

**Promoting Ecological Approaches to Educational Issues: Evidence from a Partnership
around Chronic Absenteeism in Detroit**

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Abstract

Many problems that we conceptualize as “educational” have multiple causes that cut across students’ ecosystems. Yet, most education reforms are targeted narrowly at schools, educators, and students. Supporting educators and community leaders in conceptualizing educational problems from an ecological perspective and designing policies in alignment with that conceptualization is critical to improving student outcomes. This study documented the macro-, meso-, and micro-level institutional conditions that shaped how educators and community leaders conceived of the problem of absenteeism in response to research framed ecologically. Our findings highlight the challenges researchers may have in influencing ecosystemic policy solutions, but they also provide insight into potential pathways for doing so through research partnerships.

**Promoting Ecological Approaches to Educational Issues: Evidence from a Partnership
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The narrative guiding contemporary educational reform—that accountability and market pressures will yield organizational improvements that lead to educational excellence and equity—reflects a sociopolitical investment in managerial and market-based policies (Apple, 2004), normative commitments to the meritocratic role of schools (Labaree, 1997), and rationalist assumptions about policy design and implementation (Mehta, 2013). Educational researchers have bolstered this narrative when they have oriented their work toward the improvement of schools as “great equalizers” (Wong, 2021) while ignoring or oversimplifying the social, political, and economic context of schooling (Gewirtz, 2002). By understanding and producing evidence of the ecological nature of educational issues, researchers can help promote a coordinated set of policies and practices meant to address structural and environmental inequalities. Yet, the dominant logics and existing institutional and organizational arrangements of educational policy and practice create obstacles to ecological approaches.

Drawing on interviews, field notes, and artifacts from a partnership around chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 10% or more school days) in Detroit, we offer evidence of the opportunities and obstacles to promoting an ecological approach to educational issues. We have researched chronic absenteeism in partnership with a community-based coalition (the Coalition) working on decreasing chronic absenteeism, and also leaders in a Detroit school district (the District). We conceptualized absenteeism as an ecological problem (see Childs & Scanlon, this issue). From that perspective, we produced quantitative and qualitative studies to inform our collective understanding of chronic absenteeism and evaluate efforts to address it (see Lenhoff, Edwards et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2021). The purpose of this paper is to highlight whether and

how our partners adopted an ecological approach in response to our research, and the institutional and organizational factors that mediated that adoption. Our research questions are:

1. How did our partners' conceptual understanding of chronic absenteeism evolve over time?
 - a. How did their approaches to address absenteeism reflect an ecological conception?
2. What macro-, meso-, and micro-level institutional factors affected how our partners adopted an ecological approach to chronic absenteeism?

The Role of Research in Promoting Ecological Approaches

Research is not inherently central to promoting a more ecological approach to educational issues. Students, parents, educators, and activists have been the vanguard of advocacy for educational policies that disrupt inequality (Ferman, 2020; Nygreen, 2016; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Further, research often has no impact on policymaking (Lubienski, 2018), and the questions researchers ask and methods they use may contribute to the maintenance of inequalities (Nygreen, 2006; Slee et al., 1998). Still, as the demand for evidence-based policy has increased (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), researchers can shape the direction of educational reform by situating educational issues in the context of broader inequality.

Researchers can understand themselves as policy actors and develop strategies around knowledge production and dissemination to influence educational policymaking and practice (Heimans & Singh, 2018). Researchers working to disrupt the inequalities that are expressed in America's educational system need to play a role in mobilizing system-level actors to address the political, economic, and cultural structures at the root of those inequalities (York et al., 2020). Given the complex nature of the policy process and the role of research in it (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013, 2016) researchers can work strategically with practitioners and policymakers to inform and mobilize coordinated and ecosystemic approaches to educational policy (Honig et

al., 2017; Lupton & Hayes, 2018). To that end, researchers increasingly use a suite of collaborative problem-solving approaches wherein they engage stakeholders when designing, implementing, and studying solutions for systemic change (Penuel et al., 2020).

