



# DETROIT STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



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## **OUR THANKS TO**

Thank you to the Detroit Public Schools Community District for partnering with us to make this project possible. We also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Skillman Foundation and the Brightmoor Alliance. Thanks very much to Elizabeth Orr Jones, who designed this report. Results, information, and opinions solely represent the analysis, information, and opinions of the authors and are not endorsed by – or reflect the views or positions of – grantors, DPSCD, or any employee thereof.

## **DETROIT EDUCATION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP**

The Detroit Education Research Partnership is a collaboration between researchers at Wayne State University's College of Education and a constellation of community partners interested in improving Detroit schools. We orient our work around the pressing policy needs of the Detroit education community, and we seek to inform improvement in the stability and engagement of school experiences for Detroit youth. We believe that education reform in other places has important lessons for our collective work in Detroit, but that any solution for Detroit will have to respond to the unique strengths and needs of our community. Using continuous improvement methods, we work in partnership with schools, community organizations, and policymakers to identify the key problems that impede improvement in Detroit schools. We then collaboratively determine what stakeholders need to know to solve those problems and design research studies to inform improvement in policy and practice. Learn more about our work and provide your input at <https://education.wayne.edu/detroit-educaton-research-partnership>.

## **REFERENCE FOR THIS REPORT**

Lenhoff, S. W., Stokes, K., Khawaja, S., & Singer, J. (2020). Detroit students' experiences during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Detroit Education Research Partnership.  
<https://education.wayne.edu/detroit-educaton-research-partnership>



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## COLLABORATIVE POLICY RESEARCH

This research is the result of a collaboration between Wayne State University's College of Education and a constellation of community partners interested in improving Detroit schools, called the Detroit Education Research Partnership. We orient our work around the pressing policy needs of the Detroit education community, and we seek to inform the design of local educational reforms. We believe that education reform in other places has important lessons for our collective work in Detroit, but that any solution for Detroit will have to respond to the unique strengths and needs of our community.

## STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC

As part of our research-practice partnership with Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and the Every School Day Counts Detroit coalition, the Detroit Education Research Partnership interviewed 29 DPSCD high school students in May and June 2020 about their experiences with COVID-19, how often and in what ways they participated in distance learning, and what their perspectives were about school in the fall. This research brief highlights several key findings that have implications for how students can be supported both during and after the pandemic:

- There was considerable variation in students' participation in distance learning. Although most students said they were participating consistently, 28% had not participated at all. Nearly 90% of the students who had not participated at all had been chronically absent from school in the Fall 2019 semester. There were also clear differences in participation by school, with students in some schools all or nearly all participating and in others where few were participating.
- Students described many reasons for not participating, including: lack of information, problems with technology, family responsibilities, and disinterest. These raise important questions for how schools should be tracking student participation and the ways schools need to be prepared to support students.
- Nearly 40% of the students we spoke with personally knew someone who had contracted COVID-19, and a quarter knew someone who had died from the disease. They spoke about the negative impact of these events on their families, particularly their parents.
- Students expressed mixed feelings about going back to school in the fall. Many students said they were eager to go back, but they were concerned about getting sick or bringing the disease back to their families.

## CONTACT

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he Detroit Education Research Partnership is a research-practice partnership between the Every School Day Counts Detroit coalition, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), and researchers at Wayne State University's College of Education.

Our primary focus is to improve the stability and engagement of students in public schools in Detroit, with a particular emphasis on improving student attendance and reducing rates of chronic absenteeism. Detroit has the highest percentage of chronically absent students of any large urban district in the country. More than half of the students in the city miss more than 10% of their enrolled school days, putting them at risk of dropout, lower academic performance, and weaker socioemotional skills. We use research to support improvement in the district's attendance management and intervention strategies, as well as to support our community-based partners in designing out-of-school strategies to remove barriers to attendance and engagement in school.

