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**Combating Chronic Absenteeism: A Practical Approach to Improving Attendance in a
Mid-Sized Virginia School Division**

Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education

Learning Cohort 24 - Doctorate of Education

Alissa Fraser, Caroline Goddard, Brian Raska, and Michael Sidebotham

Combating Chronic Absenteeism: A Practical Approach to Improving Attendance in a Mid-Sized Virginia School Division

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
List of Tables and Figures.....	7
List of Tables.....	7
List of Figures.....	7
List of Abbreviations.....	8
Abstract.....	9
Chapter I: Introduction.....	10
Chapter II: Methods.....	15
Client Background.....	15
Chronic Absenteeism: Comparing State and Division Data.....	16
Research Questions.....	19
Limitations and Assumptions.....	28
Study Alterations During Implementation.....	31
Chapter III: Literature Review.....	33
School Factors That Impact Chronic Absenteeism.....	35
Relationships.....	36
Engagement and Academic Performance.....	39
Climate and Safety.....	41
School Organization and Management.....	43
Transportation.....	44
Non-School Factors and Their Impact on Chronic Absenteeism.....	45
Transportation.....	45
Health.....	47
Family Factors.....	49
Mobility.....	52
Resources and Systems that Impact Chronic Absenteeism.....	54
Data Tracking and Analysis.....	55
Family Communication and Engagement.....	57
Family Outreach and Support.....	61
Positive School Climate.....	65
Implementation Science.....	66
Preparation.....	67

Initiating a New Process.....	70
Evaluating the Intervention.....	72
Fidelity.....	72
Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Findings.....	74
Quantitative Data: CPS Outperforms Virginia, U.S. but Challenges Exist.....	75
CPS Grade Level Data: High Rates of Chronic Absenteeism in Kindergarten; Increases in Middle School Through High School.....	76
Black, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged Students Struggle with Chronic Absenteeism.....	78
Title 1 Schools Experience High Variability in Chronic Absenteeism Rates.....	80
CPS Chronic Absenteeism Data Shows Wide Variations by Borough.....	82
Qualitative Data: Staff Conversations Offer Insights on Chronic Absenteeism.....	85
Identified Barriers in CPS.....	85
What We Know About Communication and Engagement in CPS.....	88
How CPS Tracks and Analyzes Attendance Data.....	90
Cultivating a Positive School Climate: Strategies and Varied Implementation.....	92
Lack of Sustained Family Outreach and Support around Attendance in CPS.....	93
The Importance of Implementation and Fidelity.....	95
Summary of Findings.....	98
Chapter V: Recommendations.....	99
Consistent Methods of Tracking and Analyzing Attendance Data.....	102
Division-wide, Systematic Use of the MTSS Framework.....	103
Clear and Consistent Use of Attendance Teams.....	104
Fidelity Leads to Successful Implementation.....	106
Intentional Planning and Sharing Ways to Create a Positive School Climate.....	108
District Wide Plan: Incentives and Mentor Programs.....	109
Facilitating District-Wide Collaboration.....	110
Fostering Communication and Engagement with Parents and Families.....	110
Providing Outreach and Support to Families.....	114
Further Explorations.....	117
Conclusion.....	120
References.....	122
Appendix A.....	135

Division Level Interview Protocol.....	135
Appendix B.....	138
School Administration Focus Group Protocol.....	138
Appendix C.....	140
School Level Team Focus Groups.....	140
Appendix D.....	142
Updated School Based Team Interview Protocol.....	142
Appendix E.....	144
Family Interview Protocol.....	144
Appendix F.....	146
Figures for Race/Ethnicity by Individual Group.....	146
Appendix G.....	148
Figures for Student Demographic Groups by Individual Group.....	148
Vita.....	150

List of Tables and Figures

List of Tables

1. Rates of Chronic Absenteeism in CPS, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the United States, 2015 - 2023.....	17
2. Rates of chronic absenteeism (in percent) among student groups in the Commonwealth of Virginia and CPS, 2015 - 2016, 2018 - 2019 and 2021 - 2023.....	18
3. Summary of Data Collection and Analysis.....	28
4. Behavior Incidents Per Student Disaggregated by Borough.....	85
5. Main Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Data Review.....	101

List of Figures

1. Four Phases of the Research Study.....	21
2. Chronic Absenteeism: National, State and Division Rates	76
3. CPS Chronic Absenteeism by Grade - Elementary.....	77
4. CPS Chronic Absenteeism by Grade - Secondary.....	78
5. Division Chronic Absenteeism by Race/Ethnicity.....	79
6. Division Chronic Absenteeism by Demographic Group	80
7. Ranges of Chronic Absenteeism for Title 1 and Non Title 1 Elementary Schools.....	81
8. Range of Chronic Absenteeism by Borough.....	82

List of Abbreviations

AI: Artificial Intelligence

AIP: Attendance Improvement Plan

CA: Chronic Absenteeism

CHEWS: Community Health Education Workers

COVID: Coronavirus Disease

CPS: Client Public Schools

EBSCO: Elton B. Stephens Company

ECD: Economically Disadvantaged

EL: English Learners

ELL: English Language Learner

ERIC: Education Research Information Center

ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act

FACE: Family and Community Engagement

K: Kindergarten

MERC: Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium

MI: Meaningful Interaction

MTSS: Multi-Tiered System of Supports

SES: Socioeconomic Status

SIS: Student Information System

SWD: Students with Disabilities

TTAC: Training and Technical Assistance Center

U.S.: United States

US: United States

VCU: Virginia Commonwealth University

VDOE: Virginia Department of Education

Abstract

COMBATING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO IMPROVING ATTENDANCE IN A MID-SIZED VIRGINIA SCHOOL DIVISION

By Alissa A. Fraser, Ed.D., Caroline S. Goddard, Ed.D., Brian A. Raska, Ed.D., and Michael B. Sidebotham, Ed.D.

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2024

Chair: Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, Ph.D. Professor, Department of Educational Leadership

Keywords: chronic absenteeism, implementation science, multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)

Chronic absenteeism poses a significant public health challenge in the United States, impacting educational outcomes and student well-being. This research explores strategies to address chronic absenteeism within Client Public Schools (CPS) before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2015-present). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates a literature review, quantitative analysis of CPS attendance data, and qualitative insights from focus groups and interviews. Findings reveal disparities among student groups, increased absenteeism post-pandemic, and multifaceted barriers to attendance, including school-related challenges and non-school-related factors. The study underscores the necessity for a unified strategy to track attendance data, consistent implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework, and fostering a positive school climate. Recommendations advocate for district-wide manuals outlining MTSS strategies, ongoing training, clear roles for attendance teams, additional personnel, incentives, mentor programs, and effective communication with parents and families. The paper emphasizes a holistic approach involving stakeholders to create a supportive environment conducive to student attendance and success.

Chapter I: Introduction

Tracking student attendance has been a fundamental part of schooling in United States public schools for generations. Spurred by the Industrial Revolution, a growing desire for a robust public education system funded by taxpayers gained momentum and public schools began to emerge across the nation throughout the late 1800s. In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to pass a compulsory education law (Glatter, 2018). By 1918, each U.S. state had enacted compulsory education laws that required children to attend school (Rauscher & Oh, 2021). In order to ensure that families adhered to these laws, taking attendance and maintaining a roll of students enrolled in a school became a necessary procedure in schools across the nation.

For over 100 years, researchers have studied how consistent attendance impacts students (Kearney et al., 2022). In the early twenty-first century, efforts to promote school attendance led Ralph Smith of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to commission research on this important topic. Through this work, a report titled *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* (Chang & Romero, 2008) was published and the term “chronic absenteeism” was born. In the report, the authors recommended that a student missing 10% or more of their instructional days should be considered chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008). Over the next decade, research on chronic absenteeism was prolific. With the inception of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) districts were required to have a non-academic factor as part of their accountability system. At this time, many states chose to emphasize chronic absenteeism as a potential measure of school performance. As a result, 36 states included chronic absenteeism as a measure within their ESSA plans that were submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.

The elevation of chronic absenteeism to a place of importance within the ESSA accountability system is not without purpose. Volumes of research exist outlining the impacts of consistent attendance on student outcomes. Several critical studies on chronic absenteeism presented analogous findings related to the impact of chronic absenteeism on students. Numerous studies outlined how chronic absenteeism led to diminished academic performance, lower standardized test scores, and an increase in the likelihood that students would be considered academically at risk (Balfanz et al., 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008). Studies also highlighted the correlation between chronic absenteeism and lower levels of student engagement, increased likelihood of behavioral issues, and an increase in dropout rates among chronically absent students (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008). Beyond the impact on school performance and engagement, chronic absenteeism has also been linked to social issues including higher rates of substance abuse as well as an increase in psychiatric disorders like depression and separation anxiety (Nairn, 2022).

Like many issues in public education, these challenges disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities, and students in poverty. Research that explored rates of absenteeism and reading performance among first graders revealed that, while performance declined as absences increased, the impact was more significant for Black and Latino students. Specifically, scores comparing students who missed less than four percent of their school days versus those who missed 10% or more of their days showed a disproportionate impact. Though students in all groups had declining scores, White student scores declined by three percent while Black and Latino students declined by six percent, or twice the rate of their White counterparts (Chang & Romero, 2008). Students with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent which consequently increases the likelihood of lower academic performance (Gottfried et

al., 2020c). Research has also shown that students with low socioeconomic status are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism. Additionally, chronically absent and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to experience slower growth in literacy than their chronically absent peers who do not face socioeconomic challenges (Ready, 2012).

As noted, chronic absenteeism has been a key nonacademic indicator for most states since the authorization of ESSA in 2015. Nationally, rates of chronic absenteeism ranged from 12% to 16% between 2016 and 2020 (Attendance Works, n.d.). During these same years, individual states reported varying rates of chronic absenteeism with Idaho and Wyoming consistently reporting some of the lowest rates (ranging from 1.7% to 3.2%) and Alaska notching the highest rates ranging from 25.8% to 30.1% (Attendance Works, n.d.). During these years, Virginia consistently had low rates of chronic absenteeism, with rates ranging from 10% to 12% in the years prior to COVID.

Following the school shutdowns caused by COVID, the national rate for chronic absenteeism has increased significantly. Since the return to full, in-person schooling in K-12 public education following the closures and modifications that occurred during the COVID pandemic, school leaders have reported declines in average daily attendance and increases in the number of students considered chronically absent. A recent report that compiled data from 40 states and the District of Columbia showed that the rate of chronic absenteeism jumped in the 2021 - 2022 school year to 30% (The White House, 2023). Research from Stanford University adds that this increase in chronic absenteeism has the potential to slow academic recovery efforts related to learning loss experienced in the aftermath of the COVID school closures (Dee, 2023). When considering the many detrimental effects that research has shown related to chronic

absenteeism, the rising numbers in this area paint a dire picture for the academic outcomes, social development, and well-being of the current and future generations of American students.

As a state that began using chronic absenteeism as a nonacademic measure in the accountability system, Virginia maintains robust data related to chronic absenteeism on the Virginia Department of Education website (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). Beginning in the 2015 - 2016 school year, comprehensive absenteeism data broken down by state, division, and individual school including all student and various demographic categories is publicly available. The data revealed that when the state began reporting this data in the 2015 - 2016 school year, 10.4% of Virginia students were considered chronically absent. The rate jumped the following school year to 11.9% prior to two consecutive years of improvements at 11% and 10.6% respectively (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). Following COVID, Virginia experienced a significant increase to 20.1% in the 2021 - 2022 school year.

Similar to national trends, chronic absenteeism has risen to the forefront of issues confronting public schools in Virginia. The issue has gained significant focus including its inclusion in a recently announced initiative from Governor Glenn Youngkin and the Virginia Department of Education titled “All In VA” (Governor of Virginia, 2023). The initiative proposes actions to combat learning loss and improve attendance with attendance listed as the first focus area in the plan. This emphasis is well placed as Virginia has seen a significant increase in the rate of chronic absenteeism since COVID. For the 2018-2019 school year, the rate of chronic absenteeism in Virginia was 10.6% (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). In the wake of the pandemic, for the 2022 - 2023 school year, the rate nearly doubled to 19.5% (Virginia Department of Education, 2023c).

Client Public Schools is one division that experienced a precipitous increase in

absenteeism in the immediate aftermath of COVID. In the years prior to COVID, the rate of chronic absenteeism in CPS ranged from 6.9% to 7.5% while during the 2021 - 2022 school year (the year for the complete reopening of Virginia schools), the rate jumped to 19.4% (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). In response to this steep increase, officials from CPS contacted Virginia Commonwealth University to submit a Request for Assistance related to the increase in chronic absenteeism in their division. The request was accepted and our capstone team has researched and will be assisting CPS with their attendance challenges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide Client Public Schools (CPS) with a comprehensive plan to address chronic absenteeism and improve school attendance. We will offer division-wide practical solutions that can be implemented across schools and that provide results for diverse student groups.

The capstone team will use a mixed methods research approach in order to:

- Understand the various factors related to chronic absenteeism post-COVID with specific attention focused on CPS
- Identify division-level support systems and resources necessary to decrease absenteeism rates
- Provide a specific division-wide plan that includes practical strategies for implementation to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism with fidelity across the division.

Chapter II: Methods

Client Background

To better focus our efforts, it was important to begin with an understanding of the community and school division so that our research and recommendations could be tailored to their needs. According to their government website, Client is a blend of urban and rural areas and boasts excellent schools, recreation, and cultural facilities (City of Client, n.d.). The city is located in southeast Virginia in the Hampton Roads region of the Commonwealth. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, nearly 250,000 people live within the 338 square miles that make up Client, making Client one of the largest cities in Virginia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Approximately 24% of the population of Client is under the age of 18 with just over 40,000 students enrolled in the school division, making it the 7th largest school division out of 133 divisions in the state (Virginia Department of Education, 2023a). The students of CPS are educated in 45 schools (28 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and 7 high schools). The division uses two models for elementary school distributions with eleven elementary schools housing kindergarten through fifth graders, nine primary schools that enroll kindergarten through second graders, and eight intermediate schools that hold third through fifth graders. Middle schools support grades six through eight and high schools enroll grades nine through twelve. The division also structures feeder patterns from elementary to middle to high school into boroughs with a total of seven boroughs linked to the seven division high schools.

In data reported in the division's School Quality Profile (Virginia Department of Education, 2023a) for the recently completed 2022 - 2023 school year, division demographics revealed a diverse student body. During this school year, White students made up the largest percentage of the student body at 43.7% followed by Black at 31.4%. Hispanic students

comprised 12.3% of the student population followed by students of two or more races at 9.1% and Asian students at three percent. American Indian and Native Hawaiian students made up less than one percent of the student population at 0.3% and 0.2% respectively. Demographically, the student population of CPS is similarly diverse to the overall student population in Virginia public schools with some variation within specific demographic groups. Across the Commonwealth, White students are the largest group at 45% followed by Black (21.7%), Hispanic (18.7%), Asian (7.5%), and two or more races (6.7%) (Virginia Department of Education, 2023c).

During this year, 40.1% of CPS students were identified as economically disadvantaged. Students with disabilities made up 18.5% of the division student body and English language learners comprised 3.8% of the population. Across Virginia, economically disadvantaged students made up 44.1% of the population, students with disabilities were 13.8%, and English language learners were 13.7% (Virginia Department of Education, 2023c). This reveals that CPS data is similar to state data for poverty while the division identifies more students for special education services than the state average and supports fewer English learners than the state average.

Chronic Absenteeism: Comparing State and Division Data

During the 2015 - 2016 school year, 16% of K-12 U.S. public school students were chronically absent (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In Virginia, schools fared better with a rate of 10.4%. CPS performed better still with a rate of 7.3% (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). Following COVID, a large increase in chronic absenteeism was reported. Specifically, the last year prior to COVID with a complete, in person school year was 2018 - 2019 at which time, the rate of chronic absenteeism was 6.9% in CPS and 10.6% in the state. In the 2021 - 2022 school year, the first with a full return to in person learning across Virginia, CPS's chronic

absenteeism surged to 19.4% and the Virginia rate nearly doubled to 20.1%. In the table below, data from 2015 - 2023 is presented. Note that CPS and Virginia data are available for each year while national data is only available for four years including 2022 - 2023 where the data was extrapolated from 40 states (The White House, 2023).

Table 1.

Rates (in percent) of chronic absenteeism in CPS, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the United States, 2015 - 2023

Year	2015 - 2016	2016 - 2017	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022	2022 - 2023
CPS	7.3	7.7	7.1	6.9	7.5	9.0	19.4	13.2
Virginia	10.4	11.9	11.0	10.6	11.8	11	20.1	19.3
US	15.5	12.8	*	16.2	*	*	30.0	*

Note. * = no data available for this year.

Data in this table comes from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b), United States Department of Education (2019), and The White House (2023).

According to research presented earlier, chronic absenteeism impacts different student populations differently. As such it is useful to know the rates of chronic absenteeism among student groups in Virginia and in CPS. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b) shows that in both CPS and across the state, homeless students have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism with roughly one-third of these students identified as chronically absent prior to COVID and over half being chronically absent after COVID. Data for each student group showed increases in division and state chronic absenteeism between 2018 - 2019 and 2021 - 2022. During that time, CPS saw rates of chronic absenteeism more than double for all groups except American Indians and those in foster care. Table 2 provides comparative data for CPS and Virginia across various groups for years prior to COVID.

Table 2.

Rates of chronic absenteeism (in percent) among student groups in the Commonwealth of Virginia and CPS, 2015 - 2016, 2018 - 2019 and 2021 - 2023.

	2015 - 2016		2018 - 2019		2021 - 2022		2022 - 2023	
	Virginia	CPS	Virginia	CPS	Virginia	CPS	Virginia	CPS
All Students	10.4	7.3	10.6	6.9	20.1	19.4	19.3	13.2
American Indian	14.0	11.6	13.7	15.8	25.2	24.5	24.3	21.8
Asian	6.2	2.1	6.6	3.3	11.4	6.9	14.4	5.2
Black	12.6	8.1	13.0	7.9	25.1	24.8	22.5	17.3
Hispanic	11.6	8.4	12.7	7.5	24.9	22.1	24.5	14.2
Native Hawaiian	9.1	4.4	9.3	7.9	19.3	27.1	18.9	11.8
White	9.7	6.9	9.5	6.2	17.3	15.8	16.5	10.7
Multiple Races	10.3	7.2	10.8	6.9	20.0	18.7	19.4	12.4
SWD	16.0	12.2	16.2	11.8	26.3	25.0	25.4	18.3
ECD	15.7	11.6	16.3	11.8	29.8	30.2	27.5	21.2
EL	10.4	8.3	11.7	7.6	22.7	22.6	23.1	16.1
Homeless	32.0	42.2	34.0	33.6	50.9	60.1	49.1	51.1
Foster Care	NA	NA	16.0	13.6	25.7	23.3	23.8	14.5

Note. SWD = students with disabilities; ECD = economically disadvantaged, EL = English learners.

Data from the 2019-2020 and 2020 - 2021 school year has been excluded due to school closures in March 2020 and varied instructional delivery models (in person, virtual, hybrid) in 2020 - 2021.

Data in this table comes from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b).

In nearly every student group, CPS outperforms Virginia. Yet, the 2021 - 2022 data reveals high rates of chronic absenteeism in vulnerable populations described in the research such as Black (24.8%) and Hispanic (22.1%) students, students with disabilities (25.0%), and economically disadvantaged students (30.2%).

Research Questions

The research questions sought to investigate chronic absenteeism in Client Schools. These questions were structured around key aspects, such as identifying underlying causes, evaluating the effectiveness of division-level systems, assessing the resources and strategies in place, and examining how these efficient division-level systems, resources, and strategies are implemented. These inquiries aimed to extract valuable insights from both the current practices within the school division and evidence-based approaches outlined in pertinent literature. The guiding questions for this evaluation were as follows:

1. What factors are responsible for contributing to chronic absenteeism among K-12 students before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2015 - present)?
 - a. What does the literature say about chronic absenteeism and the factors impacting it?
 - b. What are the main factors that CPS identify as contributors to chronic absenteeism?
 - c. How do these factors vary across different demographic groups?
 - i. Which demographic groups are the most impacted by chronic absenteeism?

2. What specific systems, resources, and strategies are necessary for school divisions to effectively address and reduce chronic absenteeism before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2015 - present)?
 - a. What does the literature say about the most impactful resources and systems to address chronic absenteeism?
 - b. In CPS, what resources and systems are currently used to address chronic absenteeism? How have they been implemented?
 - i. In CPS, what are the current attendance policies and procedures in place? How, if at all, have they changed over time?
 - ii. In CPS, what percentage of the division-wide budget is allocated to the Attendance Department? How, if at all, has it changed over time?
3. How can school divisions implement research-based systems, resources, and strategies to effectively address and reduce chronic absenteeism?
 - a. What does the literature say about implementing division-wide systems, resources, and strategies?
 - b. In CPS, what are the current approaches to division-wide implementation?
 - c. How can CPS amend/add policies and procedures to ensure the use of research-based strategies to address and reduce chronic absenteeism?
 - d. How can funding be allocated to address and reduce chronic absenteeism effectively?

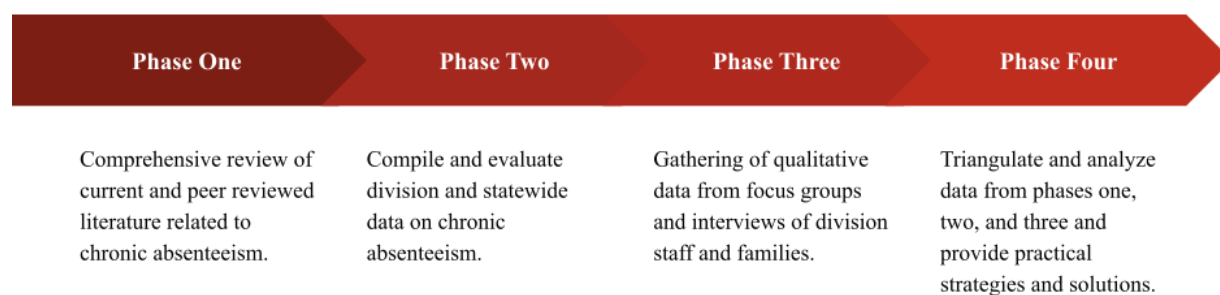
Study Design

The capstone team employed a mixed-methods research approach to comprehensively investigate the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism after the COVID-19 pandemic and to

identify essential division-level support systems and resources required to decrease chronic absenteeism rates. Additionally, we conducted an in-depth literature review to explore evidence-based practices within the fields of education and behavioral science. The mixed-method approach allowed us to provide a specific division-wide plan for CPS that includes practical strategies for implementation to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism with fidelity across the division.

Figure 1

Four phases of the research study



Phase One. The first phase in assisting CPS involved conducting a comprehensive review of current and peer-reviewed literature. The literature included was carefully evaluated by considering the strength of the study design, relevance to the subject matter, and focus on identifying root causes of chronic absenteeism and ways to increase attendance rates. The literature review allowed us to compare research findings regarding effective strategies with the current practices within CPS. This approach enabled us to tailor our recommendations more effectively.

Phase Two. The second phase involved evaluating quantitative data, which included CPS attendance rates from 2015 to the present, as well as division and statewide attendance data. We also utilized data provided by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC). The MERC data allowed for a comparison of CPS attendance data to the state and another similar

region of Virginia. This data was broken down by grade level, demographic information, and borough. This analysis aimed to establish the current profile for chronic absenteeism within CPS.

