# Schooling during COVID-19:
## Fall Semester Trends from Six Tennessee Districts

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## Introduction

Given the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-21 school year has been both different and difficult. Monitoring the impact of the pandemic-related disruptions on students is important, but the many changes that have occurred this year can make it challenging to make sense of data normally collected by districts. Throughout the past year, TERA has worked with six school districts in Tennessee to inform evidence-based decision making as they seek to best support their students during and after the pandemic. As part of this effort, we analyzed data typically collected by schools—such as enrollment, attendance, and teacher retention data—and supported districts in conducting surveys to better understand the experiences of students and teachers.

Families and students across Tennessee have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways, often exacerbating long-standing racial and socioeconomic inequities that persisted before the pandemic began. For example, national studies have repeatedly confirmed that the economic and health impacts of the pandemic have been more severe for Black, Hispanic, and indigenous Americans.[1] Similarly, certain students—such as English Learners, students with disabilities, or those from families with fewer resources to support learning at home—may have struggled more during pandemic-related school closures.

In this report, we summarize key patterns within and across these sources of data from the six districts that capture the experiences of students and educators during the first half of this school year. When possible, we compare patterns from fall 2020 to previous years throughout the report. These patterns are organized into two overarching themes: (1) student engagement and (2) enrollment and staffing needs. In both sections, we highlight concerning inequities in how students have experienced the pandemic.

Our analysis has uncovered four key findings that, although are based on data from these six districts only, may be informative to other districts in Tennessee and across the country that are likely wrestling with similar issues.

## Key Findings

1. Students felt supported by their teachers, but some students struggled with motivation and engagement with virtual learning.

2. More students were chronically absent this fall than in previous years, and absenteeism increased the most among English Learners, students of color, and students who are economically disadvantaged.

3. Student enrollment decreased in the lowest grades, and more students withdrew for homeschooling, transferred to non-public schools, and dropped out this year than in previous years.

4. Retention rates for teachers and school leaders increased in all districts this fall, but many educators reported that they have had increased responsibilities, insufficient planning time, and concerns with burnout.

## Data and Methods

Across all six districts, we examined the overall descriptive patterns, trends across time when possible, and differences across student characteristics (student race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, English Learner status, and disability status) and school characteristics (tier). Specifically, we used these data sources in our analysis:

- **Student enrollment and attendance data (from the beginning of the school year to the end of the fall semester)**

- **Teacher surveys (conducted in fall 2020)**

- **Student surveys (conducted in fall 2020)**

- **Teacher staffing data (from the beginning of each school year)**

All of our data sources were collected by the end of the fall 2020 semester. More detailed information on the data and analysis can be found in the appendix.

Collectively, the six districts serve over 150,000 students. Table 1 describes the students and schools in these districts. The findings in this report represent the patterns in these six districts and, therefore, are not representative of the state overall.

**THESE SIX DISTRICTS SERVE APPROXIMATELY**

**150,000 Students**

**ACROSS APPROXIMATELY**

**250 Schools**

**TABLE 1**

### STUDENT AND SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS ACROSS SIX DISTRICTS

| STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS | |
| --- | --- |
| Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous students | 5% |
| Black students | 35% |
| Hispanic students | 20% |
| White students | 40% |
| Female students | 50% |
| Economically disadvantaged students | 35% |
| English Learners | 10% |
| Students with disabilities | 15% |
| **Number of students = Approximately 150,000** | |

| SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS | |
| --- | --- |
| Elementary schools | 50% |
| Middle schools | 20% |
| High schools | 20% |
| K-8/K-12/other schools | 10% |
| **Number of schools = Approximately 250** | |

*Note—Numbers have been rounded to maintain confidentiality.*

**ALMOST ALL STUDENTS REPORTED FEELING SUPPORTED BY THEIR TEACHERS.**

## 96%
**OF STUDENTS SAY THAT THEIR TEACHER(S) REALLY CARE ABOUT THEM**

## 97%
**OF STUDENTS SAY THAT THEIR TEACHER(S) CAN HELP THEM WHEN THEY HAVE QUESTIONS**

Schooling this year has looked different for most students and teachers. During the fall 2020 semester, the districts in our analysis used a variety of instructional approaches. The districts differed somewhat in the instructional modalities offered to their students, and this analysis includes students who participated in mostly in-person schooling, hybrid models that blended in-person and virtual schooling, and mostly virtual schooling. We collected multiple types of data across the six districts to better understand how students were engaging with learning, with their teachers, and with their peers.

In this section, we explore patterns in student and teacher survey responses as well as student attendance data. We examine differences in survey responses and student attendance across various student characteristics to examine how experiences and engagement may have varied. When possible, we examine whether these differences reflected those in pre-pandemic years, or whether they were larger this year than in prior years.

## KEY FINDING #1

**Students felt supported by their teachers, but some students struggled with motivation and engagement with virtual learning.**
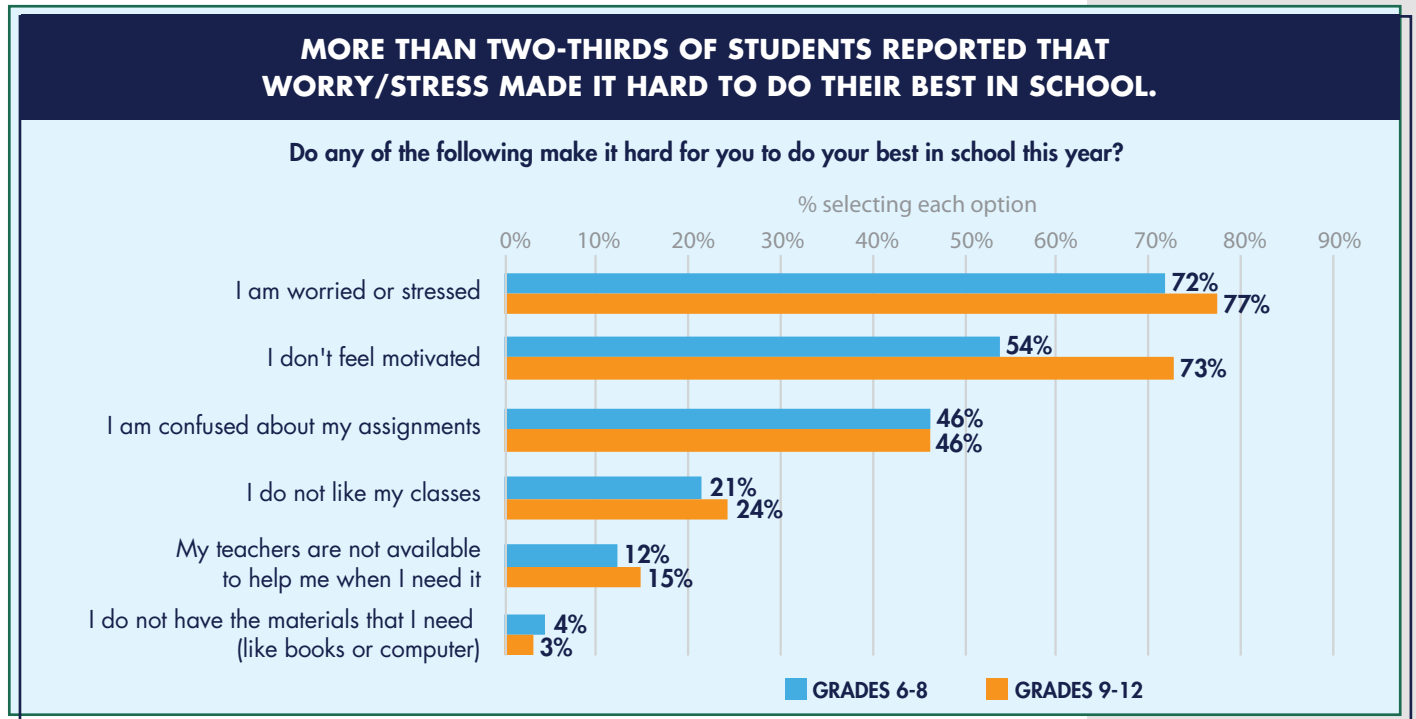
Student and teacher surveys asked respondents to reflect on their experiences this year. Students were asked questions about instructional modality, learning experiences, health/wellness, and their relationships with their peers and teachers. Across all five districts that administered student surveys, the vast majority of responding students answered favorably to questions about their teachers. In fact, 97 percent of students responded favorably when asked if their teacher(s) can help when they have questions and 96 percent of students responded favorably when asked if their teacher(s) care about them.