As part of our research partnership, we wanted to learn more about how students experience school attendance. What are the barriers to getting to school? What resources do they draw on to attend school regularly? What is school like when they do attend? We planned a data collection for the end of the 2019-20 school year to interview Detroit high school students at all levels of absenteeism - from those who attend school nearly every day to those who miss 10, 20, or even 30 percent of school days. As we co-constructed the research plan with our school and community partners, we decided to include questions related to students' experiences with school participation during the pandemic, particularly how they spent their time when schools were shut down, their perceptions and experiences with COVID-19, and their experiences with distance learning. We were interested in two main questions: 1) How did students experience school engagement and participation during the pandemic? and 2) How were students' experiences during the pandemic shaped by their experiences with school and attendance before the pandemic? Students were randomly selected from five district high schools



based on their attendance rate. We called parents' phone numbers and got permission to speak to their children. Students participated on a voluntary basis, and all identifying information was kept confidential. Families were provided \$50 gift cards to compensate them for their time. Ultimately, we interviewed 29 9th-11th grade students on the phone or on Zoom, each for about 30 minutes, from late May to mid June 2020.

## **STUDENTS' SCHEDULES AND DAILY ACTIVITIES**

School buildings in Detroit were closed on March 13, 2020 to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, and did not reopen during the 2019-20 school year. DPSCD students were provided with paper packets of schoolwork, and teachers held class with students through online video conferencing. Students were asked to submit assignments by uploading images of work to the learning platform and completing online learning modules through various websites, such as iReady and Clever. With schools closed, students had to remake their daily schedules. For many, this involved incorporating distance learning activities into their daily or weekly routines (see "Experiences with Distance Learning" below). It has also involved other activities to entertain themselves, and in some cases seeking out work or taking on more household responsibilities. Above all, it has involved much more time at home and less contact with extended family and friends. As one student explained, "A lot has changed. I don't leave the house at all. I'm really inside of the house almost 24/7."

Many students described their days as monotonous or "boring," and as such we asked about what activities they have turned to for entertainment. One of the primary activities was video games. "Oh man, I've been playing way too much video games. Before, I was also playing way too much video games, but it's extreme now." Students also shared that they watched a lot of TV or movies, and a few students shared that they took part in physical activity like working out or playing basketball, but that this was normally solitary rather than with friends. These activities were substitutes for more active or social activities that they would normally enjoy on a weekend or during the summer.



As one student explained, “I wake up, I’ll join my classes, and I’ll do some school work, but most of the day, I will just like watch movies, stuff like that... before I used to go to physical therapy, I used to go over my cousin’s house or something like that, or like go for a walk, but I’ve just been like in the house most of the time.”

Along with this shift in daily activities, students have also shifted their sleep schedules. Many of the students we talked to shared that they stayed up much later in the night than usual, and often woke up late in the morning or the early afternoon. For example, one student told us that he “wakes up anywhere from 10:00am to 11:00am, but...there was a couple of weeks that I would wake up at 2:00pm.” Some students also shared that they slept in more and took naps because there was not much else to do. Many students named sleeping along with playing video games, playing basketball, or doing their school work as some of their main activities.

Most students described their days at home during the pandemic as relatively fluid, without a set schedule. For example, one student told us that he does “a lot really. I wake up, work out, eat, play a [video] game, work out more, play basketball or something. And sometimes I do work depending on when it’s due.” For those students who described more regimented schedules, they either planned their day around their school work and online classes or they reported to a full-time job that dictated their schedules.

Lack of a regular schedule or routine for most of the students we spoke to raises important concerns. Routines have been shown to play an important role in child development (Bocknek et al., 2018; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Zajicek-Farber et al., 2014), and they can also be important for adolescents. Routines create predictability which has a positive impact on mental health, and schedules can help students learn how to self-regulate, plan, and fulfill goals, which are all critically important for preparing students for life after high school. These findings suggest that students will need much more support in creating and maintaining schedules that meet their developmental needs during the pandemic, and parents may also benefit from guidance

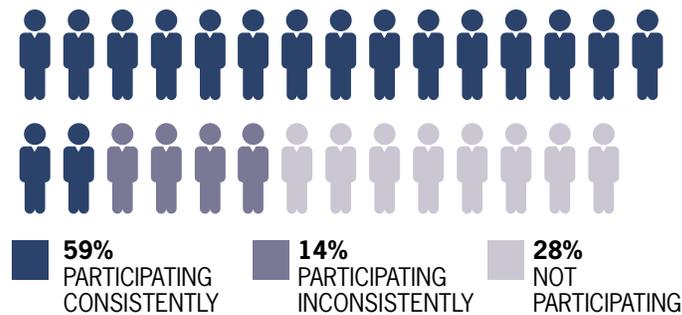


from schools and community-based organizations that attend to students' academic and social needs.

## EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE LEARNING

We categorized students' participation in distance learning by how consistently they were participating. We categorized students as participating *consistently* if they reported that they did schoolwork for at least a few hours every week. We categorized students as participating *inconsistently* if they said that their participation was more erratic, or if they had participated at the beginning of the pandemic but had stopped participating. Finally, we categorized students as *not participating* if they had not logged on to their school learning platforms or not turned in any school work during the pandemic. Our major takeaways about distance learning were:

- There was considerable variation in students' participation in distance learning. Although most students said they were participating consistently, 28% had not participated at all. And, of those participating consistently, their participation ranged from 20 minutes a day to five hours a day.
- Nearly 90% of those who had not participated at all had been chronically absent from school in the Fall 2019 semester.
- Students described many reasons for not participating: lack of information about how to participate, problems with technology, family responsibilities, and disinterest. For some students, getting the message that distance learning would not count toward their grades made them less motivated to participate.
- There were clear differences in participation by school, with students in some schools all or nearly all participating and in others where few were participating.



## VARIATION IN EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE LEARNING

Of the 29 students we interviewed, 17 (59%) said that they were participating consistently in distance learning, but there was extreme variation in the number of hours they were doing schoolwork or logged on to online classes, ranging from 20 minutes a few days a week to five hours every weekday. We heard different experiences from students, even when they attended the same school. This is just a small sample of the levels of participation we heard from students: logging on from 8:00 to 1:30 and spending 1-2.5 hours after that doing homework; logging on everyday for 10 to 20 minutes; logging on for 3 to 4 hours everyday; spending 1-3 hours everyday on homework; 40 minutes of work one week, no work the next week; not participating at all.

There was also considerable variation in the work that students did between schools. We interviewed students from five district high schools. As shown in Table 1, in Schools 2 and 4, all or nearly all students participated in distance learning consistently. At School 3, some students participated consistently, some inconsistently, and one not at all. In School 1, four out of seven students had not participated at all, and the two students we interviewed at School 5 had also not participated. Although it is not clear from our data why students' experiences varied so much, they do suggest two possibilities: 1) there may have been stronger supports for distance learning at some schools than at others; and/or 2) some schools may serve students who have more barriers to participation than others, including work or family responsibilities or lack of technology.

Some students said that they were doing “about the same amount of work”



that they had been doing before the pandemic and that they were submitting assignments to their teachers every day. Although some students complained that the workload was too much, others thought it was about right or even too little. Some students shared that they had to juggle school work with other responsibilities, such as working or taking care of young siblings. For instance, one student said that she was working and busy, but she still tried to stay connected to school:



*I try to be in contact with my teachers and let them know that, ‘Hey, I got to work, what did I miss?’ ... So I still attend to some of my classes, but I’m not going to lie, it’s kind of hard because I work eight hours mostly every day, and I have to wake up, and I wake up late. So it’s kind of hard to probably make it to the first hour, but I will still try to... Not try. I do communicate with my teachers to see missing work. (High school student interview, 2020)*

Other students said they were participating consistently and had developed a regular schedule to make sure they were doing what they needed to do. One student told us: “So my schedule goes math, English, Spanish, lunch, history, science, SAT prep. Only math and English meet every day. Spanish and SAT prep, Tuesday and Thursday. Lunch is every day, and social studies and science, Monday through Thursday. Say if it was a Friday, I would only have to do two classes.” However, even with this regular schedule, he said he had not submitted assignments often and mentioned that many of his peers had stopped participating:



*I’ve been trying to get back on that, but it’s kind of awkward with the teachers now, because I’ve noticed I’ve been attending the classes still, because I still want to get my attendance, but barely anybody participates in the meetings anymore. It’s really weird. I don’t know why it happened, but like all of a sudden about, I want to say a week or two ago, it went from the 23 students down to seven or eight. Sometimes four, it’s bad. (High school student interview, 2020)*



The variation in student participation suggests that some students were getting the right amount of support for distance learning and others were not supported adequately. Below, we summarize the primary problems that go in the way of consistent participation in distance learning.

