

LANIER COUNTY
STUDENT ATTENDANCE & SCHOOL CLIMATE COMMITTEE
PROTOCOL

Alapaha Judicial Circuit
Lanier County, Georgia

Adopted: March 10, 2026

I. INTRODUCTION

Georgia law mandates that all children between the ages of six (6) and sixteen (16) are subject to 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. Chronic absenteeism has been linked to lower academic performance, increased dropout risk, and reduced postsecondary opportunities.

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2, the Chief Judge of the Alapaha Judicial Circuit has established the Lanier County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee ("Committee") to adopt a written Student Attendance Protocol for Lanier County Schools.

The purpose of this Protocol is to ensure coordination and cooperation among courts, schools, law enforcement, the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), public health, mental health providers, Family Connection, and other community partners in addressing compulsory attendance matters.

This Protocol outlines procedures for identifying, reporting, investigating, and addressing violations of compulsory school attendance laws; determining the causes of nonattendance; implementing intervention strategies; facilitating appropriate referrals; and reviewing school climate indicators for the purpose of promoting improved student achievement, attendance, morale, community support, and safe learning environments while reducing suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts.

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.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All interagency collaboration and data sharing under this Protocol shall comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA),

the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and all applicable federal and state confidentiality laws.

I.A. Committee Membership

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2, the Lanier County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee shall include representatives from agencies and organizations involved in addressing student attendance and school climate. These agencies may include, but are not limited to:

- Superior Court of the Alapaha Judicial Circuit
- Juvenile Court
- Lanier County Schools
- Lanier County Sheriff's Office and local law enforcement agencies
- Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS)
- Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)
- Local Public Health Department
- Local Mental Health Organization
- Family Connection or other community-based organizations

II. IDENTIFYING, REPORTING, INVESTIGATING, AND ADDRESSING VIOLATIONS

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.1 and Georgia Department of Education Rule 160-5-1-.10 (Student Attendance), the Lanier County School System shall implement procedures for identifying, reporting, investigating, and addressing violations of compulsory school attendance laws in accordance with Board of Education Policy JB and the Lanier County Student and Parent Handbook.

A. Compulsory Attendance Requirement

All children between their sixth and sixteenth birthdays who reside in Lanier County shall enroll in and attend school regularly unless enrolled in a private school or home study program meeting state law requirements.

Although compulsory attendance under Georgia law applies to children ages six through sixteen, students enrolled in the Lanier County Pre-Kindergarten program through 12th grade are expected to attend regularly and are subject to district attendance policies.

B. Lawful 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. Recognized religious holidays observed by the student's faith.
4. Service as a Page in the Georgia General Assembly.
5. Registering to vote or voting (not to exceed one day).
6. Conditions rendering attendance impossible or hazardous.
7. Court orders or governmental agency mandates.
8. 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.
9. Absences deemed to have merit as determined by the Superintendent or designee.
10. Foster care proceedings.
11. Participation in a 4-H sponsored activity.

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.

Parent notes will be accepted for no more than five (5) days per school year.

C. Unlawful (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 grades PK-12 shall be counted absent when they miss more than one-half of the instructional day.

D. Required Notifications Under Georgia Law

1. Written Summary of Consequences (Annual Requirement)

By September 1 of each school year, or within thirty (30) school days of enrollment:

- The school shall provide each parent, guardian, or person having control or charge of a student a written summary of possible consequences and penalties for failing to comply with compulsory attendance laws.
- Parents/guardians must sign a statement acknowledging receipt.
- Students age ten (10) or older by September 1 shall also sign acknowledgment.

After two reasonable attempts to secure signatures, the school shall send the statement via certified mail, return receipt requested, or first-class mail, and shall be considered in compliance.

2. Five (5) Unexcused Absence Notification

When a student accumulates five (5) unexcused absences, the school shall notify the parent, guardian, or person having control or charge of the student. The notice shall outline the penalties and consequences under O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.1 and shall inform the parent or guardian that each subsequent unexcused absence constitutes a separate offense.

After two reasonable attempts to notify, the school shall send written notice via certified mail, return receipt requested, or first-class mail.

3. Certified Mail Prior to Judicial Proceedings

Prior to commencing any judicial proceedings to impose a penalty on a parent, guardian, or other responsible person, the school system shall send notice via certified mail, return receipt requested. Documentation of mailing shall be maintained in the student record.

E. Progressive Discipline and Parental Involvement Process

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

The following steps shall be followed for unexcused absences:

- 1 unexcused absence – automatic phone notification.
- 3 unexcused absences – parent contact and written notice.
- 5 unexcused absences – SRO visit and certified mail notice.

- 6+ unexcused absences –possible referral to DJJ or DFCS.

Students are considered tardy when arriving after scheduled start time. If a student accumulates:

- 5 unexcused tardies - Parent contact.
- 7 unexcused tardies - 2nd parent notification.
- 10 unexcused tardies - Referral to school social worker or district designee and possible referral to DJJ or DFCS.

Lanier County Schools maintain progressive discipline procedures in accordance with Board policy and as outlined in the Lanier County Student and Parent Handbook. The Handbook is available through the enrollment and update portal, on the District website, at each school, and at the District Office.

