



Issue Brief on Attendance Incentives 2021

Detroit PEER has worked closely with Detroit schools and community-based organizations since 2017 to identify barriers to K-12 student attendance and use research to inform improvements in attendance policy and practice. This issue brief highlights what research has shown about the effectiveness of incentive interventions and provides a framework for thinking through their use among our partners.

Overview

- Absenteeism should be understood as an [ecological problem](#). While parent or student motivation may contribute to absenteeism for some students, what motivation means and whether incentives will impact motivation is complicated and contextual.
- The major drivers of high absenteeism in Detroit and other cities are related to broader social and economic inequalities that will not be overcome through incentives.
- Research on incentives and other “nudges” for attendance suggests a small effect, if any; and one major study on attendance incentives found negative unintended consequences.
- If attendance incentives are used as part of a broader attendance improvement strategy, we recommend using [Balu and Ehrlich’s \(2018\)](#) framework to design, implement, and evaluate incentives. Their framework asks designers to consider the following questions:
 1. **Problem diagnosis:** What are the *specific attendance problems/causes* that need to be solved?
 2. **Selection of incentive(s):** What *type of incentive* should be implemented in order to address the identified problem and change behavior?
 3. **Implementation planning:** How can the incentive be implemented in ways that *increase its salience and decrease tradeoffs*?
 4. **Evaluation and revision:** What do *evaluation results* of incentive-based approaches indicate about effectiveness and how to improve subsequent implementation?

Motivation in the Theory of Absenteeism

Our research, like others, has theorized that school attendance and absenteeism is a “wicked problem” shaped by individual level factors, family circumstances, school and neighborhood characteristics, and the macro-economic and policy context ([Childs & Lofton, 2021](#); [Gottfried & Gee, 2017](#); [Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018](#); [Singer et al., 2021](#)). Incentives, then, might theoretically affect attendance for students or parents who lack motivation for getting to school at the individual level. However, from [interviews with parents](#), we have learned that out-of-school barriers are significant, and “motivation” is complex and interrelated with these barriers in a way that incentives are unlikely to overcome for most families.

“Motivation” around attendance is shaped by *repeated experiences in context*. Incentives do not necessarily address the contextual factors that are demotivating. For example, one east side parent we spoke to explained that her son takes DDOT to school, and that repeated instances of missing

the bus (along with unsafe conditions and too-far distances to walk) have changed her son’s behavior around attendance. He does not see the bus as reliable, and that influences his decision to attend school on some days. Motivation may play some role in missing school for this student, but it is not clear whether incentives would increase his attendance, absent other interventions that changed his relationship with the bus.

Other high school students we spoke to suggested that broader cultural issues at the school, such as few strong relationships and unengaging curriculum, also shape their “motivation” about school. This might affect their decision-making, and attendance incentives probably wouldn’t resolve those issues.

Most parents with whom we spoke for our research identified significant out-of-school barriers, especially related to health and transportation. We did not find evidence that parents or students “don’t care” about school; rather, we found evidence that they face significant obstacles to attendance. Families whose children had good attendance sometimes faced similar obstacles, but they typically had greater resources to draw on, such as higher incomes, a stronger social network, and more reliable personal transportation. High rates of absenteeism in Detroit are related to social and economic inequalities. Detroit faces the greatest challenges compared to other cities.

Large Cities Ranked by Structural and Environmental Barriers to Attendance

Percentage of Adults with Asthma (%)		Violent Crime per 1,000 People		Unemployment Rate (%)		Poverty Rate (%)	
1. Detroit	14.00	1. Detroit	19.90	1. Detroit	19.80	1. Detroit	37.90
2. Baltimore	12.30	2. Milwaukee	14.85	2. Philadelphia	11.30	2. Fresno	28.40
3. Louisville	12.30	3. Baltimore	13.39	3. Fresno	11.10	3. Milwaukee	27.40
4. Philadelphia	11.60	4. Indianapolis	12.55	4. Baltimore	10.00	4. Philadelphia	25.80
5. Boston	11.40	5. Washington, D.C	11.85	5. Chicago	9.90	5. Tucson	24.10

Racial Segregation Index for Greater Metro Area		Average Monthly Temperature (°F)		Residential Vacancy Rate (%)		Population Change (%), 1970-2010	
1. Milwaukee	69.42	1. Denver	46.48	1. Detroit	27.00	1. Detroit	-52.86
2. Detroit	68.42	2. Milwaukee	46.67	2. Baltimore	18.00	2. Baltimore	-31.45
3. New York	63.66	3. Detroit	49.03	3. Chicago	14.00	3. Philadelphia	-21.69
4. Chicago	62.57	4. Chicago	49.56	4. Houston	13.00	4. Washington, D.C.	-20.46
5. Philadelphia	61.56	5. Boston	50.42	5. Indianapolis	13.00	5. Chicago	-19.94

Research on Attendance Incentives and Nudges

Research on attendance incentives and nudges suggests they could have unintended negative consequences. There is one major study that tests the causal impact of incentives on attendance. That study, by [Robinson et al. \(2021\)](#), found that attendance awards that were communicated in advance had **no impact** and that attendance declined after the awards stopped. The study also found that surprise awards that were given retrospectively (e.g., perfect attendance awards) had a **demotivating effect** and actually decreased attendance.

Research on other attendance interventions to “nudge” families, such as new forms of communication, shows a **very small impact**. For instance:

- [Robinson et al. \(2018a\)](#) found that targeting parental beliefs through communication decreased chronic absenteeism in a district from 5.5% to 4.5%.
- [Lasky-Fink et al. \(2021\)](#) changed the language in truancy letters to affect behavior. It reduced absences for students by 0.07 days compared to the original letter.
- [Robinson et al. \(2018b\)](#) found that many students want to participate in behavioral commitment devices (such as an “attendance contracts”) but that these things ultimately do not change student behavior.
- There are different kinds of school-based attendance incentives (e.g., awards, pizza parties, free dress day, Pistons tickets), but “**there is minimal research or evidence on their effectiveness**” ([Balu & Ehrlich, 2018](#), p. 96).

Because of the limited evidence of the effect of incentives and the theoretically different role of incentives across different grades, [Balu and Ehrlich \(2018\)](#) recommend that school and district leaders are very intentional about their design and implementation. They recommend the following framework to guide development:

1. **Problem diagnosis:** What are the *specific attendance problems/causes* that need to be solved? In other words, what attendance barriers can be solved through incentives?
2. **Selection of incentive(s):** What *type of incentive* should be implemented in order to address the identified problem and change behavior? In other words, who should be the target of the incentive and what kind of incentive might induce changed behavior?
3. **Implementation planning:** How can the incentive be implemented in ways that *increase its salience and decrease tradeoffs*?
4. **Evaluation and revision:** What do *evaluation results* of incentive-based approaches indicate about effectiveness and how to improve subsequent implementation?

Please contact Sarah Lenhoff with any questions or to learn more at sarah.lenhoff@wayne.edu.