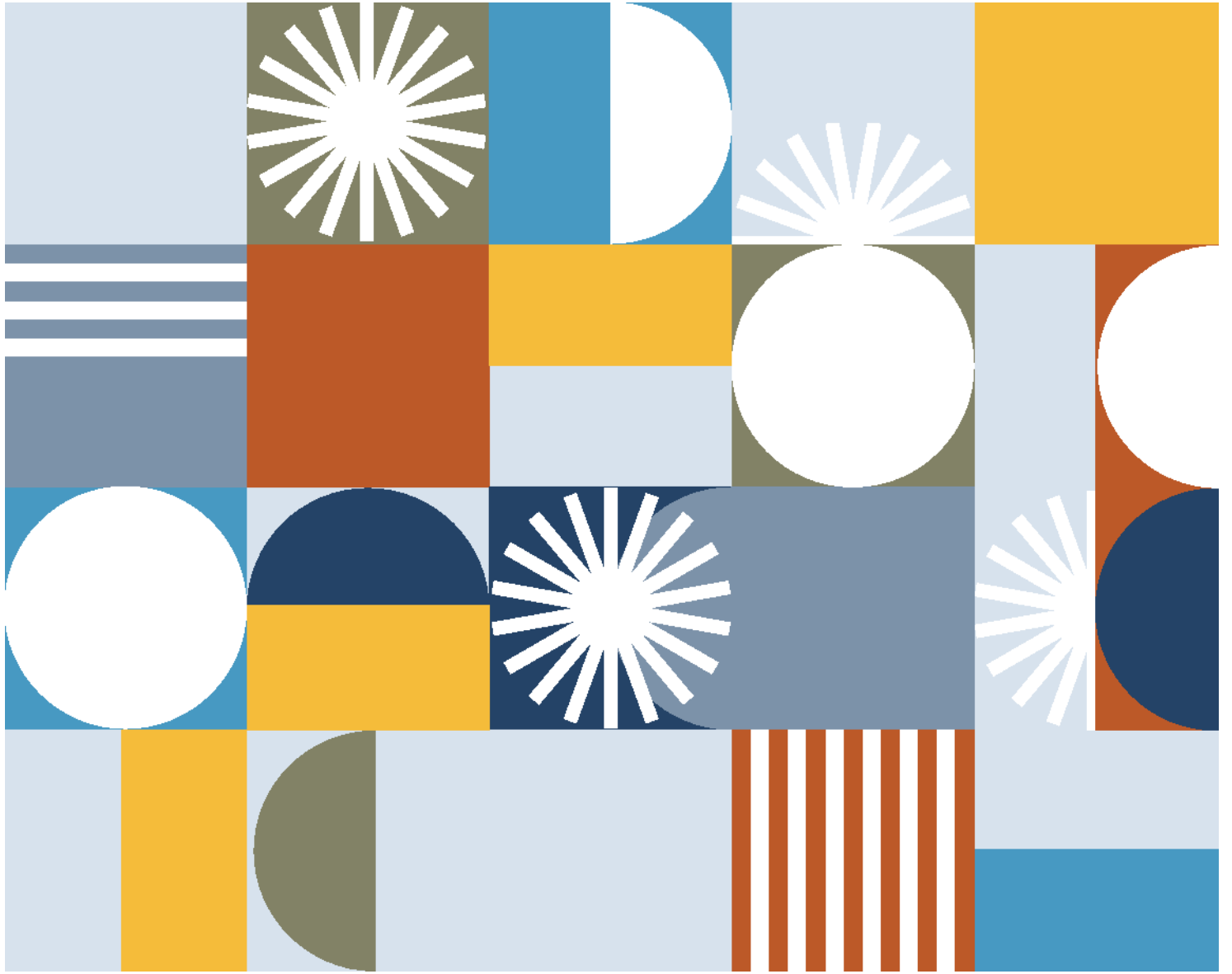


# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: A RESEARCH REVIEW



November 9, 2020

**Presented by the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES)**

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## INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving contracted with the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) to conduct a research review in support of its efforts to combat chronic school absenteeism in the greater Hartford area. CES began the work by identifying a framework for organizing the information that they expected their research review to yield. During the late spring and summer of 2020, CES conducted the following research:

- An analysis of available information from scholarly and community sources (Literature Review)
- Key informant interviews with leaders of 14 nonprofit and government organizations that work with young people and families in the Hartford area (Practitioner Review)
- An analysis of the Hartford Foundation investments made in 2019 (Investments Inventory)

The essential questions we explored included:

- Based on current regional and national research and expertise, what are the key community, individual, and household factors that keep young people out of school?
- What are examples of successful interventions outside of the school system that support greater engagement with education?
- What do community leaders believe are the most important community-level supports for educational engagement? What are their suggestions for how the Hartford Foundation can use its resources to enhance educational engagement in the greater Hartford area?
- What funding streams currently or recently provided by the Hartford Foundation are directed toward community, family, or individual interventions that will support greater engagement with education?
- How can the Hartford Foundation position its future grantmaking to support educational engagement among students in the greater Hartford area?

Appendix A describes the methodology used for each of these three research components, and appendices B, C, and D contain summaries of key findings from each. This summary report presents a synthesis of learnings from the components above, along with strategic recommendations for future grantmaking as well as community engagement.

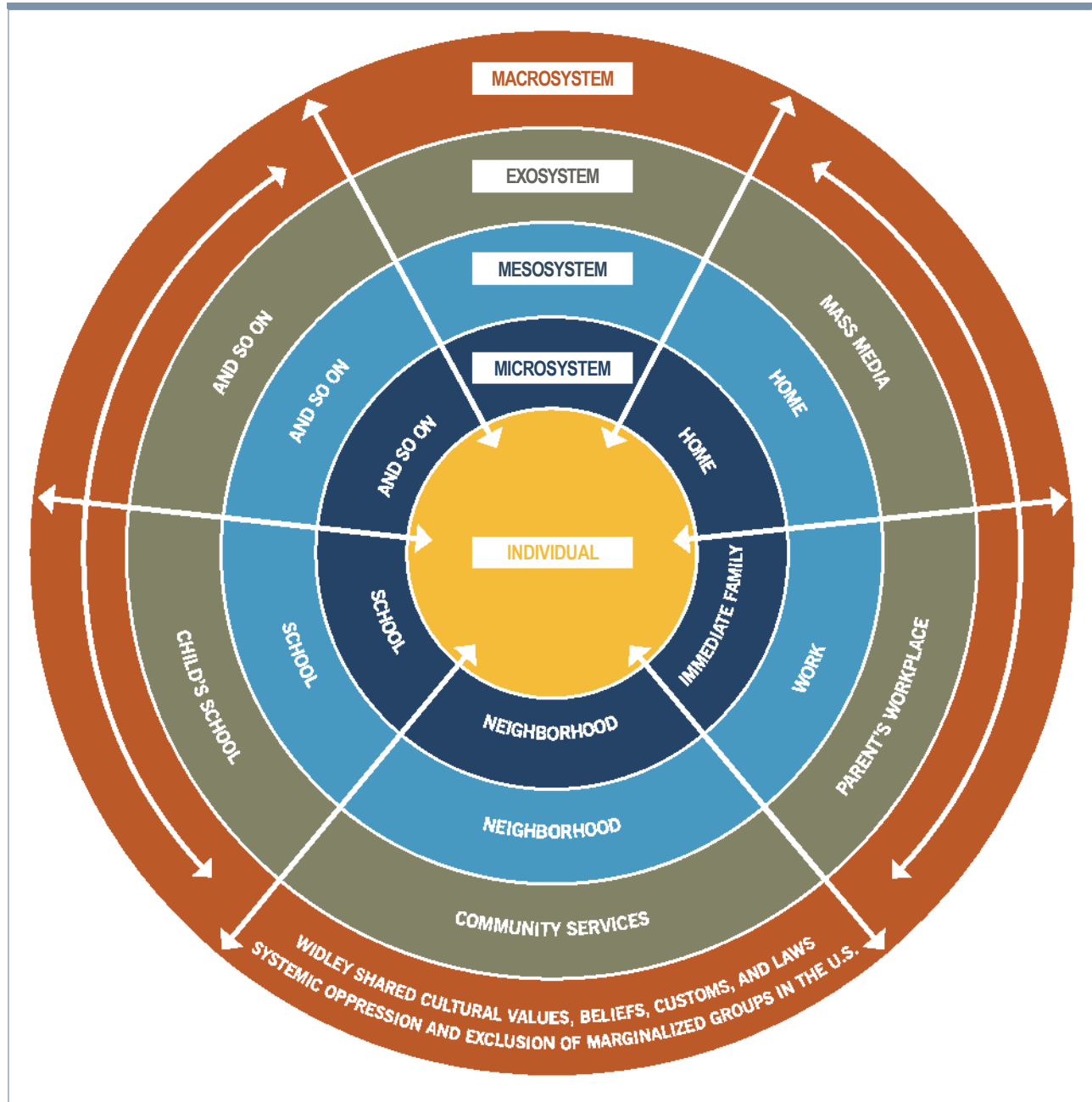
The framework we selected for the research review was Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development,<sup>1</sup> which has been applied as a frame to understand chronic absenteeism and other social issues. As we began to review the literature, it became clear that students are often chronically absent due to multiple contributing factors in a student's environment and that absenteeism increases significantly once families are confronted with three or more risks - often families living in poverty, from a racial/ethnic minority group, or in poor health.

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1 Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <http://doi.org.silk.library.umass.edu/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114>

This was later confirmed by conversations we had as part of our practitioner review. We found that Bronfenbrenner’s model allows a comprehensive picture of the complex relational contexts and systems (ecologies) in which students and families are embedded. It helps us account for structural inequities that influence absenteeism, rather than emphasizing individual actions or choices.

FIGURE 1: BRONFENBRENNER’S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY <sup>2</sup>



The literature review, Appendix B, contains a more complete description of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development and how it relates to our analysis of chronic absenteeism.

<sup>2</sup> [https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Bioecological\\_model](https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Bioecological_model)

## KEY FINDINGS

### ***Based on current regional and national research and expertise, what are the key community, individual, and household factors that keep young people out of school?***

Our literature review and our interviews with practitioners have indicated that the key drivers of chronic absenteeism include:

- Physical and mental health challenges
- Poverty and associated challenges, such as food insecurity, homelessness, and lack of transportation
- A disconnect between school culture and family needs that leads to a lack of engagement with schooling

Our full report explores these drivers in more detail, putting these drivers in the context of the Bronfenbrenner model.

### ***What are examples of successful interventions outside of the school system that support greater engagement with education?***

Our literature review describes many interventions outside of the school system that have been found to support greater engagement with education. Some examples of programs that have impacted school attendance have included increased access to health care, access to center-based care for pre-kindergarten children, access to transportation, and mentoring programs. See Appendix B for more details about these programs.

### ***What do community leaders believe are the most important community-level supports for educational engagement? What are their suggestions for how the Hartford Foundation can use its resources to enhance educational engagement in the greater Hartford area?***

Community leaders most frequently mentioned:

- The importance of working with families to support school engagement and attendance
- The need for community organizations to build relationships with schools
- The importance of offering integrated supports to young people and families, along with a vision of organizations partnering to offer many different services to students at a variety of ages

In addition, several practitioners suggested developing a coordinated messaging campaign promoting the value of attending and completing school, perhaps with young people involved as social influencers.

Suggestions for ways in which Foundation could support this work included additional funding as well as capacity-building support for organizations.

### ***What funding streams currently or recently provided by the Hartford Foundation are directed toward community, family, or individual interventions that will support greater engagement with education?***

In 2019, the Hartford Foundation directed 88% of its portfolio-based funding toward addressing direct or indirect drivers of chronic absenteeism, along with 52% of funding outside of outcomes portfolios (not including donor-directed grants and scholarships). A substantial portion of the Foundation's funding was directed toward family and school engagement (21% of the 2019 grantmaking portfolio) and material well-being (14% of the 2019 grantmaking portfolio). In addition, the Hartford Foundation supports organizations doing work in these areas with capacity-building grants that allow them to provide services more effectively.

***How can the Hartford Foundation position its future grantmaking to support educational engagement among students in the greater Hartford area?***

Our recommendations included:

- Increased investments in access to physical and mental health services
- Increased investments in capacity-building support to organizations that work to address drivers of chronic absenteeism
- Promoting cross-organization and collaboration among community organizations
- Engaging in conversations with state and regional leaders to rethink measures of educational engagement

## A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

We learned that a number of different terms have been used to describe student absence from school. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, each term has different connotations, definitions and use:

- **Chronic Absenteeism:** The conceptual distinction between ‘chronic absenteeism’ and ‘truancy’ is important because chronic absenteeism seeks to shift the focus away from compliance with school rules and punitive approaches (Jordan & Miller, 2017)<sup>3</sup> and onto the overall impact of missed school days. The term “chronic” indicates issues that are long-standing and that cannot be solved overnight. Many of the root causes and implications transcend the school walls (Torres-Rodriguez, 2018). ***This research review uses the term ‘chronic absenteeism’ because this is the term reflected in the most recent literature and shared across departments of education (including Connecticut) and national organizations highly active in this work*** (for eg. Attendance Works, Everyone Graduates Center, etc.). Chronic absenteeism was also the key search term used because searching for literature on “school participation” did not surface enough findings about school absence, particularly in the context of the United States (school participation is more commonly used as a term in research internationally).
- **Truancy:** While truancy is a common term used to describe school absences that appears widely in the early literature, the definition of truancy only counts unexcused absences. A truant is defined as a child with “4 unexcused absences from school in 30 calendar days or 10 unexcused absences in one school year” (CT.Gov., 2020b). While many programs that do absence prevention work continue to use the term truancy, the field has generally moved away from using this term because of its emphasis on rule compliance and association with punitive/legal solutions (Attendance works, n.d; Jordan & Miller, 2017). The Connecticut Department of Education emphasizes that ‘truancy’ is not interchangeable with ‘chronic absenteeism’ because the two terms describe different aspects of the absence problem and require different approaches (CT.Gov., 2020a). The word truant also has a number of negative connotations and is derived from the French word “truand” meaning beggar, parasite, lazy person, naughty child, or rogue (Haarman, 2012), and is used to describe illegal or illegitimate behavior.
- **School refusal:** There has also been a gradual recognition of a subset of children who are absent from school, but who do not fit the typical patterns or dynamics of truancy (Haarman, 2012). While there are significant overlaps between truancy and school refusal, school refusal is distinct because it is motivated by psychological and emotional distress or anxiety associated with being in school (Haarman, 2012).
- **Barriers to School Participation:** Barriers to school participation is not a common term used in the U.S.-based research (with a few exceptions, where the term has been used to describe the non-participation of students with disabilities in school, after school or community activities). This term, in and of itself, appears to highlight structural barriers rather than emphasizing student or family action/inaction. However, this is not widely shared as a conceptually meaningful term in the majority of the research literature.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B: Literature Review for full citations.



**WHAT ARE THE KEY COMMUNITY-LEVEL DRIVERS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?  
AND TO WHAT EXTENT ARE RECENT HARTFORD FOUNDATION FUNDING STREAMS DIRECTED TOWARD THESE DRIVERS?**

The charge given to CES was to focus the research review on community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism: that is, factors related to individuals, families, peers, communities, and social structures, but not related to what is happening at school. We did find, however, that people with whom we spoke as part of the practitioner review often mentioned school culture as an important driver of absenteeism, and so we have included some reflection on the importance of school culture here as well.

The key drivers that were noted in the literature and by regional practitioners are organized here according to their place within the Bronfenbrenner model. It should be noted that they are not organized by effect size:

- Because absenteeism, as noted above, is often caused by multiple factors, and scholarly literature concerning chronic absenteeism often examines only one type of intervention in each analysis of effectiveness, we found that it was not useful to our analysis to determine relative effect sizes.
- During our practitioner review, we asked people working at community organizations to note what they saw as the significant community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism. This section reflects their responses, but it should be noted that their perspectives were somewhat constrained by the type of services their organizations provide. This is another reason why we found a hierarchical list of the reasons for chronic absenteeism to be inappropriate. See Appendix C for a more detailed analysis of findings from the practitioner review.

The major factors that the literature review found to be associated with chronic absenteeism included challenges with:

- Physical Health (acute illness, asthma and oral health)
- Mental Health (mental and behavioral disorders)
- Material Well-being (poverty, homelessness, transportation)
- Learning and Engagement (disengagement, negative perceptions of school, academic/social struggles)

The drivers of chronic absenteeism most frequently mentioned by participants in our practitioner review included:

- Poverty
- Family engagement with and prioritization of education
- School culture and school engagement

We explored how these drivers play out at the various levels of the Bronfenbrenner bioecological theory of human development (see graphic on Page 2). These levels include:

- **INDIVIDUAL:** The individual or 'Person' forces describe the dispositions, bio-psychological attributes, and ascribed characteristics of individual students. While demographic factors are often included at this level, in the case of chronic absenteeism, we refer to them at the exo- and macrosystem levels to reflect their impact on absenteeism as a result of structural conditions, rather than individual characteristics.
- **MICROSYSTEM:** The microsystem refers to the contexts and relationships with which the student directly interacts, such as the school or the family.
- **MESOSYSTEM:** The mesosystem describes the linkages and processes between the microsystems, such as the connection between the school and family.
- **EXOSYSTEM:** The exosystem calls attention to systems and influences that impact students but in which the student may not directly belong, such as the economy, social services, and media.
- **MACROSYSTEM:** The macrosystem is the broadest in context and includes things such as cultural norms, and beliefs, societal values, and customs. It also includes systemic oppression and exclusion of marginalized groups in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

#### **SIGNIFICANT DRIVERS AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

**INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:** The dispositions, bio-psychological attributes, and ascribed characteristics of individual students

**PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH:** Findings from the literature review and the practitioner review identified children's health, including mental health, as a primary driver of chronic absenteeism. Health issues may be an acute illness, but could also be ongoing health issues such as asthma, which one study found accounts for one-third of all days of missed instruction. Oral health, including tooth decay, is another common health-related reason for missing school, as are behavioral health issues such as attention-deficit disorder.

Mental health issues are also a significant driver of chronic absenteeism. The literature review explores this in more depth, and multiple practitioners noted mental health issues as a factor in absenteeism. Two practitioners further noted that missing school for any reason can cause anxiety about the ability to catch up, which can then result in additional missed school if the anxiety is not addressed.

