

## **Chronic Absenteeism in the School-Prison Nexus**

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## **Abstract**

Since the incorporation of student chronic absenteeism rates into state school accountability systems after the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, schools have adopted new practices to improve student attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism. Some of these practices borrow features from behavior management systems such as tiering students, differentiating support and consequences, and taking disciplinary action. This qualitative case study examines how attendance management practices are designed and implemented in a large urban school district and explores the empirical and conceptual relationship between student behavior and attendance management within the “school-prison nexus.” We use interviews with parents, high school students, and staff charged with reducing chronic absenteeism to demonstrate how managing students’ attendance through intervention plans, student monitoring, and threats of legal action have implicit and explicit parallels to the management of student behavior in schools and could be considered a potential mechanism through which the school-prison nexus functions. We conclude with implications for schools and districts as they seek ways to reduce chronic absenteeism without contributing to the over-surveillance and punishment of high school youth.

*Keywords:* attendance, chronic absenteeism, school discipline, suspension, school-prison nexus

## **Chronic Absenteeism in the School-Prison Nexus**

Student absenteeism and discipline problems are both traditionally conceptualized as student behaviors that require school management (Weathers et al., 2021). This view can lead to exclusionary measures (e.g., suspension, truancy court referral) that ignore the context and root causes of these “behaviors” and can exacerbate absenteeism. In addition to exclusionary measures, student behavior and attendance management approaches such as contracts and incentives tend to direct efforts toward improving student or family motivation rather than the individual, community, and policy contexts that contribute to both absenteeism and student misbehavior (Lenhoff et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018, 2019). Taken together, school practices related to both absenteeism and school discipline could be implicated in the school-prison nexus, in which students are subject to monitoring, categorized as at-risk, and pushed out of school. These practices are particularly harmful to students of color, whose schools tend to have fewer resources compared to white students and are more at risk of pushout and criminal legal involvement (Sojoyner, 2013).

In this paper, we use empirical data from Detroit to develop a conceptual link between chronic absenteeism and school discipline as they operate in the school-prison nexus. We show how school practices to manage absenteeism resembled approaches and heuristics designed to address discipline problems. We answer the following questions:

1. How is student attendance managed by school personnel in the high absenteeism context of Detroit?
2. What features of attendance management are related to traditional features of discipline and behavior management?
3. How does attendance management exclude students from school?
4. How do students and parents experience attendance and behavior management?

Using interviews and observations of school-based staff charged with reducing chronic absenteeism, along with interviews with parents and high school students, what follows is an exploration of the relationship between behavior management, attendance management, and how they together function as mechanisms of the school-prison nexus.

### **Chronic Absenteeism**

Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing ten percent or more of the academic year for any reason (Strategies for School Sites, 2020), including excused and unexcused absences as well as suspensions. After the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* was signed in 2015, many states adopted chronic absenteeism as a non-academic indicator of school performance for their school accountability systems (Jordan & Miller, 2017). As such, researchers and policymakers have paid the issue increasing attention (Gottfried & Hutt, 2019), and school districts have developed new practices and roles to address chronically absent students (Lenhoff et al., 2022).

Chronic absenteeism can jeopardize literacy development and lead to lower academic achievement, matriculation, and graduation rates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Gee, 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2014). Absenteeism is also associated with negative health outcomes and involvement with the criminal legal system (Gee, 2019; Hendron, 2016; Kearny, 2013; Romero & Lee, 2007). Researchers have increasingly framed chronic absenteeism as an ecological issue, highlighting how it results from a combination of factors and processes within individual students and their immediate and broader contexts (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Melvin et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2021; Sugrue et al., 2016).

While the evidence on what works to reduce chronic absence is still developing, some studies have found that communicating with parents about their child's attendance and providing mentorship and support can improve attendance (Robinson et al., 2018; Smythe-Leistico & Page,

2018). However, few studies have examined the common practices schools are using to address student absenteeism, particularly since state accountability policies have motivated schools to make reducing chronic absenteeism a high priority (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Childs and Lofton (2021) suggest that chronic absenteeism is a “wicked problem” requiring a complex, holistic, and nuanced approach to addressing the issue (Childs and Lofton, 2021). Additional research maintains that current approaches to reduce absenteeism lack the nuance to address the disparities seen for students of color, or those who are economically disadvantaged or disabled (Gee 2018). While these studies are a promising start, much more is needed to understand and solve for the issue of chronic absenteeism. We believe that the empirical link between management approaches for chronic absenteeism and student discipline examined in the paper begin to move that research forward.

