Chronic absenteeism: Addressing systemic & structural inequities through participatory action research

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Introduction

Chronic absenteeism is a critical issue in contemporary education policy. Since the pandemic, public school enrollment and attendance have declined, raising concern about the adverse outcomes associated with missed school days (Dee & Murphy, 2021; Walters, 2022). Chronic absenteeism significantly decreases access to educational opportunities and increases the likelihood that students will experience social and academic hardships (Gottfried, 2019; Eklund et al., 2022). The intersectional significance of the issue is also critical, given that students who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent and with fewer resources to make up missed learning (Gee, 2018). For these reasons, improving attendance is a matter of social and racial justice, given public schools' capacities to serve in an essential protective capacity for youth, in general, and youth of color, in particular.

As an inter-generational collaborative of education researchers and activists, we apply these concerns to our local context in Detroit. Chronic absenteeism is a particularly acute problem in our city, as it holds the country's highest rate of severe missed attendance (Singer et al., 2021). Since 2013, we have been organizing to research and address this problem from quantitative and city-wide perspectives, documenting the structural barriers to attendance facing Detroit's students and families; and building a Research Practice Partnership (RPP) advocating for its alleviation. This study expanded the scope of our work by documenting the lived experience of chronic absenteeism in a Detroit neighborhood acutely affected by the problem. Through a participatory process rooted in community members' schooling experiences, we worked to understand the needs of students who experience chronic absenteeism. In so doing, we

demonstrate the critical significance of centering youth voices to advance culturally relevant and systems-focused education policy change.

Chronic Absenteeism: Causes, Outcomes & Reduction Practices

Estimates suggest that students miss 14-20% of school days per year, with some reports showing as many as 1 in 7 students missing 10% or more days (Dee, 2024; Eklund et al., 2019; Plasman & Gottfried, 2022). Various explanatory factors are ascribed to chronic absenteeism, including food insecurity, insufficient school and family resources, neighborhood conditions, hostile school environments, parental influences, students' physical and mental health challenges, and discipline histories (Bristol, 2017; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). Inadequate and unreliable transportation are also critical contributing factors (Lenhoff, Singer et al., 2022; Trivedi & Denton, 2019). The effects are felt both in and out of schools, as chronic absenteeism is negatively associated with literacy (Romaro & Lee, 2007), high school completion (Childs & Grooms, 2017; Gottfried, 2011), and contact with juvenile court systems (Baker et al., 2001; Eklund et al., 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017). The problem is also characterized by spillover effects, demonstrating reduced reading and math outcomes among students who experience chronic absenteeism and regularly attending students alike (Gottfried, 2014).

Carrying a chronic absence rate some 3.5 times higher than national estimates (Singer et al., 2021), Detroit's challenge with student attendance is an acute crisis. The social problems associated with the issue demand systemic responses to mitigate the risks it invites into students' lives and the pressures it exacts upon schools and their workers. Further, the city's majority Black, Brown, and low-income student population foregrounds the potential for chronic absence to exacerbate pre-existing race and class disparities in educational outcomes. Despite these pressing matters, Detroit's school districts have been slow to initiate formal responses, likely

because few strategies are available to draw from to improve attendance in large urban districts. School-based interventions that have succeeded were conducted in districts with lower concentrations of chronic absence than in Detroit and have produced only moderate effects (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020). To address this problem, nascent research has turned to collaborative methodologies to understand and address attendance barriers (Childs & Grooms, 2018; Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Lenhoff et al., 2020). Usually conducted within the context of RPPs, district and school administrators, parents, university researchers, and human services professionals work together to share data and resources to reduce chronic absenteeism. These collaboratives have developed resources to simplify organizational processes, create and disseminate information on the importance of attendance, and promote school improvement.

This study worked to expand this body of literature in ways that accounted for the affective dimensions of chronic absenteeism. Acknowledging that the underlying reasons for chronic absenteeism are multifaceted, there is a critical need to understand the lived experience of the issue. Though many studies detail the reasons why youth miss school and approaches to address chronic absenteeism, very few consider how they feel about the issue and what they believe are its solutions. Similarly, few studies consider the perspectives of educators who are responsible for carrying out attendance policies. Scholars of intersectional justice have long argued that people living a phenomenon are best positioned to serve as authorities on it and that alleviating the burdens of those most deeply marginalized produces equity and justice for all (Combahee River Collective, 1986; Collins, 2000). For these reasons, this study worked to expand the literature by centering the perspectives of those closest to the problem in a context where the problem is severe. In so doing, this research aimed to inform and improve strategies that can be applied across various contexts and school systems. The hope was that centering

youth and educator insight may inform attendance policy development in ways that promote

equity, helping to develop more effective strategies to address and reduce absenteeism in places

where the problem is critical.

Who We Are & Why We Write

In 2013, a coalition of neighborhood-based non-profit organizations taking political

action to address chronic absence established itself as a city-wide coalition to transform

attendance policy in Detroit's public schools. Their coalition laid the foundation for a Research

Practice Partnership (RPP) that has explored Detroit's problem with chronic absence for nearly

10 years (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022). The RPP found that health problems concentrated in low-

income neighborhoods, a lack of accessible childcare, and inadequate transportation systems

make attendance difficult for most of Detroit's families (Pogodzinski et al., 2022; Singer et al.,

2021). Still, school districts in the city often lean on accountability practices rendering students

and families vulnerable instead of working to address these complex problems (Edwards et al.,

2023).

