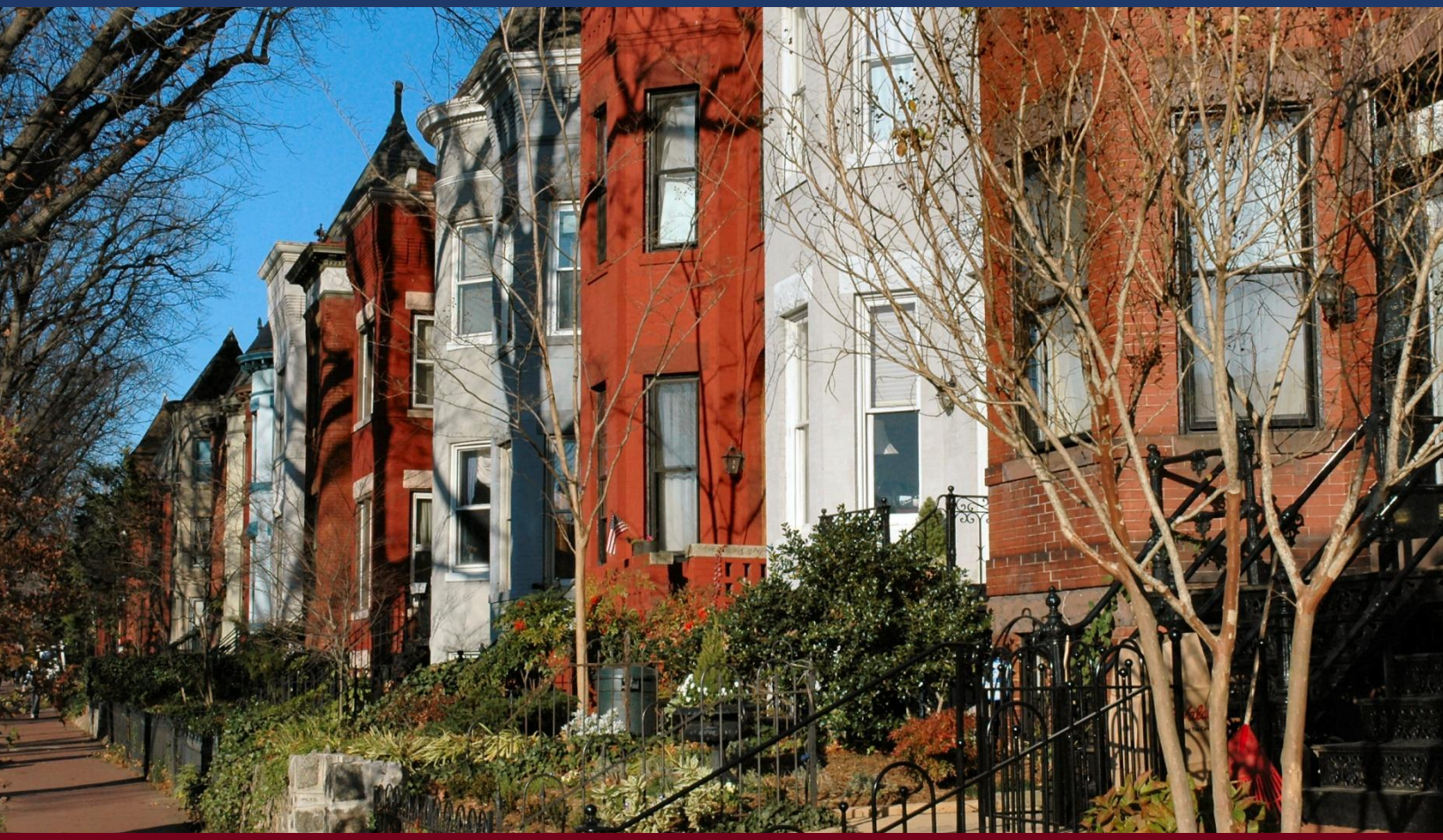
Variation in 2010-11 Truancy Rates Among District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) High Schools and Middle Schools



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Executive Summary

This report provides a snapshot of truancy in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) high schools and middle schools in 2010-11. School data on student absenteeism was combined with Census and crime data on school neighborhoods and students' residential neighborhoods. Key findings include:

- The average truancy rates vary so much between schools that the average across all students in all schools represents neither a typical nor representative school, nor a typical student. Informative analysis of truancy must focus on the variation among schools, and the truancy rates of particular schools.
- Across schools, about 2,500 high schools students were chronically truant. Truancy rates are very high at several high schools, with four schools showing chronic truancy for the majority of their students, and another three showing over 40 percent chronic truancy. **These numbers mean it is simply not feasible for the primary response to be based in the Family Court. Actually referring all of these chronic truants to Family Court would swamp the Court's resources.**

For high schools:

- Overall absences and truancy are so highly correlated with each other that either measure produces equivalent findings in comparing high schools. As a result, any of these measures can be used to explore why schools vary and the findings will be equivalent.
- High school (HS) absenteeism rates are strongly predicted by their students' 8th grade truancy. Therefore, most of the differences in truancy among high schools are not due to differential success among HSs in preventing truancy. Put another way, the continuation and escalation of truancy behavior from middle school to high school seems equivalent across schools. **This suggests that lowering middle school absenteeism may be the most efficient and effective approach to lowering high school truancy rates.**
- The high school's immediate neighborhood is a weaker predictor of truancy than the residential neighborhoods of its students, although violence surrounding the school is moderately related to truancy.
- HS truancy rates are moderately related to student poverty and poverty in students' residential neighborhoods.
- Crime in high school students' residential neighborhoods is moderately related to truancy.

For middle schools:

- Middle school overall absences and truancy are somewhat distinct.
- The immediate neighborhood of middle schools has little relationship to its truancy.
- Neighborhood relationships for middle school truancy are weaker than for HS truancy.
- Middle school students' poverty, residential neighborhood poverty, and residential neighborhood crime are moderately related to truancy, but at one-third to one-half the strength of HS truancy.

Residential neighborhood features are more strongly associated with truancy in HS than MS. This is consistent with a general developmental pattern: The family context and parents are the most important influences for younger children; with age, broader social contexts, including peers and neighborhoods, exert more direct effects on children's behavior. **Truancy interventions that are primarily family-based are more likely to prove effective at earlier ages, while truancy interventions at older ages need to also involve broader social contexts.**

Exploring community-level risk variables is an important addition to analysis of truancy data alone, but it only begins to explore the important risk factors for truancy. For example, family factors are widely believed to be important risk factors for truancy, and are central to two pilot interventions launched by the Interagency Truancy Task Force in 2011-12. The current report does not explore such family risk factors, although some "family factors" such as single parenthood are explored at the neighborhood level. Similarly, school factors such as teacher relationships are undoubtedly important factors for truancy, but were beyond the scope of the current study.

Introduction

Truancy is well documented as an indicator of high risk for drop-out and failure to graduate, as well as a risk factor for delinquency (e.g. Baker, et al 2001; Hawkins, et al, 1998; Herrenkohl et al 2001; Huizinga & Jakob-Chien 1998). Truancy generally refers to unexcused school absences. As a policy or legal matter, truancy is variously defined by localities, generally in terms of the number of unexcused absences that lead a student to be defined as a "chronic truant." Because of the variation in definitions, there are no national estimates of the number of truants. However, some large cities report thousands of unexcused absences on a given day (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent 2001). Truancy petitions filed in state courts rose by 69 percent from 1995 to 2004, to over 55,000 petitions (Stahl 2008).