However, as illustrated in Figure 1, more than half of responding students—and more than two-thirds of responding high school students—reported that worries, stress, and lack of motivation have made it hard for them to do their best in school this year. Our findings are consistent with national student surveys that also found that stress and anxiety have impeded learning for many students.[2]
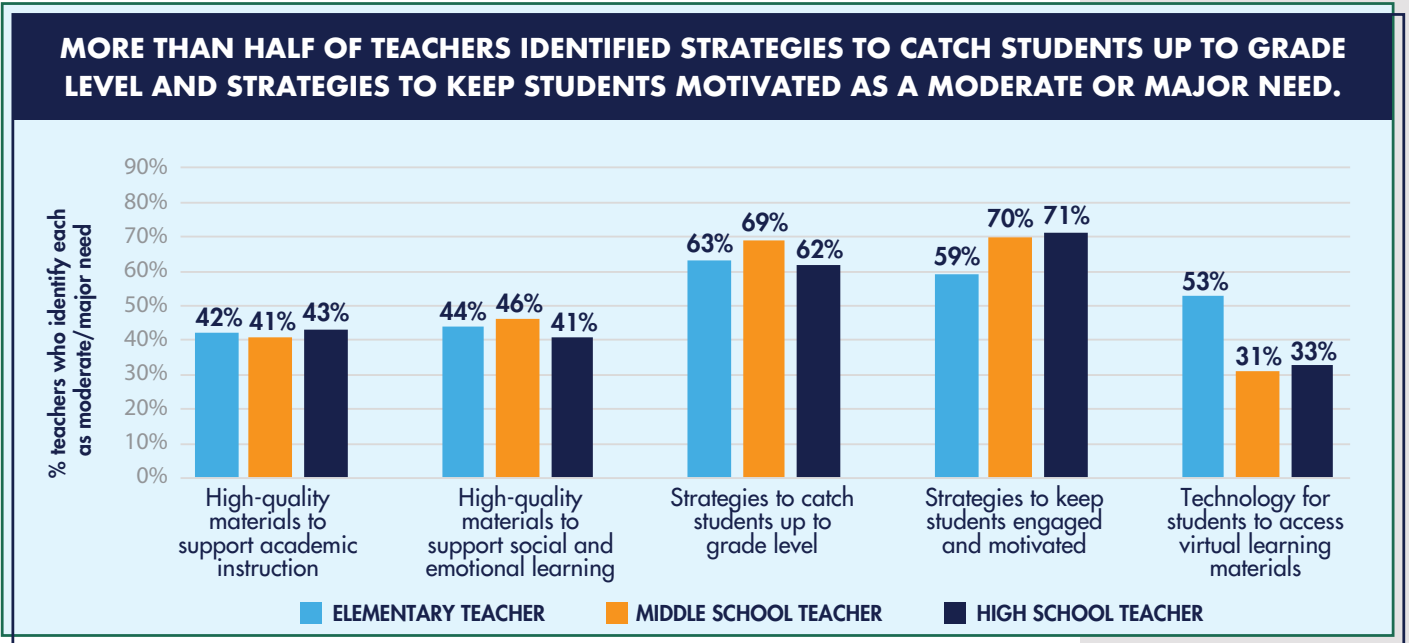
**FIGURE 1**

## MORE THAN TWO-THIRDS OF STUDENTS REPORTED THAT WORRY/STRESS MADE IT HARD TO DO THEIR BEST IN SCHOOL.

**Do any of the following make it hard for you to do your best in school this year?**

% selecting each option

| | GRADES 6-8 | GRADES 9-12 |
|---|---|---|
| I am worried or stressed | 72% | 77% |
| I don't feel motivated | 54% | 73% |
| I am confused about my assignments | 46% | 46% |
| I do not like my classes | 21% | 24% |
| My teachers are not available to help me when I need it | 12% | 15% |
| I do not have the materials that I need (like books or computer) | 4% | 3% |

Responding teachers in the four districts that participated in the fall teacher survey also underscored this challenge around student motivation. Teachers were asked to gauge their current level of needs for various additional supports. As shown in Figure 2, about two-thirds of responding teachers identified "strategies to keep students engaged and motivated" as a moderate or major need. Motivation strategies and strategies to catch students up to grade-level were the two supports most commonly identified as a moderate/major need. Middle and high school teachers were more likely to identify motivation strategies as a moderate/major need while elementary teachers were more likely to identify technology as a moderate/major need.

**2/3**
OF RESPONDING TEACHERS IDENTIFIED **STRATEGIES TO KEEP STUDENTS ENGAGED AND MOTIVATED** AS A MODERATE OR MAJOR NEED
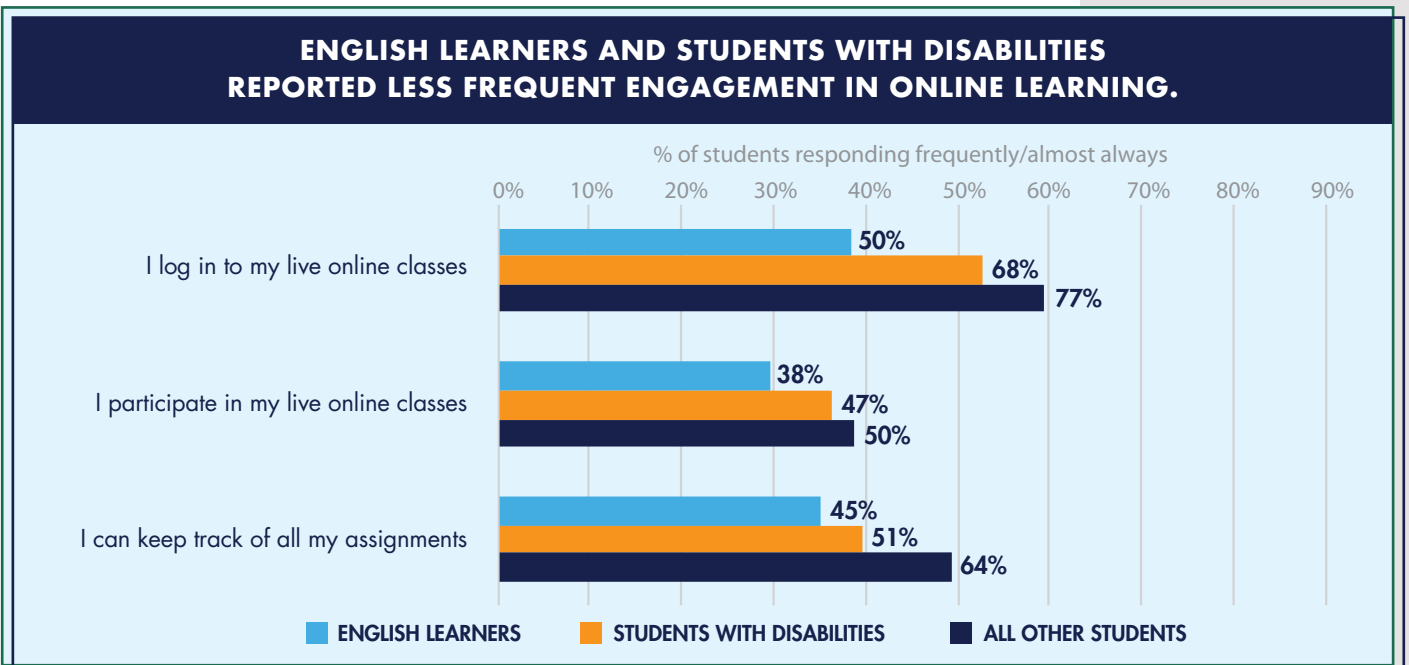
## FIGURE 2

**MORE THAN HALF OF TEACHERS IDENTIFIED STRATEGIES TO CATCH STUDENTS UP TO GRADE LEVEL AND STRATEGIES TO KEEP STUDENTS MOTIVATED AS A MODERATE OR MAJOR NEED.**

% teachers who identify each as moderate/major need

| | Elementary | Middle School | High School |
|---|---|---|---|
| High-quality materials to support academic instruction | 42% | 41% | 43% |
| High-quality materials to support social and emotional learning | 44% | 46% | 41% |
| Strategies to catch students up to grade level | 63% | 69% | 62% |
| Strategies to keep students engaged and motivated | 59% | 70% | 71% |
| Technology for students to access virtual learning materials | 53% | 31% | 33% |