Phase Three. The third phase of our research centered on gathering qualitative data. To achieve this, we organized focus groups and conducted semi-structured interviews. These sessions aimed to gather insights from both staff and families regarding the factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism among K-12 students. Additionally, we learned what existing resources and systems are employed by CPS to address chronic absenteeism. Our ultimate goal was to identify the most effective approaches for addressing and reducing chronic absenteeism. We engaged in meaningful conversations with administrators, Central Office personnel, and school staff involved in attendance matters. We had hoped to engage with families to capture their perspectives and experiences with chronic absenteeism but were unable to do so. We also conducted a focus group with representatives of the Virginia's Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC). TTAC was chosen due to their collaboration with the division in the area of chronic absenteeism. This phase of our research was of paramount importance because it enabled us to provide recommendations that are not only relevant but also sustainable for the school division.

Phase Four. In the last phase of our research, we triangulated and analyzed the data collected from our literature review, quantitative research, and qualitative research. This comprehensive analysis enabled us to provide valuable feedback as well as practical strategies and solutions to address the needs of Client Public Schools effectively (Perry et al., 2020).

Data and Methods

Literature review. To conduct the literature review, we utilized Virginia Commonwealth University's databases, including Proquest, ERIC, and EBSCO, in combination with Google

Scholar to identify relevant literature. Additionally, reviewed literature led us to identify other pertinent articles and resources. Our initial search criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles. However, given the dynamic nature of chronic absenteeism as a trending subject in education, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, we also broadened our scope to include recent non-peer-reviewed literature. This adjustment enabled us to uncover literature that offers valuable insights into the most up-to-date developments and understandings related to chronic absenteeism. We started with over 100 articles and then selected those that were most relevant to our topic and ended with over 80 articles. Our review encompassed literature from the early 2000's up to the present day, with a particular focus on recent research related to the post-pandemic period.

Search terms on the topic of chronic absenteeism included barriers to school attendance, truancy, strategies to improve attendance, school climate, and absenteeism, attendance improvement programs, the impact of chronic absenteeism, factors contributing to absenteeism, student and teacher relationships, implementation science, and sense of belonging.

Our search focused on specific terms and articles that revolved around four main themes related to our research questions. These four themes are factors within schools and divisions that contribute to absenteeism, factors outside of school that affect school attendance, the necessary resources and systems to reduce absenteeism rates, and the implementation of initiatives on a school or division-wide scale. After conducting our initial literature search, we carefully reviewed each article to determine those that contained valuable information and compelling data related to the four main topics. This systematic approach allowed us to delve deeply into each theme, synthesize the existing literature, and extract key research findings to inform our research.

Interviews and Focus Groups. The capstone team conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups to investigate the factors contributing to chronic student absenteeism, the necessary resources and systems for addressing low attendance rates, and the steps required for the successful implementation of strategies to combat chronic absenteeism. In November, we collaborated with personnel from Client Public Schools to identify participants for our focus groups and interviews. The capstone team provided the district with an outline of the key characteristics and qualities we sought in individuals for potential interviews and focus group participants. Our target participants included current CPS principals, school-based and district personnel responsible for attendance and supporting students with attendance issues, and families with students who have a history of chronic absenteeism. We engaged with these groups to gather valuable insights and input regarding chronic absenteeism.

We held three distinct focus groups, each with two to four participants. The first focus group consisted of school-based personnel who are responsible for addressing attendance and supporting students at risk of chronic absenteeism. This group included individuals such as assistant principals, truancy presenters, and attendance clerks. The second focus group was composed of elementary school principals, while the third focus group included principals from secondary schools. We included a mix of principals from schools with both low and high chronic absenteeism rates to gather a diverse range of perspectives. The focus groups took place from December to January. During these sessions, participants were asked questions and prompted to share their experiences regarding school absenteeism. Participants had the freedom to contribute as much or as little as they felt comfortable with, but they were encouraged to describe their experiences and express their opinions openly.

Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with district personnel in the same November to January time frame. Our focus for the interviews was on district personnel responsible for attendance. The interviews took place virtually, and participants received a confirmation email with instructions on how to log in and how to participate in the group. One or two members of the capstone team conducted each interview.

The identified participants received a detailed description of the purpose of the interview or focus group, the time commitment, and any identified benefits, harm, or consequences for participation or non-participation. A reminder email was sent prior to the focus group or interview to decrease the chance of participants dropping out.

Both the interview and focus group participants were identified solely by their general roles, such as administrator, division personnel, or counselor. The questions were posed by one or two team members, and the discussions were conducted via Google Meet and recorded. These recorded discussions were transcribed for analysis, with the verbal consent of the participants. The interviews and focus groups centered on three main areas from the research questions: How is data used to support attendance and engagement, what trends are seen in the data, what processes and systems are used at the different levels, and finally how are incentives used to support good attendance? The capstone team piloted the interview and focus group protocol with two principals within Stafford County Public Schools. This ensured that the tool was viable, the instructions were clear, the sequence of the questions made sense, and we elicited the data as intended. Feedback from these administrators indicated that they found the questions to be thorough and detailed, and expressed comfort in responding to them. Subsequently, the questions underwent review by the Capstone Committee, who advised the team to streamline the questionnaire, particularly for the focus groups, to strike a balance between obtaining essential

information and avoiding undue burden on interviewees. The interview protocol was reduced by 10 questions resulting in a total of eight questions for the interviews and five for the focus groups (see Appendix A-C). The analysis of the interviews and focus group transcripts involved breaking down the data into meaningful categories or codes. We developed a preliminary set of codes to cluster the raw data into chunks with similar qualities. The team utilized the assistance of technology to aid in the data deduction process. From there we used the coded data to extract meaningful insights and themes (Billups, 2021). Each theme was defined and given a descriptive name or label to succinctly capture the essence of the theme. Ultimately the themes were used to see the emerging concepts, compare them to the existing literature, and aid in the development of recommendations to support CPS in combating chronic absenteeism.

Attendance Data. Our third data collection method involved gathering and analyzing attendance data spanning from 2015 to 2023 within CPS as well as comparable state data. Quantitative data was gathered through the Virginia Department of Education website, MERC, and the CPS website. We used this publicly available data to review state, division, and school chronic absenteeism rates. Data was available in raw numbers that are present within spreadsheets housed on the Virginia Department of Education website. We input this data into our own spreadsheets, focusing on four selected academic years of 2015 - 2016, 2018 - 2019, 2021 - 2022, and 2022 - 2023.

Our rationale for selecting these years was that they allowed us to look at trends over time since the inception of ESSA. In addition, each of these years served a specific purpose in our analysis. Data from the 2015-2016 school year provided the baseline data for the beginning of ESSA and the use of this data as an accreditation indicator in Virginia. The 2018-2019 school year was selected because it was data following three years of use as an accreditation indicator.

Additionally, it was the final complete school year prior to the COVID pandemic that caused significant school closures and shifts to academic delivery models such as virtual learning. We selected the 2021-2022 school year as it represented a return to full, in-person learning for all divisions across Virginia following two years when alternative options and flexible absenteeism policies were in place. Finally, we selected the 2022-2023 school year as it was the most current year for which comprehensive chronic absenteeism data was available.

Within our sheets, we calculated and disaggregated demographic trends for racial groups, specific student groups, and grade levels. We compiled data for Title 1 and non Title 1 elementary schools as well as data for each of the seven boroughs provided by the division. We have included the boroughs in our analysis based on discussion with division staff on the use of a borough system to divide and link schools that are in the same high school feeder pattern and geographic area of the division.

Our approach aimed to uncover the underlying reasons behind chronic absenteeism in CPS. We descriptively analyzed this data by subgroups and examined trends, patterns, and discrepancies to gain a comprehensive understanding of which demographic groups are most impacted by chronic absenteeism and how this issue has evolved over time. We completed the data collection and analysis process between November and January.

Review of Client Public School Documents. The final data we used was an analysis of the systems and resources used in CPS. We did this by reviewing division documents to include policies and regulations that outline the attendance monitoring process for how schools should respond to chronic absenteeism and staff assigned to supporting attendance efforts. This allowed us to identify the policies and procedures that CPS currently had in place, which helped with our

research questions focused on how systems and resources are being utilized in CPS. This work took place between November and January.

Table 3.

Summary of Data Collection and Analysis.

Data	Description	Source	Timeline	Analysis
Literature review	Peer Reviewed Journal Articles	Databases accessed through VCU libraries and Google Scholar	September-October	History, themes, effective practices, connection to other areas of research
Interview and focus groups	District Leaders, Administration, School Personnel	Client Public Schools	November-January	Transcribe recordings, code data, and identify themes
Attendance data from CPS	Attendance Data for CPS spanning from Spring 2015-2023	Virginia Department of Education	September-November	Organize data and analyze trends in attendance, and achievement by sub-group
Review of Client Public School Documents.	Review of CPS policies and regulations related to absenteeism, budget and staffing allocations	Client Public Schools	November-January	Evidence-based practices, resources, and professional development

Limitations and Assumptions

This study is subject to several limitations. These limitations include those we predicted prior to implementation of our research and those that emerged during the research. First, trustworthiness, including credibility, is a concern that might affect the validity of the findings. Bias can occur when the personal assumptions of the researchers overshadow the viewpoints of the participants (Billups, 2021). The researchers, all of whom are public school principals, could

introduce bias while gathering, interpreting, and analyzing data. Furthermore, during interviews, participants are encouraged to share their opinions openly, allowing them the freedom to contribute as much or as little as they see fit. However, this openness might have led participants to modify their behavior and responses, particularly when discussing procedures within their schools and district. Participants who are hesitant to be entirely truthful or transparent during interviews might impact the reliability of the gathered data (Billups, 2021).

Additionally, apart from the constraints related to both researchers and participants, it is essential to acknowledge that the study's scope was restricted due to time and resource limitations. The data collection and analysis occurred within a three-month timeframe. It is important to note that a researcher must spend considerable time in the research field to best understand the participants and collected data (Billups, 2021). Our research has been solely conducted within the 2023 - 2024 school year. The 2022 - 2023 school year revealed a marked improvement in rates of chronic absenteeism across CPS but, with only one year of data showing the improvement, it is difficult to see if the division has truly established a positive trend in combating absenteeism or if the year was an anomaly.

Our research revealed an absence coding option that was available to CPS for the 2022 - 2023 school year that is no longer allowed by the state. This coding option called Meaningful Interaction or MI allowed schools to code students as present if they weren't physically at school but had one of several defined illnesses (such as COVID or influenza) and had interacted with/completed school work while away from school. The capstone team is curious about the significance of the MI coding in relation to the improvement in chronic absenteeism from the 2021 - 2022 school year to the 2022 - 2023 school year and data from the current school year could reveal this impact. Studying the data from the current school year and reconnecting with

interview and focus group participants could enhance our understanding and refine our recommendations.

When considering the implementation of the study by the capstone team, limitations became apparent as we worked through the various stages of the research. When conducting interviews with principals, we learned that half of respondents had been at their current school for less than one year. Conversation with representatives from TTAC confirmed that there were numerous principals who were moved resulting in many schools under new principal leadership. As such, a limitation that emerged was the lack of context or historical perspective on the schools that they led. In these focus groups, the principals were able to speak comfortably about their experiences at their prior schools and data from these schools. They were transparent about the limits to their understanding of chronic absenteeism at their current schools but this did narrow our findings on how chronic absenteeism has changed over time at their schools.

Limitations also emerged related to data and documents requested from CPS. Central among these was access to attendance improvement plans (AIPs). We had hoped to review the AIP template and also view some examples of plans to see how the plans connected to research on how to effectively address chronic absenteeism as well as how they linked to barriers experienced by families. Not having access to these limited our ability to view the inner workings of division efforts to work with families on chronic absenteeism.

As noted in Table 3, we also requested division policies, regulations, and procedures related to attendance as well as division budget and staffing items that would allow us to identify funding available to support attendance efforts. We did receive school board policies related to school registration and attendance. These included residency requirements, reporting absences, allowances for pregnant students, married students, and homeless students. Some provided

documents were unrelated to absentee policies such as Policy 9-16 which gives guidelines to what schools should do if a student is identified as missing. During focus groups, principals reported training on procedures related to absences and truancy. We had hoped to access the training information or manual for review but no document was provided.

In addition to documents, access to participants was also a limitation. We requested assistance in identifying and contacting parents with students who were on AIPs so that we could understand the process from their perspective and hear first hand accounts of the barriers they experienced related to their child's attendance. We did not receive names or contact information for any families so this data source and the insight it would have provided does not exist in our research or analysis.

Study Alterations During Implementation

As we conducted our research, we remained responsive to the data that emerged and reflected on this in relation to our research questions. This resulted in several adjustments to our data collection that are described here.

We noted that our initial interviews and focus groups did not uncover many quotes and examples of the causes of chronic absenteeism and barriers contributing to chronic absenteeism. Some findings were inferred based on initial conversations such as the use of multiple languages in communications on chronic absenteeism (which indicated a need for support for the English Learner population) and the mention of a homeless shelter in one borough (which indicated needs for the economically disadvantaged and homeless populations). We revised our questions for our final focus groups with school based attendance teams in order to glean more specificity on the root causes of chronic absenteeism in the division (see Appendix D).

After completing interviews with principals that were selected by the division, we decided to conduct our next round of focus groups, those that involved school based attendance teams, with staff from these principals' schools. We made this decision because we had not received specific guidance from the division on teams they wanted us to meet with. Since we had established communication with building principals, we leveraged this connection to request permission to speak with their teams and were granted access. We note that this approach provided strengths and weaknesses in relation to the data collected. A limitation exists in the fact that we spoke with staff from a small number of schools, though schools with strong and weak chronic absenteeism were represented in the focus groups. We feel this limitation is outweighed by our ability to connect the responses between principals and school based teams due to familiarity we gained by delving deeply into specific schools for both focus groups.

Another alteration occurred in the inclusion of an additional division document that was not part of our initial proposal. In late September, the All In VA program was approved by the Virginia Legislature and signed by Governor Youngkin. This program allocated one time funds to divisions to assist in combating chronic absenteeism and required divisions to submit a proposal for use of these funds. This proposal came about following the start of our research and was not initially among the documents our team sought as part of our study. Because of its connection to our work, we did review the proposal from CPS and included it in our analysis as part of our research.

Chapter III: Literature Review

An initial review of peer reviewed literature on chronic absenteeism revealed a wide variety of sources spanning many decades. In some cases, researchers referred to chronic absenteeism as a “wicked problem” (Childs & Grooms, 2022; Childs & Lofton, 2021). Rittel & Webber (1973) first defined the concept of wicked problems in their work on public policy. Weber and Khademian (2008) contemporized the concept of wicked problems in their work on public administration and policy research. They described wicked problems as those that are complex, interconnected, fluid, overlapping, and relentless (Weber & Khademian, 2008). An overview of the literature on chronic absenteeism included all of these characteristics, with researchers varying in their approaches to identifying root causes and solutions that explored students, families, schools, systems, resources, and more.

Due to the wicked nature of chronic absenteeism, our literature review began by looking at the scope and demographics of chronic absenteeism. As noted in the introduction, the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 led to over 30 states selecting chronic absenteeism as a non-academic indicator to be collected and analyzed as part of school accreditation data. Prior to the COVID pandemic, data from the U.S. Department of Education collected during the 2015-2016 school year (the first year of implementation for ESSA) revealed that roughly 16% of American public school students were considered chronically absent (US Department of Education, 2019; Skedgell & Kearny, 2016). We limited the years within our review to the late 2000’s through 2023. The reason for this time-based bounding was to look at research around the inception of the ESSA, during which chronic absenteeism became a school accreditation factor in the majority of states, through COVID and the years following the pandemic, which corresponded with increases in chronic absenteeism.

To further explore the scope of chronic absenteeism, it is instructive to look at how chronic absenteeism varies across student groups. Again, referencing data from the 2015-2016 school year, we learned that absenteeism disproportionately impacts different student groups. American Indian students experienced the highest rates of chronic absenteeism at 26% followed by Pacific Islanders at 22.6% (Lee et al., 2023). Black students and students of two or more races followed at 20.5% and 18.4% respectively. Hispanic students also experienced higher rates of chronic absenteeism than the national average for the 2015-2016 school year with a rate of 17%. Only White and Asian students had chronic absenteeism rates lower than the national average at 14.5% and 8.6% respectively (US Department of Education, 2019). Delving further into the statistics, we learn that chronic absenteeism grows as students age and progress through various grades. Prior to COVID in the elementary school years, chronic absenteeism rates were reported at 13.6%. This rate grows in middle school to 14.1% and peaks in high school with research estimating 19 to 21.1% (Allison & Attisha, 2019; US Department of Education, 2019).

In addition to disparities in chronic absenteeism among racial groups, English language learners and students with disabilities experience chronic absenteeism at rates that differ from the overall national average. English language learners were less likely to be chronically absent, with a rate of 13.7% compared to the national rate of 16%. In contrast, students with disabilities were chronically absent at a higher rate of 22.5% (Lee et al., 2023; US Department of Education, 2019). Within this category, the identified disability also revealed variations in rates of chronic absenteeism. Students with emotional disabilities had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism at 23% (Gottfried et al. 2019). Students in other low incidence special education programs also experienced elevated levels of chronic absenteeism at 20.5% (Gottfried et al., 2020c).

While national data on chronic absenteeism gathered since the COVID pandemic has been incomplete, recent surveys of parents conducted by McKinsey and Company (Dorn et al., 2021) showed an increase of 2.7 times over pre pandemic levels. In the surveys, over 30,000 parents from all 50 states and the District of Columbia were asked to self-report if their child had missed 15 or more days of school within a school year prior to COVID and following COVID. Eight percent of parents reported chronic absenteeism prior to COVID compared to 22% following COVID.

To focus our literature review while giving credence to the multifaceted nature of the wicked problem of chronic absenteeism, we identified four categories in which to analyze the literature. These four categories are: school factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, non-school factors, school resources and systems related to chronic absenteeism, and research related to implementation science and efficacy in implementing change.

School Factors That Impact Chronic Absenteeism

In American public schools, attendance taking practices typically divide students who miss school into two distinct groups, those who cannot attend and those who do not want to attend (Nairn 2022). Those who cannot attend are often impacted by illness (including chronic illness), transportation struggles, homelessness, foster care and court entanglements, and school discipline that results in suspensions. Those who choose not to attend attribute absences to anxiety including worries about safety in their school, attitudes about the importance of school, or doing something other than school such as vacationing or skipping school for other activities (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022; Nairn, 2022). School attendance and truancy policies typically focus on the second group, those who choose not to attend.

Much of the research reviewed for this project focused on attendance problems and proposed solutions. As such, some literature spoke to causes and the impact of interventions for combating chronic absenteeism. In these cases, we can make clear statements about school factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism. In other studies, the focus is on the positive impact of interventions. As such, some of the contributing factors of chronic absenteeism derived from these articles are inferential in nature as we work backward from the solution to the problem that is being addressed.

Relationships

A significant body of research reviewed for the literature review revealed the importance of relationships in prompting students to attend school and increases in absenteeism when strong relationships were not present.

Staff Relationships. Educators have long known the value of forging connections with students and its impact on academic achievement and behavior. Research on chronic absenteeism also shows that connections between students and staff can promote better attendance. While studying reasons that students refuse to go to school (truancy), several studies confirmed that the student/teacher relationship was a contributing factor. Nutall and Woods (2013) highlighted that poor teacher/student relationships were a significant contributing factor to student absenteeism wherein students felt disconnected from their school community. This finding was echoed in later research that mentioned teacher connectedness with students impacted attendance, noting that students' "perceptions and attitudes about teachers and school were strongly associated with absenteeism" (Lee et al., 2023, p. 159). This was reaffirmed in research by Childs and Scanlon (2022), Corcoran and Kelly (2022), and Daily et al. (2020) that showed a positive impact on attendance when students had strong relationships with educators and felt a sense of belonging.

In the study by Childs and Scanlon (2022), the researchers used surveys to investigate an ecological perspective wherein they explored the interconnected relationships between schools, families, communities, and more and how leveraging all of these can have impacts on chronic absenteeism. Surveys were also used in research by Corcoran and Kelly (2022) and Daily et al. (2020) though their efforts focused more closely on schools and student perceptions. In all of these studies, the importance of relationships and student connectedness along with quality instruction impacted rates of student attendance. Subsequent research on attendance in the aftermath of COVID noted the importance of re-establishing strong relationships with school staff as a necessary step to improving attendance (McDonald et al., 2022).

Staff/student relationships also had distinct connections to attendance for student groups that had above average absenteeism. As noted in the introduction to the Literature Review, all racial groups except White and Asian students were chronically absent at rates that were higher than the overall national average. Several studies explored the impact of the teacher's race on attendance. The findings of studies that explored absenteeism among Black and Hispanic students revealed that these students showed improved attendance when they had at least one class led by a teacher of the same race (Gottfried et al., 2021; Tran & Gershenson, 2021). While this finding offers a potential solution, it also offers an inverse implication that that lack of diversity in staffing plays a part in the above average absenteeism within these student groups.

A program called Check & Connect is an intervention that uses a blend of mentoring and case management aimed at reducing school dropout rates and improving attendance. The "Check" component includes frequent monitoring of students' performance and progress, while the "Connect" component involves staff giving individualized attention to students and connecting them with the necessary resources (REL, 2020). Maynard et al. (2013) evaluated the

effectiveness of Check & Connect in a rigorous randomized controlled trial of middle and high school students. The study consisted of four high schools, nine middle schools, and one combination middle/high school in a large urban region of the southwestern U.S. The outcomes of the study showed reduced dropout rates, improved academic performance, and reduced disciplinary infractions (Maynard et. al, 2013, U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Peer Relationships. In addition to the impact that the student/teacher relationship has on attendance, research has also explored how peer relationships impact chronic absenteeism. In an international study conducted by Rahman et al. (2021), not having friends and a sense of loneliness at school were correlated to increased absences. Interestingly in this study, loneliness as a contributing factor for chronic absenteeism was limited to North and South America and the Mediterranean region. The study also explored the impact of peer conflict and noted increased absences, further reinforcing the impact of peer relationships and school attendance. When looking specifically at American schools, Kirksey and Gottfried (2018) arrived at similar conclusions regarding peer connectedness and chronic absenteeism. Their study explored the impact of having familiar classmates and school attendance. Their research concluded that having a higher number of familiar classmates from year to year correlated to better attendance whereas not having as many familiar peers led to a higher likelihood of chronic absenteeism.

Research on peer connections revealed further implications in research by Gottfried et al. (2020a). In this study, peer absenteeism was explored to see if it correlated to increased absences among their classmates. Findings from the study showed that frequent absences among peers in the fall correlated to increased absenteeism among classmates in the spring. Further, the research showed that peers did not necessarily need to be close friends for the increased absences. Rather

seeing classmates who were frequently absent produced a copycat effect and reinforced the interconnectedness of peer school behaviors and their spread to others.

When looking at students with disabilities and their relationships with peers, another troubling trend emerged in relation to chronic absenteeism. Our introduction to the Literature Review noted the high rate of absenteeism among students with disabilities, particularly for students with emotional disabilities and those served in low incidence programs. Research by Gottfried et al. (2019) offers a possible explanation for this trend that links to peer relationships and belonging. The study explored absenteeism among students with disabilities and included a focus on where these students spent most of their instructional time (general education versus special education setting). The results showed higher rates of chronic absenteeism for students who spent most or all of their time in a self-contained special education setting. Further, the research noted that students with disabilities who spent more time in the general education setting experienced a greater sense of belonging.

Engagement and Academic Performance

In addition to the relationships forged between teachers, students, and their peers, the learning experience for students is also a factor that impacts attendance. In a study on positive school climate and student attendance, Hamlin (2020) found a correlation between academic engagement and student attendance. While academic engagement was a broad measure in Hamlin's study, other researchers also found correlations between engagement and school performance and chronic absenteeism. Engaging instruction was one such factor, with research showing that ineffective or unengaging instruction was a barrier to school attendance (Lenhoff et al., 2022). A study conducted by Daily et al. (2020) that explored school climate and attendance identified curricular relevance as a factor in why students choose to attend or not attend school.

