation among state and local officials, agencies, partners, and programs engaged in promoting compulsory attendance and enhancing school climate throughout Berrien County. We are dedicated to identifying and overcoming barriers to regular attendance for students and families. Through collaborative and tailored measures, our goal is to establish a comprehensive, county-specific protocol that ensures effective processes to support student attendance and well-being.

Vision

Our vision is a community where every student thrives in safe, engaging school environments with minimal unexcused absences. We are committed to supporting proactive, intervention-focused strategies from our community partners that promote attendance and foster inclusive, welcoming school climates. Through innovation and collaboration, we strive to empower students and families to succeed in their educational journeys.

Commitment Statement

The members of the Committee are dedicated to proactive, intervention-oriented measures aimed at reducing unexcused absences and fostering safe, supportive school environments. Each member is accountable to the mission and vision of the Committee, striving to meet the diverse needs of students and families across Berrien County. The Berrien County Student Attendance

and School Climate Committee members and their representative agencies affirm commitment to the implementation of this Protocol pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2.

Each participating agency agrees to the following:

1. Designate an official representative to serve on the Committee.
2. Participate in at least two Committee meetings annually.
3. Share relevant, non-identifying attendance and school climate data.
4. Collaborate in implementing intervention strategies.
5. Uphold the responsibilities outlined in the adopted Protocol

Confidentiality

All information shared among the committee members of the Student Attendance and School Climate Committee shall be handled in accordance with the applicable state and federal confidentiality laws.

Information and data shared pursuant to this protocol shall be used solely for the purpose of improving student attendance and school climate and shall not be disclosed outside the Committee except as permitted by law. This provision does not restrict the distribution of this written protocol or general procedural information.

Committee Members

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2(c), the following agencies, officials, and programs shall designate a representative to serve on the committee:

1. The superior court judge of the Alapaha Judicial Circuit
2. The juvenile court judge of the Alapaha Judicial Circuit
3. The district attorney of the Alapaha Judicial Circuit
4. The Department of Juvenile Justice
5. Berrien County School System; specifically the superintendent, school social worker, one board member and one certified school employee
6. The Department of Family and Children Services
7. Berrien County Sheriff's Department
8. Nashville Police Department
9. Alapaha Police Department
10. Enigma Police Department
11. Ray City Police Department
12. Public Health Department
13. Family Connections/Communities In Schools of Berrien County
14. Local Mental Health Agencies

Relevant Law

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.1 and the Georgia Department of Education Rule 160-5-1-.10, children between the ages of six and sixteen who have more than 5 unexcused absences in a single school year are considered truant. The Berrien County School System shall implement procedures for identifying, reporting, investigating and addressing violations of compulsory attendance laws in accordance with the Board of Education Policy JB and the Berrien County Schools Student Handbook.

Determining the Cause of Nonattendance

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2 and GaDOE Rule 160-5-1-.10(k), Berrien County School System shall implement proactive strategies to identify the causes of student nonattendance and provide appropriate school based interventions prior to judicial referrals. The school system recognizes that attendance concerns may be related to academic, behavioral, social, emotional, medical, transportation, housing, or family related barriers. Schools shall make reasonable efforts to identify and address these barriers rather than responding solely to the number of absences.

Schools shall promote positive attendance habits through school-wide practices that establish clear expectations and support a positive school climate.

When a student demonstrates ongoing attendance concerns, the school shall implement targeted interventions to determine and address the cause of nonattendance. These efforts may include an Attendance Intervention Team (AIT) meeting, development of Attendance Improvement Plan (AIP), review by the MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) team, and referral to school or community based supports, as appropriate.

Prior to any referral to the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) or the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS), the school will ensure that all reasonable efforts have been made to determine and address the cause of nonattendance. The efforts shall be documented in the student record.

