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"I Hope I Make It": Alternative School Students' Attendance and the Need for an Expanded Accountability

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Abstract

Few empirical studies describe the interior world of alternative school settings. We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 11 alternative school students, discussing factors that contribute to absenteeism as well as the circumstances that led them to enroll in an alternative setting. We find that students' regular attendance is facilitated by (1) stable housing, (2) a means of transportation to school, (3) feelings of belonging, and (4) flexible supports from staff. Given that two of these pertain to matters beyond the school, we argue for an "expanded accountability," in which the language of "accountability" is broadened to encompass non-educational policymaking.

Keywords

alternative schools, absenteeism, truancy, attendance, student voice, accountability

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Introduction

Our nation's dropout crisis (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012) and the pattern of racially disproportionate school exclusion (Wald & Losen, 2003) garner widespread public and scholarly attention. Wedged between these phenomena are the experiences of students in alternative schools. For the purposes of this paper, we define "alternative schools" as described by the National Center for Education Statistics: public schools designated for students withdrawn from school because of poor grades, truancy, behavior deemed highly disruptive leading to expulsion, pregnancy, or other factors that have previously driven them to leave traditional school settings or have driven school officials to make them leave. Such schools are most prevalent in urban districts; 94% of city school districts include at least one alternative school setting, compared to 66% of suburban districts and 56% of rural districts (Carver et al., 2010). However, the firsthand experiences of students attending such schools are largely absent from the research literature and the concern of the general public.

In this study, we consider the factors that promote or inhibit student attendance at alternative schools as an entry point for a broader conversation about the experiences of urban alternative school students. We began with the following research questions: What factors do students enrolled in an alternative school identify as supporting them in being present at school regularly and on time? What factors do they identify as challenging their efforts to be at school regularly and on time? How do students view teachers' efforts and schoolwide efforts to ensure regular attendance, and what suggestions do they have for other initiatives to improve attendance?

To address these questions, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews of eleven students enrolled at an alternative high school in an urban school district, with the goal of centering student voice in our inquiry. Although research centering student voice has surged in recent years, the need remains for scholarship that uplifts student perspectives rather than only evaluating academic outcomes; such scholarship has the potential to enrich our intellectual understanding of how to tackle educational challenges and to provide an avenue for students to develop a sense of agency and participation in civic society (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2014; Thiessen, 2007).

Based on student accounts, we identify four factors that impact attendance in alternative school settings. Two of these—safe and stable housing, and reliable and safe means of transport to school—have little to do with the policies or practices of the school itself. Two other factors—feelings of belonging at school, and material support and flexibility from staff—are within the

control of school-level decision makers. While much of the literature on high school attendance focuses on personal motivation and incentives, we find that such efforts have limited utility for alternative school students. We argue that *expanded accountability*—shifting away from a focus on teacher-level and school-level incentives and consequences, toward a more ecological view of the issues affecting young people—would benefit not only these students, but all students in urban public school settings.

Literature Review

Disruptive Youth and the Politics of Containment

Research in this area is complicated by the fact that districts use diverse terms to describe alternative schools, such as "transfer" schools in New York City or "options" schools in Chicago and Los Angeles. There is no agreed-upon national standard defining the components of a successful alternative education program or how they should be evaluated for effectiveness (Duffield, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2019; McGee & Lin, 2017). In 2008, a national survey reported that 646,500 students in the United States attended alternative schools; 64% of surveyed districts had an alternative school or program (Carver et al., 2010). Historically, the term "alternative school" has been used to describe a variety of nontraditional approaches to education. The 1970s saw the rise of schools describing themselves as "alternative," in response to the perceived failures of traditional public education. Early champions of alternative education envisioned models of school reform specifically for students with disabilities as well as students affected by fissures in urban social policies, such as in housing and public transportation (Sagor, 1999). In the 1980s, the label "alternative school" became associated with "disruptive youth" (Arnove & Strout, 1980). Selman (2017) argues that in the wake of this development, alternative schools have become a carceral space, a site of punishment where students are "banished" through a process that "mimics the traditional push-out mechanisms it was intended to react against: reinforcing inequality by promoting the control, exclusion, and imprisonment of marginalized youth."

Given the now-extensive literature on the ways in which the logic of carcerality impacts the lives of young people based on intersections of race, gender, and disability (Annamma, 2017; Gregory et al., 2010; Meiners, 2001; Morris, 2005, 2016) the population of students within alternative schools should perhaps be unsurprising. The majority of students referred to alternative schools are youth of color, students who qualify for free or reduced lunch programs and/or students with disabilities (Lehr & Lange, 2003; Perzigian

et al., 2017). These students have been characterized as too disruptive to be educable in "normal" settings, as suffering academic and behavioral failure, lacking goals (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996), and prone to violence (Escobar-Chaves, 2002); alternative schools have been characterized as "dumping grounds" intended not primarily to offer a fulfilling educational setting, but to deter crime (Kim, 2011). As Dunning-Lozano (2016) has documented, sending students to alternative schools can serve to safeguard boundaries of White culture by removing students of color deemed threatening and subsequently blaming their removal on their moral failures, thus making their exclusion appear race-neutral. In this sense, the alternative school serves a symbolic function in soothing anxieties about "urban youth" more broadly, engaging in a "politics of containment" (Smith & Stovall, 2008) by separating them to assuage fears about perceived unruliness. As Brown (2007) writes, alternative school students are marked "as disciplinary problems" rather than as learners, stigmatized with the presumption that they simply do not *want* to learn.

Attendance at Alternative Schools

While alternative school students may be a small group in relative terms, comprising only about 1.3% of the total public school population (Carver et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008), their experiences are worthy of discussion. On one hand, the fact of their having left school and the collection of life events leading up to that pivotal moment reflect great vulnerabilities for any adolescent or young adult—issues such as homelessness, abuse, pregnancy, and myriad other challenges (Porowski et al., 2014). On the other hand, given these circumstances, the decision to return to secondary school *after* having experienced such monumental challenges reflects resilience, offering useful lessons for meeting the needs of vulnerable students across urban districts.

