

POLICY BRIEF

Inherent Inequity: Navigating the Landscape of Truancy Response Across Michigan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

K-12 students across Michigan are missing school at one of the worst rates in the country. Statewide, 42% of students were chronically absent in the 2021-22 school year. The issue is particularly significant in marginalized communities, specifically for Black and Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and urban-residing students.

Absenteeism negatively impacts educational outcomes for an entire classroom, and attendance policies can criminalize and punish both students and their guardians through court involvement, harmful academic repercussions, and financial consequences. Analysis shows that a decentralized and unstandardized approach has led to disjointed efforts that can discredit certain barriers to school attendance and disproportionately punish poor and racialized communities. The resulting system is inherently inequitable.

A statewide transformation is essential in order to make attendance policies and processes equitable and improve student outcomes. This transformation necessitates a change in rhetoric, a vastly modified approach to managing absenteeism, changes to state law, and improved data collection.

RESPONDING TO ABSENTEEISM

Two distinct concepts are used when referencing attendance issues in Michigan's K-12 schools.

Truancy stems from state compulsory education law requiring that children aged 6 through 18 attend school¹. However, what makes a student 'truant' is not defined federally or by the state. Generally, truancy refers to multiple *unexcused* absences², but in Michigan it is left up to districts or schools to quantify and create policy around it. Schools also decide what they view as an excused vs. unexcused absence.

Truancy is a punishable *crime* by state law¹. Some schools may focus efforts on support and prevention³, but the law allows for schools and courts to respond more punitively.

Children may be...

- Formally or informally involved with the court system⁴
- Placed on probation or in programming¹
- Sent to juvenile detention¹
- Suspended or expelled

Parents may be...

- Convicted of a misdemeanor crime¹
- Forced to pay fines or spend time in jail¹
- Found ineligible for certain cash benefits⁵
- Visited by Child Protective Services for educational neglect⁴

Exactly which consequences a family will face can vary across the state and within school districts.

Chronic absenteeism became the primary indicator for attendance issues when the federal government enacted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. A student is chronically absent if they miss **10%** or more days in a given school year, whether those are *unexcused* or *excused*⁶. With this shift, Michigan stopped collecting truancy data and instead focused solely on chronic absenteeism data⁷.

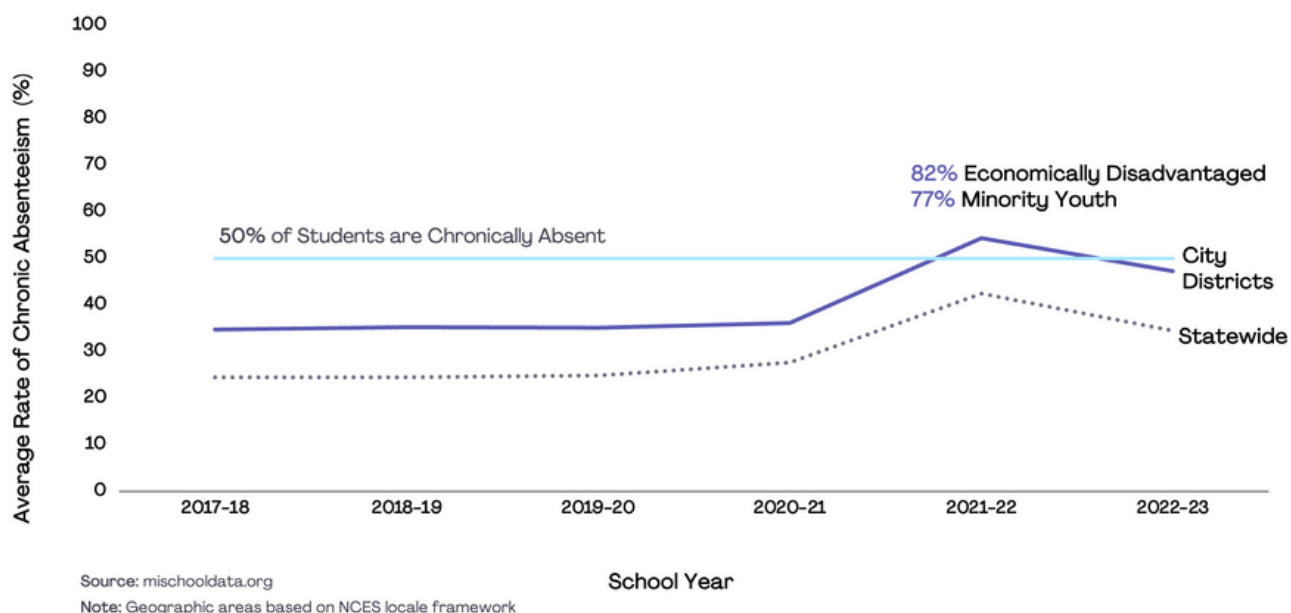
However, policy to respond to attendance issues didn't experience that same shift, and is still heavily truancy-focused. Therefore, the repercussions of missing school are targeted only at students who are decided to be unexcused. But, an absence is an absence, no matter the classification.