Investigation and Referral Documentation

Prior to court referral, the school shall verify the following:

- Parent contact and/or conference was attempted.
- Notification via certified mail or home visit by school social worker or SRO were completed.
- Attendance interventions documented.
- Educational supports reviewed.

All documentation shall be maintained in accordance with district and court requirements.

Required Notifications Under Georgia Law

1. Written Summary of Requirements:
 - a. By September 1 of each school year, or within 30 days of a student's enrollment, the school will provide the parent/guardian with a written summary of possible consequences and penalties for failing to comply with the compulsory attendance law.
 - b. Parents/guardians must sign a statement acknowledging the receipt. Students aged eleven or older by September 1 will also be required to sign acknowledgement.
 - c. After two reasonable attempts to secure signatures, the school shall send the statement via certified mail, return receipt requested, first class mail, or home visit and shall be considered in compliance.
2. Five (5) Unexcused Absence Notification
 - a. When a student accumulates five unexcused absences, the school shall notify the parent/guardian. The notice shall outline the penalties and consequences under O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.1 and shall inform the parent/guardian that each subsequent absence constitutes a separate offense.
 - b. After two reasonable attempts to notify, the school shall send notice via certified mail, return receipt requested, first class mail, or home visit and shall be considered in compliance.
3. Parent Notification Prior to Judicial Proceedings
 - a. Prior to commencing any judicial proceedings to impose penalty on a parent, guardian or student, the school system shall send notice via certified mail, return receipt requested, first class mail, or home visit and shall be considered in compliance.
 - b. Documentation of mailing shall be maintained in the student record.

Progressive Parental Involvement Process

In accordance with GaDOE Rule 160-5-1-.10(k), Berrien County Schools shall implement a progressive parental involvement process prior to court referral

The following steps shall be followed for *unexcused* absences:

- 3 unexcused absences - parent/guardian contact by teacher
- 5 unexcused absences - parent/guardian contact by school counselor and written notice
- 7 unexcused absences - parent/guardian contact by school social worker via phone, home visit and/or certified mail
- 8+ unexcused absences - possible referral to DJJ or DFCS

The following steps shall be followed for *excused* absences:

- 5 excused absences - parent/guardian contacted by teacher
- 7 excused absences - parent/guardian contacted by school counselor
- 10 excused absences - parent/guardian contacted by school social worker
- 15+ excused absences - possible referral to DJJ or DFCS

The following steps shall be followed for tardies and early check-outs combined:

- 5 unexcused tardies/check-out - parent contact by teacher
- 7 unexcused tardies/check-out - parent contact by school counselor
- 10 unexcused tardies/check-out - parent contacted by school social worker via phone, home visit and/or certified mail
- 15+ unexcused tardies/check-out - possible referral to DJJ or DFCS.

Excused Absences

Students may be temporarily excused from school for the following reasons:

1. Personal illness where attendance would endanger the student's health or others.
2. Serious illness or death in the immediate family.
3. A court order or an order by a governmental agency, including pre-induction physical examinations for service in the armed forces, mandating absence from school.
4. Recognized religious holidays observed by the student's faith.
5. Registering to vote or voting (not to exceed one day).
6. Conditions rendering attendance impossible or hazardous.
7. Absences for students whose parent or legal guardian is deploying, returning from deployment, or on military leave may be excused for up to five (5) school days with prior approval.
8. Absences deemed to have merit as determined by the Superintendent or designee.

Students must submit written documentation within three (3) school days of returning to school. Failure to submit documentation will result in the absence being recorded as unexcused.

A maximum of five (5) parent/guardian notes per school year may be accepted to excuse student absences for grades PK-8. Students in grades 9-12 operating on semester based block schedules are allowed a maximum of three (3) parent/guardian notes per semester.

Unexcused Absences

Any absence not permitted under state law, GaDOE Rule 160-5-1-.10, or Board Policy JB shall be considered unlawful and unexcused. For attendance purposes, students in PK-5 shall be counted absent when they miss more than one half of the instruction day, students in 6-12 shall be counted absent when they miss more than one half of a block class.