As the RPP's efforts to understand chronic absenteeism in Detroit grew in nuance, they

sought to partner with families affected by the issue to ensure that lived experience was at the

center of their advocacy. To do this, the RPP's members invited their constituents to hear about

their attendance research and advocacy and to invite their leadership in future research. Residents

from Detroit's Brightmoor community volunteered to serve as participant researchers in this

study through this call for deeper community engagement.

Nine Brightmoor residents and two university researchers collaborated to design and

carry out this study. We are an intergenerational group of Black activists who hold close ties to

the Brightmoor community. Four of the Brightmoor researchers were parents and grandparents

of students attending the community's Neighborhood High School (NHS)[1], three were resident community activists working on education justice issues in the community, and one was a high school student living in Brightmoor but attending a school outside of the neighborhood because of the persistent injustices facing NHS. The university researchers were a faculty person and a graduate student (See Table 1). Both university researchers held close ties to Brightmoor through family and friends who live there and their professional experiences as community-based educators working in the community.

Table 1

Participant-Researcher Demographics

Participant-Researcher	Age	Affiliation	Relationship to NHS	Racial Identity
DeAntawain	Youth	Brightmoor Researcher	Community Activist	Black
[Author]	Adult	Brightmoor Researcher	Community Activist	Black
[Author]	Adult	Brightmoor Researcher	Community Activist	Black
Monet	Adult	Brightmoor Researcher	Community Activist	Black
Dorrie	Senior	Brightmoor Researcher	NHS Grandparent	Black
Helen	Senior	Brightmoor Researcher	NHS Grandparent	Black
Desiree	Adult	Brightmoor Researcher	NHS Parent	Black
Charniece	Adult	Brightmoor Researcher	NHS Parent	Black

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[1] Neighborhood High School is a pseudonym for the high school where most students from Brightmoor in 9th-12th grades attend.

Colbert	Adult	Brightmoor Researcher	NHS Parent	Black
[Author]	Adult	University Researcher		Black
[Author]	Adult	University Researcher		Black

Compared to the rest of Detroit, Brightmoor's community is deeply affected by chronic absenteeism. The neighborhood is educationally underserved, with just one traditional public K-8 school serving 1,500 children (Lenhoff, Singer, Pogodzinski et al., 2022). Few employment opportunities and access to safe and reliable transportation are available (Cornelissen, 2022; Sachteleben, 2020; Santiago et al., 2022; Shanks, 2017). These problems likely contribute to the neighborhood's challenge with missed school days. 54% of Brightmoor's students experience chronic absenteeism.

Our research team was motivated by these realities to learn about chronic absenteeism in ways that foregrounded the structural dimensions of the experience. Our knowledge of the systemic barriers to attendance in Brightmoor and our positionalities as neighbors, parents, students, activists, friends, and family prompted a shared concern for how educators treat people who struggle to get to school. Further, our shared racial identity prompted our interest in the connection between missed days of school and their potential to exacerbate racial disparities in education. With these concerns serving as the foundation of our inquiry, we co-created an interview study through a participatory research process to understand how students who experience chronic absenteeism were served by Brightmoor's Neighborhood High School.

Methodology: Participatory Action Research to Address Chronic Absence in Brightmoor

We framed this research by using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as both theory and methodology. PAR theorizes the approach as rooted in collectivism and liberatory political education. It holds that people affected by social problems are best positioned to analyze them because of their proximity to the policies, practices, and perceptions at their roots. In so doing, PAR also democratizes knowledge production by re-positioning people traditionally regarded as participants into researchers, asking them to consider their personal and political experiences as the basis of inquiry and to design and carry out studies from the foundation of lived experience (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). PAR is also conceptualized as a pragmatic and justice-oriented frame that produces useful results in real settings and among people critically affected by a phenomenon (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013).

While there is considerable diversity of thought regarding how to conduct PAR studies, methodologists generally agree that research development occurs in stages that include issue education and identification, group solidarity development, research design and implementation, data analysis and reporting, and action informed by the research (Ferrell et al., 2014; Kindon et al., 2010). Built throughout this process is a commitment to reflective practice, as the research team considers their choices and agrees upon a course of action that honors lived experiences, encourages deeper participation in the group, and takes care of the feelings and perspectives of everyone involved (Kindon et al., 2010). The university researchers used these theoretical and methodological assumptions to move the Brightmoor researchers through a 5-stage process that recruited community members, identified research questions and methods, and collected, analyzed, and reported data. The following sections detail this process.

Stage 1: Recruitment

The university researchers and non-profit leaders who are members of the RPP initiated this PAR. They conceptualized the study to secure funding that could provide stipends and research materials for participant researchers, given the constraints on time and personal resources that many of their members face. After the RPP secured funding, they recruited prospective participant-researchers by inviting their members to a two-day retreat on chronic absence in Detroit. During that time, the university researchers oriented the community members to the issue by reviewing previous studies and city-wide campaigns conducted by the RPP. From this foundational understanding, the university researchers facilitated conversations to identify shared issues and experiences with chronic absence. Through the process, youth shared experiences with educators who lacked empathy for the reasons why students experienced chronic absenteeism. Parents and grandparents discussed interactions with educators that made them feel blamed for circumstances affecting attendance that were often beyond their control. These experiences prompted the group to wonder how students who experience chronic absenteeism are treated in their neighborhood high schools.