**Table 1.** Number of Students Participating in Distance Learning by School

	Participating Consistently	Participating Inconsistently	Not Participating
School 1 (n=7)	2	1	4
School 2 (n=7)	7		
School 3 (n=6)	2	3	1
School 4 (n=7)	6		1
School 5 (n=2)			2
<b>Total</b>	<b>17 (59%)</b>	<b>4 (14%)</b>	<b>8 (28%)</b>

## PROBLEMS WITH DISTANCE LEARNING

Students described several reasons for not participating in distance learning, or for participating inconsistently. The primary reasons we identified include: lack of clear information about how or whether to participate, lack of technology, and other interests or responsibilities taking priority over schoolwork.

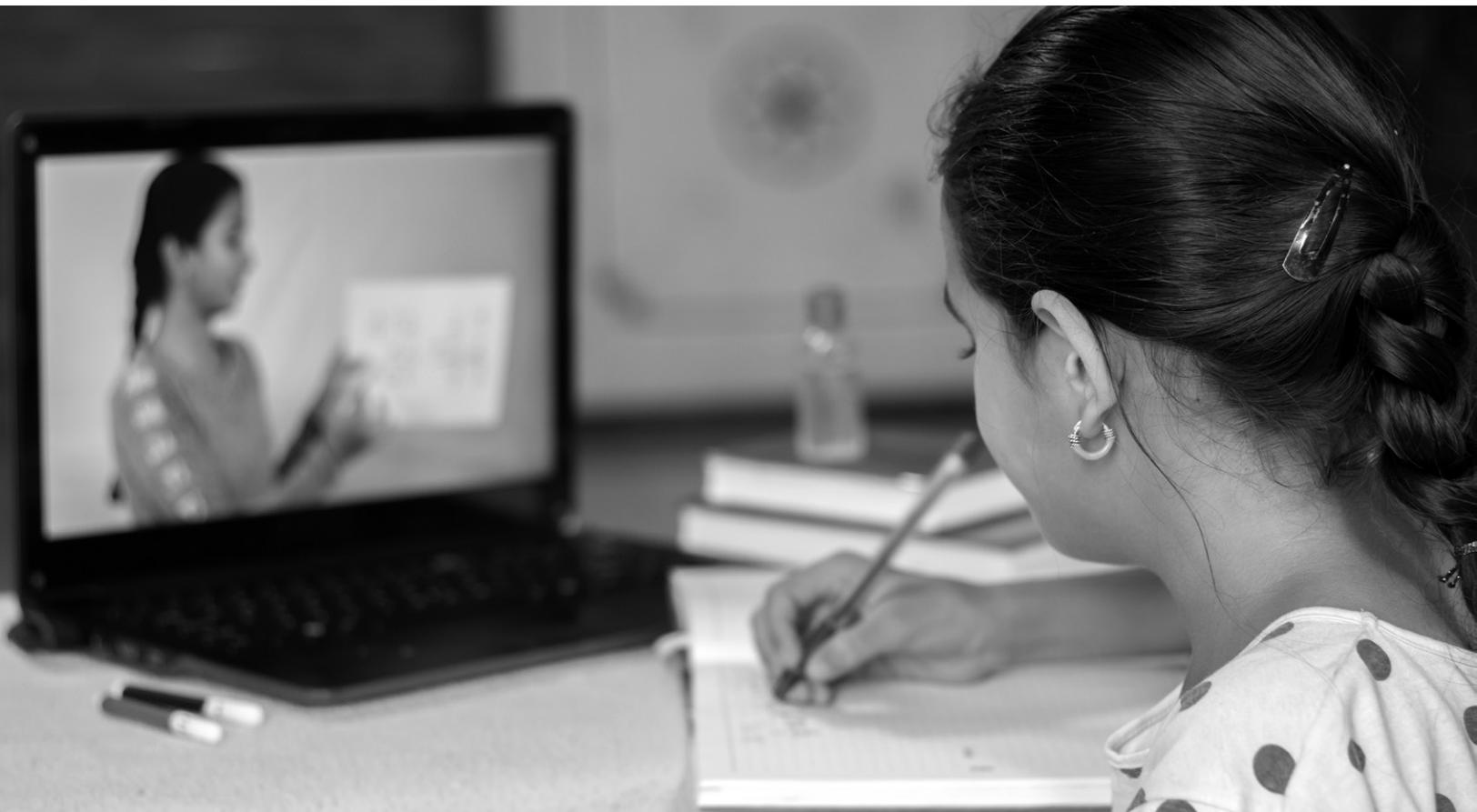
Some students did not get clear information about how to participate. For instance, one student said that they were not doing any schoolwork because they did not know what to do: "I don't know if they are [sending any work] because they didn't send me nothing. They know my mom's number, so I don't know." Another student mentioned: "they never sent out no work, none of that, no computers for us to work on, none of that." Another student said, "I've just never reached out to nobody and nobody ever reached out to me to tell you what site I was supposed to go on or anything. I have a laptop so I'm accessible to the internet, they just never reached out to me."