■ ELEMENTARY TEACHER   ■ MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER   ■ HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

In the five districts administering student surveys, students with disabilities and English Learners had similar responses to their peers across most survey questions except for questions about engagement in online learning. As illustrated in Figure 3, English Learners and students with disabilities were less likely to report that they frequently or almost always logged in to their online classes, participated in their online classes, and kept track of their assignments.[3]

**ENGLISH LEARNERS AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WERE LESS LIKELY TO REPORT THAT THEY FREQUENTLY OR ALMOST ALWAYS LOGGED IN TO THEIR ONLINE CLASSES, PARTICIPATED IN THEIR ONLINE CLASSES, AND KEPT TRACK OF THEIR ASSIGNMENTS.**

## FIGURE 3

**ENGLISH LEARNERS AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES REPORTED LESS FREQUENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE LEARNING.**

% of students responding frequently/almost always

| | English Learners | Students with Disabilities | All Other Students |
|---|---|---|---|
| I log in to my live online classes | 50% | 68% | 77% |
| I participate in my live online classes | 38% | 47% | 50% |
| I can keep track of all my assignments | 45% | 51% | 64% |

■ ENGLISH LEARNERS   ■ STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES   ■ ALL OTHER STUDENTS

Additionally, in the four districts that participated in teacher surveys, teachers were asked whether they had adequate guidance and support to address the needs of certain student groups. Across the four districts, the majority of responding teachers who work with students with disabilities and English Learners indicate that they had adequate support. However, some teachers reported needing more support to best serve their students. Specifically, 26 percent of teachers who serve English Learners indicated that they lacked adequate guidance and support and 38 percent of teachers who serve students with severe disabilities reported they lacked this guidance.

Teachers were also asked an open-ended question about what guidance, support, or resources they need to better support their students. In their open-ended comments, teachers often referenced the challenges of providing accommodations for English Learners and students with disabilities, especially when they were learning virtually. Teachers cited challenges with staffing (e.g., aides or support teachers being required to cover other duties) and reported that many families lacked the resources to support their students learning virtually.

## KEY FINDING #2

**More students were chronically absent this fall than in previous years and absenteeism increased the most among English Learners, students of color, and students who are economically disadvantaged.**

Attendance is one way to measure engagement, and previous studies have linked absences to lower achievement and dropping out of school.[4] Beginning in 2017-18, Tennessee added chronic absenteeism as a metric for school and district accountability and defines a student as chronically absent if they missed at least 10 percent of their instructional days.

One-fifth of students in these six districts were chronically absent by the end of the fall 2020 semester. Rates of chronic absenteeism varied substantially across districts, ranging from four percent to 26 percent as of December 2020. Notably, these districts had somewhat different policies for attendance this year, especially for students attending virtually.

We examined how chronic absenteeism rates varied for students learning virtually and for those learning at school in fall 2020. As shown in Figure 4, chronic absence rates were higher for students who were only learning virtually in fall 2020, but chronic absence rates were also higher for students learning in person than they had been in past years. This finding aligns with educator reports from a national survey conducted in fall 2020, in which educators estimated that daily absence rates doubled this year and these increases were reported in districts that are doing both in-person and fully virtual schooling.[5]

**1/5**
ONE-FIFTH OF STUDENTS IN THESE SIX DISTRICTS WERE
**chronically absent**
BY THE END OF THE FALL 2020 SEMESTER

**FIGURE 4**



**RATES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM INCREASED FOR STUDENTS ATTENDING SCHOOL IN PERSON AND ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE ATTENDING VIRTUALLY.**

% students identified as chronically abesnt as of 12/18

| Year | In Person | Virtual |
|---|---|---|
| 2018-19 | 10% | |
| 2019-20 | 12% | |
| 2020-21 | 18% | 27% |

IN PERSON   VIRTUAL

Following historical trends, chronic absence rates were greatest among high school students in fall 2020 (28 percent chronically absent) compared to middle school students (23 percent) and elementary students (15 percent). However, many more elementary and middle school students were chronically absent in fall 2020 than in past falls. Across the six districts, there was an 88 percent increase in chronic absence among elementary students from fall 2019 to fall 2020, a 92 percent increase in chronic absence among middle school students, and a 33 percent increase among high school students.

Additionally, chronically absent students reported challenges with staying engaged. In the five districts administering student surveys, chronically absent students who responded to the student survey reported lower levels of engagement in learning and were more likely to report challenges with navigating online learning platforms and keeping track of assignments. As shown in Figure 5, only 35 percent of chronically absent students who responded to the student survey reported that they can keep track of their assignments frequently or almost always compared to 65 percent of all other students.

ACROSS THE SIX DISTRICTS, THERE WAS AN

**88%**

INCREASE IN CHRONIC ABSENCE AMONG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS
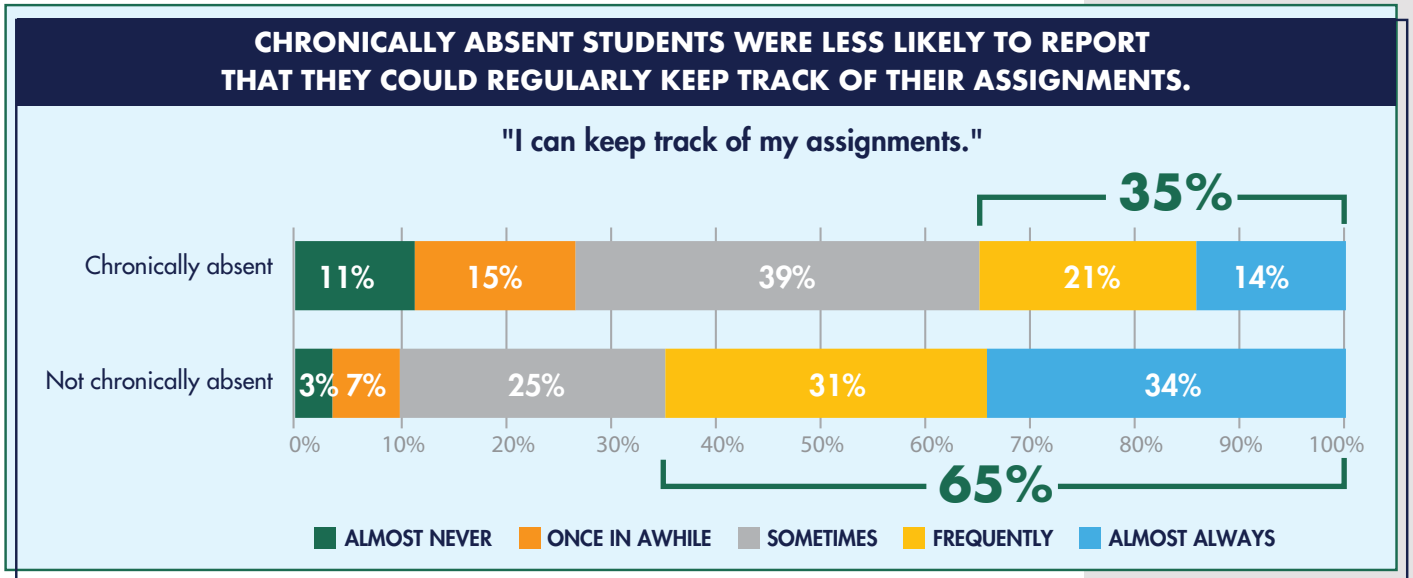
**92%**

INCREASE IN CHRONIC ABSENCE AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