Stage 2: Research Design

After the retreat, the university researchers gauged interest in continuing to participate in the project and obtained informed consent from those who did. All the Brightmoor participant-researchers who attended the retreat continued participating in the project as participant-researchers and established themselves as a working group to learn about chronic absenteeism in their neighborhood.

We then established regular monthly meetings to continue developing an inquiry. During those meetings, the university researchers facilitated group solidarity and story-telling exercises, helping the group name how they were personally and politically affected by chronic

absenteeism and the policies and practices meant to address it. The Brightmoor-researchers shared different experiences with the issue, with some having experienced chronic absenteeism, others being the parent or grandparent of a student experiencing chronic absenteeism, and others being concerned about how missing school affects community violence. We then applied our interest in the treatment of students who experience chronic absenteeism to the extant literature, developed research questions, designed a qualitative interview study to address them, and obtained IRB approval to conduct the study. As relayed in our review of the literature, the process taught us how leaders and stakeholders approach the issue but did not demonstrate the role educators play in attendance policy implementation—leading to our first research question:

> 1) What approaches do administrators and teachers use to support students who experience chronic absenteeism at Brightmoor's neighborhood high school?

Our group also found that few studies on chronic absenteeism centered youth voices or elicited their perspectives on addressing the problem. These paucities led the group to our second research question:

> 2) What approaches do Brightmoor's students who experience chronic absenteeism like or need to support improving their attendance rates?

This question also provided a solid counterpoint to compare the findings from research question 1, which focused on how adults who have decision-making power frame the issue. In so doing, we hoped to compare whether and how educator and student perspectives differ.

Stage 3: Sampling & Data Collection Methods

The group determined that our research questions were best suited to a qualitative interview study informed by a purposeful sample of educators and students who experience chronic absenteeism at Brightmoor's Neighborhood High School. About 90% of Neighborhood

High School students experienced chronic absenteeism in the 2021-22 school year, about 80% were categorized as "economically disadvantaged," and nearly 100% were Black. Approximately 85% of the teachers were Black, and about 10% were white (see more school characteristics in Table 2). We collaborated with a non-profit organization serving as an external partner to the school to recruit students and educators. The organization provided wrap-around services to students requiring additional social and academic support. Through this approach, we recruited 90 of the school's 500 students who experienced chronic absenteeism during the 2021-2022 academic year. We engaged these 90 students in 22 focus groups, each averaging four participating students and lasting for 45 minutes. Given the comparative nature of our research questions, the non-profit organization we partnered with also helped us recruit 11 of the school's 40 teachers and 4 of the school's five administrators. Each educator participated in one 30-minute interview.

Table 2

High School Characteristics, 2021-22

Characteristic	Percent of Total
Student Characteristics	
Chronically Absent	90%
Economically Disadvantaged	80%
Race - Black	100%
Students with Disabilities	30%
English Learners	0%
Female	40%
Teacher Characteristics	
Race	
Black	85%
White	10%
Hispanic	5%
Female	55%
Novice (3 years or less experience)	25%

Note. Statistics have been rounded to protect the identity of the school.

Stage 4: Analysis Methods

During the summer of 2022, we worked collaboratively through an inductive approach to thematic analysis to find and compare themes within the data. We divided our team into three groups, each responsible for analyzing student, teacher, and administrator data. In our respective groups, we used descriptive coding as an initial analysis method to break the data corpus into manageable parts. In a second round of analysis, we used focused coding to categorize the initial codes into groups according to similar topics. We then compared categories across the entire data corpus by fine-tuning their definitions and determining how they corresponded to the research questions. Categories about research question one, which focused on the approaches teachers and administrators used to address chronic absence at the school, were placed together, and categories pertaining to research question two, about students' support needs, were put together (See Table 3).

Categories about research question 1 developed a theme regarding the ineffectiveness of district policies and educator practices to connect with chronically absent students. Tensions between educator and student perspectives demonstrated a punitive attendance policy-scape that constrained educators' capacities to lead around and prevent the issue. Categories that addressed research question two demonstrated students' needs and wants to establish humanity-centered education to improve chronic absence. Students who experienced chronic absenteeism at Neighborhood High School articulated approaches to student engagement that may support their capacities to connect with the school as a space for human development.

Table 3

Thematic Analysis

Research Question	Corresponding Category	Theme Across Categories

1. What approaches do administrators and teachers use to support chronically absent students who attend Brightmoor's neighborhood high school?	1. The Punitive 3-6-9 Policy 2. Teachers' Preventative Approaches 3. A Lack of Accountable School Leadership on Chronic Absence 4. Student Perceptions of Empty Encouragement	The Punitive Nature of Attendance Policy at Neighborhood High School
2. What approaches do chronically absent students in Brightmoor like or need to support improving their attendance rates?	1. Structural Pathways 2. School Improvements 3. Social-Emotional Supports	Humanity-Centered Education as an Approach to Improving Chronic Absence

