



Detroit Families' Experiences with COVID-19 and School Attendance

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Detroit Families' Experiences with COVID-19 and School Attendance**Abstract**

How much school students attend is a powerful indicator of their wellbeing and a strong predictor of their future success in school. Popular media has reported significant increases in chronic absenteeism during the first full school year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21). This sequential explanatory mixed-methods study describes how experiences during the pandemic and socioeconomic circumstances in general shaped Detroit student attendance during this critical school year and how the district responded to attendance issues. We found that 70% of students were chronically absent, with 40% of parents reporting that computer problems contributed to absenteeism. Despite significant investment in technology, the district's strategies for engaging students were not sufficient in overcoming economic hardships and the new challenges of remote learning.

Detroit Families' Experiences with COVID-19 and School Attendance

School attendance is one of the most reliable non-academic indicators of student success in school, and student absences have a near-linear relationship with achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Ansari & Gottfried, 2021; Gershenson et al., 2017). Chronic absenteeism also has harmful effects on student attainment and socioemotional outcomes (Gottfried, 2014; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021) and has been described as a “wicked problem” (Childs & Lofton, 2021) because of the complex and varied factors that contribute to it, and the implications for other social policy sectors beyond education in solving it (Lenhoff et al., 2021; Pyne et al., 2021; Singer et al., 2021). Excessive absences, particularly those that are “unexcused,” are important indicators of student wellbeing and the social and economic support families may need (Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2009; Pyne et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional public schooling across the U. S. and may have exacerbated the long-standing social and economic problems that contribute significantly to student absenteeism (Singer et al., 2021). In the cities with the highest rates of chronic absence (e.g., Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C.) most students attended school online in 2020-21; nationally, Black students were more likely than white students to attend school online rather in person (Camp & Zamarro, 2021). In addition, mandated social distancing, business closures, and severe illness created socioeconomic, physical and mental

health, and educational challenges for students and their families (Davis et al., 2020; Duckworth et al., 2021; Levinson et al., 2021). These challenges, many of which were more significantly experienced by Black and low-income families (Camp & Zamarro, 2021; Haderlein et al., 2021), may have contributed to increased student absenteeism in 2020-21. Policymakers, educators, and community organizations need to understand the extent of these challenges and their relationship with student attendance, so they can design supportive policies and programs as the pandemic continues to shape children's schooling experiences.

In this study, we combine survey data from a representative sample of Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD) families at the end of the 2020-21 school year, students' attendance records, and interviews with families and school staff to identify how experiences during the pandemic and socioeconomic circumstances in general shaped attendance during this critical school year. Detroit is an important site for understanding the effects of the pandemic on student attendance. Detroit had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism among major cities in the country prior to the pandemic (Singer et al., 2021), and it was an early site of COVID-19 case surges in the United States ("Michigan Coronavirus Map and Case Count," 2020). In addition, although most students were online most of the year, some students had the option to attend school in person, creating different contexts for school attendance. We asked:

1. How did attendance patterns change during the first full academic year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21)?
2. How did COVID-19 effects (e.g., mental health, logistical, and financial challenges; change to employment; online learning) shape attendance patterns?
3. How did the district address absenteeism during the pandemic?

Methodology

We employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to answer these questions (Hewitt & Mansfield, 2021). To measure attendance patterns and the relationship between student and school characteristics and attendance, we used confidential student-level administrative data from the Detroit Public Schools Community District from years 2018-19, 2019-20, and 2020-21. The student-level data included demographics (e.g., race, gender, exceptional student status, grade) and daily attendance records for each day of the school year, which we used to calculate students' attendance rate and their chronic absence status. The dataset included 52,244 K-12 students who were enrolled in DPSCD during the 2020-21 school year. Importantly, although Michigan allowed districts to report that students were present all week if they had at least one online two-way interaction with their teacher per week during the 2020-21 school year, the attendance data from the district reported daily absences using pre-pandemic rules, counting a student absent if they missed more than half of the day's instruction. Thus, the daily

attendance data from DPSCD allowed us to study attendance in 2020-21 and compare it to prior years in a way that the public data, and restricted-use data from the state, precludes.

To measure the associations between attendance patterns and student-level characteristics and experiences not found in administrative data, we conducted a representative survey of DPSCD students' parents. We randomly sampled DPSCD students and sent their parents an online survey. The survey asked about their socioeconomic circumstances, their experiences with COVID-19, and their child's attendance. Ultimately, we included 776 survey responses in this analysis. After linking student survey responses to administrative data, we ran a series of stepwise OLS regressions to estimate the associations between student characteristics, socioeconomic circumstances, and COVID-19 experiences (independent variables) and the percent of days absent in 2020-21 (dependent variable). We also ran linear probability regression models with the same independent variables and chronic absence status (greater than or equal to 10% days absent) as the binary dependent variable.

To further explain our quantitative findings, we conducted a secondary analysis of qualitative data from interviews with ten DPSCD families who were involved in an attendance improvement initiative during the 2020-21 school year. We interviewed a parent or guardian from each family three times during the 2020-21 school year, asking them about how COVID-19 was affecting their health,

family logistics, and financial situation, and what challenges their children faced to attending and engaging in school. We also conducted a secondary analysis of interview and focus group data from a study of district attendance initiatives. We use insights from these interviews to deepen our interpretation of the major findings from the survey. Details on our survey methodology and qualitative data collection can be found in Appendix A.

Findings

How Attendance Patterns Changed in 2020-21

Student attendance rates in DPSCD were significantly lower in 2020-21 compared to the last complete school year before the pandemic (2018-19), falling from an average of 82% to 68%, (see Appendices B1 and B2). Chronic absenteeism was also higher in 2020-21, with 70% of students missing 10% or more of the school year, compared to 62% in 2018-19. In addition, 54% of students were severely chronically absent, missing 20% or more of enrolled school days (Figure 1). More than 7,000 students, or about 21% of those enrolled in the district in 2018-19 and 2020-21, were chronically absent in 2020-21 when they had not been before the pandemic (see Appendix B3).

[insert Figure 1 about here]

Although attendance rates throughout the school year were lower in 2020-21 than before the pandemic, seasonal patterns were similar to pre-pandemic school years (Figure 2). More students were present on Fall count day, there was slightly

lower attendance on Mondays and Fridays, and attendance dipped around school breaks.