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<sup>4</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <http://doi.org.silk.library.umass.edu/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114>

**HARTFORD FOUNDATION INVESTMENTS TARGETING CHILDREN'S HEALTH:**

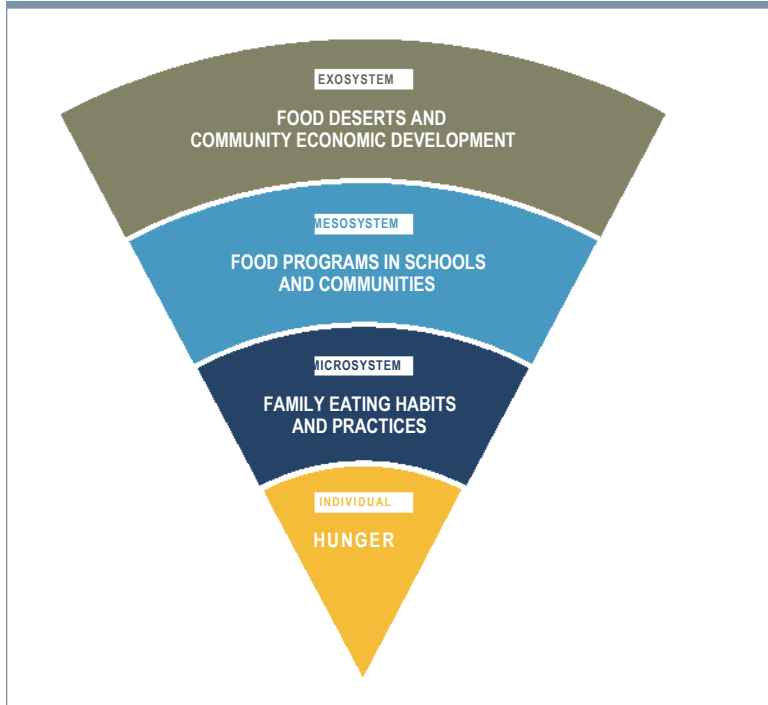
In 2019, Foundation made 11 grants toward organizations providing services related to children's health, totaling \$743,700, or 3% of the Foundation's grantmaking portfolio.<sup>5</sup> The largest grants supporting health services included:

- \$270,000 to the University of Connecticut Health Center, to support the Health Equity Advocacy Research (HEAR) program
- \$195,000 to Malta House of Care, to support a new mobile medical clinic
- \$150,000 to Hartford Behavioral Health, as transitional operating support following the loss of DCF funding
- \$55,000 to Hartford Behavioral Health, to support a neighborhood health and wellness center at Phillips Plaza

**OTHER INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DRIVERS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

The literature review explored how the lack of basic material needs plays out as a significant driver of chronic absenteeism at the individual, microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem levels. For example, Figure 2 demonstrates how food insecurity plays out at different levels of the bioecological framework.

**FIGURE 2: FOOD INSECURITY ACROSS THE BIOECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**



While we recognize that a lack of basic material needs plays out in different levels, we explore this area in detail in the section addressing exosystem-level drivers, below.

<sup>5</sup> Hartford Foundation awarded \$24,162,564.71 in grants during 2019.

## **SIGNIFICANT DRIVERS AT THE MICROSYSTEM LEVEL**

**MICROSYSTEM LEVEL:** The contexts and relationships with which the student directly interacts, such as the school or the family.

**FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:** Individuals with whom we spoke during the practitioner review often noted a disconnect and a lack of engagement between schools and families as a significant driver of chronic absenteeism. More specific examples included:

- Competing priorities and a focus on immediate needs resulting in less focus on regular school attendance as a priority
- Families' lived experiences not reflecting the value of education
- Fear, particularly by undocumented families but also shared by many other immigrant families, of exposure to immigration enforcement
- Lack of supervision and attention to older students' educational participation

**SCHOOL CULTURE:** While our conversations with community practitioners were intended to specifically address community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism, many of the people with whom we spoke talked about school culture as working against their efforts to increase student engagement and attendance. Areas of concern that they noted included:

- A lack of personal relationships between school personnel and students
- A lack of understanding among school personnel about youth development
- A lack of culturally competent teachers
- Student reports that the school feels like a prison - rules, uniforms, "people barking out orders at me"
- Limited time or no time for socializing and recess
- Schools' focus on accountability and evaluation - not on education
- A lack of connection to school and teachers exacerbated by virtual learning
- Older students who lack credits being placed in classes with younger students, which leads to disengagement
- Students don't see how what they're learning in school relates to their life
- Young people are sometimes in an adult role at home, but are treated like children in school

Literature around chronic absenteeism also noted the impact of school climate on students' mental health, which in turn impacts absenteeism.

#### HARTFORD FOUNDATION INVESTMENTS TARGETING BOTH FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL CULTURE:

The Hartford Foundation has made substantial and ongoing investments in two programs that directly address these two drivers: the **Community Schools program**, implemented in seven public schools in Hartford, and investments in seven **Alliance Districts** located in the Foundation's service area.

In 2019, the Hartford Foundation invested \$1,492,340 directly in the **Community Schools program**, and awarded an additional \$242,681 for the evaluation of the program, for a total of \$1,735,021 or 7% of Foundation's overall funding portfolio. Community Schools offer an integrated approach to service delivery, with schools and academic partners providing academic support, health and social services, and youth development and community development, to students and to their families. The Hartford Foundation was part of a partnership to bring Community Schools to Hartford in 2008, and has consistently supported the programs since their inception.

It should be noted here that the evaluation of the Community Schools program showed mixed results. Evaluators found that overall, students in Community Schools had more unexcused absences than students in the comparison group, especially among older students (there were some positive effects on absenteeism for younger students). In addition, evaluators were unable to confirm that Community Schools showed a positive impact on family engagement, primarily because of a lack of ability to measure this engagement across schools.

However, we are still including this work with the Hartford Foundation's investments in family engagement and school culture. While the evaluation report was not able to show conclusive effects on absenteeism, the goals of the program are to promote student and family engagement with education, and this funding stream therefore qualifies as addressing the chronic drivers of absenteeism. This model is also one that has been shown to have positive effects on student and family engagement in other communities.

**Alliance Districts** are a state-level designation of districts targeted for additional investments because of low accountability scores on state-established metrics. There are seven Alliance Districts in the Hartford Foundation's service area, in the towns and cities of Bloomfield, East Hartford, Hartford, Manchester, Vernon, Windsor, and Windsor Locks. These districts received a total of \$1,486,000 from the Hartford Foundation in 2019 (6% of Foundation's grantmaking portfolio) to implement programs related to family engagement, school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance.

**Additional Hartford Foundation investments targeting family engagement with schools:** In 2019, the Foundation made eight additional grants, outside of the Community Schools program and Alliance Districts, directly in support of family engagement with schools, and another three grants that supported organizational growth for agencies working toward increasing family engagement with schools. These grants totaled \$2,398,500, or 10% of Foundation's grantmaking portfolio. The largest grants targeting family engagement included:

- \$820,000 to support the network of six Hartford Family Centers
- \$307,000 to the Vernon Public Schools, for continued support for the family, school and community partnership
- \$270,000 to the Hartford Public Library, to support Boundless Library at Rawson
- \$210,000 to the East Hartford Public Schools, to support the Responsive School Systems for Student Success project

**Additional Hartford Foundation investments targeting student engagement with schools:** In 2019, the Foundation made nine additional grants, outside of the Community Schools program and Alliance Districts, directly in support of student engagement, and one grant for board development at Compass Youth

These grants totaled \$2,129,000, or 9% of the Foundation's grantmaking portfolio. The largest grants targeting student engagement with schools included:

- \$562,500 to Our Piece of the Pie, to support the Hartford Youth Service Corps
- \$270,000 to the Hartford Public Library, to support Boundless Library at Rawson
- \$220,000 to Capital Workforce Partners, to support the 2019 Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program
- \$210,000 to the East Hartford Public Schools, to support the Responsive School Systems for Student Success project

### **OTHER MICROSYSTEM-LEVEL DRIVERS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

The literature identified other microsystem-level drivers of chronic absenteeism. As noted in Figure 2, material well-being (explored below at the exosystem level) can play out at all levels, including the microsystem. In addition, physical and mental health issues are related to family systems (microsystem level):

- Poor health, mental illness, substance abuse or smoking habits among parents or adult caregivers makes students more likely to be absent from school
- Adverse childhood experiences such as domestic violence, arrest of a parent, mental health disorders, substance abuse or criminal justice involvement of a birth parent, family involvement in the child welfare system, homelessness, changes in household adult composition, or the death of the parent makes students more likely to have severe attendance problems

### **SIGNIFICANT DRIVERS AT THE MESOSYSTEM LEVEL**

**MESOSYSTEM LEVEL:** The linkages and processes between the microsystems, such as the connection between the school and family.

**COMMUNITY SAFETY:** While it did not rise to the level of a primary driver of chronic absenteeism, some of the practitioners with whom we spoke mentioned community safety as an important factor affecting chronic absenteeism, including both vulnerability to crime and bullying in students' neighborhoods, as well as the need for some students to walk to school across busy streets. Several community practitioners noted that a recent change by the Hartford Public Schools to increase the distance from schools that students must live in order to qualify for bus transportation has had a negative effect on school attendance.

#### **HARTFORD FOUNDATION INVESTMENTS TARGETING COMMUNITY SAFETY:**

The Hartford Foundation lists community safety as a priority area for grantmaking, as well as a potential outcome. The 2019 grants database included five grants in the community safety priority area, for a total of \$1,128,000 (5% of the 2019 grantmaking portfolio). These grants included:

- \$562,500 to Our Piece of the Pie for the Hartford Youth Service Corps (an additional \$187,500 was awarded for the same project but allocated to the workforce development priority area)
- \$500,000 to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Hartford for the New Southend Unit (an additional \$500,000 was awarded for the same project but allocated to the workforce development priority area, and is included in the workforce development section below)
- \$40,000 to the Connecticut After School Network for the development of the spring of 2020 online summer program directory, serving Greater Hartford
- \$20,000 to the Judy Dworin Performance Project, to provide flexible funding for a mix of Family Connections and reentry programs
- \$5,500 to Hartford 2000 for a Community Safety Conversation held in March 2019

#### **OTHER MESOSYSTEM-LEVEL DRIVERS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

Many other issues affecting student attendance are connected to the interplay of the microsystems in which these students are directly involved. For example:

- Student and family material well-being is influenced by parental employment and neighborhood economic opportunities
- Student attitudes toward schooling are affected by adult family members' own negative experiences with their schooling
- Family mobility affects students' ability to feel connected to a community and school
- Adults in some neighborhoods lack involvement with and engagement in education, which impacts community culture

Also, as noted in Figure 2, material well-being (explored below at the exosystem level) can play out at all levels, including the mesosystem.

We analyzed our findings and Hartford Foundation funding related these factors in different sections of the report: family engagement with schooling is analyzed in the microsystem section, and poverty/economic opportunity in the exosystem level of the report.

#### **SIGNIFICANT DRIVERS AT THE EXOSYSTEM LEVEL**

**EXOSYSTEM LEVEL:** The exosystem calls attention to systems and influences that impact students but in which the student may not directly belong, such as the economy, social services, and media.

**POVERTY AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY:** Both the literature review and the practitioner review noted that poverty and lack of material well-being are significant drivers of chronic absenteeism. More than one practitioner identified it as a primary cause. We have previously noted (Figure 2) that individual and family poverty are shaped by factors at each of the other levels in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. For the purposes of this analysis, we focus our examination of poverty at the exosystem level, because it is the interplay of economic systems, employment opportunities, policies, and support systems that circumscribe family access to wealth and opportunities.

The literature and practitioner reviews identified many ways in which these systems influence material well-being, the ways in which poverty impacts students and families, and thereby affects school attendance and engagement. Some of the most significant areas affecting absenteeism are:

- Housing instability
- Hunger and food insecurity
- Transportation and logistics, including access to weather-appropriate clothing
- Family mobility
- Student responsibilities outside of school, including part-time jobs and caring for younger siblings
- Stress resulting from the lack of reliable income
- Lack of Internet access and appropriate technology, to participate in distance learning opportunities during school building closures related to COVID-19

These issues are related to exosystems such as affordable housing policies and practices, child welfare policies, workforce development systems, and community economic development.

#### **HARTFORD FOUNDATION INVESTMENTS TARGETING POVERTY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:**

Support for basic needs is a substantial component of the Hartford Foundation's grantmaking portfolio. In 2019, the foundation awarded 85 grants<sup>6</sup> totaling \$3,446,543 to organizations providing support for those in poverty, including food, shelter, clothing, school supplies, and other basic needs. This represents 14% of Foundation's overall grantmaking portfolio.<sup>7</sup>

The largest grants awarded were all related to housing, and could be said to target community development as well as poverty relief. These included:

- \$860,000 to the Local Initiatives Support Corporation for building capacity for comprehensive community development
- \$390,000 to the Christian Activities Council, for empowering housing choice for federally displaced Hartford tenants
- \$326,033 to the Salvation Army Southern New England Division, to continue services in the Marshall House homeless services
- \$300,000 to the Northeast Neighborhood Partnership, for the Swift Factory Redevelopment Project

<sup>6</sup> There were 86 grants awarded in 2019 through the Hartford Foundation's Basic Human Needs grantmaking portfolio. However, some of these grants addressed health services and are included in a different section of the report. Other grants were awarded outside of the Basic Human Needs grantmaking portfolio but include support for direct services - for example, housing programs that are part of the Community and Economic Development portfolio, or Responsive Grants that addressed basic support services.

<sup>7</sup> Community Schools provide support for students' and families' basic needs; however, basic needs are not a primary outcome of the Community Schools program. Funding for Community Schools is addressed separately and not included in this section of the report.



#### **HARTFORD FOUNDATION INVESTMENTS TARGETING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:**

While direct support for those in poverty is important, practitioners noted that equipping people with the skills and knowledge they will need to move into well-paying jobs is necessary to alleviate poverty. In 2019, the Hartford Foundation awarded 13 grants as part of its Community and Economic Development grantmaking portfolio. Some of these address community development and housing, and are included in the poverty relief section above. There were 5 grants in the Community and Economic Development portfolio, and one in the Basic Human Needs portfolio, that directly address workforce development, totaling \$1,288,757 (5% of the Foundation's 2019 grantmaking portfolio). These included:

- \$270,000 to the University of Connecticut Health Center, to support the Health Equity Advocacy Research (HEAR) program<sup>8</sup>
- \$249,157 to the Capitol Region Education Council, to continue the Medical Office Assistant program
- \$220,000 to Capital Workforce Partners, for the 2019 Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program
- \$212,100 to Capital Workforce Partners, for the 2019 Hartford Student Internship Program (HSIP)
- \$187,500 to Our Piece of the Pie for the Hartford Youth Service Corps (an additional \$512,500 was awarded for the same project but allocated to the community safety priority area and is included in the section about community safety, above)
- \$150,000 to United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, to support the Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford

#### **SIGNIFICANT DRIVERS AT THE MACROSYSTEM LEVEL**

**MACROSYSTEM LEVEL:** The macrosystem is the broadest in context and includes things such as cultural norms, and beliefs, societal values, and customs. It also includes systemic oppression and inclusion of marginalized groups in the United States.

In one sense, the macrosystem in the United States is supportive of school attendance. Completion of K-12 schooling is a cultural norm and is reinforced in popular culture. However, for groups outside of the dominant culture, the macrosystem in the United States is also a source of racism, bias, oppression, and exclusion.

Some examples we found in the literature of how the macrosystem affects chronic absenteeism include impacts on physical health, including disparities in health outcomes such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, asthma, and lead poisoning, and mental health, such as high rates of absenteeism among Native American students as a result of the deep distrust of institutionalized education resulting from assimilation-focused American Indian boarding schools.

We also heard from community practitioners, and from our broader engagement with issues of racial and social justice, about how poverty, a lack of school engagement, and engagement with the criminal justice system all disproportionately impact People of Color in the United States. An examination of how these issues impact absenteeism must acknowledge the broader culture which supports these disproportionate impacts.

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<sup>8</sup> This is part of the Basic Human Needs portfolio and is also counted in grants directed to health-related services. It contains a fellowship component to support future health equity leaders, and is therefore included in our analysis as also supporting workforce development.

## WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTIONS OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM THAT SUPPORT GREATER ENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION?

The literature has many examples of successful interventions outside of the school system; these are explored in detail in our literature review, along with many examples of local organizations providing similar services (see Appendix B). Some examples of community programs that have been found to have an impact on school attendance include:

- The State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in New York State has had a positive and significant effect on statewide school attendance and reduced medical care access disparities between White, African-American, and Hispanic children (Yeung et al., 2010).<sup>9</sup>
- Center-based care for pre-kindergarten children is linked with lower rates of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten (Gottfried, 2015).
- The Student Pass Program in Minneapolis, MN provides high school students with unlimited public transportation ride passes, and has been shown to have benefits for student attendance, as well as access after school learning opportunities outside school, saving time for families, and equity benefits for low income families (Fan & Das, 2015).
- Success Mentors has been implemented in New York City as an in-school mentoring program using three models — internal (school staff), external (non-profit partners) and peer-based. It has had, among other effects, an impact on reducing absenteeism in most schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, n.d).
- TeamMates is a community volunteer mentor program that, among other things, improves students’ engagement and attendance in school (Calderon, 2011).

## WHAT DO COMMUNITY LEADERS BELIEVE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT COMMUNITY-LEVEL SUPPORTS FOR EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT?

Not surprisingly, the supports that community practitioners identified as being most important for educational engagement align with the drivers of chronic absenteeism that they believe to be most important; this is also consistent with the literature. A summary of their suggestions is included here; a more detailed exploration of their thoughts is included in Appendix C.

Just as lack of family engagement was noted as a significant driver of chronic absenteeism, staff at community organizations often stressed the **IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND ATTENDANCE**. Some specific supports that they are currently working on, and suggest expanding, include:

- Teaching families how to navigate the school system and advocate for their children
- Providing information about education that is easily understood and accessible to non-English speakers
- Home visits to the families of students participating in programs, engaging the parents and talking with them about the importance of attendance

<sup>9</sup> See the Literature Review for information on references cited.

- Connecting families to schools by offering community programs in school buildings, including before-school and after-school programs, as well as housing support staff in schools
- Providing holistic support for families through family centers

Many of the people with whom we spoke also recommended that **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS**. Suggestions included:

- Offering programs that bridge the gap between school time and out-of-school time, thus creating a network of support for students, while also engaging them with school
- Schools partnering with service-providing organizations to identify and meet the additional students needs that schools do not have the resources to address
- Community organizations providing a point person at each school who can manage individual cases and connect students to needed supports

Another recommendation that we heard from community organizations is the importance of offering **INTEGRATED SUPPORTS** to young people and families, along with a vision of organizations partnering to offer many different services to students at a variety of ages. In fact, many of the comments that practitioners made about connecting with families and with schools were related to this vision. Many practitioners are already doing this on a limited scale with the small number of students that they serve, but see a need for expansion.

Finally, several practitioners suggested developing a coordinated messaging campaign promoting the value of attending and completing school, perhaps with young people involved as social influencers.

In order to expand offerings aligned with the suggestions above, practitioners identified areas in which they see the need for greater Foundation support. As is often the case, the primary recommendation or request is for additional funding. Competition for funding from a limited number of donors makes it challenging for organizations to partner with each other - one practitioner noted that cooperation can quickly become “cooptition” as organizations seek to position themselves to attract donors’ attention.

Several others noted that service providers often lack capacity to measure the effectiveness of their work, and to develop the skills they need to serve the community better. They noted that many funders prefer that funding go toward direct services rather than to capacity building within organizations.