Other students described problems with technology or the internet that kept them from participating. For instance, one student said they could not



participate because they did not have a computer. Another student said, “I don’t know my login stuff, so I don’t know what I can do right now.” This student also mentioned she was preoccupied with taking care of her younger siblings, and was therefore not thinking about her schoolwork. Other students described how they tried to participate, but it was difficult to fully engage in coursework because their only device was a phone.

The students at some schools were unclear of what they were supposed to do or how to participate, so they did not participate at all. We heard from students that they thought they did not have to log on for distance learning if they were not failing a class: “I wasn’t failing any classes, so I didn’t have to do any work.” Similarly, when one of the students was asked how often he is doing online instruction with his teachers, he said, “I passed all my classes, but I still go in there and see how people are doing. Usually it really depends on if you passing or not. So I’m passing, so I don’t think I’m doing hours. But I’m still, probably an hour in total because I’m passing. I just check. I don’t really got to do it.” One of the students mentioned that they were “joining





once a week, [however], someone told me that if you have Cs then you're good. So, I stopped attending." When one of the students was asked how often they submit assignments to their teachers they said that "its not very often they need it." They also mentioned that they only needed to get passing grades, and once they got that they don't "need to do anything else." These students' perceptions suggest that they were receiving mixed or unclear messages about how or why to participate in distance learning. This may have been due to different teachers' expectations, differences in school practices, or unclear communication between adults and the students we spoke to.

## **CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PRE-PANDEMIC ATTENDANCE AND DISTANCE LEARNING PARTICIPATION**

There were important differences in the participation of students who were chronically absent from school in the first semester of 2019-20, meaning they had missed 10% or more school days in the fall before the pandemic. As shown in Table 2, while 90% of students with strong attendance had participated in some distance learning during the shut-down, just 63% of the chronically absent students had participated at all. In addition, 37% of students who were chronically absent in the fall did not participate in distance learning at all during the pandemic. This suggests a potential connection between students' attendance in school pre-pandemic and their ability or willingness to engage in distance learning during the pandemic.

In our research on families' barriers to school attendance, we found that Detroit families face multiple barriers to school attendance, many of which were related to structural conditions in Detroit, such as concentrated poverty, weak transportation infrastructure, and neighborhood and school safety. Students who were chronically absent before COVID may also be at risk of school disengagement during distance learning. We found that families of chronically absent students had fewer social support resources to rely on, such as family or friends who could help get children to school, particularly when school transportation was not available. During the pandemic, this



may mean that chronically absent students have fewer social supports for participating in distance learning, such as adults to help with navigating the online learning systems or setting up schedules for completing schoolwork. Many chronically absent students also had family and work obligations that were taking up their time, pulling them away from schoolwork.

