

Detroit Schools **Outpace** State in Improving Student Attendance

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INTRODUCTION

Schools in Detroit and across the state are focused on improving student attendance, especially since the rise in chronic absenteeism rates during the COVID-19 pandemic (Singer, 2024). In this brief, we provide important evidence on the effectiveness of Detroit schools. To do so, we use a value-added method, which helps us account for students' background characteristics and estimate the impact of each school on attendance. (See our [prior report](#) for additional details about our methodology and detailed findings from our statewide analyses [Singer et al., 2026].)

Even while chronic absenteeism rates in Detroit remain among the highest in the state and the country (Singer, 2024; Singer et al., 2021), our estimates show that Detroit's schools are among the most effective at boosting student attendance. Attendance value-added scores vary among Detroit schools, but on average they are higher than schools throughout the rest of Michigan (and demographically-similar schools in the state). This apparent contradiction highlights the persistent role of poverty and other forms of inequality in shaping Detroit students' attendance (and their educational outcomes more generally). Local and state policymakers must support the positive efforts of Detroit schools by helping to address the broader social and economic challenges that impact Detroit students and their families.

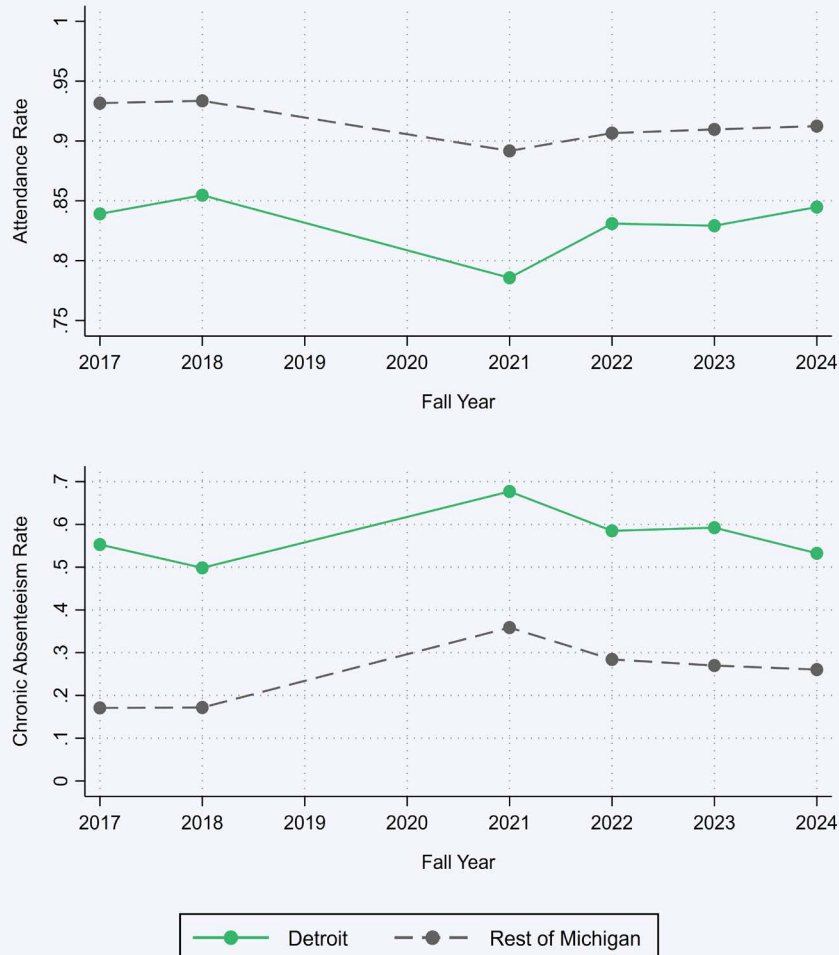
DETROIT HAS HIGHER ABSENTEEISM RATES BUT STRONGER POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Absenteeism rates remain high in Detroit, but the city's schools have had a stronger recovery when compared to the rest of the state (Figure 1). Prior to the pandemic, the average attendance rate of Detroit students was around 85%, compared to around 93% for students in the rest of Michigan; and around half of Detroit students were considered

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chronically absent (i.e., missing 10% or more school days), compared to around 17% statewide. During the pandemic, attendance rates in Detroit and statewide fell, and absenteeism rates rose. While attendance has improved over time statewide, it has just about recovered to pre-pandemic levels in Detroit. By contrast, the average attendance rate for the rest of Michigan remains lower than before the pandemic, and the chronic absenteeism rate remains higher. In 2024-25, the average Detroit student attended school at about the same rate as in 2017-18, whereas the average student in the rest of Michigan missed between three and four more days of school than in 2017-18.