This idea included a focus on cultural learning related to relevance which could offer a connection to higher rates of chronic absenteeism for racial and ethnic groups when culturally responsive curriculum is lacking.

Lack of engagement has often been seen as a precursor to students acting out and displaying inappropriate behaviors in school. In cases of poor behavior, schools often issue suspensions from school which can have a duplicate or even triplicate impact on absenteeism for these students (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). Suspension from school counts as an absence from school. Additionally, many divisions include truancy from school in the disciplinary codes and can even suspend students for skipping school (Childs & Lofton, 2021). When students are suspended, they also lack access to appropriate instruction, causing gaps in instruction that make catching up with learning more difficult. This, in turn, can exacerbate behaviors meaning students who frequently misbehaved had a higher likelihood of being chronically absent. In addition, falling behind due to missed instruction has been shown to increase anxiety and also resulted in increased absences beyond the suspension (Hamlin, 2020).

Beyond engaging and relevant instruction, student performance and achievement also factored into absenteeism. Not surprisingly, students who did not feel successful in school were more likely to be absent from school. In a general sense, students who reported struggles with academics were more likely to be chronically absent (Gottfried et al., 2020c). This idea was further explored in studies on students with disabilities. We discussed this student group in the section on relationships which spoke of inclusive and self contained environments and the impact on attendance. Students in this category have demonstrated academic, behavioral, and health needs that require specialized services and programming that are provided by the school. Yet, even with services and support, students with disabilities are more likely to be chronically

absent (Gottfried et al., 2019; Gottfried et al., 2020c). This trend was also exacerbated following the COVID pandemic, with an increase in chronic absenteeism for these groups (McDonald et al., 2022).

Research on this factor showed higher levels of chronic absenteeism for students who feel disengaged from the learning as well as those who have academic struggles. In essence, the quality of the learning experience and the success of the student or lack thereof had implications for chronic absenteeism.

Climate and Safety

When students feel welcome and safe in their school environment, attendance is likely to improve as noted in research stating, “Students who feel safe, cared for, and have strong connections with school educators are more likely to have high rates of attendance” (Childs & Scanlon, 2022, p. 76). As a result, numerous researchers have explored the role that school environment has on attendance. When exploring the relationship between school attendance and the school environment, several studies showed connections between climate and attendance. Specifically, research showed that a positive school climate correlates with improved attendance while schools lacking a positive climate had higher rates of absenteeism (Corcoran & Kelly, 2022; Daily et al., 2020, McDonald et al., 2022). In these studies, the climate was a descriptor that focused on the feel of the school and highlighted ways that students felt connected to their school or felt satisfied or dissatisfied with their school.

Beyond the psychological aspects of a positive climate, research also explored how the physical environment impacted absenteeism. In a nation where school facilities vary widely in age and infrastructure, students may be reluctant to attend schools in buildings that are aging,

worn, and outdated. Research on the physical environment did show that schools that were outdated or in a state of disrepair had higher levels of absenteeism (Childs & Lofton, 2021).

School safety was also frequently cited as having an impact on attendance. General concerns about school safety were cited as a factor in increased absenteeism in numerous studies (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Hamlin, 2021; Nairn, 2022). A deeper dive revealed that researchers found permissive classrooms and poor student behavior correlated with higher rates of absenteeism (Lenhoff et al., 2020) whereas increased order and discipline were linked to improved attendance (Lee et al., 2023).

A closer look at how student behaviors impact attendance revealed several interesting findings. First, peer victimization was linked to higher rates of absenteeism (Rahman et al., 2021). In this study, survey data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey that was collected between 2003 and 2015 was analyzed. Respondents consisting of over 207,000 students from 71 countries aged 11 to 17 shared that fears related to peer conflict, including bullying, and potential injury resulted in more frequent absences. In contrast, students who misbehaved were more likely to attend school (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). At the same time, when discipline was enforced through class exclusions and suspensions, these students were more likely to be absent (Lee et al., 2023).

COVID had an impact on perceptions of school safety and school attendance. Specifically, students were shown to have higher levels of anxiety related to contracting COVID which led to increases in absenteeism. In addition, changes in school operations such as social distancing, limits on visitors and volunteers, etc. led to increases in reports of anxiety in students and a subsequent increase in absenteeism (McDonald et al., 2022).

School Organization and Management

American public schools are bureaucratic organizations that are influenced by a variety of stakeholders including local, state, and federal government officials, parents, community stakeholders, and students. As such, it can seem that schools are restricted by rules and regulations that dictate how they can operate. Yet, research on school organization, management and the impact this has on chronic absenteeism reveals that differences among schools do make a difference.

Principal quality is a broadly defined factor that plays a part in student absenteeism. Research by Bartanen (2020), explored the impact principals have on student attendance with a specific focus on high value principals (defined by academic performance of students in their schools as measured by end of year and end of course assessments). The findings showed that schools with principals rated at the 25th percentile for effectiveness had students miss an average of 1.4 more days per year than those in schools led by principals at the 75th percentile of effectiveness. This research reinforces the role the principal plays in organizing attendance efforts and engaging stakeholders in promoting school attendance (Attendance Works, n.d.; Childs & Grooms, 2018). Further, it is supported by research that shows schools with higher organizational effectiveness have lower chronic absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2020b; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018).

A variety of organizational factors within how a school operates also have implications on school attendance. One such factor is class size. In a study conducted by Tran and Gershenson (2021) that explored various impacts on absenteeism including class size, an analysis of attendance of classes determined to be small-sized (between 13 and 17 students) and regular

sized (between 22 and 25 students) found that an increase of 10 students in a class resulted in a 21% increase in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism among students in the class.

The quality of the person leading the instruction was also a factor with research showing that high teacher turnover and poor teacher quality also correlated with a higher likelihood of chronic absenteeism (Lenhoff et al., 2020). These findings support the premise that management and organizational structures including staffing and teacher retention impact absenteeism.

Transportation

It goes without saying that attendance is dependent on arriving (or not arriving at school). American students have various pathways to school depending on where they live and the transportation services provided. Schools may have walking zones, public transportation, school busing, parent transportation, and more. When looking at the role that the school plays on getting students to and from school, school bus transportation must be examined to better understand the impact on chronic absenteeism.

Not surprisingly, lack of access to reliable school transportation is correlated with increased chronic absenteeism. Lack of a school-provided transportation option as well as poor coordination of transportation services is shown to have a negative impact on school attendance (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022) as well as a negative impact on student performance (Cordes et al., 2022). Conversely, when schools offer a transportation option, those who access this option are more likely to attend school (Gottfried, 2017; Lenhoff & Singer, 2022). This topic is explored in more depth related to transportation means and reliability in the next section.

Overall, a review of literature on school factors that impact chronic absenteeism spans various categories. In all but two examples (physical environment of the school and transportation), the factors identified relate to interpersonal aspects of the school experience.

Relationships, the quality of teaching, the safety of the students, and the role of leadership in utilizing resources to create a safe, engaging school with structures that promote attendance all rely on the efforts of a village of people. The literature also indicates there are specific populations such as students with disabilities and students from certain racial groups that miss school at higher rates and benefit from targeted support. In addition, the research suggests that any intervention requires a level of personalization due to the myriad school factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism.

Non-School Factors and Their Impact on Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is a critical issue facing schools nationwide, especially regarding educational outcomes and student well-being. While some factors of chronic absenteeism are strictly school-related, many extend beyond the confines of the school building. These non-school factors play a significant role in contributing to chronic absenteeism for students. In this exploration, we dive into some of the key non-school factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, discover how they can detrimentally impact a student's motivation and capacity for regular school attendance, and detail the interplay between poverty and these factors.

Transportation

For many students, the lack of reliable transportation can be a formidable barrier to regular school attendance. When considering school and transportation, it's common to immediately associate this with a school-related concern involving the absence of or uncertainty surrounding school bus services. However, diving deeper into the issue, we discover several transportation limitations that revolve around non-school factors. In this discussion, we will explore those non-school factors and their profound impact on a student's ability to attend school regularly.

Transportation, especially those aspects outside of the school's control, can severely impact a student's ability to attend school regularly (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Gottfried, 2017; Lee et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2017; Welsh, 2018). When asking families to identify the factors that most significantly impacted their child's ability to attend school regularly, the second highest reason for any absence was transportation (Gottfried, 2017). For many families, barriers to getting their children to school regularly include the lack of adequate resources and consistent modes of transportation to help their children attend school regularly (Gottfried, 2015; Lenhoff & Singer, 2022; Sugrue et al., 2016). For example, a student that misses the school bus in the morning, and their family lacks reliable transportation, will not be able to attend school that day. Furthermore, for some families, parent/caregiver involvement in getting their children to school and failing to determine how their children will get to school inhibits regular school attendance (Gottfried, 2015; Gottfried, 2017).

Intersection with Poverty. Transportation issues related to chronic absenteeism are exacerbated when it comes to families experiencing poverty, as poverty often adds challenges to accessing dependable transportation options such as private vehicles and public transit systems (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Lim et al., 2019). Furthermore, children living in households experiencing poverty are more likely to have less safe routes to school, and this, combined with parents who struggle to ensure the transportation needs of their children are met, leads to a high likelihood of a student's inconsistent school attendance (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018).

Considering the non-academic factors that impact student chronic absenteeism, transportation emerges as notable and impactful. For many, the availability and reliability of transportation greatly impact a student attending school regularly. When combined with poverty,

this issue becomes even more challenging. Families lack resources for transportation, and if left unaddressed, this factor will continue to cause barriers for students to attend school regularly.

Health

Health and wellness are some of the most precious assets anyone can possess. Regarding students and their ability to attend school regularly, the contributing impact on their physical and mental well-being cannot be overstated. In this section, we explore the relationship between a student's health and wellness and how that can become a formidable obstacle to a student's consistent attendance in school.

A child's health and wellness is a factor largely outside of the school's control and plays a significant role in regular school attendance (Gottfried, 2017; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lee et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2018). The health factors contributing to student chronic absenteeism can be related to mental, physical, and emotional health (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Sugrue et al., 2016; Welsh, 2018). Research indicates that students with health issues were more often chronically absent compared to those students lacking health concerns (Gottfried & Gee, 2016; Lim et al., 2019).

Physical Health. A child's physical health plays a fundamental role in their capacity to maintain regular school attendance. Students who suffer from physical health complications, such as asthma, obesity, and oral health, are far more likely to miss school than their healthier peers (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Lim et al., 2019). The severity of the physical health condition also factors into chronic absenteeism for students. For example, asthma is the leading health-related cause of student chronic absenteeism, and the severity of asthma can greatly impact the consistency of school attendance for that child (Childs & Lofton, 2021).

Mental Health. A child's mental and emotional well-being can significantly shape their capacity for regular school attendance. Students who display internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and disengagement are more likely to have negative feelings about school, which contribute to them being chronically absent (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lim et al., 2019; Sugrue et al., 2016). Additionally, students experiencing trauma have an increased likelihood of anxiety and other mental and emotional illnesses, which not only cause issues with consistent school attendance but also increase the likelihood of the chronic absenteeism trend continuing year after year (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2023). Lastly, a parent's mental and emotional health can impact a student attending school regularly as their ability to establish consistent routines and provide structure are greatly diminished, thus impeding the ability to provide the support and consistency needed for their children to attend school regularly (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Intersection with Poverty. The intersection of poverty and health can have a profound impact on a child's ability to attend school regularly. Children from low-income households are more likely to experience greater health issues, such as asthma and depression, thus struggling with attending school regularly (Gottfried, 2015; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Lim et al., 2019). Additionally, families experiencing poverty often lack the resources and access to health care to combat the presence of health-related factors contributing to chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2015; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Lim et al., 2019).

The impact of health and wellness on a student's ability to attend school regularly cannot be overstated. Student health issues, whether physical, mental, or emotional, play a substantial role in school attendance and contribute significantly to chronic absenteeism. Additionally, the

intersection of poverty and health further amplifies the challenges that students and families face when it comes to attending school regularly. Understanding how health issues and a lack of support for those struggling with health issues impact chronic absenteeism is vital to overcoming this barrier.

Family Factors

The family unit is the foundation upon which a student's education can be built. A family is complex, comprising many factors that impact children. At the same time, chronic absenteeism continues to be a great concern for schools nationwide. When family factors adversely impact a student's ability to attend school regularly, the intersection of these factors with chronic absenteeism can be detrimental for students. In this discussion, we explore the family factors, such as parent/caregiver involvement, family characteristics, and the perceived value of school/attendance, that impact a student's ability to attend school consistently.

Parent/Caregiver Involvement. The level of parent/caregiver involvement in a child's education can be a critical factor influencing their regular school attendance. Low parent/caregiver involvement and engagement, characterized by a lack of effort to ensure their children attend school regularly, is a family factor directly contributing to higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2015; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Rahman et al., 2023). Parents/caregivers indicate that the demands and hours required of their jobs, working multiple jobs, unemployment, and health problems are the primary reasons why they struggle to be involved in their child's education (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Malika et al., 2021; Segrue et al., 2016).

Family Characteristics. The characteristics and dynamics within a family have the potential to significantly shape a child's regular school attendance. Whether a child lives with

one parent or two can impact their ability to attend school more regularly. Children from single-parent households have a much higher likelihood of chronic absenteeism than children from two-parent households, as the parents are often balancing various roles without adequate adult assistance and may require extra support and resources to get their children to school (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Lim et al., 2019; Sugrue et al., 2016). The size of one's family can also determine whether a child can attend school regularly. Larger households with multiple siblings have lower rates of chronic absenteeism as there are more individuals to support one another (Gottfried, 2017; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lim et al., 2019). More specifically, children whose family size is greater than four are significantly less likely to be chronically absent (Lim et al., 2019).

Perceived Value of School. The significance attributed to school and the value placed on regular attendance can profoundly impact a child's consistency in attending school. A parent's attitude towards school and attendance, along with their lack of value or appreciation for education, can lead to attendance concerns for their children (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Gottfried, 2015; Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021; Robinson et al., 2018). Parents' pessimistic attitudes toward education can be influenced by factors such as unfavorable past school experiences, a lack of comprehension, and cultural disparities, all of which can cause parents to feel uneasy when communicating with the school (Malika et al., 2021; Sugrue et al., 2016). Moreover, an undervaluing of school by parents is also associated with a higher likelihood that their children will question the value of school, thus causing disengagement and isolation, which leads to higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2019).

Socioeconomic Status (SES). The socioeconomic status of a family is a critical factor that can significantly affect a child's ability to maintain consistent school attendance. Low income and low-SES are strong predictors of increased chronic absenteeism for children (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Gottfried, 2017; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Lim et al., 2019, Sugrue et al., 2016). Children from low-income households have limited access to resources, which can present challenges to their basic needs being met, thus impacting their ability to attend school regularly (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Gottfried, 2015; Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Food insecurity is a basic need that low-SES families struggle with (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Lim et al., 2019). Students who experience food insecurity are often more hungry during the school day, and this leads to increased odds of them being chronically absent from school (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Rahman et al., 2023). Additionally, children from low-SES families are more likely to have parents who undervalue attendance and possess more negative feelings about going to school (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021; Robinson et al., 2018). Finally, families with low-SES are more likely to have parents/caregivers who are less involved in their children's education due to factors such as working multiple jobs, unemployment, health issues, and so on. Consequently, this lack of parent/caregiver involvement often results in inconsistent school attendance for their children (Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018).

A student's family can serve a crucial role in their educational success. However, families often face various complex challenges that significantly impact students' ability to attend school regularly. These challenges include limited access to affordable childcare, insufficient time off for health or childcare needs, unaffordable housing and lack of housing support, inadequate healthcare, and ongoing discrimination in employment. These stressors create significant barriers

for families, particularly in maintaining consistent school attendance. Insufficient parent/caregiver involvement disrupts the necessary routines and structures, leading to irregular school attendance. Single-parent households experience higher rates of chronic absenteeism, while negative perceptions of school diminish the importance of regular attendance. When combined with low-SES, these factors create even greater challenges, increasing the likelihood of chronic absenteeism. It is crucial to recognize and address these factors to improve student attendance rates.

Mobility

Home should serve as a stable environment in which comfort and well-being are promoted for children. For many students who experience homelessness or unstable housing situations, this comfort and well-being notion can be lost. The transient nature of these living conditions can cause hardships for families, making it difficult to attend school regularly. In this discussion, we explore the mobility factors, such as homelessness and housing instability, that impact a student's ability to attend school consistently.

Homelessness. The condition of homelessness can create significant obstacles to a child's consistent school attendance. Homelessness is one of the most common causes of student mobility and directly leads to an increase in a student's chronic absenteeism (Stargel & Easterbrooks, 2022; Welsh, 2018). Students experiencing homelessness after starting pre-kindergarten and students who have experienced homelessness in the past are both at risk for high rates of chronic absenteeism (Stargel & Easterbrooks, 2022). Families who experience homelessness often struggle to attend school regularly, most often because they place higher importance and priority on finding a place to live (Stargel & Easterbrooks, 2022; Sugrue et al., 2016).

Housing Instability. The instability of housing can have a profound impact on a child's ability to maintain regular school attendance. The disruption of a family's living situation causes instability that directly leads to a student missing school (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Sugrue et al., 2016; Welsh, 2018). Foster care, and the movement between foster care, is also a form of housing instability that is associated with high rates of chronic absenteeism (Welsh, 2018).

Intersection with Poverty. The intersection of poverty and mobility can deeply affect a child's capacity for consistent school attendance. Schools in neighborhoods with a prevalence of public housing and low-income shelters tend to experience elevated chronic absenteeism rates (Welsh, 2018). The presence of low-income households is indicative of the challenges associated with poverty and housing instability, such as violence and limited safe routes to school, which further contribute to absenteeism (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Lim et al., 2019; Sugrue et al., 2016; Welsh, 2018).

A stable and nurturing home environment is vital for children's well-being, but experiencing homelessness and housing instability disrupt this stability, posing challenges to regular school attendance. Finding stable housing, safe routes to school, and violence can all impact a student's ability to attend school. Recognizing and addressing these factors are vital to improve student school attendance.

Chronic absenteeism is a critical challenge facing schools nationwide. While some factors related to chronic absenteeism are solely school-related, a significant impact can be found in non-school factors as well. This exploration has uncovered several non-school factors, shedding light on how they can undermine a student's motivation and capacity to attend school regularly. Transportation, health, family, and mobility are all non-school factors that can contribute to student chronic absenteeism, and all are exacerbated when combined with poverty.

In addressing chronic absenteeism comprehensively, it is imperative to recognize these factors and understand how they impact regular school attendance.

Resources and Systems that Impact Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism in educational settings represents a formidable challenge that demands comprehensive and multifaceted solutions. To effectively combat chronic absenteeism, educational institutions and stakeholders must leverage a wide range of resources and implement well-designed systems. Comprehensive, multi-tiered support system approaches to absence prevention, early and consistent interventions, and individualized remediation plans have been shown to be the most effective and equitable ways to address chronic absenteeism (Doremus, 2022). Schools and communities can systematically work toward reducing chronic absenteeism by addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism and providing targeted support (Gottfried, 2017). This section of the paper delves into the literature and research in an attempt to identify essential resources and systems required to tackle chronic absenteeism. The literature offers insights into the strategies and tools that can make a significant impact on attendance rates and, subsequently, students' academic success and overall well-being.

The literature points to four key elements: data tracking and analysis, fostering communication and engagement with parents and families, providing outreach and support to families facing attendance challenges, and cultivating a positive school culture. Furthermore, we will identify the specific systems and resources required for the successful implementation of each of these essential elements. The beginning of each section will provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic, preceded by a more detailed explanation of each identified component. By comprehensively addressing these areas, educational institutions can embark on a

journey toward reducing chronic absenteeism and nurturing a climate of consistent student involvement.

Data Tracking and Analysis

Collecting, monitoring, and analyzing attendance data is an essential step in reducing chronic absenteeism rates. Several scholars and reports have highlighted the importance of using data on attendance and mobility to identify and monitor students in need of additional attention and support (Attendance Works, 2018; Welsh, 2018). Regularly reviewing school attendance records helps pinpoint the students who may be heading toward chronic absenteeism, which is essential for implementing timely interventions (Attendance Works, 2018).

A key component of this process is establishing early warning systems to identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism. Early warning systems are systematic approaches used in elementary and secondary schools to recognize and assist students who may be at risk of becoming chronically absent (Gottfried, 2015; REL, 2020). According to Gottfried (2023) schools that analyzed data from their existing early warning indicator systems were able to identify and provide targeted support, resulting in significant reductions in chronic absenteeism. Studies have found that schools implementing such systems in their first year have witnessed a statistically significant decrease in chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2015; REL, 2020). In a specific research study conducted by Faria et al. (2017), the effectiveness of early warning interventions and monitoring systems was examined. This study encompassed seventy-three high schools and a total of 37,671 students who were in grades 9 and 10. The findings of this research indicated an enhancement in attendance and a reduction in course failures (Faria et al., 2017). Furthermore, evidence indicates that even with limited initial implementation, a comprehensive early warning system can reduce chronic absenteeism rates and the number of students failing

one or more courses (REL, 2020; IES, 2017). Schools and districts require a comprehensive system for collecting and reporting attendance data, including reasons for absences, to inform the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies and resource allocation (Attendance Works, 2018). The sections below detail components needed for a district ensure a comprehensive attendance and data system.

Technology Infrastructure. A robust technology infrastructure is fundamental for schools to track and manage attendance data effectively. Student Information Systems (SIS) facilitate the collection and storage of attendance data and allows school personnel access to this information quickly and efficiently (Welsh, 2018). The technology should make it possible to notify teachers, administrators, and parents of the increased risks in specific classrooms over the duration of the school year (Gottfried, 2015).

Attendance Teams. Solving the problem of chronic absenteeism takes a multidisciplinary team approach. School and district attendance teams tasked with the collection, analysis, and reporting of attendance data are a key ingredient in reducing chronic absenteeism. This team plays a vital role in recognizing trends, patterns, and areas where interventions are most necessary (Attendance Works, 2017). Effective teams exhibit traits such as cohesion, clear communication, and cooperation (VDOE, 2023). Furthermore, they possess a well-defined organizational structure and articulate goals that are shared by all team members (VDOE, 2023).

Identifying attendance issues early is crucial as it allows for timely interventions, preventing the escalation of chronic absenteeism into a more severe problem (Attendance Works, 2018). The team should use both qualitative and quantitative data to understand the scope and scale of the problem and use that information to break down the larger problem of chronic absence into smaller solvable problems for groups and individual students. The team should be

prepared to connect students and families to resources and the team should monitor progress (VDOE, 2023).

For optimal effectiveness, an Attendance Team should be cross-functional, drawing upon the expertise of key stakeholders (VDOE, 2023). To operate efficiently, this team should designate a chairperson or facilitator and include members capable of comprehending and analyzing attendance data. Evidence from schools that have successfully reduced chronic absence demonstrates that teams are most effective when led by the school principal. Having the principal lead the team elevates the issue across the school and helps connect the issues associated with absenteeism to other student support strategies (VDOE, 2023). The most effective teams are multi-disciplinary and include the school social worker, school nurse, school counselor, the attendance clerk and being able to leverage the knowledge of other key stakeholders like teachers, parents, and community partners (Attendance Works, 2017; VDOE, 2023).