The Punitive Nature of Attendance Policy at Neighborhood High School

The teachers, administrators, and students described approaches to address chronic absenteeism that inadequately addressed the root causes of the problem. Teachers shared their efforts to support students who regularly missed school with empathy and opportunity, while administrators largely blamed students and parents for the problem. The students countered these findings by describing an antagonistic and uncaring school culture, where attendance was encouraged without providing systemic support to ensure it. In the following sections, we present the educators' perceptions and experiences with students who experience chronic absenteeism before sharing the students' perceptions. We represent the data in this way to demonstrate the policy context through which students navigate and to illustrate the tensions between educators' and students' characterization of the issue.
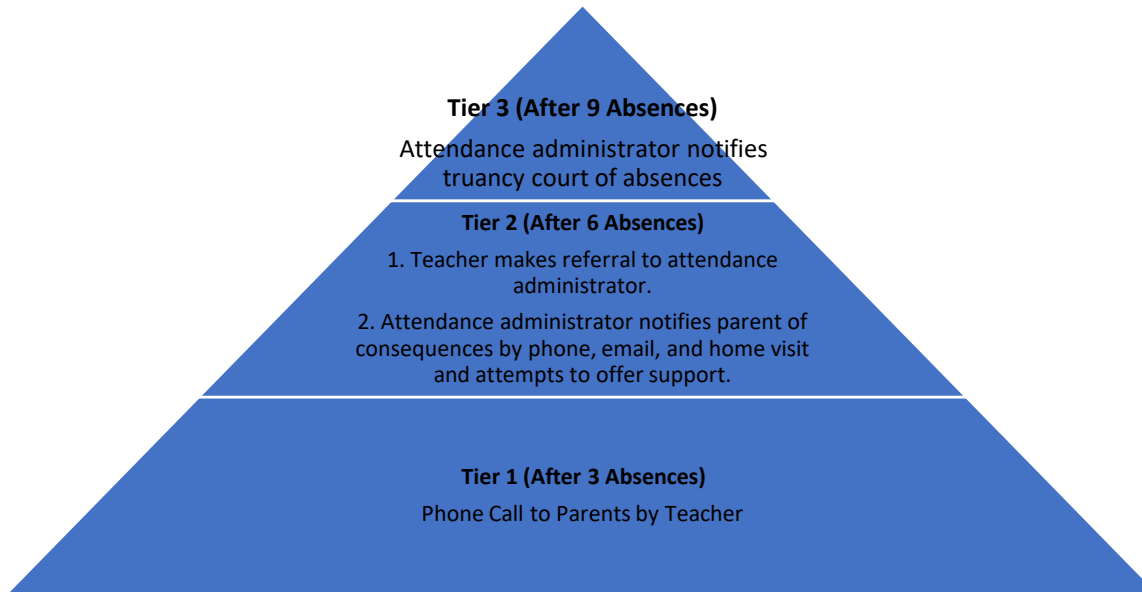
The Punitive 3-6-9 Policy

Both teachers and administrators named a specific school district attendance policy as the primary method to connect with students who experience chronic absenteeism. Called "3-6-9,"

the policy was a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) requiring educators to communicate with parents after a certain number of consecutive or non-consecutive absences of any sort, providing interventions of increasing severity at certain thresholds. Districts often use MTSS to address behavioral and other social challenges quickly and in ways appropriate to an infraction's severity (Lane et al., 2014).

The administrators and teachers shared the district's attendance MTSS as occurring in the following way: the first intervention threshold occurred after three missed days. It required teachers to make a phone call home to parents to notify them of their student's attendance status. The second threshold occurred after six missed days when teachers were required to inform the school's attendance improvement administrator about the student's sustained trouble. The attendance administrator was then responsible for contacting the family by phone and sharing the school district's requirement to report absences to the truancy court if they continued to miss school. The attendance administrator was also required to conduct a home visit if the family could not be reached by phone or email. Part of their responsibility in that communication was to provide resources and information to support the family in getting the student to school. After nine absences, the highest threshold of severity, the attendance administrator was required to report the family to the truancy court system, which would then be responsible for investigating and determining the student's status and need for family and juvenile intervention (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

The School District's 3-6-9 Attendance Policy

Tier 3 (After 9 Absences)

Attendance administrator notifies
truancy court of absences

Tier 2 (After 6 Absences)

1. Teacher makes referral to attendance
administrator.

2. Attendance administrator notifies parent of
consequences by phone, email, and home visit
and attempts to offer support.

Tier 1 (After 3 Absences)

Phone Call to Parents by Teacher

The teachers and administrators at Neighborhood High School cited the 3-6-9 policy as

inadequate to address students' reasons for chronic absenteeism. Their perceptions of barriers to

attendance matched those in the literature, as they highlighted students' need for transportation,

healthcare, employment, and other family caregiving responsibilities as getting in the way of

coming to school (Lenhoff, Edwards et al., 2022). They also shared how the 3-6-9 policy fails to

consider the nuances of chronic absenteeism, given the demands students and parents face in

their school community. An administrator remarked:

> Well, we have a [software program that] shows us our students who are chronically
> absent. It lets us know which category of attendance the students are in: "good,"
> "borderline," or "severe." I don't like the software system because we have kids that have
> improved their attendance to, like, the 80th percentile, but they're still labeled as chronic.
> That's not chronic to me because you improved, and when you're getting grades in
> school, 80% is not considered bad performance….And then we're dealing with urban kids
> and families. Not all families are this way, but a lot of our parents are single, working
> more than one job, maybe in school, whatever it is. It's difficult, and we don't know how
> many children they may have at home….So the kids are in it with the parents, and it
> could be [parents] don't know what resources are out there to get their children to school
> or help them stay in class. And I think a lot of times we make assumptions that they
> know.