Urban alternative schools often have poorer attendance rates than their peer institutions. For instance, in the average Los Angeles public school in the 2018 to 2019 school year, 41.93% of students had attendance at or above 96%. In the average Educational Options school (the term for alternative schools used in the Los Angeles Unified School District), 12.96% of students maintain such high attendance (LAUSD Open Data, 2020). During the same school year, the average daily attendance across all New York City public schools was 89.79%. For "transfer" schools (the term for alternative schools used in the New York City Department of Education), it was 63.59% (NYC Department of Education, 2020; NYC Open Data, 2019). Such disparities present a challenge, since attendance is a basic prerequisite for student suc-

cess, and in many districts, students who miss a certain number of days cannot graduate regardless of their demonstrated academic proficiency.

Although alternative enrollment criteria vary from district to district, in most U.S. states they include factors such as serious behavioral problems, pregnancy, homelessness, dropout status, and substance use disorders (Porowski et al., 2014). Therefore, the fact that students are enrolled in an alternative school by its very nature means that they have experienced a major disruption in their educational pathway. It is reasonable to wonder how such disruptions may continue to affect students even after they have enrolled in an alternative school, and how they may contribute to attendance trends—particularly because Wilkerson et al. (2016) found in a study of almost 20,000 students, using longitudinal attendance data, that enrollment in an alternative high school was a significant predictor of declines in attendance.

Attendance in high school matters. In their work developing the widely-cited Freshman On-Track indicator, Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that academically high-achieving students with more absences were more likely to fail a course than classmates with lower test scores who missed fewer school days; the authors refer to attendance as "the most essential requirement for avoiding course failure." Though an extensive body of literature discusses attendance, absenteeism, and truancy in secondary schools, these studies are generally oriented around traditional school settings (Hartnett, 2007).

The preponderance of the research on secondary school attendance seeks to identify student risk and protective factors, as well as to describe intervention programs. There has been much less work on the effective educational policies and practices that schools can use to support student attendance and engagement (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Dynarski et al. (2008) identified six school-level recommendations to improve attendance through classroom instruction, academic support, social services, and advocacy. It is not clear how these recommendations might be more, less, or divergently effective in the context of alternative schools, where students have distinct circumstances. However, there is some evidence that despite their reputation as supporting stratification between schools in urban districts, alternative schools can provide a beneficial culture at the within-school level. In one qualitative study, alternative school students reported their relationships with teachers, sense of maturity and responsibility, peer relationships, and sense of a supportive atmosphere to be superior relative to their prior experiences at traditional schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Loutzenheiser, 2002). In another study of Latine students attending an urban alternative school in the Southwest, students similarly reported feeling more supported by their teachers and less likely to get left behind compared to their previous schools (Fairbrother,

2008). It may be that these perceptions provide opportunities for improved attendance, if they can be leveraged by school personnel. In interviews and observations with alternative school leaders, Duke and Tenuto (2020) note that administrators working with alternative school students made decisions "on a case-by-case basis," informed by conversations with families, mentors, and teachers about each student's situation. Taken together, the existing literature suggests that we require a more nuanced understanding of attendance barriers and supports in alternative school settings.

Conceptual Background: Expanded Accountability

Since the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools have had to adapt to the "era of accountability," in which teachers must negotiate a set of high-stakes externally-monitored expectations and accompanying consequences (Jennings & Sohn, 2014). In the book *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education*, the authors describe key features of the present accountability model—it is designed to (1) determine expectations, (2) evaluate whether those expectations have been met, and (3) mete out rewards and punishments for compliance or noncompliance; further, the authors, write, "every individual, organization, agency, and advocacy group involved in any way with education policy, practice, and reform" has been subject to this model (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018).

For nearly two decades, scholars and activists have challenged the assumptions that underlie the way such consequences are framed, arguing that rather than systematically addressing social inequalities as promised, the current accountability paradigm reinforces those inequalities (Au, 2015; Hagopian, 2014; Lipman, 2004; Meier & Wood, 2004). Despite ongoing efforts that position "accountability" as the basis for systemic change, such attempts at reform can mask structural problems by proceeding under the mistaken assumption that school systems are inherently meritocratic and benevolent (Castagno, 2017). Bae (2018) describes changes implemented by some districts in their efforts to build systems of accountability based on continuous improvement and learning rather than just compliance, and recommends improving such systems by "focusing attention on a broader set of behavioral and attainment outcomes and balancing accountability with support for continuous improvement" and including "input measures" such as school funding and the quality of school facilities. In a report, Schanzenbach et al. (2016) recommended that chronic absenteeism is one of the most effective measures of school quality that schools can include in their accountability systems, arguing that absenteeism as a measure is both linked to academic success and likely to incentivize schools toward reforms that are in aligned with rather

than contrary to positive learning environments (as compared to an emphasis on, for instance, standardized testing, which can promote narrow teaching). Going further than adjusting inputs or outputs, Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) suggest an entirely new way of thinking about accountability, *democratic accountability*, a frame focused around the idea that "the goal of teacher education is preparing teachers who know how to create democratic learning environments that enhance students' academic, social, and emotional learning and also prepare them to participate in a complex, diverse, and divided democratic society."

While such reforms offer a much-needed intervention, they nevertheless retain the basic premise of the era of accountability: the idea that on the path to educational success, it is *teachers, students, schools*, and *districts* that should be the targets of accountability-driven rewards and sanctions. We first entered the field with this premise in mind, searching for ways that school personnel could change policies or behaviors to promote student attendance. However, as our findings detail, consistent student attendance was often hindered by factors driven by social policies beyond the control of the school building or the district. In reviewing the stories shared by these students, if we ask ourselves who should be held accountable, and by what standards and measures, we find the current accountability paradigm to be inadequate for understanding alternative students' experiences. Therefore, we argue the need for a much broader vision of accountability, an *expanded accountability*: a paradigm that would hold ostensibly non-educational decisionmakers accountable for the ways that their actions contribute to the tenor of the environment in which students, teachers, and schools are trying to succeed. This concept emerged inductively from the empirical process described below.