In the District of Columbia, wide interest in addressing truancy is reflected in the Interagency Truancy Task Force, headed by the presiding judge of the Family Court and the Deputy Mayor for Education. The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) truancy policy as of 2010-11 was as follows:

> Parents of students with five unexcused absences will be requested to participate in a truancy conference. Elementary and middle school students with ten or more unexcused absences will be referred to the Child and Family Services Agency for suspected educational neglect. For high school students, ten or more unexcused absences per advisory, in any class, will result in a referral to the school's attendance committee for the development of an attendance intervention plan. Twenty five or more unexcused absences will result in a student/parent referral to the Office of the Attorney General or Court Social Services (DCPS, 2010).

DCPS schools vary dramatically in their truancy rates. For example, high school chronic truancy rates in the District range from less than one percent of students to over 60 percent. This wide variation means that average rates across all students fail to describe typical schools, and are essentially meaningless.

The District of Columbia Crime Policy Institute at the Urban Institute (UI) was asked by the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council and the Interagency Truancy Task Force to examine the variation among DCPS schools in truancy, and correlates (or predictors) of school's truancy levels. Why does truancy vary so dramatically among schools? What differentiates schools with high versus low truancy rates?

Generally, factors contributing to truancy have been conceptualized as falling into four domains: individual, family, school, and community (Baker, et al 2001). Individual student factors include academic challenges (e.g., learning disabilities), other individual risk factors (e.g., social and/or behavioral problems) and motivation. Family factors include poverty, single parenthood, mobility, child maltreatment, poor parenting skills, as well as issues more directly related to education, such as lack of parental involvement in education. School factors include problematic teacher relationships, deficient attendance policies, bullying, and lack of accommodation for diverse learning styles and special needs. Community factors include neighborhood disadvantages, including high levels of crime, drug abuse and drug selling, and unemployment.

To address these questions, this report relied on individual-level data on truancy for students in middle and high schools, which was supplied by DCPS. The report is based on absenteeism and truancy for the school year (SY) 2010-11, and provides a snapshot of truancy during that school year. In addition, by linking several years of attendance data, UI was able to examine both current absenteeism and truancy, and the absenteeism and truancy history of current students.

Census data and crime data were used to explore community level risk factors. UI geocoded schools and student residences supplied by DCPS, and then supplemented the DCPS data with U.S. Census data concerning the neighborhoods (Census tracts) of the schools themselves and of students. MPD data on neighborhood (police district) crime was also added. These data were then aggregated to the schools. In combination, these data allowed UI to explore several important community level risk factors for truancy that could help inform efforts to address truancy.

I. High School Truancy

Variation in Attendance and Truancy

With guidance from DCPS, the attendance and truancy data in this report are limited to students who registered and attended for at least 25 days and who did not turn 18 during the school year.[1] These same criteria were used in the recent report by the DC Office of the Inspector General (2012).

Across all of the schools, about 2,500 high-school students met the chronic truancy criterion of 25 or more unexcused absences. **Exhibit 1** displays **a**ttendance and truancy rates by high schools, using five different indicators of absenteeism and truancy. Two indicators concern days absent, whether or not excused. The average (mean) number of days absent at a school range from 5 to 52 days; the percent of students absent for at least 25 days – five weeks of school – ranges from 2 percent to 70 percent among DCPS high schools.

The other three indicators concern *unexcused* absences. Unexcused absences also show enormous variation, with school-wide averages ranging from 2 to 47 unexcused absences. For high-school students, 25 or more unexcused absences is the criterion for chronic truancy that can trigger referral to the Family Court. School rates of chronic truancy vary dramatically, from less than 1 percent of students to 66 percent. At four schools, over 50 percent of students met the criterion for chronic truancy, and at three additional schools more than 40 percent met this criterion.

The table also displays the percentage of high-school students with at least 10 unexcused absences, which allows for comparison to middle-school truancy rates, discussed later in this report. In SY 2010-11 10 unexcused absences was the middle-school criterion for referral to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA).

Importantly, all of these indicators are very strongly correlated at the school level.[2] The correlations with the HS chronic-truancy criterion (i.e., 25 or more unexcused absences) are shown at the bottom row of the table. Whether one considers all absences or only unexcused absences, and whether one uses a 10-day or a 25-day criterion, school rankings remain largely unchanged, and all of the relationships reported below are essentially identical across all of these measures.

Magnet Schools

The table also indicates which high schools are magnet schools. As might be expected, most of the magnet schools are in the lower half of the truancy rankings. However, as will be seen in the next section, the students in magnet schools were also lower in their truancy history from 8th grade.

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[1] Because attendance is not legally mandated after age 18 and because the data available for this report did not differentiate when in the school year absences occurred, all students who were already 18 by the end of the 2010-11 school year were excluded from this report.

[2] All analyses reported for high school truancy were also repeated with 9th grade students only. Results were substantively equivalent and are not presented here.

Therefore, much of the apparent success of the magnet schools can be reasonably ascribed to the selection process, in which magnet schools attract and accept students with low truancy histories.

EXHIBIT 1: HS TRUANCY, 2010-11

	Absences		Unexcused Absences		
School[3]	**Avg**	**% 25+**	**Avg**	**% 10+**	**% 25+ -- *HS Chronic Truancy***
Anacostia SHS	52	71%	47	90%	66%
Cardozo SHS	45	59%	42	80%	55%
Dunbar SHS	44	65%	37	87%	54%
Roosevelt SHS	41	57%	38	78%	53%
Ballou SHS	38	58%	35	84%	49%
Woodson, H.D. HS	31	51%	26	83%	43%
Spingarn SHS	41	60%	28	74%	42%
Dunbar Pre-Engineering	*25*	*33%*	*23*	*74%*	*27%*
Wilson, Woodrow HS	18	20%	15	42%	17%
Coolidge SHS	17	21%	11	40%	11%
Phelps ACE High School	*16*	*18%*	*11*	*39%*	*9%*
McKinley Technology HS	*11*	*10%*	*8*	*29%*	*4%*
Columbia Heights EC	11	10%	6	23%	3%
Ellington School of the Arts	*7*	*3%*	*4*	*10%*	*1%*
Benjamin Banneker SHS	*5*	*2%*	*2*	*1%*	*0%*
School Without Walls HS	*6*	*2%*	*2*	*1%*	*0%*
Correlation w/ Chronic Truancy (% 25+ Unexcused)	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.94	1.00

Note: Schools are sorted by the chronic truancy rates in the last column. Schools shown in red italics are magnet schools.

[3] The data of two schools was excluded. For the Woodson Business and Finance magnet school, the data set included attendance data on only about half of the reported number of enrolled students. Eastern High School was being reorganized, and in SY 2010-11 only had 12th graders; after excluding students who turned 18 during the year as well as those with less than 25 days of attendance, too few students' data remained.

Truancy History — 8th Grade

What explains the variation in truancy among DCPS high schools? We first consider student's history of truancy, as indicated by their absenteeism during 8th grade. This essentially shows us the degree of attendance problems that can be anticipated for this cohort of high-school students as they transition from middle school to high school.

Exhibit 2 displays the truancy history of students in high school in 2010-11, using the same absenteeism indicators as before, based on their 8th grade attendance records. The bottom row of the table shows the correlations, among schools, of the 8th grade measure with HS chronic truancy (25 or more unexcused absences).[4] These relationships are displayed graphically in **Exhibit 3**. For each high school, the absenteeism history (in 8th grade) of its students is displayed on the horizontal axis, with current absenteeism on the vertical axis. **Panel A** shows days absent, whether excused or not; **Panel B** shows only unexcused absences.

The absolute levels of absenteeism and truancy are considerably lower in HS than in 8th grade. In the figures this can be seen in the different ranges on the horizontal and vertical axes. However, the increase in absenteeism is relatively consistent across schools, by a factor of about 2.5.