This administrator highlighted what other educators at Neighborhood High School were clear to stress: the 3-6-9 policy fails to consider students' attendance improvement and community context. Similarly, the educators shared that the software system used to manage attendance was often inaccurate or working improperly. A teacher shared:

> A lot of the phone numbers that are in the system don't work because parents aren't able to keep their cell phones on, or their numbers change, and they don't update. So, we're not able to make contact to find out why that student isn't present. There's also a lack of communication and a breakdown between the administration, our attendance team, and the teachers. So, a lot of times, the way that the information is disseminated is sometimes secondhand or very late.

Maintaining an accurate and reliable communication system was critical to the educators' efforts to address chronic absenteeism, given that the 3-6-9 policy relied on phone communication as the foundation of its approach. However, challenges with being able to keep accurate records got in the way of being able to respond to attendance issues quickly. This problem suggests that systemic inaccuracies contribute to the problem of chronic absence, as educators struggled to communicate absentee status internally and externally with parents.

Further, the attendance administrator shared how the school's monitoring inefficiencies contributed to the tensions they experienced with parents. The attendance administrator remarked:

> By the time they come to me, I'm a fear to the parents and the students because of the authority I have to connect them with the courts….Last thing I want to do is send you to court, but I also want you to understand at the same time, your child needs to be in school. It is the law.

The educators' descriptions of an attendance policy that failed to account for student improvement, relied on an inadequate and slow communication system, and instilled fear in parents and students demonstrate the punitive nature of the 3-6-9 policy. Though seemingly designed to improve student attendance through swift and appropriate intervention, it created

institutional ties between Neighborhood High School and the truancy court system and relational

divides between educators, parents, and students who experience chronic absenteeism. This

suggests that although the 3-6-9 policy intended to address chronic absenteeism effectively, it

served as a punitive measure with the potential to invite social risks into students' and families'

lives.

Teachers' Preventative Approaches

Deficit perceptions often frame urban and under-resourced educators in the literature

(Howard & Milner, 2014), so it is important to note that most of the participating Neighborhood

High School teachers expressed how they attempted to circumvent the punitive 3-6-9 policy. Few

teachers expressed negative or disparaging opinions about their students. Instead, they relayed

efforts to prevent absences through their expressions of care and classroom policies. A teacher

shared:

> I message [chronically absent students] on Teams before it's a real problem and say, "Hey, what's up? Anything I can do to help?" Instead of, "Where are you? What have you been doing?" I try and say, "Hey, I'm here to help you. What can I do to get you to school?" And usually, the kid will say, "I lost my ID. I don't have a bus pass." Or something like that. "Okay, get here once, and we can fix that. We can get you another bus pass." That's not a problem because it's embedded into their IDs this year. I try to be a problem solver.

The teachers expressed how they worked from a position of awareness that their students often

deal with circumstances and responsibilities that create barriers to their attendance. For these

reasons, they shared the importance of suspending judgment about students' attendance status

and offering as many opportunities for students to be successful as possible:

> If the student feels like they have a chance to catch up, make up, present something that shows that they learned something or where they can kind of recover, they'll be more likely to come to your class versus if they know, "Oh, he don't take no late work. I done missed too many days, I got an F." But if they know, "Nope, there's a chance," I can find out what the situation was and we can try and work through that.

Still, these empathetic and relational approaches conflicted with the greater attendance policy

framework. The teachers expressed how the 3-6-9 policy did not offer flexibility, requiring them

to rely on escalating punitive attendance interventions in ways that exacerbated the effects of

missed school.

> I usually give my kids every opportunity to succeed, but I have one student I've seen twice all year. He's got to drop his little brothers and sisters off at school in the morning. He's got a valid excuse. I usually talk to him, or I'll message him on Teams and say, "Hey, is there anything we can do on our end to help you?" I try to make it feel like somebody cares. "Let us help you." Sometimes that works. I try to be warm with him but sometimes I have to say, "I don't know what you want me to do. My hands are tied as well. If you don't get your work in, you're just not getting a grade, and I have to tell [the attendance administrator]."

The teachers' approaches demonstrated the inadequacy of relational approaches to meet the needs

of students who experience chronic absenteeism, given the broader policy context of their efforts.

Their work to show empathy, suspend judgment, solve problems, and create opportunities were

mediated by an attendance monitoring system requiring them to adhere to the punitive 3-6-9

policy. These findings demonstrate teachers' considerable difficulty in resisting the policy's

punitive effect.

A Lack of Accountable School Leadership on Chronic Absence

The teachers' perspectives differed from the administrators,' who shared that their larger

responsibilities interrupted their ability to build meaningful relationships with students who

experience chronic absenteeism. Most of the administrators shared that they did not monitor or

address attendance issues. Instead, they conceded that job to the attendance administrator. The

attendance administrator's responsibilities included monitoring student attendance and

intervening at various levels of increased severity in cases teachers could not address. An

assistant principal shared, "Well, attendance issues go to [the attendance administrator]. When it

gets to her, then that means that it's a serious issue. And if I do see [attendance problems], I'll

refer to her." Another assistant principal echoed this remark and commented on the nature of the

attendance administrator's role:

> I'm not really sure about the details of those attendance policies. That probably would be better geared toward the [attendance administrator], who probably does [know]...but [the attendance administrator] has to do that home visit because they're technically truancy officers, but we want to make it sound nice.

These remarks further evidence the punitive nature of the attendance policy structure, as the

administrator clarified how the attendance MTSS maintains the conceptual markers of a carceral

approach to missed school. In ceding attendance issues to a single administrator responsible for

enforcing the attendance policies and laws, the administrators demonstrated a lack of leadership

to provide a nuanced perspective, vision, and direction regarding the issue.