**33%**

INCREASE IN CHRONIC ABSENCE AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
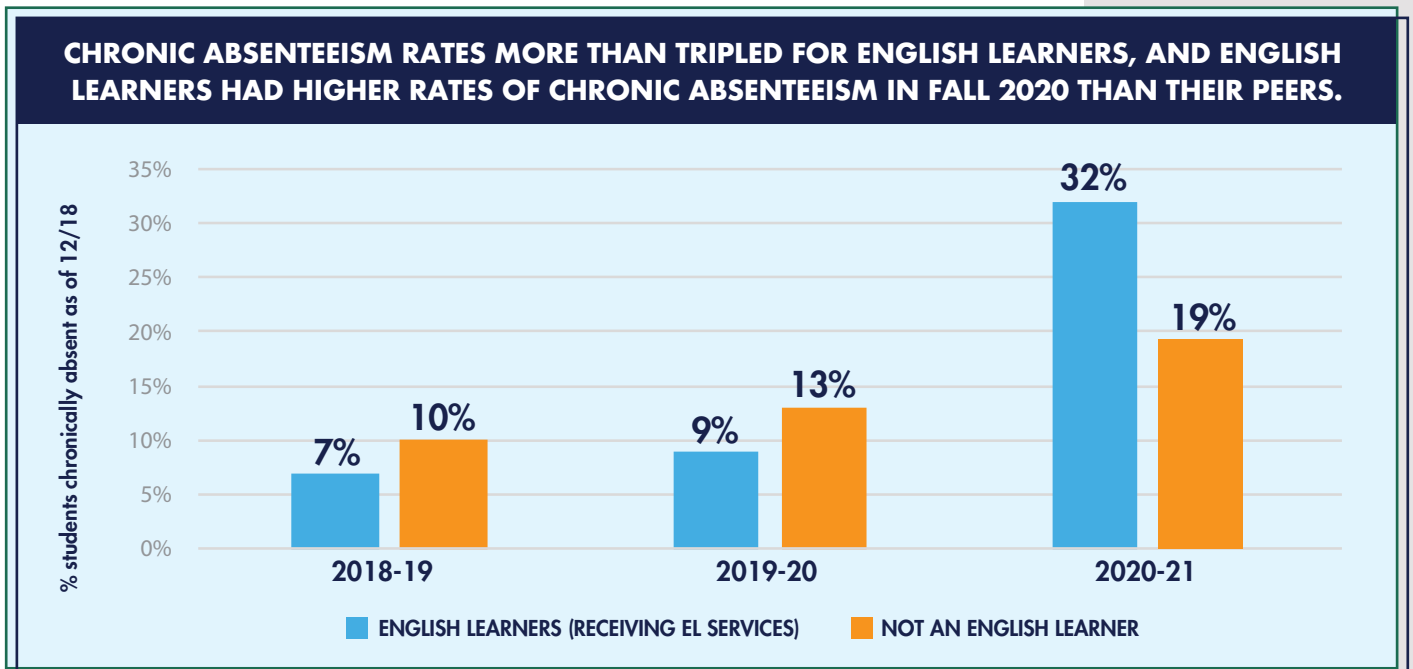
FROM FALL 2019 TO FALL 2020

## FIGURE 5

**CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS WERE LESS LIKELY TO REPORT THAT THEY COULD REGULARLY KEEP TRACK OF THEIR ASSIGNMENTS.**

"I can keep track of my assignments."

**Chronically absent:** 11% ALMOST NEVER | 15% ONCE IN AWHILE | 39% SOMETIMES | 21% FREQUENTLY | 14% ALMOST ALWAYS — **35%**

**Not chronically absent:** 3% ALMOST NEVER | 7% ONCE IN AWHILE | 25% SOMETIMES | 31% FREQUENTLY | 34% ALMOST ALWAYS — **65%**

Legend: ALMOST NEVER | ONCE IN AWHILE | SOMETIMES | FREQUENTLY | ALMOST ALWAYS

To better understand differential experiences of students during the pandemic, we examined patterns in chronic absenteeism across student groups. As shown in Figure 6, the chronic absenteeism rate for English Learners[6] more than tripled between fall 2019 and fall 2020 across the six districts. In prior years, English Learners had lower rates of chronic absenteeism than their peers, but in fall 2020, their rates were almost double those of their non-English Learner peers. Chronic absenteeism rates for English Learners increased in five of the six districts, and English Learners had higher chronic absence rates than their peers in four of the six districts. Chronic absence rates were highest for English Learners who were learning virtually (37 percent) but had still increased for English Learners who had spent at least some time learning in person (27 percent).

THE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATE FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS **more than tripled** BETWEEN FALL 2019 AND FALL 2020 ACROSS THE SIX DISTRICTS

## FIGURE 6

**CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES MORE THAN TRIPLED FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS, AND ENGLISH LEARNERS HAD HIGHER RATES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN FALL 2020 THAN THEIR PEERS.**

% students chronically absent as of 12/18

| | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
|---|---|---|---|
| English Learners (receiving EL services) | 7% | 9% | 32% |
| Not an English Learner | 10% | 13% | 19% |

Legend: ENGLISH LEARNERS (RECEIVING EL SERVICES) | NOT AN ENGLISH LEARNER

Similarly, chronic absenteeism rates increased more among Black and Hispanic students while White students, especially those who are not economically disadvantaged, had much smaller increases in their rates of chronic absenteeism. As illustrated in Table 2, differences in chronic absenteeism rates by racial/ethnic background and economic disadvantage pre-dated the pandemic but appear to be larger in fall 2020 than in prior years.

**TABLE 2**

## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES INCREASED MUCH MORE FOR BLACK AND HISPANIC STUDENTS THAN WHITE STUDENTS.

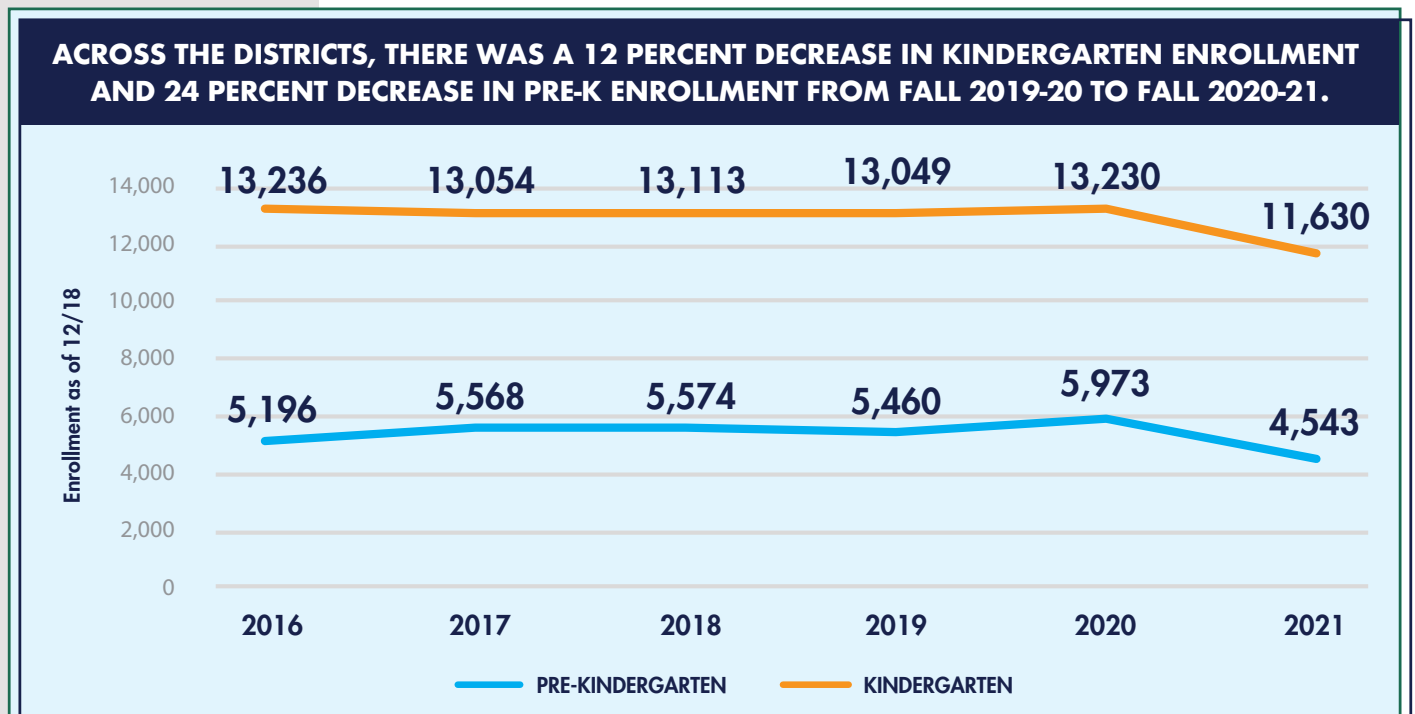| | 2018-19 ABSENCE RATE | 2019-20 %CHANGE | 2019-20 ABSENCE RATE | 2020-21 %CHANGE | 2020-21 ABSENCE RATE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **BLACK STUDENTS** Economically Disadvantaged | 17% | +21% | 20% | +80% | 37% |
| **BLACK STUDENTS** Not Economically Disadvantaged | 6% | +63% | 9% | +76% | 16% |
| **HISPANIC STUDENTS** Economically Disadvantaged | 10% | +25% | 13% | +140% | 31% |
| **HISPANIC STUDENTS** Not Economically Disadvantaged | 6% | +41% | 9% | +165% | 24% |
| **WHITE STUDENTS** Economically Disadvantaged | 16% | +26% | 21% | +31% | 27% |
| **WHITE STUDENTS** Not Economically Disadvantaged | 6% | +44% | 9% | +4% | 9% |

