

The 7th Annual Family Engagement
Leadership Summit

welcome!

we will begin
shortly...

**Ohio Statewide
Family Engagement Center**

For Every Child, Every Family, Every School

Chronic Absenteeism: Insights & Strategies

What We Learned from Columbus Students

The Columbus Foundation

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Why We Did the Work

Project Background

As part of the Community Well-being Practice at the Columbus Foundation, we sought to better understand the reasons why some high school students in Columbus were chronically absent.

Through our co-design methodology, we worked directly with chronically absent young people to co-create innovative approaches to boost engagement around learning.

This approach centered the voices of those most impacted by chronic absenteeism, ensuring our solutions were grounded in lived experience.





The Team

Our multi-disciplinary team brought together “chronically absent” young people (who were paid for their time) alongside expertise in youth engagement, co-design methodology, and educational policy.

Dedicated to redefining student success through lived experience.



How We Did the Work



Team Interviews

The team interviewed 30+ young people (12-19 years old; mostly Black students who primarily attended public school. A smaller group attended charter and private schools. All were paid for their time.)

All were or had been chronically absent.



Sense-Making

The team looked across interviews to pick out learnings that were surprising or interesting.



Ideation

The team created ideas that might address problems heard directly from students.



Testing

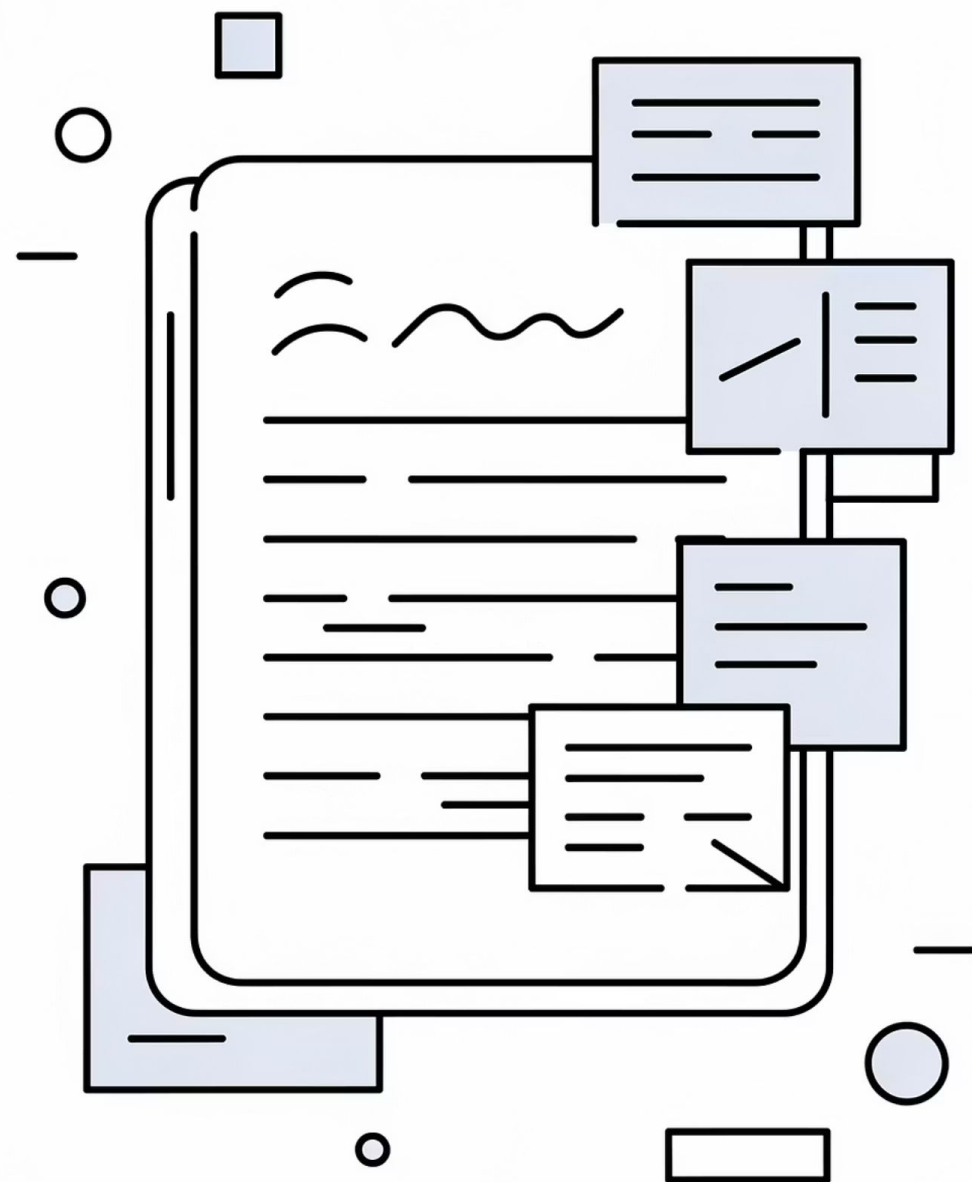
The team tested potential prototype solutions with chronically absent young people to see what might have promise.



The Learnings

Distilling the expertise of chronically absent young people





MYTHS We Encountered and Dispelled During the Process

Through deep conversations with young people, we uncovered a reality different from assumptions our team brought to the work.

The following slides reveal truths that challenge conventional thinking about **chronic absenteeism**.



MYTH: Being Absent is Cool



We mistakenly assumed that kids might be proud of missing school, perhaps reinforcing the **"too cool for school"** mythology. However, our interviews revealed a starkly different reality.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

"I need to graduate."

"I feel like if you don't graduate, that's a bad look on you."

