WHY DO DETROIT STUDENTS MISS SCHOOL?

IMPLICATIONS FOR RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER COVID-19

DETROIT EDUCATION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

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OUR THANKS TO

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 collect, interpret, and disseminate that information to the audiences that need it most. Learn more about our work and provide your input at https://education.wayne.edu/detroit-education-research-partnership.

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WHY DO DETROIT STUDENTS MISS SCHOOL? IMPLICATIONS FOR RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER COVID-19

Even before the pandemic, more than half of Detroit students were considered "chronically absent," missing 10% or more of the school year. During the pandemic, attendance has gotten even worse on average, as students struggled with new and continuing barriers to engagement. How can we ensure that Detroit students, who have experienced one of the most personally and collectively challenging years in generations, can attend school regularly enough to access the education they deserve? This study draws on in-depth interviews with Detroit parents and high school students, along with observations and interviews with Detroit school staff and analysis of attendance trends, to outline the major causes of student absenteeism in Detroit, the challenges school systems have in addressing these causes on their own, and the implications for policy and practice at the school, community, city, and state levels, as students move back to in-person schooling.

Major Findings

- Transportation was by far the most frequent and pervasive barrier to attendance that we heard from families. Yet, issues with getting to school were more complex than immediate access to transportation. They emerged from a combination of unreliable or inconsistent availability of transportation, weak social networks, parents' work schedules, unsafe conditions, and more.

- Health issues, acute and chronic physical health issues in particular, but also mental health and parent health issues, created barriers to attendance.

- Parents expressed a strong understanding that missing school jeopardized students' learning, and they went to great lengths to get their children to school. Parents also weighed serious trade-offs between attendance, safety, health, and family income, reflecting the unjust conditions they face.

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Key Recommendations

- Detroit school and civic leaders must develop new, system-wide solutions for school transportation to ensure that students can access the public education they deserve, including immediately advocating for more resources to maintain health and safety protocols on school and public transportation, developing creative solutions for back-up transportation, and aligning school transportation with other efforts to strengthen neighborhood vitality in Detroit.

- Detroit school leaders should provide clear guidance to families about health and school attendance, advocate for resources to ensure that schools are safe when students and staff return to in-person learning, and proactively establish contingency plans for when in-person learning is not safe.

- School and community attendance initiatives should prioritize *support* more than *accountability*. Cross-sector partnerships should be developed and strengthened to remove barriers to attendance and strengthen the conditions for student attendance at every level of Detroit's educational ecosystem.

WHY DO DETROIT STUDENTS MISS SCHOOL? IMPLICATIONS FOR RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER COVID-19

As we look toward the 2021-22 school year, the stakes for student attendance are higher than they have ever been. Most U.S. students had their schooling significantly disrupted over the last year. Many school districts moved to online learning in March 2020, and some have stayed online through the 2020-21 school year. Others started in person in fall 2020, only to move online for weeks or months at a time when school outbreaks or community spread made in-person gatherings risky for contracting COVID-19. Most of Detroit's traditional public and charter school students have not entered a school building since March 10, 2020. Detroit was hard-hit by the novel coronavirus in April 2020. Since then, 100,000 Wayne County residents have contracted the coronavirus, and nearly 4,000 have died ("Michigan Coronavirus Map and Case Count," 2020). These devastating numbers are likely to get worse before fall 2021. Progress on COVID-19 vaccinations and stronger evidence on protective measures like masks and social distancing offer hope for a return to in-person schooling for the 2021-22 school year or earlier, but there are significant questions about whether Detroit students will be able to access the schooling they need and deserve when that time comes.

Even before the pandemic, more than half of Detroit students were considered "chronically absent," missing 10% or more of the school year. During the pandemic, attendance has gotten even worse on average, as students struggled with new and continuing barriers to engagement (Korman et al., 2020). Emerging evidence from national studies suggest that many students will need extra support in the coming school years to ensure that they meet academic expectations for high school graduation and college enrollment (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). How can we ensure that Detroit students, who have experienced one of the most personally and collectively challenging years in

generations, can attend school regularly enough to access the education they deserve? Where do we go from here?