We learned from our review of Hartford Foundation investments that this is an area in which the Hartford Foundation is already supporting local nonprofits, through investments related to nonprofit support, data and evaluation, small agency programs, responsive grants, and (a few) summer program grants. In 2019, the Foundation gave over \$3.8 million in grants that provide capacity-building support. About one-third of this support (\$1,276,644) was awarded to organizations that address community drivers of chronic absenteeism. These were most frequently awarded to organizations providing youth development services, such as after school or summer programs. Other categories of support provided by organizations receiving this funding included basic needs, academic support, and health.

## HOW CAN THE HARTFORD FOUNDATION SUPPORT EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG STUDENTS IN THE GREATER HARTFORD AREA?

### GRANTMAKING

A review of Hartford Foundation investments in 2019 indicates a high level of investment in family engagement and school engagement (21% of the 2019 grantmaking portfolio, including Community Schools, funding for Alliance districts, and individual grants in these areas) as well as in material well-being (14% of the 2019 grantmaking portfolio). One area that our literature review identified as being critical to promoting school attendance, however, was **PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH**. The review showed that the Foundation's investments in these areas was only a small part (3%) of its grantmaking portfolio in 2019. This is a potential area for additional grantmaking.

The Hartford Foundation also provides capacity-building support to organizations doing work to support children, families, and communities. While the Foundation allocates a substantial amount of funding toward this work, in 2019 only about one-third of this funding went toward organizations that provide direct support toward addressing the community drivers of chronic absenteeism. The Foundation may wish to consider increasing capacity-building funding to organizations that are providing services directly related to reducing chronic absenteeism.

Given the interconnections among the various systems and factors affecting chronic absenteeism, the Hartford Foundation could also explore best practices in funding networks of support, cooperative agreements among agencies to provide integrated supports, or single sites where multiple organizations are housed. The Community Schools program offers an example of how integrated supports can be provided at a single site.

### OTHER SUPPORT

The influence of the Hartford Foundation in the greater Hartford area is not limited to its grantmaking. Many of the people with whom we spoke during the practitioner review had participated in previous convenings and programs sponsored by the Hartford Foundation that were intended to promote cross-organization collaboration. "The Hartford Foundation has been a beacon of hope," noted one service provider. "Their funding, trainings, professional development . . . no one matches their commitment to young people and families."

Appendix C describes many ways in which practitioners believe that the Foundation can be supporting organizations doing work around reducing absenteeism beyond grantmaking. Some of the ideas that we found most intriguing include:

- Requiring grantees to plan for connections with other programs as they serve students, as a condition of funding
  - Developing networks of professional support for young people of color in leadership positions
  - Offering workshops that allow time for building connections, sharing best practices, and visiting successful organizations
- 
- Leading, or supporting, a public messaging campaign around school engagement and

### attendance **THINKING BEYOND ABSENTEEISM**

As we discussed the drivers of chronic absenteeism with community practitioners, several of them challenged the Hartford Foundation's focus on absenteeism and suggested ways in which the foundation could be a thought leader around deeper structural changes to education. They noted that the shift to remote learning occasioned by COVID-19 opens up opportunities for rethinking what educational engagement can look like. "Seat time is not an effective measure of learning," said one. "We rely on antiquated ways of measuring engagement and participation."



Some of the organizations with whom we spoke are already running alternative education programs that rely heavily on asynchronous learning, allowing students to set goals for their learning and progress through them in a way that works for their individual circumstances. They suggested that expanding these programs and allowing students to engage with school in ways that are meaningful for them will have a positive impact on school engagement and completion, while completely bypassing the issue of absenteeism.

Of course, eliminating “seat time” as a requirement for graduation is not something that local districts can do on their own. Implementing these ideas would require deep conversations with the Connecticut State Department of Education, and the development of mutually agreed-upon measures of engagement that go beyond attendance. The Hartford Foundation, perhaps in partnership with leaders from Alliance districts in its service area and/or with other foundations, education researchers, think tanks, and advocacy groups, may be well-positioned to begin to lead these conversations.

## CONCLUSION

The Bronfenbrenner model provides a framework for considering the multiple ways in which the major drivers of chronic absenteeism - poverty, school engagement (for students and families), and physical and mental health - play out at different levels and interact with other factors. It helped guide our thinking around viewing chronic absenteeism as an issue that goes beyond students and families -- one that is shaped by the communities, and the larger world, in which students live.

We suggest that this framework can play a role in considering where levers of change exist, as the Hartford Foundation plans its strategic thinking, grantmaking, and community engagement. For example, the Foundation can address poverty at the individual level, with basic needs supports, but also at the mesosystem level (basic needs supports provided in schools, which then anchors families and students to the school), and the exosystem level, through initiatives targeted toward wealth-building and economic development. All are important; but the Foundation may wish to consider what the most impactful targets for the attention would be.

While the Hartford Foundation is already addressing many of the most important community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism through its grantmaking portfolio, we found that potential areas for expanded grantmaking support include support for health-related programs, and for capacity-building among organizations that address chronic absenteeism.

In addition the Hartford Foundation is well-regarded as a source of expertise, professional development, and convening among nonprofits in the greater Hartford area. These organizations look to the Foundation as a source of non-monetary support, and have many ideas about ways in which this support can target chronic absenteeism.

## APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

Our report drew from three sources of information: a literature review of national and local literature concerning the community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism, a review of investments made by the Hartford Foundation in 2019, and conversations with individuals working in nonprofit or government agencies in the Hartford area concerning their perspectives on chronic absenteeism. The details of each of these sources are explained below.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Our literature review relied on the extensive resource repositories on the Attendance Works and Everyone Graduates Center websites as a starting point. We then continued to explore references from the articles cited there, and asked for input from the Hartford Foundation for additional information. We also relied on ERIC, an educational database. Our search keywords included Chronic Absenteeism, School Participation, and School Engagement, all combined with the words Drivers, Factors, Causes, and Influences.

### INVESTMENTS INVENTORY

CES received an Excel workbook containing details of all grants awarded in 2019, sorted by 13 different priority areas. In consultation with Kate Szczerbacki, the Foundation's Director of Strategic Learning and Evaluation, we decided to analyze and code grants in 11 of these priority areas.

#### **Outcomes Portfolios**

The primary analysis was completed on grants within the Hartford Foundation's six outcomes portfolios:

- Basic Human Needs (86 grants)
- Birth to Career (16 grants)
- Community and Economic Development (13 grants)
- Community Safety (5 grants)
- Civic and Resident Engagement (20 grants)
- Strategic Grants to Arts (17 grants)

For each of these grants, we categorized the grants by major outcomes, informed by what the literature review and practitioner review say are community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism:

- A direct focus on greater attendance/reduced absenteeism
- Children's physical and mental health
- Material well-being (food, housing, clothing, other basic supports)
- Other factors noted by practitioners but not reflected in the literature review: school engagement, family engagement, youth development, and community safety

Most of the grants made by the Hartford Foundation fall into one of these categories listed above. However, we also developed a category for grants that were not related to chronic absenteeism, except potentially in a very general sense (if you try hard enough, you can connect just about anything to chronic absenteeism; we looked for specific outcomes that were relevant to the categories above). This includes all of the grants in the Civic and Resident Engagement outcomes portfolio. Other grants coded as unrelated to chronic absenteeism usually encompassed services that are exclusively addressed toward adults and unrelated to basic needs. Some examples of these grants include substance abuse treatment, adult education, domestic violence prevention, and town governance.



### **Grants Outside of Outcomes Portfolios**

We also analyzed, separately, the grants that are not included in outcomes portfolios. These included:

- The Nonprofit Support Program (53 grants)
- Data and Evaluation (4 grants)
- Small Agency Program (46 grants)
- Responsive Grants (83 grants)
- Summer Programs (56 grants)

If these grants were related to direct services (as were most of the summer programs, and some in other categories as well), we coded them in the same way as the outcomes portfolios grants. As we spoke with practitioners, we found that many also noted the need for capacity-building among nonprofits in order to better provide direct services. For this reason, we looked for and coded capacity-building grants from these priority areas. If agencies were providing services that are directly related to what the literature and practitioner review say are community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism, we coded these grants as providing support related to reducing chronic absenteeism, and added subcategories to indicate the type of service provided.

For example, a grant given to provide support to the South Park Inn (a homeless shelter serving adults and families) in their search for an executive director was coded as providing support to an organization that provides housing services. However, a grant given to the Vernon Community Network to provide operating support was coded as unrelated to chronic absenteeism.

It should be noted that the process of categorizing these grants was more challenging than the process for the grants within the outcomes portfolios, as the outcomes listed in the database for these grants were about internal capacity building rather than direct service. We used a combination of previous knowledge of these organizations, their appearance among the outcomes portfolio grantees, and sometimes a quick web search to determine whether these organizations were providing services related to reducing absenteeism. However, we did not have the time or resources for a thorough investigation of these organizations, and so our categorization may be imprecise at times.

### **Uncategorized Grants**

As decided in consultation with Kate Sczcerbacki, we did not code grants categorized as Donor-Directed/Donor-Advised (422 grants) or scholarships (130 grants).

### **PRACTITIONER REVIEW**

After completing a draft of the literature review, we identified organizations doing work in addressing community drivers of chronic absenteeism in the Hartford area. We discussed this list with the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and considered types of services provided as well as geographic diversity (some organizations serving Hartford, some serving neighboring towns and/or the greater Hartford region, and some statewide). Using these three areas of prioritization, we identified 14 organizations to contact:

- Big Brothers Big Sisters Nutmeg
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford
- Campaign for Grade-level reading in Hartford
- Center for Latino Progress
- City of Hartford Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation
- Community Renewal Team
- Compass Youth Collaborative

- Ebony Horsewoman
- GForce Studio
- Organized Parents Make a Difference
- Our Piece of the Pie
- The Manchester Youth Service Bureau
- The Village
- Urban League of Greater Hartford

We spoke with a representative of each organization, and sometimes several people at once, through videoconferencing in August and September of 2020. Each conversation lasted approximately 45 minutes. Conversations addressed the following questions:

1. Tell me more about the work your organization does. Prompts: population served, services provided, desired outcomes
2. Do you see your work as supportive of school engagement/regular school attendance/reducing chronic absenteeism? How so?
3. What do you see as the major factors that are keeping students out of school? (Prompt for factors that are community-level, also individual and household factors as relevant).
  - a. How did you develop this perspective (conversations with families, with school personnel, with young people directly)?
4. What supports can community organizations provide that will encourage students to attend school regularly?
  - a. What are effective ways of delivering these supports? For example, what is the best path for delivering these supports - directly to the family in their home, through the school, through family or student participation in community activities?
  - b. Are there barriers to providing the supports that need to be considered? Do you have any advice about how to overcome these barriers?
5. What are some ways that the Hartford Foundation can support the work done around these efforts?
  - a. If the response is "more funding," press for specifics - which organizations? What type of programming? Is there a systematic approach that the Foundation could be taking?
  - b. Press for other possibilities other than funding - community convenings, connecting organizations together to share resources and expertise, helping organizations leverage modest grants into larger, sustainable programs.
6. Do you have any other feedback or suggestions around addressing school engagement or related issues?

## SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS

- Chronic absenteeism is commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason, including excused, unexcused and disciplinary absences.
- Students who disproportionately experience chronic absenteeism are **Native American, African-American and Hispanic**; students from **low socioeconomic backgrounds**; students who are **English language learners**, and students with **disabilities**. These students often face the greatest barriers to participating in schooling.
- The drivers of chronic absenteeism are often **complex** and result from a number of **different, interrelated** factors. Students are chronically absent when missed school days caused by various factors begin to **'add up'** over the course of the school year, or even within a month.
- This literature review adopts **Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model** to unpack and examine these factors in relation to broader societal context and structural conditions. This model seeks to shift the focus or 'blame' away from individual students and families to account for the structural barriers and inequities that they encounter that prevent them from participating in school.
- Key drivers of school absenteeism can be broadly categorized as challenges with:
  - **Physical Health** (acute illness, asthma and oral health)
  - **Mental Health** (mental and behavioral disorders)
  - **Material Well-being** (poverty, homelessness, transportation)
  - **Learning and Engagement** (disengagement, negative perceptions of school, academic/social struggles)
  - Each of these drivers reflect a complex array of factors that exist across the layers of the bioecological model.
- **Community partnerships** can play an important role in reducing rates of chronic absenteeism and improving outcomes for children and families, especially in communities with high rates of poverty. **Philanthropic foundations & local funders** in particular can play a key role in convening strategic partnerships, building public awareness, using absenteeism as an accountability metric, and investing in data-driven solutions.
- Supports or interventions at the **community level** to reduce chronic absenteeism include a range of **organizations and programs** that directly support students and families in local communities or work in close partnership with schools.

## WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

- Chronic absenteeism is commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason including excused, unexcused and disciplinary absences (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012; [CT.Gov.](#), 2020a). While the Department of Education describes chronically absent students as those who "miss at least 15 days of school in a year" (Department of Education, 2016) this varies across districts and states depending on the length of the school year.
- When chronic absenteeism is examined within a framework that includes excused and disciplinary absences, in addition to unexcused absences (truancy), it can serve as an early sign of distress in the home, community, or school and encourage using community-based or positive strategies to intervene, rather than relying on legal or administrative solutions (Attendance Works, n.d.; Chang & Romero, 2008).

- Average daily rates of attendance can often mask high concentrations of chronic absenteeism, which is one reason why it is often overlooked, especially in the early grades and elementary levels (Bruner, Discher & Chang, 2011).
- While most students are absent from school for at least a few days a year for myriad well-known reasons such as illness, suspension, or family circumstances, as the number of missed days increase, so too do the reasons for the absences (Sundius & Farneth, 2008a).

## RATES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM:

### **Nationally:**

- Over 7 million students were chronically absent from school in 2015-16 in the U.S. (Department of Education, 2016)
- Chronic absenteeism among different groups varies substantially. Data<sup>1°</sup> from the U.S. Department of Education (2016) (and other sources noted) show:
  - **Race/Ethnicity:** 26% of American Indian and Pacific Islander students, 20% of Black students, 17% of Hispanic students, and 15% of White students are chronically absent in schools.
  - **Disability Status:** Students with disabilities are about 50% more likely to be chronically absent than are students without disabilities.
  - **Language Status:** Chronic absenteeism is 15% less likely among English learners (14%) than non-English learners (16%); however, the opposite is true in high school (25% ELLs and 21% for non-ELLs)
  - **Gender:** Overall, chronic absenteeism does not differ significantly by gender (16% each). However, the reasons for absenteeism differ (see barriers to school participation).
  - **Grade level:** More than 20% of students in high school are chronically absent; as are more than 14% of students in middle school, and almost 14% at the elementary school level.
  - **Socioeconomic status:** A study by the Economic Policy Institute (Garcia & Weiss, 2018) indicates that 23% students eligible for free lunch (a proxy for poverty level), and 18% of students eligible for reduced-price lunch were chronically absent - a higher rate than for students overall (15%). Economically disadvantaged students are more than twice as likely than their peers to experience extreme chronic absenteeism (more than 10 days a month).
  - **Gender and Sexuality:** Research also shows that LGBTQ students are at higher risk of absenteeism than their peers (Burton, Marshal & Chisolm, 2015; GLSEN, 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2011).
  - **Geography:** Chronic absenteeism is often higher in urban schools than in rural schools (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), although this is not always true across states (Chang, 2017).
- **Chronic absenteeism in the early grades:** While chronic absenteeism in the early grades has long been overlooked, a burgeoning body of literature has started to examine this issue because of the high rates at which students miss school in grades K-3 and the connection between school attendance at this level and academic performance in subsequent grades (Romero & Lee, 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008; Burner, et al., 2011; Ehrlich et al., 2013). Research shows that one-quarter of students at the kindergarten level are chronically absent or at risk of being chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008).

<sup>1°</sup>1 Chronic absenteeism is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as missing 15 or more school days in a year

- Other factors related to chronic absenteeism include **family size, family mobility, parental education, teenage motherhood, single motherhood, receiving TANF or SNAP benefits, and parental unemployment** (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Chang and Romero, 2008).

#### In Connecticut:

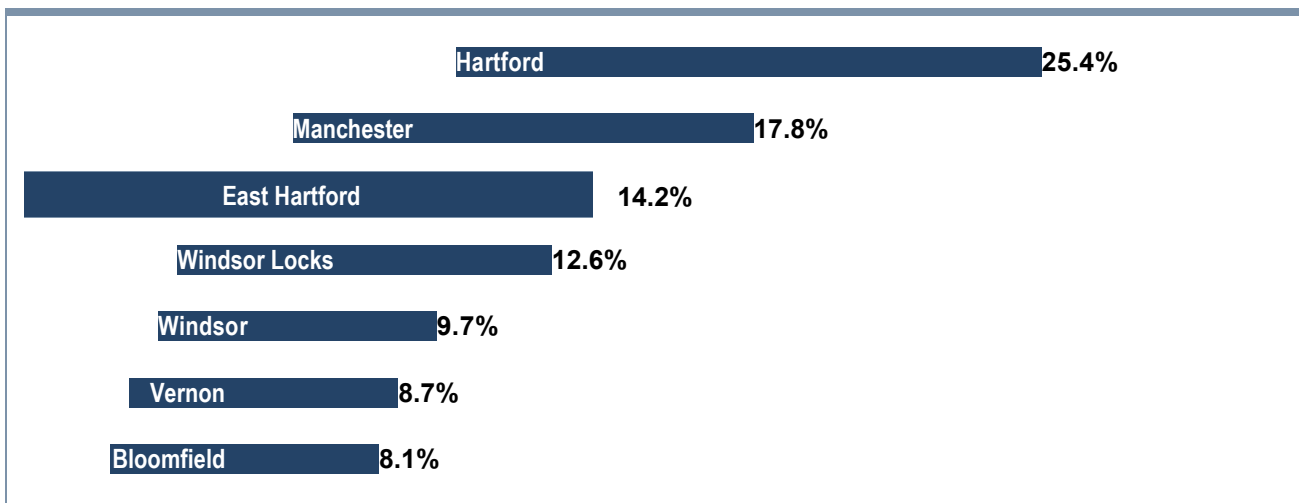
- Connecticut defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason including excused, unexcused and disciplinary absences ([CT.Gov.](#), 2020a).
- 10% of students are chronically absent on average in Connecticut public schools ([EdSight](#), 2020). This is substantially below national rates.
- Connecticut State Department of Education data from 2015-16 ([CT.Gov.](#), 2020c) show varying rates of chronic absenteeism according to:
  - **Socioeconomic status:** Chronic absence rates for students eligible for free meals are more than three times that of those of their peers.
  - **Race/Ethnicity:** Chronic absenteeism rates for Black/African American and Hispanic or Latino students are more than two times that of White students.
  - **Disability and Language Status:** Students with disabilities and English language learners have substantially higher chronic absenteeism rates than their peers.
  - **Geography:** Chronic absence rates are significantly higher in urban districts than in rural or suburban districts.

Literature Review Appendix B-1 shows the breakdown of levels of chronic absenteeism in Connecticut schools by varying indicators.