Family Communication and Engagement

In the fight against chronic absenteeism, this literature underscores the pivotal role of effective communication and family engagement as essential methods for school districts to understand and employ. In the existing body of literature, a multifaceted approach has emerged to address this concern, focusing on various strategies to tackle its underlying causes. Among these strategies, two prominent themes have emerged: the necessity of educating families about the importance of being at school and the importance of furnishing regular updates on student attendance (Gottfried et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2018; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Research has shown that parent/caregiver involvement plays a crucial role in addressing chronic absenteeism, especially in the early grades (Robinson et al., 2018). A first step toward

leveraging parent/caregiver support in the quest to improve student attendance involves ensuring parents recognize the value of attending school regularly in the early grades. The literature acknowledges that children of parents who believe attendance is important are more likely to have better attendance (Ehrlich et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2018). In particular, children of parents/caregivers who believed that regular attendance in early grades is important had absence rates 43% lower than those of children whose parents did not believe that regular attendance in early grades is important (7.5% vs. 13.2% absence rates, respectively) (Ehrlich et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2018). While schools may face external factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism beyond their control, parents and guardians wield significant influence over attendance-related factors during the initial stages of education (Robinson et al., 2018). Parents/caregivers are vital partners in promoting good attendance because they hold the ultimate responsibility for setting attendance expectations and ensuring their children attend school daily. Therefore, it is essential for schools to empower them with the necessary information so that they understand that good attendance directly translates to providing their children with more or better learning opportunities (Connecticut Department of Education, 2023; Robinson et al., 2018).

The literature also highlights that parents/caregivers often harbor misconceptions about attendance, underestimating its importance in the early grades compared to later years and frequently miscalculating their child's absences (Ehrlich et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2018). These misunderstandings can hinder families from taking proactive steps to reduce their child's absences. Schools can address these misconceptions by emphasizing the significance of consistent attendance during the early grades and providing regular and specific updates on students' attendance records (Robinson et al., 2018). Simply informing parents/caregivers about their child's attendance record can lead to a 10-percentage-point increase in attendance (Nairn,

2022). Consequently, a critical step in mobilizing parent/caregiver support to improve student attendance revolves around ensuring that they recognize the importance of regular school attendance and have timely information regarding their own child.

Direct Messaging. The literature highlights several effective communication and engagement strategies that schools can employ to enhance parental awareness regarding the importance of consistent school attendance. One widely used approach involves direct communication through methods such as phone calls, text messaging, and emails. Studies have demonstrated that implementing specific communication routines with parents/caregivers can heighten their awareness of attendance issues among students and lead to improved attendance rates (Nairn, 2022; REL, 2020).

Given that parents/caregivers often underestimate the extent of their child's school absences, many school districts have adopted the practice of sending regular attendance reports via text messages or phone calls. Research has shown that when personalized messages are sent directly to parents, chronic absenteeism can be reduced by as much as 10% (Nairn, 2022; REL, 2020). The use of two-way text messaging also plays a vital role in facilitating important communication and addressing obstacles to regular attendance. In one study, two-way text communication was utilized to encourage parents/caregivers to seek guidance from school staff when faced with challenges that might cause their child to miss school. School staff could then respond with support and solutions, resulting in a significant decrease in chronic absenteeism during the first year of implementation (Gottfried, 2023).

Furthermore, another study investigated the impact of sending parents/caregivers informational mailers emphasizing the value of consistent school attendance during the early grades. Sometimes referred to as “nudge letters,” these mailers aim to inform families about their

child's absences and are designed to influence decision making and avert future absences (MacIver et al., 2020). A study in the 2022-23 school year included 18 schools in San Diego County, an urban school district, and included the intervention of sending letters to families of students who were at risk of becoming chronically absent. At the end of the school year, the percentage of students who experienced moderate or severe chronic absenteeism declined from 41% prior to the intervention to 32% after the intervention (San Diego County Office of Education, 2023). Additionally Robinson et al. (2018) conducted a study that included 42,853 students across ten districts. This study explored the impact of sending parents mailers that emphasized the value of regular school attendance in the early grades and accurately reported how many days their child has been absent. The findings revealed that these mailings led to a 15% reduction in chronic absenteeism and appeared to be particularly effective for the most at-risk students (Robinson et al., 2018).

Workshops. Offering workshops for parents/caregivers on the topic of school attendance is another proven strategy supported by the literature. These workshops typically cover essential aspects such as educating parents on the distinction between unexcused and excused absences, introducing contingency management techniques, establishing consistent routines, and familiarizing parents with school and district policies (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Research shows that schools that participate in a greater number of activities focused on attendance are more effective in lowering the percentage of students who miss 20 or more school days each year (Attendance Works, 2018; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Home visits. Lastly, another effective strategy in combating chronic absenteeism, as supported by research, involves conducting home visits (Peetz, 2023). These visits, carried out by either nurses or school staff, can yield valuable insights into the reasons behind a child's

chronic absences while simultaneously nurturing strong relationships between families and schools (Gottfried, 2023). Studies have indicated that home visit programs correlate with reductions in chronic absenteeism and improved reading proficiency, particularly among students whose families previously had limited engagement with the school (Gottfried, 2023; Jordan, 2019). For instance, a specific home visit program known as Parent Teacher Home Visits demonstrated that students whose families received at least one annual visit from teachers were 21% less likely to be chronically absent than their peers (Jordan, 2019). These home visits facilitate increased communication between families and schools, ultimately proving beneficial in the battle against chronic absenteeism.

Family Outreach and Support

A growing body of research highlights the crucial role of family outreach and support programs in tackling chronic absenteeism. The initial step in assisting families involves identifying the obstacles and factors that contribute to decreased attendance. Linking students and families with community resources to mitigate barriers to school attendance, such as transportation, housing, and childcare, promotes student and family engagement in school and can positively impact school attendance (Doremus, 2020). This identification process helps determine the most appropriate solutions, such as implementing mentorship programs, improving access to healthcare, launching initiatives like walking school buses, offering tutoring services, providing mental health support, establishing morning or afterschool care, and other related approaches (Attendance Works, 2022).

Once these barriers have been identified, schools and districts must establish effective systems to address them, thereby offering support to families and ultimately boosting attendance rates. The literature indicates various ways in which schools can successfully engage in support and outreach efforts for families dealing with attendance issues. These strategies encompass addressing transportation challenges, attending to both physical and mental needs, implementing

mentorship programs, and forging partnerships with public agencies and community-based organizations (Attendance Works, 2018; Gottfried, 2017; Nairn, 2022).

Transportation. Investments in safer and more accessible transportation can lead to significant improvements in student attendance (Gottfried, 2017). Safe and reliable access to school is associated with higher attendance rates for all students, particularly those in rural areas and those from low-income families (Gottfried, 2017). The literature suggests intentional transportation efforts are more likely to be needed for students who are homeless, live in foster care, have disabilities, travel long distances to school, or have a history of chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2017). Early studies show positive outcomes when schools employ transportation strategies such as door-to-door van services, ride-sharing, and family carpool coordination (Gottfried, 2017).

Mental and Physical Health Support. Research has shown that schools can play a crucial role in effectively addressing chronic absenteeism by providing support for students' physical and mental health. Specifically, interventions that target the physical and mental health needs of students have proven to be highly effective (Gottfried, 2023). This support encompasses various in-school health services, such as school nurses, school-based health centers, dental care, vaccinations, and mental health counseling, all of which contribute significantly to improving students' overall well-being. As a result, this enhanced well-being often leads to better attendance (Attendance Works, 2018; Gottfried, 2023).

In recent times, the focus on providing mental health support for students has grown, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study has highlighted that students who can manage their emotions are better equipped to cope with the stresses of attending school and are less prone to avoiding school due to anxiety. Moreover, students who self-reported higher

levels of traits like cooperation, emotional control, and energy were found to have a reduced tendency to exhibit chronic absenteeism (Yin et al., 2023). Therefore, it is advisable for schools and districts to regularly assess students' social and emotional skills, particularly in areas like assertiveness, self-control, cooperation, and energy. This information can be valuable for teachers and staff to identify and provide support to students who may be at a higher risk of chronic absenteeism (Yin et al., 2023).

Mentor Programs. The literature points to mentorship programs, when designed effectively, can foster positive relationships between students and mentors. REL (2020) describes mentoring as a program developed by schools to provide a range of supports and is primarily meant to establish an ongoing positive relationship between a student and a caring adult. Nearly two decades of research show that students who participate in mentoring programs for at least one year demonstrate significant gains in academic growth, school behavior, self-confidence, extended interest in hobbies, and most importantly attendance (Gottfried, 2023; May et al., 2021; REL, 2020). A study conducted by Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) examined the impact of a specific mentor program, Success Mentors. The mixed-methods correlational and quasi-experimental study of 100 elementary, middle, and high school students in New York found students, on average, gained almost two additional weeks of schooling in the year(s) they had a mentor (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; REL, 2020). The data is positive for low-income students as well. Studies reveal that students in high-poverty districts participating in a low-cost mentoring program in middle and high school show significantly fewer absences. Further, as the students' absences decreased, their grade point averages increased (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; May et al., 2021).

The literature also identifies common factors that contribute to the success of mentorship programs. One critical factor involves using attendance data to detect early warning signs, identifying students in need of early intervention, and connecting these students with a mentor (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; REL, 2020). Additionally, consistent and regular meetings between mentors and mentees are another crucial element. Research has shown that students who meet regularly with their mentors are 52% less likely to skip a day of school and 37% less likely to skip a class (Attendance Works, 2018; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). Notably, greater benefits were observed for students who had mentors throughout both middle and high school, rather than just one of these periods. Other studies have shown that mentors can effectively reduce chronic absenteeism from one year to the next and that activities specifically targeting attendance can decrease the percentage of students who miss at least 20 days of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018).

Interagency Partnerships. Collaborative partnerships between schools, public agencies, and community-based organizations have proven to be effective in addressing the complex challenges associated with chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2023; Welsh, 2018). Research indicates that programs focusing on the collaboration of schools, parents, families, and communities result in students achieving higher grades, attending school more consistently, and staying enrolled for longer periods (Malika et al., 2021; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). These collaborative partnerships enable the pooling of resources, expertise, and the development of meaningful relationships across public, for-profit, and nonprofit agencies (Childs & Groom, 2022). Furthermore, community-focused partnerships and interventions can effectively tackle common barriers such as transportation, childcare, and housing (Nairn, 2022). For example, a study demonstrated that the implementation of community health education workers (CHEWs)

working with low-income families led to the identification and effective resolution of factors contributing to chronic absenteeism. This resulted in a three percent increase in attendance compared to the previous school year (Malika et al., 2021).

Positive School Climate

A positive school climate encompasses the overall atmosphere, relationships, and perceptions within a school, which can profoundly influence students' motivation to consistently attend school (Gottfried et al., 2019). The National School Climate Center has identified five broad domains that contribute to school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the external environment (Eck et al., 2017). Existing literature highlights the significance of fostering a positive school community characterized by strong teacher-student relationships, as it can positively impact the social and emotional adjustment of both children with and without disabilities (Gottfried et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of all students feeling a sense of belonging and inclusion within the school environment, particularly those with unique needs (Gottfried et al., 2019; Young, 2020).

In one study, it was observed that chronic absence rates were significantly lower in schools with a "positive climate" profile compared to those with "moderate" or "negative" climate profiles. This difference was also evident at the school level, with "climate challenged" schools experiencing significantly higher rates of chronic absence than "marginal climate" schools (Eck et al., 2017). Notably, the most substantial disparities among these climate profiles were in areas such as school connectedness, parent involvement, teacher-student relationships, and the learning environment. Interestingly, these aspects of school climate that seem to differentiate the profiles the most are directly related to the interpersonal connections that students and families have with school staff (Eck et al., 2017). The literature points to a positive

school climate as a driver for school attendance, therefore, schools and districts must take this into account when formulating a comprehensive plan to combat chronic absenteeism.

Incentives. One strategy to promote attendance, which schools as a whole or individual teachers can implement, is incentive programs. Rather than punishing students who fall short of expectations, these programs celebrate students who meet their attendance goals (Nairn, 2022). Keys to a successful incentive program are clear attendance goals, communication with students and parents, incentives clearly linked to attendance, and rewards earned as soon as the goal is met (Nairn, 2022). The existing literature points to a mixed set of results on the effectiveness of incentives to improve student attendance. A study conducted by Balu and Ehrlich (2018) attempts to make sense of the seemingly inconsistent results when using incentives. To help policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and intervention developers consider whether and when to use incentives, Balu and Ehrlich (2018) offer a framework around how to make decisions around design, use, and implementation. The four components of the framework are to diagnose the problem, match the incentives to the diagnosis, plan for the implementation, and then use data to refine the program (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018). This study encourages more intentional planning and use of incentives in ways that ensure better alignment with the problem, thus improving outcomes.

Implementation Science

Implementation science is the application of research into practice to change learner outcomes. There are many frameworks, models, and theories used in research to define implementation science, the implementation process, and how to evaluate the successes of the interventions (Nilsen, 2015). When evaluating the success of an intervention, adherence to the predetermined steps and the quality of the implementation are the key components to

determining the fidelity of any implementation plan (Hagermoser & Collier-Meek, 2019).

Research has shown that determining the fidelity of the implementation is a multidimensional process, but is required to ensure that changes are seen in the outcomes for students (Cook et al., 2019; Forman & Barakat, 2011; Hill et al., 2023).

Implementing a program or process involves several key steps and strategies to ensure success. These steps include establishing research questions and developing a data collection and analysis plan, specifying details about the intervention and its implementation, identifying context features, prioritizing aspects of the intervention, and analyzing and reporting findings. Strategies include training and capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and sustaining and growing the intervention. Organizational structure, program characteristics, and materials must be a good fit with school goals and policies to ensure implementation success (Berkel et al., 2010; Forman et al., 2013; Gomes-Koban et al., 2019; Hagermoser & Collier-Meek, 2019; Janssen et al., 2014; Oliver, 2011; Moir, 2018).

Preparation

Collecting data is the first step when beginning to consider the implementation of a program or process. Determining the area of focus or the research question allows leaders to determine the steps they must take moving forward (Hill et al. 2023). When addressing chronic absenteeism, for example, Balu and Ehrlich (2018) emphasize the importance of collecting data for problem diagnosis before implementing any intervention. Behavioral diagnosis is suggested as a practical approach to identifying existing obstacles to regular attendance. It combines behavioral and psychological insights with data to identify potential challenges students and families face. This approach recognizes that some obstacles may be beyond anyone's control, while others can be addressed through knowledge, motivation, or action-related interventions.

An implementation team should identify the best framework to support the end goal of the intervention using the data. The implementation team can build support and engagement from key individuals and organizations throughout the crucial process. The team should include individuals who are trained and have the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively carry out the implementation activities. The team should also involve stakeholders and address their concerns to ensure a smooth implementation process (Nilsen, 2015).

A framework is crucial in implementation science as it provides a structured approach to designing and evaluating interventions. It helps to organize and guide the implementation process by outlining the stages and core components necessary for successful implementation. Frameworks provide a roadmap for practitioners and researchers, offering a set of steps or factors to consider when implementing an intervention. They help to address all essential aspects of the intervention, such as staff selection, training, consultation, and evaluation (Forman et al., 2013).

By following a framework, practitioners can increase the likelihood of successful implementation and sustainability of the intervention. The framework also allows for examining contextual factors that may influence the effectiveness of interventions. Moreover, frameworks facilitate communication and collaboration among stakeholders involved in the implementation process. They provide a common language and understanding of the critical components and stages, allowing for effective coordination and shared decision-making. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing implementation's complex and multifaceted nature within educational settings (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018; Hill et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2022; Moir, 2018; Nilsen, 2015).

One such framework is the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). This framework focuses on prevention and intervention strategies to support students with various challenges in

schools. It emphasizes a tiered continuum of support, evidence-based practices, problem-solving, and data-based decision-making. This framework can address different domains of functioning, including academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical health (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Due to these factors, the MTSS framework is commonly used in educational settings.

Other frameworks are used in implementation science. One such framework is the two-factor model of implementation. It focuses on the context of the work organization. The first factor is the organization's climate for implementation, which refers to staff members' perceptions of the extent to which the innovation is rewarded, supported, and expected. The second factor is organization members' perceptions of the fit of the innovation to their values. This model emphasizes the importance of the organizational reward structure in facilitating implementation (Forman et al., 2013). Yurkofsky (2022) suggests the analytic framework for examining the different kinds of uncertainty that operate in schools. The framework identifies three forms of uncertainty: environmental uncertainty, technical uncertainty, and representational uncertainty. These forms of uncertainty manifest across different contexts, aims, and levels of school systems and are interrelated. The framework suggests that these uncertainties must be strategically mitigated or fostered to improve education.

Evidence-Based Practices. Evidence-based practices are important in various fields, including psychology, education, and health sciences. These practices are based on research and scientific evidence, which helps ensure that interventions and strategies are effective and produce desired outcomes. By using evidence-based practices, professionals can make informed decisions and provide the best possible care or support to individuals (Demers, 2021; Shogren et al., 2021). One of the main reasons for using evidence-based practices is to enhance effectiveness. Demers

(2021) also concluded that when interventions or strategies are based on solid evidence, there is a higher likelihood of achieving positive outcomes.

Evidence-based practices have been rigorously tested and proven to be effective, which increases confidence in their ability to produce desired results. Using evidence-based practices also helps professionals avoid ineffective or potentially harmful practices. Without relying on evidence, there is a risk of implementing interventions or strategies that may not work or even have negative consequences (Shogren et al., 2021). By using evidence-based practices, professionals can ensure that they are providing interventions that are safe and effective. Lastly, evidence-based practices help optimize resource allocation. By focusing resources on interventions and strategies that have been proven to be effective, professionals can allocate their time, energy, and resources more efficiently. This ensures that resources are not wasted on practices that may not yield desired outcomes, allowing for better utilization of limited resources (Nilsen, 2015).

Overall, evidence-based practices are crucial for enhancing effectiveness, avoiding ineffective or harmful practices, promoting accountability and quality improvement, and optimizing resource allocation. By relying on research and scientific evidence, professionals can provide the best possible care or support to individuals in various fields (Demers, 2021).

Initiating a New Process

When initiating a new process with stakeholders, the first step is building a sense of urgency and understanding for the new initiative (Cook et al., 2019). A high level of support and commitment from individuals or organizations towards implementing a new practice or innovation is crucial. It ensures that stakeholders are actively engaged and willing to participate. Some strategies to promote buy-in include involving executive boards, identifying and preparing

champions, and informing local opinion leaders about the new practice. Other strategies involve proactive communication before, during, and after the initial implementation, peer support, and timely and early feedback for those implementing the new initiative (McDonald et al., 2022).

These strategies aim to create a positive environment and encourage stakeholders to embrace and support the implementation efforts.

Once an understanding of why an initiative is needed is present, effective training and ongoing support are crucial for successful implementation. Foreman and Barakat (2011) noted that addressing acceptable forms of flexibility and adaptation is also essential to effective training. The potential implementer's decision to implement and their ability to implement well are influenced by their knowledge and skills related to the program (Forman & Barakat, 2011). This includes connecting with others who can provide training, modeling, and coaching to enhance stakeholders' capacity (Metz et al., 2021).

Training must occur over multisession training opportunities, including goal setting, modeling, practice, feedback, and follow-up "booster sessions" or technical assistance. Hagermoser and Collier-Meek (2019) suggest that although direct training is needed, other methods such as role play and modeling are needed for practitioners to truly become proficient in a new intervention. Thorough training and ongoing assistance enhance implementation success (Forman et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2023). To ensure fidelity, it is crucial for schools to have a clear plan and designated individuals or teams responsible for implementing and monitoring the attendance incentive program. Regular communication and collaboration among school staff members are also important for sharing data, identifying patterns, and seeking answers to the root causes of issues like chronic absences (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018).

Evaluating the Intervention

The final step in the process is the evaluation of the intervention. The three steps in the evaluation phase require the implementers to gather data, analyze results, and make informed decisions for future implementation. Evaluation data collected includes an assessment of various implementation aspects, such as match, adoption, appropriateness, costs, feasibility, fidelity, effectiveness, and sustainability. Additionally, it is crucial to identify if certain factors had a more significant impact than others when implementing an evidence-based intervention (e.g., rural vs. urban, large vs. small, high poverty vs. high socioeconomic status). Areas to evaluate include process evaluation, program evaluation methods, and intervention fidelity assessment.

Fidelity

Research agrees that determining the fidelity of the implementation process is the number one factor in determining effectiveness. Fidelity in implementation science refers to the degree to which a plan or intervention is implemented as intended. Fidelity can be divided into two primary levels: implementation fidelity, which focuses on how well the intervention is implemented by the implementers, and intervention fidelity, which focuses on how well the intervention is received and enacted by the recipients (Demers et al., 2021).

Fidelity evaluation helps identify if the intervention was implemented correctly and if any adjustments are needed for better outcomes. There are four pre-specified dimensions: content, quantity, mode, and quality. These four dimensions include factors such as adherence, exposure, quality, participant responsiveness, and differentiation, which provide information on the effectiveness and success of the implementers and the impact on the receivers (Hill et al., 2023; Metz et al., 2021; Moir, 2018).

Fidelity is an essential concept that aims to ensure the quality and effectiveness of evidence-based practices. Several factors can influence fidelity, including the characteristics of the intervention, the skills and training of the implementers, the organizational context, and the support provided to implementers. Understanding these factors can help researchers and practitioners identify strategies to improve fidelity (Hill et al., 2023).

Evaluating fidelity is crucial to accurately measure the outcomes of new practices and provide feedback to those responsible for implementing them. It helps identify any discrepancies between the intended plan and its implementation, allowing for adjustments and improvements. Fidelity evaluation ensures interventions are implemented as intended, leading to more effective results maximizing their potential benefits (Demers et al., 2021). When interventions are implemented with fidelity, it becomes easier to evaluate their effectiveness and determine whether they are achieving the desired outcomes. When we identify fidelity, it allows for replicating a successful intervention in different settings, providing a clear framework for implementers to follow (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Findings

This mixed methods study uses a variety of data sources to aid the analysis of chronic absenteeism within CPS. Through a review of quantitative data from state and division sites, a collection of qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus groups, and a review of division documents, we have compiled data from which to ground our research findings.

The capstone team contacted individuals identified by CPS to schedule focus groups and interviews. The team was able to conduct these with over half of the identified subjects. We were unable to conduct interviews with families as we did not receive names or contact information for families with attendance improvement plans.

For each meeting, the team utilized a series of questions that were linked to the research questions. These protocols can be found in appendices A, B, C and D. Of note, the capstone team revised the questions for school attendance teams when our initial analysis revealed sparse data on contributing factors to chronic absenteeism.

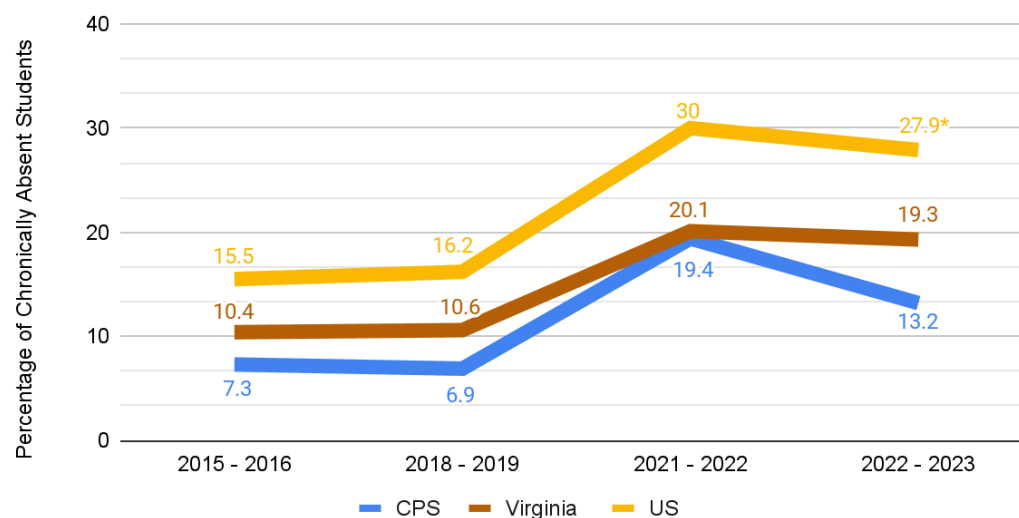
As noted in the Methods chapter, interviews and focus groups were conducted via Google Meet and recorded to allow for automatic transcription through the Google platform. The team then reviewed each transcript and video to edit the transcripts for accuracy prior to coding. The capstone team then used artificial intelligence (AI) for the initial coding. Preliminary codes were derived from the AI review. The team then coded each transcript by hand to see if themes and codes that were identified through AI were useful. These codes were also consolidated and reworded for commonalities and applicability across the interviews and focus groups. The team then transferred the codes of each transcript into a shared spreadsheet that correlated codes to research questions and allowed for the inclusion of specific quotes from the transcripts that linked to the identified codes.