When students miss school, they experience worse academic performance, are at higher risk of dropping out, and are more likely to participate in criminal activities⁸. When absenteeism is high the entire learning environment is disrupted, and there is decreased engagement⁸. Absenteeism is not just an individual problem, but one that impacts the entire school environment.

ABSENTEEISM IN MICHIGAN

Absenteeism is a problem impacting school environments across Michigan. Ranking 4th worst in the country⁹, we saw chronic absenteeism rise to **42%** across districts¹⁰ in 2021-2022, the first school year of mostly normal instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). There is also a clear gap in district-level absenteeism rates, with districts in large cities consistently experiencing higher rates of attendance issues, rising to **54%** in that same year¹⁰. A majority of students within these districts are youth of color¹¹ and come from low-income families¹².

Figure 1. Gap in Chronic Absenteeism Rates Across Michigan School Districts



This trend persists at the student level. **53%** of Black students in Michigan are chronically absent, followed by **42%** of students considered economically disadvantaged, and **36%** of Hispanic students, compared to **24%** of white students¹⁰ (Figure 2). Even though a student needs to miss just **18 days** of a school year to be considered chronically absent, students in Michigan are missing much more than that. On average, chronically absent Black students are missing **43 days** of school¹⁰. That is almost one-quarter of the school year. Other groups face similarly high rates¹⁰. If these students were to continue on this path, they will have missed almost **3 years** of K-12 instruction by their high school graduation.

It is clear that children of color and poor families are disproportionately impacted by truancy policies and, as a result, any punitive consequences.

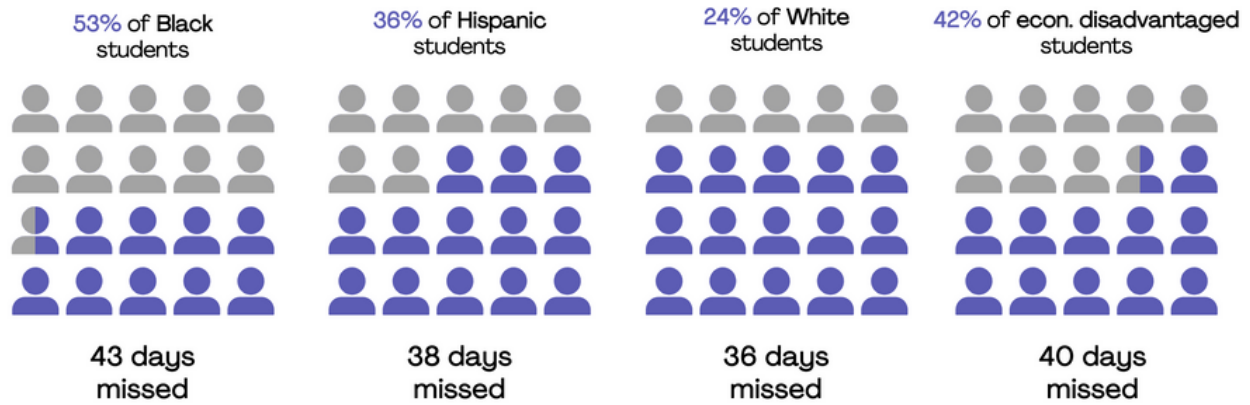


Figure 2. Chronic Absenteeism by Student Demographics

A CASE STUDY: INGHAM COUNTY ISD

Many of these students face different levels of response and resources based solely on the school that they go to.

Ingham County Intermediate School District (ISD) serves as a representative case study to see how attendance policies might differ, since similar trends are apparent across its schools and the ISD supports diverse community types (Appendix A). Ingham ISD serves over 44,000 students and is the final authority for truancy issues experienced by districts and academies under its jurisdiction.

Across Ingham's 12 school districts, there are **six unique truancy definitions**. These definitions range from **1 unexcused** absence, to **10 unexcused** absences, to over **30 days** missed, in one academic year.

There are **seven distinct protocols for excusing an absence** across these districts. **No data** is available to the public on truancy-related indicators and outcomes, however, there were **221 referrals** from districts to the ISD for truancy support in the 2021-22 school year. This suggests that truancy is still an issue enforced by the districts. This number even excludes its largest district, Lansing, which manages truancy itself.

This analysis makes clear that students across Ingham ISD's districts have differing experiences with truancy policy, which is likely the case for other districts across Michigan. With almost 900 districts in Michigan, the door is open for a substantial number of distinct definitions and responses to students who are all in similar situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A decentralized and unstandardized approach has led to disjointed efforts, rooted in a focus on truancy that often discredits certain barriers to school attendance and disproportionately punishes poor and racialized communities. The result is a system that is inherently inequitable.

Therefore, a statewide transformation is essential in order to make attendance policies and processes equitable and improve student outcomes. The following are recommendations for how to get there.

1

Shift the discourse around absenteeism. The governor has made K-12 education one of the key priorities of her administration. Including lowering chronic absenteeism rates to this platform can indicate that Michigan plans to target absenteeism and shift away from truancy. The rhetoric must target *all* absences and cease to unfairly target students and families from certain communities more than others.

