Attendance Practices in High-Absenteeism Districts

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Introduction

Educational policymakers, leaders, and researchers are paying increasing attention to student attendance and chronic absenteeism (typically defined as missing 10% or more school days), especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Council of Economic Advisors, 2023; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; Jordan & Miller, 2017). Though absenteeism rates increased broadly across the United States through the pandemic (Dee, 2023), the issue remains the greatest in high-absenteeism urban districts, where broad social and economic inequalities have long created substantial barriers to attendance (Singer et al., 2021). Multiple waves of research have documented the consequences of chronic absenteeism for student development and learning (e.g., Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried & Ansari, 2021; Kearney & Spear, 2012), as well as the causes and correlates of absenteeism (Childs & Lofton, 2021). Researchers have evaluated the effects of specific interventions and policies on attendance (reviewed below), and some educational advocacy organizations have promoted specific approaches or practices for improving attendance (e.g., Heyne, 2024; P. Jordan, 2023).

Despite this growing attention to chronic absenteeism, there is limited empirical evidence about what schools and districts are actually doing to improve attendance. Only a small number of studies have documented the attendance practices that schools, districts, and other community organizations are intentionally developing and implementing (Childs et al., 2022; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Childs & Lofton, 2021; Childs & Scanlon, 2022; E. B. Edwards et al., 2023; Lenhoff & Singer, 2024). Since these existing studies focus on a

single context or single initiative, the field lacks a broader survey of attendance practices across districts.

This study presents evidence about the types of attendance practices that high-absenteeism districts in Michigan are planning and implementing. Michigan's forty-seven "Partnership districts" are those with at least one low-performing school identified for turnaround status. In 2022-23, these districts engaged in a school improvement planning process with state education officials and outlined new goals and strategies for improvement, which in most cases included goals for attendance. To advance our understanding of attendance practices, I ask the following research questions:

1. What attendance practices were Partnership districts implementing in the 2022-23 school year?
2. What activities have Partnership districts planned for their efforts to improve attendance in the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years?

To answer these questions, I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from a combination of different data sources: surveys of Partnership district principals, the districts' school improvement plans, interviews with case study district leaders, and observations of improvement planning sessions. I find that in the 2022-23 school year, Partnership district principals reported using communication practices, incentives, and to an extent providing resources to address barriers to attendance. In terms of new attendance activities, districts planned to create new organizational infrastructure and hire new personnel, with less emphasis on specific practices. These findings highlight a reliance on communication-based strategies and limited existing organizational infrastructure for addressing attendance.

Though these districts have planned to develop new attendance systems and practices, it is unclear whether they will substantially reduce absenteeism, in particular

because they do not necessarily target the social and economic inequalities at the root of high absenteeism rates. Thus, I conclude that districts should carefully monitor new attendance practices and systems for effectiveness and coherence, prioritize addressing root causes, and avoid counterproductive practices.

Literature Review

Understanding Chronic Absenteeism as an "Ecological" Issue

Chronic absenteeism is best understood as an ecological issue—one that results from a combination of individual, family, school, neighborhood, and macro-structural factors (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Sugrue et al., 2016). An ecological perspective requires understanding proximal causes of chronic absenteeism within the context of structural and environmental determinants (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), rather than "in isolation from one another" (Gottfried & Gee, 2017, p. 2). For example, asthma is a common reason for student absenteeism. In some cases, the severity of a student's asthma alone could explain their absenteeism, but disparities in access to healthcare and treatment help explain why some students with asthma are chronically absent and others are not (Kim et al., 2020). As another example, transportation issues are also a major reason for absenteeism. Transportation issues are the result of a variety of factors, including car ownership, parental work schedules, availability of family or friends as back-up options, availability of public or school-based transportation, and limited income to afford car repairs, insurance, or gas (Lenhoff et al., 2022).

Though the reasons that students miss school are complex and varied for students across the United States, the "ecological" perspective on attendance is especially important in high-absenteeism districts, where broad social and economic inequalities are strongly

associated with high chronic absenteeism rates and structural and environmental inequalities create greater barriers to getting to school (Singer et al., 2021). Consequently, districts with high rates of chronic absenteeism face a difficult task: they are accountable for attendance as an educational problem (Jordan & Miller, 2017), but the solutions require a combination of school- and district-based efforts and out-of-school resources and services over which they do not have direct control (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022).

Types of Attendance Practices

In the face of chronic absenteeism, districts can adopt different types of practices. Communication-based strategies are one common approach. A collection of studies shows that effective communication about attendance—for example, informing families about their children's attendance or communicating the importance of regular attendance—can result in small positive increases in attendance (Bergman & Chan, 2021; Himmelsbach et al., 2022; Lasky-Fink et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2018; Swanson, 2022). While these are low-cost and easy-to-implement practices, the small effects suggest that they are unlikely to substantially decrease chronic absenteeism rates in high-absenteeism contexts. Intensive two-way communication with families to identify and address students' barriers to attendance may have a larger positive impact, though these efforts could require substantially more personnel and funding (Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018; Stemler et al., 2022). Communication with families can also take a punitive turn, however, when schools or districts stigmatize families for missing school, especially if they threaten families with court-based prosecution due to truancy (E. B. Edwards et al., 2023; Lasky-Fink et al., 2021; Weathers et al., 2021).