Quantitative Data: CPS Outperforms Virginia, U.S. but Challenges Exist

As discussed in Chapter I, chronic absenteeism has been a focus for accreditation across most states including Virginia since the 2015-2016 school year. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of the instructional days in a school year. Since that time, chronic absenteeism data disaggregated by the entire state, division, and school has been reported and is publicly available on the Virginia Department of Education website (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). In order to better understand trends and the current state of chronic absenteeism in CPS, we have reviewed division and school data for our four identified academic years: 2015-2016, 2018-2019, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023.

To better understand how chronic absenteeism has evolved since 2015-2016, we have disaggregated the attendance data to explore all students, student grade, student demographic groups, comparisons between Title I and non-Title I schools, boroughs that represent feeder patterns, and links to school climate as represented by discipline data. The various analyses offer insights into our research questions and contribute to targeted suggestions for addressing chronic absenteeism.

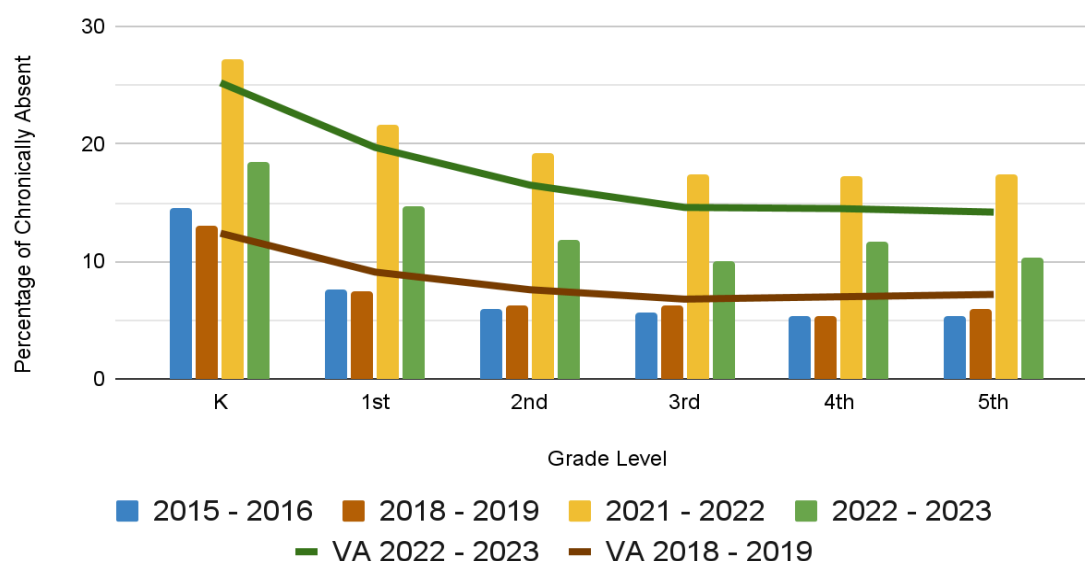
In reviewing the data from CPS, Virginia, and the United States, division and state data consistently demonstrate less chronic absenteeism than national data. Figure 2 shows that CPS outperforms the state and nation with consistently lower rates of chronic absenteeism. Figure 2 also reveals that chronic absenteeism in CPS improved at a greater rate than in Virginia and the U.S. with a six percentage point reduction for CPS compared to reductions of less than three percentage points for state and national data from 2021-2022 compared to 2022-2023.

Figure 2*Chronic Absenteeism: National, State, and Division Rates*

Note. National data for 2022 - 2023 is based on aggregated data from 11 states for which data was available and extrapolated to create an estimated national average*. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b) and Attendance Works (2023).

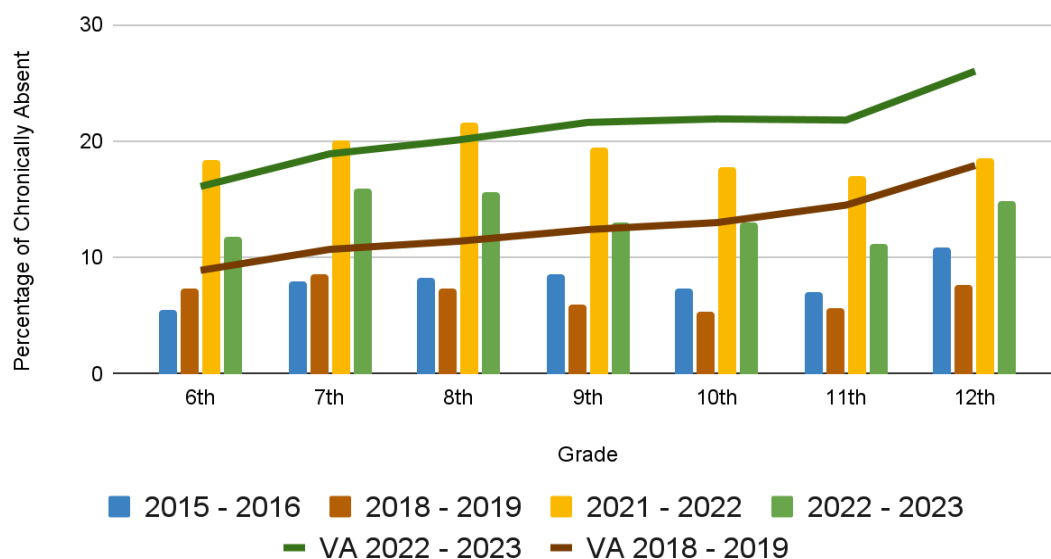
CPS Grade Level Data: High Rates of Chronic Absenteeism in Kindergarten; Increases in Middle School Through High School

A deeper dive into division data reveals how changes in chronic absenteeism were experienced across grade levels and by student groups. Data shows that kindergarten is the grade that consistently had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism at the elementary level (see Figure 3). Prior to COVID, the rate of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten was slowly declining between 2015 - 2016 and 2018 - 2019 but still outpaced absenteeism at other elementary levels. Since returning to full in person learning, rates have declined at all levels with attendance improving in each subsequent grade as students age up from kindergarten to 5th grade. CPS rates of absenteeism by grade level mirrored state trends as shown by the data for statewide grade level rates for the 2022 - 2023 school year.

Figure 3*CPS Chronic Absenteeism by Grade - Elementary*

Note. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b) and MERC (Naff et al., 2023)

Secondary schools revealed a different trend when compared to elementary schools (see Figure 4). PreCOVID chronic absenteeism increased in the middle school years (6th - 8th grade) followed by a trend of stable or declining chronic absenteeism in grades 9 - 11. In the 12th grade year, chronic absenteeism increased in all selected years. This occurred in each data year with the increase from 2021 - 2022 to 2022 - 2023 being pronounced at 3.6 percentage points. Following COVID, 8th grade experienced the most significant increase but also saw a decline of more than five percentage points between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 while 12th grade has been the slowest to recover with a decline of less than four percentage points from 2021 - 2022 to 2022 - 2023. Similar to elementary school trends, statewide absenteeism percentages by grade level mirror CPS rates as seen in the line for 2022 - 2023 data on Figure 4.

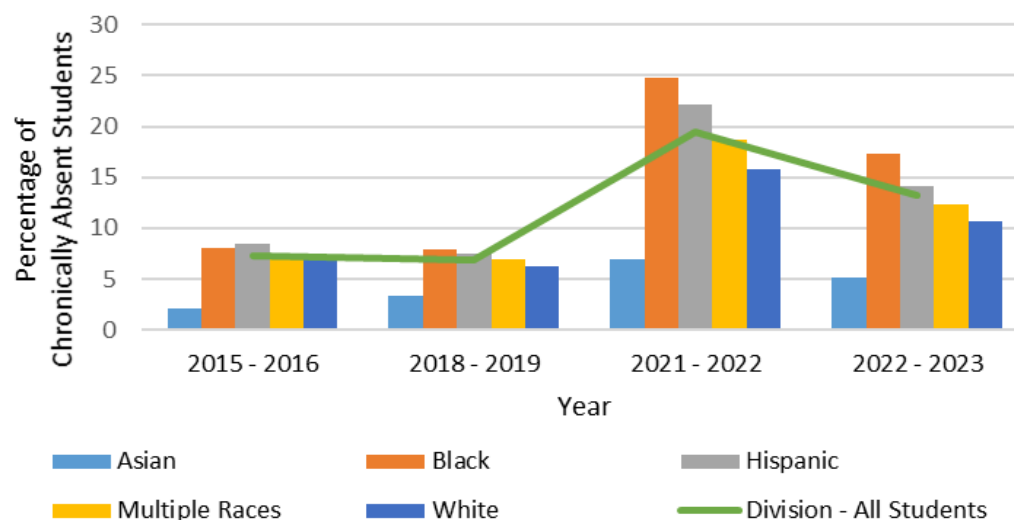
Figure 4*CPS Chronic Absenteeism by Grade - Secondary*

Note. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b) and MERC (Naff et al., 2023)

Black, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged Students Struggle with Chronic Absenteeism

When reviewing division data on race and ethnicity, preCOVID data showed a positive trend between 2015 - 2016 and 2018 - 2019 where only one group, Black students, had a chronic absenteeism rate that was more than one percent over the division average.

Following COVID, all populations saw significant increases with Black and Hispanic students exceeding the division average. This was most significant for Black students who were chronically absent at a rate that was 5.4 percentage points higher than the division average of 19.4%. In the subsequent school year, the Black and Hispanic populations experienced a reduction in chronic absenteeism that moved them closer to the overall division average but both groups continued to exceed the division rate of 13.2% (Individual figures for all racial groups can be found in Appendix F).

Figure 5*Division Chronic Absenteeism by Race/Ethnicity*

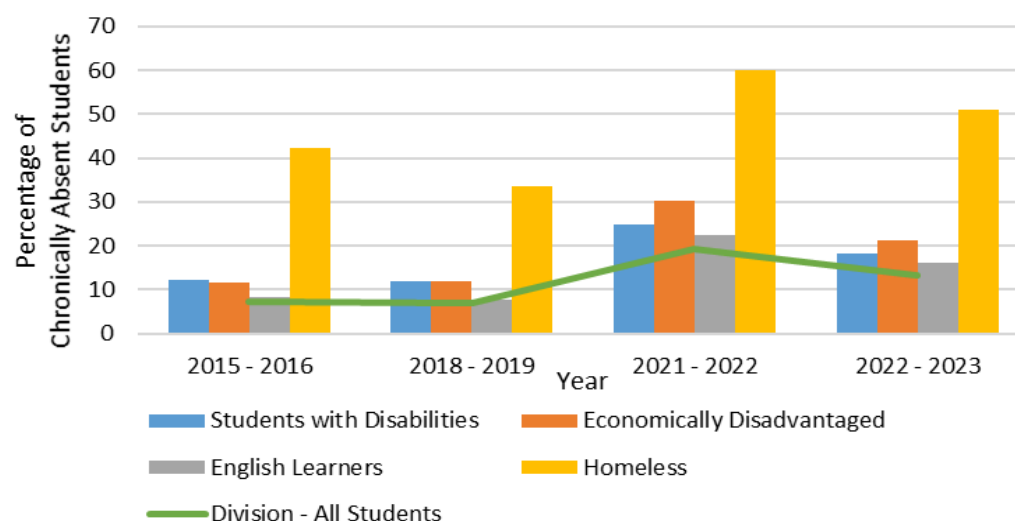
Note. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b).

Across all years, homeless students are the most impacted with chronic absenteeism rates that consistently exceed the division average by between 20 and 40 percentage points though the percentage of homeless students in CPS is 0.3%. Prior to COVID, only English language learners have chronic absenteeism rates that are less than the division average. In the years prior to COVID, chronic absenteeism rates for students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students were nearly identical and exceeded the division average by roughly five percentage points. Following COVID, chronic absenteeism rates for economically disadvantaged students outgrew students with disabilities by more than five percentage points with economically disadvantaged students jumping to 30.2% and students with disabilities moving up to 25%. Since COVID, all student groups have continued to experience rates of chronic absenteeism that exceed the overall division average. Homeless students remain the most impacted but also experienced the greatest decline from 2021 - 2022 to 2022 - 2023, with a drop

of nine percentage points (Individual figures for demographic groups can be found in Appendix G).

Figure 6

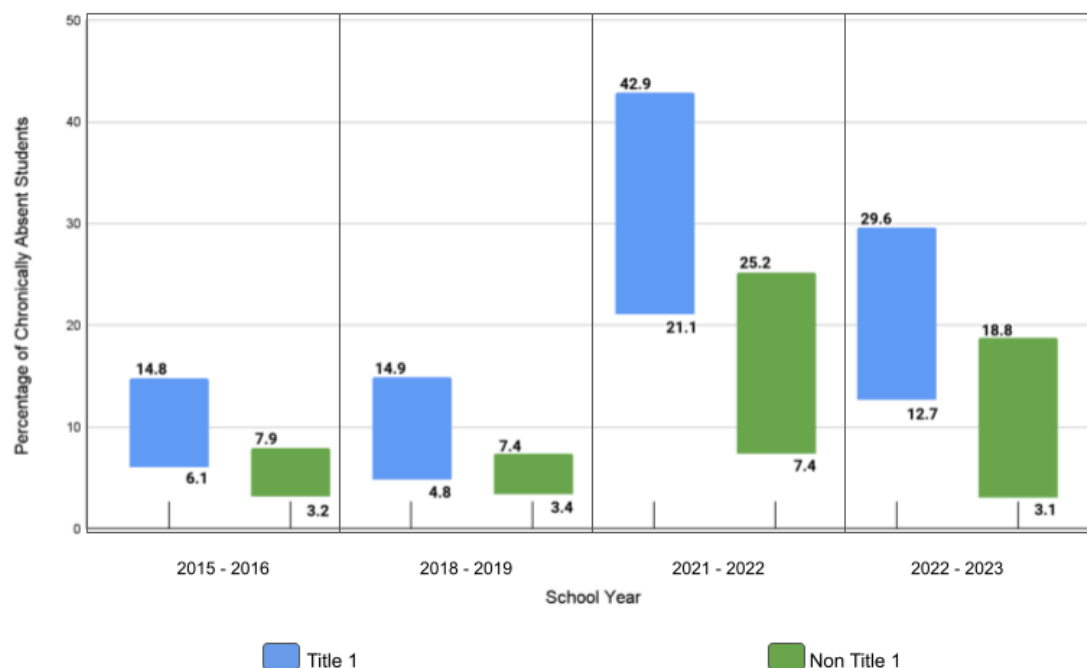
Division Chronic Absenteeism by Demographic Group



Note. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b).

Title 1 Schools Experience High Variability in Chronic Absenteeism Rates Post COVID

CPS has 14 schools designated as Title 1 based on federal free and reduced lunch participation and Medicaid participation. Of these 14 schools, 13 are elementary schools with the other being a middle school. When comparing Title 1 and non Title 1 elementary schools (see Figure 6), a discrepancy exists with Title 1 schools having higher rates of chronic absenteeism each year. Similar to other quantitative data, a marked increase in absenteeism occurs following COVID and improvement is again present in the most recent year with measurable data (2022 -2023). Yet, Title 1 schools continue to display higher rates of chronic absenteeism and a larger span on rates across the thirteen Title 1 elementary schools.

Figure 7*Ranges of Chronic Absenteeism for Title 1 and Non Title 1 Elementary Schools*

Note. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b).

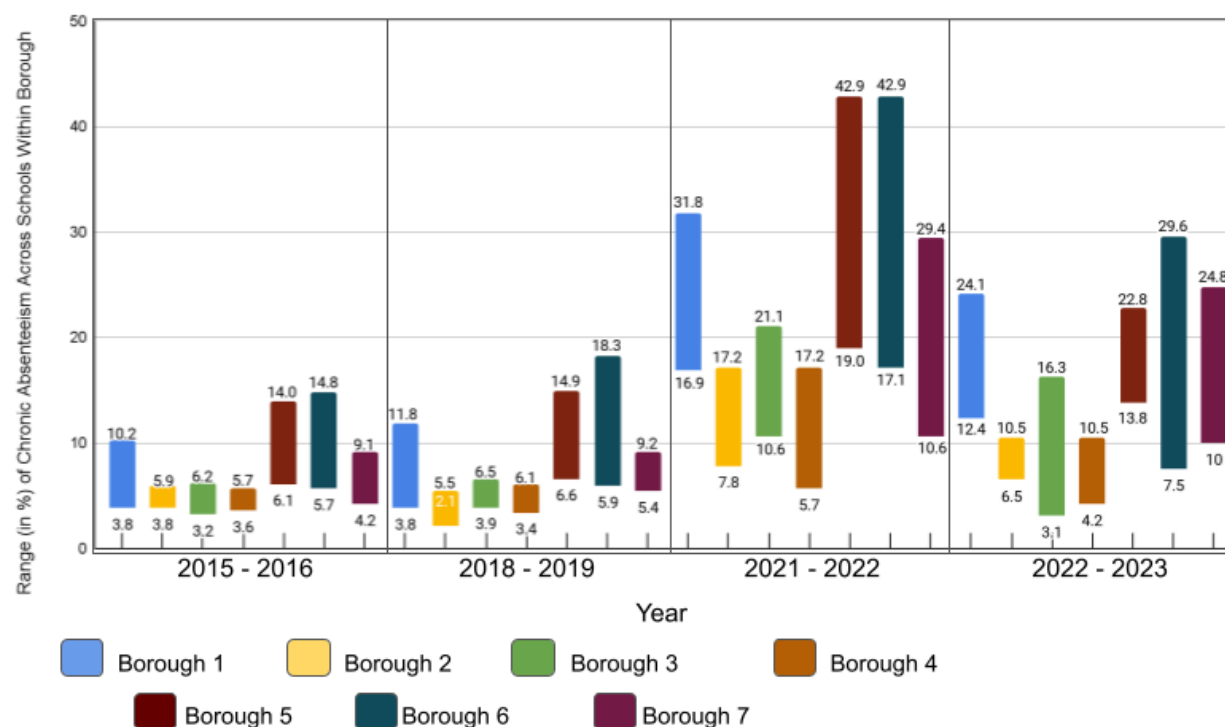
In reflecting on the data contained in Figure 7, it is notable that the variation in the Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools with the least and greatest rates of chronic absenteeism before COVID was much smaller for non-Title 1 schools with the variance being less than five percent for non Title 1 schools versus an eight percent to 10% range for Title 1 schools. Following COVID, both Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools had wide ranges between schools with low and high chronic absenteeism. Additionally, both groups had variations of over 15% for both post-COVID years where data was measured. This indicates that while overall chronic absenteeism continues to be better at non-Title 1 schools, both Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools experienced greater volatility with their attendance rates after the pandemic.

CPS Chronic Absenteeism Data Shows Wide Variations by Borough

CPS uses a borough system as part of their feeder pattern for the division's seven high schools. The borough system does not correlate to school board representation and is used to provide geographic boundaries for which households attend which schools. Here, we explore how chronic absenteeism trends vary by borough. The boroughs are economically stratified; boroughs five and six have the highest number of Title 1 schools within their boundaries while boroughs one, three, and four have no identified Title 1 schools in their boundaries. Figure 7 represents the ranges of rates of chronic absenteeism within each borough spanning from the school with the lowest chronic absenteeism rate to the school with the highest rate within each borough.

Figure 8

Range of Chronic Absenteeism by Borough



Note. Data from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b).

Prior to COVID, boroughs five and six had the greatest span in the rates of schools within each borough. Additionally, these boroughs had schools with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. Following COVID in 2021 - 2022, each borough showed significant variations between schools with the greatest and least amount of chronic absenteeism with the span ranging from nearly 10% (borough two) up to 25.8% (borough six). For the 2022 - 2023 school year, boroughs two and four showed significant improvements and also narrowed their ranges to less than seven percent. Borough five also experienced the largest decline for its highest school which experienced a decrease of over 20%. Throughout pre and post COVID years, borough six consistently had the school with the highest chronic absenteeism rate and has the largest range across schools within the borough. It is also the borough with the most Title 1 schools with eight Title 1 schools within the borough. This correlates with division data on economically disadvantaged students who have exceeded the division chronic absenteeism rate in each highlighted year (Figure 5).

In addition to overall school rates within the borough, we explored how school climate varies by borough in order to compare this to borough chronic absenteeism ranges. To assess one aspect of school climate, we utilized a data source available from the Virginia Department of Education website: the number of coded discipline incidents per school. We included this item because it is included on the Virginia Department of Education's School Quality Profiles as a Learning Climate indicator. In addition, research has shown perceptions of safety at school impact chronic absenteeism (Lenhoff et al., 2020). Data was not available for the 2015 - 2016 school year so we narrowed this data to three of our selected years, 2018 - 2019, 2021 - 2022, and 2022 - 2023. It is important to note that the total number of incidents coded does not equate to a one to one correspondence as some disciplinary infractions that occur within schools can be

coded with multiple codes for the one incident. For Table 4, the total number of coded incidents per school were added together by borough for a borough total. School enrollments for each school within the borough were added to create a total number of K - 12th grade students per borough.

Table 4 shows that the number of incidents per student more than doubled for each borough between 2018 - 2019 and 2021 - 2022, the years before and after the pandemic related closures and shifts in instructional models. This aligns with division absenteeism data which showed rates of chronic absenteeism also more than doubled during the same time period, growing from 6.9% to 19.4%. In contrast, division chronic absenteeism improved in all grades, demographic groups, and boroughs between 2021 - 2022 and 2022 - 2023 whereas discipline incidents per student continued to grow in each borough. In addition to the overall change in behavior incidents, a wide variation exists between boroughs. Borough five reported a slightly greater than 1:1 ratio of behavior incidents per student and borough six also had a high rate of incidents per student at 0.80. Of note, borough six also has the school with the highest chronic absenteeism rate in the 2022 - 2023 school year while borough's two and four have low rates of chronic absenteeism and a small variation among chronic absenteeism rates among their schools. These boroughs also have the lowest number of behavior incidents per student. This data suggests a correlation between behavior and chronic absenteeism.

Table 4.***Behavior Incidents Per Student Disaggregated by Borough, 2018 - 2019 and 2021 - 2023***

	Borough 1	Borough 2	Borough 3	Borough 4	Borough 5	Borough 6	Borough 7
2018 - 2019	0.13	0.06	0.10	0.05	0.23	0.24	0.20
2021 - 2022	0.35	0.21	0.34	0.16	0.67	0.53	0.44
2022 - 2023	0.48	0.30	0.38	0.25	1.07	0.80	0.58

Note. Data in this table comes from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b)

Qualitative Data: Staff Conversations Offer Insights on Chronic Absenteeism***Identified Barriers in CPS***

Identifying the factors, or barriers, that contribute to a child's inability to attend school regularly is of utmost importance for schools when considering where to start in addressing chronic absenteeism. By doing this, one can gain understanding on how to minimize the adverse academic and developmental outcomes (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Our qualitative research, including interviews and focus groups, revealed that CPS is facing both school and non-school barriers.