[insert Figure 2 about here]

The patterns of chronic absence in DPSCD by student characteristics were similar to previous years, but at elevated levels. Absenteeism was highest in the early elementary grades and high school, and students who received special education services had higher absenteeism (Gee, 2018). However, absenteeism was much higher in 12th grade than in other grades; 87% of 12th grade students were chronically absent in 2020-21 (see Appendix B4).

[insert Table 1 about here]

How COVID-19 Shaped Attendance

Financial, Mental Health, and Logistical Challenges

More than 50% of all families in the district reported financial, mental health, and logistical challenges during the pandemic (Table 1). Thirty-four percent of DPSCD families had a family member who got sick or died of COVID-19 during the 2020-21 school year. Many families also experienced significant employment challenges, and 29% strongly agreed that their family had “experienced financial distress due to COVID.” For instance, while 14% of families had a parent who worked more, 67% had a parent who worked less or lost their job during the pandemic, with 41% of parents reporting that all parents in the household had worked less or lost their job. Although housing instability was likely reduced

because of the temporary ban on evictions, 9% of DPSCD families still reported they were evicted or otherwise forced to leave a living situation in the last year, including 12% of severely chronically absent students.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Self-reported levels of COVID-19 hardship, however, were not significantly associated with percent days absent or chronic absence (Table 2), even when measures of socioeconomic status, technology issues, and learning modality were excluded (see Appendix B8). The survey data (discussed above) and interview data (discussed below) offer two explanations. First, COVID-19 had a wide-reaching impact, with many families reporting negative health, financial, and logistical impacts (Table 1). Second, a family's access to technology, ability to manage online learning at home, and prior socioeconomic circumstances mitigated the impact of these pandemic-induced hardships on attendance. Still, even when parents were able to buffer against the impact of COVID-19 on their children's attendance, these hardships took a significant toll on their emotional and financial well-being.

Prior to the pandemic, many parents reported that it was most challenging to get their children to school when they had limited social support (Lenhoff et al., 2021). These challenges were exacerbated during the pandemic, as parents were responsible for overseeing their children's online education. As one mother shared:

“Them going to school in person helped me out so much. And with them being out of school, it's such a burden on me, with me being a single mom. I don't have no support or help. This is all on me, so it's so hard right now.”

Other parents discussed how having their children attend school online negatively affected their employment. This mother, for instance, had limited hours she could work because she had to supervise her children during online school:

“I'm still unemployed, I'm still looking for work, but I'm trying to look for a job like on the weekend, or maybe a midnight shift. So I can be there for the kids for their online schooling because I'm a single mother so I'm the only person they have to help them.”

Some parents shared how they felt they had been laid off because they had to take time off work to watch their children during virtual school. One mom said:

“They chose to lay me off because I called off a couple of days because I didn't have a babysitter and I had to stay home with the kids because they were not able to go to school. I didn't have a choice because I can't leave the kids home alone when they can't go to school.”

Parent and student mental health challenges were also common among the families we surveyed. Overall, 57% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that mental health had been a challenge during the pandemic. As one parent shared,

“They're telling me that they can't focus, they're having too hard of a time focusing, being able to concentrate. So, yeah definitely, the mental aspect

is very difficult...You know, because one thing that I, you know, take very seriously with my kids is school.”

These challenges were widespread among students at high and low levels of attendance, suggesting that supporting student and family mental health will be critical for school systems as they seek to recover from the pandemic.

Although self-reported financial hardship during the pandemic was not associated with absenteeism, socioeconomic circumstances continued to be associated with attendance. For instance, severely chronically absent students' families had an average household income of \$18,215, compared to \$30,197 for moderately chronically absent students and \$36,277 for not chronically absent students. Severely chronically absent students also faced more significant employment and housing challenges than other students.

These patterns were reinforced in our regression results (Table 2). A one unit increase in a family's income-to-poverty ratio was associated with a 3% decrease in the percentage of days absent. Students who had at least one parent who worked full-time had 7% fewer days absent than students with no full-time working parents. When including prior-year measures of attendance or absenteeism, the relationship between these socioeconomic measures and attendance weakens or becomes statistically non-significant, highlighting the relationship between persistent socioeconomic disadvantages and cumulative absenteeism (Singer et al., 2021).

Technology and Online Learning

In addition to the persistence of socioeconomic barriers to attendance, our findings reveal the emergence of technology issues as new barriers to attendance during the pandemic. Nearly 40% of parents reported that computer issues were a reason why their child was often or always absent, and 30% reported that internet connectivity was a problem for attendance. Of the students who shifted from not being chronically absent in 2018-19 to being chronically absent in 2020-21, computer and internet challenges were major issues. Whereas 17% of parents whose children were not chronically absent both years cited internet problems as a major reason for absence, 35% of parents whose children became chronically absent in 2020-21 had internet problems. Similarly, 21% who were not chronically absent both years had computer problems, compared to 42% of those who were not chronically absent previously but became chronically absent in 2020-21.

Our regression estimates reinforce that, while socioeconomic challenges are the primary drivers of absenteeism in Detroit, technology issues were likely responsible for the uptick in absenteeism during the 2020-21 school year (Table 2). Students who sometimes, often, and always had computer issues missed significantly more school than those who never or rarely had issues. Always having computer issues was associated with a 27 percentage-point increase in absences and 35% higher odds of being chronically absent compared to students who never had computer issues. In addition, unlike the socioeconomic measures, frequent

computer issues still had a large and statistically significant association with attendance rates and chronic absenteeism even after controlling for prior year attendance measures. Coefficients for internet issues were lower but followed a similar pattern – as the severity of internet issues increased, attendance last year became worse (see Appendix B8).

Students who were in remote instruction all year had fewer days absent and were less likely to be chronically absent. Darling-Aduana et al. (2022) similarly found that students who had more online instructional days had higher attendance rates in 2020-21. While this might seem counterintuitive, our analysis suggests that there are likely several explanations. First, students in families with greater financial precarity were more likely to attend school in person for at least part of the year. Second, students who experienced more frequent technology problems were more likely to attend school in person some of the year. The district gave many parents a choice whether to enroll their children in online or in-person instruction, and families who had a difficult time with remote instruction may have been more likely to choose to come back in person when that was a more widely available option in Spring 2021. In fact, only 52% of parents who reported that their child was “always” absent due to a computer issue were online all year, whereas 72% of parents who said their child was “never” absent due to computer issues stayed online all year. This gap suggests that families that more easily engaged in online learning were more likely to stay online when given the choice. While

attending school in person may have reduced barriers to attendance related to technology for some families, it likely reintroduced typical barriers to attendance, such as transportation challenges (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). In addition, students who attended school in person were asked to stay home (and were counted as absent) when they were sick or quarantined, whereas as online students may have logged on and been marked as present even while sick.