This study seeks answers for the future by looking to our recent past. High rates of absenteeism in cities like Detroit are driven by out-of-school challenges that emerge in high-poverty contexts, from greater constraints on family resources and time, to less reliable access to transportation and less safe neighborhood and school contexts, to more pervasive physical and mental health issues (Balfanz & Chang, 2016). For any given student, the combination of personal, family, out-of-school, and in-school factors that shape their attendance patterns may vary. Broadly speaking, however, the ecological conditions that emerge from the inequality of racial poverty in urban districts helps explain why so many students miss so much school in Detroit (Singer et al., 2019). Understanding how parents and students experience chronic absenteeism—the barriers they face and their attitudes and dispositions toward school attendance—can help schools and districts effectively allocate their resources and identify what issues they can resolve and where there is a need for community partnerships and broader policy change.

In this report, we present findings about the reasons that students miss school in Detroit, from interviews during the 2019-20 school year. We interviewed 38 parents or guardians with students in seven elementary-middle and high schools in the Detroit Public schools Community District (DPSCD). About one quarter of the parents had children who were not chronically absent that year, and the rest had children who were moderately or severely chronically absent. We also interviewed 29 high school students from five high schools, about a third of whom were children of parents we interviewed in the first round and two-thirds of whom were new participants. About a third of those high school students were not chronically absent, and the rest were moderately or severely chronically absent.[1]

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[1] Moderately chronically absent means that students missed between 10% and 20% of school days. Severely chronically absent means that students missed 20% or more school days.

We found that out-of-school barriers, especially related to getting to school and also related to health, were the biggest drivers of chronic absenteeism. These issues were so pervasive that they were cited as challenges for families even when their children were not chronically absent. We understood the impact of these issues ecologically: they emerged from and acted as barriers to attendance as a result of an interconnected set of issues, as shown in the theory of the problem of absenteeism on page nine. We also found that parents and students cared about good attendance, and drew extensively on social and familial resources to get to school when they faced barriers.

When in-person schooling commences, parents and students will be eager to return. The health and economic impacts of the novel coronavirus pandemic, however, have likely exacerbated barriers to regular attendance that students face. Schools and districts may need to offer extra support and resources for families so that they can return to school with the regular attendance needed to make the most of the first post-pandemic school year.
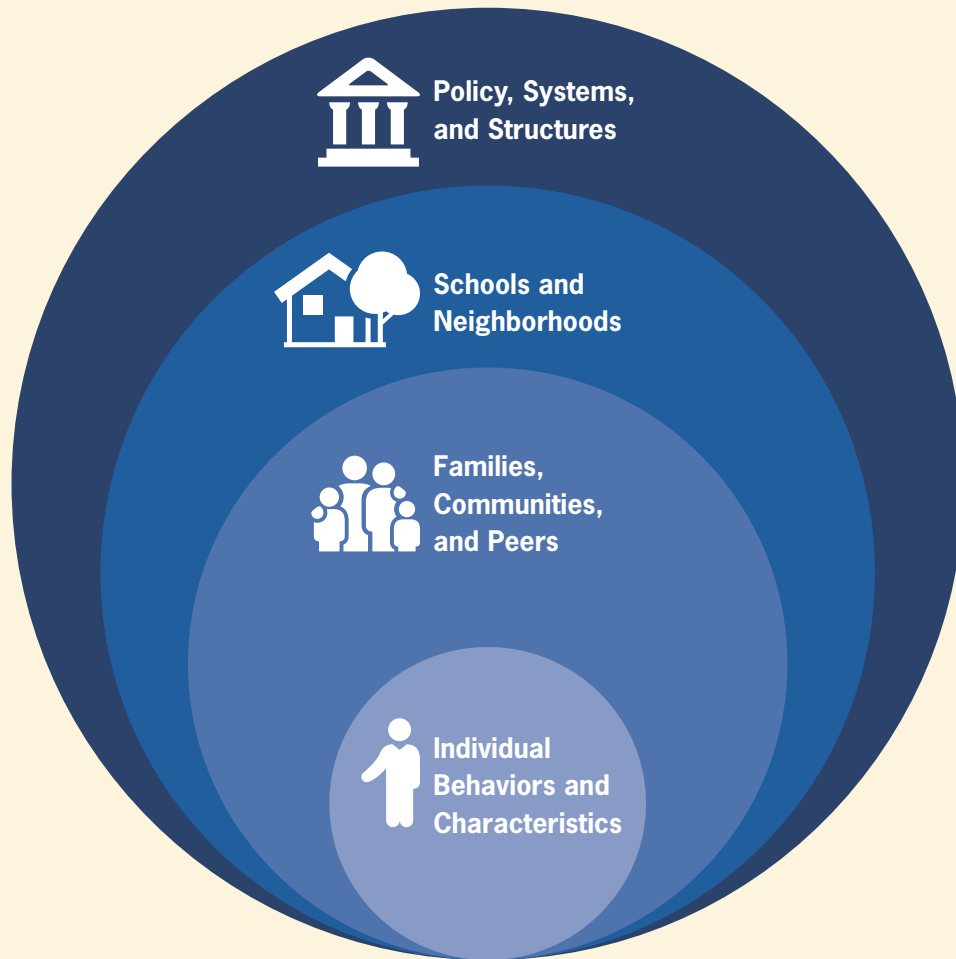
BARRIERS TO ATTENDANCE