#### In the Greater Hartford area:

- In 2017–18, 12 percent of students in Greater Hartford were chronically absent from school. This is higher than the rates for Connecticut overall, although lower than national rates.
  - **Race/Ethnicity:** 7% of White students, 15% of Black students, 22% of Latino students, and 9% of students of other races/ethnicities were absent (Abraham & Seaberry, 2019).
  - **Socioeconomic status, Disability and Language Status:** Students with disabilities, students eligible for free and reduced price meals, and English language learners were more than twice as likely to be chronically absent as their lower-risk counterparts (Abraham & Seaberry, 2019).

CHART 1: ALLIANCE DISTRICTS ABSENTEEISM RATES IN 2018-19 (FROM EDSIGHT, 2020):



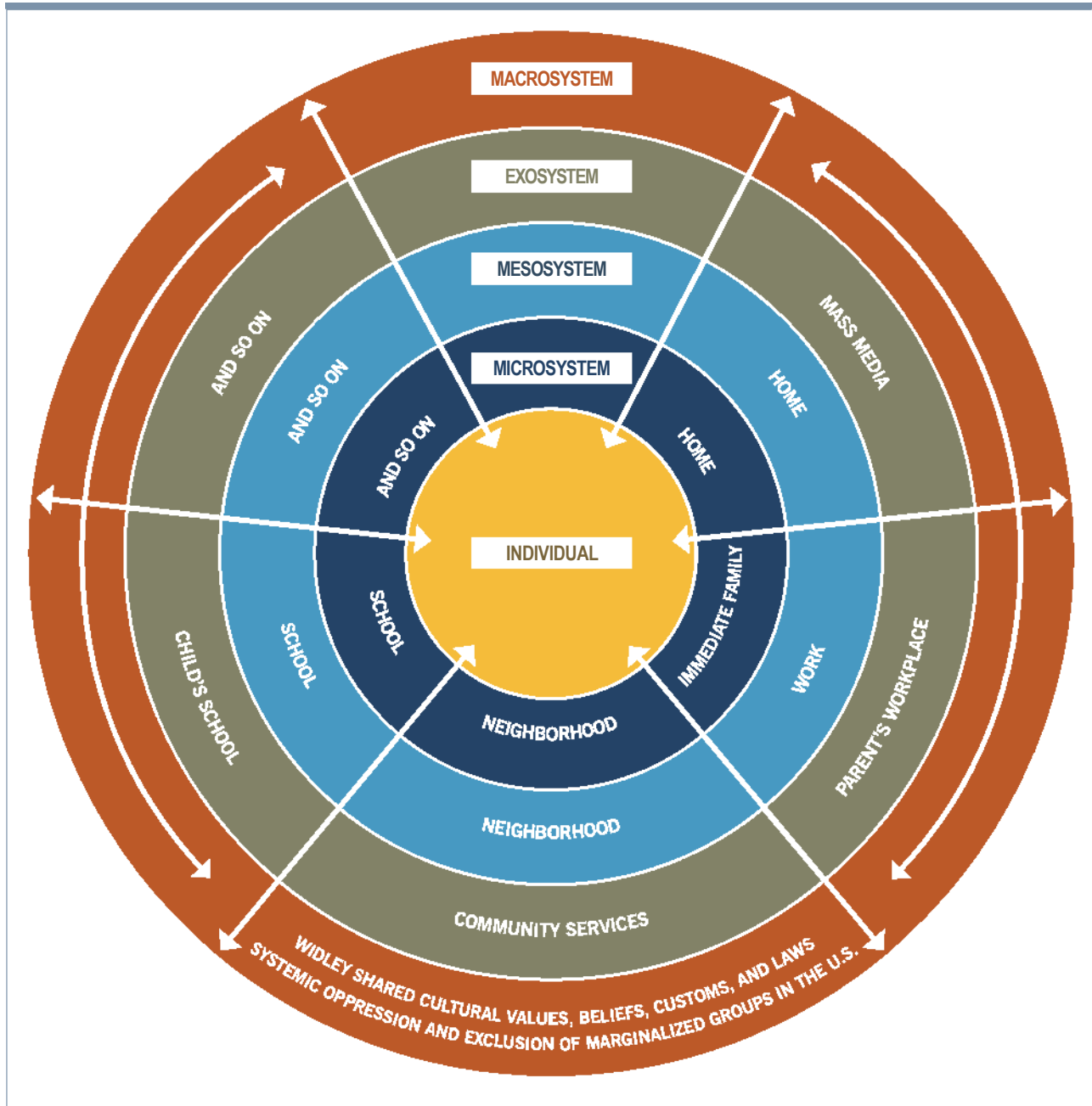
### WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES AND CORRELATES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

- Chronic absenteeism is a **detriment to academic success** as early as kindergarten and beyond high school:
  - In the early and elementary grades, chronically absent students have fewer literacy skills, are more likely to be retained, and are more likely to have lower academic achievement, which is especially the case for students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Chang & Romero, 2008; Ready 2010; Ehrlich et al., 2013). Children who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are also much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade (Attendance Works, 2011).
  - A number of studies indicate a strong relationship between student attendance in the middle grades and high school graduation (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).
  - At the high school level, school attendance is the strongest predictor of both student achievement and of dropping out of high school, and absenteeism reduces the likelihood of post-secondary enrollment (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Mac Iver, 2010).
- Chronic absenteeism also negatively impacts students' **socio-emotional outcomes**:
  - In addition to detrimental academic outcomes, chronic absenteeism also increases students' alienation and reduces students' educational and social engagement (Gottfried, 2014). Furthermore, students' socio-emotional skills are directly correlated with students' academic success (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2020).
  - Students who are frequently absent are also more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors like substance abuse (Sundius & Farneth 2008a).
- Students who are chronically absent are also more likely to face negative **long-term outcomes**:
  - Chronically absent students are more likely to experience dropping out of school, and students who drop out are more likely to have poor outcomes later in life, including poverty and reduced earning potential, diminished health, substance abuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Sundius & Farneth 2008a; Department of Education 2016).

## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: BRONFENBRENNER'S SOCIAL ECOLOGY MODEL

- Researchers commonly organize the factors related to chronic absenteeism into four categories (Jacob & Lovett, 2017):
  - Student-specific factors
  - Family-specific factors
  - School-specific factors
  - Community-specific factors
- Another widely adapted framework proposed by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) conceptualizes the reasons behind absenteeism as reasons why students i) cannot attend school (barriers) ii) will not attend school (aversions) and iii) do not attend school (myths/discretion).
- Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (1979) has also been used to study chronic absenteeism (Gottfried & Gee, 2014; Melvin et al., 2019; Sugrue, Zuel & LaLiberte, 2016). See Figure 1, below.
- We use the Bronfenbrenner model to frame our research into drivers of chronic absenteeism because current literature has identified that students are often chronically absent due to *multiple* contributing factors in a students' environment and *that absenteeism increases significantly once families are confronted with three or more risks* -- often families living in poverty, from a racial/ethnic minority group, or in poor health (Chang & Romero, 2008).
- Bronfenbrenner's model allows for a more comprehensive picture of the complex relational contexts and systems (ecologies) in which students and families are embedded. It helps us account for structural inequities that influence absenteeism, rather than emphasizing individual actions or choices.
- It is important to note that since the drivers of chronic absenteeism are layered and contingent on many factors and can even vary from school to school—from unreliable transportation to illness to neighborhood violence—parsing out why students are missing school is often done locally on a district, community, or school level (McKinney, 2017; Nauer, et al., 2008).
- We draw on the 'Person' and 'Context' component of the Process, Person, Context, Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006) to guide this literature review and to give a broad overview of the factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism:
  - **INDIVIDUAL:** The individual or 'Person' forces describe the dispositions, bio-psychological attributes, and ascribed characteristics of individual students. While demographic factors are often included at this level, in the case of chronic absenteeism, we also include them at the exo- and macrosystem levels to reflect their impact on absenteeism as a result of structural conditions, rather than individual characteristics.
  - **MICROSYSTEM:** The microsystem refers to the contexts and relationships with which the student directly interacts such as the school or the family.
  - **MESOSYSTEM:** The mesosystem describes the linkages and processes between the microsystems, such as the connection between the school and family.
  - **EXOSYSTEM:** The exosystem calls attention to systems and influences that impact students but in which the student may not directly belong, such as the economy, social services, media etc.
  - **MACROSYSTEM:** The macrosystem is the broadest in context and includes things such as cultural norms, and beliefs, societal values, and customs.

FIGURE 1: BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY 11



11 2 [https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Bioecological\\_model](https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Bioecological_model)



## WHAT BARRIERS TO SCHOOL PARTICIPATION LEAD TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

- While most students are absent from school for at least a few days a year for different reasons, as the number of missed days increases, the reasons for those absences get more complex and varied (Sundius & Farneth, 2008a).
- It is worth reiterating that while students can be absent from school for any number of reasons, students are often *chronically* absent due to *multiple* contributing factors in a students' environment rather than a single factor (though this may sometimes be the case, such as with chronic illness). Research on early absenteeism shows that rates of absenteeism increase significantly once families are confronted with *three or more risks* – most often families living in poverty, from a racial/ethnic minority group or in poor health (Chang & Romero, 2008). In other words, students are chronically absent when absences for multiple reasons begin to add up.

*In 2015, her mother severely injured her back in a car accident and was mostly bedridden for more than a year. This left Britaney, then in her early teens, with the responsibility for taking care of both her mother and her youngest brother, Kaden.*

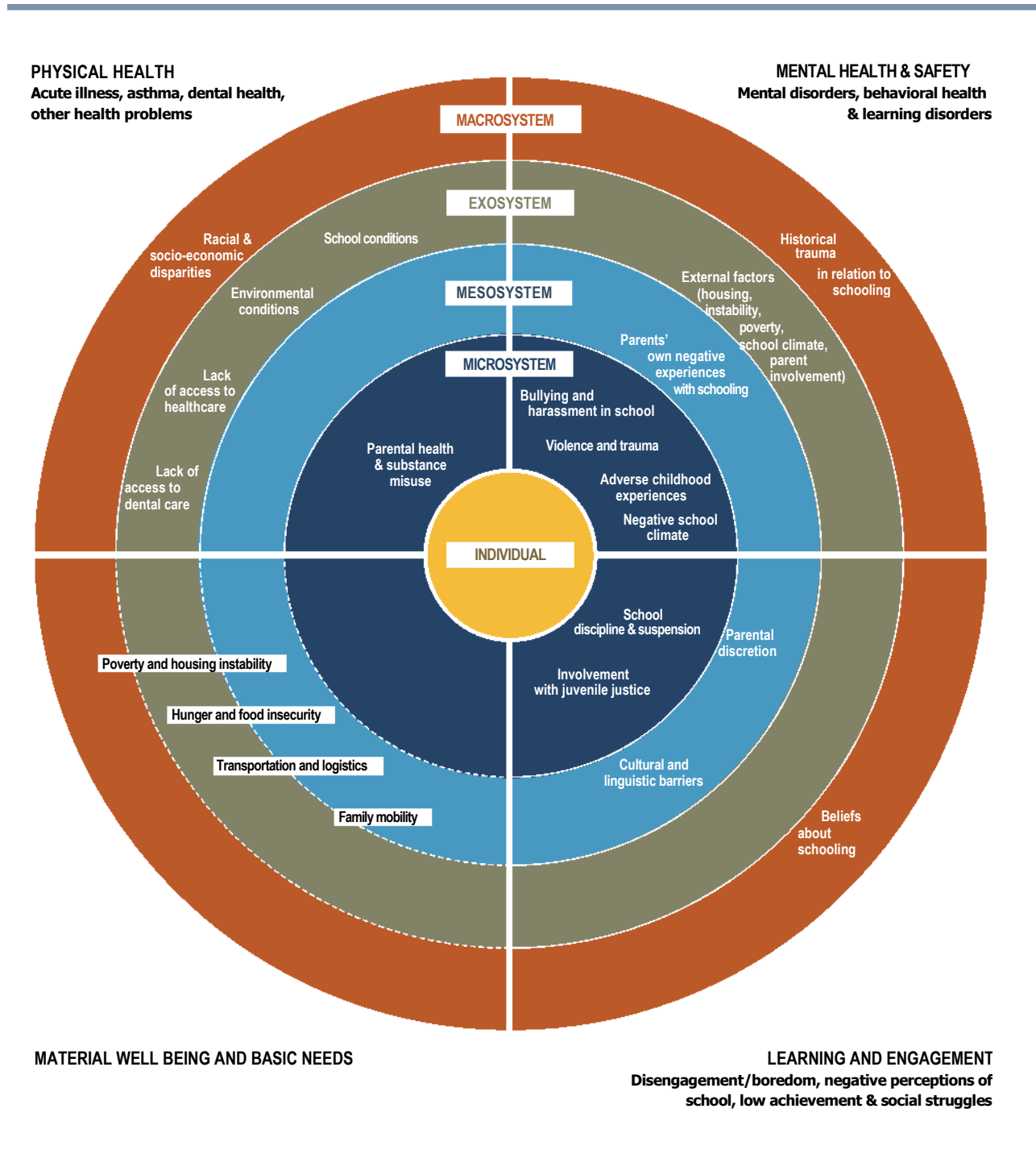
***“I was making food for him and my mom a lot too. That was really hard...In the morning, I'd wake up and get him woken up, get him dressed, get him food, get him ready for school. A lot of times I'd get him to the bus but I'd still not be ready.”***

*On days when she missed the bus, Britaney would run from house to house on her street asking if anyone was headed into town and could give her a ride to school.*

***“If it didn't work out, I'd just be like alright I guess I'm staying home today”...***

*She missed 35 days during the 2014-15 school year and 38 days during 2015-16, her attendance records show. (Washburn, 2019).*

**FIGURE 3: BARRIERS TO SCHOOL PARTICIPATION**



## PHYSICAL HEALTH

### INDIVIDUAL

- **Acute Illness:** Students are most often absent from school because of health-related reasons, which contribute significantly to chronic absenteeism. According to a study of Chicago Public Schools, health was the primary reason children miss preschool, e.g., the flu, a cold, ear infections etc. (Ehrlich et al., 2013). A study of several school districts in Texas found 48 percent of absences were caused by acute illness (Wiseman & Dawson, 2013).
- **Asthma:** Another leading cause of school absenteeism is asthma, especially when it is poorly managed, accounting for one-third of all days of missed instruction (CDC, 2015; Jordan & Chang, 2015; Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d).
- **Dental Health:** Oral health problems, such as tooth decay, are another major reason why students miss school (Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d; Pourat & Nicholson, 2009). Children with poor oral health are nearly three times more likely than their counterparts to miss school as a result of dental pain (Jordan & Chang, 2015).
- Other health problems that contribute to absenteeism include vision problems, seizure disorders, diabetes and obesity, chronic illness, chronic pain, alcohol and substance misuse, reproductive health (for teen mothers), poor diet, and lack of physical activity among others (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, 2012; Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d, Henderson, Hill & Norton, 2014; Runions et al., 2020).

### MICROSYSTEM

- **Parental Health and Substance Misuse:** Poor health, mental illness, substance abuse or smoking habits among parents or adult caregivers makes students more likely to be absent from school (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Guevara et al., 2013; Levy, Winickoff & Rigotti, 2011; Sugrue, Zuel, & LaLiberte, 2016)

*“A lot of times parents are out drinking or using drugs and they don’t come home and the kids are up all night and they don’t get up for school”*

*– Community agency worker (Sugrue et al., 2016, p.140).*

### EXOSYSTEM

- **School Conditions:** Asthma can be exacerbated by factors in the school environment, particularly issues such as mold, harsh cleaning chemicals that affect indoor air quality (Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d), or poor ventilation in schools (National Collaborative on Education and Health, 2015). Schools with large minority enrollment in districts with a high percentage of low-income families are also most likely to be in poor physical condition (Race Matters, Institute 2013), which can exacerbate health problems.
- **Environmental Conditions:** African-American students and students of Puerto Rican descent are disproportionately exposed to environmental conditions that trigger severe asthma, such as allergens and air pollution. The stressful circumstances, hospitalizations, doctor visits, and sleep disturbances that result from severe asthma contribute significantly to school absenteeism (Race Matters Institute, 2013). Lead exposure, which is especially toxic to children, also puts students at risk, and lead poisoning also has implications for students’ learning and abilities (Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, 2012).

- **Lack of Access to Healthcare:** Lack of access to basic health care service and health insurance is another factor that contributes to missed school days. A lack of health insurance means that students do not seek preventative care, and the lack of access to health care further exacerbates existing health problems (Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, 2012; Henderson, et al., 2014).
- **Lack of Access to Dental Care:** Inability to access or afford dental care contributes to absenteeism, and poor students are 12 times more likely to face restricted activity due to dental problems than are students from higher income families (Pourat & Nicholson, 2009; Henderson, et al., 2014).

## MACROSYSTEM

- **Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities:** Broader racial and economic disparities and disenfranchisement that permeate society contribute to health disparities (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, asthma, and lead poisoning, as well as maternal health problems and health-related behaviors) that keep students from school (Currie, 2005).

## MENTAL HEALTH, SAFETY & WELLBEING

### INDIVIDUAL

- **Mental Health:** Depression, anxiety disorders, and other mental health issues have been related to school avoidance and absenteeism (Egger, Costello & Angold, 2003; Finning, et al., 2019; Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d; Henderson et al., 2014; Kearny, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2019). The interrelationship between mental health problems and poor academic outcomes, especially in poor urban communities, is often reflected in students' academic progress and in students' rates of expulsion as early as preschool (Spencer, 2013).
- **Behavioral Health and Learning Disorders:** Students that experience a behavioral or developmental disorder, such as ADHD or autism, and don't receive the appropriate care are less likely to be engaged in school, which contributes to absenteeism each year. Students with learning disabilities who receive special education are also at higher risk for chronic absenteeism (Black, 2018; Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d; Henderson, Hill & Norton, 2014).

### MICROSYSTEM

- **Bullying and Harassment in School:** Fear of bullying, victimization, embarrassment and harassment in school (by peers or teachers) and the lack of trusted relationships in school can contribute to students' refusal to go to school (Balfanz & Byrnes 2012; Henderson, et al. 2014; National Collaborative on Education and Health, 2015). LGBTQ youth are also a group at risk for increased absenteeism compared to their heterosexual peers, due to depression, suicidal thoughts and anxiety, avoidance and fear of harm, victimization by peers or fear of exposing their identity (Burton et al., 2014, Robinson & Espelage, 2011).
- **Violence and Trauma:** Experiencing violence and trauma, such as witnessing violence in the family or neighborhood or experiencing physical, sexual or emotional/psychological abuse, can affect children's ability and willingness to attend school, increase depression or disruptive behavior, and limit students' academic progression (Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, 2012; Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d; Henderson, et al., 2014).

- **Adverse Childhood Experiences:** Research shows that adverse childhood experiences such as domestic violence, arrest of a parent, mental health disorders, substance abuse or criminal justice involvement of a birth parent, family involvement in the child welfare system, homelessness, changes in household adult composition, or the death of the parent makes students more likely to have severe attendance problems (Blodgett, 2012; Ready 2010; Stempel et al., 2017).
- **Negative School Climate:** Negative school climate, including issues such as perceptions of safety, safe paths to and from school, vandalism, substance abuse and aggressive behaviors in schools, school relationships, and school environment, has an important relationship with chronic school absences (Van Eck et al. 2015). Students may also avoid school to avoid real and perceived embarrassment such as being asked to read out loud in class and revealing poor skills or speech impediments (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

## MESOSYSTEM

- **Parents' own Negative Experiences with Schooling:** Parents' own negative experiences with schooling and families who feel disrespected or "have a bad taste in their mouth around school" (Sugrue, Zuel, & LaLiberte, 2016, p.140) contribute to absenteeism and parents' reduced involvement in their children's education.