"Everyone should graduate."

"It's embarrassing to not even graduate from high school."

"At a minimum, you do high school."

These young people were clear: they felt **deep shame** around not showing up and viewed education as their **only ticket to advancement**.



MYTH: Young People Are Lazy

Our research with chronically absent youth revealed a drive to succeed that directly contradicts "lazy" stereotypes. **The young people we met can and did work hard when they wanted to.**



THE REALITY OF ENGAGEMENT

- **Summer School:** Students made personal decisions to accelerate through material to complete subjects as quickly as possible.
- **Vocational Programs:** Programs like **Project Lead the Way** saw students showing up every day with "immense pride."

"I did the program... They pay you like \$200 for 10 weeks. You get certificates."

INTERVIEWER: How was your attendance during that time?

"It was good... Do you want to see my certificate? I got an electrical engineering one... Here's the card."

"I had summer school... I passed the class in two days (science, reading, and government) in summer school."

The data is clear: When the value proposition aligns with student goals, students show up.



Key Learnings

From Our Empathy Work with Ohio's Youth

Beyond dispelling several myths, our human-centered research uncovered **deep systemic patterns** that drive chronic absenteeism.

These insights reveal the true complexity of why students miss school and point toward actionable, **meaningful solutions** that could be adopted.



Reasons We Heard About Why Young People Do Not Show Up



Logistical Barriers

Transportation challenges, need to make money, security concerns, and sleep issues create concrete obstacles.



Value Proposition

Students constantly weigh whether school provides enough value to overcome daily barriers.



Fixed Mindsets

All-or-nothing thinking, lack of choice, and absence of curiosity about learning compound challenges.

Critical Insight: When explaining absences, young people offered reasons that related to all three of these categories. Usually the categories were intertwined in the rationale for absence. The reasons for not showing seem bound together, **thus in addressing them, it would be useful to consider all of them simultaneously.**



Logistical Barriers

Young people feel they are being asked to overcome *too many* barriers to attend school five days a week.



Transportation

"The bus comes at 6:20AM. If I miss it, I'm screwed. My mom can't drive me. I just don't go."



Need to Make Money

"I can't be going to school every day. Sometimes I have to make money during the day."



Security

"Sometimes it's best not to show up at school. Too much popping off. You can't leave."



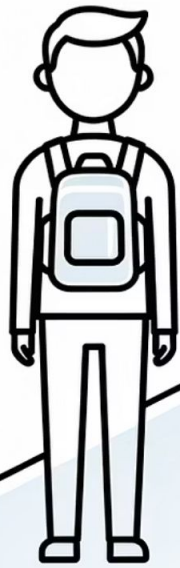
Sleep

"I stay up until the am's playing the game and then can't wake up for the bus."

Policy Insight: These barriers are interconnected. For Columbus youth, they shape a **daily calculation** of whether attending school is feasible that day or not.



Value Proposition



"Everything I know I learned in elementary school."

"They make me do 7 periods a day. It's too much. **They should be paying me.**"

"Why do we even need to know about September 11?"

"They don't teach me how to buy house or do taxes."

Young People Are Constantly Considering:

Do I get enough out of school that it's worth overcoming the barriers every day?

The **carrots** (diploma, socialization, learning) and the **sticks** (suspension, summer school) that have historically been part of schooling no longer seem as compelling.

The Challenge:

The value proposition of attending school has to be high enough to inspire young people to overcome the weight of the barriers they face in getting to school every class, every day.



Fixed Mindsets: The All-or-Nothing Mentality

Students often feel that once they slip, there is no path back—creating a cycle of **disengagement**.



Point of No Return

"Once I started missing, I knew I couldn't come back that quarter. Why even try?"

"There's no way to get back on track once you lose too much."



The Sunk Cost

"And then when I'm late, what's the point?"

"I figure I'll just lock in next year."



Perceived Futility

"Once I got behind there was no way to catch up. My parents told me I could. I didn't believe it."

Educational Insight for Leadership:

Once students fall behind, attendance can feel psychologically and academically unrecoverable. We heard chronic absenteeism was often driven less by refusal to attend than by students' belief that they could no longer catch up. This made us wonder about needing recovery-oriented attendance strategies, not just compliance incentives.



Moving into Solutions

Leveraging lived experience to create potential solutions



Four Pillars of Student-Centered Design

Students brainstormed solutions that all stemmed from these design principles



Do NOT Reinforce Shame

Creating supportive environments that move away from punitive measures and stigma



Break the "All or Nothing" Mindset

Shifting focus from perfection to progress, allowing for recovery and continuous engagement



Make School Feel Worth It

Ensuring immediate value and relevance of education in the lives of students



Build in Choice and Dignity

Empowering students with flexibility and respect, honoring their agency and humanity

"I'm 17. I shouldn't have to ask to go to the bathroom."



From Learning to Action: Prototype Solutions



Drop-In School

Creating flexible, welcoming spaces where learning is accessible and immediate, making education an inviting choice for every student.

(School at the Library)



Guidance Counselor on Location

Bringing support directly to students, offering guidance counselor appointments and fostering connections right where they are.

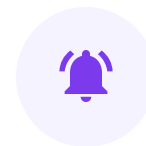
(Guidance Counselor at the Rec Center)



Reimagining the Bare Minimum

Redefining essential learning experiences to ignite curiosity and expect something more of students.

(What if the “bare minimum” was higher?)



Small Habit Reminder

Implementing gentle nudges and positive reinforcements at all hours to cultivate consistent engagement.

(Coach sends “go to bed” video message)





Thank you!

Questions? Please reach out to *Heather Tsavaris*

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