Method

To explore the issue of attendance from the perspective of alternative school students, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 11 young people attending Ford High School,[1] an alternative high school in an urban district. Semi-structured interviews allow students to construct expansive accounts of their own experiences as learners and to make meaning of those experiences, rather than pathologizing them or reinforcing the idea that they have somehow "failed at school." These interviews also privilege youth voice and center possibilities for positive youth development through the research process as opposed to simply identifying perceived student deficits (Futch Ehrlich, 2016).

Table 1. Ford High School Racial Demographics, 2017 to 2018.

Latine	50%
Black	31%
Asian-American	7%
White	10%
Native	1%
Multiracial	1%

Research Site

As an alternative high school, Ford has several distinct features tailored for its population of students, who either self-identify or are identified by the district as needing "an alternative path" toward a high school degree. This may include students who have dropped out, been expelled, or experienced pushout (Tuck, 2012) at their previous school, students who are parents, or students who have been released from the juvenile justice system. Ford students are aged 16 to 21, and have the option of a flexible part-time schedule which permits them to leave school at noon if they have documented employment. The school also has a partnership with a community college whereby students can earn entry-level credits there at no cost if they are able to place into appropriate courses. Ford's stated mission is to help students "overcome obstacles," "advocate for themselves," and be "self-reliant." Ford has open attendance boundaries, allowing any student who would like to continue their education to enroll.

During the 2017 to 2018 academic year, when our interviews were conducted, 7% of students at Ford were bilingual. The school is comparatively racially diverse (see Table 1). Seventy-eight percent of Ford students were classified by the district as economically disadvantaged; 12% of students were enrolled in special education services. The school's mobility rate was 68%, far higher than the district average of 11%.

The average daily attendance rate at Ford was 72%, above the mean attendance rate for the district's alternative schools (64%) but below the mean for the district's high schools overall (82%). As of this writing, average daily attendance at Ford has declined to 63%.

As is the case in many other schools across the country, high-stakes district-wide "accountability" efforts made attendance numbers a source of anxiety for Ford educators. School leaders expressed consternation with both their low attendance numbers and a double-pronged relationship with district leadership that caused stress: on one hand, there was the expectation that the school and teachers be held accountable at regularly held "data meetings."

On the other hand, there was a perceived lack of support for increasing attendance that appropriately accounted for the unusual circumstances of an alternative school.

Participants

We recruited participants by briefly introducing ourselves at the beginning of advisory periods and explaining the study and its purpose, and students were able to follow up with us independently (after class or between periods) to schedule an interview time. Five participants were female-identifying and six were male-identifying. Six were Latine, three were Black, one was White, and one was Asian-American.

While young people in all high school settings may have experienced unaddressed trauma, students we spoke with at Ford had faced extremely challenging circumstances that ultimately led to their enrollment in an alternative school. When asked about their schooling and personal experiences prior to coming to Ford, our participants described running away, living in a group home, coping with physical abuse at the hands of family members, being evicted, the deaths of loved ones, witnessing fights in school, gang violence, bullying, and general feelings of disengagement and alienation. While students in other school settings may struggle with such obstacles, the nature of an alternative school means that students' enrollment signals an intense disruption in their schooling experience, most often tied to one or more traumatic incidents.

Researcher Positionality and Context

Each of the scholars who conducted interviews with participants had extensive practitioner experience with young people whose experiences reflected student life at Ford. Ewing, a Black woman, was previously a middle school teacher and Davis, a White woman, was a middle and high school teacher and a dean of instruction. The other two interviewers were Black women, one a licensed clinical social worker and one a former high school teacher specializing in trauma-informed teaching practices. All four interviewers approached participants with a commitment to seeing them as human beings, as learners, and as students, rather than through the stigmatizing lens of school failure.

The present study was driven by a conversation between Ewing and a teacher at Ford, who noted challenges with school attendance that teachers and students were struggling to contend with. Motivated to understand the issue better, this teacher conducted an informal student survey and identified several barriers to regular attendance, including work schedules, childcare

demands, physical trouble sleeping, and challenging commutes. Ewing, the teacher, and the school principal agreed that a small qualitative research study could be a better way to gain an in-depth understanding of these issues and the specific ways that students experience them, as well as student ideas about how to use personal and school-wide assets to address attendance problems.

Data Collection and Analysis

To understand the factors that facilitate or hinder regular attendance in an alternative school setting, a team of four researchers (Ewing, Davis, and two additional graduate student colleagues) conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 11 students enrolled at Ford High School.

Each interview was approximately an hour long, and touched on various aspects of the participant's schooling experience both before coming to Ford and in the present (see Appendix A for interview protocol). We asked students directly what they thought of the school's attendance policies and efforts by teachers and administration to improve attendance, and solicited suggestions regarding how these policies could be improved. We also asked about their experiences prior to coming to Ford, and the events or structures that ultimately made their previous schools untenable for them. Given that the current literature documenting alternative school students' experiences is limited, we encouraged students to touch on a wide variety of experiences beyond the specific topic of attendance if they were interested in doing so, with the recognition that these accounts can also serve as a significant contribution to this area of research. We conducted interviews in a quiet area of the school cafeteria; each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed so that interviewers could focus on interpersonal rapport with participants without the distraction of note-taking. After each interview, researchers completed a reflective memo sharing initial thoughts and reactions. Participants received a $25 gift card; while this was intended as a token courtesy in acknowledgment of their time, for some participants this was a significant incentive to participate. While interest among students was high, the often-unpredictable nature of their schedules made it challenging to reach a large number of students within our allotted time without disrupting the educational environment. As Ford is a small school, at the time of data collection this number represented about 5% of total school enrollment.