The parents we interviewed described significant technology issues. As one mother shared, “A lot of days they have trouble with the computer.... Because my daughter can't even get into her Microsoft Teams for some reason. And she hasn't been sitting [in class] for a week.” Other parents shared about problems with devices and Wi-Fi: “She will get on. But then her computer dies and then she'll go back with her phone and then the phone dies also.” These problems were exacerbated by financial strain. When asked why her child missed school some days, one mom said, “Technical issues with the computer, the Wi-Fi messes up. I have the \$10-a-month Wi-Fi. So, I don't know if I have to pay more money. I can't afford it right now...but half the time the Wi-Fi doesn't work.” In sum, Detroit families faced significant challenges during the pandemic that meaningfully shaped their children’s attendance. In addition to the acute problems with technology that are likely to be muted with most students back to school in person, more than 50% of families experienced economic hardship that may continue to negatively impact attendance for years to come.

District Approach to Supporting Attendance During the Pandemic

In prior years, DPSCD's approach to addressing absenteeism included a multi-tiered system of support implemented through a school attendance team, data monitoring to determine when students were nearing chronic absence, and parent outreach through phone calls and home visits. In 2020-21, attendance staff most frequently used strategies related to communicating with families and helping with tech issues (see Appendix B9). In this section, we describe the district's approach to supporting student attendance during the pandemic and analyze how that approach aligned with families' experiences and needs.

[insert Table 3 about here]

Communication Strategies

The predominant form of outreach families received about attendance was through phone calls, with 72% of families reporting being contacted this way (Table 3). Other forms of communication were much less frequently used, with text messages being reported by 27% of families and emails by 19%. All other communication was reported by fewer than 10% of families, and 16% of families reported no communication about their child's attendance.

While phone calls were the most frequent activity reported by attendance staff (see Appendix B9), home visits were perhaps the most significant source of stress. In our interviews with attendance support staff, conducting home visits was mentioned as a predominant work activity. Home visits were initially seen as

controversial, given concerns about COVID-19 transmission, but over the course of the school year “the volume had really increased.” For example, when we asked one attendance staff member how he was spending most of his time, he said, “Home visits. Home visits through the roof...Those are students that are chronically severe.” In addition, DPSCD experienced a 3.7% decline in student enrollment in the 2020-21 school year (Levin, 2022). Attendance staff reported that they were asked to conduct home visits not only for attendance problems, but also to identify students to come back to school or drop from the rolls:

Last week, the principal sent me a list of students. It was about 30 kids or something like that. She's wanting an update on all of them...The list was pretty much from students that we were trying to see who we should drop. From that list, some students they said when the learning center starts back up, they'll be back in school.

Learning centers were hybrid options that permitted students to physically come to a school building to participate in online instruction. They reduced the demand for in-person staff while providing an option for families who could not supervise online instruction at home. As the staff member's quote above illustrates, the district's emphasis on home visits blurred the line between addressing enrollment and attendance.

For the great emphasis that the district placed on home visits, however, only 8% of families reported receiving a home visit for attendance. Attendance staff

were limited in the number of visits they could conduct. One attendance staff member explained that “on a typical day, I've got eight to ten families I'm going to visit,” and her time each week was split between home visits, other family communication, and school-based responsibilities. Overall, attendance staff expressed challenges with knowing how to prioritize their time with limited resources and new demands. As one staff person shared:

There are more severely chronic children. The number has like tripled...So you have to decide, and then you look at your [moderate] chronic children and that number, of course, had gone down a little, because they had all moved to that [severe] category. So now, it's deciding how to go about your work. Those [moderate] students or those at risk students... Where are you going to put your focus?

These overwhelming demands created a climate in which school staff were working tirelessly while still not fully meeting families' needs for students to engage in regular school participation.

Technology and Tech Support

DPSCD implemented two major technology initiatives to support attendance as students shifted to online learning. First, the district partnered with business and philanthropic organizations to create the Connected Futures program, which donated a laptop with LTE data (enabling internet access without a wired connection) to every student who was enrolled in 2019-20 (Wisely, 2020). For

newly enrolled students in 2020-21, the district issued loaner computers. Second, in December 2020, the district installed 13 technology hubs in school buildings throughout the city for hardware repairs, software installation, or informal training on the applications needed to engage in online school (Catolico, 2020). Parents could come to the hubs, which were open during school hours, to get their children's computers repaired and ask questions about the online platforms. Forty-nine percent of district families used a technology hub. Of the 51% of families who did not use a hub, 20% reported that they could not get to a hub when they needed support, 9% reported that the hubs were not open during hours convenient to them, and 6% did not know about the hubs (Table 3).

While the parents we interviewed shared that their children used the donated laptops to log on to school, many said that the devices were low quality and not designed for high volume use on multiple applications at one time. As one parent said, "The computers keep messing up. I have to keep taking the computers to get fixed." Another shared that "the computers are constantly lagging, shutting down. They couldn't get in their classes."

While attendance staff reported similar responsibilities and goals for their work as previous years, they had added responsibilities of assisting with technology distribution and problems. As one attendance staff person said:

So at the beginning, ... the priority was to make sure all of those Connected Future devices have been deployed to the students because, of course, if

they didn't have those devices they could not connect academically to learning.... So, I assisted with the deployment of those devices, calling those parents, going to the home.

Attendance staff universally shared that the demands of their jobs increased considerably during the 2020-21 school year, particularly since communicating with families was more difficult when there were few in-school opportunities.

When students missed school because of technology issues, someone from the school usually contacted them with a phone call. Parents had mixed experiences with this type of support. For some parents, this kind of communication was viewed as helpful, and it improved over the course of the year. As one parent said: “They started sending emails and telling us exactly how to log.” Another shared that “It's getting better, finally. I'm in more communication now with her teacher.” School staff reiterated that online instruction created a learning curve for all parties and that support improved over time: “Virtual is something new to everybody. It was new to the teachers, it was new to the principals and everybody. It's a new world. Make sure that the kids can log on. That was the biggest part because if they can't log on, then they're not attending class.”