Despite this change in the absolute number of absences, at the school level the correlations of 8th grade truancy history with current (i.e., high-school) truancy are exceedingly high.[5] The absenteeism history of a school's students in 8th grade strongly predicts absenteeism in high school, as can be seen in both figures. Total absences in 8th grade strongly predict absences in HS ($\underline{r}$ = 0.91), as can be seen in Panel A. Unexcused absences are also strong predictors, as seen in Panel B ($\underline{r}$ = .88). This greater spread in Panel B seems to suggest that the reported rate of unexcused absences is a combination of student absenteeism and how well a school and its parents distinguish excused from unexcused absences.

Exhibit 4 then examines the relationship between chronic truancy in 8th grade and in high school. While the criteria used differ by grade level, the high inter-correlation among these measures (see Exhibit 1) means that the results are equivalent when explored in different ways.

Use of these criteria, where each student is either considered truant or not, reduces the correlation somewhat ($\underline{r}$ = .85), as can be seen by the somewhat greater spread of the schools from the diagonal line. It also has the effect of grouping schools into one of two clusters, one of schools low on both truancy history and current truancy, and the other of schools high on both, while a few schools seem to depart somewhat from the pattern. No such departures were seen in Panel A of the preceding figure, which suggests that these departures are less a function of student absenteeism than of differences in practices concerning excuses.

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[4] If correlated instead with the comparable HS measure, the correlations are essentially identical.

[5] Note that these correlations are of schools rather than individual students. Generally, correlations between means (for each school) are higher than the same correlations at the individual level, because the differences among students within the same schools are already averaged out.

In sum, most of the variation between high schools in absenteeism rates was evident in their students *prior* to their enrollment in high school. What primarily differentiates high schools in terms of their truancy rates is their student populations' preexisting attendance inclinations, rather than how well the schools mitigate truancy risk.

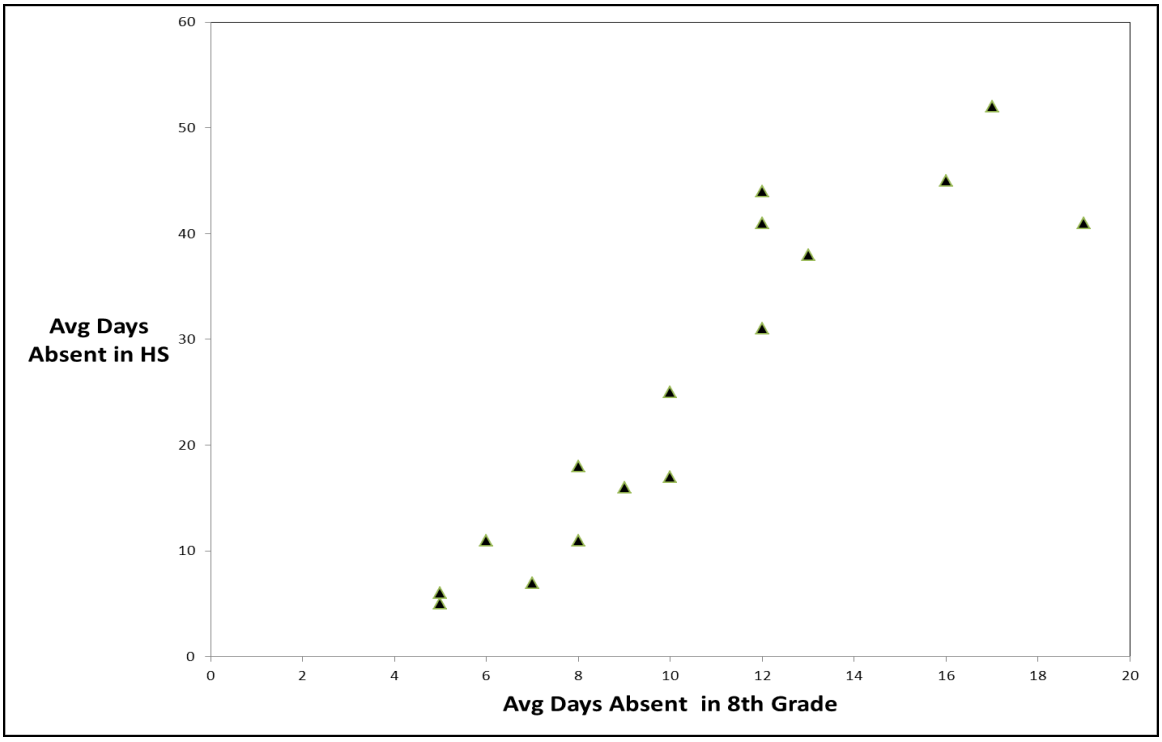
EXHIBIT 2: EIGHTH-GRADE TRUANCY HISTORY OF CURRENT HS STUDENTS

	CURRENT (HS) TRUANCY	8TH GRADE TRUANCY OF CURRENT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS				
	Unexcused Absences	Absences		Unexcused Absences		
School	% 25+	Avg	% 25+	Avg	% 10+	% 25+
Anacostia SHS	66%	17	23%	12	44%	13%
Cardozo SHS	55%	16	24%	10	33%	12%
Dunbar SHS	54%	12	13%	7	23%	5%
Roosevelt SHS	53%	19	28%	14	48%	18%
Ballou SHS	49%	13	15%	8	31%	4%
Woodson, H.D. HS	43%	12	14%	10	42%	9%
Spingarn SHS	42%	12	16%	9	37%	10%
Dunbar Pre-Engineering	*27%*	*10*	*6%*	*7*	*37%*	*3%*
Wilson, Woodrow HS	17%	8	5%	5	15%	2%
Coolidge SHS	11%	10	8%	7	24%	5%
Phelps ACE High School	*9%*	*9*	*6%*	*5*	*17%*	*2%*
McKinley Technology HS	*4%*	*8*	*2%*	*5*	*12%*	*1%*
Columbia Heights EC	3%	6	3%	3	9%	0%
Ellington School of the Arts	*1%*	*7*	*3%*	*4*	*10%*	*1%*
Benjamin Banneker SHS	*0%*	*5*	*1%*	*2*	*4%*	*0%*
School Without Walls HS	*0%*	*5*	*0%*	*2*	*2%*	*0%*
Correlation w/ % 25+ Unexcused Absences in HS	**1.00**	**0.92**	**0.92**	**0.88**	**0.86**	**0.83**

Note: Schools are sorted by the chronic truancy rates. Schools shown in red italics are magnet schools.