When considering the interrelated social and economic problems that manifest in school and student outcomes, however, a limitation of collaborative education research thus far is its focus on educational systems as opposed to educational *ecosystems*. Research partnerships and efforts to improve research use have tended to focus primarily on teaching and learning (Chapman & Ainscow, 2019). While these efforts support implementing policies, organizational structures, or practices for instruction that are more just or equitable, they limit the “sites of possibility” (Giroux, 1986, p. 192) to address inequality, and therefore overlook the potential for ecological approaches that span multiple domains of policymaking and practice.

An important first step in using research to promote ecological approaches in education relates to the notion of *conceptual use of research*—the way policymakers draw on research to frame and understand an educational issue, thereby guiding the way they imagine potential solutions (Weiss, 1977). Historically, research for educational policy has tended to be used instrumentally or symbolically in the short-term, with conceptual impacts on “the broad assumptive worlds” of policymakers and educational leaders unfolding over the long-term (Lingard, 2013, p. 124). Thus, an imperative for researchers seeking to promote an ecological approach to educational issues is to intentionally orient research production and dissemination around conceptual use, to expand conceptions of educational issues and identify the relevant political, economic, and cultural systems that need to be addressed. With ecological conceptions institutionally embedded in official theories of change, organizations can lay the foundation for long-term instrumental use in the design of new policies and practices.

Obstacles to an Ecological Approach in Education

There is a long history of organizing American schools and educational systems to address a host of social and economic issues (Labaree, 2008; Wells, 2009). Yet, there is less precedent for the reverse: expanding “what counts” as educational policy (Anyon, 2005) and marshalling institutions and resources outside of educational systems to respond to the problems of educational inequality. Because schools and districts often exhibit “institutional inertia,” or a resistance to change (Cohen, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 2012), the existing sociocultural and organizational dimensions of schooling are likely to create obstacles to ecosystemic policy.

Researchers have offered insights into the macro-, meso-, and micro-level drivers of institutional inertia in education (Scott & Meyer, 1994). At the *macro level*, as policymakers and educational leaders create or reform policies and systems to influence how educational organizations work, they draw on institutional logics from broad cultural institutions (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2013) and entrench ways of thinking about and acting on educational issues in the cultural milieu and organizational infrastructure of the system (Spillane et al., 2019). At the *meso level*, districts and schools tend to mimic an established organizational form to maintain legitimacy and buffer from external demands (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). While leaders of educational systems are responsive to pressure for change from their institutional environment (Spillane et al., 2019), schools and districts often modify highly visible formal structures and policies and somewhat visible surface-level aspects of their practice while avoiding deeper changes in practice (Yurkofsky, 2020). Organizations also vary in their ability to incorporate new knowledge to inform organizational policies and practices (Crain-Dorough & Elder, 2021). At the *micro level*, school staff, with some discretion (Weick, 1976), face demanding contexts, often with inadequate resources, threats to authority, and conflicting expectations (Lipsky, 1971). In those circumstances,

they engage in a cognitive and emotional process to make sense of and implement policies. This sensemaking—bound up with prior knowledge, personal values, and professional sense-of-self, and situated in their social and organizational contexts (Spillane et al., 2002)—further mediates organizational change (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2020).

Other educational actors, such as intermediary organizations (Honig, 2004; Scott & Jabbar, 2014) and collective impact partnerships (Henig et al., 2015), have been studied from the perspective of politics more than organizational dynamics. Still, there are insights into the institutional inertia of these organizations, such as from the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1988), which has been used to study policy learning by organizational actors in educational politics (e.g., Lenhoff et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2015). The ACF suggests that, for members of an advocacy coalition, “deep core beliefs are resistant to change,” while beliefs about specific policies are less rigid, and beliefs related to their understanding of the problem are most flexible (Sabatier, 1998, p. 104). Further, while there can be internal and external sources of change for an advocacy coalition, “organizational forces create considerable resistance to change, even in the face of countervailing empirical evidence or internal inconsistencies” (Sabatier, 1993, p. 33). These forces include the balance between self-interest and the coalition’s interests, and the role of subunits in each organization that have the expertise and capacity to make changes (Sabatier, 1998). Such dynamics mirror the findings from institutional and organizational studies in education, such as the role of institutional logics at the macro-level, organizational incentives and capacities at the meso-level, and sensemaking at the micro-level.

Methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from secondary analyses of interviews (n=161), observations (n=44), and artifacts (n=54), from several studies between 2017-2021. Interview

participants included school staff and District and Coalition leaders involved in attendance initiatives. Participant observations included informal check-ins, formal Coalition meetings, District professional development sessions, and developmental learning meetings, where we shared emerging research findings, co-constructed meaning, and discussed implications (Lenhoff, Edwards et al., 2020). More details about our participants and primary analyses can be found in our prior research (Lenhoff, Edwards et al., 2020; Lenhoff, Singer et al., 2020).

We used in vivo coding to categorize conceptualizations of the root causes of absenteeism in interview transcripts and artifacts, then used descriptive coding to further specify within broad categorizations. For observations, we created analytic memos within our field notes and read across them to identify patterns in the structural (macro), organizational (meso), and interpersonal (micro) dynamics that shaped the interpretation of the problem and strategies to address it. We also examined whether conceptualizations of absenteeism aligned with strategies. We analyzed any explicit shifts in the conceptualization of absenteeism after presentation of research findings, and we created memos to reflect on what we were learning from our partners.

Findings

How did our partners' conceptual understanding of chronic absenteeism evolve over time?

The District

In 2018, the District outlined a new strategic plan for addressing chronic absenteeism, centered around expanding attendance staff to every school and reorienting from truancy case management to tracking attendance data, communicating with families and students, developing attendance incentives and other school culture initiatives, and connecting families to wraparound services. The District's attendance plan only partially addressed chronic absenteeism as an ecological issue. The plan's section on wraparound services vaguely connected students' "health

and wellness needs” to “social and non-academic barriers,” implicitly downplaying structural and material barriers that families faced. The plan proposed attendance teams to develop student intervention plans and coordinate wraparound services that “in most instances” would be able to improve attendance. Thus, responsibility for identifying wraparound services and building organizational capacity to connect families with them was left up to school staff and responsibility for delivering those wraparound services was left to external organizations.

Over the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, the District partially understood attendance as an “ecological” issue, but the ecological nature of their efforts were limited. School staff and families themselves pointed to a host of in-school and out-of-school factors contributing to chronic absenteeism. District leaders, however, combined an acknowledgement of these barriers with a deficit view that parents and students were inadequately motivated to come to school. Before in-person schooling was abruptly closed in Spring 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the district was seeking to refine its policies and practices, which largely did not reflect an ecological approach to absenteeism. While school staff felt increasingly discouraged by a lack of progress, the District focused on ranking their effectiveness at improving attendance. District leaders and some school staff began to reembrace court-based action in cases of severe absenteeism.

The Coalition

The Coalition began its work with deep knowledge of the students and families in their communities, gained through long-time community investment and educational programming, as well as focus groups with families they served. Partly influenced by the national dialogue around chronic absenteeism, they focused on teaching parents that the threshold for chronic absenteeism was 10% of school days and that reaching that threshold could have negative consequences. Their first campaign was centered on a widely distributed pledge card for stakeholders to demonstrate

their commitment to regular school attendance. The Coalition also designed an after-school program to entice students to come to school. Leaders of the Coalition expressed interest in pursuing systemic changes, but they pursued initiatives that targeted individual behavior.