School Barriers. CPS staff identified school barriers that encompass a variety of challenges impacting their educational environments. Building leaders reported that communication and language barriers were a constant struggle with many of their families. An elementary school principal highlighted that they have a high English Language Learner (ELL) population, and they “know language can be a barrier and we're doing all that we can to make sure that all the documentation and all the communication we send home is available in both languages, but sometimes I think the language piece is too much.”

Additionally, it was noted that there weren't many considerations given to students with disabilities. One elementary school principal, who had a large population of students with severe

disabilities, shared that, “the state doesn’t account for these students with severe and terminal disabilities, but we know they are much more than a number.” This is in line with the research that states students with disabilities were chronically absent at a higher rate of 22.5% (US Department of Education, 2019, Lee et al., 2023).

CPS staff shared that issues with transportation were an attendance barrier that they were constantly trying to maneuver around. One high school staff member noted that, “the county is in desperate need of bus drivers” and “there’s, generally speaking, two to three buses that arrive after the bell rings on a daily basis.” We know, from the research, that the lack of a school-provided transportation, as well as poor coordination of transportation services, is shown to have a negative impact on school attendance (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022).

Virtual learning and the utilization of the Canvas platform are also barriers that have caused attendance issues in CPS, especially at the high school level. One high school principal noted that, “Canvas is still an option that teachers are required to upload lessons to, so some families use that as a crutch, as in they don’t see the importance of going to school if they can access the lesson online at home.”

Furthermore, CPS staff identified other school factors that pose barriers such as issues related to the implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) without adequate training and support, the need for effective data-driven decision making, challenges in resource mapping, and the absence of consistent attendance recognition programs. It is noted that these barriers were revealed without substantial discussion amongst all stakeholder groups that were interviewed and participation in focus groups.

Non-School Barriers. CPS staff identified non-school barriers that present challenges impacting their students’ attendance. Family priorities was a noted barrier by CPS staff. One

school administrator noted that, “parents screen the school’s phone numbers so they don’t have to talk to the staff about their child’s attendance.” This administrator further elaborated that it “forces the school staff to have to find time to make home visits to even get in contact with families because they don’t want to talk about their students’ absences.”

Furthermore, mental health concerns were mentioned by CPS staff as factors that impact a student's ability to attend school consistently. One high school principal noted that, “With the social emotional and mental health aspect, we get a lot of reasoning for absences based on those things.” Another school administrator noted that, “since COVID, it is easier for students to just stay home.”

Homelessness, poverty, and military families were also mentioned during our interactions with CPS staff as being barriers to school attendance for their students. However, it should be noted that these barriers were revealed without substantial discussion amongst all stakeholder groups that were interviewed and participated in focus groups.

The school division does appear to be recognizing the importance of more mental health support as evidenced by their All-In VA Plan, which was recently presented to the VDOE. CPS’s All-In Plan includes a measure to increase the staff of Office of Student Attendance by one by adding a social worker to this team. This is important for CPS to address because the research indicates that students who display social and emotional behaviors such as anxiety and disengagement are more likely to have negative feelings about school, which contribute to them being chronically absent (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lim et al., 2019; Sugrue et al., 2016).

What We Know About Communication and Engagement in CPS

Fostering communication and engagement with parents and families is critical in addressing chronic absenteeism. In particular, the necessity of educating families about the importance of being at school and the importance of furnishing regular updates on student attendance are essential components to this work (Gottfried et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2018; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Our qualitative research, which involved interviews and focus groups, found that CPS has put in place distinct systems, resources, and strategies to communicate and involve families. However, there is variability in the consistency of these approaches across different schools and levels. Most schools have supplemented these general strategies with additional, school-specific measures, contributing to a lack of uniformity in the implementation of family engagement practices throughout the CPS system. One division-level staff member noted that, “we are really good at tapping into our resources, but more on an individual school-based level, not division-wide.” Additionally, some key components of effective communication, according to the research, were not mentioned by any CPS personnel.

Studies have demonstrated that implementing specific communication routines with parents/caregivers can heighten their awareness of attendance issues among students and lead to improved attendance rates (Nairn, 2022; REL, 2020). CPS stakeholders identified communication tools and methods they use to interact with families, which included emails, phone calls, Synergy-generated letters, the Thrillshare app, in-person events, and attendance plans through the implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Elementary and secondary school leaders noted that they use “beginning of the year events and family engagement nights throughout the year as outreach to families that are struggling with school attendance.” Additionally, these same school leaders share that they communicate to families

about attendance through their “school’s handbook, parent newsletters, and automatically-generated letters.” Furthermore, secondary leaders note that, in addition to phone calls and emails, they “meet with students 1:1 to help them track their own attendance data.” CPS acknowledged the importance of connecting with parents to help improve their student’s attendance, with one elementary school leader specifically noting that they, “get in the car with a colleague and go directly to their student’s home to discuss the attendance concerns with the parent.”

However, while employing these various communication tools and methods, CPS acknowledges encountering challenges that impede their implementation. Research shows that parent/caregiver involvement plays a crucial role in addressing chronic absenteeism (Robinson et al., 2018). With this, CPS acknowledges that a parent’s lack of awareness and/or prioritization of attendance are key factors that hinder their communication with families. Division-level staff share that, “unless it’s written down and right in front of them, parents are absolutely oblivious to the fact that their kids were missing that many days of school.” Furthermore, all division and school leaders alluded to the COVID pandemic as a factor that has inhibited their communication, in that parents don’t prioritize their child’s attendance in school like they did before. One elementary school leader said, “the shift is that parents don’t care now and their mentality is that they are going to do what they want with their family.” We know informing parents/caregivers about their child's attendance record can lead to a 10-percentage-point increase in attendance (Nairn, 2022). However, as one elementary school leader put it, “We still see many Disney trips, with parents seeming to not care that their child is missing school, even when we explain to them about chronic absenteeism through multiple means of communication.”

It appears that even though CPS is communicating to families, they are struggling to fully and consistently negate the barriers that might allow for an increase in attendance.

While CPS has implemented various tools and methods to connect with families, there exists a notable variability in the consistency of these approaches across different schools and levels. Despite acknowledging the importance of connecting with parents, CPS encounters challenges, such as a lack of parental awareness, prioritization issues, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for CPS to create a more uniform and effective family engagement and communication strategy throughout their school system.

How CPS Tracks and Analyzes Attendance Data

Tracking and analyzing real-time attendance data is a crucial element in addressing chronic absenteeism for county and school building leaders. Regularly reviewing school attendance records helps pinpoint the students who may be heading toward chronic absenteeism, which is essential for implementing timely interventions (Attendance Works, 2018). CPS has implemented a system using Synergy to facilitate effective attendance tracking at both the central office and school levels. Our research, including interviews and focus groups, revealed consistent utilization of Synergy across the county. Central office staff and building leaders reported having access to various analytics panels within Synergy, providing them with instant, up-to-date information. During the interviews and focus groups, all building leaders mentioned they receive daily emails from the county containing their attendance percentages for the day. These leaders expressed appreciation for this practice, emphasizing its usefulness. An elementary school principal highlighted, "Something they started doing this year is sending us a daily tracking of

attendance percentages, which I find unbelievably useful. As a principal and my assistant principal, we get to see that daily tracking of our attendance by percentage."

Attendance teams play a crucial role in analyzing the collected attendance data. This team is essential to be able to recognize trends, patterns, and areas where interventions are most necessary (Attendance Works, 2017). Although all CPS schools have attendance teams, the composition and utilization of these teams vary. School leaders consistently noted that assistant principals and school counselors were part of the attendance team. Title I schools included their Family and Community Engagement (FACE) person, but acknowledged their part-time employment limited their availability. Social workers were present on some teams, but leaders noted their part-time status made it difficult to attend consistently. Attendance data clerks and classroom teachers were additional staff members mentioned as part of some school attendance teams.

Inconsistencies in the frequency of attendance team meetings and their responsibilities were discovered through interviews and focus groups. Meeting frequency ranged from weekly to biweekly to inconsistent. For example, one principal mentioned weekly attendance team meetings, while another stated, "We have an attendance team. It does not meet as often, and we meet kind of separately, not as much together." Secondary school leaders noted having a truancy team and an MTSS team focusing on attendance.

The responsibilities of the teams varied among schools. Most schools use their teams to analyze attendance data and identify at-risk students. Other responsibilities mentioned included creating attendance improvement plans, using district guidelines for sending letters to families, assigning students to different staff members, conducting home visits, developing incentive plans, and planning student-specific interventions.

Overall, we found that Synergy is consistently used throughout the county. This usage allows central office staff and building leaders to access attendance information instantly and stay up-to-date. However, we observed inconsistencies in the frequency of attendance team meetings and the assigned responsibilities of team members.

Cultivating a Positive School Climate: Strategies and Varied Implementation

A positive school climate encompasses the overall atmosphere, relationships, and perceptions within a school, which can profoundly influence students' motivation to consistently attend school (Gottfried et al., 2019). Information gathered from focus groups and interviews revealed that both CPS Central Office personnel and building leaders recognize the important relationship between a positive school climate and good student attendance. The participants emphasized the need for a welcoming and engaging climate where students feel connected to the school. One principal emphasized the importance of connecting kids to the school stating, "Connecting the kids to the school is a priority. If we can get them connected to school, they want to be here." One middle school principal mentioned getting students involved in after school clubs as a way of connecting and increasing attendance.

Building leaders noted the importance of teachers building relationships with students as a key component to combating chronic absenteeism. They pointed out that teachers are often the first point of contact when students miss consecutive days, because those relationships have been formed. For instance, a school principal shared that their teachers reach out to parents after two consecutive absences if they haven't heard from them yet. Another elementary principal echoed this approach, saying, "Our teachers are the first point of contact when we notice students missing consecutive days. We make a courtesy call just to ensure everything is okay."

Participants highlighted the use of school-wide incentive programs as effective tools for

cultivating a positive school climate and improving attendance. Building leaders shared differing approaches to utilizing incentives in their respective schools. Examples included recognizing individual students with positive attendance through pride cards, golden tickets, and tokens for book vending machines. Some schools fostered friendly competition among grade levels, awarding banners or certificates to classes with the best weekly attendance. It became evident from the focus groups and interviews that schools implemented various incentive strategies, or none at all, possibly indicating a lack of collective discussion on the topic. A school based staff member expressed surprise, stating, "I did not think we were allowed to provide incentives for attendance." The participants in our focus groups emphasized the value of exchanging ideas among building leaders.

Overall, CPS acknowledged the importance of establishing a positive school culture; however, each school varied in the systems, resources, and strategies employed to achieve this goal. A notable discovery from the focus groups and interviews was the absence of mentor programs. Despite participants identifying school connectedness as crucial in addressing chronic absenteeism, none of the schools had a functioning mentor program in place. The literature points to mentorship programs, when designed effectively, can foster positive relationships between students and mentors resulting in increased attendance.

Lack of Sustained Family Outreach and Support around Attendance in CPS

Research indicates that outreach efforts to families play a crucial role in addressing chronic absenteeism. These efforts involve various strategies to engage families and provide support. Effective outreach strategies include collaborating with community organizations, offering mentoring programs, organizing workshops and seminars, and providing crisis intervention services to support families' varied needs (Attendance Works, 2022). Regular

assessment of students' social and emotional skills can help identify those at higher risk and provide necessary support. Community based mentorship programs have been found to foster positive relationships and improve attendance (Yin et al., 2023). Additionally, family outreach and support programs help identify barriers to attendance and connect students and families with community resources to mitigate these barriers (Doremus, 2020).

Focus group and interview data suggested that CPS faces challenges in providing consistent resources and systems to effectively offer outreach and support to families. School based teams and administrators all reported that they focus on family engagement but none were able to share any ways that they connect with community based organizations to support families and the barriers to attendance. They referred to family nights and other events planned and implemented by the school to build community within their school. The themes from these interviews also showed that home visits were one strategy many secondary schools used to provide outreach and support. "At our former school, we did a lot of home visits. We had a graduation coach and we frequently were going out putting door hangers on doors." Other examples of outreach were FACE coordinators, bilingual staff that can communicate with families in their native language, and staff dedicated to educating parents about the importance of good school attendance. The overall theme of the interviews shows that most school staff identify building relationships with families as the key to their outreach approach, therefore additional outreach and supports are needed.

The theme of mental health appeared in the data as having a large impact on the current attendance of the CPS students. A division level staff member stated, "I've seen an increase in the mental health concerns of the young. And I see a lot of parents struggling with that. Struggling because there's a lack of resources. I mean, we're in Hampton Roads. We have a

children's hospital here. Parents can't get appointments, providers are booked out months in advance. And then you have parents that they genuinely want to help but this isn't their skill set either so they're stuck.” Yet none of the interviewees spoke about how they supported the mental health of their students.

There is a lack of system-wide approaches to outreach in CPS and, based on the data, most school personnel confused communication with outreach and support. A division level staff stated, “So we are good at tapping into our resources. But more at an individual school-based level, I would say.” Partnerships that were identified focused on local restaurants and faith-based organizations but there was no mention of how to utilize those partnerships to support chronic absenteeism. If there were system-wide processes in place, then schools and even boroughs would be able to apply those practices that would best support their schools’ unique needs. Through interviews and focus groups, it became clear that CPS is not using the resources in their community to support families and remove their barriers to good attendance.

The Importance of Implementation and Fidelity

The implementation of attendance policies with fidelity is crucial to combat chronic absenteeism. Policies implemented with fidelity ensure that all schools have the same set of expectations for coding, communication, outreach, incentives, and more. Following a structured framework and adhering to predetermined steps, ensures the quality and effectiveness of interventions and every school’s response to chronic absenteeism (Hagermoser & Collier-Meek, 2019; Janssen et al., 2014; Oliver, 2011; Moir, 2018). It also promotes accountability, resource optimization, and continuous improvement. Through effective implementation, professionals can provide interventions and support that meet the unique needs of each family.

CPS recognizes that division-wide approaches are more comprehensive and have a greater impact on attendance rates when implementation is monitored and fidelity is ensured. A review of division documents received suggests that there is a policy for the division that addresses chronic absenteeism and there is a manual for schools on how to enter data and build reports in their student database. However, CPS has an inconsistent implementation process throughout its schools in how they apply the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework.

TTAC presented training to all leaders in CPS and, after reviewing the training documents and the resource map provided by the TTAC team, there are resources that the CPS team can implement to address chronic absenteeism across all three tiers of intervention. Based on interviews and focus groups it became apparent that there is a basic understanding of the MTSS process. Still, there are no clear guidelines on what criteria are used to move students through the levels of support or what interventions should be implemented based on the barriers identified. One principal shared, ‘Our department of student conduct and support... is working to code them correctly so that it doesn't impact us on our chronic absenteeism.'; "I think we all kind of have our little twist on it because we're all just trying to figure out what else can we do to get our numbers down and get kids to school."

In CPS, all schools have an attendance team, but at each level it is made up of personnel with different roles and responsibilities in the school. For example in high schools, there is an attendance clerk who solely focuses on attendance, while at the elementary school level, the attendance clerk might also be the one who answers phone calls and fields other office needs. Having a centralized role for each school allows for the needed fidelity when implementing processes to address chronic absenteeism. TTAC stated,

So we want to look at the barriers absolutely, but we also want to look at the strengths. Where do you have schools where attendance is amazing? Where teacher attendance is amazing, where climate data is amazing. I mean, I would love to look at their climate data dovetailed as well as their academic and behavior data, but looking at their climate data dovetailed with their attendance data, and then you dovetail that with their behavior data, and then you have connected that with their literacy, and then you kind of get a big picture for which are some schools that are rocking and how do we replicate what's working in those schools?

This shows the importance of teams not only collecting data and learning about barriers but also learning from each other and communicating across the division successful approaches that all can use to address chronic absenteeism and develop resource maps unique to the needs of the CPS community.

Fidelity is important because it ensures that interventions are implemented as intended, maximizing their potential benefits. When interventions are implemented with fidelity, it becomes easier to evaluate their effectiveness and determine whether they are achieving the desired outcomes. Evaluating fidelity is crucial to accurately measure the outcomes of new practices and provide feedback to those responsible for implementing them. It helps identify any discrepancies between the intended plan and its implementation, allowing for adjustments and improvements. Fidelity evaluation ensures interventions are implemented as intended, leading to more effective results (Hill et al., 2023; Metz et al., 2021; Moir, 2018). In CPS there is only one person who is charged with ensuring the fidelity of the implementation of the MTSS process around chronic absenteeism and as a TTAC member noted,

This year when we were looking at are the schools implementing these practices that are in the resource map, and are they implementing them with fidelity and that's hard for one person who also has to spend half her time in court.

Overall, CPS knows the importance of systems-wide approaches to address chronic absenteeism and has taken the time to train their leaders in a resource map that offers guidance on the steps needed to implement the MTSS framework, but there has not been any fidelity monitoring of this implementation. A lack of common set of expectations for the MTSS process has also led to consistent practices across the district.

Summary of Findings

Through the use of data analysis, document review, interviews, and focus groups researchers were able to identify areas of strength and growth for CPS as they try to combat chronic absenteeism throughout the district. CPS faces a myriad of barriers to addressing chronic absenteeism, spanning communication challenges, inadequate support for students with disabilities, transportation issues, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These barriers extend beyond school-related factors, encompassing parental understanding, homelessness, poverty, military-related challenges, and mental health concerns. While CPS employs diverse communication strategies and utilizes the Synergy system for attendance tracking, inconsistencies exist in meeting frequency and team responsibilities due to the lack of a common set of expectations for teams. Moreover, while efforts are made to cultivate a positive school climate through teacher-student relationships and incentive programs, implementation varies across schools. Addressing these challenges requires sustained family outreach, support, and fidelity in implementing attendance policies and interventions to effectively mitigate chronic absenteeism.

Chapter V: Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to provide CPS with a comprehensive plan to address chronic absenteeism and improve school attendance. We sought to study existing structures and procedures related to attendance within the division, analyze research and best practices from an extensive literature review, connect with other entities supporting CPS with their attendance efforts, and utilize demographic data to offer division-wide practical solutions that can be implemented across schools and that provide results for diverse student groups. Since the beginning of our work with CPS, additional scrutiny and support for divisions in Virginia related to chronic absenteeism have emerged. Central among these is an initiative from the Governor titled All In VA which includes financial support to aid divisions in addressing chronic absenteeism (Governor of Virginia, 2023). To receive funds, divisions had to submit an application including proposed plans for usage of these funds. CPS applied for and received funding for All in VA and we included this application in our document analysis.

The capstone team used a mixed methods research approach in order to answer the following research questions:

- What factors are responsible for contributing to chronic absenteeism among K-12 students before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2015 - present)?
- What specific systems, resources, and strategies are necessary for CPS to effectively address and reduce chronic absenteeism before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2015 - present)?
- How can school divisions implement research-based systems, resources, and strategies to effectively address and reduce chronic absenteeism?

When CPS contacted VCU with their request for assistance regarding chronic absenteeism, the division was experiencing a significant increase in rates of absenteeism much like other divisions across the Commonwealth. The most recent data from the 2022 - 2023 school year showed a substantial improvement for CPS, with their overall rate of chronic absenteeism declining by 6.2 percentage points (from 19.4% to 13.2%) and falling below the state threshold of 15% for high chronic absenteeism (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). At the same time, state data showed a slight improvement, dropping from a chronic absenteeism rate of 20.1% to 19.3% (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). With their marked improvement, CPS's rate of chronic absenteeism was one of the ten lowest in the state (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b). The capstone team applauds CPS for the strong improvement in their rates of chronic absenteeism and notes that the recommendations contained in this chapter are intended to enhance and maintain the progress that is being made within the division.

Through our focus groups and interviews, we had the opportunity to speak with a variety of dynamic leaders. These conversations revealed that many of the evidence-based action steps identified by the research literature as effective for addressing chronic absenteeism were already in practice at individual schools. School leaders from the building and central office level offered praise for the data that is readily available to them through their Synergy student management system dashboards. They noted the division's Synergy team was award winning and had done great work in building absenteeism tracking tools, making the process of identifying students with attendance needs less cumbersome. In addition, principals and attendance teams noted ongoing efforts to connect with students and families, stressing the importance of relationships as a key factor in improving attendance. Many of the recommendations that follow include implementing these actions with fidelity across the division for maximum effectiveness. Others

point to necessary changes and enhancements such as adding central office staff to create an MTSS manual related to addressing chronic absenteeism with specific guidance for schools, adding school based attendance clerks at designated elementary schools to assist with data tracking and analysis, providing time for school leaders to share successes and school practices related to reducing chronic absenteeism, and adding parent liaisons for each school who oversee outreach related to chronic absenteeism.

Table 5.

Main Findings from Quantitative and Qualitative Data Review

Finding	Recommendations
CPS has provided a system for schools to track and analyze attendance data . These systems and resources, including attendance teams and utilization of the MTSS framework, are inconsistent throughout the schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creation of a division wide manual to address chronic absenteeism through the MTSS framework. ● Dedicated central office personnel to help with the consistent implementation of the MTSS framework. ● Addition of an Attendance Clerk at select elementary schools with absentee rates at/above 15% for the past two years. ● District training provided to attendance teams to include who should be on the team, roles, and responsibilities
CPS recognizes that division-wide approaches are more comprehensive and have a greater impact on attendance rates when implementation is monitored and fidelity is ensured . However, CPS has an inconsistent implementation processes throughout its schools. Of note, the application of an MTSS framework varies widely and would benefit from additional focus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop fidelity processes to ensure monitoring of the MTSS framework through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Training and supporting admin and team on the facets and tiers of the MTSS framework ○ Support from central office including dedicated team member at each school ○ Establishing a process for regular monitoring at the school level by central office

CPS acknowledged the importance of creating a **positive school culture**; however, each school differed in the systems, resources, and strategies employed to achieve this goal.

- A division-wide plan with key components of how to create a positive school culture
- Dedicated time for principals to discuss strategies to effectively reduce chronic absenteeism.
- District support for the development of in-school mentoring programs.

CPS has implemented specific systems, resources, and strategies to **communicate and engage** families to reduce chronic absenteeism. While some of these methods are being implemented consistently throughout the school, most schools have added additional strategies specific to their schools. Additionally, according to the research, some key components of effective communication were not mentioned by any CPS personnel.

- Identify consistent ways for schools to communicate and engage with families around attendance.
- Addition of a Parent Liaison dedicated to engaging families around attendance, supporting AIPs, and providing resources.

CPS faces challenges in providing consistent resources and systems to effectively offer **outreach and support** to families who have concerns about attendance.

- A comprehensive plan at the division level is needed to establish systems and allocate resources
- Use of Parent Liaison to help coordinate the use of outside resources and supports
 - The creation of after-school/mentoring programs at each school.
 - Mental health resources
 - Ways for schools to help with transportation issues

Consistent Methods of Tracking and Analyzing Attendance Data

Reducing chronic absenteeism rates requires a systematic approach that effectively tracks, analyzes, and addresses attendance data. The data shows that CPS has a consistent and reliable method for tracking the data through the use of Synergy. However, there are inconsistencies across schools on how attendance data is analyzed and who participates in that

process. A unified approach to how attendance teams are utilized and the use of the MTSS framework would enable CPS to adopt a consistent, division-wide strategy for tackling chronic absenteeism. The VDOE recommends following guidance from Attendance Works which promotes attendance teams having a two-fold responsibility: first, they are charged with looking at individual students who are chronically absent and ensuring their needs are met using all available resources; second, they monitor what is happening overall for all students and student sub-groups at a school site. Attendance teams can carry out both levels of work by clearly defining when they will work at each level (Attendance Works, 2018). This standardized approach would empower all schools to implement effective measures to reduce absenteeism rates.