EXHIBIT 3: HS STUDENTS' CURRENT ABSENTEEISM AND ABSENTEEISM HISTORY

A. Average Days Absent in High School and 8th Grade



B. Average Unexcused Absences in HS and 8th Grade

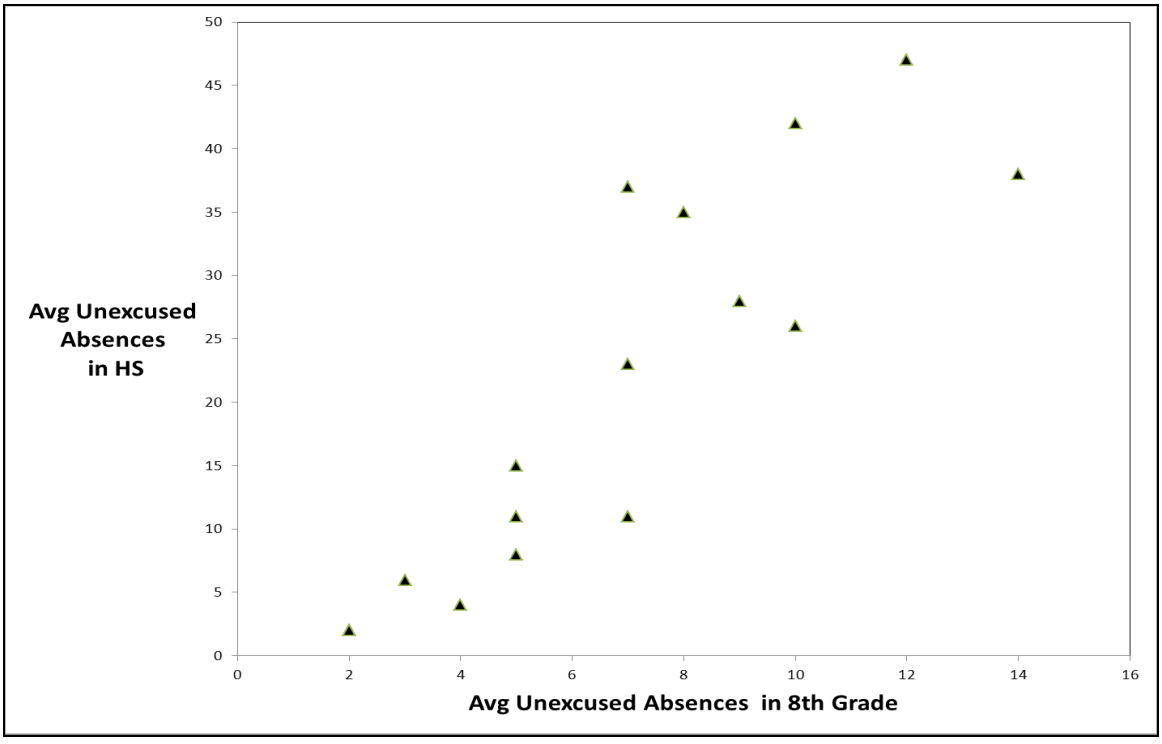
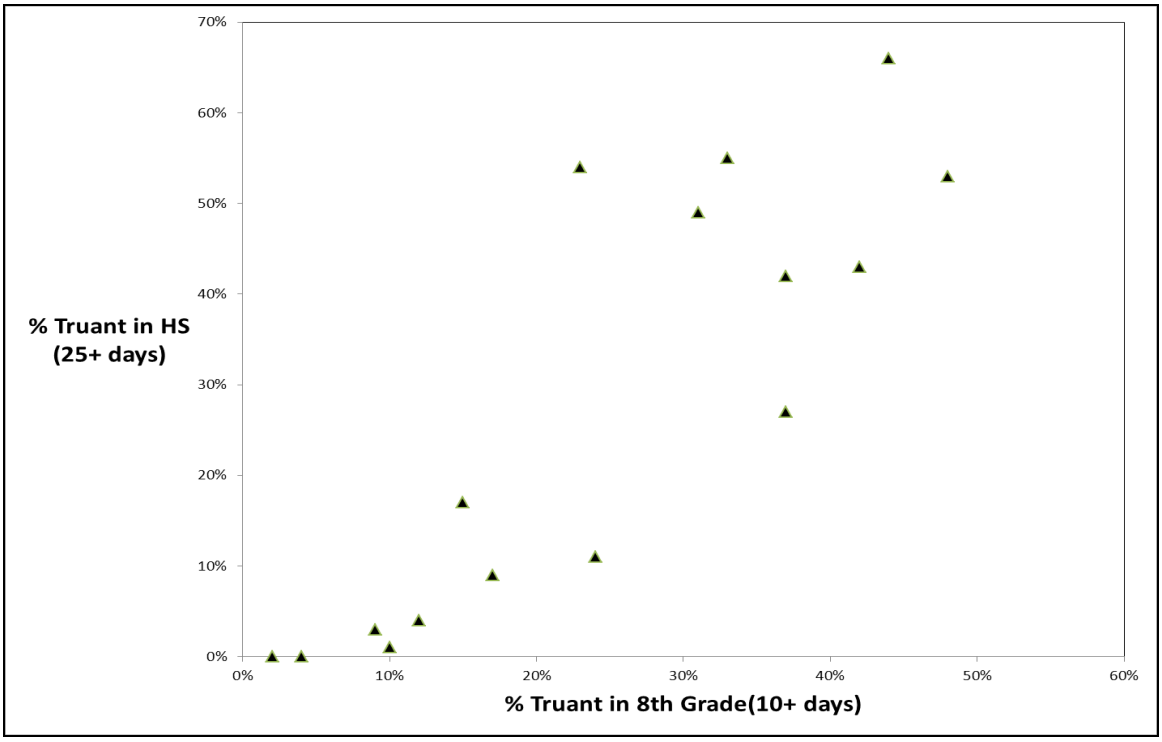


EXHIBIT 4: HS STUDENTS' CURRENT TRUANCY AND TRUANCY HISTORY



High Schools and Neighborhoods

The locations of the high schools examined are displayed in **Exhibit 5. Exhibit 6** then examines how the schools and their immediate neighborhoods are related to truancy rates; the correlations between poverty and crime with truancy rates are shown at the bottom of the table. Neighborhood poverty is moderately correlated with truancy (r= .31), as are violence and drug arrests near the school (rs = .43 and .41). School size (enrollment) has only a small relationship with truancy (r=.10); the three largest schools, with over 1,000 students, vary considerably in truancy.