In early 2020, the Coalition shifted its formal conceptualization of the problem of absenteeism, orienting their strategic work around understanding and addressing systemic barriers. One leader described the shift this way during a citywide meeting: “The group has evolved in terms of how we define the work...How do we ‘see’ the challenges to getting to school more clearly?” At the same meeting, coalition members were asked to reflect on what it would take to “adopt a school-going culture in Detroit.” The responses cut across many dimensions of the educational ecosystem: transportation, mental health and trauma, policy and legislation, community-based support (defined as multiple actors to help kids get to school across different sectors), student perceptions of educational quality, and systemic/institutional racism.

In strategic planning sessions throughout 2020 and 2021, the Coalition formally adopted an ecological framework as the centerpiece of its theory of the problem of absenteeism. In doing so, the group acknowledged the interconnected factors across educational ecosystems that contribute to absenteeism and envisioned how to leverage their resources and organizational strengths to address those factors. The Coalition formalized theories of change for each of their strategies to improve school attendance across the educational ecosystem. For instance, the group wrote that communication would be “the mechanism/device by which [the Coalition] exchanges information with persons exercising power and implementing policy from the individual to macro level,” conveying how communications strategies were not only focused on informing parents but also those with the power to create policy change in support of students. Likewise, for wraparound supports, they wrote about “remov[ing] barriers at the micro level” and working with schools and

community-based organizations to establish “a coordinated system to address barriers at the meso level.” These changes to the Coalition’s strategic plan demonstrated a marked shift from a narrow conceptualization of the problem of absenteeism, to one that explicitly adopts an ecological frame and designs strategies to cut across educational ecosystems. Still, the Coalition’s core activities—implementing in-school and out-of-school programs, providing technical assistance to schools, and working directly with families—focused on individualized rather than ecological interventions.

What institutional factors affected the extent to which our partners adopted an ecological approach to chronic absenteeism?

Macro-Level

The macro-institutional logic of the markets and choice permeated the organizational priorities of District leaders and shaped the Coalition’s scope of activities. A major finding from our research has been that many families face transportation barriers to attending school (Singer et al., 2021). When these findings were first emerging, District leaders shared that they viewed transportation problems as a combination of some gaps in the District’s resources for supporting families (e.g., no yellow bus for high school students) and errors of parental judgment in enrolling their children in schools too far from home. As one District leader shared:

I think we can hold parents more accountable. I think district policies should change too, if we identify, while this is a choice state and you say you want your kid in this school that is not a neighborhood school, if we identify that a child is beginning to become absent at a rate that turns in a direction of them being chronic, we're going to move them ... to their neighborhood school so that they can get proper transportation.

This perspective reflected the macro-level conditions in which the District operated, where families were conceptualized as the decision-makers in accessing high quality schools, and the

District had a limited view of their ability to solve transportation-related attendance problems.

The macro-institutional environment shaped the Coalition's adoption of an ecological perspective in a different way. The decentralized system of schools in Detroit—with nearly 200 public schools operated by 50 school districts—created conditions in which ambitions for citywide, coordinated system change to improve conditions for school attendance were viewed as idealistic. Although many Coalition members expressed support for coordinated multi-system transit or healthcare reforms, for instance, the fragmented educational system created challenges in working across institutions that were positioned as competitors rather than allies in educational improvement. One Coalition leader shared this about how challenging the institutional context is: “[We’re trying to] figure out a way for all of us to work together with common goals and outcomes. . . . You don't have one god on top. You've got a whole bunch of little gods everywhere.” Therefore, although there was conceptual use of an ecological framework, the instrumental use in Coalition strategy and partnerships was constrained.

Similarly, most of the Coalition's initiatives were directed at schools themselves. School systems are an obvious partner in the work of increasing school attendance, and these partnerships were seen as accessible by Coalition members. However, partnerships with city, state, or social sector agencies were more challenging to pursue. These organizations were conceptualized as part of the ecosystem for improving conditions for attendance, but Coalition members did not have clear pathways to interact with them.