2

Prevent the use of harmful punitive measures. The state legislature can immediately do this by rejecting the more punitive aspects of attendance policy. State law must ban expulsion and suspension for a student who only experiences attendance issues. The current law that targets poor families, making them ineligible for temporary cash assistance due to low student attendance, must be repealed.

3

Move toward centralization and standardization. A joint task force, established by the Governor and State Board of Education and comprised of government and education stakeholders, along with community leaders, can determine what should be standardized and centralized while still recognizing unique needs across communities. Defining tiered levels of response, identifying a funding structure, and developing an early-warning indication system are necessary goals for this collaborative task force.

4

Collect more robust attendance data. Centralization and standardization can enable more robust data collection and set clear standards that districts and schools must be held accountable to achieve. Transparency can be improved through reporting detailed data about things such as absence levels, referrals for absenteeism support, and referrals to court.

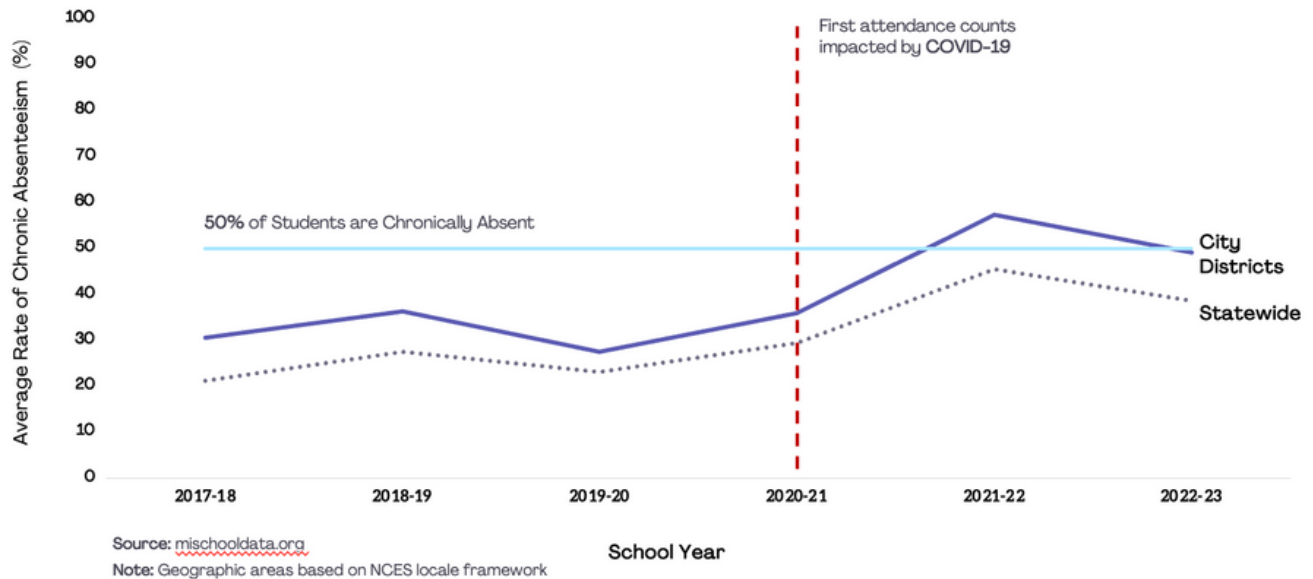
At a time when education is facing many challenges and priorities, we must ensure that our K-12 students have the **resources and supports** necessary to attend school consistently and that families across Michigan are **treated equitably** in the process.

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APPENDIX A: INGHAM COUNTY ISD

Gap in Chronic Absenteeism Rates across Ingham School Districts



Ingham County ISD – Public School District Information

Entity	Students Served*	% Chronically Absent*	% Economically Disadvantaged*	% Nonwhite*	Locale
Ingham County ISD	44141	31.24%	45.97%	31.32%	NA
Dansville Schools	778	21.59%	35.03%	7.48%	Rural: Distant
East Lansing Public Schools	3914	28.46%	37.49%	40.53%	City: Small
Haslett Public Schools	2620	20.04%	27.85%	35.77%	Suburb: Large
Holt Public Schools	5087	32.36%	51.10%	45.17%	Suburb: Large
Lansing School District	10445	80.80%	89.49%	77.94%	City: Midsize
Leslie Public Schools	1138	27.50%	50.00%	8.17%	Rural: Fringe
Mason Public Schools	3369	24.31%	32.58%	20.48%	Suburb: Large
Okemos Public Schools	4755	19.39%	20.61%	46.69%	Suburb: Large
Stockbridge Community Schools	1205	24.07%	43.51%	5.36%	Rural: Distant
Waverly Community Schools	2971	35.38%	64.16%	69.03%	Suburb: Large
Webberville Community Schools	467	26.98%	56.36%	4.76%	Town: Fringe
Williamston Community Schools	1881	13.98%	22.86%	9.72%	Town: Fringe

*2022-23 data