

Downtown Clayton block party planned for Aug. 8

Staff Reports

A Downtown Clayton Block Party & Cruise-In is scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 8, from 4 to 7 p.m. on Main Street in Clayton.

The event will feature classic cars, food trucks and local shopping.

The schedule for the day begins earlier than the block party as a Soapbox Derby will roll down Hiawassee Street beginning at 12:30 p.m. to going to 3 p.m. for the Clayton Police Department's second-ever race before the main party starts. The first derby was held on March 14, prior to the last block party.

For the Classic Car Cruise-In, people will get a chance to see vintage trucks, hot rods and classic automobiles lined up on North Main Street.

Food trucks like Lobster Dog, Blue Hound Barbecue and Sugartopia are scheduled to be downtown along with others.

While enjoying the block party, attendees also will have the opportunity to shop in downtown boutiques and other stores.



Submitted photos

Henry Dumas collects water from Lake Burton, which he will take back to test for E. Coli levels in the IDEXX laboratory on the TFS campus.

Tallulah Falls School joins effort to help protect local waterways

By Elisha Boggs
Special to The Clayton Tribune

Protecting North Georgia's waterways now involves a science lab at Tallulah Falls School.

Through a partnership with Savannah Riverkeeper and the Lake Burton Civic Association, TFS is now home to an IDEXX laboratory, one of the most advanced systems available for detecting E. coli in water. The new laboratory will support long-term water quality monitoring in the Rabun and Habersham County watershed while providing TFS students with meaningful, hands-on research opportunities.

Leading the initiative is Tonya Bonitatibus, executive director and riverkeeper for Savannah Riverkeeper, who has spent years protecting the health of the Savannah River Basin throughout Georgia and South Carolina.

"I never get tired of making the drive from the heat in the south to the cooler air of Tallulah Falls," Bonitatibus said. "This community treasures its lakes and streams, and clean water is essential to protecting both the people who live here and the natural resources that make this area so special."

After securing the funding to purchase the IDEXX laboratory equipment, Bonitatibus faced one challenge: finding a permanent home for this technology. Tallulah Falls School stepped forward by providing space within its upper school science department.

"The establishment of this lab makes TFS home to the most advanced E. coli testing equipment in surrounding counties," Bonitatibus said. "We know bacteria contamination exists in our waterways. The first step toward solving the problem is identifying where it exists so communities can address the source. At the same time, TFS students will have the opportunity to participate in meaningful scientific research while helping improve water quality throughout the region."

While E. coli itself is not always harmful, its presence often signals that disease-causing pathogens may also be



Tonya Bonitatibus and Henry Dumas collect data from Tiger Creek, which they will use to decipher water spots to test for E. Coli levels in the IDEXX laboratory.

present. The data collected helps identify potential issues such as failing septic systems, allowing communities to address problems before they become larger public health concerns.

TFS rising sophomore Henry Dumas was hired as a summer intern to collect water samples from streams flowing into Lake Burton and Lake Tallulah. He then analyzes them using the new equipment. His responsibilities include sampling waterways, incubating samples, recording results, and learning how to use Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

The internship has also introduced Dumas to the region's extensive network of waterways. "There are so many rivers and streams around us that most people don't even realize exist," he said. "We're surrounded by water. It's fascinating to see how everything connects."

Beyond monitoring E. coli, Bonitatibus hopes the partnership will continue to grow by incorporating biological monitoring using aquatic insects, whose presence can reveal the overall health of streams and creeks.

"Water quality doesn't

belong only in a biology lab," she said. "It belongs in the stream. We want students outside collecting data, understanding ecosystems, and becoming stewards of the natural resources around them."

The monitoring effort also supports ongoing applications for state and federal funding that could help improve impaired waterways in the region. Volunteers with the Lake Burton Civic Association have spent three years collecting samples across the watershed. The addition of the IDEXX laboratory significantly expands the accuracy and efficiency of those efforts.

For Tallulah Falls School, the partnership reflects its commitment to experiential learning by connecting students with authentic scientific research that benefits the community. While learning advanced laboratory techniques and geospatial mapping, students are also helping protect one of North Georgia's most valuable natural resources for generations to come.

Elisha Boggs is the director of Communications and Media for Tallulah Falls School.

Student absenteeism a persistent problem, but Georgia is doing better than most states

By Ty Tagami
Bureau Chief/Capitol Beat News Service

ATLANTA — When COVID-19 struck, schools closed, students "attended" from home, and too many got out of the habit of going to school when the doors reopened.