Importantly, chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects students who are traditionally disadvantaged in the United States. In particular, Black students and economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to be chronically absent (Conry & Richards, 2018; Anderson 2020; Gee, 2018; Gottfried, 2014). These disproportionalities are related to structural and environmental inequalities that economically disadvantaged students and racially minoritized students often face (Singer et al., 2021). Indeed, high levels of chronic absenteeism are concentrated in high-poverty urban districts, as well as in high-poverty rural areas (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Further research has found that the general framing and understanding of what counts as an excused or unexcused absence contributes to the racial and other demographic disparities present in chronic absenteeism rates as current policies and practices come largely from a white, Christian, and middle-class perspective (McNeely et al, 2021).

### **Behavior Management and the School-Prison Nexus**

The school-to-prison pipeline is a metaphor used to discuss the relationship between education, disciplinary practices, and involvement in the justice system. It is often conceptualized as the over-punishment of students, especially students of color, which pushes them out of the school system and into the justice system and incarceration. The pipeline metaphor, however, is somewhat limited in its articulation of a problem that goes beyond a linear connection between exclusionary discipline and justice system involvement. Instead, we describe the phenomenon as the school-prison nexus (McGrew 2016; Meiners, 2011). The school-prison nexus moves away from the singular idea of tracking students from school to prison and considers the larger network of connectivity between education, policy, and the criminal legal system, by interrogating the idea that people of color are inherently dangerous and in need of constant monitoring (Goldman & Rodriquez 2022).

Black, Latinx, and poor students are more likely to be subjected to these forms of monitoring and control, as they are much more likely to be labeled as outside the norm and either “at-risk,” “in need,” or both. This monitoring of Black students and their behavior in school is akin to the way Black citizens are often overpoliced (Goff, 2021; Owusu-Bempah, 2016). In Black communities across the country, intense police surveillance is evident through the high number of police stops and investigation of Black residents who are conducting normal daily business. We see this through stop and frisk and traffic stops based on mere suspicion based purely on race (Goff, 2021; Owusu-Bempah, 2016). As an extension of this, Black Americans are arrested at higher rates than whites for subjective offense such as disorderly conduct (Owusu-Bempah, 2016). Once within the justice system, Black defendants are served harsher sentences than whites where similar crimes are committed and thus our prisons experience higher shares of Black inmates than in the population (Goff, 2021; Lanni, 2022; Owusu-Bempah, 2016). In these forms of behavioral

management, both in schools and outside of them, both school discipline management and policing, Black people are over-monitored and investigated, are subjected to discipline/arrest at higher rates, often for subjective offenses, and receive longer/harsher suspension/sentences than white people do (Goff, 2021; Owusu-Bempah, 2016; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2011, Hughes et al. 2022). Schools have also brought police into the educational setting with School Resource Officers (SROs), which may view districts with large Black populations as vulnerable to threats from within (Fisher et al., 2022). Around 33% of public schools have SROs with the majority being in urban districts, which tend to have higher populations of students of color (Counts et al., 2018).

Researchers have closely examined the role that schools' exclusionary discipline policies play in the school-prison nexus. These policies target students who were perceived to be compromising the learning environment. Suspension and expulsion gained prominence in the 1960s to curb student misbehavior, and they were broadly used during the Reagan era of the 1980s (Offutt-Chaney, 2023). The national discourse at the time was heavy with racialized rhetoric about being "tough on crime" and having "zero tolerance" for perceived misbehavior or unlawful actions (Allman & Slate, 2011). This discourse spilled over into public schools, where administrators sought to convey a "tough" approach to student misconduct and policymakers promoted behavioral management over providing greater resources and supports to meet student needs (Offutt-Chaney, 2023). Suspension rates skyrocketed, especially for Black students, in the wake of these zero-tolerance policies (Allman & Slate, 2011; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Ramirez, et al., 2012). The racial disproportionality in school discipline cannot be accounted for by Black students engaging in more unwanted behaviors than other races, and Black students are more likely to be suspended for subjective offenses, such as "disrespect" (Fenning & Jenkins, 2019; Skiba et al.,

2014; Welsh & Little 2018). Exclusionary discipline not only fails to address perceived maladaptive behavior, but they can also exacerbate it, with increasing severity of penalties often resulting in increased frequency and intensity of behaviors viewed as problematic by school staff (Sugai & Horner, 2016). Given the racial disproportionality of exclusionary school discipline and its negative long-term consequences for students (Armour, 2016; Anyon et al., 2014; Curran, 2016; Hughes et al. 2022; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2011), this prominent form of behavioral management is a clear mechanism of the school-prison nexus.