EXHIBIT 5: DCPS HIGH SCHOOL LOCATIONS

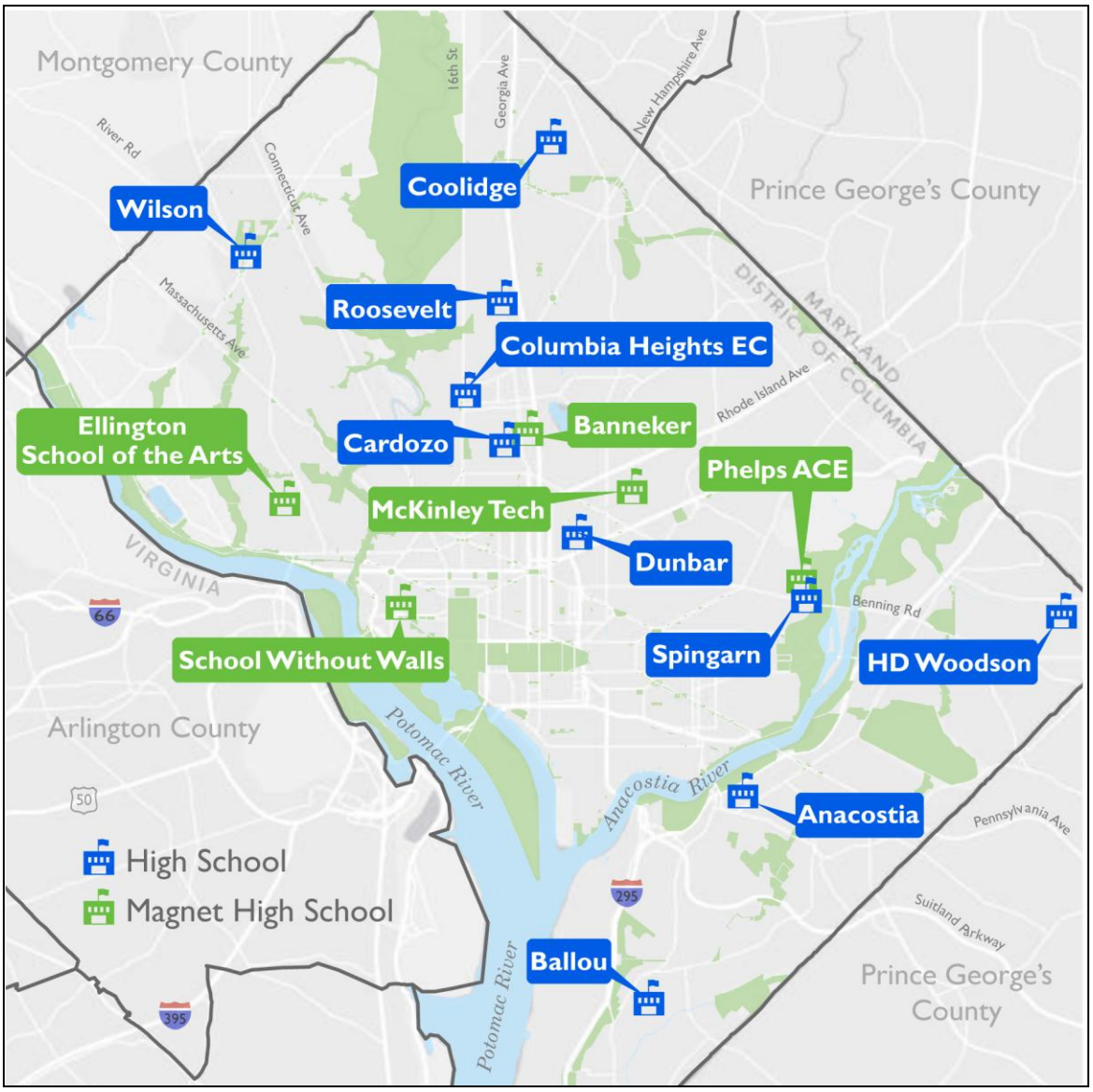


EXHIBIT 6: HIGH SCHOOL NEIGHBORHOODS

	Poverty	Crime		School Size
School	**% Families in Poverty**	**Violent incidents (Per 100K)**	**Drug arrests (Per 100K)**	**DCPS Enrollment**
Anacostia SHS	19%	1515	4960	905
Cardozo SHS	20%	1046	1877	631
Dunbar SHS	19%	2708	6407	714
Roosevelt SHS	28%	1879	4033	646
Ballou SHS	24%	1813	3698	1100
Woodson, H.D. HS	28%	1823	6966	518
Spingarn SHS	26%	1813	8704	551
Dunbar Pre-Engineering	*19%*	*2708*	*6407*	*91*
Wilson, Woodrow HS	7%	544	146	1534
Coolidge SHS	8%	660	508	689
Phelps ACE High School	*26%*	*1813*	*8704*	*300*
McKinley Technology HS	*8%*	*1662*	*2493*	*689*
Columbia Heights EC	22%	2104	2198	1285
Ellington School of the Arts	*12%*	*241*	*48*	*492*
Benjamin Banneker SHS	*32%*	*1283*	*4545*	*427*
School Without Walls HS	*NA*	*234*	*187*	*468*
Correlation w/ % 25+ Unexcused	**0.31**	**0.43**	**0.41**	**0.10**

Note: Schools are sorted by the chronic truancy rates. Schools shown in red italics are magnet schools.

HS Student Poverty and Student Neighborhood

We now turn to the residential neighborhoods of each school's students. Although many students live near their schools, either in the same neighborhoods or in adjacent neighborhoods, many students attend out-of-boundary schools. For example, in SY 2008-09, more District students attended out-of-boundary traditional public schools (37 percent) than in-boundary traditional public schools (30 percent) (other students attended charter schools; Comey & Grosz, 2011). As a result, students' residential neighborhoods are distinct enough from the school neighborhood to warrant separate examination.

Exhibit 7 displays student poverty rates and five types of neighborhood-level barriers to school attendance: poverty, crime, distance between home and school, percent of single mothers, and percent

of residents without high-school degrees. For each indicator, the average value of students in the school is shown.[6]

Most indicators show relationships with truancy rates in the direction expected (rs = .49 to .65). Schools with students from high poverty neighborhoods— and whose families are poor enough to qualify for Free And Reduced Meals (FARM)— have higher truancy rates, as do schools with students from neighborhoods with more violent or drug crimes, more single mothers, and more residents without high-school degrees.

We find that students' residential neighborhoods are more strongly related to schools' truancy rates than the schools' immediate neighborhoods. Truancy correlations with neighborhood poverty and drug crime are about one-and-a-half times as large as for the school's immediate neighborhood.

Average distance to school is negatively correlated with truancy. That is, schools to which students travel farther have higher attendance. This is largely a product of magnet schools, which have low truancy but are farther from student's homes than other schools.

[6] Student addresses were matched to neighborhood (or Census tract) socioeconomic and crime data. Students' neighborhood data were then averaged within a school. Socioeconomic data came from both the U.S. Census Bureau and District of Columbia Public Schools. Crime data came from the Metropolitan (DC) Police Department.

EXHIBIT 7: HS STUDENTS' POVERTY AND RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

	Student Poverty	Neighborhood Poverty	Neighborhood Crime		Other Neighborhood Barriers to Attendance		
School	**% Free And Reduced Meals**	**% Families in Poverty**	**Violent incidents (Per 100K)**	**Drug arrests (Per 100K)**	**Miles to School**	**% Single Moms**	**% without HS degrees**
Anacostia SHS	70%	32%	1758	3257	0.96	20%	20%
Cardozo SHS	65%	22%	1484	3200	1.03	12%	21%
Dunbar SHS	69%	26%	1808	4442	1.28	15%	19%
Roosevelt SHS	65%	16%	1268	2374	1.18	11%	20%
Ballou SHS	73%	36%	2049	3689	1.14	27%	21%
Woodson, H.D. HS	78%	29%	1888	4678	1.10	21%	21%
Spingarn SHS	67%	28%	1991	5038	0.88	18%	21%
Dunbar Pre-Engineering	*67%*	*25%*	*1609*	*3551*	*2.07*	*16%*	*19%*
Wilson, Woodrow HS	41%	13%	865	1527	1.76	7%	12%
Coolidge SHS	63%	15%	1101	1905	0.70	11%	18%
Phelps ACE High School	*68%*	*24%*	*1636*	*3480*	*1.47*	*16%*	*18%*
McKinley Technology HS	*52%*	*20%*	*1445*	*2911*	*1.94*	*13%*	*17%*
Columbia Heights EC	74%	18%	1335	2574	1.48	10%	22%
Ellington School of the Arts	*37%*	*19%*	*1360*	*2704*	*4.20*	*13%*	*17%*
Benjamin Banneker SHS	*53%*	*19%*	*1389*	*2696*	*2.11*	*13%*	*18%*
School Without Walls HS	*19%*	*14%*	*968*	*1592*	*3.27*	*8%*	*12%*
Correlation w/ % 25+ Unexcused	0.58	0.65	0.59	0.54	-0.62	0.54	0.49

Note: Schools are sorted by the chronic truancy rates. Schools shown in red italics are magnet schools.

II. Middle-School Truancy

Variation in Middle School Attendance and Truancy

Attendance and truancy rates for DCPS middle schools are displayed in **Exhibit 8.** About half of the schools are middle schools (MS), and half are Education Campuses (EC) that combine elementary and middle schools.[7] Regardless of the school structure, this report only examines the absenteeism of students in sixth through eighth grades.

The table displays three different indicators of current absenteeism and truancy. Across middle schools, the average number of days students were absent ranges from an average of 0 days to 20 days. About half of those days absent were unexcused; school averages of unexcused absences range from 0 to 12 days. The table also shows the percent of students who exceeded 10 unexcused absences, which ranges from 0 to 41 percent of middle school students.