*"To this day, there is still a great deal of distrust; The education system is still seen by many American Indians as trying to make us less Native, and more like the mainstream, and that makes for a complicated relationship"*

*– Danielle Grant, Executive Director of Education and Cultural Services and Indian Education for Minneapolis Public Schools and a member of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe tribe (Attendance Works, 2015)*

## EXOSYSTEM

- **External factors:** Research shows that broader risk factors that can lead to anxiety and school absences include things like housing instability, poverty, school climate and parent involvement (Henderson, et al., 2014).

## MACROSYSTEM

- **Historical Trauma in Relation to Schooling:** Chronic absenteeism rates are substantially higher for Native American students than for students of other ethnicities. Research shows that this is, in part, a result of the deep distrust of institutionalized education and the historical trauma of assimilation-focused American Indian boarding schools (Sugrue, et al., 2014).

## MATERIAL WELL-BEING & BASIC NEEDS

### INDIVIDUAL, MICROSYSTEM, MESOSYSTEM & EXOSYSTEM

*In the case of material well-being and needs, the different systems have been collapsed. Even though they are still analytically distinct, for example, 'food insecurity' is experienced at the individual level as 'hunger', at the micro level as 'family eating habits/practices', at the meso level as 'absence of food programs in schools and communities' and at the exo level as 'food deserts' and community economic development; each level challenging to disentangle with the available research.*

- **Poverty & Housing Instability:** It is difficult to disentangle the effects of poverty from the effects of homelessness (Cunningham, Harwood & Hall, 2010). A major reason that students are absent from school is housing instability and includes issues such as homelessness, movement between foster care placements, frequent school transfers, home foreclosure, eviction, inability to pay rent, living in a poor neighborhood, and lack of immunization records to enroll in a new school after moving (Balfanz & Byrnes 2012, BCTF Research, 2016; Cunningham, Harwood, Hall, 2010; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2013; ICPH, 2015; Nauer, Mader, Robinson & Jacobs, 2014; National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; Barrat & Berliner, 2013). A study in Michigan showed that homeless students missed two-and-a-half times more school than housed students and four times more than their higher-income peers (Erb-Downward & Watt, 2018). In Connecticut, a one-day snapshot in 2018 estimated that 5,054 youth under age 25 reported being homeless or unstably housed on the night of January 23 in Connecticut (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, 2020a). In Hartford, a one-day snapshot in 2011 estimated that 164 out of 864 homeless persons were children (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, 2011). It is important to note that homelessness disproportionately impacts people of color, particularly those in Black/African American communities. In Connecticut, Black/African-Americans account for over 30% of people experiencing homelessness, but only represent about 10% of the state's general population (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, 2020b). Additionally, more than one-third (38%) of adults with children in Hartford cited domestic violence as a contributing cause of homelessness, while rent problems were also frequently reported by families (23%), and about one-quarter (23%) of all adults without children in Hartford attributed their homelessness to a conflict with family or friends (Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, 2011).
- **Hunger & Food Insecurity:** Connected with poverty, hunger and household food insecurity for families -the lack of consistent access to food to lead healthy lives -- negatively impacts school attendance (BCTF Research, 2016, Nauer, et al., 2014; Tamiru & Belachew, 2017). Families experiencing poverty may have to make tradeoffs between shelter, home energy costs, and food or other basic needs and miss meals or go hungry (Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, 2012; Henderson, Hill & Norton, 2014). However, food insecurity can also affect families not experiencing poverty. Research shows that students who live in food deserts have lower academic outcomes (Frndak, 2014), and that there are persistent racial and ethnic disparities with regard to food insecurity that disproportionately affect Black, Latino and immigrant caregivers (Children's HealthWatch, 2018).

*"I bounced around a lot of schools and never got comfortable being there. Since I knew that I'd be at a school for just a little bit, I felt like I didn't need to care about my studies."*

*– Student in foster care (Barrat, & Berliner, 2013, p.3)*

- Transportation and Logistics:** The challenge of *getting to* school is often a major factor that contributes to absenteeism in school. This includes the lack of feasible transportation (such as having to change several buses), reliable transportation (lack of dependable public transport or not owning a car), affordable transportation options, logistical difficulties, parents' work schedules that don't align with school schedules, unsafe paths to school, poor planning, and family needs (BCTF Research, 2016, Burdick-Will, Stein & Grigg, 2019, Chang & Romero, 2008, Elrich et al. 2013; Nauer, et al., 2014; SCUSD, 2014). Black, Latino and immigrant families disproportionately face these kinds of logistical challenges (Race Matters Institute, 2013). Weather conditions (especially for students who take public transport) and a lack of weather-appropriate clothing or even clean clothing can also discourage students from going to school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Sanctions in school for tardiness can keep students from going to school altogether as well (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).
- Family Mobility:** High family mobility for parents and families who are migrant workers or farmworkers also contributes to chronic absenteeism, a factor that particularly affects Hispanic students and Native American students (Henderson et al., 2014; Jordan & Chang, 2015; Nauer, et al., 2014). Students in foster care who move around a lot are also at risk for high rates of absenteeism (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). In 2015, Connecticut had 3,908 children in foster care for reasons such as neglect, parental substance abuse, inability to cope, physical abuse, child behavior problems, inadequate housing, parental incarceration, abandonment and sexual abuse (Child Trends, 2015).

*Alexa Marotta, a senior at Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, said some of her classmates struggle with absences because of transportation problems. If a student misses the bus, he or she may have no other way to get to school. Waiting to catch a city bus can take more than an hour, she said. And then there are family issues.*

*"I know in high school a lot of the peers have younger siblings, so they sometimes have to stay home to take care of those siblings if they're sick because their parents have to go to work," Marotta, 18, said. "Other times they might leave school early because they have to work and make that money for their families."*

*(Carlesso, 2018)*
- Student Responsibilities Outside of School:** Student responsibilities outside of school, such as paid employment or helping with a family business, caring for parents, siblings or elders in multigenerational households, and other family obligations often play a role in student absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; BCTF Research, 2016; Nauer, et al., 2014; Sundius & Farynth 2008a). A study in Sacramento public schools indicates that these become significant factors for students beginning in middle school, increase in high school and disproportionately affect Latino students (SCUSD, 2014). Girls are more likely than boys to miss school to care for younger siblings or elderly relatives, or because they are responsible for getting younger children to school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Finlay, 2005).

## LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

### INDIVIDUAL

- **Disengagement/Boredom:** Alienation, disengagement from school, a lack of connectedness and boredom are all reasons students cite for not attending school, and can be an early predictor of high school dropout (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, Lan & Lanthier, 2003, Lehr, Sinclair & Christenson, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). English language learners can also become disengaged from school if instruction in school does not meet their educational needs (Attendance Works 2015).
- **Negative Perceptions of School:** Students who have negative perceptions of school because of school climate, school discipline, or perceptions of disciplinary policies are also more likely to be absent from school (Abraham & Seaberry, 2019; Railsback, 2004; Van Eck et al. 2015).
- **Low Achievement & Social Struggles:** Low achievement in school, including failing courses and low academic self-concept, as well as social struggles and poor social relationships in school, can be a contributing factor in students' school avoidance that can lead to chronic absenteeism (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Henry, 2007; Mac Iver 2010).

### MICROSYSTEM

- **School Discipline & Suspension:** The excessive and indiscriminate use of discipline and suspension that neither keeps schools safe, nor students disciplined, contributes to absenteeism, but also results in poor behavior, unwelcome schools, and academic failure (Sundius & Farneth, 2008a). Black and Latino boys are expelled or suspended far more frequently than White peers, even as early as preschool (Abraham & Seaberry, 2019; Attendance Works 2015; Race Matters Institute, 2013). LGBTQ students also face high rates of school discipline, including detention, suspension, and expulsion from school compared to their peers (GSLEN, 2016). Weak attendance policies and student perceptions that teachers do not notice their absence also contribute to missed school days (Balfanz & Byrnes; Sundius & Farneth 2008a).
- **Involvement with Juvenile Justice:** Students who are suspended from school are also more likely to be involved with juvenile justice and often further miss school while being detained, going to court, and transitioning back into school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, Abraham & Seaberry, 2019).

### MESOSYSTEM

- **Parental discretion:** Students may be absent from school because of parents' or guardians' lack of understanding of the importance and value of school attendance (Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2017; Attendance Works 2014). Especially at the pre-K and kindergarten level, parents might consider schooling an extension of daycare (Chang & Romero, 2008). Parents may also not have an understanding of school attendance policies and compulsory education laws, or be part of a culture that believes that missing school is not a problem (Elrich et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2014; Sugrue, Zuel, & LaLiberte, n.d).
- **Cultural and Linguistic Barriers:** Cultural and language barriers may also be an impediment for families - who themselves may have little prior experience with formal school - to be involved in school and to communicate with teachers. This can be further exacerbated by limited outreach from schools (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Nauer, et al. 2014, Race Matters Institute, 2013; Sugrue, et al., n.d.).

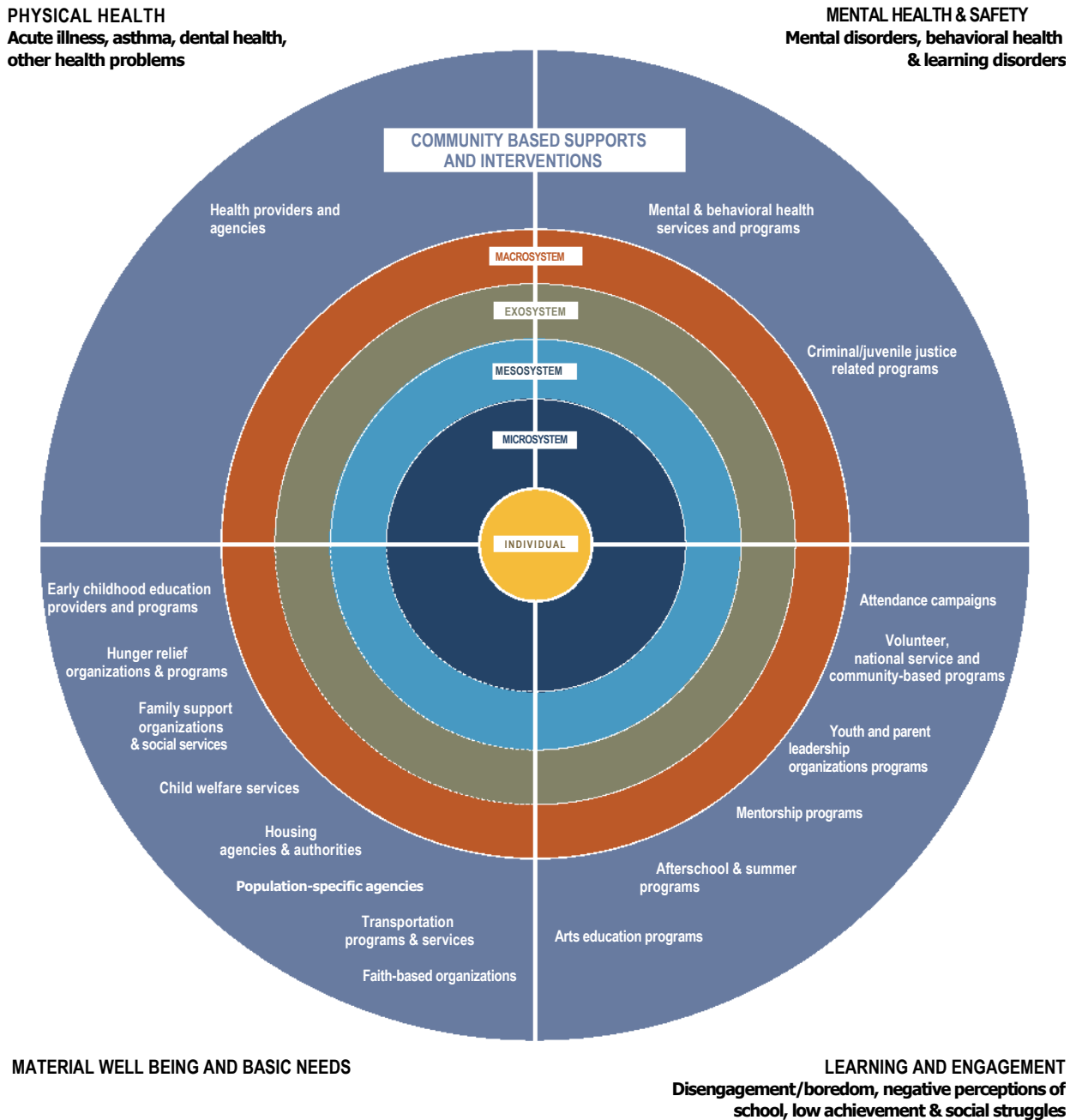


## MACROSYSTEM

- **Beliefs about schooling:** Absenteeism in school can also be due to conflicts between the cultural context of ethnic communities and the dominant cultural context in the U.S., such as different conceptions of time and lateness, or family priorities to return to their home countries for weeks or months for family events or visits (Attendance Works, 2015; Nauer et al., 2014; Sugrue, et al., n.d). In high poverty schools, missing school days can become so commonplace that it can become a 'norm' passed on to each incoming class (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Research with immigrant parents also reveals that parents have differing childrearing practices and culturally-based ideas about preparing children for school success, but schools often do not build upon these approaches (Race Matters Institute, 2013).

**WHAT SUPPORTS OR INTERVENTIONS HELP STUDENTS ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL?**

**FIGURE 4: SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS TO SUPPORT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**



## **COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

- Successful and promising practices for reducing rates of chronic absenteeism include the development of comprehensive multi-sector approaches and collaboration between schools, families, and community partnerships to improve outcomes for children and families (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang, Russell-Tucker & Sullivan, 2016; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Chang & Romero 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2008).
- Since absenteeism is often an intensely local issue and requires locally-informed solutions, local funders, such as community foundations and family foundations focused on a particular geographic area, are particularly well-positioned to make a difference (Chang, 2017). The factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism often overlap with problems that donors and foundations are often already working to solve (Attendance Works, 2018).
- There is a robust evidence-based body of literature that focuses on school-based interventions, services and programs for reducing chronic absenteeism, but there is no roadmap for effective or evidence-based community strategies. However, community-based organizations can play a key role in addressing many of the drivers of chronic absenteeism. In particular, schools in high-poverty districts benefit from strong relationships with community-based organizations (Nauer, White & Yerneni, 2008).
- Once chronic absenteeism is identified as a significant issue at the school or district level, it can be significantly reduced, and strategies to reduce absenteeism also have important benefits for the wider community (Attendance Works, 2018).
- Philanthropic foundations and funders in particular can make a difference through building public awareness, promoting data-driven solutions, and encouraging grantees to use absenteeism as an accountability metric (Attendance Works, 2018), as well as by convening strategic partnerships and investing in evidence-based approaches to improving attendance (Attendance Works, 2017).
- Chang & Guy (2010) highlight some approaches and entry points that different foundations have taken to address absenteeism, including supporting grade level reading, community health, and youth development, as well as relying on a strong local research and evidence base. The Princeton Area Community Foundation lists the non-profit and school partnership grantees of their All Kids Thrive Program that work to reduce chronic absenteeism by addressing school climate, student engagement, basic needs, transportation, behavioral health, and other drivers of absenteeism (PACF, 2018).
- New Britain, Connecticut, where 30% of kindergartners were missing school, is often cited as a success story in significantly improving rates of chronic absenteeism. With the help of the state and a local foundation, the district leveraged data sharing, family outreach, social workers, and community agencies to support families of kindergartners, including community partnerships ranging from the Department of Children and Families to the local Boys & Girls Club (Chang, Russell-Tucker, Sullivan, 2016; Jordan & Chang, 2015).
- Hartford Public Schools has also affirmed the need to create a system of supports to improve student attendance through interagency agreements and shared accountability that leverage resources and services that span across multiple sectors (public, private, service, faith, etc.) as well as to “share our silos of power, resources, and responsibility with one another in a collaborative manner” (Torres-Rodriguez, 2018).
- This section focuses on non-school/community supports and interventions that can help students participate in school and highlights programs in Connecticut and Greater Hartford. Organizations located in the Greater Hartford area are marked by an asterisk. Their work represents examples of community-level interventions (based on information available online) but doesn’t represent a comprehensive list.

## Physical Health

- Health Providers and Agencies: Health agencies can play a role in helping families understand when to keep students home due to illness, helping students manage chronic conditions, providing tele-health or out-of-school-hour appointments, and creating awareness among families about the importance of school attendance and health-related absenteeism (Attendance Works 2015, Chang 2017). In communities with low-income and working poor families, it may be important to expand enrollment in children's health insurance and also provide immunizations and comprehensive screenings for vision, hearing, developmental delays, dental screenings and preventive and restorative services (Chang & Romero, 2008; Healthy Schools Campaign, n.d.). Handwashing interventions programs (Nandrup-Bus, 2010) and school-based flu vaccinations (Keck, Ynalvez, Gonzalez, & Castillo, 2013) also reduce absenteeism, which may have increased relevance under COVID-19 pandemic conditions.
  - A study found that State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in New York State has had a positive and significant effect on statewide school attendance and reduced medical care access disparities between White, African-American, and Hispanic children (Yeung et al., 2010).
  - Baltimore Medical System operates eight school-based health centers; tracks and assesses health-related chronic absenteeism; and provides referrals for supplementary and remedial instructions, health assessments and screenings, and illness management services, in addition to connecting students with health insurance (Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign, 2012).
  - [Keep Flu Out of School](#) is a project focused on preventing influenza in schools by promoting access, awareness, communication, and education about vaccinations.
  - [Asthma-Friendly Schools Initiative](#) is a comprehensive framework and approach to manage asthma in schools and to keep students healthy in school. They support school health services, asthma education, high-quality physical education and activity, as well as a healthy school environment.
  - [\\*Husky Health Connecticut](#) (CT) provides low-cost or free health coverage for medical, dental, and behavioral health.
  - [\\*Child Health and Development Institute](#) (CT) seeks to build effective health systems and interventions in schools.
  - [\\*School-based dental clinics](#) (CT) are dental services providers located in Hartford Public Schools
  - [\\*Malta House of Care](#) (CT) mobile medical clinic is a corps of medical volunteers that visits neighborhoods in Hartford and serves about 2,200 uninsured adults.
  - [\\*Wheeler](#) (CT) collaborates with school districts to develop individualized in-district solutions for students with complex social, emotional, developmental, learning, and/or behavioral challenges, that allow students to remain in their home districts.
  - [\\*Hispanic Health Council](#) (CT) takes an evidence-based approach to addressing disparities in social determinants of health disparities affecting Latino communities.