Exclusionary school discipline practices, however, are only one set of tools that schools use to police students of color and push them away from educational opportunity and toward prison or other maligned statuses in society, such as “high school dropout.” Schools also employ academic testing and tracking to categorize students as “at risk” or “below grade level;” monitor and seek to punish their behavior, language, dress, and out-of-school activities; and implicate their families as deviant when they do not ascribe to formal and informal rules around attendance and parental involvement (Childs, 2018). The school-prison nexus literature has primarily examined schools and their connection to the criminal legal system with a broad lens that considers the multiple factors and forces at play not only within the schools, but also the communities and lives of people of color who are disproportionately affected by the nexus. There is, however, very little research into the specific role chronic absenteeism and schools’ management of the issue play in the school-prison nexus. This paper contributes new knowledge to our understanding of the school-prison nexus by focusing on how student attendance behavior management is executed with similar strategies and logic models as school discipline and other monitoring.

### **Conceptual Links Between Chronic Absenteeism and Exclusionary Discipline**



There is strong theoretical justification for understanding chronic absenteeism and exclusionary discipline as linked in how schools manage student behavior. To start, the literature on each suggests a correlation with the other, such that when students are chronically absent, they are more likely to be subject to school discipline policies and vice versa (Anderson, 2020; Gottfried, 2014; Kearney et al., 2014; Weathers et al., 2021). Quite literally, when students are suspended, they miss school and lose out on learning and development that would otherwise take place, and upon return, students are likely to behave in the same way that got them in trouble in the first place (Fabelo et al., 2011). Likewise, Mireles-Rios et al. (2020) show that zero tolerance policies can result in students being suspended and expelled for truancy which leads to further absenteeism. Kearny and Graczyk (2014) found that severe absenteeism or “truancy” is correlated with substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and other behaviors that make young adults more vulnerable to criminal legal system involvement. Further, students of color are disproportionately represented among those experiencing absenteeism and school discipline (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Schools often employ behavior management in a similar manner to solve for both absenteeism and student behavioral issues. This approach to student attendance has historical root: in the late 1800s and early 1900s, urban schooling and the penal system developed in tandem through the enforcement of truancy laws (Kafka, 2023). Today, behavior management involves how and why teachers and other school staff intervene to curtail, redirect, or sanction student behavior that is either formally against school rules or generally disruptive to the learning environment (Snyder et al., 2009). Teachers report that they get little training in their preparation programs for behavior management and that, even though it is an important part of their jobs, they largely learn routines and practices for behavior management through trial by fire, while in their

first years in the profession (Snyder et al., 2009). As a result, schools have often employed punitive and disciplinary policies to address perceived maladaptive behaviors in students. Though in-school behavior and student attendance are different domains for schools to address, staff perceptions of student absenteeism and the underlying logics for addressing it reflect the same kinds of deficit-based and anti-Black approaches found in the implementation of exclusionary discipline (Edwards et al., 2023).

Most U.S. states have laws that affect chronically absent students and their families, including punishments like fines, probation, removal of social service benefits, and even jail time. These punishments can lead to further trouble with the justice system even if the absenteeism is corrected, as students can violate the terms of their probation (e.g., not pay court fines and fees), which can then lead to jail time (Conry & Richards, 2018). In addition to truancy laws, some schools use suspension as a punishment for truancy. This approach is clearly “counterintuitive and difficult to justify given that this consequence further excludes students from school” (Anderson, 2020, p. 437). These harsh disciplinary reactions to school absenteeism, along with truancy laws, are ineffective and can exacerbate chronic absenteeism (Conry & Richards, 2018). Weathers et al (2021) confirm in their study that introduction into truancy court does not serve the intended purpose of curtailing absenteeism but instead leads to further truancy, especially for students of color, and that truancy has an association with a higher likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors and increased chances of arrest. Truancy policies have the intended effect of influencing families’ decisions about being present in school and what might constitute a valid excuse to miss school. While this may hold true for certain decisions, it is unlikely that these laws would change absences around factors that the student and families cannot control such as health, homelessness, and family emergencies. Not only are truancy laws unlikely to change attendance habits when

unexpected circumstances arise, they have the potential to worsen student attendance as students attend legal proceedings and are subject to attendance interventions, which may include exclusion from the classroom (Conry & Richards, 2018).