Transportation was the most frequent and pervasive barrier to attendance cited by families. Yet, issues with getting to school were more complex than immediate access to transportation. They emerged from a combination of unreliable or inconsistent availability of transportation, weak social networks, parents' work schedules, unsafe conditions, and more. Health issues, acute and chronic physical health issues in particular, but also mental health and parent health issues, also created barriers to attendance. School-based issues like student-teacher relationships, unengaging instruction, classroom or school policies, and student conflicts and safety created additional barriers to attendance. Our focus, however, is on issues with getting to school and health because they were more prominent in our data and are likely to be exacerbated by the public health and economic issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Below, we describe what we heard from parents and students about why they missed school, or why it was sometimes difficult to get to school.

Theory of the Problem of Absenteeism

Policy, Systems, and Structures

Schools and Neighborhoods

Families, Communities, and Peers

Individual Behaviors and Characteristics

- Absenteeism is an ecological problem, with multiple interacting and dynamic factors that contribute to whether preK-12 students are present and engaged in school.
- Chronic absenteeism is both a proxy indicator for youth, family, and community wellness and a contributing factor to future youth success in school.
- This means that how frequently Detroit children attend school tells us important information about how well their families and communities are doing. It also points toward what schools and communities may need to do to support them.

Getting to School

Even though all the families we spoke to had a regular way to get their children to school, transportation was cited as a major barrier for most of them, and it was the most frequently requested resource when we asked parents what would help them with their child's attendance. For chronically absent students, however, transportation was frequently cited by parents as a key barrier to attendance, usually because there were problems with the regular way they got their children to school. For instance, some parents did not own a car or said that their car was unreliable or broke down frequently, that they sometimes did not have money for gas or car repairs, or that the city bus was late or unsafe. Parents discussed the hardship of not having access to other transportation options when the household car was not working. Some expressed frustration that a school bus was not available–most students in K-8 were not eligible for school-based transportation due to eligibility rules (Singer et al., 2020). Parents also often felt that public transportation or walking were not safe options for their children, for reasons such as neighborhood crime, inclement weather in the winter, or being too young to take public transit or navigate it alone.

Disruptions to families' regular routines created new barriers to school attendance. Parents we spoke to regularly drove their children to school and some relied on a school or public bus, but when parents' availability changed due to sudden illness or unexpected work commitments, they sometimes struggled to find backup transportation. For parents whose children were chronically absent, a lack of social support often left them with limited transportation options when their routines were disrupted and they had to find backup transportation to get their children to or from school. Many families relied on themselves or a single other person to get their children to and from school. One parent explained the challenge of finding back-up transportation with limited social resources: "If I wasn't able to take her then that'll be a challenge to pretty much get her to school because I don't have a lot of

people, or pretty much nobody to rely on to be able to take her to school if I'm not able." Other parents described how their children took the bus most days, but if they were running behind in the morning and missed the school bus, there were sometimes no alternative ways to get to school because they did not own a car and did not have friends or family members who could drive their children to school. When students missed the bus or had issues with their car or schedule, parents looked for alternative ways and sometimes paid for cabs or ride shares if they could afford it.

Implications for the Return to School

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate challenges with getting to school in four ways.

1. Prior to the pandemic, more than a third of Detroit families did not own a car (Gerbert et al., 2017) and most lived too far from school to walk. Rising unemployment and greater financial insecurity in Detroit during the pandemic (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2020a, 2020b) means that **families will have fewer resources to get to school** (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2020b). Families may be more likely to lack the economic resources needed for transportation, or more likely to face difficult trade-offs between using money on getting to school versus other household necessities.

2. **Families' social and familial networks may be less reliable for getting to school** than before the pandemic. Ongoing social distancing may mean that parents cannot turn to a family member or friend that they previously relied on for primary or backup transportation. Likewise, increased financial insecurity may mean that family members and friends will not have the same means to help out, even if they are willing or able to do so.