The administrators also identified parents as the primary party responsible for students'

chronic absences. They characterized parents as uninformed about and unmotivated to address

chronic absence, effectively blaming them for students' struggles to get to school. Even as many

acknowledged Brightmoor residents' significant challenges, they placed the onus on parents to

improve the issue. An administrator shared:

> [There's] just the lack of focus on education on the student and the parent's part. Many times, the parents, they don't have education at the forefront. They don't place value on education.…Someone in the building, a parent, or some family member will come up here and explain, "Well, my child was having an issue with so and so." So, we'll sit down and discuss it to find out what's going on. But as far as they're just being chronic, not coming to school, it's many factors, I think, at home. The parents should know if the students are not going to school. Many of these parents won't even come to parent/teacher conferences. And we really bombard them with announcements about different things that are coming up at school. We have the robocalls for parent/teacher conferences and different things like that ...Yeah, so we have ways to get our information out, but they're not coming in the building.

Despite this administrator's insistence that the school had multiple ways to disseminate information, the only strategies shared during their interviews were to make repeated phone calls and, in severe cases, to make home visits.

When asked to share initiatives to encourage student attendance, the administrators described their efforts on the state's designated student enrollment count day. They used incentives to encourage students' attendance on that day—the outcome of which determined funding for the school district. Administrators enticed students with the promise of movie outings, ice cream socials, and pizza parties for grade levels and classes showing the highest attendance.

The administrators' perspectives demonstrated a lack of leadership to prioritize and innovate around chronic absenteeism. Instead, they admitted to relying on punitive procedures to address the issue, blamed parents as its root cause, and formally encouraged attendance on just one day of the school year. These inadequate administrative approaches further demonstrate Neighborhood High School's incapacity to meet the needs of students who struggle with chronic absenteeism.

Student Perceptions of Empty Encouragement

The students corroborated our analysis of Neighborhood High School's ineffective attendance policy context through their perceptions of educators' work to address their needs. They described receiving what we call "empty encouragement" to come to school, meaning that educators' efforts amounted to small gestures encouraging attendance without offering structural support and opportunities.

The students explained that their challenges with attendance stemmed from a larger sense of hopelessness that permeated the Brightmoor community. In so doing, they expressed how an

escalating series of threatening phone calls, home visits, and failing grades adds to, rather than

alleviates, the school- and community-based social problems Brightmoor students face. Students

shared:

Student 2:	It's the school environment, and we don't want to come here and do work. We're thinking, "What's the point?"
Student 6:	Yeah, I like that. A lot of it is being a product of [our] environment. You go around us, just some people get content with it, accustomed to it. That's all it's gonna be. School ain't gonna get you out of here, so what I'm trying so hard for? Last year, I dropped out. I didn't want to come. I was feeling I wasn't meant for it. I just got tired of coming to school.
Student 3:	It's nothing you would wake up at eight o'clock in the morning and look forward to.
Student 6:	Yeah, I didn't have nothing to look forward to. I know I thought I could keep it steady at home, maybe turn into, like, my mama and work, but I had to come, and the court was calling. I'm not a bad kid, though. I'm not bad. I do my work. This just isn't where you want to be.

The students in this focus group described what nearly all did: Neighborhood High School was

not an inviting environment that builds hope for the future. Another group reiterated this point,

adding how the school's inability to connect students to gainful employment and college access

opportunities made attendance futile, especially given the negative climate they experience when

they do attend:

Student 4:	[They need] to make us understand what you can get out of education. Okay. You go to school and say you graduate high school, but you didn't have the best SAT scores, and your parents don't got enough money to pay for college. Now you went to school for all these four years and-
Student 3:	For nothing, basically.
Student 4:	... you've got a high school degree, you got your high school diploma, but you're not going to college, so what'd you get out of it? You did four years in high school, and they told you to focus on high school, high school, high school. You did it. You didn't get nothing different from it. You still been doing the same job if you wouldn't have went to school. They tell us, if you do your work, you get the best SAT score, you try your hardest, and you put forth the effort, that effort will come back to you. If it ain't reciprocated... If I do something, and now I don't get nothing back in return, that's when you're saying, "There's no point to go." What am I here for?

These sentiments were evident across the students' focus groups, with all students expressing how Neighborhood High School's initiatives are often disconnected from the realities of their lives and hopes for the future. From this perspective, the educators' efforts amount to empty encouragement because they fail to make tangible connections between where students are and how attendance can support them with where they want and need to go.

The students also commented on their treatment in school. Where the teachers in this study described a sense of care and empathy for students, the students expressed a harsh and unrelenting school life, prioritizing institutional needs over students' realities. One student shared: "When I told her what was going on with me, [my teacher said] 'pain is temporary and GPA is forever,' basically trump other stuff I'm going through in my personal life and just worry about my grades."

We did not hear from students about caring teachers who attempted to problem-solve their attendance challenges or show understanding about their circumstances. Instead, they described educators who spoke to students harshly, used punitive discipline, threatened students with court involvement, and gave up on them. They described this treatment as occurring in a context where classes were not engaging, and a strict dress code often determined whether a student would be admitted to the building when they arrived. One student likened the experience of receiving empty encouragement to a Marvel villain, Thanos, whose defeat entirely erased his existence from the universe:

> So yeah, I feel like the teachers will help you, have a certain care for you, but if you're just like, "Oh, I'm failing, I'm not coming to school regardless." They're like, "You're cut." They're not even going to try to see what's really going on. [There's] a deadline. Last year my friend had a deadline to get his grades and attendance back up [by] March for him to graduate. And that was plus for credit recovery. So, then it got pushed all the way down to June itself. If he at least finished all his credit recovery, he could have been done before then, but he didn't do anything. So, [the school] just Thanos snapped [him] out of existence.