As punitive policies such as suspension have fallen under greater scrutiny, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and team-based, preventative measures have increased in popularity with U.S. schools. One multi-tiered system of support that has been used to manage student behavior is School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is a framework of tiered support for students at different levels of need and has been linked to decreased discipline and improved attendance when used with fidelity (Anderson, 2020). The framework supports school staff in categorizing students into levels of need and targeting different supports based on the extent of risk the student represents (Kearny & Graczyk 2018). Similarly, many districts have adopted PBIS and other forms of MTSS to categorize students and target strategies to address different levels of absenteeism (Strategies for School Sites, 2020). These frameworks reflect a view that the culture and climate of the school are primary drivers of student behavior and that school-based staff can best curtail undesirable behaviors by creating new incentives, systems of rewards and punishment, and individualized programs. However, some scholars have critiqued PBIS as being misaligned with trauma-informed education, reflective of a behaviorist view of students that disregards their internal wants and needs, and narrowly defining appropriate behavior in racist and ableist ways (Annamma, 2017; Kim & Venet, 2023). These critiques suggest that adopting PBIS-like frameworks to manage student attendance may create new ways to control, monitor, and punish students within the school-prison nexus. Little research has studied the use of this framework and other school practices in managing student attendance. This study begins to fill that gap.

## Methodology

We used qualitative data to empirically explore the relationship between absenteeism and behavior management in one urban school district. Qualitative data allowed us to understand how parents' and students' experiences of exclusionary discipline overlapped with chronic absenteeism, how the district approached these issues from a behavioral management perspective, and how parents and students experienced and were affected by that approach.

As part of a partnership with Detroit Public Schools Community District, we conducted a two-year developmental evaluation of the district's approach to reducing chronic absenteeism (2018-2020). Detroit has the highest rate of chronic absenteeism of any U.S. urban city (Singer et al., 2021), and 62% of students in DPSCD were chronically absent in the 2018-19 school year (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022), when this study began. Structural and environmental issues such as neighborhood safety, poverty, and transportation infrastructure are strongly associated with student absenteeism in Detroit (Lenhoff et al., 2022; Singer et al., 2021; Singer & Lenhoff, 2020). In addition, although suspended students were more likely to be chronically absent than those who were not suspended and out of school suspensions led to worse attendance (Singer, 2023), exclusionary discipline was not among the primary contributors to chronic absenteeism in the district. Instead, transportation, housing, health, and other challenges associated with poverty were the primary drivers of absenteeism (Lenhoff et al., 2022; Lenhoff & Singer, 2022; Singer et al., 2021). School, staff, and parent data were collected in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were interviewed in spring 2020 about their experiences prior to the pandemic.

This paper focuses on the school-based practices that were used to manage attendance issues and parent and student responses to those practices. Although the district used the same

approach to managing attendance across schools at all grade levels, we focus on high schools here because of the more frequent use of exclusionary discipline in the secondary grades (Singer, 2023). We recruited a stratified randomized sample of families with students in three chronic absence strata: not chronically absent, moderately chronically absent, and severely chronically absent. In Fall 2019, we interviewed parents from these families. In Spring 2020, we contacted the parents of high school students who we had interviewed to ask for consent to interview their children about their attendance. We recruited 37 parents and 29 high school students from five district high schools across the three absenteeism strata, as shown in Table 1. The interviews focused on the barriers families experienced in getting to school regularly and the resources they drew on to help them with attendance. We asked respondents whether suspensions or other issues at the school ever created barriers to attendance. When they did, we asked follow-up questions to explore more about how behavior management contributed to absenteeism. Family participants' racial demographics reflected the district, with about 14% identifying as Hispanic and 86% identifying as Black.