Districts may also focus on improving their school culture and climate. Factors such as student belonging and student-teacher relationships are correlated with better student attendance (Liu & Lee, 2022). Yet, whether improving school culture causes an increase in student attendance is unclear (Hamlin, 2020). Further, the specific actions that districts and schools should take to improve school culture for attendance may be unclear, given that school and teacher value-added for attendance are only weakly correlated with value-added for test scores (Bartanen, 2020; Liu & Loeb, 2019). Importantly, discrete efforts to encourage student attendance through incentives (e.g., rewards, awards) have little supporting evidence (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018), and such practices can even have negative effects on attendance depending on how they are implemented (Robinson et al., 2021).

Finally, districts and schools can focus on providing resources and services to help students and families overcome barriers to attendance related to factors such as health, transportation, and housing. For example, districts can expand access to school-based transportation, which can have a positive impact on student attendance (D. S. Edwards, 2022). Districts can also connect students to social services provided by governmental agencies as well as non-profit and community-based organizations. The community schools model, which integrates these types of services into the school, has shown positive effects on attendance (Covelli et al., 2022). Importantly, effectively connecting families with new resources and services requires dedicated personnel, strong school-family relationships, well-developed organizational infrastructure, as well as adequate access to the resources or social services themselves (Hine et al., 2023; C. Kearney et al., 2023).

Institutional and Organizational Perspectives on Attendance Practices

In sum, districts may address attendance through communication with families, incentives that recognize or reward students, improvements to school culture and climate, or direct resources and services to address barriers to student attendance. Institutional and organizational perspectives—which scholars have applied to understand instructional reform efforts (Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Peurach et al., 2019)—offer some insight into how districts might select, systematize, and implement attendance practices.

Districts are likely to adopt new attendance practices in response to growing external demands from their institutional environment (Spillane et al., 2019), such as formal accountability for student attendance or growing popular concerns about chronic absenteeism. Yet, especially compared to other domains such as instruction, districts have relatively little existing technical expertise and organizational infrastructure for attendance practices (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022; Yurkofsky, 2022). With limited time and resources overall, and given the magnitude and complexity of absenteeism, districts' efforts to improve attendance may strain their overall capacity and coherence (Spillane et al., 2022). Thus, districts may tend toward practices that are easier-to-implement.

In addition, districts tend to mimic existing organizational forms, which can help fill in knowledge gaps and confer legitimacy to their efforts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For attendance, district leaders may mimic the systematic approaches from domains in which they have existing competencies, such as instruction (Peurach et al., 2019). They may also rely on models of practice promoted by external organizations (Trinidad, 2023). For example, some advocacy organizations promote a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) approach to attendance practices (Jordan, 2023).

Finally, the practices that districts select may be informed by institutional logics—the broad cultural ideas and expectations that are embedded in organizations and influence their behavior (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2012). District leaders may select different attendance practices depending on how they are influenced by cultural ideas about student and parent responsibility, bureaucratic processes, professional expertise, communal support, or some combination of these (E. B. Edwards et al., 2023; Lenhoff & Singer, 2022).

Study Context

This study draws on data collected as part of a broader evaluation of Michigan's Partnership Model for school and district turnaround. The Partnership Model is Michigan's policy to identify and intervene with the "bottom 5%" of schools in the state, in compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Partnership Model involves a combination of supports and accountability measures, through which the state aims to spur school improvement (Burns et al., 2023). While schools are the unit of identification for Partnership status, all districts with at least one Partnership school (i.e., Partnership districts) enter into agreements with the state department of education, which involve academic and non-academic goals that schools are expected to meet and accountability measures that may be imposed if not.

The current cohort of Partnership schools and districts was identified in November of the 2022-23 school year. There are currently 47 Partnership districts; some of the schools were reidentified from prior cohorts and others were newly identified (Singer & Cullum, 2023). The Partnership districts enroll about 138,000 students, or around 10% of students in the state. The districts vary in size: some are among the largest traditional public districts in

the state, while others are small traditional public districts with a few schools or even charter districts with a single school.

These schools and districts are not only among the lowest-performing academically in the state, but also are schools that serve a disproportionately large share of Black students and low-income students, reflecting the historical and persistent relationship between racial and socioeconomic inequalities and educational opportunities and outcomes (Burns et al., 2023; Singer & Cullum, 2023).. Also of note, in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities served by Partnership districts experienced greater hardships than other parts of the state (Harbatkin et al., 2023).