Figure 1: Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism Rates Over Time for Detroit and the Rest of Michigan



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Detroit's stronger attendance recovery since the pandemic is a product of the effectiveness of city schools. As we discuss in the following section, our value-added estimates show that Detroit schools, on average, are more effective than schools in the rest of the state at improving student attendance.

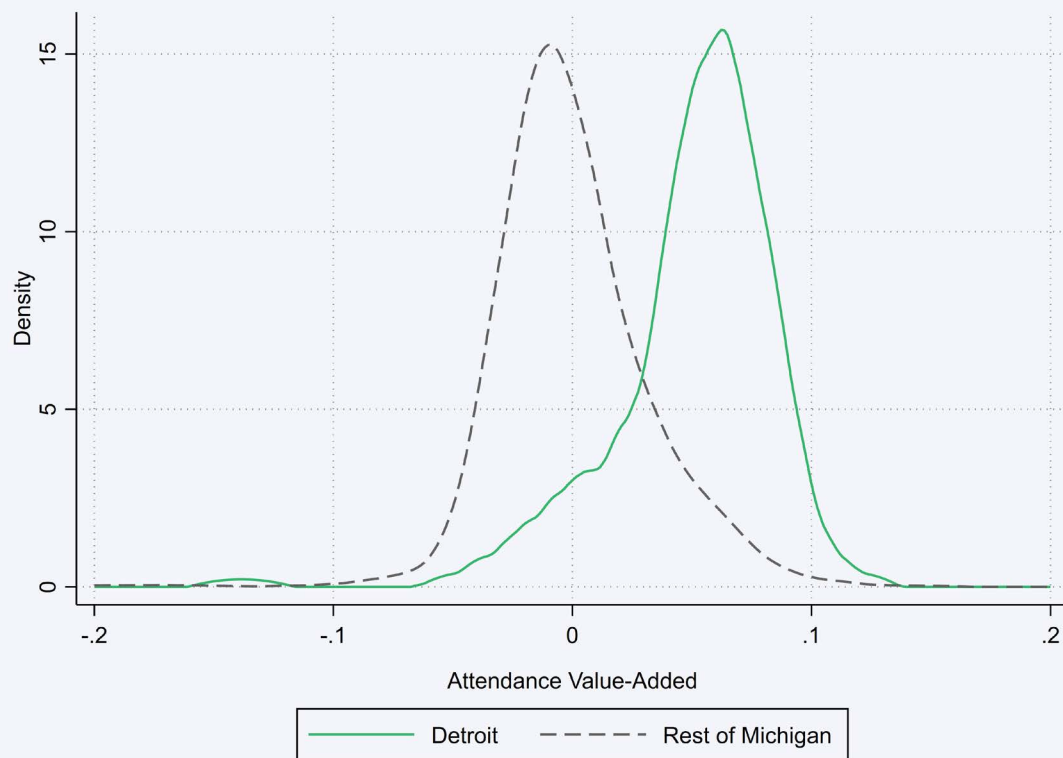
DETROIT SCHOOLS ARE MORE EFFECTIVE (ON AVERAGE) AT BOOSTING ATTENDANCE

We define a school's attendance effectiveness based on its "attendance value-added" score (Singer et al., 2026). For context, the average value-added score in Michigan is 0, meaning that the average student would not be expected to attend any more or fewer days if they attended that school. Schools with above-average value-added are places where students attend school more than they would be expected to in an average school; and students in schools with below-average value-added attend less than they would be expected to in an average school. The average Michigan student would be expected to attend 7 additional days (in a typical 180-day school year) if they switched from a below-average school to an above-average school.

In Detroit and the rest of the state, there are many schools both above and below the average for attendance value-added; but Detroit schools stand out as especially effective. The average Detroit school has a value-added score of 0.05 (i.e., +5 percentage points), which means that the average Detroit student is expected to attend 9 more days of school than if they went to the average Michigan school (Figure 2).

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Figure 2: Attendance Value-Added for Detroit Schools Compared to All Other Michigan Schools, 2024-25



Detroit is not the only high-poverty district where schools are effectively supporting student attendance. We found that Michigan schools with a larger share of low-income students tend to have higher value-added scores on average, perhaps because school-based attendance efforts may have bigger impacts for students who need the greatest support (Singer et al., 2026). Still, even when compared with similar schools around the state, Detroit schools have higher value-added scores (translating to about 2 additional days attended). Schools in the Detroit Public Schools Community District and Detroit charter schools are similarly effective (i.e., similar average value-added scores and similar distribution of schools above and below average).