**KEY FINDING #3**

**Student enrollment decreased in the lowest grades, and more students withdrew for homeschooling, transferred to non-public schools, and dropped out this year than in previous years.**

**ACROSS THE 6 DISTRICTS, THERE WAS A**

# 12%

**DECREASE IN KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT**

**AND A**

# 24%

**DECREASE IN PRE-KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT FROM FALL 2019 TO FALL 2020**

To better understand how enrollment trends have shifted this year, we examined overall student enrollment numbers as well as student withdrawals as captured in Tennessee's EIS system. In this analysis, we compared enrollment and withdrawal information from fall 2020 to previous falls.

When examining overall enrollment trends, four districts had similar or slightly increased enrollment in fall 2020 compared to prior years, while two districts had decreased enrollment (three to six percent drops in overall enrollment numbers when comparing fall 2020 to fall 2019). An early analysis of state-wide enrollment numbers by Chalkbeat suggested that enrollment dropped 3.5 percent statewide.[7]

All six districts had decreased enrollment in either Pre-Kindergarten and/or Kindergarten during the fall semester, and Figure 7 illustrates the longitudinal trends in enrollment across all districts combined. Across the districts, there was a 12 percent decrease in Kindergarten enrollment and 24 percent decrease in Pre-Kindergarten enrollment from 2019-20 to 2020-21. These drops mirror findings from a national survey of school and district leaders in which 62 percent of leaders reported declines in preschool enrollment and 58 percent of leaders reported declines in Kindergarten enrollment.[8]

**FIGURE 7**

**ACROSS THE DISTRICTS, THERE WAS A 12 PERCENT DECREASE IN KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT AND 24 PERCENT DECREASE IN PRE-K ENROLLMENT FROM FALL 2019-20 TO FALL 2020-21.**



Enrollment as of 12/18

| Year | Kindergarten | Pre-Kindergarten |
|------|--------------|-------------------|
| 2016 | 13,236 | 5,196 |
| 2017 | 13,054 | 5,568 |
| 2018 | 13,113 | 5,574 |
| 2019 | 13,049 | 5,460 |
| 2020 | 13,230 | 5,973 |
| 2021 | 11,630 | 4,543 |

PRE-KINDERGARTEN    KINDERGARTEN

These differences in enrollment were likely driven by two primary factors: 1) parents waiting to enroll their students in the earliest grades (often called academic redshirting), or 2) parents withdrawing their children from district schools for other educational options.

While we cannot observe academic redshirting in the enrollment data yet, we do see evidence that all six districts had increased numbers of students transferring from the district to attend homeschool or a non-public school in fall 2020 compared to prior years. Across all six districts, the number of student transfers from district schools to non-public schools increased by 130 percent and the number of student withdrawals for homeschooling increased by 84 percent in fall 2020 compared to fall 2019. As illustrated in Figure 8, these increases were much higher for elementary schools compared to middle schools and high schools.

## FIGURE 8

**STUDENT WITHDRAWALS FOR HOMESCHOOLING AND TRANSFERS TO NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS INCREASED MOST FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS.**



Transfer to Non-public School

Withdrawal for Homeschooling
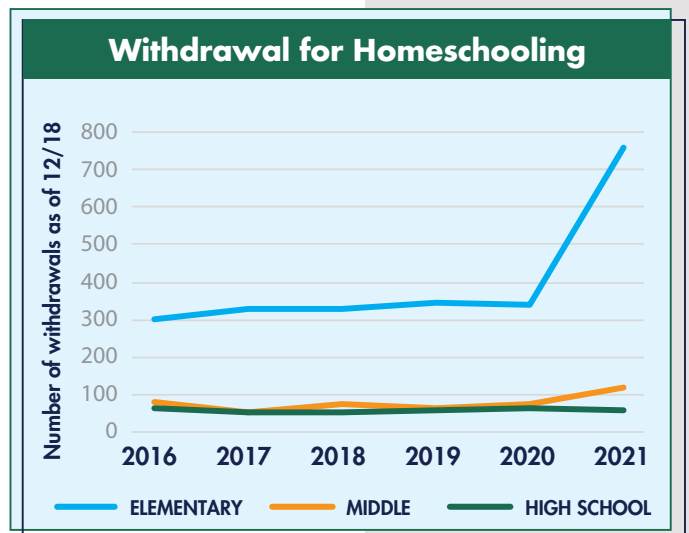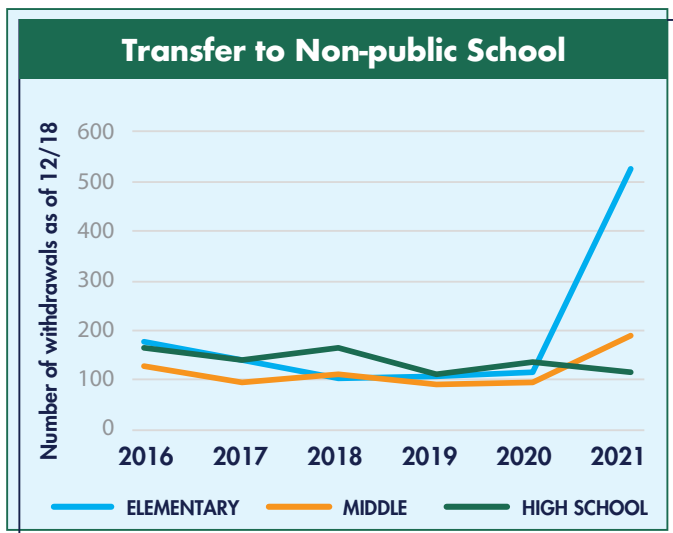
Further, the increase of student transfers to non-public schools and homeschools was mostly driven by White students and students who are not economically disadvantaged. Figure 9 shows how the number of student transfers to a non-public school or homeschool within each student group have changed over time.

**FIGURE 9**



STUDENT TRANSFERS TO A NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL OR HOMESCHOOL HAVE INCREASED THE MOST AMONG WHITE STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED.