Some of the parents in our study, however, felt that the school only cared about being able to mark their child as present, and they did not offer support or sympathy when computer or internet issues arose:

I've spoken to principals, I've spoken to the attendance lady. I've spoken with several people, and it seems like they just don't care. All they worry more about is their attendance, not actually what's going on with [my children]...They only give me a call when they wasn't being online. They didn't care about them not being able to get online due to the fact that they had no service, their computers didn't work. Now that they're online, they don't even call to see what's going on with them or anything.

This sentiment suggests that parent outreach about attendance, absent authentic relationships, can be viewed as punitive or focused on bureaucratic accounting of students rather than as attempts to understand family needs and offer supports. Overall, despite increased efforts to engage students in online learning and adjust to this new normal, many students still struggled with technology, were not able to access the provided support (e.g., technology hubs), and, in some cases, came back to school in person because of technology problems that went unaddressed.

Discussion and Implications

By combining administrative records with original survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews, this study provides a rich, holistic accounting of Detroit student experiences during the pandemic and the challenges they faced in accessing school. Although Detroit has a unique context for student attendance (Singer et al., 2021), our findings are helpful for school leaders across the U.S. who are considering how best to support students and families who have experienced

extreme pandemic-related hardship (Childs et al., 2022). In addition, they offer useful insights to better prepare for future disruptions to in-person schooling due to new pandemics, climate disasters, or community crises. Computer and internet issues were major contributors to the increase in chronic absence during the 2020-21 school year. However, now that most students are back in person, the social and economic factors that contributed to high rates of chronic absence in previous years (Childs & Lofton, 2021; Lenhoff et al., 2021; Singer et al., 2021) have likely been exacerbated by increased financial and mental health challenges (Davis et al., 2020). Indeed, economic hardships in Detroit have persisted (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2022), and chronic absenteeism rates in DPSCD for 2021-22 are comparable to 2020-21 (Altavena, 2022). Students in families who faced greater economic precarity (e.g., lower income-to-poverty ratio, no fully-employed parent, facing eviction) were more likely to be severely chronically absent (see Appendix B6). There were also significant socioeconomic differences between moderately and severely chronically absent students, suggesting that reducing chronic absenteeism will require social and economic supports beyond what schools alone can provide.

Our findings indicate that, despite major philanthropic investment to provide computers and internet to all students in the district, these efforts were insufficient to ensure that students attended and were engaged in school. Based on parent and staff interviews, the devices were not built for daily video-conferencing

and multiple educational platforms. As districts continue to experiment with online learning as a regular or as-needed option for student engagement (Pitts et al., 2022), more research should investigate the types of devices that are easiest for families to use given the demands of the software required by schools.

In addition, technology support should be well-communicated and available for families when they need it. Approximately 10% of all families in the district needed tech support but could not access it because they could not physically get to the technology hubs and another 5% could not access because they were not available during the hours of operation. Although these specific challenges may dissipate with lower levels of online learning, they indicate that a significant number of families may not be well-served by resources offered at school buildings or during school hours. They also reinforce the idea that equitable and adequate school transportation is a prerequisite to accessing educational opportunity (Edwards, 2021; Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). State and district policymakers should consider how expanding school options, even virtually, without addressing underlying inequities in mobility, may exacerbate gaps in educational opportunity. They should consider ways to actively engage families in the design and distribution of new schooling options, taking into account how family resources may shape access (Bierbaum et al., 2021).

Finally, although school and district staff worked hard to address new and varied challenges in their efforts to improve attendance, chronic absenteeism rose

to 70%, and 54% of students missed 20% or more enrolled school days in 2020-21 (36 days or more for a student enrolled all year). While attendance staff spent most of their time communicating with families through phone calls and home visits, families sought more varied types of communication and more support with technology, emphasizing the importance of these supports for student engagement (Domina et al., 2021; Haderlein et al., 2021). We found that the practices of attendance staff were somewhat misaligned with student needs for engagement. Given the significant role that structural and environmental conditions play in student attendance in Detroit (Singer et al., 2021), these findings suggest that efforts to re-engage students in regular school attendance will require more coordinated efforts with social support agencies and policy change in sectors outside of schools.

More than ever, the city and state governments, community organizations and nonprofits, and educators across students' educational ecosystems must challenge the status quo to improve conditions for getting to school (Childs & Grooms, 2018). As districts and cities determine how best to use federal and state dollars to support pandemic recovery, they should consider how to strengthen that ecosystem by ensuring that students have resources for learning in and outside of school, and by actively engaging families in discussions about what they need and how best to deliver those resources. They should work together to address the root causes of poverty, unemployment, and health inequities (Childs & Lofton, 2021), while also adjusting school policy and practices to better support families as they

go to great lengths to ensure strong attendance. This is not a matter of will—Detroit parents want their children in school (Lenhoff et al., 2021). Now, the systems charged with supporting families must create the conditions they need to help get them there.

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Tables

Table 1

Families' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Weighted Survey Sample)

	N	Weighted Mean
Any Parent Worked More during COVID	770	0.13
Any Parent Less Hours/Lost Job during COVID	775	0.64
All Parent Less Hours/Lost Job during COVID	776	0.39
Evicted during COVID	775	0.09
Family Member Sick or Died of COVID	774	0.36
Mental Health Challenges during COVID	772	0.60
Financial Challenges during COVID	774	0.56
Logistical Challenges during COVID	772	0.54
Often/Always Reason for Absences during COVID		
Lack of Transportation	770	0.12
Child's Health	762	0.16
Parent's Health	760	0.13
Child Refused	759	0.13
Computer Issues	771	0.39
Internet Issues	766	0.30
Log-on Issues	767	0.06
Issues with Teachers	765	0.09
Issues with Other Students	764	0.03
Remote Learning All Year	770	0.58

Note: N varies due to missing data from respondents. All variables are dummy (0 or 1) variables.