Meso-Level

At the meso-level, the organizational forms of the District and the Coalition influenced how the problem of absenteeism was conceptualized and how research was used to address absenteeism ecologically. In the District, the hierarchical structure limited cross-divisional

communication and coordination. Therefore, if one office identified a problem of absenteeism that needed to be addressed through another office, the channels for communicating that need and instituting change were difficult to navigate. For example, while one office was responsible for enrolling students and informing families about their transportation options, another office worked with families once enrolled, when they struggled with transportation, needed information on switching schools, or were housing unstable and needed enrollment support. The technical infrastructure to facilitate data and information sharing to support families was separated into different functions for each department with no way to crosswalk easily. Our research team coordinated meetings between these offices to generate initial conversations about how they might conceive of the problem of absenteeism as being within the scope of work of both offices. Although the leaders expressed interest in collaborating, the organizational conditions made it difficult to see how they might coordinate to address students' needs ecologically.

The District also encountered organizational challenges to addressing absenteeism ecologically because of bifurcated lines of authority. Although a District office was responsible for coordinating school staff's response to absenteeism, the staff reported to principals, who had virtually no interaction with the office. Principals often had different priorities for what school staff should be working on than the office. When there was a conflict in priorities, staff typically followed the guidance of their principals, who were formally evaluating their performance. For instance, one staff person in charge of attendance shared that "[The office] passes on directives from the Superintendent. The principal gives us directives as well from the Superintendent. Unfortunately, we serve two masters." School staff felt caught between competing priorities, none of which allowed them to pursue systemic changes or influence district policy.

The Coalition's organizational structure was flat, with a core leadership team that made

decisions by consensus. The leaders met regularly to decide how to organize for policy change or expend resources to advance coalition goals. This structure meant that multiple strategies could be implemented across the educational ecosystem simultaneously and in coordination with each other, directed at the same goal. Although the organizational form of the Coalition made it easier to adopt an ecological frame than the hierarchical form of the district, there were other organizational characteristics that created roadblocks to an ecological approach. The organizations that made up the Coalition were mostly small CBOs focused on youth development, community building, or grassroots organizing. While this made them more attuned to the specific needs of the families and students they served, it also meant that they were largely running on small budgets, funded through short-term grants awarded by local foundations and city agencies. These grants were often tied to specific initiatives, such as after school or employment programs, that often focused on individual behavior rather than systems change. In addition, one-year grant terms often came with measurable outcome expectations that required the organizations to count the number of students or families served and track their attendance over time to determine if the investment “made a difference.” These expectations required Coalition leaders to focus on improving attendance directly for the students who they served, rather than improving the conditions for attendance in Detroit. Coalition leaders, then, were sometimes overly committed to existing programs that were likely to be funded again and somewhat resistant to reimagining how they might address absenteeism through other means.

Organizational histories and interests influenced whether and how our partners adopted an ecological approach. Both organizations had invested time and resources into bringing a particular school-based model of improving attendance to Detroit. This prior investment constituted a “sunk cost” that shaped whether leaders were willing to consider alternative models

to address the problem, and it also created micro-level challenges to developing a shared theory of the problem of absenteeism and potential solutions for solving it.

Micro-Level

Within the Coalition, researchers played an “insider” role as formal members of the leadership team and regular participants in strategic planning sessions over several years. Because the research team participated as active members in the Coalition, research framed from the ecological perspective was discussed at every meeting and played an important role in shaping the group’s priorities. For instance, the Coalition collectively determined that it needed research on how families conceptualized their barriers to attendance. Once complete, that research study was read by all Coalition leaders and supplemental materials were created to advocate for policy changes suggested by the research. The presence of researchers as insiders also created micro-level social pressure, in which researchers’ viewpoints were considered and taken up in decision-making because of the collegial trust and respect that had been developed, and the status attributed to researchers in this context (Coburn et al., 2008).