F. Investigation and Referral Documentation

Prior to court referral, the school shall verify:

- Parent conferences were attempted
- Certified mail notifications were sent as required by law
- Attendance interventions documented
- Educational supports reviewed
- Progressive discipline process implemented, if appropriate

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

III. DETERMINING THE CAUSES OF NONATTENDANCE

Multi-Tiered Intervention Framework Prior to Judicial Referral

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2 and GaDOE Rule 160-5-1-.10(k), Lanier County Schools shall implement proactive strategies to identify the causes of student nonattendance and provide appropriate school-based interventions prior to judicial referral. 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. These efforts may include implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), communication of attendance expectations to students and families, attendance awareness initiatives, regular monitoring of attendance, parent notifications, and staff follow-up when attendance concerns begin to emerge.

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

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

IV. DATA REVIEW & SCHOOL CLIMATE ACCOUNTABILITY

Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2, the Lanier County Student Attendance and School Climate 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 data review is to monitor attendance trends, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, identify systemic barriers, promote accountability, strengthen school climate outcomes, 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.

The Committee shall document all data reviewed in meeting minutes, identify trends and areas requiring improvement, and recommend policy or procedural adjustments when necessary. 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 JB.

Committee minutes shall be maintained and an Annual Summary Report may be submitted to the Chief Judge and Superintendent.

V. DISTRIBUTION REQUIREMENTS

The Protocol and summary of compulsory attendance consequences shall be distributed annually to schools and community partners and filed with the Georgia Department of Education.

VI. COMMITMENT

The Lanier County Student Attendance and School Climate Committee members and their respective agencies affirm commitment to the implementation of this Protocol pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-690.2.

Each participating agency agrees to:

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.

SIGNATURES:

Judiciary

Clayton A. Tomlinson

Date: 3/10/2026

Clayton A. Tomlinson

Chief Judge of the Superior Court, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

Suzanne P. Mathis

Date: 3/17/2026

Suzanne P. Mathis

Juvenile Court Judge, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

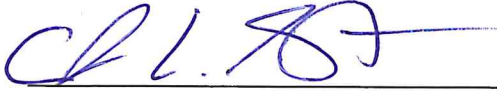
Victoria Jewell

Date: 3-11-2026

Victoria Jewell

Probate Judge, Lanier County

Prosecutorial Authority



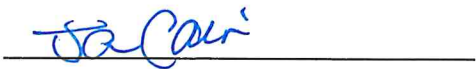
Chase L. Studstill
District Attorney, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

Date: 3/31/2026



J. Allen Lawson
Chief Assistant District Attorney, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

Date: 3/31/2026



Jason Cain
Assistant District Attorney, Alapaha Judicial Circuit

Date: 3-17-26

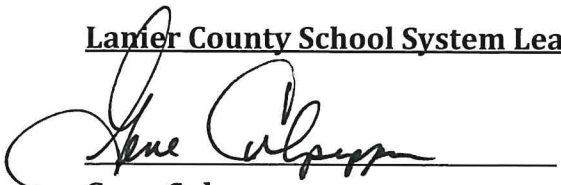
Juvenile Justice



Timothy Gourley
Juvenile Probation Manager, Department of Juvenile Justice

Date: 3/18/26

Lanier County School System Leadership



Gene Culpepper
Superintendent, Lanier County School District

Date: 3/18/26



Randy Simmans
Chairman, Lanier County Board of Education

Date: 5/7-26

Faletta Acoff

Date: 3/17/26

Faletta Acoff

Assistant Superintendent for School Services, Lanier County Schools; Chairperson,
Lanier County Student Attendance & School Climate Committee

Deidre Chadwick

Date: 3/20/26

Deidre Chadwick

Vice-Chairperson, Lanier County Student Attendance & School Climate Committee;
Assistant Principal, Lanier County Elementary School

Cheryl Powell

Date: 3/17/26

Cheryl Powell

School Social Worker, Lanier County Schools

Law Enforcement

Amanda Giddens

Date: 03/18/26

Amanda Giddens

Deputy, Lanier County Sheriff's Office

James Sumner

Date: 03-24-26

James Sumner

Lakeland Police Department

Child Welfare Services (DFCS)

Xavier Walker

Date: 5/7/26

Xavier Walker

Director, Lanier County Division of Family & Children Services, Georgia Department
of Human Resources



Date: 5-7-2026

Terry Johnson

Child Welfare Services Case Manager Supervisor, Lanier County DFCS, Georgia
Department of Human Services



Date: 5-7-2026

Melody Mitchell

Child Welfare Services Case Manager Supervisor, Lanier County DFCS, Georgia
Department of Human Services

Public Health



Date: 05/13/2026

Mark J. Eanes

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

Mental Health Services

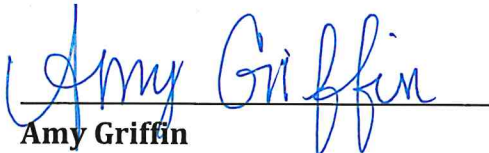


Date: 3/20/2026

Judy Mullis

South Georgia Community Service Board Member (Mental Health Board)

Community Organizations



Date: 3/12/2026

Amy Griffin

Director, Lanier Family Connection; Lanier Called to Care; Secretary, Lanier County
Student Attendance & Climate Committee