Table 2

Regressions Estimating the Percentage of Days Absent and Probability of Chronic Absence, 2020-21 School Year

	(1) Pct. Days Absent	(2) Pct. Days Absent	(3) Chronically Absent	(4) Chronically Absent
Family SES				
Income-to-Poverty	-0.03**	-0.01	-0.07**	-0.05*
Any Parent Full-Time	-0.07*	-0.05	-0.04	-0.03
Single Parent	0.08*	0.05	0.12**	0.08
Evicted in 2020-21	0.09	0.11	0.13**	0.13*
COVID-19 Challenges				
Health	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.06
Mental Health	-0.03	-0.01	0.02	0.00
Logistics	-0.01	0.00	-0.01	0.00
Financial	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04	-0.06
Remote Instruction Only	-0.08**	-0.09***	-0.08*	-0.06
Computer Issues (reference = Never)				
Rarely	0.05	0.06	0.09	0.08
Sometimes	0.10**	0.06	0.15**	0.13*
Often	0.20***	0.16***	0.33***	0.29***
Always	0.27***	0.22***	0.35***	0.29***
Race (reference = Black)				
Hispanic	-0.12*	-0.08*	-0.21**	-0.16**
Other Race	-0.07	-0.06	0.02	0.02
Special Education	-0.04	-0.03	0.06	0.04
Female	-0.07	-0.04	-0.04	-0.02
Grade Level (reference = K-2 nd)				
3 rd -5 th	-0.01	0.00	-0.08	-0.06
6 th -8 th	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.01
9 th -12 th	0.21***	0.15***	0.18***	0.15**
Prior-Year Absences	-	0.80***	-	-
Prior-Year Chronically Absent	-	-	-	0.25***
Constant	0.27***	0.16**	0.54***	0.44***
R ²	0.38	0.46	0.28	0.32
N	776	648	776	648

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Outcome is the percentage of days absent (models 1 and 2) or whether a student was chronically absent (i.e., 10% or more days absent; models 3 and 4). Standard errors are robust. Analytic weights are applied (see Appendix A). Models that include “prior year” measures drop observations that are not observed in the 2019-20 school year (N=128). While results are informative they should not be directly compared to the main models.

Table 3*Attendance Communication and Support from School*

	N	Mean
Communication Received		
Phone Call	766	0.72
Text Message	766	0.27
Home Visit	766	0.08
Email	766	0.19
Video Call	766	0.10
App-based Communication	766	0.06
No Communication	766	0.16
Communication Preferences		
Phone Call	749	0.86
Text Message	749	0.53
Home Visit	749	0.09
Email	749	0.35
Video Call	749	0.17
App-based Communication	749	0.12
Ever Used District Technology Hub	763	0.49
Reasons for Not Using Tech Hubs ⁺		
I didn't need tech support.	385	0.55
I received tech support elsewhere.	385	0.12
I couldn't get to the hubs when I needed support.	385	0.20
The hubs were not open during convenient hours.	385	0.09
I owned or bought tech to replace the district tech.	385	0.01
I didn't know about the tech hubs.	385	0.06

Note: N varies due to missing data from respondents. All variables are dummy (0 or 1) variables.

⁺We asked respondents the "reasons for not using tech hub" question only if they indicated that they never used a tech hub. We asked respondents to select any reasons that applied.

Figures

Figure 1

Distribution of Attendance Rates in DPSCD, 2020-21

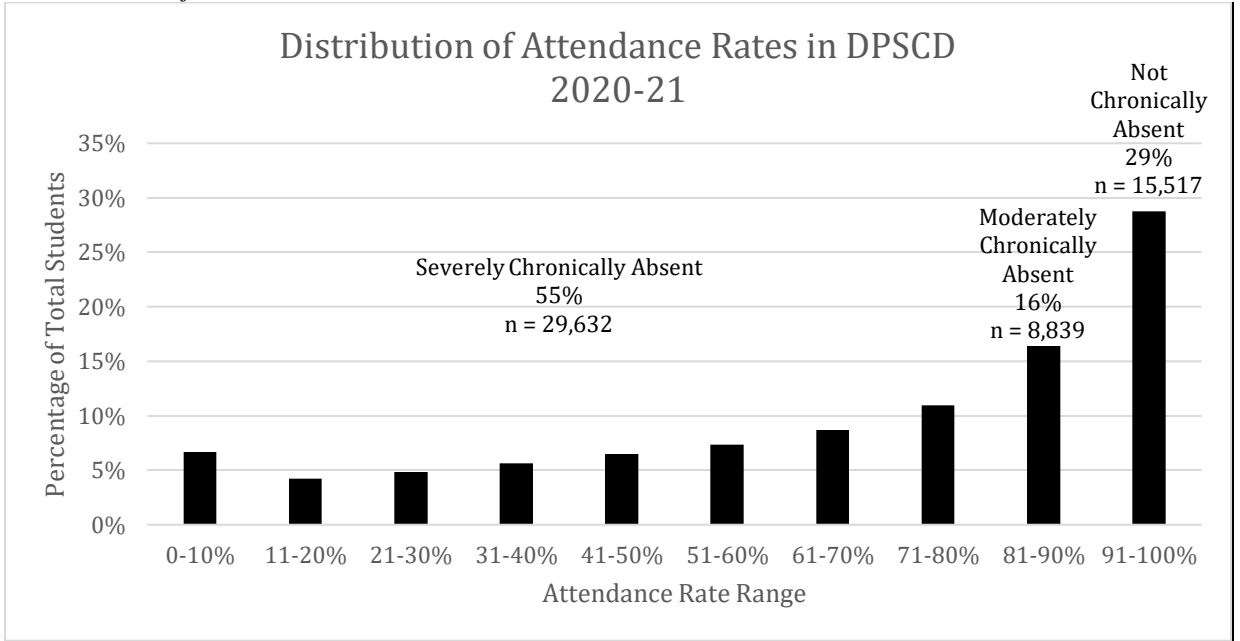
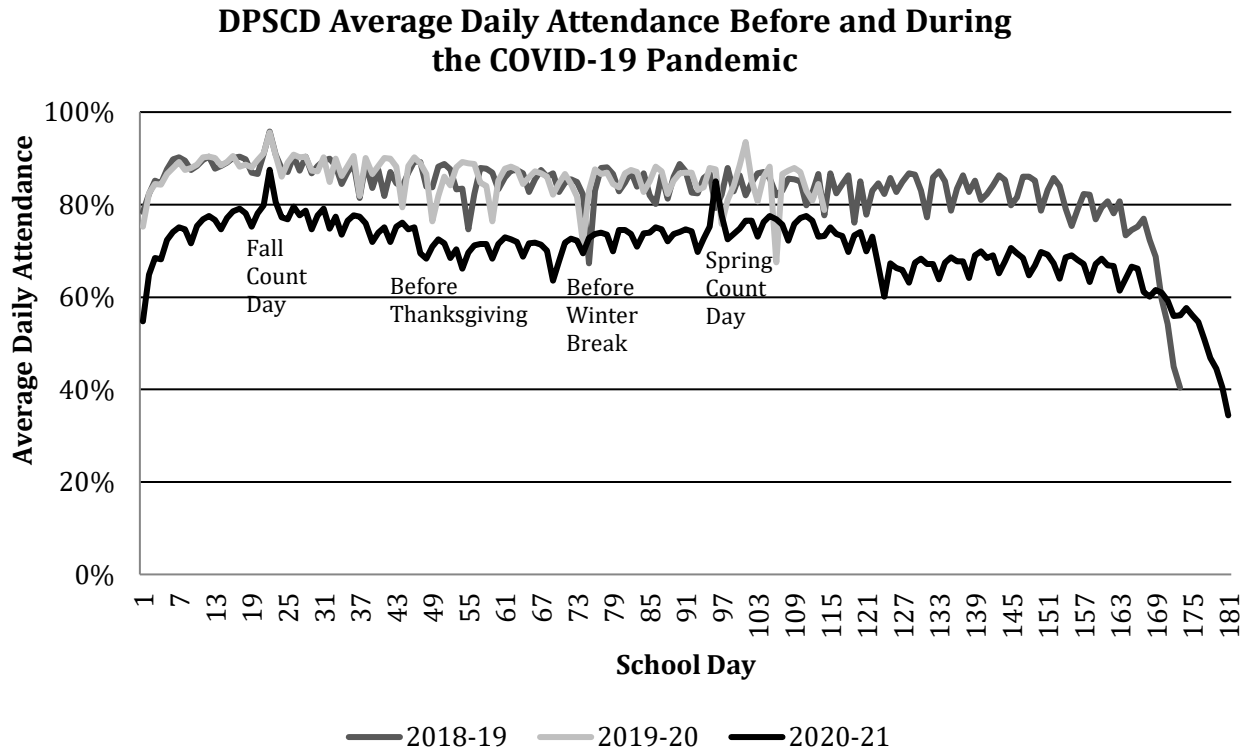