We conducted two rounds of coding in NVIVO using the flexible coding method (Deterding & Waters, 2021), a method of analysis well-suited to a study in which we entered with questions informed by the existing literature

and our prior knowledge about alternative schools, the district, and the student population, as well as well-suited to the use of team analysis and data re-analysis. Our first round of coding established a series of index codes, drawing on the interview protocol to divide the interviews into easily manageable sections and allow for a first reading of the transcripts. The purpose of index coding is use broad codes that establish an "anchor" to the interview protocol, and to provide an opportunity to explore initial themes and findings (Deterding & Waters, 2021). During this phase, researchers did not code transcripts of interviews which they themselves had conducted, allowing for a fresh perspective on each set of responses. We then collectively generated a series of analytic codes, identifying emergent findings and themes well-suited for further analysis. The purpose of this phase is to identify specific themes or concepts that offer responses to the stated research questions. Within each index code, we reviewed student responses through the specific lens of the research question, asking ourselves whether the participant was describing a factor *assisting* or *hindering* attendance and making a note accordingly, then re-categorizing these notes into a series of analytic codes (for instance, "morning logistics" to describe a student's challenges leaving on time to access a bus or train was subsumed into "transportation"). (See Appendices B and C for a list of index and analytic codes.) Throughout the interview process, we maintained impressionistic memos and observational memos to contribute to an audit trail, and returned to these documents during the analytic phase to assess the validity of our codes. Through this second round of coding and discussion of these themes, we identified the findings that follow.

Findings

In our interviews with students, they described both challenges and successes with school attendance since enrolling in an alternative school, often in overlapping and complex ways. We identified four factors that enabled sustained school attendance. The first two were safe and stable *housing* and reliable and safe *transportation*. These factors are beyond the usual locus of control of teachers or school leaders, and as students detailed the way that housing, transportation, and safety played a role in their educational success or challenges, we became acutely aware of the limits of the familiar "accountability" framework in addressing these concerns. By contrast, other factors affecting attendance are within the sphere of influence of school leaders: *feelings of belonging* at school and *material supports and flexibility* from school staff.

Safe and Stable Housing

Many of the students we interviewed who had the most consistent attendance described their stable housing situation as a supportive factor. Conversely, multiple participants described challenges with maintaining stable housing and the way this impacted their school life. Students often relied on family members for a safe place to live, only to be asked to leave after common conflicts arose—wanting more freedom, being involved in a romantic relationship, or breaking curfews. When relying on non-parental family, these challenges were exacerbated. Students were often incredibly resilient despite these conditions—finding ways to attend school in spite of considerable challenges with housing. Aisha describes the way that her constantly shifting housing situation affected school attendance:

Aisha: Oh, I got kicked out on my birthday.
Interviewer: On your birthday? This year?
Aisha: This year. And I—he just took me in last year on my birthday.
Interviewer: Okay, so tell me what happens. So, you pack up your stuff, you call your grandma and your uncle? Not the same grandma from the east side?
Aisha: No, no. That's the same.
Interviewer: Same grandma, okay. So you call her, they come get you. And then by the next day, you're living in [a suburb 37 miles away from school]. And you're still going here? How did you keep that up?
Aisha: Yes. I had to. . .I was coming out $100 a week out of pocket. Then, I was absent for two weeks straight until the social worker called and found out about my situation. Then, the school gave me [commuter rail] cards, they found a way because I'm under the homeless act. So, then I was able to get free bus cards and free [commuter rail] cards. So that started coming in for me.
Interviewer: Okay, but for a while you were figuring out your own way?
Aisha: Yeah. I had to come up with my own money. I didn't have time to buy anyclothes or shoes anymore because all of my money was going to getting here. That's all I knew was to go to school, go to school, go to school.
Interviewer: But you kept coming and attendance was great.
Aisha: Mm-hmm. I even cried about my grades. If I was to get a bad grade, I would cry because it was like, I'm like everybody else here. I'm nineteen. I'm supposed to be graduated. I don't have time to play. That's 'cause that's all I did my whole life, was play, play, play, play, play. So now it's time for work.

Aisha disclosed that she was losing her housing again, as her uncle and grandmother were kicking her out. She expressed missing her grandfather, who had provided her with secure housing. Her plan was to stay at a homeless shelter identified by the school social worker, but said she felt "very scared" about it. Despite these fears, Aisha stayed optimistic: "I come to school smiling every day, making sure everybody okay. And I be like, 'I hope I make it, I hope I make it.' But I know I am because I'm very strong." Nevertheless, the city where Ford is located offers few options for safe youth shelters and long-term housing assistance. As Aisha's housing situation remained precarious, her previous experiences suggested that this would make it challenging for her to continue to come to school regularly.

Reliable Transportation and Safety

Because of its unique offerings as an alternative school, Ford attracts students who may live a great distance away and cannot find a similar option closer to home. The public transit system in the city where Ford is located does not equally serve all parts of the metropolitan area. As in Aisha's situation, transportation presents a significant challenge for many students. When living with her grandmother and uncle in the suburb of Kirkton, about 37 miles from Ford, Aisha's trip to school would require an eight-dollar commuter rail ticket followed by a two-dollar bus ticket, for a total trip of 1 hour and 15 minutes (not accounting for the sporadic schedule of the commuter rail or the trip from home to the train station). Another student, Estefania, notes her concerns about her own issues with getting to and from school via reliable, safe, and reasonable transportation. The bus, she says, "gets really scary sometimes in the evening."

> Estefania: My least favorite is the way here, taking the train and the bus.
> Interviewer: How long does it take you to get to school every day?
> Estefania: Forty-five minutes.

In the neighborhood where Ford is located, 48% of residents are children, adolescents, or young adults, and 1 in 10 adults do not have a high school diploma. This suggests a need that the school can fill, making the location a natural fit—but it also creates challenges for Ford students, as they interact with peers outside the building who are neither working nor in school. Luis, a student who left his first high school due to bullying and gang violence, expressed a sense of fear in his transit to and from school.

Interviewer: And what's your least favorite part of your alternative school experience?
Luis: The location.
Interviewer: Okay.
Luis: The location. . .yeah, like getting here.
Interviewer: In what way? Like is it far from your house? Or what? The neighborhood?
Luis: No, it's just being in the neighborhood. Like, it's the people around it. Like there's too much gang activity and makes it a little bit dangerous.

Another student, Mackenzie, cited similar concerns. "Going outside the school, this neighborhood isn't really safe, but I don't feel like I'm in danger most of the time. Sometimes there's arguments and fights, but I just keep walking past them. Other than that, I really like it here." She also shares that many of her classmates, also concerned about their safety, take matters into their own hands in potentially dangerous ways.