Transfer to non-public schools, economically disadvataged students

Transfer to non-public schools, students who are not economically disadvantaged

Withdrawn for homeschooling, economically disadvantaged students

Withdrawn for homeschooling, students who are not economically disadvantaged
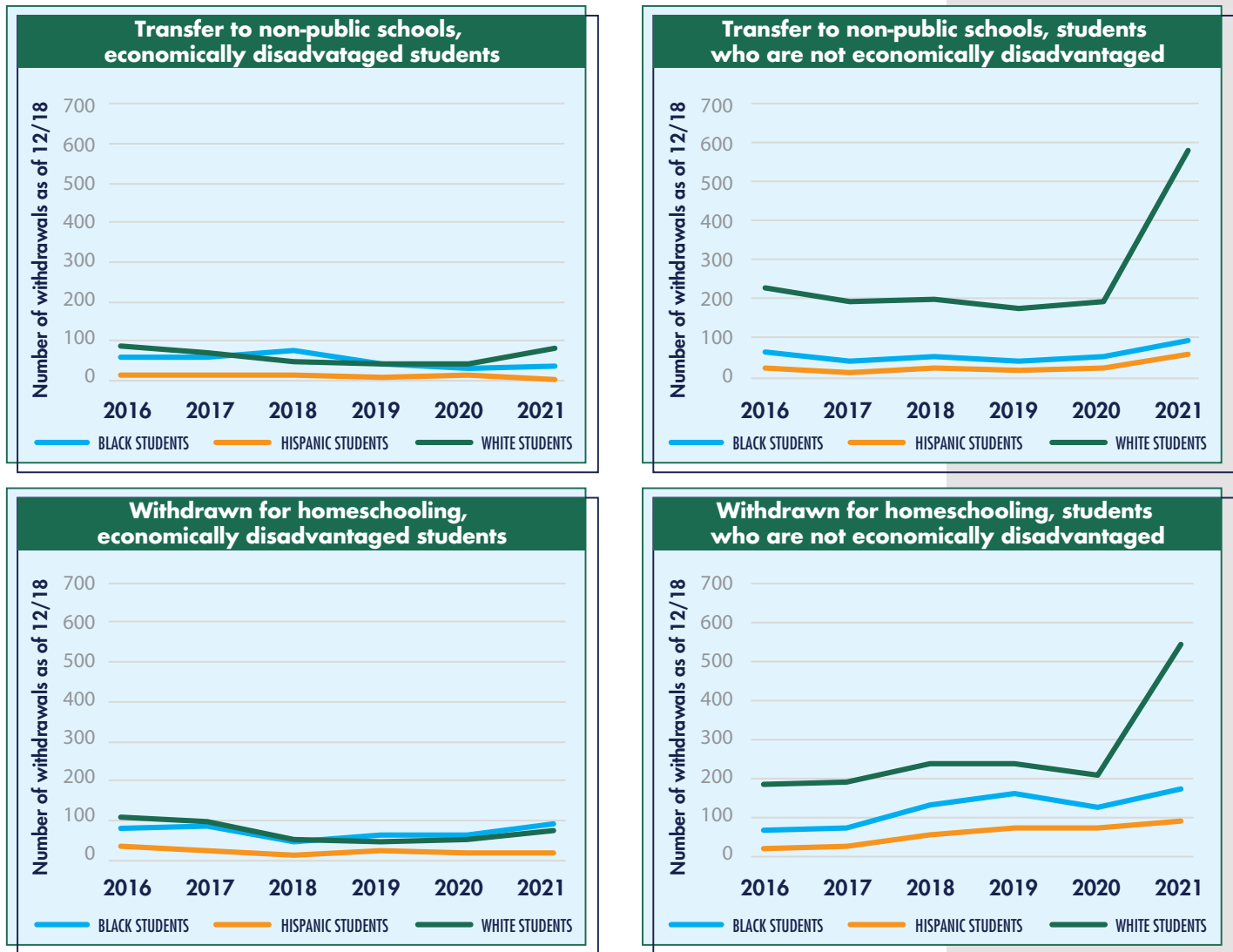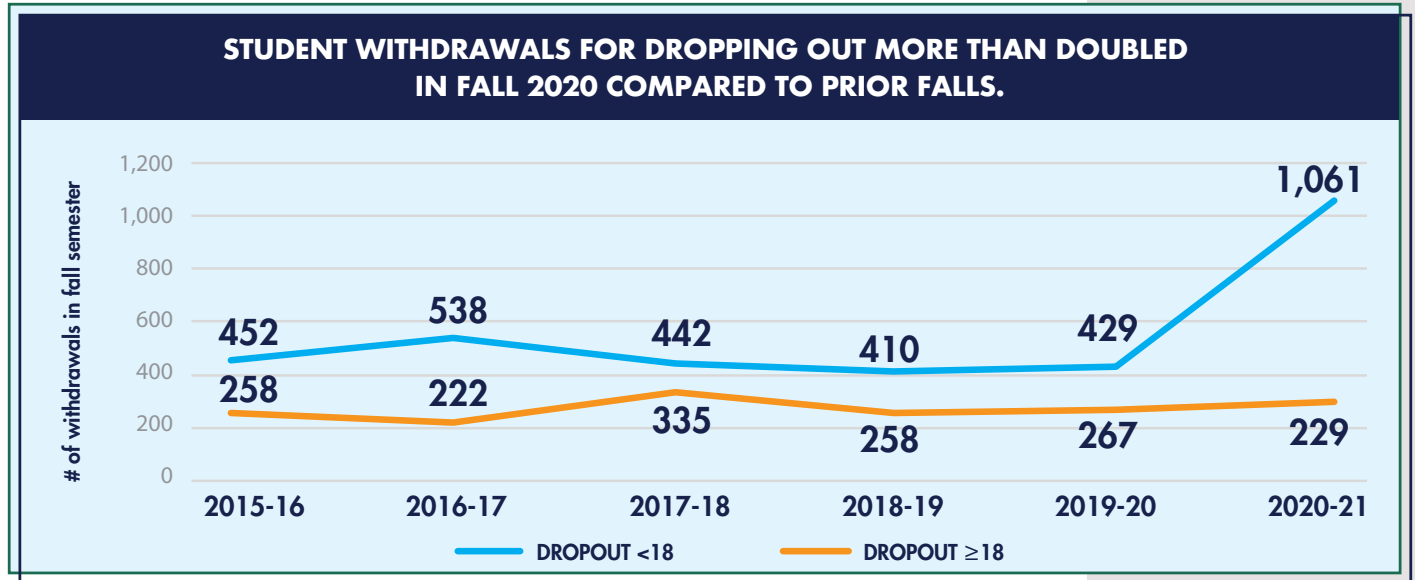
# Looking Ahead – Enrollment

To better assess how districts could plan for future enrollment, we examined historical trends in these six districts to see what percentage of students who transferred to non-public schools and who withdrew for homeschooling returned to the district within the next year. When averaging the re-enrollment rates from 2015-16 to 2018-19, approximately 30 percent of students who transferred to private school re-enrolled in the district, while about half of students who withdrew to homeschooling re-enrolled in the district. However, it is too early to know whether these trends will hold during the pandemic.

In addition to transfers and withdrawals for homeschooling, we also examined trends in withdrawals for dropping out of school. By December 2020, student withdrawals for dropping out in these six districts had more than doubled compared to previous fall semesters. As illustrated in Figure 10, this increase was concentrated among dropouts under the age of 18. The number of student withdrawals for dropping out increased in every district, although the percent change varied from +33 percent to +200 percent. These increases in under-18 dropouts were similar across almost all student groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, sex, economic disadvantage).

**FIGURE 10**



**STUDENT WITHDRAWALS FOR DROPPING OUT MORE THAN DOUBLED IN FALL 2020 COMPARED TO PRIOR FALLS.**

# of withdrawals in fall semester

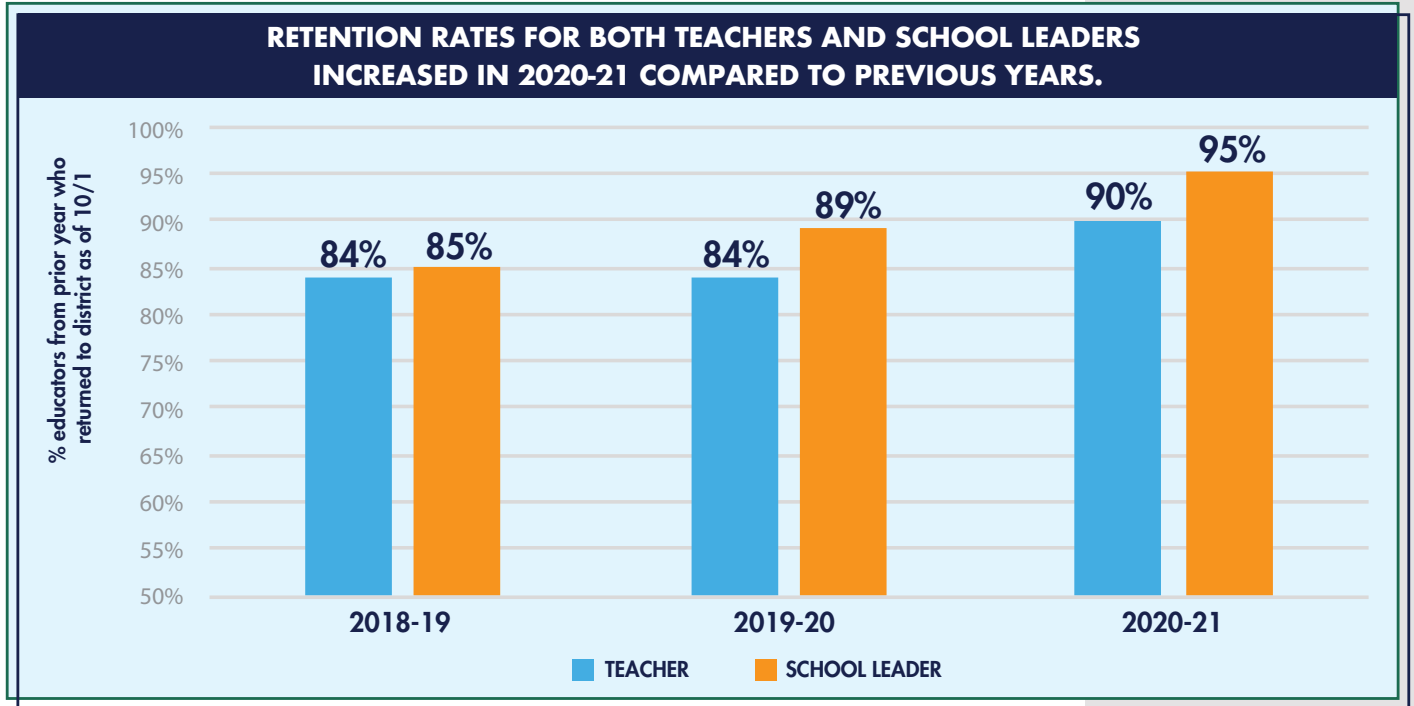| | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DROPOUT <18 | 452 | 538 | 442 | 410 | 429 | 1,061 |
| DROPOUT ≥18 | 258 | 222 | 335 | 258 | 267 | 229 |