## **MENTAL HEALTH, SAFETY & WELLBEING**

- **Mental & Behavioral Health Services and Programs:** More than half of the students in Connecticut with mental and behavioral health problems do not receive the help or care they need (Spencer, 2013), and providers have limited capacity and resources to meet the needs of people who are already diagnosed (Siddiqui et al., 2019). Data suggest that early identification and intervention, particularly through services in schools (including screening and referrals), hold promise for positive outcomes, especially for reaching ethnic minority students and students with less visible problems, such as anxiety and depression (Lawrence et al., 2019; Spencer, 2013). This is particularly true when programs are held on an informal basis, rather than requiring students to register, present insurance cards, and potentially face stigma around requiring mental health services (Nauer et al., 2018).
  - [\\*Child Health and Development Institute](#) (CT) seeks to build effective mental health systems including trauma-informed initiatives and interventions in schools.
  - [\\*The Village](#) (CT) provides mental health and behavioral health treatment and support services for children, families and adults, as well as youth programs.
  - [\\*My People Clinical Services](#) (CT) is a mission-driven, community-based social service organization that provides families with therapeutic, case management, mentoring, crisis management, behavioral, housing, and other services.
  - [\\*Ebony Horsewoman](#) (CT) provides equine-assisted therapy and equine-assisted growth and learning programs to empower youth to lead successful lives, deter destructive behaviors, build leaders, and increase academic achievement.
- **Criminal/Juvenile Justice-related programs:** Since truancy has traditionally been treated as a legal matter that can involve the justice and court systems, enlisting leaders from the legal system, including the state Attorney General and influential judges, can be used to encourage and promote positive strategies to address chronic absence as a way to prevent the need for more expensive court intervention and criminalization (Attendance Works 2015).
  - [Truancy Arbitration Program in Jacksonville, FL](#), found that rather than send a parent to jail (which might exacerbate the challenges of getting children to school), parents could be required to attend school with their child for several days as a form of community service and require regular school attendance as a condition for parole (Chang & Romero, 2008).
  - [\\*The Truancy Prevention Project](#) (CT), among other interventions and advocacy, runs a mentorship program with volunteer judges (Center for Children’s Advocacy, 2016).
  - [\\*Juvenile Justice Alliance](#) (CT) seeks to amplify youth voices and end the criminalization of young people.

## **MATERIAL WELL-BEING & BASIC NEEDS**

- **Early Childhood Education Providers & Programs:** Accessing early childhood services can be challenging for families who are vulnerable or experiencing homelessness (Shaw, Hirilall & Hale, 2020). Quality early care and education experiences can play an invaluable role in reducing chronic absence by orienting families to school norms and helping families make regular school attendance part of their daily routine (Chang & Romero, 2008).
  - [Center-based care](#) for pre-kindergarten children is linked with lower rates of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten (Gottfried, 2015).

- [\\*Care 4 Kids](#) (CT) helps low to moderate income families in Connecticut pay for child care costs, sponsored by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood.
- (See more under Family Support)
- **Hunger Relief Organizations and Programs:** Since hunger and the health-related consequences of poor nutrition can hamper children's ability to get to school, local food banks and welcoming/non-stigmatizing school breakfast programs can support students' school attendance (Chang, 2017; Anzman-Frasca, et al. 2015).
  - Universal school breakfast programs: Research shows that breakfast programs in schools can significantly contribute to reducing chronic absenteeism among students (No Kid Hungry, 2020, Sundius & Farenth, 2008b), and that weekend breakfast programs also improve school attendance (Fiese, Gundersen, Koester & Waxman, 2020).
  - [\\*MANNA Food and Neighborhood Services](#) (CT) provides basic needs to thousands of individuals through Community Meals, Community Pantry & Neighborhood Services, and Backpack Nutrition Programs.
  - [\\*End Hunger CT!](#)(CT) focuses on outreach, education, advocacy, and technical assistance to improve access to healthy and nutritious foods while also reducing food insecurity in Connecticut.
  - [\\*Knox Hartford](#) (CT) are community gardens providing healthy, safe, affordable, and culturally relevant foods for families.
  - [\\*Hartford Food System](#) (CT) focuses on understanding and addressing the underlying causes of inadequate community access to healthy food.
- **Family Support Organizations & Social Services:** Family-oriented social services and programs and social services offer important and valuable resources to families that can provide parent education, support groups, basic needs, targeted outreach, and referrals to other services, thereby helping improve family resiliency and attendance (Chang & Romero, 2008; Nauer, et al., 2008; Pampel & Beachy-Quick, 2013).
  - HOPE SF's Education Strategy includes school-based, community-based, and resident-led support. Their Education Liaison program hires liaisons from the neighborhood-based Family Resource Centers, who live in housing development communities and seek to increase family engagement, help families navigate school service systems, and implement educational activities (Hope SF, n.d.).
  - [\\*Connecticut Family Resource Center Program](#) (CT) provides support to families and contributes to school readiness, early identification of special needs, high quality childcare and other essential supports and services (Finn-Stevenson, 2009).
  - [\\*Child, Youth and Family Support Center](#) (CT) provides strength-based interventions for youth and families to improve school attendance and academic success as well as to divert participants from further court involvement, supporting job readiness and vocational opportunities, improving family relationships, and increasing resiliency (NAFI Connecticut Inc., n.d).
  - [\\*The Manchester Youth Service Bureau](#) (CT) provides programming such as early childhood services and teen programs and outreach.
  - [\\*Community Renewal Team](#) (CT) provides child care, housing, basic needs, mental health, and wellness services.
  - [\\*Hartford Neighborhood Center](#) (CT) offers camps, early education, and a food pantry among other services.

- [\\*NAFI](#) (CT) provides programming, consultation and individualized support services to youth, families, and adults in a variety of settings
- **Child Welfare Services** can align agency operations with geographic boundaries of schools to minimize the extent to which children’s involvement with these services disrupts their schooling. Neighborhoods for Kids in San Diego assigned social workers to schools and developed “Way Station” foster homes that house children near schools in the geographic areas with the highest levels of child abuse for up to 30 days until a placement is found to keep the child in the same school (Chang & Romero, 2008).
  - [FosterEd](#) supports students who come into contact with the child welfare and justice systems to ensure equitable opportunities for children and youth through research, policy and programs. In Indiana, family case managers and education liaisons work in partnership with a range of stakeholders to support students and families to improve educational opportunities and outcomes (Yoder, 2012).
- **Housing Agencies and Authorities:** Housing authorities are also in a unique position to support educators, low-income students, and their caregivers to address housing instability and the barriers to school participation (Leopold & Simington, 2015).
  - [Housing & Education Partnerships](#) is a study that describes the partnership between the housing authority and school district in New Haven, Connecticut by providing housing assistance, case management and other wraparound educational support (Leopold & Simington, 2015).
  - [Grade Level Reading](#) (2020) briefly describes ‘Housing Bright Spots’ -- collaborations between housing authorities and schools in eight different states in communities with high rates of absenteeism.
  - [\\*Hands On Hartford Housing](#) (CT) provides safe and affordable supportive housing and related support services for individuals and families with serious health issues.
  - [\\*Partnership for Strong Communities](#) (CT) is a statewide nonprofit policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ending homelessness, expanding affordable housing, and building strong communities in Connecticut.
  - [\\*Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness](#) (CT) provides a number of safety programs, services for homeless youth and improves the capacity of communities to meet the needs of youth.
- **Population-Specific Agencies:** Specialized agencies and services can be important resources to provide support, programs, advocacy, information, and services. They also can ensure that attendance strategies are appropriate for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, families with disabilities, LGBTQ families, and other specialized populations.
  - [\\*True Colors Sexual Minority Youth & Family Services](#) (CT) provides mentoring and youth leadership development, among other programs.
  - [\\*After School Academy for English Learners](#) (CT) at the Hartford Public Library serves immigrant, migrant, and refugee teens.
  - [\\*The Bridging Boundaries Arts Intervention Program](#) (CT) at Judy Dworin Performance Project helps incarcerated individuals and their families.
  - [\\*Horizons Summer Camp](#) (CT) offers out-of-school summer programming for students with special needs
  - [\\*HARC](#) (CT) provides a summer program and services for people with intellectual disabilities.

- **Transportation Programs & Services:** Transportation is an important resource that families rely on to ensure that students can get to school (Gottfreid, 2017). Improving the safety, reliability, and ease of transportation to and from school can be a way to alleviate a significant barrier that students and families face in getting to school (Sundius & Farneth 2008a).
  - [Safe Routes to School](#) uses education, engineering, and enforcement tools that encourage students to walk and bicycle to school and create safe routes for doing so. The [\\*Connecticut](#) program funds a variety of programs such as building safer street crossings and establishes programs that encourage children and their parents to walk and bicycle safely to school.
  - [Student Pass Program](#) in Minneapolis, MN provides high school students with unlimited ride passes, and has been shown to have benefits for student attendance, access after school learning opportunities outside school, saving time for families, and equity benefits for low income families (Fan & Das, 2015)
  - [Walking School Bus Programs](#) were found by a pilot study to have promising effects among urban, low-income elementary school students in supporting students to walk safely to school (Mendoza, Levinger & Johnston, 2009).
    - [\\*Injury Free Coalition for Kids of Hartford](#) (CT) operates a walking school bus program.
- **Faith-based organizations:** Local faith-based organizations and congregations are well-positioned to help with attendance issues, because families often turn to them for guidance on parenting as well as material needs. Faith-based organizations may already work to solve problems such as unstable housing, violence, insufficient health and mental health care access, or family stressors that drive chronic absenteeism.
  - The [\\*Faith-Based and Community Leadership Advisory Group](#) (CT) partners with Hartford Public Schools to identify and highlight issues of concern, enlist and enable the support of stakeholders for district initiatives, serve as ambassadors in the community, and collaborate with the district on solutions (Hartford Public Schools, 2020).

## **LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT**

- **Mentorship programs:** Research shows that supportive peer & adult relationships in schools and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors measurably reduces students' chronic absenteeism (Calderon, 2011; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).
  - [Check & Connect](#) is a dropout prevention strategy that relies on close monitoring of school performance, mentoring, case management, and other supports, and has been shown to have positive effects on helping students stay in school (What Works ClearingHouse, 2015).
    - The [\\*Urban League of Greater Hartford \(CT\)'s Aspire Local High School Impact Initiative](#) has enabled dropout prevention services in Hartford Public High School (HPHS) for 9th and 10th grade students using the Check and Connect Model.
  - [Success Mentors](#) has been implemented in NYC as the largest in-school mentoring program using three models — internal (school staff), external (non-profit partners) and peer-based. It has had, among other effects, an impact on reducing absenteeism in most schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, n.d).
  - [TeamMates](#) is a community volunteer mentor program that, among other things, improves students' engagement and attendance in school (Calderon, 2011).
  - [\\*ConnectiKids](#) (CT) is a youth development nonprofit organization that includes tutoring and mentoring, summer programs, and arts enrichment.



- **Afterschool & Summer Programs:** Research shows that high-quality and intentional afterschool & summer programs can increase student engagement; foster positive, caring and stable adult and peer relationships; and reduce the number of missed school days (Attendance Works, n.d.; Chang & Jordan, 2013; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Lowe Vandell, 2013; Sundius & Farenth, 2008b).
  - [\\*Compass Youth Collaborative](#) (CT) uses afterschool and summer programs to re-engage youth in their school, family, and community; contribute to students' academic success; and help families navigate challenging social and economic obstacles. In addition, they provide crisis intervention, court support services, mental health referral, case management, and drop-out intervention among other services.
  - [\\*Summer Youth Employment & Learning Program](#) (CT) at the Center for Latino Progress provides Hartford's youth the Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program. This program offers a structured, tiered approach to "learning and working."
  - [\\*Summer Bridge](#) (CT) seeks to curb chronic absenteeism by offering cash to students who attend a new high school summer preparatory program (Capital Workforce Partners, 2019).
- [\\*GForce Studio](#) (CT) offers a therapeutic martial arts and youth development program that helps students develop physical and academic skills as well as self-trust and confidence.
- **Attendance Campaigns:** Attendance campaigns or issue-specific campaigns (such as health-related absenteeism or educating parents about the importance of attendance) have been used by states and districts to combat chronic absenteeism during attendance awareness month in September or through yearlong initiatives such as 'Every Student Present' in New York, 'Make Every Day Count' in Arkansas, 'Never Be Absent' in Abilene, Texas, and "Get 2 School. You Can Make It" in Cleveland, Ohio (Chang, 2017; Rafa, 2017).
  - [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#) is a national level campaign that mobilizes local funders and networks to support early school success for children from low-income families and to disseminate proven practices and models, including to decrease absenteeism (GLR Campaign, 2020).
    - [\\*Campaign for Grade-Level Reading in Hartford.](#)
- **Volunteer, National Service and Community-Based Programs:** Volunteer and national service programs are well-equipped to strengthen relationships among schools, families, and communities, and to provide individualized support and a range of services such as mentorship, arts, sports, afterschool, and summer programs. They are particularly important in schools and communities facing the unique challenges of poverty (Balfanz, 2013).
  - Some national programs that effectively address absenteeism include:
    - [Boys and Girls Clubs](#) (Arbreton, Sheldon, Bradshaw & Pepper, 2009)
    - [Communities In Schools](#) (Communities In Schools, 2008)
    - [Big Brothers Big Sisters](#) (Mitchell, 2020)
    - [City Year](#) (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2020)
    - [Local United Way affiliates](#) (United Way of Central and Northeastern CT, 2020)
  - School-based collaborations with community organizations such as [Crossroads](#), [Kidwise](#), and [Bridge Builders](#) in New York City offer different models for integrating a range of community-based services in schools (Nauer et al., 2008).
  - [\\*The Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford](#) (CT) offers programs that have positive academic and health impacts.

- [\\*YMCA of Greater Hartford](#) (CT) offers programs and activities that can potentially have academic and social benefits for students and provide support for families (sports, camps, childcare, no school/snow day programs, before & after school programs, health & nutrition programs etc.).
- [City Connects](#) provides integrated student support in schools and research shows that among other effects, it reduces chronic absenteeism (Manekin, 2016). [\\*City Connects in Connecticut](#) takes a case management approach and places coordinators in Hartford schools who work with teachers to provide individualized support to students, especially those who face most risks (Haywoode, 2017). This approach is shown to reduce dropout rates (Haywoode, 2018).
- **Youth & Parent Leadership Organizations and Programs:**
  - [\\*Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative](#) (CT) uses data and collaboration to empower youth, leverage resources, and build pathways for youth to succeed in school and beyond.
  - [\\*Urban League of Greater Hartford](#) (CT) offers youth education programs that help students stay academically and culturally engaged and get ready for college, work, and life.
  - [\\*Our Piece of the Pie](#) (CT) supports urban youth to develop personal and academic skills.
  - Other youth and parent organizations in the Greater Hartford area include [\\*Rise UP](#), [\\*Padres Abriendo Puertas INC./Parents Opening Doors INC.](#), [\\*Organized Parents Make a Difference](#), [\\*Hartford Police Activity League](#).
- **Arts Education Programs:** Arts education programs have been shown to increase students' engagement in school and to have positive academic and social impact for students (Bowen & Kisida, 2019; Thomas, 2016).
  - [Young Audiences New Jersey & Eastern Pennsylvania \(YANJEP\)](#) received a \$300,000 All Kids Thrive Grant Award from the Princeton Area Community Foundation through the All Kids Thrive initiative, which pairs nonprofit organizations with high-needs schools in order to fight chronic absenteeism (Young Audiences, n.d.).
  - [\\*Moving Matters](#) (CT) at Judy Dworin Performance Project brings collaborative movement-based residencies into schools and engages students in school participation.
  - [\\*HartBeat Ensemble](#) (CT) offers a professional paid internship in acting, playwriting, theater design, or stage management for young adults where youth develop and express their perspectives about social justice.
  - Other Hartford-area art programs include (but are not limited to): [\\*Arts for Learning Connecticut](#), [\\*Hartford Stage](#), [\\*Wadsworth Atheneum Community Arts Program](#), [\\*Real Art Ways](#), [\\*Charter Oak Cultural Center's Youth Arts Institute](#), [\\*Hartford Performs](#), [\\*National Theatre of the Deaf Immersion Program](#), and the [\\*Center for Leadership and Justice: Adventures in the City Freedom School](#)

Other organizations that can play a role in reducing chronic absenteeism include businesses, institutions of higher learning, and local governments (city, county, and tribal) that often work in coalition, collaboration, and partnership with community organizations such as the ones described above.

## **COVID-19 AND ABSENTEEISM**

- School closures and the transition to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted and exacerbated many of the challenges that chronically absent students and families were already facing.
- According to the CDC, key services (meals, other social, physical health, and mental health services, after school programs) for students have been interrupted; families have faced the economic consequences of the costs of childcare, lost wages, and lost jobs; student engagement with schools and peers are diminished (which could increase anxiety and other mental health and emotional problems); and some families do not have capacity for students to participate in distance learning at all (e.g., no computers, internet access issues) (CDC, 2020).
- As learning and development have been disrupted for millions of students, the pandemic has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put low-income students at a disadvantage relative to their better-off peers, especially the uneven access to the devices and internet access critical to learning online (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).
- Proving Ground (a Harvard-based program that helps school districts improve learning outcomes with data) found in one district that students were less likely to attend school virtually than they were to attend in *person*, and that students who were chronically absent before COVID-19 were unlikely to attend school virtually at all (Millward, 2020).
- Low-income and special needs students are experiencing the highest rates for absenteeism for online learning and the greatest learning gaps, magnifying already existing inequities (Goldstein et al., 2020; Kamenezt, 2020).
- While chronic absence has been waived as an ESSA accountability metric in response to the pandemic, monitoring and addressing chronic absence is more essential than ever (Attendance Works, 2020).

*“The COVID-19 crisis is sharpening the focus on inequalities that have always been with us, but now they’re in the headlines. Now it is more visible that food, safety, and connection are deeply intertwined with learning and opportunity.”*

– Joan Wasser Gish <https://cityconnectsblog.org/author/ash183/>  
(Haywoode, 2020)

### **What we know about absenteeism can help us understand and address COVID-19**

- While COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges, there are parallels between the current situation and other reasons students miss school that can give insight into how COVID-19 may affect achievement, including prior research on the effects of out-of-school time on learning due to absenteeism, weather-related school closures (e.g., Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans), and summer vacation. Projections based on previous research indicate that when students enter school this year, they may be substantially behind, especially in mathematics, and that students are likely to enter school with greater variability in their academic skills (Soland et al., 2020).
- Prior research also shows that reduced learning time has likely been an impediment to student learning and also affected the development of the whole child. Research on chronic absenteeism and on remote learning reinforces the urgency of providing support to children who are most vulnerable, because they are most at risk of becoming disengaged and dropping out of school entirely (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

- As schools have transitioned to distance learning, national organizations like City Year that have a history of success with attendance and know the value of personal connections in school, have turned their focus to family engagement, making calls to parents and students to check in on well-being, ask about obstacles to learning, provide technical support, and translate district communications into other languages (Millward, 2020).