While the average number of absences at a school was strongly correlated with the average number of unexcused absences at the school ($\underline{r}$ = 0.79), there was more variation between these metrics than was seen in the HS results ($\underline{r}$ = .99). This relationship is displayed graphically in **Exhibit 9**.

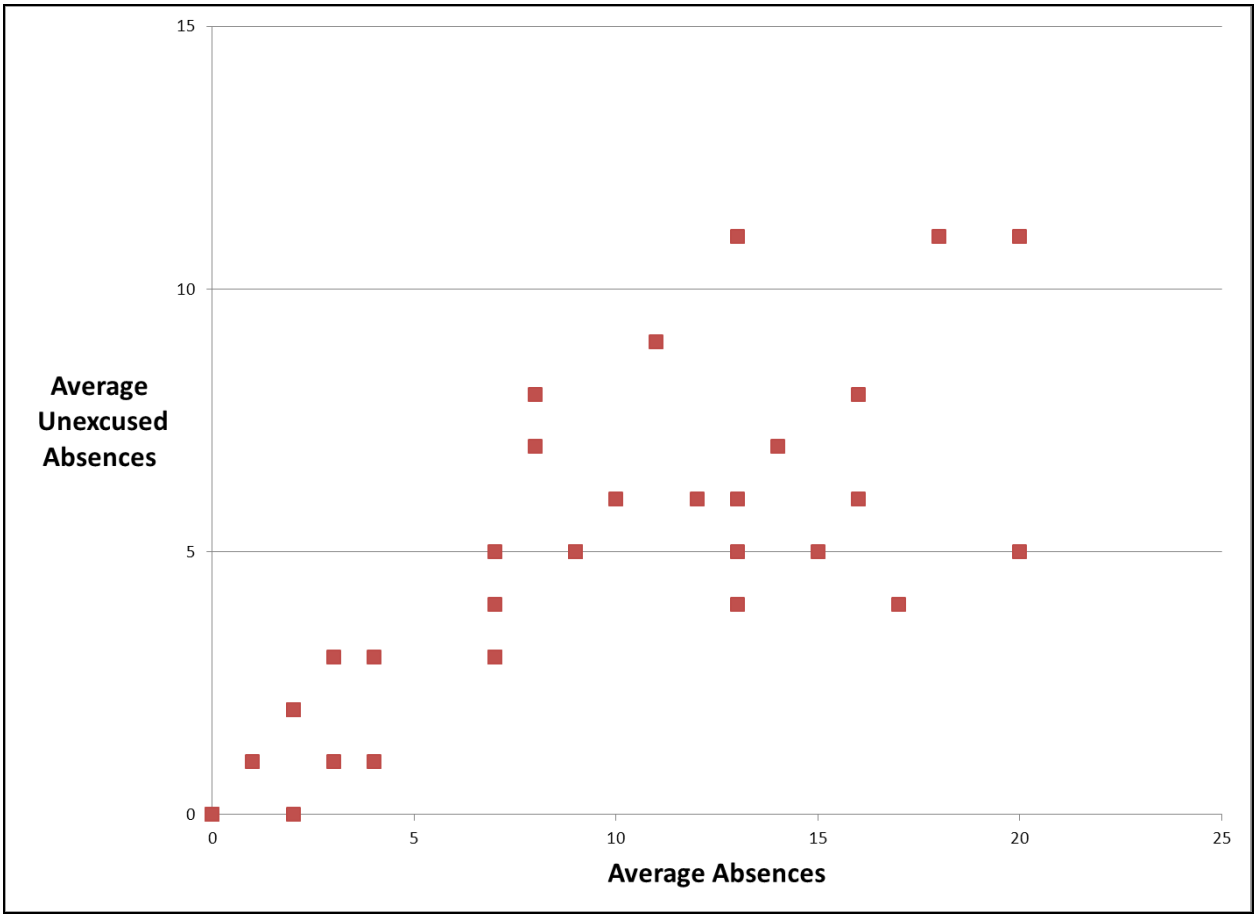
[7] ECs, with more grades, are generally larger than MSs.

EXHIBIT 8: MS TRUANCY, 2010-11

	Absences	Unexcused Absences	
School	**Avg Days**	**Avg Days**	**% 10+**
Eliot-Hine MS	20	11	44%
Wheatley EC	18	11	44%
LaSalle-Backus EC	13	11	41%
Whittier EC	11	9	39%
Kelly Miller MS	16	8	37%
Langdon EC	8	8	31%
Jefferson MS	14	7	28%
Brookland EC at Bunker Hill	13	6	23%
Johnson, John Hayden MS	16	6	23%
Kramer MS	8	7	20%
West EC	9	5	20%
Columbia Heights EC	9	5	17%
Emery EC	10	6	17%
Truesdell EC	12	6	16%
Sousa MS	20	5	15%
Hart MS	13	5	14%
Shaw MS at Garnet-Patterson	15	5	14%
Stuart-Hobson Middle School	7	5	14%
Takoma EC	7	4	12%
Browne EC	3	3	7%
Francis - Stevens EC	13	4	7%
Oyster-Adams Bilingual EC	7	3	6%
Winston EC	2	2	5%
Deal MS	7	3	4%
Walker-Jones EC	4	3	4%
MacFarland MS (Lincoln Hill)	17	4	3%
Burroughs EC	4	1	2%
Hardy MS	1	1	1%
Ron Brown MS	3	1	1%
Brightwood EC	0	0	0%
Noyes EC	2	0	0%
Raymond EC	2	2	0%
Shaed EC	0	0	0%
Correlation w/ % 10+ unexcused	**0.70**	**0.96**	**1.00**

Note: Schools are sorted by the chronic truancy rates in the last column.