Figure 2
Average Daily Attendance Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic



Note: The 2018-19 school year had 173 school days due to snow days, and the 2020-21 school year had 181 school days, which is why the graph appears misaligned near the end of the school year. Schools were abruptly closed in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why the 2019-20 attendance data ends at day 114.

Appendices

Appendix A: Details on Methodology

Survey Methodology

In partnership with DPSCD, we fielded a survey of DPSCD families from June 22, 2021, to July 20, 2021. The population for the survey included all DPSCD students with either a phone number or email address through which they could be recruited (N= 26,362). We separated the population by school type, aiming for a representative sample of students enrolled in neighborhood DPSCD schools (with school attendance boundaries) and application/exam-based DPSCD schools (where enrollment depends on an application or entrance exam score). We randomly sampled students from each group to complete the survey through replicate sampling (Lavrakas, 2008). Each replicate sample group included 200 students, and we released the survey to subsequent groups as we received responses from the previous groups until we reached the target number of responses. We offered a \$10 gift card to respondents who completed the survey.

For this analysis, we considered a complete survey as ones where respondents had at most one missing answer for our key variables of interest (see Appendix B5 and B6 for a list of these variables). We used this criterion so that included observations would require at most one variable to be imputed for our regression analysis. In total, we included 776 respondents—341 from neighborhood schools (response rate = 6.63%) and 435 from application/exam schools (response rate = 10.32%). We pooled the responses from the neighborhood and application/exam schools, and used raking (Lavrakas, 2008) to weight the responses to match the district population. For the weighting process, we accounted for school type, grade level, gender, race/ethnicity, and attendance quantile (twenty quantiles, ranging from 100% attendance to 0-9% attendance). For our regression analysis, we imputed missing variables with a regression-based multiple imputation method. We predicted values for missing independent variables based on the observation's other independent variables (all of which were non-missing due to our inclusion criteria).

Table A1
DPSCD Student Population and Sample, 2020-21

	Population (N=52,244)	Unweighted Sample (N=776)	Weighted Sample (N=776)
School Type			
Neighborhood	0.76	0.44	0.76
Application/Exam	0.24	0.56	0.24
Grade Level			
Kindergarten	0.07	0.05	0.07
1st	0.08	0.07	0.08
2nd	0.09	0.08	0.09
3rd	0.08	0.09	0.08
4th	0.08	0.09	0.08
5th	0.08	0.09	0.08
6th	0.07	0.07	0.07
7th	0.07	0.04	0.07
8th	0.07	0.04	0.07
9th	0.09	0.11	0.09
10th	0.08	0.10	0.08
11th	0.07	0.08	0.07
12th	0.07	0.08	0.07
Female	0.49	0.51	0.49
Race/Ethnicity			
Black	0.82	0.86	0.82
White/MENA	0.03	0.03	0.03
Hispanic	0.13	0.09	0.13
Asian	0.01	0.01	0.01
Other Race	0.01	0.01	0.01
Chronically Absent	0.70	0.54	0.70

Qualitative Methodology

The authors of this paper are part of a research-practice partnership with DPSCD focused on studying student absenteeism and initiatives to reduce it. As part of the partnership, we conducted two studies during the 2020-21 school year that we draw on for the qualitative analysis in this paper. First, we conducted an evaluation of a cash assistance program to support families whose children were chronically absent. Each family received \$1,800, dispersed in amounts and in increments when the families chose, throughout the 2020-21 school year through a community-based organization in the neighborhood of their schools. We interviewed a parent from each family three times during the school year over the telephone, once before the cash assistance began and twice after cash was dispersed. Families were compensated with a \$25 gift card to participate in the interviews. Table A2 summarizes the families and their children's absence rates.

Table A2

Parent Interview Participants and Point-in-Time Absence Rates during the 2020-21 School Year

School	# Children in Schools	# Chronically Absent in 2019-20	Children's Cumulative Average % of Days Missed			
			2019-20	Fall 2020	Winter 2021	Spring 2021
School 1	4	4	20%	57%	62%	62%
School 1	1	1	24%	28%	29%	20%
School 1	2	1	9%	68%	65%	70%
School 1	3	1	6%	1%	2%	1%
School 1	3	1	7%	38%	38%	42%
School 2	4	4	13%	22%	19%	18%
School 2	2	2	31%	63%	61%	60%
School 2	2	2	23%	12%	18%	29%
School 2	1	1	36%	23%	19%	17%
School 2	1	1	20%	27%	19%	12%

Note: Attendance varied among children within the ten families to an extent, but not drastically (e.g., all students were moderately or severely absent). Thus, for ease of interpretation, we present the average attendance among children within the families.