3. The economic effects on school districts will likely mean **there are fewer resources for school transportation**. Even before the pandemic, most Detroit students did not have access to school-provided transportation (Singer et al., 2020). The budgets of public transportation systems and school districts have been stressed by a combination of sharp decreases in ridership and state and city revenues (Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020; Spangler, 2020; Turner, 2020). To deal with budget shortfalls, the city and schools may be tempted to cut back on already-expensive transportation services.

4. Families may have **new safety and health concerns regarding mass transit**. Even if most adults are vaccinated by September 2021, most children will likely not be vaccinated against the coronavirus until early 2022. Families may feel uncomfortable or unsafe with their children riding crowded buses until there is a pediatric vaccine. As parents weigh safety and health concerns, they may seek out alternative modes of transportation for their children, even if they are less reliable; or decide to keep their children home instead of using public transportation as a back-up.

Given the transportation barriers students faced prior to the pandemic, and these exacerbating conditions, Detroit school and civic leaders must develop new, system-wide solutions for school transportation to ensure that students can access the public education they deserve. We have organized these possible solutions into immediate, short, and long-term recommendations.

Recommendations

IMMEDIATE: Advocate for transportation and health resources, and maintain health and safety protocols on school and public transportation. Providing more transportation options during an economic downturn will not be easy, but not doing so will ensure that many students will not be able to get back in school in person even

after the pandemic wanes. There must be state and local investment in a transportation infrastructure that serves students equitably and well, including the health protocols that will keep children safe from COVID-19 until there is a pediatric vaccine.

SHORT-TERM: Develop creative solutions for back-up school transportation. Given the unreliability of personal and public transit in Detroit, school, community, and governmental entities should partner to use existing and new resources (e.g., vans, car pools) to fill in the gaps when students cannot get to school.

MEDIUM-TERM: Align with other efforts in Detroit to strengthen neighborhood vitality to ensure that students can enroll in a public school close to home, and invest in building back neighborhood school enrollment. The few families we spoke to who lived within walking distance to school cited that as a key resource for getting to school, saying that it meant not having to worry about arranging transportation, and students could still get to school even if there were disruptions to their routines, such as changes to work schedules. Research also suggests that "community schools" that serve as hubs for social service resources for students and their families are linked to improved attendance (ICF International, 2010; Johnston et al., 2020; Oakes et al., 2017).

LONG-TERM: Provide access to school transportation for all students who need it. Detroit's current system of school choice, in which any student can enroll in almost any public school in the city, regardless of attendance zones, requires a system-wide transportation infrastructure to ensure equitable access to educational opportunity. Without this, only students whose families have the means will be able to enroll in any school of their choosing. Other families will be limited to those they can physically get to on a regular basis.

Health

Health is an issue for all families, and getting sick is a reason that just about every student has missed school. All the families that we interviewed recalled instances that their children missed school due to a specific illness (e.g., a cold, the flu, or a virus) or symptoms (e.g., coughing, a fever, or a runny or stuffy nose). For chronically absent students, illnesses were not the only reason that they missed school, but they added a substantial number of days on top of other reasons that students were absent. In addition, when students have chronic health issues (e.g., diabetes, severe asthma, or allergies) that are under-treated or very severe, they are the main driver of chronic absence. Health-related absences are exacerbated by issues with health care access, such as limited access to transportation, inaffordability of medical care, the need for frequent or recurring appointments, or appointments that can only be scheduled during school hours.

We directly asked the parents who we interviewed about their criteria for keeping kids home when they are sick, because a common concern about attendance and health is that parents choose to keep their children home for health reasons when students are in fact not too sick to go to school (Attendance Works, n.d.). In almost all cases, families explained a criteria for keeping their children home based on clear indicators of sickness, such as excessive coughing, fevers, runny or stuffy noses, throwing up, or behavior that was uncharacteristic of the student (in terms of seeming sick), reflecting a salient concern for their children's well-being. Importantly, several parents referenced the health of other students, and the fact that their children could spread their sickness to others, as part of their decision-making.

Students' physical health was not the only health issue. Mental health affected students' attendance as well. Parents linked mental health issues to family tragedies (e.g., the loss of a family member), and students mentioned dealing with past trauma, coping with anger or depression, or currently having conflicts with their peers as reasons why they might miss school. As with physical health issues, some students had mental health care sessions that were frequent and could not be scheduled outside of school hours. Parents' health issues also affected their children's attendance, primarily because when parents were sick, it sometimes meant that they were not able to get their children to school. Examples we heard included parents receiving treatment for or recovering from injuries or illness (e.g., cancer or broken bones), and chronic conditions (e.g., back pain, arthritis) that made mobility difficult.