In contrast, researchers played an “outsider” role in the District, as formal partners but not decision-makers. This meant that researchers’ framing of the key issues and implications for strategy were viewed as additional data for consideration, but by no means a definitive account of the problem. In fact, although the researchers met biweekly with District leaders, these leaders had limited influence on how other offices addressed absenteeism. We also found that District leaders were mistrustful of parents’ and staff members’ views about student attendance. For example, we observed District leaders questioning the accuracy of qualitative accounts of the primary causes of absenteeism. Their skepticism reflected the relatively low status of parents and limited authority of school staff in the District (Coburn et al., 2008).

Finally, individual beliefs and prior experiences shaped the approach to the problem. Both organizations were led by long-time practitioners in their fields who had interacted with thousands of students and families over multiple decades. Their recollections of these families significantly influenced their problem definition and acceptance of new evidence, limiting their willingness to take on a new approach. They often questioned research because it did not match their prior beliefs, or because they had personal examples that countered that evidence.

Discussion

Many problems that we conceptualize as “educational” have multiple causes that cut across students’ ecosystems. Yet, most education reforms are targeted narrowly at schools, educators, and students. Supporting educators and community leaders in conceptualizing educational problems from an ecological perspective and designing policies in alignment with that conceptualization is critical to improving student outcomes. This study documented the institutional conditions that shaped how educators and community leaders conceived of the problem of absenteeism in response to research framed ecologically. Our findings highlight the challenges researchers may have in influencing ecosystemic policy solutions, but they also provide insight into potential pathways for doing so.

First, the macro-institutional conditions that create problems in educational ecosystems also influence how and why system leaders take up ecological frames. This presents a circular problem for creating ecosystemic policy reforms, since system leaders find it difficult to conceptualize problems ecologically when they have no proven examples of it being done. For instance, district and community leaders may be reluctant to pursue policy change with social welfare agencies if they have had no evidence that those agencies will see educational problems as within their scope of responsibility. Similarly, the fragmented educational ecosystem both

contributes to the problem of absenteeism and makes it difficult to coordinate solutions across ecological systems.

Second, authority in educational organizations shapes how members take up new information and use research conceptually and instrumentally (Coburn et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2019). These problems may be more acute when using research to advance ecosystemic policy change because doing so requires coordination across divisions that may not have existing infrastructure to work together. Whereas personnel within and across curriculum and instruction departments are generally organized to work with the key personnel and systems required to implement instructional reform, personnel and systems required to coordinate ecosystemic reform, such as addressing students' health, transportation, and instructional engagement needs simultaneously, are more complicated. In many districts, each of these functions is the responsibility of different offices with different formalized priorities.

However, one potential pathway for researchers seeking to influence ecosystemic approaches to educational problems is to gain credibility as the connector between and among district offices and external agencies. We found that we as researchers gained status and authority in the Coalition, creating an entry point for research to influence the conceptualization of the problem. From there, community-based organizations could play a more important role in influencing ecosystemic policy design among social sector agencies and perhaps in the District.

Finally, at the micro-level, educators and community leaders working on tough social problems are wedded to prior beliefs about the root causes of problems and reluctant to throw over longstanding ideas about how to fix them. However, we identified two potential avenues for shifting individual perceptions in service of ecosystem research use. Our research methods included continuous improvement strategies such as root cause analysis and plan-do-study-act

cycles that invited community and district leaders into the research production process (Penuel et al., 2020). Although our research is still ongoing, early evidence suggests that these methods hold some promise for reorienting the perspectives of participants and activating interest in ecosystemic policy solutions (Lenhoff et al., 2020). In addition, our long-standing research partnership has created more time to establish the evidence and organizational structures required for conceptual use of research. This time can be used to support participants in adopting frames for understanding and communicating the key issues, as well as time to practice the strategic use of frames and logics to shape policy decisions (Coburn et al., 2008; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the connections between students' individual, family, community, and contextual characteristics and conditions have never been more obvious, and the necessity of conceptualizing and solving education problems ecologically has never been stronger. Researchers can play an important role in shaping how leaders approach problems, how they assess research evidence on potential solutions, and how and to whom they communicate their research.

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