Division-wide, Systematic Use of the MTSS Framework

Implementing the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework consistently within a school district can significantly assist in addressing chronic absenteeism. CPS has been utilizing the MTSS framework throughout the district for academic and behavioral interventions. At the beginning of the 2023-24 school year, they collaborated with TTAC to train school administrators on utilizing the MTSS framework to help reduce chronic absenteeism. However, our research revealed inconsistent implementation of this framework across schools. Since, research shows that schools and districts require a comprehensive system for collecting and reporting attendance data, including reasons for absences, to inform the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies and resource allocation, the creation of a district -wide comprehensive manual is recommended (Attendance Works, 2018). A district-wide manual that outlines the MTSS framework with specific strategies to employ at each tier would help create consistency across CPS. This manual would include clear descriptions for each tier, basic

responses and interventions for each level, and designated individuals responsible for implementing action steps. By utilizing recommendations and protocols from TTAC, this manual aims to standardize MTSS implementation across the district, enhancing efforts to address chronic absenteeism effectively. In order to create, provide training, and oversee the implementation of the MTSS framework for chronic absenteeism, the central office requires an additional staff member. This individual would collaborate with TTAC to develop a comprehensive manual that clarifies all strategies and action steps across each tier and ensures schools possess the necessary resources for implementation.

In addition, our research revealed disparities in chronic absenteeism rates across various demographic groups. Specifically, Black and Hispanic students are still chronically absent at rates that are higher than the state average and at a greater percentage than White students within CPS. Higher rates of chronic absenteeism also exist for economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. As such, and given the concentrations of these students in certain district boroughs, the manual should provide school teams with targeted strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism for impacted groups. Extensive research has been conducted on the disproportionate impacts of chronic absenteeism on student groups. For instance, Black and Hispanic students who are chronically absent show larger declines in test scores than their White counterparts (Chang & Romero, 2008). As such, aligned strategies and interventions should be incorporated into the MTSS process and reflected in a division manual. Following the manual's completion, continual training and support will be essential to ensure schools receive ongoing assistance in executing the action steps effectively.

Clear and Consistent Use of Attendance Teams

Within the MTSS framework, school-based attendance teams play a key role in

monitoring attendance data and implementing strategies to reduce absenteeism rates. Currently, attendance team utilization varies among CPS schools. Effective teams exhibit traits such as cohesion, clear communication, and cooperation (VDOE, 2023). Establishing a cohesive and clear framework outlining these teams' composition, purpose, and processes would greatly benefit CPS and aid in reducing chronic absenteeism.

The initial step in optimizing attendance teams involves assembling the right individuals. Providing guidance on team composition will offer schools a starting point and foster alignment of team objectives. According to Attendance Works (2018), an attendance team needs a designated chairperson/facilitator and members such as the principal who can understand and analyze attendance data to function effectively. Ideally, teams should include not only school staff but also representatives from other community agencies who can help reach out to students and their parents and offer resources for overcoming barriers to attendance. According to VDOE (2023) attendance teams should be prepared to connect students and families to resources and the team should monitor progress. While all schools should maintain a core team, we propose tailoring attendance team composition to meet each school's specific needs. Utilizing data, such as chronic absenteeism rates across the boroughs and within demographic groups, can assist in identifying schools requiring additional team members. Additionally, participants of our focus groups and interviews noted a lack of personnel at the elementary level to track and analyze attendance data. At the elementary level, the Attendance Clerk also serves as an administrative assistant, whereas in secondary schools, these are separate positions. Our recommendation is to have a dedicated Attendance Clerk at each elementary school whose sole focus is on attendance, thus becoming a crucial member of the attendance team. An initial step towards this goal would be to add an Attendance Clerk at select elementary schools with CA rates at or above 15% for

the past two years. According to the data from 2022 - 2023, this numbers 12 elementary schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b).

Furthermore, it is important to articulate a clear purpose for school attendance teams and delineate how they will collaborate. Division-wide expectations regarding the team's objectives, including analyzing attendance data, identifying barriers, and implementing strategies, should be established and communicated clearly to all schools. Additionally, guidelines regarding meeting frequency should be addressed to ensure consistent understanding across schools. For example, according to Attendance Works (2018), school-based attendance teams would ideally review data biweekly to identify which students might need support and notice if multiple students from the same family are struggling with attendance. The additional personnel mentioned earlier could serve as a valuable resource in developing these guidelines for attendance teams.

Fidelity Leads to Successful Implementation

Implementation science is the application of research into practice to change learner outcomes. It involves using frameworks, models, and theories to define the implementation process and evaluate the success of interventions. As stated above, CPS should implement the MTSS framework that was introduced to local school leaders. Adherence to predetermined steps and the quality of implementation are key components in determining the fidelity of any implementation plan. Research has shown that determining the fidelity of the implementation is a multidimensional process, but is required to ensure that changes are seen in the outcomes for students (Cook et al., 2019; Forman & Barakat, 2011; Hill et al., 2023). Strategies for successful implementation include training and capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and sustaining and growing the intervention. As recommended, CPS should not only fully develop their MTSS

plan for attendance but it must also develop a system for determining the fidelity of the implementation of the MTSS plan.

To fully ensure the fidelity of the MTSS plan, CPS must ensure that not only do schools set a clear goal, but training, data collection, and monitoring are occurring on a regular basis both at the school and central office level. The appointed district-level staff should create detailed protocols and procedures outlining how the attendance program will be implemented. This includes defining roles and responsibilities, establishing communication channels, and outlining the process for data collection and analysis. Once these decisions are made, it is imperative that training is offered to all staff involved in the implementation of the attendance program to ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities, as well as the protocols and procedures to be followed (Demers et al., 2021). This may include training on data collection methods, intervention strategies, and best practices for engaging students and families.

Once the processes are determined, it must be regularly monitored to ensure that it is being carried out according to the established protocols and procedures. A schedule for this monitoring should be developed that not only determines what data is collected and how often it will be reviewed. Monitoring should begin at the school level with the attendance clerks and administrators. Regular meetings should be held at the school level every two weeks with the entire attendance team with a standard agenda. Monthly, each administrator should meet with the division level personnel assigned to monitor the implementation of the MTSS practices to ensure the implementation of the MTSS plan for chronic absenteeism (Hill et al., 2023). Other monitoring tools may involve conducting observations, reviewing documentation, and soliciting feedback from staff and stakeholders. Analyzing this data regularly will allow the monitoring team to identify trends, assess progress toward program objectives, and make any necessary

adjustments to the program. The monitoring team must use what is learned to offer ongoing support and feedback to staff involved in the implementation of the attendance program. This may include providing additional training, addressing challenges as they arise, and recognizing and celebrating successes (Demers et al., 2021).

As the attendance program continues it will be important to engage stakeholders, including students, families, staff, and community partners, throughout the implementation of the attendance program by soliciting their input, involving them in decision-making processes, and communicating regularly about program progress and outcomes. Over time, it will be important to conduct periodic evaluations of the attendance program to assess its overall effectiveness in achieving its objectives and to use this information to make informed decisions about the future direction of the program and identify areas for improvement. By following these steps, organizations can ensure the fidelity of their attendance programs and maximize their impact on student attendance and engagement.

Intentional Planning and Sharing Ways to Create a Positive School Climate

As our research revealed, cultivating a positive school culture is crucial for reducing chronic absenteeism. CPS school members recognize a positive school environment can motivate students to attend regularly and engage in their education. However, the approaches utilized to create the positive school climate varied among schools. Therefore, key strategies to decrease chronic absenteeism rates across the division include implementing a division-wide plan that includes incentives and mentor programs and providing avenues for school staff to exchange ideas on creating a positive school climate.

District Wide Plan: Incentives and Mentor Programs

Incentives can be a positive approach utilized by schools to reduce chronic absenteeism if they are planned intentionally to ensure alignment with the barriers that have been identified. A study by Balu & Ehrlich (2018) encourages more intentional planning and use of incentives in ways that ensure better alignment with the problem, thus improving outcomes. The district plan can offer suggestions for incentives to students with exemplary or improved attendance records, such as certificates of achievement, recognition ceremonies, or class celebrations. A key part of the plan must be providing guidelines to school leaders on the acceptable use of incentives and how schools can use attendance data to make those school-wide decisions.

Additionally, a supportive environment through mentorship programs can motivate students to attend regularly. CPS can draw from a study conducted by Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) that examined the impact of a specific mentor program, Success Mentors. The study of elementary, middle, and high school students in New York found students, on average, gained almost two additional weeks of schooling in the year(s) they had a mentor (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; REL, 2020). The data is positive for low-income students as well which is useful for CPS as this population is the second highest among division student groups with a chronic absenteeism rate of 21.2% for the 2022 - 2023 school year (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b).

CPS can assist the schools in establishing functioning mentor programs in a number of ways. First, develop mentorship guidelines and best practices to ensure the effectiveness and safety of the program. This may include establishing clear expectations for mentors and mentees, implementing protocols for monitoring and evaluating the program's progress, and providing ongoing support and supervision for both mentors and mentees. Second, they can help schools

create mentor programs by allocating resources and funding to support the infrastructure needed for such initiatives. This includes training for mentors and mentees and providing materials and resources for program implementation. Lastly, CPS can facilitate partnerships with local community organizations, businesses, or universities to recruit mentors from diverse backgrounds who can relate to the students they will support. Research shows that attendance improves when students from diverse populations feel connected to mentors of similar backgrounds (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). By utilizing these external resources, schools can access a wide pool of potential mentors. CPS can use the attendance data disaggregated by demographics to match mentors with the specific needs of each school. By leveraging these strategies, schools can create mentorship programs that effectively address chronic absenteeism and support student success.

Facilitating District-Wide Collaboration

CPS school leaders expressed a desire for dedicated time to collaborate and explore strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism alongside their peers. The topic of how to use incentives to promote a positive school climate was of most interest to our interview and focus group participants. Allocating a specific time during a principal or assistant principal meeting, for example, would provide an avenue for in-depth conversations around this topic. Moreover, establishing clear protocols and structures for facilitating the discussion, as well as mechanisms for capturing and disseminating ideas would enhance their effectiveness. Fostering open dialogue and sharing best practices could significantly impact attendance rates and overall school culture.

Fostering Communication and Engagement with Parents and Families

The two most prominent themes emerging from the research on combating chronic absenteeism are educating families about the importance of being at school and the importance

of furnishing regular updates on student attendance to affected families (Gottfried et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2018; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Currently, CPS is putting in place some systems, resources, and strategies to communicate and involve families, however, there is variability in the consistency of these approaches across different schools and levels. Most schools have supplemented general strategies with additional, school-specific measures, contributing to a lack of uniformity in the implementation of communication and family engagement practices throughout the CPS system. The strategies below are steps that CPS should take division-wide to ensure a uniform system is present when strengthening their communication and family engagement strategies to combat chronic absenteeism.

The initial step in creating a uniform system across CPS for communication and engagement is to prioritize open lines of communication with families. This can be done through letters, regular newsletters, emails, and updates on schools' websites. This message aims to inform rather than punish. Research indicates that this type of communication can positively influence decision-making and discourage future absences (San Diego County Office of Education, 2023). Additionally, doing this will ensure parents and families are well-informed about upcoming events, school policies, and their child's academic and attendance progress. Furthermore, research has shown that attendance is increased when automated communications are sent by the school to families (Robinson et al., 2018). With this, CPS should leverage technology platforms and user-friendly apps to help facilitate seamless communication between the school and families, allowing for easy access to resources and opportunities for dialogue.

The addition of a parent liaison to the staff at each school would allow for more succinct and consistent communication between the school and families. As such, we recommend that CPS invest in creating a Parent Liaison position for each school. This individual would dedicate

their work to engaging families around attendance, supporting Attendance Improvement Plans, and providing resources. With 45 schools in the division, adding 45 Parent Liaisons could be an expensive initiative. In order to phase in the implementation of this position, trend data suggests that Title 1 schools should be prioritized as they have higher rates of chronic absenteeism. A review of division data revealed that eight of 11 Title 1 elementary schools exceed the division average for chronic absenteeism as well as the 15% threshold identified by the state as meeting accreditation expectations. In addition, borough six has the greatest need for support based on the wide range of chronic absenteeism among schools within the borough and the fact that it has the school with the highest rate in the division.

Furthermore, it is important to foster strong partnerships between families and educators through meaningful interactions. Research shows that family conferences, including parents and members of the school, help to aid in increasing academics and reducing absences (Eklund et al., 2020). With this, CPS should require regular parent-teacher conferences in an effort to provide a valuable space to discuss students' academic achievements, address concerns, and collaboratively set goals for improvement, with provisions made for non-English-speaking families through interpreters and translated materials.

In addition to conferences, schools should offer parent workshops that delve into topics such as the significance of regular attendance, effective ways to support learning at home, and practical parenting strategies. By addressing common barriers to attendance and actively involving parents in finding solutions, families are empowered to play an active role in their child's education journey. Additionally, parent workshops offer an environment in which educators can learn from families. Families are afforded opportunities to share with school staff what's important to them, how they think schools can best support their children, how they best

receive communication, and other valuable pieces of information that a school can take into account when formulating next steps in their school-family partnerships. Based on rates of absenteeism within CPS, workshops for families of students with disabilities that include specific items and conversations about the experiences of these students and barriers to attendance should be a specific focus.

Moreover, it is vital to understand the value of personalized connections in addressing challenges related to chronic absenteeism. Home visits can lead to a significant increase in student attendance (Peetz, 2020). Through home visits, strong relationships between teachers and families are forged, providing a personal touch that helps identify and address underlying issues with care and collaboration. According to the MTSS framework already established in CPS, a home visit is recommended when a student hits the Tier 3 mark. CPS should continue this practice and ensure all schools adhere to it.

To further strengthen community ties, CPS schools should host a variety of family engagement events throughout the year, including back-to-school nights, family fun nights, and cultural celebrations. These gatherings not only foster a sense of belonging but also serve as opportunities to highlight the importance of attendance and provide additional support resources for families in need.

Recognizing the significance of positive reinforcement, schools should develop an attendance incentive program to celebrate and reward students and families who consistently prioritize school attendance. By collaborating with local businesses, schools can offer incentives such as gift cards or discounts to encourage and acknowledge their student's efforts. The team recommends that this be done on a quarterly basis.

Finally, CPS should remain committed to supporting families facing challenges contributing to absenteeism by using the personnel already hired within their schools. Research indicates that a holistic approach by school personnel helps to improve a students' attendance rate (Childs & Grooms, 2022). Through their counseling and support services within the school, CPS should offer assistance with transportation, health concerns, or family crises, and connecting families with community resources to ensure they receive the support they need to overcome obstacles and thrive within the school community.

Providing Outreach and Support to Families

Collaborative partnerships between schools, public agencies, and community-based organizations have proven effective in addressing the complex challenges associated with chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2023; Welsh, 2018). These partnerships facilitate the pooling of resources, expertise, and the development of meaningful relationships across public, for-profit, and nonprofit sectors (Childs & Groom, 2022). It would greatly benefit CPS to establish a comprehensive system that not only allocates resources and support to schools and boroughs with greater need but also prioritizes the cultivation and maintenance of partnerships with community organizations to address the unique needs of each school. As noted in Chapter IV, discrepancies exist among boroughs and between Title 1 and non Title 1 schools. Priority considerations should be given to Title 1 schools, especially RBW Primary (29.6%*¹ rate of chronic absenteeism), SW Elementary (24.8%*) and GAT Elementary (24.1%*). Schools in borough five should also be a priority as all schools in this borough have rates of chronic absenteeism that exceed the division average. Schools in borough six should also be a priority as this borough has the elementary, middle, and high school with the highest rate of chronic

¹ Data indicated by an * comes from the Virginia Department of Education (2023b).

absenteeism in the division. Establishing and nurturing these community partnerships can create a network of support for families, addressing various factors contributing to chronic absenteeism and fostering a more conducive environment for student success. Regular communication and collaboration with these external partners are essential for the success of these initiatives.

CPS has shown through the interviews and focus groups that schools organize community events that bring together families, school staff, and organizations. These events help the schools build relationships with their community of students and can raise awareness about the importance of attendance and provide information on available resources. These events are the beginning of an outreach program that all school divisions need. It is recommended that CPS expand on this and offer after-school programs for economically disadvantaged students by partnering with community organizations, libraries, or local businesses to offer after-school programs that engage and support students. Mentor programs provide students with positive role models and additional support and can be sponsored by local mentoring organizations or businesses. For example, boroughs five and six have demonstrated greater needs in areas such as school climate as measured through reported behavior incidents as well as the range of school rates of chronic absenteeism among borough schools. These after-school and mentoring programs can provide additional educational opportunities, a safe environment, and a positive experience for at risk students (Guryan et al. 2020).

One of the primary obstacles highlighted in interviews pertained to transportation, particularly the lack thereof for students. A school administrator pointed out, “We don't have many students who drive or provide their own transportation. Consequently, they heavily rely on school buses or parental transport.” Several members of the school-based teams echoed this concern, citing issues such as lengthy walking distances and the need for staff to retrieve students

facing transportation challenges. While CPS is actively striving to improve bus punctuality, establishing partnerships with local organizations to address students' transportation needs could yield immediate benefits.

Many non school related issues can affect school attendance. Research indicates that students with health issues were more often chronically absent compared to those students lacking health concerns (Gottfried & Gee, 2016; Lim et al., 2019), therefore it is recommended that CPS partner with local health clinics or organizations to provide health services on-site or refer families to affordable healthcare resources. It is also recommended that they organize workshops and seminars in collaboration with community organizations to address specific challenges faced by families, such as financial literacy, time management, and parenting skills. Families experiencing poverty often lack the resources and access to health care to combat the presence of health-related factors contributing to chronic absenteeism (Gottfried, 2015; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Lim et al., 2019). By partnering with crisis intervention services CPS can help to provide immediate support to students and families facing emergencies or crises that may contribute to absenteeism.

To foster these partnerships, the division level attendance personnel should lead the outreach program and support the school based staff such as the parent liaison or FACE coordinators as they align the resources to their school's unique needs. This process would allow CPS to continue to forge connections with organizations in the community utilizing data collected from attendance plans to prioritize the needs of the division and, ultimately, each school. Addressing the chronic absenteeism issue in CPS takes an ecological approach in which multiple stakeholders, including schools, community organizations, families, and mental health

service providers, collaborate synergistically to create a supportive and holistic environment conducive to regular attendance and student success.

Further Explorations

As noted in chapter II, one limitation of our study was the duration. With our research taking place in one school year, we recognize that there are areas for further exploration by CPS that we wish to include here. Chronic absenteeism is a “wicked” problem with many causes, factors, and solutions (Childs & Grooms, 2022; Childs & Lofton, 2021). As such and due to our time constraints in conducting our research, we have included four areas where continued study could prove beneficial.

First, we encourage CPS staff to gather and analyze additional qualitative data on the root causes and barriers related to chronic absenteeism. Our quantitative data revealed disparate data spanning schools, minoritized students, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and students in certain boroughs. Understanding the barriers these specific groups face would be advantageous in order to tailor interventions accordingly. Since we were unable to review AIPs and speak with families of students who were chronically absent, this limited our ability to better understand the barriers faced by these families and link recommendations to such data. Therefore, we encourage CPS to engage with these families to deepen the qualitative data available. This data could assist with targeting recommendations for the greatest impact.

Second, we encourage an audit of the impact of the virtual academy focusing on how it is impacting attendance. Our research revealed questions from school leaders about enrolling and disenrolling in the virtual academy and how much the virtual academy impacted attendance positively. As a result, we encourage CPS to collect robust attendance data for virtual academy attendees that spans the time before enrolling in the academy, the time the student is enrolled,

and, for those who disenroll, attendance upon their return to traditional schooling. We recognize that the virtual academy was not chartered with attendance as a sole focus but feel a clear picture of how attendance is impacted could lead to improvements in the academy that incorporate absenteeism as an operational success criteria.

Third, our literature review included various references to the impact that transportation has on attendance and absenteeism (Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Gottfried, 2017; Lenhoff & Singer, 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2017; Welsh, 2018). During our interviews and focus groups, several division leaders noted the impact of late or canceled buses, correlating to the data from our literature review. With this in mind, we recommend the collection of data on on-time arrival and bus cancellations with a specific focus on schools that are currently struggling with chronic absenteeism. This data could allow CPS to focus resources and improvements in their transportation operations on schools that are most impacted by chronic absenteeism.

Finally, we noted that rates of chronic absenteeism both across Virginia and in CPS are highest among homeless students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. While we included recommendations in this chapter meant to improve attendance for economically disadvantaged students, addressing chronic absenteeism for students experiencing homelessness and students with disabilities is a more challenging proposition that requires a more nuanced approach.

Homelessness is a multifaceted problem that has multiple impacts on school attendance. As discussed in Chapter III, inconsistent housing, frequent moves between friends and family, changes in shelters, and more make establishing consistent schedules, routines, and pathways to school a daunting proposition. In CPS, there were 136 students identified as homeless during the 2022 - 2023 school year, with 69 of these students classified as chronically absent (Virginia

Department of Education, 2023b). While improving attendance rates for these students experiencing homelessness is not an easy fix, CPS should gather qualitative data from impacted students and families to help devise plans to aid in getting students to school. This qualitative exploration should explore transportation barriers, communication pathways used by families, and systematic practices that inhibit attendance in order to extrapolate possible solutions and streamline processes to make attending school easier.

For students with disabilities, research has shown that inclusive practices have a positive impact on attendance (Gottfried et al., 2019). When students with disabilities are educated in inclusive, general education settings, they form peer relationships which contribute to improved attendance. As with other recommendations for further exploration, offering a blanket recommendation to increase inclusive practices at schools across CPS fails to account for variations in schools or highlight schools that have lower rates of chronic absenteeism for this population. CPS currently has 14 schools (including all schools in borough four) that fall below the 15% threshold for chronic absenteeism for students with disabilities (Virginia Department of Education, 2023b).

We recommend additional quantitative and qualitative exploration of attendance patterns for students with disabilities to include an analysis of how many SWDs are in each school, the types of disabilities served within each school, and the rate to which these students participate in the general education setting. This data can be correlated to overall rates of chronic absenteeism for SWDs within each school to see if there is a link between inclusion and improved attendance within CPS. Additionally, qualitative data from conversations with students and families could enhance the understanding of factors contributing to higher chronic absenteeism for SWDs in

CPS. Based on this exploration, CPS could then offer cogent recommendations to address chronic absenteeism for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism presents a significant challenge in the United States, impacting educational outcomes and student well-being. Through our data collection process, many findings about student groups and barriers to attendance were uncovered. Quantitative data analysis revealed significant disparities among student groups, with certain demographic groups experiencing higher rates of chronic absenteeism, notably impacting minoritized, economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Furthermore, recent data suggests a substantial increase in absenteeism following the pandemic.

Through qualitative data analysis, various factors hindering student attendance were uncovered. These barriers encompass both school-related challenges, such as communication issues, inadequate support for students with disabilities, and transportation difficulties, as well as non-school-related factors including parental understanding, homelessness, poverty, military-related challenges, and mental health concerns. Despite employing diverse communication strategies and utilizing the Synergy system for attendance tracking, inconsistencies exist in meeting frequency and team responsibilities due to the lack of a common set of expectations for teams. Additionally, while efforts are made to foster a positive school climate through teacher-student relationships and incentive programs, implementation varies across schools.

