

# DETROIT PARTNERSHIP FOR EDUCATION EQUITY & RESEARCH

## **Centering Community Voice in Chronic Absence Research: Detroit PEER's Commitment to Participatory Action Research**

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We prefer having a robust understanding of absenteeism at Detroit PEER, which means that we explore the issue from as many angles as possible. In addition to using state and local administrative data to understand this complex issue, we also center the perspectives of people who navigate the complex terrain of getting to school. To do this, our studies have used quantitative and qualitative approaches to learn how school officials, parents, and students perceive the strengths and challenges associated with regular attendance.

In the past two years, we have also used a participatory approach to understand the issue through the imperatives of youth, parents, and concerned citizens. Our goal in centering community in our research on chronic absenteeism is to inform policy in ways that address the direct needs of people who are challenged by getting to school. We have partnered with two community-based organizations, Urban Neighborhood Initiatives and 482 Forward, to do this work. Together, we've been thought partners around the systemic factors affecting attendance and have designed a number of community-based studies to inform how we can keep youth engaged in school.

In Year 1 of the project, Urban Neighborhood Initiatives organized a youth-led participatory action research team from the Springwells Community in Southwest Detroit to develop a research-informed youth awareness campaign. 5 youth came together to learn what chronic absenteeism is, why it happens, and how it affects youth in their neighborhood. They searched the literature and surveyed their peers to learn that transportation, family emergencies, family illness, and mental health challenges are at the root of attendance challenges in Springwells. They also learned that students fall behind in school, lose social skills and academic interest, and ultimately get off track with graduating from high school on time when absences become chronic. To make their findings actionable, the team created an infographic and vision board to use as the foundation of a youth-facing social media campaign.



\* Springwells PAR Team Vision Board

During the same year, 482 Forward organized members from the Brightmoor Neighborhood in West Detroit to learn what parents, students and community members think are the issues affecting attendance. The Brightmoor team surveyed their neighbors and found that both youth and adults perceive challenges with school climate and curriculum at the crux of the problem. Students gave specific feedback on how schools can promote attendance, including improving teacher performance, changing punitive school rules, and increasing security measures to make school buildings safer. Surprisingly, 42% of students identified school faculty, staff, and peers among those who discourage them from coming to school.



These projects inspired our efforts in Year 2, with both teams continuing their work to understand chronic absenteeism in their communities. The Springwells Team scaled up their survey research by conducting a comparative study of student and educator perceptions of chronic absenteeism at private, public, and charter high schools in their neighborhood. They

wanted to understand how educator assumptions about chronically absent students shape the experiences of students who struggle with regular attendance. So far, they have collected 100 youth surveys and 10 educator surveys at a private high school and plan to collect at least that same amount at the major charter and traditional public schools in their neighborhood.

Building on their year 1 finding that what goes on inside of schools is important to regular attendance, the Brightmoor Team furthered their work by exploring educator perceptions of chronically absent students in year 2. The team conducted focus groups at a high school serving most of the youth from their neighborhood. Importantly, the group is centering youth voices in their approach by comparing educator perceptions of chronically absent students with how those students perceive themselves.



Our intention in supporting these studies is to ensure that our efforts to understand attendance policy stays connected to those who experience chronic absenteeism most acutely. So far, we've learned how important school climate is to chronically absent students and families; and the important role that educators' perceptions of chronically absent students plays in student experiences. This year, we look forward to analyzing the robust data collected in year 2, presenting our work at the University Council for Educational Administration annual meeting in Seattle, Washington, and considering policy solutions to ensure that schools are welcoming spaces for students who find it difficult to get there!