

Chronic Absenteeism in Detroit:

Addressing Systemic & Structural Inequities through Participatory Action Research

Who We Are & What We Did

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- We collaborated to learn deeply about chronic absenteeism in Brightmoor & Springwells to support existing efforts to transform attendance rates in Detroit.

Chronic Absenteeism

What is it?

Missing 10% or more of enrolled school days, or about 18 days in a regular 180-day school year.

Why does it matter?

We have long known that attendance has a significant association with outcomes.

Chronic Absenteeism has been a grassroots issue in Detroit for nearly a decade.

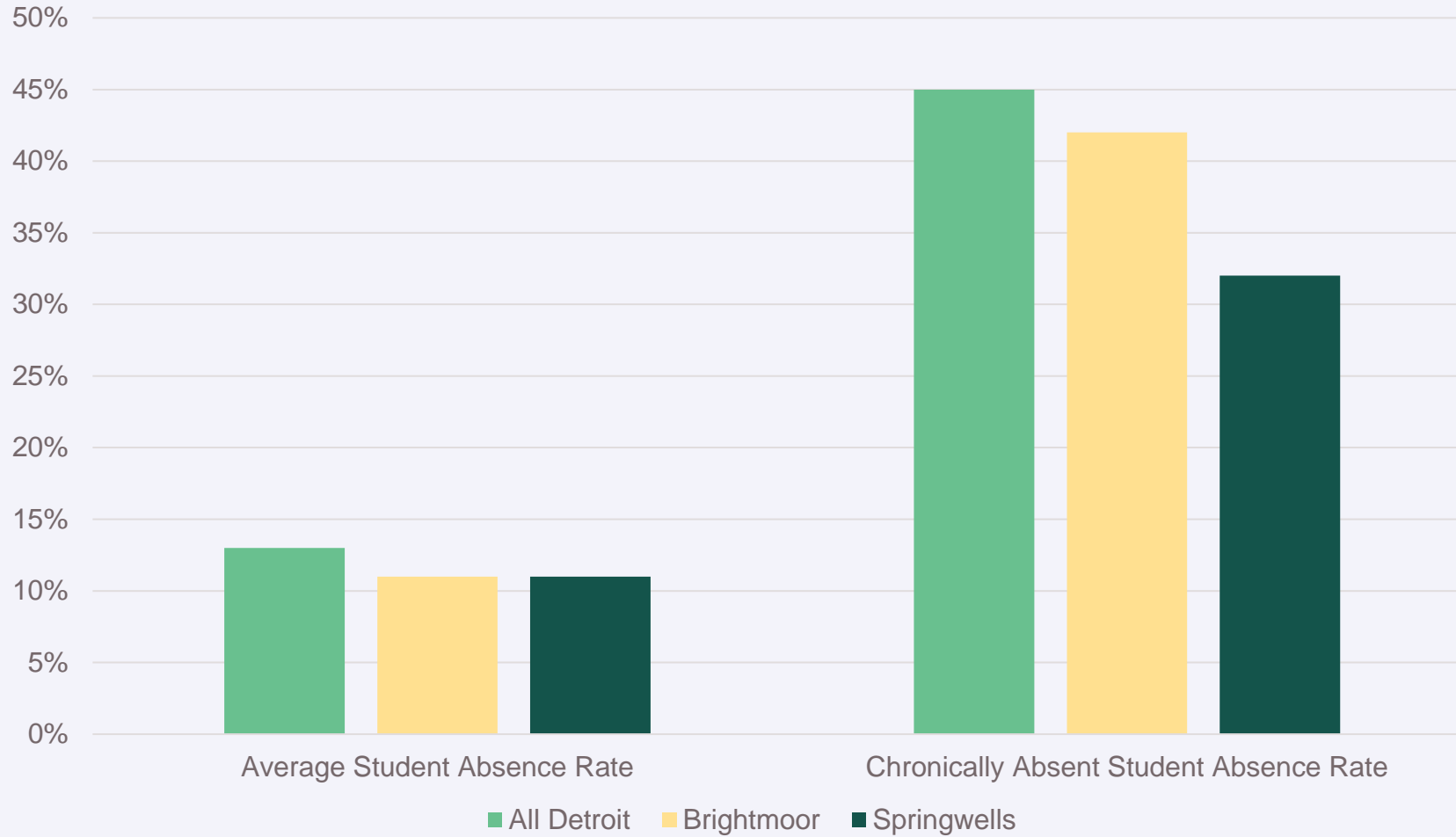
Lenhoff, S. W., Edwards, E. B., Claiborne, J., Singer, J., & French, K. R. (2020). A collaborative problem-solving approach to improving district attendance policy. *Educational Policy*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820974402>