WHAT STRATEGIES EXPLAIN DETROIT SCHOOLS' EFFECTIVENESS?

We conducted a statewide survey of principals to learn more about how schools are addressing chronic absenteeism (Singer & Lenhoff, 2025), and the results from that survey provide some clues for why Detroit schools are especially effective in supporting student attendance. These differences suggest that Detroit schools' effectiveness with attendance is, at least in part, due to their (a) sustained attention to absenteeism, (b) stronger attendance-related systems, (c) deeper family engagement, and (d) a broader set of student supports. Specifically:

- Detroit school leaders more often list attendance as a top priority and are more involved in attendance-related efforts.
- Detroit schools use a broader set of strategies, and more often use strategies that involve deep family engagement (e.g., home visits). They are also more often addressing key out-of-school barriers (e.g., transportation, housing, financial insecurity).
- Very few Detroit school leaders (about 14%) ever refer students or parents to truancy court, compared to school leaders in the rest of the state (63%).
- Detroit schools have made more progress establishing and fully implementing systems to coordinate their attendance efforts, such as attendance teams and multi-tiered systems of support.
- Non-instructional staff members that support students (e.g., attendance personnel, deans of culture, family engagement personnel) are more common in Detroit than the rest of the state.
- Detroit principals more often reported that their districts provide guidance around attendance, and more often rated that guidance as very helpful (rather than somewhat or not helpful).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings on attendance effectiveness challenge a common narrative about Detroit schools and student attendance. Although Detroit students have high rates of chronic absenteeism, Detroit schools are (on average) very effective at supporting attendance, with much higher value-added scores than the statewide average and demographically similar schools elsewhere in Michigan. This distinction matters: high absenteeism rates in Detroit should not be interpreted as evidence that schools are failing students, but rather as evidence that schools are working hard in a context where students and families face substantial barriers to regular attendance. Our research suggests that Detroit students would be missing significantly more school if it wasn't for the efforts of their schools.

At the same time, these findings make clear that schools cannot solve chronic absenteeism alone. Detroit schools appear to be doing many of the things policymakers and researchers recommend: prioritizing attendance, using data, building attendance teams, engaging with families, implementing new practices, and addressing barriers when possible. But the persistence of high absenteeism despite these efforts underscores the need for broader local and state investments in the social and economic conditions that shape whether students can get to school consistently (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025).

The city of Detroit has already taken positive steps in this direction, from establishing the Office of Youth Affairs and increasing coordination with Detroit schools (City of Detroit, 2026a) to adopting the "Rx Kids" program to provide financial support to young families (Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, 2026) and the "Ride to Rise" program to provide free public bus rides to all Detroit K-12 students (City of Detroit, 2026b). The city can build on these efforts by making schools a central partner in neighborhood, housing, and transportation policy: engaging school leaders and families in development decisions, helping to expand the "community schools" model, strengthening housing protections and supports for families with school-aged children, and coordinating transit, safety, and sidewalk improvements so students can reliably get to school and participate in neighborhood life (Lenhoff & Singer, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

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At the state level, rather than placing the burden solely on schools, the state should invest in the conditions that make regular attendance possible—including economic opportunity for families, affordable housing, accessible health and mental health services and reliable transportation (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). A useful first step would be to convene a legislative working group to identify statutory barriers and coordinate attendance policy across agencies and sectors. An example of this is Minnesota’s Student Attendance and Truancy Legislative Study Group (Nigro, 2024). The state could also fund and evaluate promising pilots, such as relationship-centered home-visit models like Connecticut’s LEAP program (Brunner & Ross, 2024), which improved attendance among chronically absent students; or explore creative transportation strategies, like those emerging in Indianapolis, where leaders responded to bus driver shortages and rising costs with transit passes, shared service models, and changes to state law allowing smaller vehicles (D’Orio, 2022). Together, these approaches would shift state policy from monitoring and punishment toward coordinated support, local flexibility, and evidence-building around what helps students get to school consistently.

Finally, Detroit’s success should be treated as an opportunity for learning and improvement. Future work should examine what distinguishes the Detroit schools with especially high attendance value-added from those that are less effective, including differences in leadership, staffing, family engagement, student supports, and implementation quality. Understanding these differences can help Detroit schools continue to improve while also offering lessons for other Michigan schools seeking to strengthen attendance in the post-pandemic period.

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