[insert Table 1 about here]

We also analyzed transcripts from interviews with 52 school and district staff who were involved in attendance initiatives, including attendance agents, deans of culture, school social workers, and others working on or with school-based attendance teams. Participants were recruited at district professional development sessions focused on attendance practices. We asked them about the barriers to attendance that they heard from students and families, the practices they employed to address absenteeism, and their use of data on attendance to inform their efforts. Although we did not collect data on the racial demographics of the district and school staff we

interviewed, 81% of the administrators and 93% of the school non-instructional staff in the district were Black in the 2018-19 school year, according to the State Longitudinal Data System.

We employed a two-part coding process, with parent/student transcripts coded separately from staff transcripts. Parent and student interview coding began with a code tree derived from an ecological systems framing, where we sought to code specific barriers and resources for school attendance across multiple domains of families' lives including school culture and discipline practices. We then looked within coded excerpts related to suspension (n=29 excerpts) to identify themes related to families' experiences with behavior and attendance management. For staff interviews, we inductively coded for specific practices that were used to improve student attendance. Out of 613 excerpts coded related to attendance practices, the plurality (n=206 excerpts or 34%) were related to the Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) approach that was also used to manage student behavior. In addition, 153 excerpts were related to monitoring student attendance data, 33 excerpts focused on using discipline policies, and 27 were related to court referrals. We read through the excerpts for each code and wrote thematic memos summarizing the key findings and specific practices identified.

### **Limitations**

Our data collection within schools focused on attendance management, not on discipline practices. Therefore, the connections we draw between attendance and behavior management are based on traditional models of discipline in schools and reports on school discipline from parents and students. We are not able to report on the specific discipline policies and practices the schools were implementing beyond what was told to us by parents and students.

### **Findings**

We organize our findings in three sections. First, we report on how attendance is managed by school personnel in the Detroit context, focusing on the development of school-based attendance agents, attendance teams, and the adoption of a PBIS-like system. Then, we draw parallels between the features of attendance management in the district and traditional discipline practices, particularly focusing on the monitoring, tracking, and excluding of students. Finally, we illustrate how parents and students experience attendance and behavior management, focusing on how discipline experiences influence families' relationships with school and, in turn, their attendance.

### **Attendance Management Practices**

For decades, attendance agents existed in the Detroit educational system as deputized officers who issued truancy notices and ensured that parents showed up to court when their children had missed extreme levels of school. These officers were not integrated into the school community and served primarily to punish truant students and their families. As school accountability efforts began to focus on “chronic absenteeism” rather than truancy after the passage of *ESSA*, the district reimagined attendance agents as a school-based role integrated in the school community. As one district staff person said:

Our plan for addressing chronic absenteeism this year was to go about placing an attendance agent in every school. In past practices, the district only had a few schools with a school based agent, and then the other schools relied, about three-fourths of the district, relied on the central office attendance agents.

Instead of focusing on truant students with the most severe attendance issues, the newly envisioned school-based attendance agents were tasked with proactively addressing absenteeism by building relationships with students, incentivizing strong attendance, and monitoring

attendance data. To do this, they were asked to implement an attendance MTSS that categorized students by the percent of days they had missed school, as well as continuing to implement the district's 3-6-9 policy, as described by a district leader:

We refined our 369 policy because there was a gray area. At three days, it was up to the teacher. So, if a child missed school up to three days, it was up for a teacher to make a call. At day six, the attendance agent would get involved. But there was no action of what to place on day four and five. So, we just updated that and put that on the teachers to continue to make contact up to day five, and at day six, turn it over to the attendance agent with documentation of the attempts that have been made to reach out to the child.

Agents were then asked to tailor their approaches for each category of students. The specific tools they were asked to use by the district included home visits, attendance contracts, attendance plans, and a data tracker. Home visits were sometimes used to build relationships with families or identify barriers to attendance that the district could address, by some parents found them intrusive or felt that they were being overly surveilled rather than supported. Attendance agents also continued to use incentives, court referrals, and other practices requested by their school leaders.

Finally, agents were asked to establish and facilitate an attendance team at their schools as “an expectation of that role.” The membership of the team was described by a district leader:

The Dean of Culture is required to be on the attendance team. We suggest a building administrator, AP or Principal. But if not, since the Dean is an administrator in the building, that would suffice. What we do there is to make certain that the Dean is aware because there may be some kids that cause behavioral issues, are also having attendance concerns. So being able to tier them and provide that support.



