

# Why Students Miss School and What You Can Do About It

*DPSCD Principal Academy, 2023*

Hi! I'm Sarah Lenhoff.

I am a former public school teacher, now a professor at Wayne State University.

I have a Ph.D. in ed policy from MSU.

I am a parent of two DPSCD students.

I've been studying chronic absence in Detroit for six years.



# Chronic Absenteeism

## *Why Students Frequently Miss School*

## Myths about Why Students Miss so Much School in Detroit

- Detroit parents and students don't care about school.
- Detroit parents and students don't know the importance of strong attendance.
- Detroit schools are not putting enough effort in to increase attendance.

## Facts about Why Students Miss so Much School in Detroit

- Most students do not live within walking distance to school, many students are not eligible for school transportation, and **1/3 of Detroit families do not own a car.**
- Nearly 50% of students in DPSCD neighborhood schools live in "deep poverty," with household income at half of the federal poverty rate or less.
- About 17% of DPSCD students face housing instability.
- While schools are working hard to reduce absenteeism, they cannot do it alone.

# Detroit has the most challenging conditions for student attendance of all large U.S. cities

Racial Segregation Index for Greater Metro Area		Violent Crime per 1,000 People		Poverty Rate (%)		Unemployment Rate (%)	
1. Milwaukee	69.42	<b>1. Detroit</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>1. Detroit</b>	<b>37.90</b>	<b>1. Detroit</b>	<b>19.80</b>
<b>2. Detroit</b>	<b>68.42</b>	2. Milwaukee	14.85	2. Fresno	28.40	2. Philadelphia	11.30
3. New York	63.66	3. Baltimore	13.39	3. Milwaukee	27.40	3. Fresno	11.10
4. Chicago	62.57	4. Indianapolis	12.55	4. Philadelphia	25.80	4. Baltimore	10.00
5. Philadelphia	61.56	5. Washington D.C.	11.85	5. Tucson	24.10	5. Chicago	9.90
Percentage of Adults with Asthma (%)		Residential Vacancy Rate (%)		Population Change (%) 1970-2010		Average Monthly Temperature (°F)	
<b>1. Detroit</b>	<b>14.00</b>	<b>1. Detroit</b>	<b>27.00</b>	<b>1. Detroit</b>	<b>19.80</b>	1. Denver	46.48
2. Baltimore	12.30	2. Baltimore	18.00	2. Philadelphia	11.30	2. Milwaukee	46.67
3. Louisville	12.30	3. Chicago	14.00	3. Fresno	11.10	<b>3. Detroit</b>	<b>49.03</b>
4. Philadelphia	11.60	4. Houston	13.00	4. Baltimore	10.00	4. Chicago	49.56
5. Boston	11.40	5. Indianapolis	13.00	5. Chicago	9.90	5. Boston	50.42

## Severely chronically absent students have much more challenging economic conditions

	<b>Not Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Moderately Chronically Absent</b>	<b>Severely Chronically Absent</b>
<b>Number of Children</b>	2.5	2.7	<b>3</b>
<b>Number of Adults</b>	1.91	1.92	<b>1.73</b>
<b>Single Parent/Guardian</b>	42%	53%	<b>71%</b>
<b>Household Income</b>	\$36,277	\$30,197	<b>\$18,215</b>
<b>Any Parent Stable Work Hours</b>	65%	64%	<b>50%</b>
<b>Car in Home</b>	75%	73%	<b>60%</b>
<b>Homeless</b>	8%	8%	<b>16%</b>

# Complex Causes of Absenteeism

- Students who switch schools in the middle of the year are 3.5 times more likely to be chronically absent.
- Students who are economically disadvantaged or who move homes are 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent.
- Students in schools with weaker school-family relationships are more likely to be chronically absent.
- Students who were chronically absent in the previous year were nine times as likely to be chronically absent in the current year.

Parents and Students Cited  
**Transportation, Health, School  
Belonging, and Safety** as  
Contributing to Absenteeism

## Constraints on getting to school go beyond access to a car, bus.

- **Work schedules:** One 9<sup>th</sup> grader said, when asked for some of the reasons he was absent ten days in the first semester: “Probably waking up late. My mom, she works 4pm to three in the morning. So ... sometimes when she couldn't get up.”
- **Financial constraints:** One mother shared: “So sometimes, they'll have to stay home, because there's no gas.”
- **Unreliable transportation:** Another mother said, “Oh, my goodness. I had for a month, every Friday, every Thursday, my car would break down in front of my house.”
- **Lack of social support:** A parent of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader shared: ““The biggest challenge is her not having another source of transportation. So, if I wasn't able to take her, then that'll be a challenge to pretty much get her to school because I don't have a lot of people, or pretty much nobody to rely on to be able to take her to school if I'm not able.”