Mackenzie: . . .[T]here was a whole lockdown because a kid here got shot, because of gang violence.
Interviewer: Where did he get shot?
Mackenzie: Do you know where the Subway [restaurant]—
Interviewer: Yeah.
Mackenzie: Right on that corner, and that's right down the street from the school, and so a lot of people were scared from that. I think just having metal detectors, that would make it a lot easier, because a lot of people bring weapons into the school. I know they don't get used, because you don't ever hear of anything, or nothing seriously happens to you, but you never know. That one day, you could bring something to school, and then someone could pop off.
Interviewer: Do you think they're bringing them because they feel like they need them to go back and forth to school?
Mackenzie: Yes, and most kids come from bad homes, or bad neighborhoods, where you have to carry something on you to be protected. I'm not against that. I'm all for it. If you really feel like you need to carry something on you, do it, because if your life is endangered, do it. It doesn't have to be a gun. It could be a pocket knife. It could be a taser. . ..

While Mackenzie feels safe inside the school, she often sees strangers congregated on the busy street near the Ford entrance, which frightens her. Much of her reason for leaving her previous school was her own gang

involvement, and she is afraid that people from her former life will come to the school to hurt her. While school personnel are able to alleviate that fear somewhat, Mackenzie wishes she had a safe, direct way to travel home, to eliminate the danger altogether. "Security that's inside the school is really good about walking you to the train if you really need that protection," she says, "or standing outside, which kind of helps, but not completely. I really wish they had a bus stop right in front of the school so people could just get on and go."

Feelings of Belonging

Students expressed feelings of belonging, teacher and peer support as enabling them to have strong attendance. Here, Estefania expresses her joy in taking part in after-school programming and clubs. Estefania was a member of an afterschool guitar club, which she described as "intriguing," "fun," and "awesome," and described how the supportive culture of thee school played a role in her own attachment and commitment to being present.

> Interviewer: Anything else that you think is unique about Ford, about your experience here?
> Estefania: Just how helpful everybody is and—
> Interviewer: The students or the teacher and staff?
> Estefania: Everybody. Everybody is so supportive with each other, and everybody knows that everybody has their own little problems with being a student or attendance, just being in school in general. . . Everybody cares about one another. Everybody wants each other to graduate.

Mackenzie expressed similarly important feelings of belonging. After becoming pregnant, she worried that peers and teachers would condemn or reject her. However, their support increased as her challenges did.

> Mackenzie: [My teacher said] "you've been through a lot. We're here to help." She goes, "You're not alone in this battle. Look at everybody around you. Everybody has been through or has been in the same situation you were in, and you're going to finish." She goes, "You're going to finish here in high school, and you're going to finish going to college, if you want to do that. It's up to you."
> Interviewer: How did that make you feel?
> Mackenzie: Appreciated. I was crying, because I've never had a teacher, a random teacher that didn't even know me, be so supportive. I felt accepted, and it made me realize, just because one school was not good

doesn't mean all schools are bad. Now that I'm here, I feel like I'm in a family. Everybody here is just so supportive. When they found out that I'm expecting, they [said], "I'm so excited. I can't wait. We're going to pick out names. We're going to throw a little shower here at the school for you."

Interviewer: That's not what you saw coming.

Mackenzie: I didn't. I expected everybody to be like, "Oh, well, she's a ho. She sleeps

around," and all this other stuff. There are some haters here that say that, that's just because they're not accepted with their self, to really see. They just want to bring everybody down because they don't know how to accept their own feelings. But the teachers here, they are so accepting of it, and if I need anything, they're on it.

This sense of belonging, of being accepted despite big life challenges, aided Mackenzie's attendance and was the element of her school that she described liking the most.

Mackenzie: When you're not here one day, they call you. "Are you doing okay today?" It's another family, pretty much. I love getting up every morning to come here. . .When I miss school, it's sad. I'm like, "Man, what if the teachers think that something really bad happened to me?" I hate being sick because I miss so much. I love coming here.

Material Supports and Flexibility

In addition to socioemotional support, the school staff's ability to provide material support and connections to specific services like counseling were meaningful in enabling student attendance, as well as reinforcing a culture of care. Providing material support in turn created the conditions under which students would disclose their needs, ask for help, and problem-solve with adults so they could continue to prioritize their education despite challenges. Jesus describes the way that simple supports like transportation help students have conversations about bigger struggles—like homelessness or the need for clothes.

Jesus: Yeah, they have a bus card, and it's a reduced fare, so it's only like 25 cents a ride, so that makes it a lot easier.

Interviewer: But you still have to pay.

Jesus: Yeah. Some days, if you don't have money on your card, you can go and talk to one of the counselors, and she has little free passes for the

day or something, and that really helps out, especially if you're struggling a lot, or if you're homeless or something, they have a little program that you can get involved, and they give you free bus passes to get here, and they give you clothes and stuff.

Interviewer: That's great.

Jesus: I really appreciate this school, because it's like they try so hard to get you to where you're going. I accept that. I really appreciate this school. I've never seen a school do this. It's awesome.

Many alternative school students work part- or full-time in addition to attending school. Given their time out of school, work and wage-earning has become a large part of life for them and their families. Working overnight, getting little sleep, and managing a hectic and precarious work schedule is common. Antonio describes the way his work schedule interfered with attendance and the ways that staff at Ford worked with him to ensure he could stay on track to complete the high school diploma program successfully.

Antonio: Plus, at the same time, while I'm doing hours to make up for the absences that I've made or the tardies it helps a lot, especially for people like me. . . I used to work at a bakery, I'd get home at like three in the morning and have to show up again, early. I would be . . . so I would try to sleep in a little bit more and the time I would make it up later knowing that I was going to be able to get my job, my work done and make up my time [at school]. It helped a lot.

Interviewer: So, you're saying that knowing that you have this option for second

chances, sometimes you would take the opportunity to sleep in when you needed to.

Antonio: It wasn't like I wanted to sleep in. I'd rather be in school because that's time I'm missing out on getting teaching. . . But it was too much, work. . . so, I had to sleep in.

Since Antonio has been academically successful, his teachers offered him a "late start" option, allowing him to come in during third period to accommodate other obligations. If he has a senior advisory meeting, he comes early, but other than those exceptional circumstances he is able to start the day later. He uses the time to get additional sleep if he has worked late the previous night, or to take one of his sisters to school while his mother takes the other sister.