School Intervention Process

Tier 1 Attendance Interventions-For Berrien County Schools, Tier 1 attendance interventions include the following measures:

1. Parent/guardian contacts will be triggered at specific attendance milestones-3 unexcused and/or 5 excused absences, phone call from teacher; 5 unexcused and/or 7 excused absences, phone call from school counselor; 7 unexcused absences and/or 10 excused absences, contact from school social worker.
2. Each school will implement incentives to promote good attendance habits and provide resources to support attendance incentives.
3. Professional development will be offered to enhance the skills and knowledge of attendance of school staff.
4. District monitoring of attendance to improve efforts, ensuring accountability and progress towards attendance goals.

Tier 2 Interventions-Students experiencing chronic absenteeism may have access to Tier 2 attendance interventions and targeted school based supports:

1. Attendance Review Team referral: A multidisciplinary team that consistently reviews attendance data, generates attendance plans with students, and differentiates supports based on individual needs.
2. More frequent attendance check-ins and/or referral to school based attendance groups.
3. Small Groups: Evidence-based programs that address social skills, coping skills, grief, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and peer mediation.

Tier 3 Interventions-Students with significant attendance issues will have access to intensive support measures:

1. Attendance Intervention Team (AIT) meetings may be held with school staff, student, parent/guardian and community partners to address severe attendance concerns.
2. Collaborative Attendance Goals: Developed with the student, with weekly contact initiated to monitor and encourage progress. Home connection visits are continued if a student is not making adequate progress.
3. Social Work Case Management Services: Utilized to address underlying issues affecting attendance, with mental health services offered to support students' emotional and psychological needs.
4. Education Neglect Referral to Department of Family and Children Services may be completed in cases of severe attendance issues.
5. Truancy referral to Department of Juvenile Justice may be completed in cases of severe attendance issues for students age 11 and older.

Court Intervention Process

Once the school social worker has exhausted all appropriate and available intervention efforts, the district may file a formal complaint with the Department of Juvenile Justice for students with a truancy issue. At the adjudication hearing, a child may make an admission to the court, and the petitioner (i.e. the state or school district) may provide a summary of the facts regarding the truancy petition. If the child makes an admission, the court may find the child to be in need of services. If no admission is made, the petitioner must present evidence, under the clear and convincing evidence standard, that the child was truant with at least 10 unexcused absences and that all elements of the petition have been met.

Data Review and School Climate Accountability

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2, the Committee may review attendance and school climate data at least twice annually to evaluate the effectiveness of this protocol, ensure compliance, and recommend improvements. The purpose of this data review is to monitor attendance trends, evaluate interventions, identify systemic barriers, promote accountability, strengthen school climate outsiders, reduce suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts, and increase student achievement and engagement. This review is conducted to determine whether school-based interventions are effectively reducing the need for court referrals and improving student attendance outcomes.

Each protocol partner commits to sharing relevant attendance data and assessment measures with the Committee. These data and assessment measures will be shared at the Committee's regular meetings and used to identify effective interventions as well as areas for improvement.

Data to be provided includes:

- School Attendance data, including:
 - Overall attendance rates
 - Attendance rates of students referred to the Juvenile Court for truancy before and after the date of referral
 - Attendance rates by demographic characteristics
 - Attendance rates by school
 - Interventions attempted and success rates
- Truancy referral data, including:
 - Number of referrals
 - Number of DJJ complaints
 - Number of youth with co-occurring delinquency or dependency cases
 - Success rates in referred cases
 - Success rates in cases where complaints are filed
 - Interventions attempted and success rates

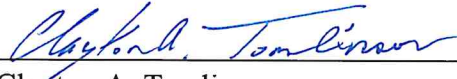
- Non-identifying data from Student Health Surveys related to attitudes towards school, attendance rates, and barriers to attendance
- Environmental and behavior indicator data, including:
 - Rates of absence for in-school and out-of-school suspension
- Parent/guardian feedback, including:
 - Responses to school surveys
 - Qualitative feedback shared with school, court, and community partner personnel
- GADOE Ratings


The Committee shall also monitor compliance with O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.1, O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2, GaDOE Rule 160-5-1-.10, and Board Policy. Committee minutes shall be maintained and an Annual Summary Report may be submitted to the Chief Judge and Superintendent.