**Table 2.** Participation in Distance Learning by Chronic Absence in First Semester

	Participating Consistently	Participating Inconsistently	Not Participating
Not Chronically Absent (n=10)	7 students (70%)	2 students (20%)	1 student (10%)
Chronically Absent (n=19)	10 students (52%)	2 students (11%)	7 students (37%)

## EXPERIENCES WITH COVID-19

The novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020 upended life for people worldwide. Detroit had high rates of community spread and one of the highest death rates in the country during the first few months of the crisis. Many Detroit students were affected personally by the disease. Because of these experiences, combined with how they felt about distance learning, students expressed mixed feelings about what school should look like in Fall 2020. Our major takeaways from students about their experiences with COVID-19 were:

- Nearly 40% of the students we spoke with personally knew someone who had contracted COVID-19, and a quarter knew someone who had died. They spoke about the negative impact of the disease on their families, particularly their parents who were grieving the loss of a family member or friend.
- Students expressed mixed feelings about going back to school in the fall. Many students said they were eager to go back to school, but they were concerned about getting sick or bringing the disease back to their families. Many students expressed skepticism about schools being clean and safe.



As cases of coronavirus continue to rise nationwide and in Michigan, students have not been immune to the impact of COVID-19. Eleven of the 29 students (38%) we spoke to knew someone who had recovered or died from the virus. During interviews, students were vulnerable and shared their personal experiences coping with the “new normal.” Students shared that aunts, uncles, fathers, brothers-in-law, and coaches had contracted COVID-19. Researchers have documented that Black and Brown communities are strengthened through a communal worldview, where extended family members often play a critical role in raising children. Dr. Riana Anderson explained this communal dynamic in a commentary on the unique stressors Black children may face during this pandemic: “Black youth often have large networks of providers, from mentors to family members. Their deprivation of in-person contact may reduce the amount of support they are receiving from their extended network” (Baeza, 2020). This lack of physical connection within a student’s “village” is likely to have a psychological impact. One student described the grief felt when an extended family member was sick, “She wasn’t directly related. You know how there are those close family friends that you call uncle. My uncle’s mom had passed. She was barely sick one night and then the next day, she didn’t wake up.” In contrast, another student we spoke to shared the relief when his coach recovered, “One of my coaches..he beat it.”

Seven of the 29 (24%) students we spoke to had lost members of their families and community to COVID-19. They shared that grandmothers, great uncles, and friends of the family had passed. Even when students did not know the person well, they witnessed their parents go through the grieving process, “My mother’s two uncles passed away from COVID-19... she’s recovering from the deaths.” Another student shared how the virus has impacted her family members, “I don’t personally know anyone, but my sister and my mom, they know of a couple of people who actually died from COVID.”

## **FEELINGS ABOUT GOING BACK TO SCHOOL**

Given the varied experiences with distance learning, concerns about COVID-19, and questions about what school would be like during the



pandemic, students expressed mixed feelings about returning to school in the fall. Some students expressed a desire to see friends again and experience high school milestones, even if that means having to wear a mask and practice social distancing. However, students also shared they were worried about going back when so many things about COVID-19 were still uncertain. One student admitted that initially school closing was exciting but after months in quarantine he wishes things would go back to normal, “Honestly, I was excited, at first. No school. So, I was excited about that. Early summer vacation. Now, it’s just...I want to go back to school. I really do. Everything with the coronavirus, and all that. It just makes everything different. Things have been really different.” Another student expressed uncertainty about returning by saying, “I mean, because like I said I do want to go back to school. I miss school. But then again, I don’t know.”

Although some students wanted to return, they were fearful about being exposed to the virus at school and potentially infecting a loved one. A few





students we spoke with lived with high-risk parents or grandparents, which made them concerned about being in the school environment. One student explained this fear by saying, “I want to go back to school, but then again, I’m not trying to go to school if I’m going to get sick, get coronavirus, or bring it home.” Students shared stories of parents who had preexisting conditions or family members whose age made them vulnerable. One student explained how putting her mom at risk was a concern, “Yeah, because my mom is at risk. Her immune system is not as strong as everybody else’s. So I can’t just be putting my mom at risk like that.”