This latter role—family caregiver—was an important one for some of our participants. Schedule flexibility and multiple opportunities to master

material, submit assignments, and make up missed classes provided by school staff were key form of supports to these students who are often navigating emotionally and physically stressful situations as young caregivers. In a long exchange, Javier, who had already shared that his depression makes attendance difficult, explains how he cares for his two grandmothers in different ways. While they are his guardians, he has an incredibly important role in their continued health.

Interviewer: Are there things besides your depression that you feel like make it difficult for you to be present?

Javier: . . . My grandmothers, because I . . . care for them, and I don't live with my mother, and I don't know my father. Because my father is back in Guatemala . . . and my mother lives in [a neighboring state] so. . . my great-grandmother and my grandmother.

Interviewer: Oh got it, got it.

Javier: Yeah. So that's who I live with, and, uh, the one thing that's been causing extremities in my absences recently is that, um, we live in a basement. So recently my grandmother fell down the stairs and she like—

Interviewer: Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that.

Javier: . . .damaged her sciatic nerve. She's been working on it, she's been doing her exercises. But. . .with the sciatic nerve being damaged, it's kind of like a permanent damage.

Interviewer: Yeah, and causes a lot of pain.

Javier: So, yeah, she has trouble walking now. So I try to help her out. But like it's kind of with her exercises and stuff, like. . .if she needs something, I go

and get it done.

Javier goes on to explain that because of the nerve damage, his grandmother has been unable to walk, making it impossible to work, and she can only get out of bed or complete household tasks with difficulty. He often stays home to assist her, or to escort her to the doctor, physical therapy, or the pharmacy. He helps her navigate public transportation, and makes sure she understands instructions during doctor visits—and this situation also makes him the primary caregiver for his great-grandmother, who is 92 years old. While it's clear that his grandmothers' health and ability to provide financially for his family is a stressor for Javier, he also feels that his contributions to their well-being provides a sense of competence and value, and aids in his own mental health. "When I get like the depression, it would benefit me to help her out instead of just like lazing around," he explains, "'cause whenever I miss a day, when I get really like down. . . I feel like I should do something to like help someone else out at least."

Given these challenges, Javier appreciates the flexibility provided for him to make up what he misses when he's caring for his grandmothers. While he's carrying a heavy load both emotionally and physically in his caregiving, it's clear that he knows his school is there for him when his grandmother is better and he can give more time to making up his academics.

> Interviewer: Those are some pretty serious things that are pretty much outside of your control. . . are there things that you feel like the school could do, or just that like society could do to ease some of the pressure? Like for example, if there was somebody at home to care for your grandmother, or other things that you wish you had a million dollars you could do?
>
> Javier: Definitely. If there was somebody that could take care of her, I'd leave them in their care. Well if they're trustworthy, I could leave them in their care. 'Cause that would help me out a bunch, that'd be like an anxiety reliever. 'Cause knowing at home that like, well [my] great-grandmother could—I don't like saying it, but she could die at any minute. And, my other grandmother, well, she can't. . . move very easily. Like what would happen if my grandmother or great-grandmother fell over and the other grandmother couldn't do anything? She like. . .the phone's like on the other side, and she can't move.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. . .Do you call them throughout the day to check on them, or what do you do?
>
> Javier: I can't call them since I don't own a phone. I only own an iPod. I try to gethome as soon as possible.
>
> Interviewer: As quickly as possible.
>
> Javier: Yeah, as soon as I finish. . . straight home. . . that's why I've been. . . I haven't been able to make up time [from absences] recently. But as soon as my grandmother, uh, is better, I'll be able to stay after school a little bit without worrying about them so much.

This kind of assurance—that when they were ready and able, they'd be able to spend more time and energy on school—helped the participants in our study who had care-giving responsibilities maintain optimism and connection to school. Instead of spiraling from missing 1 day to then missing many more to then not returning, they instead remained tied to school—confident that they were welcome to complete their work as they could. This was one of the key indicators that without feeling pushed out in moments of trouble with attendance, students instead felt pulled in—determined to return to school to handle their academic priorities. They also were able to continue to be relied-upon members of their families who were often in extreme need.

Discussion: A New Vision of "Accountability"

Interviewing alternative school students about their experiences with attendance revealed important factors that enable or hinder their timely presence in schools. The present study is an attempt to offer insights into such experiences, and to center the voices of students as individuals with direct and poignant insights to offer on the nuances of schooling. This study has several limitations, including its small scope and the selection bias inherent in our recruitment method—we were asking students about poor attendance, but were only able to interview those students who were present in school to speak with us. We hope that other scholars will dive deeper, exploring other aspects of alternative schooling in diverse contexts that we are beyond the scope of these findings, accounting for intersectional facets of identity such as class, race, gender, disability, and sexual identity. Alternative school students' experiences reflect broader realities about urban public school systems and the ways they can fail vulnerable students; they offer crucial implications beyond the specific issue of absenteeism. In asking about how and why students do or do not show up in school, we are implicitly asking about the conditions of their lives. While alternative school students are small in number, their experiences are consequential beyond the scope of their specific status within the school system, and their experiences with low attendance are worthy of our notice. The idea that one could leave school, draw on the resilience needed to return, and complete academic work only to fail to graduate because of low attendance is a devastating prospect. As students who have been essentially deemed ineducable in traditional school contexts who nevertheless have returned to school and strived toward completion, alternative school students have much to teach us about the myriad ways in which our schools fail vulnerable students. They also embody the remarkable resilience of students who try to overcome the structure of such failure.

One important insight to be gleaned from this research is the inherent limitation presented by interventions that presume students' motivations or attitudes to be the problem. Writing specifically about Black girls who have been pushed out of mainstream school settings, Morris (2016) writes about the assumption that "our nationwide culture of surveillance and criminalization" leads us to assume that such students are "too self-absorbed and consumed by themselves and their faults to participate in school communities." If this is the prevailing belief about alternative school students, it stands to reason that the remedy lies in addressing their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations as individuals.