Our research highlights the need for a unified strategy to track and analyze attendance data and utilize the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework consistently across schools. We recommend the development of a district-wide manual outlining MTSS strategies,

ensuring fidelity through ongoing training and monitoring, establishing clear roles for attendance teams, and a schedule for who and when it will be monitored. Additionally, our research emphasizes the importance of fostering a positive school climate through incentives, mentor programs, and district-wide collaboration. Strategies for effective communication and engagement with parents and families, including the addition of parent liaisons and community partnerships to address diverse needs contributing to absenteeism. Ultimately, we advocate for a holistic approach involving multiple stakeholders to create a supportive environment conducive to student attendance and success. While our research was focused on practical solutions for CPS, we feel that the actions proposed can serve for any school division that is attempting to tackle chronic absenteeism and improve student attendance and outcomes.

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Appendix A

Division Level Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is ____ and this is _____. We will be conducting this interview with the goal of learning about chronic absenteeism. As we know this issue is at the forefront for most school divisions. We hope to learn about the factors contributing to absenteeism for students, strategies for prevention, and potential solutions to address this pressing issue. You work with this issue daily and your experiences will help us gain an understanding of the successes and areas of concern for your division. Our ultimate goal is to contribute to your school division's existing efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve overall achievement. Our questions will focus on three main areas; communication/engagement, outreach and support and data and policies used in your division. We will be recording this interview so that we can be accurate in our data collection, but your identity will be kept confidential.

Ice Breaker Question:

Do you have any questions about the process for the interview?

Introductory Questions:

1. What is your role in the division?
 - a. How long have you been in this position?

Communication/Engagement

1. What are the primary methods or channels the district uses to communicate with families about attendance such as newsletters, phone calls, emails, or mobile apps?
2. Describe how parents/families respond to your attempts to communicate about absenteeism.

- a. Have you seen a shift in parents' perception about their child's attendance in school since the onset of the Covid pandemic?
- b. Have you observed a difference with particular demographic groups related to the perceptions about their child's attendance?

Outreach and Support

- 3. Does your division utilize community partners for family outreach and support? If so, can you provide some examples?
 - a. What has been your greatest success with engaging the community around chronic absenteeism and what has been the most significant struggle?

Data Tracking and Policies to Address Chronic Absenteeism

- 4. Reflecting on your current policies and practices for addressing chronic absenteeism, are there additional policies or practices that need to be implemented to increase attendance? If so, are there barriers to implementing those? If yes, what are they?
- 5. Is there a division-wide policy for coding student absences? If so, what is it?
 - a. Is there an option for principals to excuse absences or give waivers? If so, what are the options?
- 6. What systems or processes do you use to collect and disaggregate attendance data?
 - a. Are incentives a part of your division's approach to combating chronic absenteeism? If so, how is this implemented?
- 7. Which division-level staff members are tasked with supporting attendance and chronic absenteeism?
 - a. Probe: What percentage of their time do they devote to this work?

8. When looking at your division's data, we noted that the percentage of students chronically absent dropped from 19.4% in 2021-22 to 13.2% in 22-23. What do you attribute the reduction to?

Conclusion

9. What else should we know about how your division addresses student attendance and chronic absenteeism?

Thank you for your time today and your insights on this critical issue for our schools. You can always reach us at _____ for any questions you might have or if you would like to share other information with us that we missed today. .

Appendix B

School Administration Focus Group Protocol

Hello. My name is ____ and this is _____. We will be conducting this focus group interview with the goal of learning about chronic absenteeism. As we know this issue is at the forefront for most school divisions. We hope to learn about the factors contributing to absenteeism for students, strategies for prevention, and potential solutions to address this pressing issue. You work with this issue daily and your experiences will help us gain an understanding of the successes and areas of concern for your schools. Our ultimate goal is to contribute to your school division's existing efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and overall student achievement. Our questions will focus on three main areas; communication/engagement and data tracking and policies, and positive school climate. We will be recording this interview so that we can be accurate in our data collection, but your identity will be kept confidential.

Ice Breaker Question:

Do you have any questions about the process for the interview?

Introductory Question:

1. How long have you been an administrator?
 - a. How long have you been in this school?

Communication/Engagement

1. What are the primary methods or channels the district uses to communicate with families about attendance?
 - a. Probe: e.g., newsletters, phone calls, emails, or mobile apps
2. Describe how parents/families respond to your attempts to communicate about absenteeism.

- a. Have you seen a shift in parents' perception about their child's attendance in school since the onset of the Covid pandemic?

Data Tracking and Policies

- 3. Describe the process your school uses to track and monitor student attendance, including the tools or systems in place?
 - a. Probe: How has it changed over time?
- 4. Does your school have an attendance team? If so, who is on your team?
 - a. Probe: What are the roles and responsibilities of each member?
- 5. How did your school use the meaningful interaction (MI) code?
 - a. How many students do you have at CVA and how has that affected your attendance?

Positive School Climate

- 6. What role do teachers and staff play in addressing chronic absenteeism, and how are they trained to identify and support students with attendance challenges?

Conclusion

- 7. What else should we know about how your school addresses student attendance and chronic absenteeism?

Thank you for your time today and your insights on this critical issue for our schools. You can always reach us at ____ for any questions you might have or if you would like to share other information with us that we missed today.

Appendix C

School Level Team Focus Groups

Hello. My name is ____ and this is _____. We will be conducting this focus group interview with the goal of learning about chronic absenteeism. As we know this issue is at the forefront for most school divisions. We hope to learn about the factors contributing to absenteeism for students, strategies for prevention, and potential solutions to address this pressing issue. You work with this issue daily and your experiences will help us gain an understanding of the successes and areas of concern for your schools. Our ultimate goal is to contribute to your school division's existing efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve overall student achievement. Our questions will focus on three main areas; communication/engagement, data and policies and incentives. We will be recording this interview so that we can be accurate in our data collection, but your identity will be kept confidential.

Ice Breaker Question:

Do you have any questions about the process for the interview?

Introductory Question:

1. What is your role in the school?
 - a. How long have you been in this role?

Communication/Engagement

1. What are the primary methods or channels the district uses to communicate with families about attendance such as newsletters, phone calls, emails, or mobile apps?
2. Describe how parents/families respond to your attempts to communicate about absenteeism.

- a. Have you seen a shift in parents' perception about their child's attendance in school since the onset of the Covid pandemic?
 - b. Have you observed a difference with particular demographic groups related to the perceptions about their child's attendance?
- 3. What is your professional opinion about how well your school engages parents about attendance?

Data and Policies

- 4. At what point does your school begin to intervene with families about their attendance?
 - a. What are the steps you take to intervene?
 - b. How do you identify the barriers to good attendance in your school?

Incentive Programs

- 5. Think about what your school does to recognize good and improved attendance. What are some of the strategies you have employed?
 - a. Probe: How effective have those strategies been?
 - b. Probe: Does your school use Attendance Awareness Month to communicate with families about attendance? ? If so, how?

Conclusion

- 6. What else should we know about how your school addresses student attendance and chronic absenteeism?

Thank you for your time today and your insights on this critical issue for our schools. You can always reach us at ____ for any questions you might have or if you would like to share other information with us that we missed today.

Appendix D

Updated School Based Team Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is ____ and this is _____. We will be conducting this focus group interview with the goal of learning about chronic absenteeism. As we know this issue is at the forefront for most school divisions. We hope to learn about the factors contributing to absenteeism for students, strategies for prevention, and potential solutions to address this pressing issue. You work with this issue daily and your experiences will help us gain an understanding of the successes and areas of concern for your schools. Our ultimate goal is to contribute to your school division's existing efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve overall student achievement. Our questions will focus on three main areas; communication/engagement, data and policies and incentives. We will be recording this interview so that we can be accurate in our data collection, but your identity will be kept confidential.

Communication/Engagement

1. How do you engage with families about attendance?
2. Do you think these methods/strategies are successful? Anything missing?

Data and Policies

3. What are the main barriers to attendance in your school?
 - a. What are some of the successful strategies you have used to address those barriers?
4. When does your school begin to intervene with families about their attendance?
5. What would you change about CPS policies and procedures to make your work more effective in battling CA?

Incentive Programs

6. Think about what your school does to recognize good and improved attendance. What are some of the strategies you have employed?

Conclusion

7. What else should we know about how your school addresses student attendance and chronic absenteeism?

Thank you for your time today and your insights on this critical issue for our schools. You can always reach us at _____ for any questions you might have or if you would like to share other information with us that we missed today.

Appendix E

Family Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is ____ and this is _____. We will be conducting this interview with the goal of learning about chronic absenteeism. We hope to learn about the factors contributing to absenteeism for students, strategies for prevention, and potential solutions to address this pressing issue. As a parent/caregiver, your experiences will help us gain an understanding of the challenges families face around attendance. Our questions will focus on three main areas; Your experiences and beliefs about school attendance, roadblocks your family might face, and the support you receive from the school. We will be recording this interview so that we can be accurate in our data collection, but your identity will be kept confidential.

Ice Breaker Question:

Do you have any questions about the process for the interview?

Experiences and Beliefs/Barriers

1. How does your child feel about going to school? What would you attribute this to?
 - a. Probe: Are there any particular reasons they may be hesitant or unwilling to attend?
 - b. Does your child feel they have a good relationship with their teacher or another adult in the school?
 - c. Can you share any specific moments or incidences that have had a significant impact on your child/ren's school attendance?
2. Have your attitudes and beliefs regarding school attendance changed since the pandemic?
If so, how?

3. Are there any changes or improvements you'd like to see in the school environment to help promote better attendance for your child?

Supports

4. Do you feel supported by teachers, counselors, or other school staff regarding your attendance? Why or why not?
 - a. Probe: If not, what could they do to better support you?
5. How does the school communicate to you about your child's attendance?
 - a. How would you like the school to communicate with you about your child's attendance?
6. Have you received assistance or support from the school to help improve your child's attendance? If so, what has been the outcome?
 - a. Probe: How would you describe the effectiveness of these supports from the school?

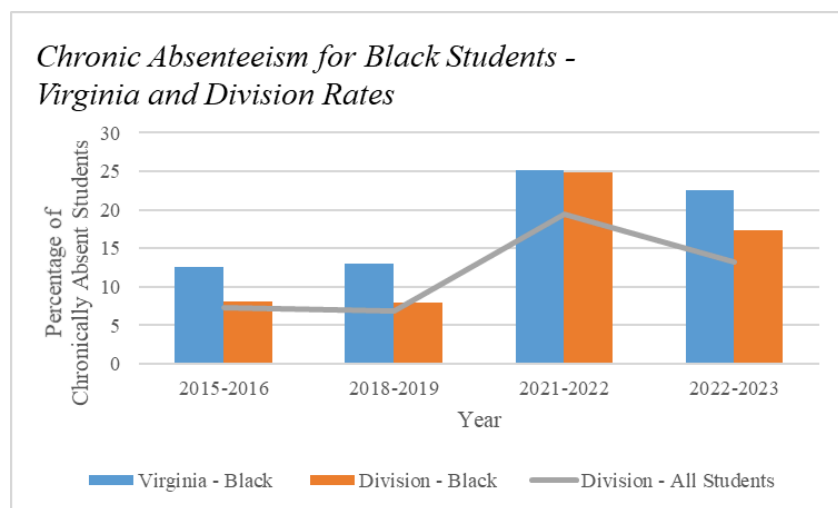
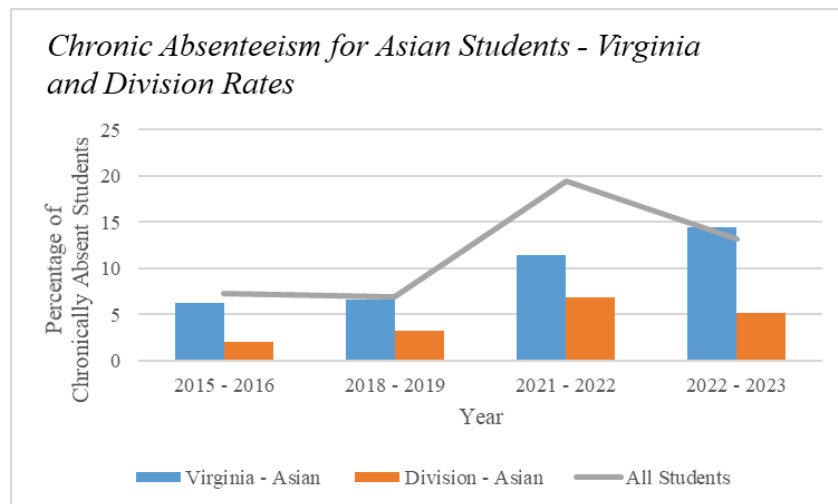
Conclusion

7. What usually happens in your home and what goes through your mind when deciding whether your child goes to school that day?
8. What else should we know about how your school addresses student attendance and chronic absenteeism?

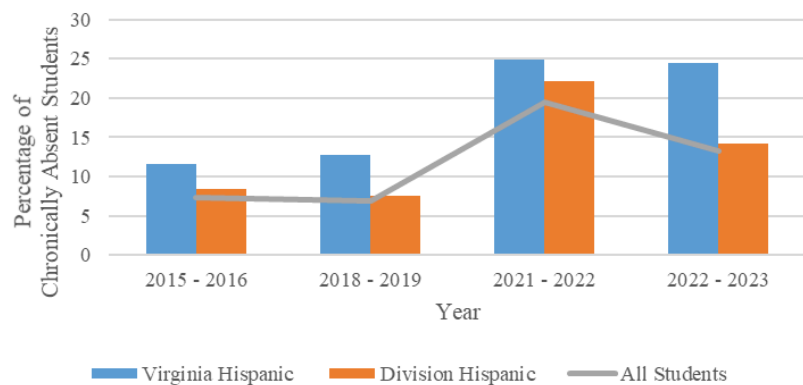
Thank you for your time today and your insights on this critical issue for our schools. You can always reach us at ____ for any questions you might have or if you would like to share other information with us that we missed today.

Appendix F

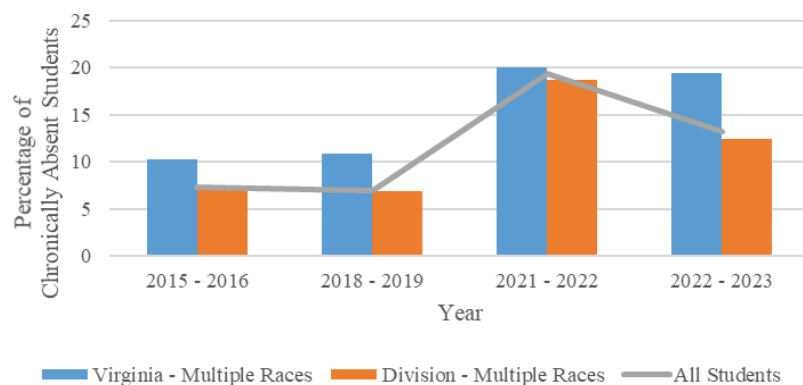
Figures for Race/Ethnicity by Individual Group



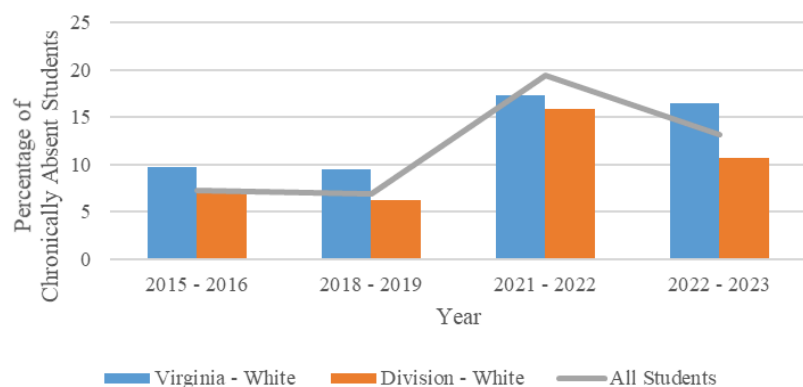
*Chronic Absenteeism for Hispanic Students -
Virginia and Division Rates*



*Chronic Absenteeism for Students of Multiple
Races - Virginia and Division Rates*

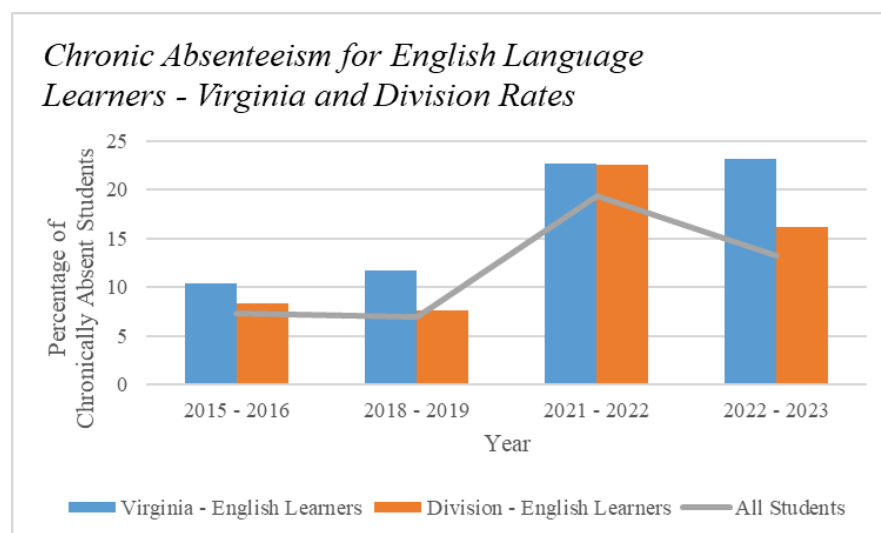
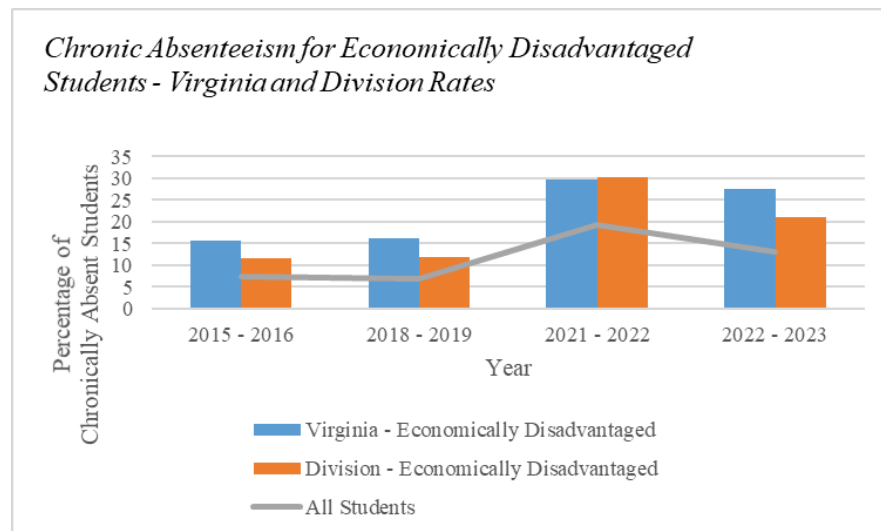


*Chronic Absenteeism for White Students -
Virginia and Division Rates*

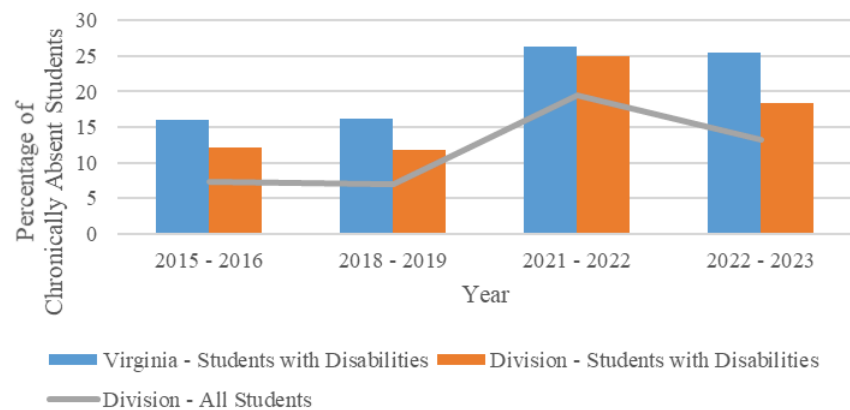


Appendix G

Figures for Student Demographic Groups by Individual Group



Chronic Absenteeism for Students with Disabilities - Virginia and Division Rates



Vita

Alissa Ann Fraser. was born on May 18, 1978 in Lansing, Michigan. Alissa attended public school from Kindergarten through 12th grade in Michigan and Maryland. She attended Salisbury State University from August 1996 through December 1999, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education. In January 2000, Alissa moved to Fort Worth, Texas and began working for Fort Worth Independent School District. In August 2002 she began working for Tucson Unified School District in Tuscon, Arizona. From July 2003 until June 2006 she worked for McGraw-Hill in Augusta, Georgia. During this time Alissa attended National University, graduating with a Master's degree in Education. In August 2006, Alissa moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia and began working for Stafford County Public Schools, where she continues to work today, having served as teacher, ESOL Coordinator, assistant principal and principal. She earned her certification in Administration and Supervision from George Mason University in May of 2016. Alissa enrolled in the Doctor of Education in School Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University in June 2021, and expects to graduate in May of 2024. Alissa lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia with her husband, Chris, and three children, Adleigh, Leah, and Jackson.

Caroline S. Goddard was born in the late 1960's to a farmer and a social worker. Giving to the community was a part of their family motto. Caroline attended Methodist University and received her Bachelors of Science in Elementary Education in 1993, while stationed there with her husband at Fort Liberty during the Gulf War. As with most military families, the family moved and Caroline was able to teach in Alaska, North Carolina, and Virginia. These experiences helped to deepen her passion for teaching and in 2000, she entered the University of Virginia for her Masters in Reading. She received her Masters of Education in Reading in 2003.

Caroline taught in many school divisions in Virginia, including Spotsylvania, Culpeper and Prince William before settling in Stafford County Schools. All of these experiences revealed to her that she was dedicated to working in Title I schools and working with students in poverty. In 2007, she enrolled in an Administrative Endorsement program with Virginia Commonwealth University and received her certification in Administration and Supervision in 2009. Caroline enrolled in the Doctor of Education in School Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University in June 2021, and expects to graduate in May of 2024.

Brian Anthony Raska Jr. was born on February 19, 1985 in Baltimore, Maryland. Brian attended public school from Kindergarten through 12th grade. He attended Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia from August 2004 through May 2008, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Kinesiology. Brian attended the University of Virginia from May 2008 through August 2009, graduating with a Master's degree in Education. In August 2009, Brian moved to Arlington, Virginia and began working for Arlington County Public Schools. In 2011, he began working for Prince William County Public Schools. Brian completed his Master's degree in Education in Administration and Supervision from George Mason University in May of 2014. In July of 2015, he began working for Stafford County Public Schools, where he continues to work today, having served as both an assistant principal and principal. Brian enrolled in the Doctor of Education in School Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University in June 2021, and expects to graduate in May of 2024. Brian lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia with his wife, Ashley, and three daughters, Caroline, Aubrey, and Mary Grace.

Michael Bruce Sidebotham was born on December 18, 1976 in Akron, Ohio. Michael attended public school from kindergarten through 12th grade. He attended Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio from August 1995 through May 1999, graduating with

honors with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education. He moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1999 and began working for Stafford County Public Schools in August of that year. He continues to work for Stafford County and has served the division as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Michael completed his Master's degree in Education in Administration and Supervision from Virginia Commonwealth University in May of 2004. He enrolled in the Doctor of Education in School Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University in summer of 2021 and hopes to complete his degree in May of 2024. Michael lives in Fredericksburg with his wife, Rebecca, and two children, Helena and Cameron.