EXHIBIT 9: MS AVERAGE ABSENCES AND AVERAGE *UNEXCUSED* ABSENCES

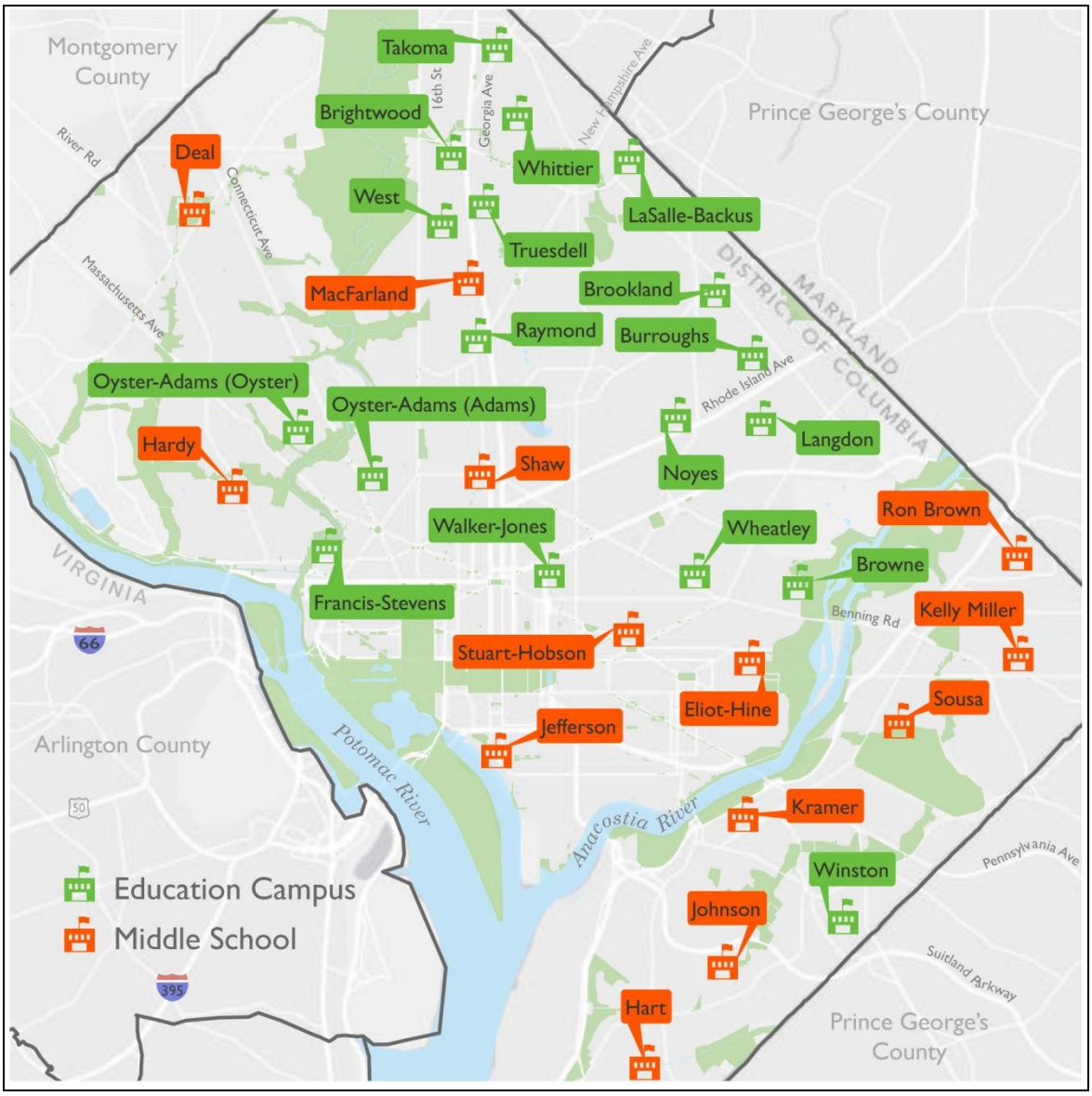


Middle Schools and Neighborhoods

In light of this divergence between absences and unexcused absences for middle schools, we explored the relationships between neighborhood features and each measure.

Exhibit 10 displays the location of the middle schools. When we examine the relationship of school neighborhood characteristics to absenteeism and truancy, we find little consistent relationship across absenteeism measures. (Detailed school tables are shown in Appendix A.)

EXHIBIT 10: MIDDLE SCHOOL LOCATIONS



Middle School Students' Poverty and Residential Neighborhoods

For student residential neighborhoods, most features are consistently related to the alternative absenteeism measures. However, the relationships are considerably weaker than they were for high school truancy. **Exhibit 11** displays the correlations with chronic truancy. (The detailed school tables, with correlations with each measure, are found in Appendix A.)

EXHIBIT 11: CORRELATIONS OF MS STUDENTS' TRUANCY WITH POVERTY AND RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

	Student Poverty	Neighbor-hood Poverty	Neighborhood Crime		Other Neighborhood Barriers to Attendance		
School	%, School on FARM Status	% Families in Poverty	Violent incidents (Per 100K)	Drug arrests (Per 100K)	Miles to School	% Single Moms	% without HS degrees
Correlation w/ chronic truancy (% 10+ Unexcused)	.22	.10	.23	.24	**-.14** (but no relationship with average absences)	.12	.01

Both poverty and crime in the residential neighborhood were moderately correlated with truancy, as was the neighborhood percentage of single mothers, but these relationships were only about half as strong as with high schools.

The distance to school was negatively related to truancy, but not to average absences ($r = -.01$). The negative relationship to truancy is presumably once again due to students attending schools at further distance only by choice. Longer transits therefore disproportionately involve families that are academically motivated, have resources to arrange transportation, and may involve better academic fit between schools and students, all of which are likely associated with lower truancy.

Finally, one relationship for HSs is not seen in middle school residential neighborhoods: The percent of neighborhood residents without HS degrees is not related to middle school truancy ($r=.01$).

III. Summary and Discussion

This report provides a snapshot of truancy in DCPS HSs and middle schools in 2010-11. An analysis of the variation in truancy among schools leads to several findings.

Average truancy rates vary so much between schools that the average across all students in all schools represents neither a typical nor representative school, nor a typical student.[8] Informative analyses of truancy must focus on the variation among schools, and truancy rates at particular schools. At several high schools truancy rates are very high, with four schools showing chronic truancy for the majority of their students, and another three showing over 40 percent chronic truancy.

For high schools, overall absences, unexcused absences, and truancy rates are so highly correlated that each measure produces equivalent findings in comparing schools. By definition, truancy (unexcused absences) numbers are lower than overall absences, but the schools with lower absenteeism are also the schools with lower truancy. As a result, any of these measures can be used to explore why schools vary and the findings will be equivalent. For middle schools, measures of overall absences and truancy are somewhat distinct. However, the predictability of stronger absenteeism from 8th grade suggests that absenteeism is the better indicator of student behavior. The added variation among schools in truancy rates seems to result from variation among schools and families in practices regarding excuses.

For HSs, school-wide absenteeism and truancy rates are strongly predicted by the absenteeism and truancy that was exhibited by their students in 8th grade, before their arrival in HS.

The HS's immediate neighborhood is a weaker predictor of truancy than the residential neighborhoods of its students, although violence surrounding the school is moderately related to truancy. HS truancy rates are moderately related to student poverty (FARM) and poverty in students' residential neighborhoods. Crime in HS students' residential neighborhood is moderately related to truancy.

The immediate neighborhood of middle schools has little relationship to its students' truancy and attendance. Neighborhood relationships for MS truancy are weaker than for HS truancy. Middle school students' poverty, their residential neighborhood poverty, and residential neighborhood crime are moderately related to truancy, although these relationships are considerably weaker than for HS truancy.

Limitations

The current report has several important limitations. First, this report explores differences between schools as a whole. In these between-schools analyses, the sample is quite small, because it is based on

[8] Averages are representative or typical when most values cluster around the average in bell-shaped distributions, which these data do not display.

the number of schools rather than the number of students.[9] As a result, these correlations should be interpreted with caution.

Second, these school-level analyses do not explore what differentiates the students within a school who attend regularly versus those who are chronically truant. In general, these need not be the same factors, and may not be for middle schools. (Our HS results suggest that it is primarily characteristics of the students— and their prior inclinations to truancy— that differentiates low- from high-truancy schools.)

Third, these correlations are insufficient to indicate causal effects on truancy. For example, the correlations between crime and truancy may tempt one to infer that higher neighborhood crime increases truancy, by either interfering with travel to school or raising other impediments to attendance. This may be the case. However, the relationship may also run the other way; students who are more frequently truant may commit more crimes, especially during school hours. As well, the correlations between truancy and crime may largely reflect other unmeasured influences. For example, some neighborhoods may have features (e.g., empty lots; people hanging out on corners) that both attract crime and interfere with attendance, while other neighborhoods may have features (e.g., high levels of monitoring) that discourage both crime and truancy.

Finally, the correlations examined here are not independent. The relationships of poverty and crime are correlated at the neighborhood level, and their relationships with truancy are likely not distinct. To analyze these issues more fully would require multivariate analyses and path analyses, but the sample size at the school level was too small to support such analyses.

Community and Other Risk Factors for Truancy

By integrating Census and crime data at the neighborhood level with student truancy data, this report is able to explore community level risk factors. Some of these factors— such as poverty and single parenthood— are likely even more important at the level of families rather than neighborhoods, but the administrative data for this report do not contain data on families. As a result, the neighborhood data likely serve as a combination of a proxy for the students' family circumstances and as a measure of community context.