Implications for the Return to School

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate challenges with health for two reasons.

1. Because they expressed concern for the health of their children and classmates before the pandemic, **families may be more likely to keep**

their children home if they appear sick or if they are concerned about sicknesses. Families may also exhibit extra-cautious behaviors if they have had family members contract COVID-19 (Lenhoff et al., 2020); or if they are skeptical about the efficacy of a COVID-19 vaccine, perceive others as unwilling to take the vaccine, or refuse to take the vaccine themselves (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2020c).

2. **There may be greater mental health or physical health issues that students and parents are now facing.** For mental health, with schools closed and medical centers focused on addressing COVID-19 illnesses, many students may have lost access to community or school-based counseling or social work support on which they usually rely. Lockdowns and social distancing may have created new stressors and a greater sense of social isolation for students; and deaths from COVID-19 in the family or social networks may have created additional trauma (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2020d). For physical health, parents and students alike may have missed out on important treatments for new or ongoing health problems. This may be due to limited healthcare capacity, a typical reliance on school-based health services (such as for vision and dental care), or delayed treatments due to concerns about contracting COVID-19 (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2020d).

Recommendations

> **IMMEDIATE:** **Provide clear guidance to families about health and school attendance.** School districts should develop accessible health protocols to help families make decisions about when to keep their children home, along with regular updates from the school system on COVID-19 outbreaks, precautionary measures, and other health information.

> **IMMEDIATE:** **Protect students and staff when they return to school.** The state, local districts, and community organizations should invest in

personal protective equipment (e.g., masks, face shields), hand sanitizer and soap, adequate ventilation, and other resources to ensure that students and staff can protect themselves from illness when they return to school in person.

MEDIUM-TERM: Proactively establish contingency plans for when in-person learning is not possible. School districts should synthesize what they have learned over the last year to proactively develop a viable distance learning option for when students cannot come to school in person, including for those students with chronic health conditions that keep them home more often than others.

MEDIUM-TERM: School schedules should promote student and staff health. Districts should prioritize scheduling that promotes physical and mental health, including physical education, safe spaces for students to manage mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, trauma), and opportunities for artistic expression.

LONG-TERM: Invest in community schools. Schools that holistically serve students and families, with integrated health and school services, can address environmental, housing, and school building condition issues that contribute to lack of healthiness.

Dispositions Toward Attendance

Parents expressed an understanding that missing school was an issue because it jeopardized students' learning and a desire to instill in their children a view that school was important and that they should not make excuses to stay home. Reflective of that commitment to education, parents reported drawing from a variety of resources, especially social and familial networks, and going to great lengths to get their children to school. As discussed above, parents turned to grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and friends to arrange transportation for their children when they had no means of transportation or had conflicts due to work or personal issues. Some parents adjusted their work arrangements or made demands of their employers to accommodate their students' schedules. That said, parents also faced and weighed serious trade-offs with their children's safety and health and their family income when they were unable to bring children to school or decided to keep them home, reflecting a holistic concern for their children's and family's well-being. The fact that decisions about well-being often required a trade-off with attending school reflect the unjust conditions they face–conditions that may demand even more trade-offs in light of the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Given the strong commitment we heard from parents and students, attendance initiatives should seek to acknowledge and honor that commitment.

Recommendations

IMMEDIATE: **School and community attendance initiatives should prioritize *support* more than *accountability*.** Our research suggests that families do not need to be held accountable for their children's school attendance. Parents want their children to be in school, and they clearly understand the negative effects of missing school. Instead of organizing initiatives around informing parents or penalizing them when their children miss school, school and community efforts should seek to identify what barriers students face in getting to school and proactively remove those barriers.

SHORT-TERM: Cross-sector partnerships should be developed and strengthened to remove barriers to attendance. The structural conditions in Detroit make school attendance incredibly challenging for some families. School staff can only do so much on their own. City and state leaders and community-based organizations should strategize with schools to develop new models for supporting families and breaking down those structural barriers.