**COVID-19 reinforces the need for comprehensive services and community partnerships**

- The COVID-19 pandemic school closures also reinforce the need for comprehensive services that are needed to serve students and families in varying circumstances and with diverse needs. While research on COVID-19 is limited, a [brief](#) by the Boston Center of Optimized Student Support highlights the strategies that policymakers and practitioners have quickly adopted to address comprehensive student and family needs to ensure their wellbeing, healthy development, and learning (Walsh, 2020).
- Massachusetts released this [guide](#) for addressing equity during the pandemic and emphasizes the need for districts to focus on equity concerns by addressing food insecurity and supporting students with disabilities, newcomer students, those with limited formal education, and students who rely on school mental health services (Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership, 2020).
- As many students may be facing greater food insecurity, loss of family income, loss of family members to the coronavirus, and fear of catching the virus themselves, prior research also suggests that understanding mental impacts and how best to support students' social and emotional needs after the huge disruption of COVID-19 will also be essential (Soland et al., 2020).
- Since COVID-19 exacerbates stressors on families, the pandemic also highlights the need for districts to coordinate with local providers and state agencies, work with shelters, housing agencies and the Departments of Children and Families, identify available resources for families, and establish shared systems for connecting students and families to statewide and community services (Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership, 2020).

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LITERATURE REVIEW APPENDIX A-1: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF KEY LITERATURE

CITATION	SUMMARY
<p>Attendance Works. (2018). Why Attendance Matters for Philanthropy. San Francisco: Attendance Works. Retrieved from: <a href="https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Philanthropy2018_final_print.pdf">https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Philanthropy2018_final_print.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Philanthropy</b></p>	<p>This report makes a case for why attendance should matter for philanthropy, arguing that addressing absenteeism is a cost-effective but often-overlooked strategy for improving school performance. Chronic absenteeism also represents both a symptom and cause of problems that donors and foundations are already working to solve, which are outlined here. The report highlights that chronic absenteeism is an attractive investment for philanthropy because it can be significantly reduced once identified, and strategies to reduce absenteeism also benefit the wider community. Funders with broader geographic reach can also support state and regional policies or initiatives.</p>
<p>Attendance Works. (2017). Leveraging ESSA's New Accountability Requirements for Chronic Absence: Investment Recommendations for Philanthropy. San Francisco: Attendance Works. Retrieved from: <a href="https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Leveraging-ESSA-BRIEF-8.pdf">https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Leveraging-ESSA-BRIEF-8.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Philanthropy, ESSA</b></p>	<p>This brief provides an overview of how funders can leverage the Every Student Succeeds Act's accountability requirements for chronic absenteeism. It also provides a helpful summary of investments to consider depending on whether chronic absenteeism has been adopted in a jurisdiction's ESSA plan, whether it is under consideration for adoption, or whether it is reported but not adopted. In particular, it calls for local, state and national grant makers to build public awareness, promote data-driven solutions, and encourage grantees to use chronic absence data.</p>
<p>Balfanz, R., and Byrnes, V. (2012). Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. Retrieved from: <a href="http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf">http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Drivers of Absenteeism</b></p>	<p>This report uses data from six states and provides an overview of chronic absenteeism as well as a comprehensive engagement with the drivers of chronic absenteeism. The report divides these drivers into three categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students who cannot attend school due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work or involvement with the juvenile justice system.</li> <li>• Students who will not attend school to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment.</li> <li>• Students who do not attend school because they, or their parents, do not see the value in being there, they have something else they would rather do, or nothing stops them from skipping school.</li> </ul>
<p>Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign. (2012). State of Chronic Absenteeism and School Health: A Preliminary Review for the Baltimore Community. Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.esc-cc.org/Downloads/Absenteeism%20and%20School%20Health%20Report.pdf">http://www.esc-cc.org/Downloads/Absenteeism%20and%20School%20Health%20Report.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Health, Drivers of Absenteeism, Promising Practices</b></p>	<p>This review report was prepared by the Baltimore Student Attendance Campaign in partnership with Elev8 Baltimore, an organization that provides out-of-school time programs and school-based services, resources and support. This review examines the health related drivers of chronic absenteeism based on data from Baltimore city (2010-2011) but provides a comprehensive overview of the key health related drivers of absenteeism that have broad relevance. It also has a second section on standards for school health based on the CDC's Coordinated School Health (CSH) model to systematically coordinate programs and policies that create a comprehensive approach to school health. This review also includes promising practices that have been successfully used in Baltimore.</p>

CITATION	SUMMARY
<p>Chang, H. (2017). Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence. Everyone Graduates Center &amp; Attendance Works. Retrieved from: <a href="http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20170901-PortraitsOfChangeReport_FINAL.pdf">http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20170901-PortraitsOfChangeReport_FINAL.pdf</a></p>	<p>Portraits of Change suggests that a data-driven approach is essential to effectively address chronic absenteeism, and that the strategies developed to address absenteeism also need to be data-driven (for example, a school with 30 percent chronic absence may need more school-wide or community-wide strategies, whereas a school with five percent may be able to address it with targeted outreach). The report draws on inspiring examples from across the country (including New Britain, CT) that demonstrate how even high levels of chronic absenteeism can be turned around. It also discusses the vital role that community partners who are enlisted can play in this process.</p>
<p><b>Keywords: Community Partners, Promising Practices</b></p>	
<p>Chang, H. &amp; Guy, C. (2010). Being There is Half the Battle: Chronic Absenteeism in Early Grades. Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families. Retrieved from: <a href="https://attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/article.pdf">https://attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/article.pdf</a></p>	<p>This article highlights the need for funders to leverage data and understand various entry points into examining and addressing chronic absenteeism as well as family and community factors that contribute to absenteeism. It also gives examples of how some foundations have approached chronic absenteeism through grade level reading campaigns, community health or youth development. It also suggests that grantmakers can play a key role in gathering data that can be used to understand drivers of absenteeism and as a measure of outcomes.</p>
<p><b>Keywords: Philanthropy</b></p>	
<p>Chang, H. &amp; Romero, M. (2008) Present, Engaged, and Accounted For The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. The National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf">http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf</a></p>	<p>This report is a key piece of literature for understanding chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Using nationally available data, it synthesizes what we know about early absenteeism to determine the prevalence and consequences of the problem, provides a comprehensive overview of the factors (schools, families and communities) that contribute to absenteeism, and suggests some implications for action. The brief identifies four effective areas of action as monitoring absenteeism, building strong school community partnerships, embedding chronic early absence into existing initiatives, and research.</p>
<p><b>Keywords: Drivers of Absenteeism, Early Absenteeism, Community Partners</b></p>	<p>It also proposes a comprehensive approach to improving attendance through School and Community Partnerships that includes quality early care and education, preventative healthcare, responsive high quality education, family engagement, parent education, student incentives, early outreach and case management, and coordinated agency and legal responses.</p>
<p>Department of Education (2016). Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools. Retrieved June 16, 2020, from <a href="https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html">https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html</a></p>	<p>The Department of Education website provides a snapshot of chronic absenteeism in the United States using 2015-16 data, defining chronic absenteeism as missing 15 or more days of school in a year. Interactive graphs and charts show demographic trends and disparities in rates of chronic absenteeism by race and ethnicity, gender, language status, disability status, school level and geography.</p>
<p><b>Keywords: Data, Demographic Disparities</b></p>	



CITATION	SUMMARY
<p>Epstein, J. L. &amp; Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Present and accounted for: partnership effects on student attendance. <i>The Journal of Educational Research</i>, 95, 308 – 318.</p> <p><b>Keywords: Community Partners, Promising Practices</b></p>	<p>This longitudinal study specifically examines how family–school–community partnerships may contribute to reducing chronic absenteeism and indicates that schools may be able to increase student attendance in elementary school by implementing specific family and community involvement activities. The practices that were meaningful in both increasing daily student attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism included: awards to students, communications with families, school contacts for families, workshops for parents, and afterschool programs. The authors also discuss practices that made a difference only for daily attendance or only for chronic absenteeism.</p>
<p>Garcia, E., &amp; Weiss, E. (2018). Student absenteeism: Who misses school and how missing school matters for performance. Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from <a href="https://files.epi.org/pdf/152438.pdf">https://files.epi.org/pdf/152438.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Data, Demographic Disparities</b></p>	<p>This report summarizes the extant knowledge about which students miss school and why, and goes on to examine how much school students miss, which groups suffer the most from chronic absenteeism, change over time and states with particularly high rates of absenteeism. Key findings of the research show that students diagnosed with a disability, students eligible for free lunch, Hispanic English language learners, and Native American students were the most likely to have missed school, while Asian students were rarely absent. The findings also show that children in 2015 were missing fewer days of school than in 2003 and confirm that absenteeism hurts academic performance.</p>
<p>Henderson, T., Hill, C., Norton, K. (2014). The Connection Between Missing School and Health: A Review of Chronic Absenteeism and Student Health in Oregon. Upstream Public Health. Retrieved from: <a href="https://docplayer.net/10046877-The-connection-between-missing-school-and-health-a-review-of-chronic-absenteeism-and-student-health-in-oregon.html">https://docplayer.net/10046877-The-connection-between-missing-school-and-health-a-review-of-chronic-absenteeism-and-student-health-in-oregon.html</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Health, Drivers of Absenteeism, Promising Practices</b></p>	<p>While this is a review of chronic absenteeism and public health in Oregon, it brings together a comprehensive breadth of literature regarding the drivers of chronic absenteeism including social, economic and environmental factors as well as health conditions. Approaching chronic absenteeism as a public health issue, the review recommends: ensuring chronic absence data is publicly reported and regularly available; using chronic absence numbers as one factor in allocating and coordinating health and social service resources; developing community-wide, cross-sector, and interagency collaboration; revisiting policies to support students; identifying challenges facing children of color and developing community-driven and implementing pilot strategies and evaluate what works best for different communities.</p>
<p>Jordan, P.W. &amp; Chang, H. (2015). Mapping the Early Attendance Gaps. Attendance Works &amp; Healthy Schools Campaign. Retrieved from: <a href="https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Mapping-the-Early-Attendance-Gap_Final-4.pdf">https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Mapping-the-Early-Attendance-Gap_Final-4.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Drivers of Absenteeism, Promising Practices</b></p>	<p>This report describes the what, when, why, who and how of chronic absenteeism, emphasizing the need to map early attendance gaps. In particular it highlights that chronic absenteeism starts early, health as a key contributor to absenteeism and low-income, American Indian, Black, Hispanic and disabled students are the populations most affected. The brief recommends 5 key steps: 1) Make the Case That Chronic Early Absence Matters 2) Map Chronic Early Absence 3) Engage Partners in Unpacking Why Early Absences Occur 4) Learn from Positive Outliers and 5) Embed Action into Existing Initiative. It concludes with a discussion about how various stakeholders across sectors can play a role in mapping and addressing the attendance gap.</p>

CITATION	SUMMARY
<p>Nauer, K., White, A., &amp; Yerneni R. (2008). Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families. Center for New York City Affairs, Milano the New School for Management and Urban Policy. Retrieved from: <a href="http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/NYC_Strengthening%20Schools1.pdf">http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/NYC_Strengthening%20Schools1.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Drivers of Absenteeism, Promising Practices</b></p>	<p>This report on chronic absenteeism in New York City's schools examines chronic absenteeism data and offers an assessment of chronic absenteeism in the early grades and explores effective school- and community-based counter strategies that might benefit families while improving attendance. The report offers three case studies in particular of community-based organizations: Crossroads, Bridge Builders and Kidwise, that provide a rich picture of the ways in which community partners have worked to engage families, offered them support, and identified what their students and families need, which can contribute to reducing chronic absenteeism. Along with a set of recommendations, the authors suggest an approach for targeting schools with the greatest need, including supporting practical assessments of the problem and effective working partnerships between principals and skilled community-based organizations.</p>
<p>PACF. (2018, December 04). Princeton Area Community Foundation's All Kids Thrive Program Grants \$3 Million To Keep Kids in School. Retrieved July 1, 2020, from <a href="https://pacf.org/princeton-area-community-foundations-all-kids-thrive-program-grants-3-million-to-keep-kids-in-school/">https://pacf.org/princeton-area-community-foundations-all-kids-thrive-program-grants-3-million-to-keep-kids-in-school/</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Philanthropy, Community Partners</b></p>	<p>This news article announces the recipients of the Princeton Area Community Foundation's All Kids Thrive Program to 10 school and non-profit partnerships that were each awarded \$300,000 over a five-year period. Each partnership takes a different approach that was informed by a \$12,500 planning grant used to conduct focus groups with students, parents and educators to learn more about the causes of absenteeism in the region. The partnerships include interventions such as creating laundry facilities, providing volunteer translators for parents; developing personalized plans for chronically ill students, school breakfast programs, sustaining positive school environments through climate teams, establishing mentorship programs, integrating arts and theater in school, among others.</p>
<p>Race Matters Institute. (2013). Race Matters in Early School Attendance. Retrieved from: <a href="https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Early-School-Attendance.pdf">https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Early-School-Attendance.pdf</a></p> <p><b>Keywords: Drivers of Absenteeism, Demographic Disparities (Race)</b></p>	<p>This report demonstrates how barriers to early school attendance are 'racialized', which means that they (1) disproportionately affect families and communities of color and (2) that these barriers result from (often reinforcing) institutional policies, practices and perceptions that maintain inequity. It also provides illustrative examples of racialized barriers and outlines effective actions that can be taken to close these gaps, including a short case study of the Oakland Unified School District. While this report focuses on early absence, the concepts and strategies outlined have much broader relevance and can be used to identify how it applies to absenteeism at other grade levels and in specific communities</p>
<p>Sheldon, S. B. &amp; Epstein, J. L. (2004). Getting students to school: Using family and community involvement to reduce chronic absenteeism. The School Community Journal, 14, 39-56.</p> <p><b>Keywords: Community Partners, Promising Practices</b></p>	<p>This study, based on longitudinal data, examined family and community involvement to reduce absenteeism. Results indicated that school, family, and community partnership practices can significantly decrease chronic absenteeism and effective practices that had measurable effects included communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors. These practices measurably reduced students' chronic absenteeism from one year to the next.</p>

**CITATION**

Sugrue, E. P., Zuel, T. & LaLiberte, T. (2016). The Ecological Context of Chronic School Absenteeism in the Elementary Grades. *Children & Schools*, 38(3), 137–145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdw020>

**Keywords: Ecological Model, Community Partners, Drivers of Absenteeism**

Sundius J. & Farneth M. (2008b). On the Path to Success: Policies and Practices for Getting Every Child to School Every Day. Open Society Institute - Baltimore. Retrieved from: [https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/4a1a9543-1e9a-4fea-b8ec-a65a6126d9f0/whitepaper3\\_20080919.pdf](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/4a1a9543-1e9a-4fea-b8ec-a65a6126d9f0/whitepaper3_20080919.pdf)

**Keywords: Community Partners, Promising Practices**

**SUMMARY**

This peer-reviewed article uses Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model to study key factors related to chronic absenteeism in the elementary grades and community case worker intervention within a truancy intervention program. Results suggest that a multilevel ecology of factors contribute to chronic absenteeism and an equally complex ecologically based intervention model is needed. This article is included here because it offers particularly rich qualitative insights, since the data were collected from interviews with community agency staff over a two month period.

Based on a case study of urban schools in Baltimore, this report is a followup report to *Missing School: The Epidemic of School Absence* and describes misguided beliefs about the importance of school, inadequate family support, pull-out factors such as family, work, or community factors, and push-out factors like school exclusion policies and a lack of academic, social, and emotional support in the schools as the factors that drive the absenteeism epidemic. The key sections of the report outline policies and practices that improve school attendance. It describes these policies under the broad headings of 1) making schools safe, engaging and attractive to all students; 2) policies that make attendance everyone’s responsibility; and 3) policies that eliminate push out practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW APPENDIX B-1: LEVELS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN CONNECTICUT

The following tables show the number and percent of schools in Connecticut experiencing levels of chronic absenteeism. Absence levels are defined in the following way:

- extreme chronic absence (30 percent or more of students)
- high chronic absence (20-29 percent of students)
- significant chronic absence (10-19 percent of students)
- modest chronic absence (5-9 percent of students)
- low chronic absence (less than 5 percent of students) (Chang, Bauer & Byrnes 2018)

**TABLE 1: WHAT IS THE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOLS IN CONNECTICUT EXPERIENCING VARYING LEVELS OF CHRONIC ABSENCE?**

CHRONIC ABSENCE LEVEL CONCENTRATIONS IN CONNECTICUT SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	PERCENT OF SCHOOLS
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	106	10%
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	122	11%
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	369	34%
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	318	29%
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	169	16%
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>1,084</b>	

**TABLE 2: WHAT IS THE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOLS EXPERIENCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM ACROSS GRADE LEVELS?**

CHRONIC ABSENCE CONCENTRATION AND GRADE LEVEL	ELEMENTARY	MIDDLE	HIGH	OTHER	TOTAL
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	27	6	62	11	106
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	61	20	36	5	122
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	208	81	62	18	369
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	223	62	29	4	318
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	97	21	39	12	169
<b>GRAND TOTAL (N)</b>	<b>616</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>1084</b>
	ELEMENTARY	MIDDLE	HIGH	OTHER	TOTAL
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	4%	3%	27%	22%	
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	10%	11%	16%	10%	
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	34%	43%	27%		36%
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	36%	33%	13%		8%
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	16%	11%	17%		24%

**TABLE 3: WHAT IS THE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOLS EXPERIENCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM BY CONCENTRATIONS OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY?**

CHRONIC ABSENCE CONCENTRATION AND GRADE LEVEL	>=75%	50-74%	25-49%	0-24%	Total
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	45	31	16	14	106
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	41	32	32	17	122
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	48	80	119	122	369
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	9	22	65	222	318
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	17	17	20	115	169
<b>GRAND TOTAL (N)</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>490</b>	<b>1084</b>
	<b>&gt;=75%</b>	<b>50-74%</b>	<b>25-49%</b>	<b>0-24%</b>	
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	28%	17%	6%	3%	
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	26%	18%	13%	3%	
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	30%	44%	47%	25%	
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	6%	12%	26%	45%	
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	11%	9%	8%	23%	

**TABLE 4: WHAT IS THE DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOLS EXPERIENCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM BY LOCATION**

CHRONIC ABSENCE CONCENTRATION AND LOCALE	URBAN	SUBURB	TOWN	RURAL	TOTAL
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	50	47	6	3	106
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	47	63	5	7	122
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	115	190	20	44	369
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	60	190	8	60	318
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	32	91	4	42	169
<b>GRAND TOTAL (N)</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>581</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>1084</b>
	<b>URBAN</b>	<b>SUBURB</b>	<b>TOWN</b>	<b>RURAL</b>	
Extreme Chronic Absence (30%+)	16%	8%	14%	2%	
High Chronic Absence (20-29.9%)	15%	11%	12%	4%	
Significant Chronic Absence (10-19.9%)	38%	33%	47%	28%	
Modest Chronic Absence (5-9.9%)	20%	33%	19%	38%	
Low Chronic Absence (0-4.9%)	11%	16%	9%	27%	

## APPENDIX C: PRACTITIONER REVIEW FINDINGS

We spoke with representatives of 14 nonprofit and government organizations in the Hartford area whose work addresses chronic absenteeism and/or school engagement. For additional information about these organizations, how they were selected, and the questions asked, please see Appendix A: Methodology.