This quotation demonstrates the outcome of the empty encouragement educators offered through the chronic absence policy and practices at Neighborhood High School. The students did not describe a culture of care that supported them in seeing the value of school. Instead, they offered a picture of their school that showed a punitive approach to attendance improvement that disappeared them altogether from the school.

Importantly, the students named their parents and families as their primary support systems to improve attendance. This finding contrasts sharply with those relayed by the administrators, given how they framed parents as a root cause of chronic absenteeism. Across all focus groups, the students expressed how their mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, stepparents, and adult family friends offered support with waking up on time for school, transporting them to school, paying for ride-shares, and consistently giving encouraging and motivating words. During one focus group, the students said:

Student 1:   My mother. She helps me. Even on days where I don't want to go to school, she encourages me to come to school anyways.

Student 2:   My grandmother supports me. She drops me off, but it's not just transportation; it's also words of support.

Student 4:   Yeah, my Momma, every day she tell me have a good day, so it's like that's inspiration to make me want to try. She tells me to get across that [graduation] stage every day.

The students painted a different picture of their home lives than those shared by the administrators. They acknowledged the significant challenges they faced because of school and community hardships while highlighting encouraging parents who worked in concrete ways to support their persistence. Contrary to the empty encouragement offered by Neighborhood High School educators, their parents seemed to offer hopeful encouragement by providing them with the resources and social-emotional support they needed to get to and stay in school.

Humanity-Centered Education as an Approach to Improving Chronic Absence

The students' characterization of the empty encouragement they were subjected to by educators, compared to the hopeful encouragement they received from loved ones, suggests the need for holistic support when addressing chronic absenteeism. The students suggested several ways to do this. They named specific structural pathways to overcome barriers to attendance, called for particular school improvements and identified several social-emotional supports to increase Neighborhood High School students' desire to attend school (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Student Recommendations to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

Structural Pathways	School Improvements	Social-Emotional Supports
• Improve Access to Transportation • Provide college- and career-focused opportunities	• Make school less strict • Improve the quality of teaching. • Use a relatable curriculum • Improve teachers' classroom management • Increase enrichment & extra-curricular opportunities	• Create a positive school environment • Show care for students while they are in school • Understand students' specific circumstances

The pathways, improvements, and supports the students suggested offer the promise of a proactive and celebratory culture of attendance to transform the reactive and punitive approaches we found to be in place. Regarding structural pathways, the students discussed how access to school-sponsored transportation would support their attendance. The school district provided its high school students with free city bus passes. However, students expressed concern about the city's unreliable public transit system and safety while riding city buses. They also discussed the

importance of providing college- and career-focused initiatives to help them see how attending Neighborhood High School corresponded with their career ambitions.

In terms of specific school improvements, the students called for a welcoming school environment characterized by excellent teaching. They named strategies to realize this desire, outlining the need for relatable curricula, improved classroom management, and increased extra-curricular opportunities through world languages, art, and music. This level of specificity contrasts sharply with the teachers' discussion of curriculum as a preventative approach to chronic absence. Where the teachers discussed how they express concern for students who experience chronic absenteeism and adjust their classroom policies to meet their needs, the students named the imperative to help them realize their future ambitions through their class work.

Lastly, the students were clear that their challenges with attendance were more than just about motivation and transportation. They also discussed the critical need for social-emotional support for students who struggle with chronic absenteeism by creating a positive school culture and climate, caring for students in school, and understanding their unique needs. One student shared, "They should be more understanding. When you come to school, they don't really care you're here. But then, when you're not at school, they're like, "Oh, it's the end for you!" This perspective expresses the double bind that students who struggle with chronic absenteeism experience. On the one hand, their presence is wanted; on the other, it is unwelcome—which deepens the sense of alienation students who deal with chronic absenteeism feel.

The students' ideas to establish structural pathways, improve school, and provide social-emotional support identify humanizing education as a guiding philosophy for chronic absence intervention. Humanization in education resists compartmentalized notions of schooling,

focusing instead on the premise that humans are motivated by a need to reason, dream, and become (Freire, 2001). The policy-scape established by the 3-6-9 Policy is based on the former and, as demonstrated through this study, encourages disconnection from school through the interruptions it causes to school-based relationships and its potential to disappear students from the school. On the contrary, the students' ideas encourage greater ease with connecting to the school community, opportunities to establish and pursue their hopes and aspirations, and critical facilitation toward personal thriving. These practices develop a humanizing pedagogy in that educators discontinue practices designed to manipulate students in favor of supporting their capacities to address the problems they face (Cannon, 1990; Dutro & Pacheco, 2022; Freire, 2001). The students' expressed desires for support with chronic absenteeism achieve this goal through their ability to improve attendance, see and realize their ambitions, and experience meaningful connections that affirm their sense of school belonging.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate the punitive nature of attendance policies, namely through their potential to imbricate students and parents in systems of social control by addressing chronic absence with ever-increasing severity. Neighborhood High School's policy also interrupted critical relationships with the potential to connect students who struggle with chronic absence to school. This systemic deficiency, along with the administrators' neglect of leadership accountability, highlights a school environment where attendance monitoring was used to marginalize and exclude students who required more resources or flexibility than the school was prepared to offer. These students challenged the school's ability to provide adequate support by needing unavailable resources, not conforming to expected behavioral standards, or struggling with rigid attendance policies. These challenges reveal the school's limited ability or

unwillingness to adapt its practices to effectively meet the diverse needs of its student

population.