But, as our conversations with students demonstrate, alternative school students face barriers to attendance rooted in a variety of social problems that

are far beyond the realm of individual shortcomings. Indeed, many of these issues—such as gaps in our nation's mental health care system and the eroded social safety net for low-income families and individuals—are not normally framed as "educational" problems.

Our findings suggest actionable steps that school leaders and teachers in alternative school settings can take to improve student attendance, steps which are likely to have other benefits as well. Participants in this study reported that feeling as though they belonged within the school community, specific material supports from teachers, and flexibility to make up lost work were all beneficial as they strove to be present and on time for school. These findings are supported by an existing body of research that suggests that higher perceived teacher support and sense of belonging at school is related to lower rates of school misconduct (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012), and that questions of belonging may be of heightened importance for students of color (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). The quality of teacher-student relationships, in turn, both promotes student engagement and enables teachers to meet the individual needs of their students (Pianta et al., 2012). Procedural modifications such as later start times have been found to improve attendance (Wahistrom, 2002), and prior scholarship suggests that flexible-yet-consistent learning environments are beneficial for young people who have experienced homelessness and/or trauma (Aviles & Grigalunas, 2017).

However, we also wish to challenge the presumption that attendance, or any educational issue, can or should be solely addressed through school-level interventions for which districts and their employees should be held accountable through incentives and sanctions, without attending to broader questions of social context. Our participants' accounts illustrate the ways in which this limited frame misses the broader ecological context in which schools, students, teachers, and leaders are situated, and the ways in which structures far beyond school walls have a direct effect on the educational enterprise. From their stories, we learn that a problem that manifests as "poor attendance" could just as well be called, in varying circumstances, a housing problem, an eldercare problem, or a transportation infrastructure problem. This insight—that "student problems" or "education problems" tend to transcend the bounds of what is traditionally referred to as "education"—is evident to any teacher who has ever bought food or clothing for students who had none, or any principal who has tried to support a parent struggling with depression or looking for employment. Put simply, trying to address academic issues without attending to these basic human needs and the conditions students require to even access school is tantamount to fretting over a plant that is wilting by tinkering endlessly with the size and shape of the pot, without ever ensuring that it has enough sunlight and water.

Practitioners in this context find themselves at the intersection of two competing ideologies. On the one hand, they are subject to a performance ideology in which quantitative outcomes such as test scores and attendance are the metrics by which their successes or failures are measured, with real consequences including employment termination and school closure; accordingly, many school leaders in this context come to view "achievement gaps" as arising from a lack of student effort (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2018). On the other hand, such practitioners may personally ascribe to a service-oriented or transformative ideology, wherein they see their fundamental purpose as nurturing the personal growth and well-being of students. At times, these ideologies may be at odds. Faced with this dilemma, educators do what they can for vulnerable students, advocating on their behalf and connecting them with resources as they are able.

This group of students is an example of what Guinier et al. (2009) refer to as "miner's canary." Much like the metaphorical canary in a coal mine that stops singing when conditions have become too noxious to breathe, alternative school students' distress and vulnerability should be seen as a signaling mechanism, pointing to places where the structures meant to sustain young people and their communities have become dangerously unstable. Scholars of urban education are often concerned with students who are deemed vulnerable, marginalized, or at risk; but, as Brown (2007) points out, even within this set of concerns alternative schools are "relatively invisible." But their experiences reflect the confluence of many systems and social trends that scholars and urban education advocates care about most deeply. Consider, for instance, Watson's (2011) description of an urban alternative school where she conducted ethnographic fieldwork: "Usually students at the SEI did not have enough family support, had issues with pregnancy or drugs, had extreme behavioral problems, or had gotten in trouble with the law and were on probation." District administrators and teachers described these students as "clearly failing at school." Although they were located a scant mile from the community's traditional public high school, "its students were not allowed on the high school grounds or the adjacent district library and would be arrested if found there."

Our findings suggest that if we truly want to transform education for vulnerable students, and therefore for all students, we would be better served by a more expansive notion of what "transforming education" even means—a notion that extends beyond schools, schooling, teachers, principals, and students. Anyon (2014) describes such a broadened framework for thinking about "educational policy" in *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*:

> "Teachers, principals, and urban students are not the culprits—as reform policies that target increased testing, educator quality, and the control of youth assume. . .Policies such as minimum wage statutes that yield poverty wages, affordable housing and transportation policies that segregate low-income workers of color in urban areas and industrial and other job development in far-flung suburbs where public transit does not reach, all maintain poverty in city neighborhoods and therefore the schools. In order to solve the systemic problems of urban education, then, we need not only school reform but the reform of these public policies. If, as I am suggesting, the macro-economy deeply affects the quality of urban education, then perhaps we should rethink what 'counts' as educational policy."

In the "era of accountability," those most directly involved in the project of schooling are held to specific and measurable standards and deemed responsible for whether or not those standards are met. We entered this study with a set of assumptions that reflects these cultural biases. A great deal of work in the field of education—from practitioner, researcher, and policy perspectives, from many corners of school reform efforts—reflects a cultural presumption that student-level, teacher-level, school-level, or, at most, district-level interventions represent the most effective approach to solve all manner of challenges. Indeed, referring to this as the "most effective" approach may in fact be an understatement, as generally this is the *only* approach considered, to the exclusion of any conversation about structural factors above and beyond the schooling context. One might argue that there is a certain elegant logic in this assumption: after all, if a problem lies with students and schools, should solutions not also rest with students and schools and the immediate mesosystems that surround them? There is a reciprocal, mutually-reinforcing relationship between the ideology of American individualism and the belief that the problems with schools are, fundamentally, problems with individuals or groups of individuals that should be solved accordingly.

But if we look at the failures of the educational system through an ecological lens, Anyon's observation is a compelling one. As our participants' stories illustrate, transportation policy, health care policy, and labor policy can all functionally become "education policy," because they impact the day-to-day lives of young people and their ability to exercise their right to access an education. It follows, then, that we should consider an *expanded accountability*. That is, considering the enormity of the policy effort to hold teachers, students, and schools accountable for their academic outcomes in the last three decades, what would it look like to cultivate a concomitant sense of shared accountability for those who shape housing, transportation, health, and economic policy? Might we envision an environment in which the policymakers who deny Javier's ailing grandmother reliable and accessible

Table 2. Current Accountability Paradigm versus Expanded Accountability.