In addition to safety concerns at home, students also expressed worries about how realistic it would be to return to school safely. Their desire to return to school was muted by concerns about how social distancing would work in a highly populated school setting. One student explained that he would want to know more about the extent of community spread in Detroit before returning: “Just depends on what ... Because I’ve seen sick people there, and stuff like that. It just depends on how the coronavirus is looking, by that time.” Another student shared his concerns about how the school space would accommodate social distancing: “I mean at school it’s not really that easy for kids to social distance. So we would all have to be bunched up in one classroom, and I don’t want that happening.” Lastly, one student we spoke with did believe that his school would take proper precautions to try to keep students safe: “If they do allow students to go back to school, I really hope that we all wear a mask and gloves so we won’t have to worry about getting it or anybody getting exposed to it. Because like I said... [at my school], they won’t take any chances with that. They are going to make sure that they have hand sanitizer and make sure they have tapes to let everybody know we got six feet.”

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR BACK TO SCHOOL PLANNING**

The findings presented in this research brief, alongside our prior research on the barriers to getting to school for Detroit families, suggest that reopening school is less a question of whether to be in person or online and more



a question of how school, government, and community resources should be allocated to ensure that all students have access to the educational opportunities they deserve – during the pandemic and beyond. In our prior work, we identified a significant relationship between Detroit’s uniquely poor structural conditions and rates of chronic absenteeism (Singer et al., 2019). Before the pandemic, Detroit had the nation’s highest rates of poverty, violent crime, unemployment, asthma, and vacancies – all city-level variables associated with chronic absenteeism. During and after the pandemic, these problems are likely to be exacerbated as the economy deteriorates. This research suggests that the students who were most vulnerable to being disengaged from school before the pandemic are also most likely to not have the educational supports they need during the pandemic. These are also students who struggled with finding a way to physically get to school earlier in the year. Therefore, we suggest the following considerations for school and community leaders to consider as they plan for how to support students this coming fall:

- Participation in distance learning varied widely, even among students who said they participated consistently. The Michigan Department of Education should work with districts to define and measure attendance during the pandemic. It should be clear what “counts” as attending school on a given day, particularly for distance learning. This definition may need to be different for students at different grade levels, and it should account for both the frequency and the level of engagement of participation.
- Students who were chronically absent in the 2019-20 school year may be more likely to face barriers to school participation during the pandemic, whether online or face-to-face. Some of the most common barriers faced by chronically absent students during the regular school year were related to transportation, chronic illness, and parent work schedules, which are likely to continue to pose challenges. Before the start of the school year, schools should be in contact with families of previously chronically absent students to identify potential barriers and provide resources and support to ensure that students can be engaged.



- If students are in face-to-face instruction only part time, the days they are supposed to be in school will be all the more critical to their success. Yet, the students most likely to benefit from face-to-face are also the students who have the most barriers to school attendance. Schools and districts must consider radical new models to ensure that students can physically get to school safely on the days they are expected to be there, including more individualized transportation support. The district may want to encourage families to enroll in their neighborhood schools so that K-8 students can access school-provided transportation.
- Schools must provide clear and consistent information to parents and high school youth about how they should be participating in distance learning. Lack of participation should be addressed quickly, since it may indicate that students do not know how to participate or lack the required technology.
- Whether in person or online, students will need socioemotional support when they come back to school this fall. Many students have witnessed the impact of COVID-19 first hand and are scared about contracting the virus themselves or infecting a loved one. Students will need caring adults to ensure they get the support and guidance they need.
- High school youth need support in developing schedules to ensure that they complete their schoolwork and to provide important routines to structure their days. Many high school youth have taken on new responsibilities at work or at home since the pandemic, and schools and community-based organizations must ensure that they have what they need to fulfill their educational and familial commitments.



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