A detailed description of our findings from these conversations follows.

### What do Hartford-area service providers view as significant community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism?

The drivers of chronic absenteeism most frequently named by practitioners were **POVERTY** (exosystem), **FAMILY ISSUES** (microsystem) and **SCHOOL CULTURE** (mesosystem).

Poverty and family issues were closely aligned; many (although not all) of the family-related pressures to keep students out of school were directly related to low family income.

School culture, and other school-related factors, was not intended to be the focus of the interviews. However, many interviewees chose to bring this factor up. For that reason, we are including school culture in our summary.

#### POVERTY (EXOSYSTEM):

Poverty was named as a significant driver of chronic absenteeism in many different ways:

- Many community leaders noted the stress on parents and families caused by a lack of reliable income, and how this traumatizes both children and adults and makes them unable to focus on more abstract goals such as learning and school attendance.
- Families sometimes rely on children to bring in income from part-time jobs or to care for younger siblings.
- When families lack resources to buy clothes, school uniforms, and school supplies, students are less likely to attend school regularly and may be sent home.

#### FAMILY (MICROSYSTEM):

Many providers noted that family issues are significant drivers of chronic absenteeism. In addition to the financial pressures on families noted above, other family-level drivers include:

- Families' lack of understanding of the importance of regular school attendance
- Adult family members' own negative experiences with school, leading to a lack of engagement
- Families' lived experiences not reflecting the value of education
- Fear, particularly by undocumented families, but also shared by many other immigrant families, of exposure to immigration enforcement
- Lack of supervision and attention to older students' educational participation

### **SCHOOL CULTURE (MESOSYSTEM):**

As one interviewee said, if the school climate is toxic, it reverses any progress that can be made at the community level. While all interviewees recognized that the Hartford Foundation was focusing on community-level drivers of chronic absenteeism and preferred to leave school-level drivers out of the analysis, many of them felt it was important to note the extent to which school culture negatively can impact attendance and engagement.

Ways in which interviewees noted that school culture affects absenteeism included:

- A lack of personal relationships between school personnel and students
- A lack of understanding among school personnel about youth development
- A lack of culturally competent teachers
- Student reports that the school feels like a prison - rules, uniforms, people “barking out orders at me”
- Limited time or no time for socializing and recess
- Schools’ focus on accountability and evaluation - not on education
- A lack of connection to school and teachers exacerbated by virtual learning
- Older students who lack credits being placed in classes with younger students, which leads to disengagement
- Students don’t see how what they’re learning in school relates to their life
- Students being treated as children even if they are in an adult role at home

### **OTHER DRIVERS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM:**

Service providers often also named individual-level, peer-level, and community-level factors as significant drivers of chronic absenteeism.

#### **INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS**

- Health issues, particularly mental health issues, keep students from school
- When students begin to miss school, for health or other reasons, they get behind in their classwork and then have anxiety about catching up

#### **PEER-LEVEL FACTORS (MESOSYSTEM)**

- Students feel self-conscious about their clothes, their shoes, and other possessions, and are embarrassed to go to school and face their peers.
- Bullying, as well as fear of being bullied, keeps students from school

#### **COMMUNITY-LEVEL FACTORS (EXOSYSTEM)**

- Transitions in housing, making it difficult to engage in new schools
- A lack of safe walking routes to school - several interviewees noted that the Hartford Public Schools changed its regulations around which students qualified for busing services, requiring more of them to walk to school.
- Crime and gang activity in students’ neighborhoods
- Fear of the police
- A lack of community involvement with and engagement in education
- As schools transition to remote learning as a result of COVID-19, a lack of Internet access and appropriate technology prevents students from attending school

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## What supports can community organizations provide to encourage school engagement and attendance?

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The people with whom we spoke are all already addressing the drivers listed above, through the work that their organizations are doing. They shared with us their thoughts about how their work can be more successful.

Just as families play a primary role in student attendance, staff at community organizations often stressed the importance of **working with families to support school engagement and attendance**. Some specific supports that they suggested include:

- Teaching families how to navigate the school system and advocate for their children.
- Providing information about education that is easily understood and translated as needed.
- Home visits to the families of students participating in programs, engaging the parents and talking with them about the importance of attendance. These visits should be conducted with respect - building relationships, engaging in conversation, finding out what barriers exist, and helping to address them.
- Connecting families to schools by offering community programs in school buildings, including before-school and afterschool programs, as well as having support staff housed in schools.
- Providing holistic support for families through family centers.

Many of the people with whom we spoke also recommended that **community organizations build relationships with schools**. Several of them spoke of offering programs that bridge the gap between school time and out-of-school time, and creating a network of support for students while also engaging them with school. They suggested that schools partner with them and with similar organizations to address the additional support that students need and that schools do not have the resources to offer. Some noted the importance of a point person at each school who can manage individual cases and connect students to needed supports, and also encourage them to stay in school in order to continue to receive these supports through the school.

People at some organizations spoke of building relationships between teachers and community organizations, helping support them in learning about youth development and creating trust, and sharing information about how to support students.

However, some others believe that the levels of trauma and mistrust inside of schools are too high for school-based relationships to be effective, and that supports need to be provided in other settings in which students feel more safe.

Another recommendation that we heard from community organizations is the importance of offering **integrated supports** to young people and families, with organizations partnering together to provide services, offering an array of programming, and addressing the needs of different age groups. "What if there were a program offering internships, child care, parent education, job search assistance - all in one place?" said one. Another noted the importance of reaching out to people associated with different service providers to help them understand the connections among factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, and giving them the opportunity to offer ideas and resources as well as partner together to offer supports. Many of the suggestions regarding family and school supports addressed above also incorporated this vision of integrated or collaborative service delivery.



Some other specific suggestions we heard include:

- A coordinated messaging campaign promoting the value of attending and completing school, perhaps with young people involved as social influencers
- Intervening with students prior to chronic absenteeism becoming an issue, addressing factors such as lateness or skipped classes with students and parents (it should be noted that the Hartford Public Schools has a program for this in place, known as Early Warning Indicators)
- Involving for-profit businesses with support and promotion of schools and school attendance
- Schools reaching out to community organizations for support with technology for remote education
- Community organizations offering employment opportunities as a leverage to engage students in learning
- Rewards such as gift cards for school attendance

Community organizations also noted the barriers to implementing the ideas they noted above. A primary one is lack of funding, and how cooperation among nonprofits can quickly become “cooptation” as they compete for funding from the same donors.

Several others noted that service providers often lack capacity to measure the effectiveness of their work, and to develop the skills they need to serve the community better. They noted that many funders prefer that funding go toward direct services rather than to capacity building within organizations.

Finally, the restrictions on program size and types of programming required to limit the spread of COVID-19 have been recent barriers to effective programming.

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### How can the Hartford Foundation be helpful in supporting organizations as they do this work?

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Many of the community organizations with whom we spoke were Hartford Foundation grantees, and had participated in previous convenings and programs intended to promote cross-organization collaboration. “The Hartford Foundation has been a beacon of hope,” noted one service provider. “Their funding, trainings, professional development...no one matches their commitment to young people and families.”

While people at these organizations recognized that the Foundation is already **promoting collaboration among nonprofits**, many noted it as an important practice to continue. Some specific ideas that they shared included:

- Supporting organizations in creating a developmental continuum of supports for young people - as they age out of one program, identifying another provider who can meet their needs and referring them there
- Requiring grantees to plan for connections with other programs as they serve students, as a condition of funding
- Helping organizations develop systems for identifying where and how students are falling through the cracks, and helping them access support
- Including the superintendent and other school officials in convenings to address school engagement and chronic absenteeism, case management and wraparound services
- Collecting and sharing data
- Outreach to churches and faith communities, who often have deep and personal connections to students and families

Another way that these organizations think that the Hartford Foundation can play an important support role is in **funding capacity building** among organizations supporting school engagement and attendance. The Foundation already provides grants that support capacity building for nonprofits; they recognized this and also had some specific suggestions:

- Support for young people of color in leadership positions
- Offering workshops that allow time for building connections, sharing best practices, and visiting successful organizations; giving community-based organizations the space and funding to work on this together
- Sharing the expertise and national connections that the Foundation has developed
- Develop funding opportunities that recognize that deep change is not realistic in a short time period, and allow realistic goals along with extended time horizons for adjusting course as necessary
- Supporting schools with building their capacity to identify and address barriers to school attendance and engagement

There were also some **specific services** that organizations suggested that the Hartford Foundation could fund:

- Juvenile case management, following youth who are truant (one community organization noted that the Foundation has funded this in the past)
- Continued and increased funding on programs that combat poverty, including providing basic needs, community development, and workforce development
- Programs that promote wealth-building and developing higher-paying jobs for people currently in poverty
- Workshops for young people that allow them to develop self-advocacy skills
- Promoting access to essential material, health, and functional supports
- Before-school and after-school programs
- A public messaging campaign around school engagement and attendance

Finally, some organizations suggested ways that the Hartford Foundation could be involved with **deeper structural changes to education**. They noted that the shift to remote learning occasioned by COVID-19 opens up opportunities for rethinking what educational engagement can look like. "Seat time is not an effective measure of learning," said one. "We rely on antiquated ways of measuring engagement and participation."

They suggested that the Foundation work with the state and with local schools to help develop a broader, more expansive set of options for moving through school, including asynchronous learning and adult education. The state also needs to develop new measures of engagement, with more of a focus on developing competency and less emphasis on attendance.

## APPENDIX D: INVESTMENTS INVENTORY FINDINGS

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving provided us with a workbook containing details of all of the grants that they awarded in 2019. We coded these grants according to whether they provided services directly related to promoting school attendance, or directly related to community drivers of chronic absenteeism as determined by our literature review and our practitioner review. We also examined grants to support organizational capacity, to determine whether these grants were awarded to organizations that provide supports related to drivers of chronic absenteeism. Our methodology section (Appendix A) provides more details of this exploration.

**What percent of funding for program support addresses community drivers of chronic absenteeism? What is the breakdown of funding among types of drivers addressed?**

Our literature review identified the following community drivers of chronic absenteeism:

- Children’s physical and mental health
- Material well-being (food, housing, clothing, other basic supports)
- Learning and school engagement

The practitioner review echoed these findings, and also noted the importance of other factors such as family engagement, youth development, community development, workforce development, and community safety.

Chart 1, below, shows the distribution of grants within outcomes portfolios<sup>12</sup> according to whether they have increased attendance as a grant outcome, address drivers of chronic absenteeism, or are unrelated to absenteeism. The “other factors” noted by the practitioner review - family engagement, youth development, community development, workforce development, and community safety - are included as “Other grants related to absenteeism.”

Chart 2, below, shows the distribution of grants outside of outcomes portfolios.<sup>13</sup> These grants include direct funding for programs and also support for capacity building. We reviewed the capacity-building grants to determine whether they were awarded to organizations whose work addresses drivers of chronic absenteeism, or to other organizations (see Appendix A for more information about this process).

Not included in either chart are donor-directed investments or scholarships given to individuals.

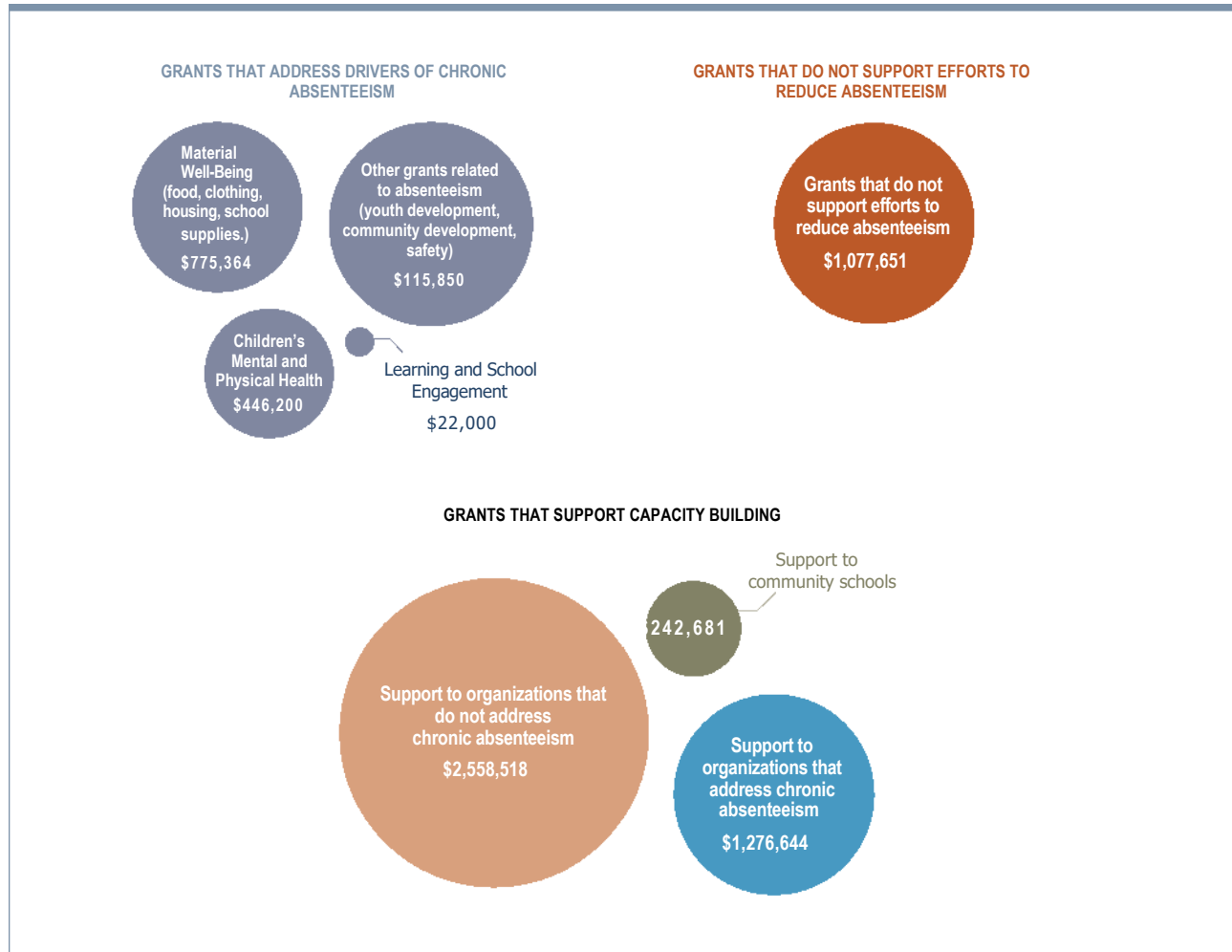
<sup>12</sup> The Foundation’s outcomes portfolios are: Basic Human Needs, Birth to Career, Community and Economic Development, Community Safety, Civic and Resident Engagement, and Strategic Grants to Arts

<sup>13</sup> Grants outside of outcomes portfolios include those that are part of the Nonprofit Support Program, Data and Evaluation, the Small Agency Program, Responsive Grants, and Summer Programs

**CHART 1: 2019 GRANT DISTRIBUTION WITHIN OUTCOMES PORTFOLIOS (TOTAL EXPENDITURES: \$13,061,793)**



**CHART 2: 2019 GRANT DISTRIBUTION OUTSIDE OF OUTCOMES PORTFOLIOS (TOTAL EXPENDITURES: \$7,514,908.00)**



Note that we coded grants related to Community Schools and to Alliance Districts separately from the others. These programs represent holistic efforts by the Hartford Foundation to address the drivers of chronic absenteeism within schools through a variety of supports. Because the intended outcomes of these programs represent several of the categories represented in the charts above, and because both programs represent substantial investments by the Hartford Foundation, they are depicted standing alone rather than subsumed into the broader categories.

The Hartford Foundation awarded grants to seven **Community Schools programs**, all embedded in public schools in Hartford, in 2019 (Chart 1), and also awarded a grant for the evaluation of the Community Schools program (Chart 2). Community Schools offer an integrated approach to service delivery, with schools and academic partners providing academic support, health and social services, and youth development and community development, to students and to their families. The Hartford Foundation was part of a partnership to bring Community Schools to Hartford in 2008, and has consistently supported the programs since their inception.

**Alliance Districts** are a state-level designation of districts targeted for additional investments because of low accountability scores on state-established metrics. There are seven Alliance Districts in the Hartford Foundation's service area, in the towns and cities of Bloomfield, East Hartford, Hartford, Manchester, Vernon, Windsor, and Windsor Locks. In addition to support from the state, these districts received funding from the Hartford Foundation in 2019 to implement programs related to family engagement, school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance.

**88%** of the Hartford Foundation's outcomes portfolio funding is associated either with directly addressing school attendance or addressing the drivers of chronic absenteeism, as is **52%** of its funding outside of outcomes portfolios. Overall funding associated with chronic absenteeism across all grants we examined is **74%** (this drops to 63% when donor-directed investments and scholarships to individuals are included).

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**What percent of funding given to develop organizational capacity was given to organizations that are directly addressing community drivers of chronic absenteeism in their overall work?**

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When we talked with representatives of nonprofit organizations that provide services to youth and families in the greater Hartford area, one theme we heard repeatedly was that organizations need funding and time to grow their capacity to provide services, and yet many grantmaking organizations prefer to fund direct services rather than capacity-building.

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving was awarding funds for capacity-building through investments related to nonprofit support, data and evaluation, small agency programs, responsive grants, and (a few) summer program grants. In 2019, about one-third of capacity-building support was awarded to organizations that address community drivers of chronic absenteeism. These were most frequently awarded to organizations providing youth development services, such as after school or summer programs. Other categories of support provided by these organizations included basic needs, academic support, and health.

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**Are there areas that we have learned from the literature review or practitioner review directly impact chronic absenteeism, but are not funded or only minimally funded by the Hartford Foundation? If so, what are they?**

**What are ways that the Foundation could reallocate funding to directly support chronic absenteeism?**

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Our literature review emphasized the importance of health, including mental health, as a major driver of chronic absenteeism. While the Hartford Foundation does provide funding for organizations that support children's health, Charts 1 and 2 above show that this is a small amount of funding relative to that of other categories.

The representatives of community organizations with whom we spoke most frequently mentioned poverty as a driver of chronic absenteeism. They reported that when families are struggling to meet basic needs, more abstract goals such as school attendance and completion become less of a priority. When families live in poverty, students also lack the resources they need to attend school (clothing, transportation, school supplies) and further, are often stepping into adult/caregiver roles at home. While the Foundation dedicates substantial funding to supporting the material well-being of families in the Hartford area, leaders of these community organizations report that there is a need for more funding in these areas. They also indicated a need for broader community and economic development, to build sustainable paths for families to escape poverty.

Finally, while the Hartford Foundation allocates a substantial amount of funding toward capacity-building for organizations, only about one-third of this funding goes toward organizations that provide direct support toward addressing the community drivers of chronic absenteeism. The Foundation may wish to consider increasing capacity-building funding to organizations that are providing services directly related to reducing chronic absenteeism.