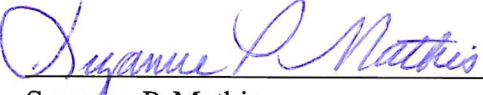
Signatures

This protocol was adopted by the Berrien County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee and approved by the Chief Judge of the Superior Court from the Alapaha Judicial Circuit. This protocol may be amended as necessary upon approval of the Committee and a Superior Court Judge from the Alapaha Judicial Circuit.

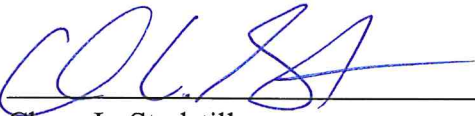
By signing below, the undersigned acknowledge review and adoption of the Berrien County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee Protocol.



_____ Date: 4/1/26
Clayton A. Tomlinson
Chief Judge of the Superior Court, Alapaha Judicial Circuit


_____ Date: 3/26/26
Richard L. "Dick" Perryman, III
Judge of the Superior Court, Alapaha Judicial Circuit


_____ Date: 3/24/26
Suzanne P. Mathis
Juvenile Court Judge, Alapaha Judicial Circuit


_____ Date: 3/26/26
Christina Allen
Probate Judge, Berrien County Probate Court


_____ Date: 4/9/26
Chase L. Studstill
District Attorney, Alapaha Judicial Circuit


_____ Date: 3/26/26
J. Allen Lawson
Chief Assistant District Attorney, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

Jason Cain

Date: 4-8-26

Jason Cain
Assistant District Attorney, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

Elexis Williams

Date: 3/26/26

Elexis Williams
Juvenile Probation Specialist, Department of Juvenile Justice

Heath Heron

Date: 3/24/24

Heath Heron
Superintendent, Berrien County School System

Keith Powell

Date: 3-26-26

Keith Powell
Berrien County Board of Education

Shannon Danforth

Date: 3/26/26

Shannon Danforth
Assistant Principal, Berrien County School System

Katie Ray

Date: 3/26/26

Katie Ray
School Social Worker, Berrien County School System

Mendi Johns

Date: 3/26/26

Mendi Johns
Director, Berrien County Division of Family & Children Services

Arel Valdez

Date: 4-21-2026

Arel Valdez
Berrien County Sheriff's Office



Date: 5-6-2026

Ronald Knowles
Chief, Nashville Police Department



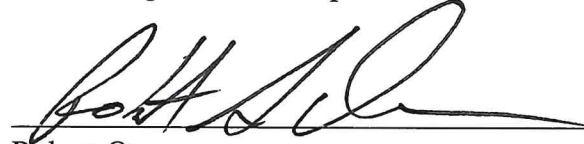
Date: 3/26/26

Larry Tabor
Chief, Alapaha Police Department



Date: 3-26-26

George Baker
Chief, Enigma Police Department



Date: 4-10-26

Robert Owens
Chief, Ray City Police Department



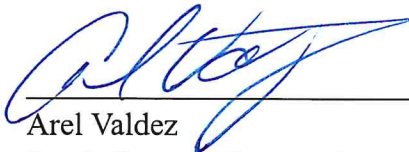
Date: 05/13/26

Mark Eanes
District Health Director 8-1, Georgia Department of Public Health



Date: 3/26/26

Sara Paulk
Director, Berrien Family Connection/Community In Schools of Berrien County



Date: 4-21-26

Arel Valdez
South Georgia Community Service Board