## KEY FINDING #4

**Retention rates for teachers and school leaders increased in all districts this fall, but many educators reported that they have had increased responsibilities, insufficient planning time, and concerns with burnout.**

We examined teacher retention and survey results to better understand how educators may be responding to the additional challenges they have faced because of the pandemic. For all six districts, within-district retention rates for both teachers and school leaders were higher in fall 2020 compared to the last two years (see Figure 11). For the approximately 250 schools in these districts, 81 percent of schools had school-specific teacher retention rates in fall 2020 that were similar or higher than retention rates in fall 2019. Only seven percent of schools had school-specific retention rates that were more than 10 percentage points lower in fall 2020 compared to fall 2019. This increase in teacher retention is similar to trends reported in other states and also aligns with prior research findings that retention increases when unemployment rates are higher.[9]

TEACHER RETENTION
INCREASED BY
**6** **PERCENTAGE POINTS**
FROM FALL 2019 TO FALL 2020

**FIGURE 11**

## RETENTION RATES FOR BOTH TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS INCREASED IN 2020-21 COMPARED TO PREVIOUS YEARS.

*% educators from prior year who returned to district as of 10/1*

| | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
|---|---|---|---|
| TEACHER | 84% | 84% | 90% |
| SCHOOL LEADER | 85% | 89% | 95% |

■ TEACHER   ■ SCHOOL LEADER

In the four districts that participated in the teacher survey, responding teachers identified many challenges and concerns about this school year. As shown in Table 3, two-thirds of responding teachers indicated that they had major concerns about their increased workload and just over half of teachers reported that they had major concerns about burnout or about their health or the health of their loved ones.

**TABLE 3**

## ABOUT TWO-THIRDS OF TEACHERS CITED INCREASED WORKLOAD AND WELL-BEING OF THEIR STUDENTS AS MAJOR CHALLENGES.

| | NOT A CONCERN RIGHT NOW | A MINOR CONCERN | A MODERATE CONCERN | A MAJOR CONCERN |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| My own health or that of my loved ones | 7% | 13% | 24% | 55% |
| Responsibilities to care for my own children or other loved ones | 19% | 13% | 24% | 44% |
| Feelings of burnout | 9% | 14% | 23% | 55% |
| The well-being of my students | 2% | 6% | 31% | 61% |
| Increased workload | 4% | 8% | 23% | 66% |

## 55%
**OF TEACHERS CITED FEELINGS OF BURNOUT AND CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR HEALTH AS MAJOR CONCERNS**
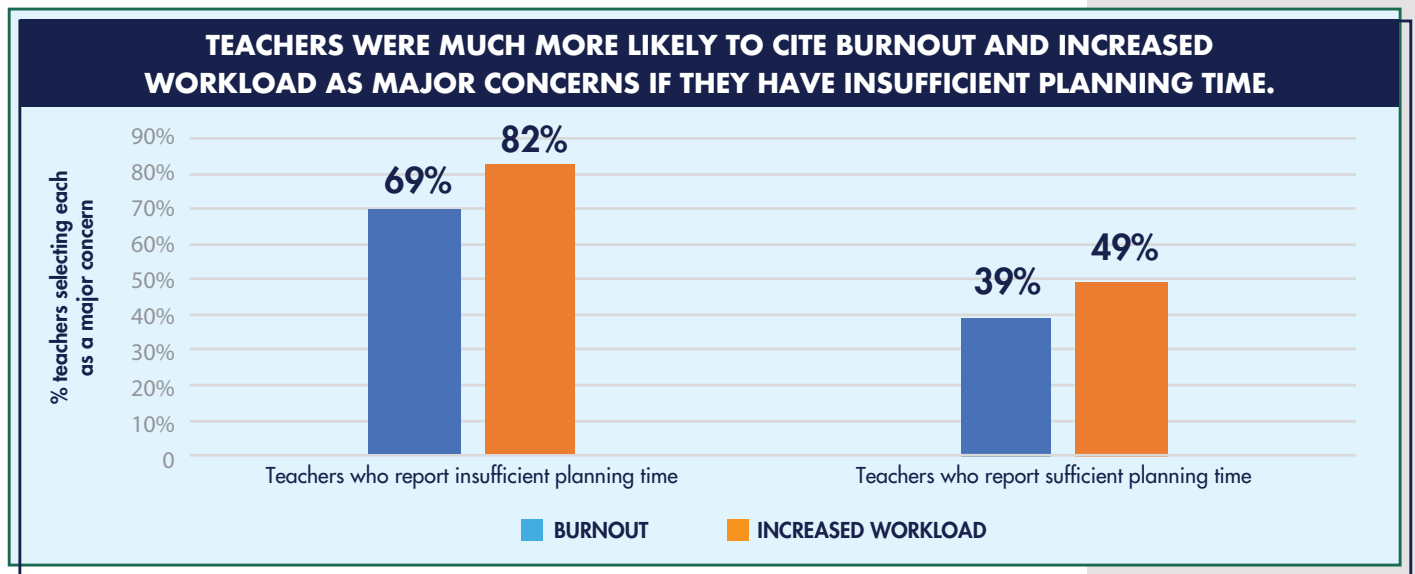
# Looking Ahead — Staffing

It is too early to know whether more teachers will leave these districts during or after the 2020-2021 academic year. In a nationally representative survey of teachers from fall 2020, 17 percent of surveyed teachers indicated that they had been unlikely to leave teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic but now are likely to leave the profession.[10]

Across these four districts, 51 percent of responding teachers reported that they did not have sufficient individual planning time this year and 45 percent reported that they did not have sufficient collaborative planning time. As shown in Figure 12, teachers who reported insufficient individual planning time were much more likely to express major concerns about burnout and increased workload when compared to teachers who reported having sufficient planning time.

"I need more planning time. Providing traditional students with in-class instruction and preparing virtual lessons for quarantined students is time consuming… I get to work by 6am each morning because I do not have time in the school day for planning lessons."

– Middle School Teacher

**FIGURE 12**



**TEACHERS WERE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO CITE BURNOUT AND INCREASED WORKLOAD AS MAJOR CONCERNS IF THEY HAVE INSUFFICIENT PLANNING TIME.**

% teachers selecting each as a major concern

Teachers who report insufficient planning time: BURNOUT 69%, INCREASED WORKLOAD 82%
Teachers who report sufficient planning time: BURNOUT 39%, INCREASED WORKLOAD 49%

■ BURNOUT   ■ INCREASED WORKLOAD

In their open-ended comments, many teachers wrote about increased responsibilities that come with teaching both in-person and virtual students and indicated that they felt like they did not have sufficient planning time to accomplish everything being asked of them this year. Of the over 600 teachers who offered open-ended comments to the question "What additional resources do you need to feel more supported and to better support your students at this time?", 40 percent of them mentioned "time," "plan," and/or "planning."
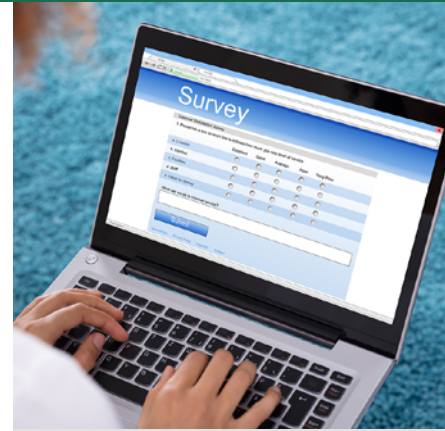
Over the past year, TERA has worked with leaders in the six participating districts to share and discuss these findings. Many of these patterns are concerning and highlight potential inequities in the experiences and engagement of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders at the school, district, and state level should consider further examining and tracking these patterns over time.