LONG-TERM: Major investment in conditions for strong attendance. Despite parents' strong desire for their children to attend school regularly, they made difficult trade-offs, weighing their child's attendance with their concerns about safety, employment, housing, and childcare needs. The state and federal governments must invest more in families to eliminate these difficult trade-offs.
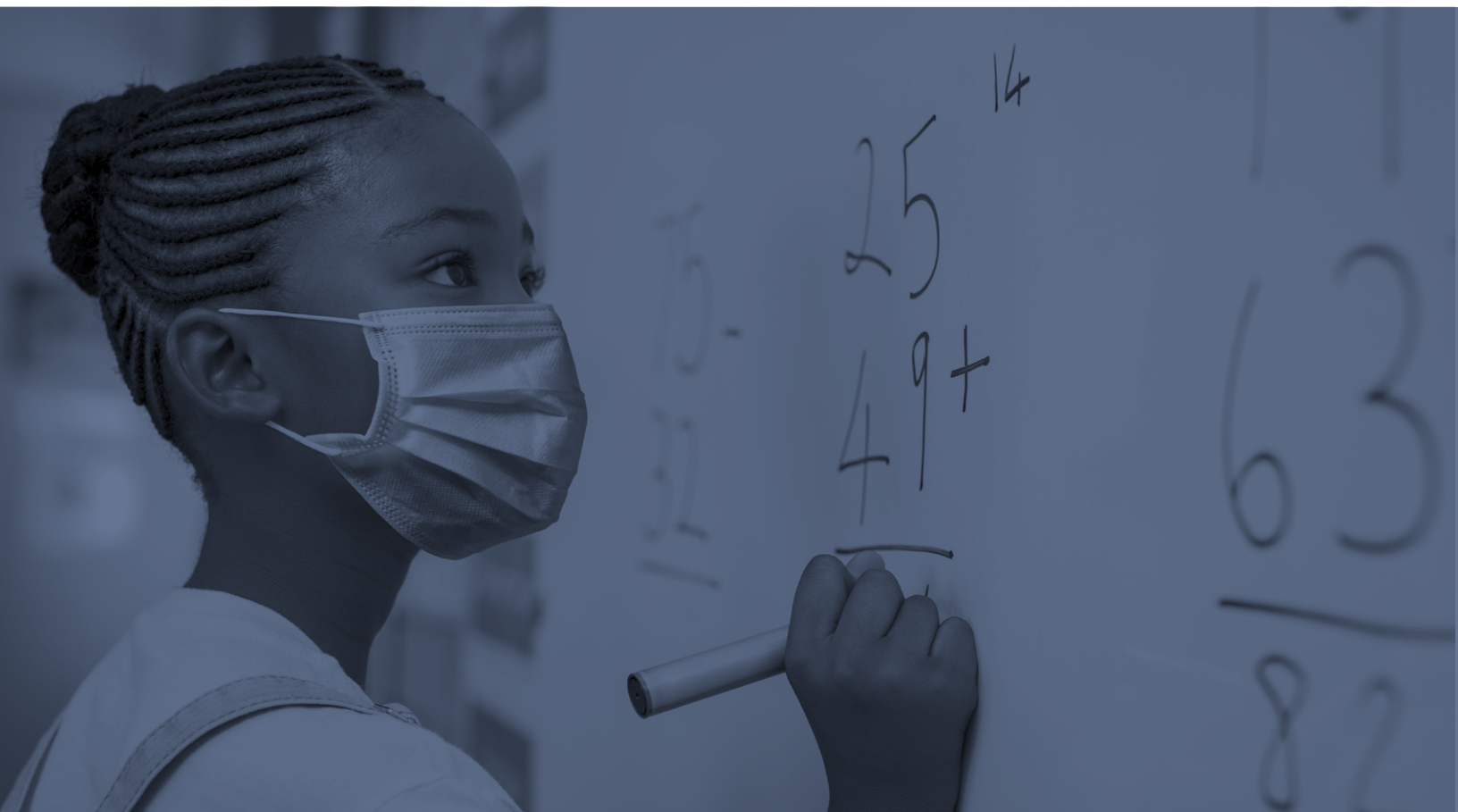
CONCLUSION

Parents are likely eager for in-person schooling to return because of concerns about the quality of distance learning and the time and effort burdens of overseeing it. Students are likely eager to spend less time on computers and more time in-person with friends and their school communities. Still, the challenging barriers to attendance they faced before the pandemic are likely to be even greater in its wake. Schools and districts will need to work hard to understand how things have changed for families, including whether they face new socioeconomic challenges, if they have suffered loss in the family or struggled with stress or trauma, and what their ongoing health and safety concerns are. Right now, school and district leaders should invest in these relational and information-gathering efforts, in order to plan appropriately, coordinate with community organizations and social services providers, and together advocate for the necessary resources from the city and state to support an effective return in the fall.

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