	Current accountability paradigm	Expanded accountability
What is the challenge to educational success?	Absenteeism	Absenteeism
Who is accountable?	Teachers, students, school leaders	Policymakers governing mental health resources, transportation access, housing policy
Possible solutions	Reward students for timeliness; sanction schools with poor attendance numbers	Collectively organize for teen/young adult mental health access, free public transportation for students, expanded transitional youth housing

eldercare is held to the same standard of "accountability" as Javier himself, or the standard expected of Javier's teachers when he does not succeed academically, or of Ford, which faces sanctions or closure if such trends persist?

In Table 2, we illustrate one example of how the notion of expanded accountability offers a different analysis of potential entry points for addressing the issue of absenteeism. Our findings suggest that social interventions in housing, transportation, and mental health access could all help address student attendance, yet such interventions are occluded by the current accountability paradigm, which focuses only on the actions of students, teachers, and schools. In the city where Ford is located, organizing on all three of these issues has been present for years, but questions of educational quality are often left out of these discussions—a missed opportunity for meaningful coalition-building on matters than can substantially impact the life chances and educational outcomes of young people. Thinking about expanded accountability is a way to spur education researchers, leaders, and advocates to look beyond school buildings and school policies for a view of the broader ecological factors that shape students' lives, and to challenge those working in other areas such as housing and transportation to think inclusively and expansively about how their work is related to school outcomes. We believe that expanding the frame of analysis in this way creates pathways for thinking differently about how to transform urban schools, and about who should have to answer for the perceived failures of urban schools.

As it stands, students like those served by Ford have been labeled "opportunity youth" in recent years, suggesting at least rhetorically that our society sees them as sites of potential. But in practice, our society largely abdicates responsibility for these young people and their lives, blaming them and their immediate school and family contexts for their perceived failures—when acknowledging them at all. The lack of an expanded accountability allows those beyond the narrowly-defined "education" arena to largely opt out of being held responsible for their future. Only when we attend to some of the most vulnerable students in our midst, these young people deemed "ineducable," can we ensure that the urban education ecosystem—the metaphorical mine that for so many students is currently inhospitable—can uplift all students.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up?

What are some things you like to do for fun?

For the first part of our conversation, I'm going to ask you some questions about your experiences before coming to Ford. I have one request—if you find yourself sharing personally sensitive information about someone else, please don't tell me their real name. Okay? (*Wait for confirmation*.)

Where did you go to school before?

What was that school like? Walk me through a typical day at that school.

(*Follow-up questions about previous school: peers, teachers, routines.*)

And would you say you mostly had good attendance at that school or were you absent a lot?

- *If good attendance*: What kinds of things made it possible for you to have good attendance?
- *If absent*: What kinds of things would lead to you being absent a lot?

Do you remember the exact moment when it was clear that you wouldn't be returning to [previous school]? Walk me through the story of that moment.

Now let's transition our conversation a little bit and talk about you coming to Ford. Do you remember the exact moment when it was clear that you would be attending Ford? Walk me through the story of that moment.

What would you say is your favorite part of the school? Least favorite part?

And at Ford, would you say you mostly have good attendance, or are you absent a lot?

- *If good attendance*: What kinds of things make it possible for you to have good attendance?
- *If absent*: What kinds of things lead to you being absent a lot?

The teachers and principal at Ford have tried lots of different things to try to improve attendance at the school, like parties and rewards. Do you feel like these things are helpful? Why/why not?

Do you have ideas about things the school could do to improve student attendance?

Is there anything else important that you think I should know that I did not ask you about?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Index Codes

- Personal Background
- Prior School
  - Child Code: Experiences
  - Child Code: Attendance Trends
  - Child Code: Attendance Factors
  - Child Code: Departure
- Alternative School
  - Child Code: Transition and Enrollment
  - Child Code: Perceptions
  - Child Code: Attendance Trends
  - Child Code: Attendance Factors
  - Child Code: School Efforts

Appendix C. Analytic Codes and Data Samples.

Analytic code	Data example
Assets contributing to attendance	
Positive family influence	I was the first one to graduate eighth grade so it was a big deal. It was just a lot of stress on me because everyone's like, "Estefania, you have to do good. You have to graduate. You got to do this, this, this."
Positive peer influence	After a few months, or a few weeks, I saw everyone in here's actually cool. They actually want their education. The people that were actually there every day, or like me. There were people like me, just trying to get back on track.

(continued)

Appendix C. (continued)

Analytic code	Data example
Future goals	Yeah, I want to become a doctor. Yeah, an oncologist. . . Ford is a school that has like, many opportunities, like to go—like our counselor has many connections to other schools.
Sense of belonging at school	I felt accepted, and it made me realize, just because one school was not good doesn't mean all schools are bad. Now that I'm here, I feel like I'm in a family. Everybody here is just so supportive.
School culture and climate	Everybody. Everybody is so supportive with each other, and everybody knows that everybody has their own little problems with being a student or attendance, just being in school in general.
Challenges to attendance	
Experiences of abuse	But she was abusive, and I'm like, "Yo, I'm a freshman in high school, you're not about to keep hitting me." And led to when she smacked me one time because I stayed after school because I wanted to help put up decorations because it was around Christmas time and stuff.
Family caregiving responsibilities	Recently my grandma just got a knee surgery, so sometimes there's nobody at home and she can't really walk around that much. Yesterday she just got her stitches out so she wanted me stay home with her and help her out and stuff.
Mental health	For someone like me who, like, suffers from depression, and like—it's—you can't, I can't guess if I'm gonna come here or not.
Work responsibilities	I'm working as a housekeeper and a babysitter. . .it's like 1:00 to maybe 11:00.
Transportation	I have to wake up really early because I live like an hour away from [school]. So I have to wake up around like five o'clock, get ready, and come to school. . . Sometimes the train goes express and I don't hear it, so I go all the way to [the end of the line].

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Note

1 The name of the school, student names, and place names are all pseudonyms, and other identifying details have been changed.

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