These findings further evidence the role of attendance policy in harming Black urban

students. The results parallel those demonstrating how attendance policy perpetuates the logic

and workings of anti-Blackness (Edwards et al., 2023; Dumas, 2016; Spencer et al., 2023).

Edwards, Singer, and Lenhoff (2023) found that over-emphasis on attendance strategies that

depend on the punitive backing of the court encouraged educators to frame Black parents and

students who experience chronic absenteeism as problems in need of surveillance instead of

support. The role of the 3-6-9 policy functioned in this same regard, doing more to encourage

fear and disconnection than connection and belonging. The educators' approaches functioned as

an additional entanglement among many erecting barriers to advancement for Black urban and

under-resourced students. These findings also parallel the critique of MTSS systems. They

further demonstrate how stepped interventions reduce the complexities of student needs to

narrowly defined behaviors, often premised on racist and ableist constructs (Annamma, 2017;

Kim & Venet, 2023). In this case, the 3-6-9 policy narrowly conceived attendance as a matter of

parental responsibility and punished Black families with court referrals without developing

preventative opportunities to avoid severe responses.

It is important to highlight how the students' reasons for absenteeism were more complex

than a lack of motivation and parental monitoring, and the approaches used to encourage their

attendance were ill-equipped to address their realities or strivings. In contrast, the solutions that

the students relayed were holistic in scope and emerged directly from their expressed needs,

emphasizing structural pathways, school improvement, and social-emotional support. In so

doing, their perceptions demonstrate how overcoming chronic absence is less a function of

monitoring and enforcement than of attendance infrastructure, curriculum, and critical care (Wilson, 2015). These insights demonstrate the imperative to develop policy solutions in concert with folks who have been affected by an issue (Kindon et al., 2010) and evidence the significance of centering youth voice in policy development and implementation—particularly when issues of race, class, gender, and other intersectional identities are imbricated. Adopting policy solutions and strategies that build upon youth insights, preferably when co-created with students and families who face barriers to attendance, may establish a foundation to create schools where students want to be.

The surveil and punish nature of the 3-6-9 policy, the teachers' inability to cultivate meaningful relationships with students, the administrators' lack of leadership and unwillingness to hold themselves accountable to improve attendance, along with the students' experience of empty encouragement demonstrate how Neighborhood High School's attendance systems dehumanized students who struggle with chronic absenteeism. Each approach to address their challenges was rooted in a perception of the need for their policing. Even attempts to empathize and problem-solve were conducted through the threat of law enforcement. The humanizing attendance policy approach implicated in the students' vision for a holistic path to school offers a preliminary framework for a socially just attendance system. Consistent with frames for humanization in education, their ideas support students' and educators' full development of personhood (Carmen Salazar, 2013). Removing barriers to transportation, developing tangible college and career plans, and ensuring a welcoming school environment characterized by dynamic teaching, positivity, and caring adults who hold regard for students are rights all students deserve. These strategies treat students with dignity and as deserving of the

opportunities that education affords. They also regard educators' humanity, given the potential they hold to abolish enforcement frameworks functioning hegemonically in their work.

When mechanisms to address social challenges meet human needs, school and community health thrive (Love, 2019; Rogers & Butler-Barnes, 2022; Warren et al., 2022). Attendance policy development initiatives can apply this premise by centering students' voices regarding chronic absence. The critical insights offered by students who experience chronic absenteeism at Neighborhood High School demonstrate how the current attendance policy-scape dehumanized Brightmoor's students and offered a framework for achieving humanity-centered attendance policies and practices. Importantly, the students' insights centered on their school, the context in which educators and education policymakers have the most capacity to make change. Given the broad ecology of absenteeism, this context-specific example of youth leadership is another hopeful avenue for change (AUTHOR, 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Educators have little influence over the societal challenges Brightmoor's students navigate. Still, they can build healthful, hopeful, and helpful school communities—which, in turn, support the overall wellness of the students, families, and community they serve.

Stage 5: Taking Action

The findings from this study support education justice efforts spearheaded by one of the members of the RPP who initiated this research, 482Forward. 482Forward uses these findings to support a campaign to shift the narrative regarding Detroit's youth and their challenges with getting to school. These findings, along with others learned through the participatory process, were shared with a non-profit media outlet covering the issue (Higgins, 2024). In so doing, the outcomes of the study were used to inform the public of the complexities associated with missing school and to build broad-based support for systems-level change. We are also working to

demonstrate the connections between attendance policy and the school/prison nexus. Our goal is to pressure policymakers to design supportive systems centered on student and community needs.

The findings have also been incorporated into 482Forward's broader platform around humanizing Detroit's Black and Brown public school students through ensuring adequate school funding, access to wellness, and school-based cultural competence. 482Forward's most recent campaign focuses on establishing healthy and healing community schools. It uses these findings by lifting the specific needs of Neighborhood High School to school board members and public-school administrators. At the time of this writing, we are exploring how the reallocation of state and local funding for education can support the students' demands for structural change in support of attendance.

Acknowledgments

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