**Based on the analyses above, districts may want to continue monitoring:**

- **Social/emotional well-being of students and teachers:** Given the high levels of stress and burnout reported by surveyed students and teachers, districts may want to consider novel ways to track social/emotional well-being and provide additional supports for both students and teachers.

- **Chronic absenteeism and disengagement:** The sharp increases in chronic absenteeism among English Learners, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students are concerning. Students miss school for many different reasons, but chronic absenteeism can serve as an early warning sign that students are disengaged or struggling. Districts may want to consider closely watching these trends and employing interventions that provide targeted supports for students who have missed the most instruction.

- **Enrollment trends in earliest grades:** Given the lower enrollment and increase in withdrawals among students in the earliest grades in fall 2020, districts may want to consider closely monitoring enrollment patterns and planning for a potential swell in early learners next year.

- **Educator workload and retention:** While teacher and school leader retention rates from 2020-21 indicate that the vast majority of educators remained in these six districts last year, the increased workload and burnout reported by teachers could increase turnover in the future. Districts may want to consider ways to reduce the burdens placed on teachers and should carefully monitor teachers' retention intentions for next year.

Teachers and educational leaders at all levels have been working extremely hard to support students during this unprecedented global emergency. Due to multiple rounds of federal investment through COVID-19 relief legislation, Tennessee districts now have additional resources to provide more targeted academic and socioemotional supports for students. This investment offers a rare opportunity to more directly address inequities caused by or exacerbated by the pandemic. Continuing to collect and examine data capturing student experiences and outcomes will be critical in the coming years to assess and inform these efforts.

"I need more time to plan, create resources, and grade. Not just a day here or there, but consistent, uninterrupted planning time without supervision duties… I need leaders to understand that I am overworked and overwhelmed and that I constantly feel like I am failing."

– High School Teacher

## Data and Methods

Across all the data sources described below, we examined the overall descriptive patterns, trends across time when possible, and differences across student characteristics (student race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, English Learner status, and disability status) and school characteristics (tier).[11]

## Student Enrollment and Attendance Data

For all six districts, we examined patterns in student enrollment and attendance data captured through Tennessee's Education Information System (EIS). We examined historical trends by comparing the enrollment numbers, withdrawal codes, and absence data for fall 2020 to previous falls. We limited our analysis to students who were enrolled in each district as of October 1 of each year and then examined enrollment and attendance data from the beginning of the school year to December 18 of each year. As a result, data for the 2019-2020 school year does not reflect any pandemic-related changes that may have occurred in spring 2020.

## Student Surveys

Five districts administered student surveys during the fall 2020 semester and the response rate among these districts was approximately 35 percent (N=25,780 students). Importantly, response rates varied somewhat across student characteristics (see Table A1), and it is likely that responding students are not representative of all students in the districts. The surveys asked about students' experiences with learning, their teachers, and their peers as well as asked questions about their sense of safety and well-being. Three districts used the same core set of survey questions while two districts included some of these core questions along with district-specific questions.

## Student Survey Response Rates

| | |
|---|---|
| **All students** | **35%** |
| Black students | 32% |
| Hispanic students | 31% |
| White students | 37% |
| English learners | 25% |
| Not an English learner | 35% |
| Econ. disadvantaged students | 28% |
| Not econ. disadvantaged | 38% |
| Students with disabilities | 26% |
| Students without disabilities | 36% |
| Chronically absent students | 17% |
| Not chronically absent | 40% |

## Teacher Surveys

Four districts administered teacher surveys during the fall 2020 semester and the response rate among these districts was approximately 32 percent (N=2,001 teachers). As shown in Table A2, response rates varied somewhat across teacher characteristics, and early career teachers and teachers of color had slightly lower response rates. The surveys asked about teachers' instruction and student engagement this year as well as questions about their concerns, needs, and challenges. All four districts used the same set of survey questions.

## Teacher Survey Response Rates

| | |
|---|---|
| **All teachers** | **32%** |
| Elementary teachers | 32% |
| Middle school teachers | 36% |
| High school teachers | 33% |
| K-8/K-12/other teachers | 36% |
| Early career teachers (<5 years of experience) | 27% |
| Mid-career teachers (5-15 years of experience) | 34% |
| Veteran teaches (>15 years of experience) | 36% |
| Teachers of color | 25% |
| White teachers | 34% |

## Teacher Staffing Data

For all six districts, we examined the teacher staffing data reported in TNCompass to examine trends in teacher and school leader retention for fall 2020 and the past two years (2018-19 and 2019-20). In this analysis, we measured retention as the percentage of educators who are listed in the staffing data as working in a district or school the prior year who then return for the beginning of the next school year.

1 Centers for Disease Control (2020). COVID-19 Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/index.html
Hardy, B. & Logan, T. D. (2020). Racial economic inequality amid the COVID-19 crisis. Brookings Institute. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/research/racial-economic-inequality-amid-the-covid-19-crisis/
Zamarripa, R. & Roque, L. (2021). Latinos Face Disproportionate Health and Economic Impacts from COVID-19. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2021/03/05/496733/latinos-face-disproportionate-health-economic-impacts-covid-19/

2 Challenge Success. (2021). Kids Under Pressure: A Look at Student Well-being and Engagement During the Pandemic. Retrieved from https://www.challengesuccess.org/kids-under-pressure-student-well-being-and-engagement-during-the-pandemic/
YouthTruth. (2020). Students Weigh In: Learning and Well-being during COVID-19. YouthTruth Survey. Retrieved from https://youthtruthsurvey.org/student-weigh-in/

3 Students were only asked these questions if they indicated that they had participated in online learning at least for part of this school year.

4 Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A Close Look at Course Grades, Failures, and Attendance in the Freshman Year. Research Report. Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Gottfried, M. A. (2010). Evaluating the Relationship Between Student Attendance and Achievement in Urban Elementary and Middle Schools: An Instrumental Variables Approach. American Educational Research Journal, 47(2), 434–465. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831209350494

5 Kurtz. H. (2020). In-person Learning Expands, Student Absences up, Teachers Work Longer, Survey Shows. EdWeek. Retrieved from https://www-edweek-org/leadership/in-person-learning-expands-student-absences-up-teachers-work-longer-survey-shows/2020/10

6 For the purposes of this analysis, we are defining English Learners as students whose first language is not English and who qualifies for direct English as a Second Language (ESL) services. This does not include students whose parents have waived direct services for ESL or students who are transitioning out of ESL services.

7 Kebede, L.F. & Aldrich, M.W. (2020). School enrollment has dropped by 33,000 students across Tennessee amid pandemic. Chalkbeat. Retrieved from https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2020/11/10/21558837/school-enrollment-has-dropped-by-33000-students-across-tennessee-amid-pandemic

8 Kurtz, H. (2020). Teacher Morale and Student Enrollment Declining Under COVID-19, Survey Shows. EdWeek. Retrieved from https://www-edweek-org/leadership/teacher-morale-and-student-enrollment-declining-under-covid-19-survey-shows/2020/09

9 Barnum. M. (2021). Despite pandemic, there's little evidence of rising teacher turnover—yet. Chalkbeat. Retrieved from https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/4/6/22368846/teacher-turnover-quitting-pandemic-data-economy
Goldhaber, D. & Theobald, R. (2021). Teacher Attrition and Mobility Over Time. CALDER Flash Brief No. 23-0421. Retrieved from

10 Kaufman, J.H. & Diliberti, M.K. (2021). Teachers are not all right: How the COVID-19 pandemic is taking a toll on the nation's teachers. RAND Corporation. Retrieved from: https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP68439.html

11 As part of our work with districts, we also analyzed data from internal benchmark tests in reading and math. We examined trends over time and differences in performance and growth across student groups. These results are not included in this report but future briefs will explore what we have learned from analyzing this data.