The second qualitative project we draw from is a study of district attendance staff's engagement in a networked improvement community to collaborate on a theory of the problem of absenteeism, share and develop new knowledge about attendance practice, and experiment with changes in practice. This study builds on a developmental evaluation of district attendance practice. During the 2020-21 school year, we conducted participant observations of networked improvement community meetings and district professional development related to attendance. We distributed a district-wide survey to attendance staff about their practices, receiving eighty-nine responses. We also conducted interviews with attendance staff in seven case study schools and a district leader overseeing attendance initiatives, and facilitated focus group interviews with an additional nine attendance staff. The primary focus of the interviews was on participants theories of improvement related to reducing absenteeism, but we also asked questions about the attendance challenges they encountered during the pandemic and the strategies they were using to reduce absenteeism, including how they were spending most of their time. Our analysis for the current study focused on summarizing themes from these latter questions.

Appendix B: Supplementary Data Analysis

Table B1

DPSCD Absence Rates Before and During the Pandemic

	2018-19	2020-21
Average Attendance Rate	82%	68%
Percent Chronically Absent	62%	70%
Percent Chronically Absent by First Semester	52%	64%

Note. We used daily attendance records to calculate attendance and chronic absence rates, in order to compare them to pre-pandemic attendance measures. However, the state permitted districts to count online students as present if they had two two-way interactions with a teacher each week. Therefore, the chronic absent rates reported in this report will not match the publicly reported numbers from the State of Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information.

Table B2

DPSCD Attendance Rate Over Time based on Truncated School Year

	Truncated School Year		
	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Average Attendance Rate	84%	81%	70%
Percent Chronically Absent	54%	52%	64%
Percent Chronically Absent by First Semester	52%	51%	64%

Note. This table uses student-level data on every K-12 student enrolled in the district each year. Truncated school year includes days 1-114 of the school year, based on the number of days in 2019-20 when daily attendance was taken in the district. Daily attendance was not taken when schools initially shut down (starting 3/16/20) because of stay-at-home COVID-19 orders.

Table B3

Changes in Chronic Absence Status Over Time

	Number of Students	Percent
Chronically Absent in 2018-19 and 2020-21	16,582	48%
Not Chronically Absent in 2018-19 and 2020-21	7,582	22%
Chronically Absent in 2018-19 and not in 2020-21	3,120	9%
Not Chronically Absent in 2018-19 but Chronically Absent in 2020-21	7,225	21%
Total	35,363	100%

Note. This table includes all K-12 DPSCD students with attendance records in DPSCD in both 2018-19 and 2020-21.

Table B4*Chronic Absence by Demographics in 2020-21*

	Chronically Absent
Kindergarten	75%
1st	74%
2nd	72%
3rd	66%
4th	63%
5th	64%
6th	67%
7th	69%
8th	68%
9th	68%
10th	68%
11th	69%
12th	87%
Gender ¹	
Female	67%
Male	72%
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	74%
White ²	59%
Hispanic	50%
Asian	40%
Special Education Status	
Receives Special Ed. Services	73%
Doesn't Receive Special Ed. Services	67%
English Language Learner Status	
English Language Learner	48%
Not an English Language Learner	72%

¹ DPSCD does not report gender identities other than male and female.

² Students who are ethnically Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) are often categorized as “white” in the administrative data (Wang, 2020). Since Detroit and the metro Detroit area has a large MENA population (Cwiek, 2014), the “white” category likely includes both white and MENA students.

Table B5
SES Factors by Chronic Absence Status in 2020-21 (Weighted Survey Sample)

	Not Chronically Absent (30% of students)	Moderately Chronically Absent (16% of students)	Severely Chronically Absent (54% of students)
Household Composition			
Number of Children	2.50 ³	2.75	3.00 ¹
Number of Adults	1.93 ³	1.94 ³	1.69 ¹²
Single Parent/Guardian	44% ²³	60% ¹³	75% ¹²
Household Income	\$37,224 ³	\$30,097 ³	\$18,521 ¹²
Income-to-Poverty Ratio	137% ³	111% ³	67% ¹²
Highest Parent Education			
High school or less	37% ³	48% ³	66% ¹²
Some college	25%	31%	20%
Associate's Degree	12%	7%	6%
BA or higher	26% ²³	14% ¹	7% ¹
Any Parent Employed Full-Time	63% ³	55% ³	35% ¹²
Evicted during COVID-19	2% ³	9%	12% ¹

¹Statistically significantly different from "Not Chronically Absent" students ($p < 0.01$)

²Statistically significantly different from "Moderately Chronically Absent" students ($p < 0.01$)

³Statistically significantly different from "Severely Chronically Absent" students ($p < 0.01$)

Table B6

COVID-related Factors by Chronic Absence Status in 2020-21 (Weighted Survey Sample)

	Not Chronically Absent (30% of students)	Moderately Chronically Absent (16% of students)	Severely Chronically Absent (54% of students)
Any Parent Less Hours/Lost Job during COVID	65%	62%	65%
All Parents Less Hours/Lost Job during COVID	34% ³	31% ³	44% ¹²
Family Member Sick or Died COVID	29% ³	36%	41% ¹
Mental Health Challenges COVID	57%	66%	59%
Financial Challenges COVID	52%	52%	59%
Logistical Challenges COVID	51%	53%	55%
Remote Learning All Year	66% ³	65% ³	52% ¹²

¹Statistically significantly different from “Not Chronically Absent” students ($p < 0.01$)

²Statistically significantly different from “Moderately Chronically Absent” students ($p < 0.01$)

³Statistically significantly different from “Severely Chronically Absent” students ($p < 0.01$)

Table B7

Often/Always Reasons for Absences by Chronic Absence Status in 2020-21 (Weighted Survey Sample)

	Not Chronically Absent (30% of students)	Moderately Chronically Absent (16% of students)	Severely Chronically Absent (54% of students)
Lack of Transportation	8% ³	9%	16% ¹
Child’s Health	8% ³	15%	20% ¹
Parent’s Health	7% ³	9%	17% ¹
Child Refused	3% ³	8% ³	20% ^{1,2}
Computer Issues	16% ^{2,3}	31% ^{1,3}	54% ^{1,2}
Internet Issues	15% ³	20% ³	41% ^{1,2}
Log-on Issues	4% ³	5% ³	13% ^{1,2}
Teachers	3%	6%	8%
Other Students	1%	2%	4%

¹Statistically significantly different from “Not Chronically Absent” students ($p < 0.01$)

²Statistically significantly different from “Moderately Chronically Absent” students ($p < 0.01$)