Therefore, the primary features of the attendance improvement strategy included a school-based attendance agent who was required to organize a team with the culture staff at the school, use data to “tier” students into a MTSS, and implement practices tailored for each tier. In the next section, we describe the implementation of those practices and their parallels with behavior management practices.

### **Parallels with Behavior Management Practices**

We identified three major parallels between attendance and behavior management in the district: how the roles and approaches were organized within the district structure, how students were monitored, and how punishment and incentives were used to shape student behavior. To begin, attendance and behavior management were overseen by the same district office. While attendance management was implemented by attendance agents and behavior management was implemented by deans of culture, their work was designed to be collaborative within school-based culture teams. Both positions implemented an MTSS approach to dealing with their respective student issues. Deans of culture and their teams used the Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) while the attendance agents and their teams used a similar MTSS focused on tracking and intervening on students based on their level of absenteeism. The primary practices implemented for attendance mirrored traditional disciplinary practices such as monitoring and tracking students, communicating about the problems, enlisting students and their families into contractual agreements, and sometimes threatening to push them out of the typical school environment.

These practices were being implemented through nearly universal use of tracking via tiers through PBIS and chronic absenteeism MTSS. Almost all attendance agents and deans of culture we interviewed said they were tracking student attendance and behavior and using three tiers to

identify the approaches to be used with students in their respective tiers. They spent the plurality of their time analyzing student attendance data and categorizing students into groups based on perceived risk of chronic absence, often in lieu of investigating the root causes of those absences. For instance, one attendance team member said their role is about, “breaking everything down into tiers and... just going over the data, learning how to go over the data.” Most district professional development sessions focused on attendance were also focused on monitoring students through data analysis and home visits, with considerably less emphasis on how to synthesize what they were learning from families about their needs and developing plans to support them. School staff responsible for attendance shared that they wanted more guidance on how to support students and families, rather than just identify problem student behavior and notify families that they may be punished.

Additionally, most of the school staff we interviewed described the use of some form of discipline for attendance and behavior issues through either the school (e.g., attendance intervention plans) or court referrals. In our interviews, no school staff mentioned explicitly that suspensions were being used to address attendance issues, but we did find that threats of discipline and legal action were major approaches to addressing absenteeism. One attendance agent described their approach as follows:

I don't want to say we want to borderline harass people and put legal notices, but we have to do our part of it too and deliver a legal notice, or have you have to come in and really tell us what's wrong. We may or may not even be able to solve it, but we do have information that could help us.

Another attendance agent described their use of legal notices as a threat by saying, “I look at attendance. If needed I use legal notices for kids or for families that need them. I'm just trying to scare them.”

While school staff relied heavily on the use of accountability, underlying causes of chronic absenteeism were often dismissed by school and district staff. We found that the schools and district staff attributed attendance issues to parent and student motivation, and thus did not trust that parents or students were telling the truth about why they were missing school. For example, one principal said, “sometimes, in my heart of hearts, I believe some parents are savvy enough to know, ‘I don't want to hear any questions, so I'm going to say it's a doctor's appointment. I've got to [say it's] a doctor's appointment when it may or may not be.’” As such, these “behaviors” continued because the root causes of each—such as a lack of access to transportation, student and parent physical and mental health, school safety, financial issues, and lack of social support, among others (Lenhoff et al., 2021)—went unaddressed. Likewise, parents did not feel that the use of exclusionary discipline helped. One mother described how suspensions were not addressing the issues at the root of her child's behavior and instead were just avoiding them:

The principal suspended him for five days, it was like he wasn't even trying to solve the problem. I never had a parent-teacher conference meeting. My son was getting suspended for five days at a time. How are you trying to help him and all you're doing is trying to avoid the problem because you just keep suspending him.

Avoiding the root causes of both misbehavior and absenteeism only served to further ostracize the students and families struggling with them.