## Parents Marshalled Substantial Resources to Get Their Children to School

- Parents frequently relied on their familial and social networks to arrange transportation for their children.
- Parents exercised their social capital at work to accommodate their children's schedule, sometimes quitting jobs that would not allow them flexibility for drop offs/pick ups.
- Parents described difficult tradeoffs between their children's well-being and their participation in school (e.g., safety concerns, health issues, need for family income).
- Many parents worried about what they would do if “even one thing” went wrong, such as a car breakdown, the loss of a reliable friend, or a health issue.

## Parents and Most Students Were Committed to Getting to School and Knew How Important it Was

- Parents emphasized the educational and social consequences of missing school, and expressed regret about their children missing school for reasons that were out of their control.
- Students spoke to the importance of getting an education for their own future and in some cases their family's future.
- When students skipped school, they generally felt badly about it and vowed to attend school more regularly. Students sometimes skipped because of mental health concerns or lack of engagement in class.

## Some Efforts to Improve Attendance Can Alienate Parents, Create New Barriers

- While many school staff view building relationships with families as key to improving attendance, the nature of these efforts matters for how effective it is.
- When outreach to families is only transactional or accusatory, it can weaken relationships. As one parent shared:

“The only thing they would do is come to the house and act like, ‘Why your kid hasn't been there?’ But not try to resolve the issue to why or ask you what's going on. I didn't have the money to buy uniforms. They didn't ask, ‘did I need help’ or, ‘we have services’...And it was like, they were coming at me hard. And I'm like, ‘I'm trying my best.’”

# What You Can Do About It

## *Principals Can Foster a Culture of Attendance*

# Foster a Positive Culture, Limiting Deficit Thinking Among Staff

- Detroit has extremely challenging conditions for student attendance, and many DPSCD students live in deep poverty, creating real barriers to getting to school.
- While motivation to come to school can certainly be one barrier, it is not the predominant one and is often brought about by other structural/economic barriers.
- Encourage staff to adopt a compassionate view of families and limit talk about punishment and accountability for attendance, which the district has said should be used only in the most severe cases.

# Encourage Effective Attendance Practices

- When communicating with families, CLT members and other staff should emphasize that the school is there to support them.
- Automatic messages about attendance should focus on sharing information, providing resources, and offering support, rather than shame or blame.
- Try to protect CLT members who are working on attendance from being pulled into other duties and empower them to propose new initiatives to reduce absenteeism, encouraging them to track their impact over time.
  - Any new initiatives should be tied to a clear theory of change for improving attendance.

# Use Data Strategically

- While collecting and using data is important for success, it is insufficient on its own and should be done in service of implementing attendance improvement strategies.
- Encourage CLT members to use data strategically, such as identifying the students enrolled on Day 1 who were chronically absent last year and reaching out to them before they become chronically absent this year.
- Encourage CLT members to track the reasons why students are absent and analyze patterns to inform new initiatives.

## Encourage Coordination with Social Workers, DHHS Workers, and FACE

- Housing instability and other economic problems are major barriers to student attendance, but DPSCD identified just 5% of students as homeless in 2021-22.
- Major obstacles to McKinney-Vento identification include:
  - Lack of awareness of McKinney-Vento rights, homeless definition among parents
  - Feelings of stigma among parents
  - Lack of follow-through when staff learn about housing problems
- Encourage CLT members to coordinate with other staff and offices and put systems into place to identify student needs.

# Communicate About Available School Transportation, Encourage Innovation

- **Encourage walking/biking or a walking school bus**
  - Among students who lived 0.25 miles away from school or less, 44% never walked or biked to school. Among students who lived 0.5 miles away from school or less, 53% never walked or biked.
- **Encourage school bus usage**
  - 40% of DPSCD students who were eligible to ride the school bus **never** rode the bus to school.
  - Some families may not know they are eligible.
  - Even if a student is not technically eligible, if they can get to a bus stop, they are allowed to ride. The district has a great website that helps parents find a bus stop close to their home.
- **Consider asking parents to opt into a school directory so that they can coordinate with other families for carpools or back-up transportation**

# Q & A

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