70% of DPSCD students were chronically absent in the 2020-21 school year, compared to 62% in 2018-19.

54% were severely chronically absent.

Chronic Absence in Brightmoor & Springwells



Brightmoor Team: Research Questions

- What approaches do administrators at our neighborhood high school take to address chronic absence?
- What approaches do teachers at our neighborhood high school take to address chronic absence?
- What approaches do students at our neighborhood high school want to address chronic absence?

We conducted 21 focus groups with students, 11 interviews with teachers, and 4 interviews with administrators at our neighborhood's traditional public high school.

We heard from 90 out of 534 students, 11 out of 40 teachers, and 4 out of 5 administrators.

Students Talk Back to Educators

- Administrators & Teachers use a 3-6-9 Policy to connect with absent students.
 - Students say that this policy encourages them to come to school, but does not motivate them to come.
 - Students say that the 3-6-9 Policy is punitive and dehumanizing. It's part of many practices that the school uses to control their behavior.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zatHOwWBPEI>
- Teachers use relationships with students to encourage attendance.
 - Students say that their most important relationships supporting attendance are at home, with themselves, and with their peers.

What Students Say They Need: Humanity First!

- Students' List of Demands
 - Make schools less strict
 - Schools are learning spaces not prison spaces.
 - Show Care for Students When They Are in school.
 - Improve the School Environment
 - Improve the Quality of Teaching
 - More Educational Opportunities
 - after-school activities
 - relevant curriculum
 - career exploration opportunities
 - Higher education opportunities
- “[My teacher said,] ‘pain is temporary and GPA is forever,’ basically trump other stuff we’re going through in our personal life and just worry about our grades.”

Future Directions for Brightmoor Research Team

- Our team is going to take what we've learned and develop a campaign around humanity-centered education



Springwells Team: Research Questions

- What do school administrators in Springwells believe about the reasons for chronic absence?
- How can administrators improve school climate in ways that reduce chronic absence in Springwells?

We surveyed 90 students and 15 teachers at a private school where a large number of Springwells' youth attend high school.

We are still working to survey this same number of youth at our neighborhood charter & traditional public high schools.

What do school administrators in Springwells believe about the reasons for chronic absence?

Educators believe that health reasons are one of the main factors contributing to chronic absenteeism with their students.

- Students report health reasons as the primary factor.

Educators also believe that transportation, home-life responsibilities, and parental disengagement are important factors.

- This was not reported among students.

Educators believe that students take longer to get to school than what the students report.

How can administrators improve school climate in ways that reduce chronic absence in Springwells?

Most students who took our survey reported being chronically absent.

55% of students report having health issues that impact their ability to come to school.

- This suggests that absenteeism may be a health issue that can be addressed through public health initiatives.

How can administrators improve school climate in ways that reduce chronic absence in Springwells?

- Administrators' beliefs differ from students' experiences.
- Educator survey results suggest that administrators assume more struggle in Brown student's lives than what the students actually reported.
 - Administrators believe that students travel long distances to get to school and that transportation and home-life responsibilities are main causes of chronic absence.
 - Most students reported that they travel short distances to school (10 minutes or less) and that health reasons, not transportation and home-life, are their main reasons for chronic absence.

Future Directions for Springwells Research Team

- Continue to survey schools that represent one charter school, and one public school.

Concluding Thoughts

- Administrators and teachers conceptualize chronic absence differently from students; and often in ways that center deficit perspectives about Black and Brown youth in our communities.
- The youth in our communities are best positioned to understand barriers to chronic absenteeism.
- We will use our learning to strategize actions in support of the self-defined needs of youth.



Thank you!