### **Exclusionary Discipline Practices Exacerbating Absenteeism**

Our analysis of interviews with students and parents helps highlight the connections between exclusionary discipline and absenteeism. Families identified several reasons the schools suspended students but most common were for fighting, skipping school or class, or general misbehavior. Several students mentioned how they were suspended because of missed class, paradoxically increasing their absences as punishment for being absent. For instance, one 11<sup>th</sup> grader we spoke to shared how he was suspended for two days after walking out of class: “So this boy keep talking, and then I told him to be quiet. I was taking the test. And he just keep talking. And I walked out.” Similarly, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader at a different high school in the district shared that he was suspended for “skipping, and sitting on the stairs.”

Several families described suspensions as not only causing attendance issues, but also having a negative impact on the family’s relationship with the school and described situations in which they felt unsafe sending their children to school afterward. One parent of a high school student mentioned that her child was suspended because he “was being bullied” and because he got into an argument with another student. A high school parent also said that her daughter had been suspended due to fighting a couple of times “because the girl was bullying her, and they were fighting. So, it was for fighting in school. I mean, she got to defend herself.” These examples suggest that suspensions may have been a consequence of other factors that are creating barriers to student attendance, like unresolved conflict between students or not feeling supported by school staff.

## **Discussion**

Common attendance management practices may be implicated in the school-prison nexus. By meeting these attendance “behaviors” with punitive and exclusionary consequences, schools are pushing students out of the school environment and into the justice system and potentially

incarceration. Like exclusionary discipline practices, attendance management approaches position students as potential “risks,” monitoring students’ behavior to categorize them as such, while often not providing the material or psychological support students may be demonstrating they need by acting out or missing school. At their most extreme, schools use the courts and other legal tools to threaten, control, and punish chronically absent students and their families. Additionally, exclusionary policies and absenteeism both involve students being out of the learning environment and, as such, lead students to miss important academic content and social interaction.

The theoretical and empirical link between exclusionary discipline and chronic absenteeism has far reaching implications for practice and policy. The nature of the school-prison nexus is that schools function in much the same way as prison in which prisoners/students, largely people of color, are monitored and punished for infractions that further inhibit their prospects for success. Additionally, both institutions fail to address the root causes of the problem they purport to fix, causing them to be largely ineffective. Both exclusionary discipline and chronic absenteeism practices function as part of the school-prison nexus by not only monitoring youth in, and excluding them from, the academic setting, but by failing to address the root issues that lead to perceived behavior or attendance problems.

Understanding this relationship allows us to interrogate our practices of monitoring students and punishing them for things that can largely be out of their control. It exposes the flaws in school discipline policies, especially in terms of suspensions and expulsions which are the largest contributors to students being pushed out of the academic environment. It also highlights the explicit link of pushing students and families into the criminal legal system by wielding mandatory attendance laws and forcing families into legal trouble for their school attendance issues. States and districts should examine their current policies pertaining to student absenteeism

and behavior and find alternative approaches to not only addressing these issues when they arise, but also developing ways to provide resources to all students and families to help alleviate the issues leading to high rates of absence or misbehavior in the first place.

Much more research is necessary to examine the connections between absenteeism, discipline, and the school-prison nexus. More research on the use of suspensions as a direct punishment for missing school could illuminate the explicit relationship between chronic absenteeism and exclusionary discipline. Further, research in line with Kearney and Graczyk (2013) exploring a Response to Intervention framework for attendance would help in understanding the issue of chronic absenteeism and its relation to the school-prison nexus more holistically. Additionally, more research is needed on the dynamic and bidirectional relationship between student absenteeism and schools' management and condition of student behaviors, including how students of color are viewed as inherently dangerous or in-danger and therefore in need of monitoring. Childs and Grooms (2018) lays a blueprint that we are in the process of following to study how community-based organizations that have an interest in working with schools on these issues could support efforts that are mutually beneficial. Exploration of these conceptual and empirical links can advance our understanding of the drivers of absenteeism and the function of the school-prison nexus.

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**Table**

**Table 1**

*Absenteeism Status of Parent and Student Interview Participants, Fall 2019*

| <b>Absenteeism status</b>                          | <b>Parents</b> | <b>High School Students</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Not chronically absent (<10% days absent)          | 9 (24%)        | 10 (34%)                    |
| Moderately chronically absent (10–20% days absent) | 13 (35%)       | 11 (38%)                    |
| Severely chronically absent (>20% days absent)     | 15 (41%)       | 8 (28%)                     |
| <i>TOTAL</i>                                       | 37             | 29                          |