In 2022, nearly a quarter of Georgia's students had absenteeism rates high enough to be considered "chronic" — nearly double the rate before the pandemic.

But new data show that the state is gradually recovering. More students are still missing school than before COVID-19, but the rate has been steadily falling, dropping to 17.7% during the 2025-26 school year.

That is nearly 2 percentage points lower than the prior year, which in turn was nearly 2 points lower than in 2023-24, the state data show. The rate remains more than 5 percentage points above the rates in the two years before the pandemic, but observers find Georgia's trajectory to be promising, especially when many other states have found their absenteeism problems to be more stubborn.

The Georgia Department of Education released the new rates last week, well ahead of most other states, noted Nat Malkus, with the American Enterprise Institute.

"Perhaps even more impressively," he wrote in an analysis published Thursday, "Georgia's chronic absenteeism rate is declining steadily, bucking the national trend."

During the 2024-25 school year, Georgia's chronic absenteeism rate was 19.5%, beating the estimated national average by more than 2 percentage points, according to the group FutureEd, whose numbers had Georgia among the third of the states with the lowest rates.

"We applaud the Georgia Department of Education's early release of end-of-the-year attendance data, which shows an impressive fifth consecutive year of decreased chronic absence," Hedy Chang, president and CEO of the group Attendance Works, said in a statement. "Georgia's commitment to timely end-of-the-year data is a model for how states can make a difference."

Some of that success came after lawmakers passed a law last year that required more coordinated and sustained efforts against absenteeism. Senate Bill 123 required that school districts with high rates create attendance review teams that engage parents.

State lawmakers tried to build on that this year with Senate Bill 513.

"If we do not have kids' butts in seats, they are not going to learn," Sen. RaShaun Kemp, D-Atlanta, said before the measure passed with just one vote against it in the Senate.

But the measure faced overwhelming opposition in the House due to some provisions seen as draconian, including loss of driving privileges. Many students who skip a lot of school need their licenses so they can get to jobs — not to mention to school, critics said.

Studies have shown that treating the problem with punishment does not work well, said Matt Smith, the policy and research director for the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.

Indeed, using punishment to address misbehavior in general can aggravate the absenteeism problem by turning school into an unwelcoming environment, he said. Out-of-school suspension, one such "legacy" strategy, directly increases absenteeism.

Instead, Georgia schools are more often trying to address the underlying problems, he said. That started with more behavioral and mental health counseling.

But poor physical health can also rob students of their ability to focus, which can in turn lead them to misbehave, he said, so more schools are looking at that too.

"It could be something as simple as getting them hearing aids or glasses, getting them dental care, he said."

Smith said the data the state education department has been releasing allows more people, including businesses and organizations in each community, to help school districts identify commonalities among students who are missing a lot of school.

That enables the districts to focus their resources on those students, and it allows the community to help.

They have a reason to help. Research shows that absenteeism affects the whole classroom by bogging down teachers who must divide their students into different groups as they try to catch up the kids who have fallen behind, Smith said.

Georgia and other states still have a lot of work to do to get their absenteeism rates back to a manageable level, Malkus wrote in his analysis. But he added that Georgia is showing how progress is possible when it is seen as an urgent priority.

Many states take far longer than Georgia did to release their data from the prior school year, he wrote. "Indeed, there are some states — Minnesota and Texas among them — that still have not released data for the 2024-25 school year."

FACES & PLACES

And the winners are...

***** 1st Place \$100 GIFT CARD ***** Michele O'Connell *****	***** 2nd Place \$75 GIFT CARD ***** Brooklyn Guffie *****	***** 3rd Place \$50 GIFT CARD ***** Rhonda Crone *****
--	---	--

Check out the Tribune's Facebook page and watch the announcement of the winners from the drawing on Aug. 4!

What can I do for your business?

AS YOUR LOCAL ADVERTISING CONSULTANT, MY GOAL IS SIMPLE:

HELP YOUR BUSINESS GET NOTICED, ATTRACT MORE CUSTOMERS, AND MAXIMIZE YOUR ADVERTISING INVESTMENT.

Whether you're looking to increase brand awareness, promote a special event, launch a new product, or simply stay top-of-mind in our community, I'll work with you to create a customized advertising plan that fits your goals and budget.

LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW WE CAN:

1. Reach thousands of local readers.
2. Build your brand in the community.
3. Promote seasonal specials & events.
4. Increase visibility with print & digital advertising.
5. Create an advertising strategy that delivers results.

Tony Penrose / Advertising Consultant

Phone: 706-782-3312
e-mail: tpenrose@theclaytontribune.com