Exploring community-level risk variables is an important addition to analysis of truancy data alone. But it only begins to explore the important risk factors for truancy. For example, family factors are widely believed to be important risk factors for truancy. This assumption is central to two pilot interventions launched by the Interagency Truancy Task Force in 2011-12 (Cahill & Liberman, 2012; Liberman & Cahill, 2012). But the current report does not explore such family risk factors, although some family factors, such as single parenthood, were explored at the neighborhood level. Similarly, school factors such as teacher relationships are undoubtedly important factors for truancy, but were beyond the scope of the current study.

[9] More complex multi-level analyses of these data would be additionally informative, but the data became available to UI too late for such analyses for the current report.

Conclusions

The current study's snapshot of truancy across DCPS middle and high schools has several important implications.

First, because HS absenteeism rates are strongly predicted by their students' 8th grade truancy, most of the differences in truancy among HSs are not due to differential success among HSs in preventing truancy. Put another way, the continuation and escalation of truancy behavior from middle school to HS seems largely consistent across schools. This does not mean that the HSs cannot intervene to interrupt the typical acceleration of truancy— on the order of a two-and-a-half-fold increase from middle school to HS. But it does suggest that lowering middle school absenteeism may be a more efficient and effective approach to lowering HS truancy rates.

Second, it is important to recognize the very high truancy rates at several high schools, with four schools showing chronic truancy for the majority of their students, and another three showing over 40 percent chronic truancy. These rates mean it is simply not feasible for the primary response to be based in the Family Court. Actually referring all of these chronic truants to Family Court would swamp the Court's resources.

Third, we find that residential neighborhood features are more strongly associated with truancy in HS than MS. This is consistent with a general developmental pattern, in which the family context and parents are the most important influences for younger children. With age, broader social contexts, including peers and neighborhoods, exert more direct effects on children's behavior. One implication may be that family-based truancy interventions are more likely to prove effective at earlier ages, while truancy interventions at older ages need to also involve broader social contexts.

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Appendix A: Detailed Middle School Neighborhood Tables

EXHIBIT 12: MIDDLE SCHOOL NEIGHBORHOODS

School	Poverty Around School	Crime near school	
	% Families in Poverty	Violent Incidents (Per 100K)	Drug arrests (Per 100K)
Eliot-Hine MS	8%	792	1980
Wheatley EC	27%	1457	4249
LaSalle-Backus EC	4%	is 201.478	873
Whittier EC	8%	660	is 507.872
Kelly Miller MS	36%	2263	10157
Langdon EC	11%	1667	2202
Jefferson MS	11%	1205	946
Brookland EC at Bunker Hill	9%	584	515
Johnson, John Hayden MS	49%	1541	1239
Kramer MS	19%	1515	4960
West EC	12%	2098	1652
Columbia Heights EC	22%	2104	2198
Emery EC	8%	1662	2493
Truesdell EC	17%	1413	2769
Sousa MS	26%	1986	2834
Hart MS	25%	2224	1981
Shaw MS at Garnet-Patterson	12%	2493	4374
Stuart-Hobson Middle School	7%	921	702
Takoma EC	5%	659	1067

Browne EC	26%	1813	8704
Francis - Stevens EC	13%	884	720
Oyster-Adams Bilingual EC	14%	355	326
Winston EC	13%	1583	1632
Deal MS	7%	544	146
Walker-Jones EC	49%	1756	8630
MacFarland MS (Lincoln Hill)	28%	1879	4033
Burroughs EC	9%	504	1033
Hardy MS	14%	995	995
Ron Brown MS	23%	2514	6391
Brightwood EC	12%	2098	1652
Noyes EC	4%	1177	5467
Raymond EC	11%	1423	2796
Shaed EC	12%	852	2091
Correlation w/ absences	**0.24**	**0.13**	**-0.03**
Correlation w/ unexcused absences	**0.04**	**0.01**	**-0.01**
Correlation w/ % 10+ Unexcused	**0.01**	**0.00**	**0.01**

Note: Schools are sorted by chronic truancy rates.

EXHIBIT 13: MS STUDENTS' POVERTY AND RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

	Student Poverty	Neighborhood Poverty	Neighborhood Crime		Other Neighborhood Barriers to Attendance		
School	%, School on FARM Status	% Families in Poverty	Violent incidents (Per 100K)	Drug arrests (Per 100K)	Miles to School	% Single Moms	% without HS degrees
Eliot-Hine MS	82%	28%	1664	3469	1.26	16%	18%
Wheatley EC	79%	32%	2057	7388	0.34	12%	25%
LaSalle-Backus EC	79%	11%	765	1408	0.23	10%	15%
Whittier EC	77%	13%	978	1709	0.36	11%	18%
Kelly Miller MS	84%	28%	2067	4960	0.53	20%	20%
Langdon EC	79%	22%	1567	3337	0.56	15%	19%
Jefferson MS	78%	27%	2099	4898	0.99	17%	18%
Brookland EC at Bunker Hill	56%	14%	850	1535	0.50	9%	16%
Johnson, John Hayden MS	80%	40%	2283	3109	0.38	31%	23%
Kramer MS	83%	30%	1732	3516	0.64	16%	18%
West EC	75%	17%	1593	2280	0.24	9%	19%
Columbia Heights EC	69%	17%	1426	2746	0.76	9%	23%
Emery EC	77%	20%	1547	3028	0.46	13%	17%
Truesdell EC	76%	14%	1285	2386	0.27	10%	24%
Sousa MS	82%	25%	1594	2883	0.62	19%	19%
Hart MS	81%	35%	1945	4025	0.68	24%	20%
Shaw MS at Garnet-Patterson	74%	24%	1632	3513	0.73	11%	19%
Stuart-Hobson Middle School	42%	19%	1417	2478	0.89	12%	14%
Takoma EC	76%	10%	860	1289	0.39	10%	11%
Browne EC	90%	25%	1616	4852	0.47	13%	23%
Francis - Stevens EC	76%	21%	1584	3114	1.78	12%	17%

Oyster-Adams Bilingual EC	47%	13%	944	1552	1.34	6%	13%
Winston EC	81%	39%	1891	2627	0.61	23%	22%
Deal MS	24%	10%	643	853	1.39	5%	9%
Walker-Jones EC	91%	36%	1783	6700	0.37	18%	21%
MacFarland MS (Lincoln Hill)	70%	13%	1187	2321	0.65	8%	23%
Burroughs EC	72%	17%	956	1687	0.37	11%	13%
Hardy MS	37%	17%	1141	2090	3.45	11%	14%
Ron Brown MS	78%	34%	1800	4035	0.30	27%	21%
Brightwood EC	77%	17%	1136	1468	0.16	8%	23%
Noyes EC	78%	25%	1626	4088	0.20	18%	20%
Raymond EC	87%	14%	1414	2527	0.34	8%	26%
Shaed EC	79%	19%	1067	2437	0.20	9%	25%
Correlation w/ absences	**0.13**	**0.13**	**0.29**	**0.21**	**-0.02**	**0.17**	**0.01**
Correlation w/ unexcused absences	**0.19**	**0.07**	**0.21**	**0.24**	**-0.10**	**0.06**	**-0.02**
Correlation w/ % 10+ Unexcused	**0.22**	**0.10**	**0.23**	**0.24**	**-0.14**	**0.12**	**0.01**

Note: Schools are sorted by chronic truancy rates.

District of Columbia Crime Policy Institute (DCPI)

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DCPI is a nonpartisan, public policy research organization focused on crime and justice policy in Washington, D.C. DCPI connects a diverse team of prominent scholars and policy experts. With funding from the Justice Grants Administration (JGA) in the Executive Office of the District of Columbia Mayor (EOM), DCPI was established at the Urban Institute in 2009.

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