³Statistically significantly different from “Severely Chronically Absent” students ($p < 0.01$)

Table B8

Stepwise OLS Regression Estimating the Percentage of Days Absent, 2020-21 School Year

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Family SES										
Income-to-Poverty	-	-0.06***	-	-	-	-	-0.03**	-0.05***	-0.01	-0.02*
Any Parent Full-Time	-	-0.08*	-	-	-	-	-0.07*	-0.08*	-0.05	-0.05
Single Parent	-	0.07	-	-	-	-	0.08*	0.06	0.05	0.04
Evicted in 2020-21	-	0.13	-	-	-	-	0.09	0.10	0.11	0.11
COVID-19 Challenges										
Health	-	-	0.03	-	-	-	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
Mental Health	-	-	-0.05	-	-	-	-0.03	-0.03	-0.01	-0.02
Logistics	-	-	-0.01	-	-	-	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01
Financial	-	-	0.02	-	-	-	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04	-0.04
Remote Instruction Only	-	-	-	-0.11**	-	-	-0.08**	-0.09**	-0.09***	-0.09***
Computer Issues										
Rarely	-	-	-	-	0.06	-	0.05	-	0.06	-
Sometimes	-	-	-	-	0.13***	-	0.10**	-	0.06	-
Often	-	-	-	-	0.24***	-	0.20***	-	0.16***	-
Always	-	-	-	-	0.34***	-	0.27***	-	0.22***	-
Internet Issues										
Rarely	-	-	-	-	-	0.07	-	0.03	-	0.00
Sometimes	-	-	-	-	-	0.03	-	0.00	-	-0.04
Often	-	-	-	-	-	0.14**	-	0.10*	-	0.07
Always	-	-	-	-	-	0.23***	-	0.15**	-	0.12*
Race										
Hispanic	-0.18***	-0.14***	-0.18***	-0.18***	-0.16***	-0.19***	-0.12*	-0.15***	-0.08*	-0.09**
Other Race	-0.12***	-0.09	-0.11	-0.12*	-0.11*	-0.13**	-0.07	-0.09	-0.06	-0.07
Special Education	-0.03	-0.05	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.05	-0.03	-0.05
Female	-0.08*	-0.07*	-0.08*	-0.08*	-0.06	-0.08*	-0.07	-0.08**	-0.04	-0.05
Grade Level										
3 rd -5 th	-0.03	-0.02	-0.04	-0.02	-0.03	-0.04	-0.01	-0.01	0.00	0.00
6 th -8 th	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04
9 th -12 th	0.12*	0.17***	0.13**	0.16**	0.16***	0.14**	0.21***	0.21***	0.15***	0.15***
Prior-Year Absences	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.80***	0.91***
Constant	0.36***	0.37***	0.37***	0.41***	0.17***	0.28***	0.27***	0.40***	0.16**	0.27***
R ²	0.12	0.26	0.13	0.15	0.27	0.18	0.38	0.32	0.46	0.44
N	776	776	776	776	776	776	776	776	648	648

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Outcome is the percentage of days absent. Reference category for computer and internet issues is “never”. Reference category for Grade Level is “K-2ⁿ”. Reference category of race/ethnicity is “Black”. Standard errors are robust. Analytic weights are applied.

Table B9

Linear Probability Model Estimating the Probability of Chronic Absence, 2020-21 School Year

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Family SES										
Income-to-Poverty	-	-0.10***	-	-	-	-	-0.07**	-0.08***	-0.05*	-0.06**
Any Parent Full-Time	-	-0.06	-	-	-	-	-0.04	-0.05	-0.03	-0.04
Single Parent	-	0.11**	-	-	-	-	0.12**	0.11*	0.08	0.06
Evicted in 2020-21	-	0.18***	-	-	-	-	0.13**	0.16**	0.13*	0.15*
COVID-19 Challenges										
Health	-	-	0.08	-	-	-	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.06
Mental Health	-	-	-0.01	-	-	-	0.02	0.00	0.00	-0.02
Logistics	-	-	-0.02	-	-	-	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
Financial	-	-	0.04	-	-	-	-0.04	-0.04	-0.06	-0.06
Remote Instruction Only	-	-	-	-0.12**	-	-	-0.08*	-0.10**	-0.06	-0.07
Computer Issues										
Rarely	-	-	-	-	0.10	-	0.09	-	0.08	-
Sometimes	-	-	-	-	0.21**	-	0.15**	-	0.13*	-
Often	-	-	-	-	0.41***	-	0.33***	-	0.29***	-
Always	-	-	-	-	0.46***	-	0.35***	-	0.29***	-
Internet Issues										
Rarely	-	-	-	-	-	0.09	-	0.04	-	0.03
Sometimes	-	-	-	-	-	0.13*	-	0.10	-	0.07
Often	-	-	-	-	-	0.32***	-	0.25***	-	0.22***
Always	-	-	-	-	-	0.37***	-	0.24***	-	0.21***
Race										
Hispanic	-0.31***	-0.24***	-0.30***	-0.30***	-0.27***	-0.32	-0.21**	-0.25***	-0.16**	-0.19**
Other Race	-0.06	-0.01	-0.03	-0.05	-0.03	-0.06	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02
Special Education	0.10	0.05	0.08	0.09	0.10*	0.10*	0.06	0.05	0.04	0.03
Female	-0.05	-0.04	-0.06	-0.06	-0.03	-0.06	-0.04	-0.06	-0.02	-0.04
Grade Level										
3 rd -5 th	-0.10	-0.09	-0.10	-0.08	-0.10	-0.11	-0.08	-0.08	-0.06	-0.06
6 th -8 th	-0.02	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01
9 th -12 th	0.06	0.14**	0.07	0.10*	0.12*	0.10	0.18***	0.18***	0.15**	0.15**
Prior-Year Chronically Absent	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.25***	0.27***
Constant	0.76***	0.76***	0.73***	0.82***	0.47***	0.59***	0.54***	0.68***	0.44***	0.55***
R ²	0.08	0.19	0.09	0.10	0.20	0.15	0.28	0.25	0.32	0.30
N	776	776	776	776	776	776	776	776	648	648

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Outcome is the percentage of days absent. Reference category for computer and internet issues is “never”. Reference category for Grade Level is “K-2ⁿ”. Reference category of race/ethnicity is “Black”. Standard errors are robust. Analytic weights are applied.

Figure B1

School Attendance Staff Reported Use of Strategies, 2020-21

To what extent have you used the following **strategies** so far this school year?