Partnership districts provide a useful context to catalog attendance practices in high-absenteeism districts. First, as shown in Figure 1, the current Partnership districts have long experienced high rates of chronic absenteeism, which were exacerbated through the pandemic. Second, the broader evaluation of the Partnership model offers useful data to understand districts' existing attendance practices. Third, Partnership districts participated in an intensive planning process as part of their identification for Partnership status, which provides further insight into how districts plan to address attendance and chronic absenteeism. In the following section, I describe the data sources and methods I use to analyze their attendance practices and plans.

[Figure 1 here]

Methodology

This study follows a parallel convergent mixed-methods research design. I drew on both quantitative and qualitative data, which were analyzed separately and then integrated for the findings (Hewitt & Mansfield, 2021). Using multiple types and sources of data

supports triangulation of the findings and a richer understanding of the topic (Creswell & Clark, 2010). In this section, I describe my data collection and analysis for three data sources used in this study.

Survey of Principals

The first data source for this study is a survey of principals in Partnership districts. The broader Partnership Model study involves an annual survey, which is distributed to Partnership district teachers and principals. In 2022-23, the principal survey included two questions about attendance. The research team fielded the survey in February and March 2023. Overall, 170 Partnership district principals responded to the survey (49% response rate). Taken together, the responses cover 45 (96%) of the Partnership districts. I apply a nonresponse weight, which is the inverse probability of response within districts. I calculate the probability of response based on demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender) and whether the principal's school is newly identified or reidentified for Partnership status.

I summarize principals' responses to a question about attendance-related practices. The survey asked principals to report the frequency with which their school used eleven different attendance practices during the 2022-23 school year. The practices in the survey question included different approaches to communication, providing resources and supports, improving school culture, using incentives, and referring families to court. Principals indicated whether staff at their school conducted these practices frequently (i.e., daily or weekly), infrequently (i.e., monthly or yearly), or never. The principals' responses provide insight into existing attendance practices and personnel across Partnership districts.

Case Studies and Observations

The second data source is a set of qualitative data from Partnership district case studies. As part of the broader Partnership Model study, the research team purposely sampled six case study districts—three traditional public school districts and three charter school districts—and conducted interviews with district and school leaders, focus groups with teachers, and observations of school improvement planning meetings. Total data collection included twenty district-level interviews, eight principal interviews, six teacher focus groups, and transcription-style observation notes from six school improvement planning meetings. In addition to interviews in the case study districts, I observed and took transcription-style notes at school improvement planning meetings in eleven other Partnership districts, to complement the case study data.

I analyzed the qualitative data to identify and more richly understand Partnership districts' attendance practices and the organizational context for their attendance-related work. After each interview and focus group, the research team completed structure memos (Miles et al., 2019) to capture key points related to districts' current challenges, existing practices, and plans for improvement. To draw out findings specifically related to attendance practices, I further summarized the data by case district in an analytic memo (Miles et al., 2019), and then filled in a matrix to compare findings across cases (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018). For the observations, I coded the transcription-style notes in two phases: descriptive coding to identify attendance-related passages, and then sub-coded the data to further describe each excerpt (Saldana, 2015). Finally, I wrote analytic memos (Miles et al., 2019) to draw out key findings on the districts' attendance practices and organizational context.

School Improvement Plans

The third data source is a set of school improvement plans from Partnership districts. As part of their turnaround status, all Partnership districts were required to participate in a structured school improvement planning process, which involved conducting a root cause assessment, setting goals with specific targets for improvement, and outlining specific activities the district will undertake to meet those goals. Twenty-eight of the districts included an attendance goal in their improvement plans, either as a standalone goal or (in some cases) as part of a broader "whole child" goal. For each goal, the plans include a root cause assessment and specific planned activities. For this study, I focus on the plans for those 28 districts.[1]

I quantitatively coded and analyzed districts' planned attendance activities. I adapted a deductive coding scheme previously developed by the research team to study Partnership district funding requests and activities, and inductively added additional codes as necessary. Table 1 lists and defines the key codes applied to attendance activities.[2] The types of activities fit into three broad categories: organizational infrastructure, specific practices, and staffing. For each activity, I marked a one (1) for codes that applied to the activity and a zero (0) for codes that did not apply.

[Table 1 here]

I descriptively analyzed the presence of different types of activities for the 28 Partnership districts with attendance goals. I considered an activity type to be present if it

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[1] The Michigan Department of Education's Office of Partnership Districts shared the plans with the research team. Seven districts did not sufficiently complete their plans and as a result those plans were not shared. The 28 plans used in this study represent 60% of all Partnership districts and 70% of districts whose plans we received.

[2] While I coded activities for all goals (e.g., student proficiency and growth goals), I only include attendance-related activities in this study, and thus I exclude some code categories that were not relevant to the attendance-focused analysis (e.g., academic curriculum, academic intervention).

ever occurred in a plan. I chose this measure rather than a count or proportion of activity types because of variation in the way districts wrote their improvement plans: some wrote a single activity for each activity type (e.g., one statement for new data systems) while others split activity types into multiple activity statements (e.g., one statement for selecting a data system and another statement for implementing the data system). In addition, some lumped multiple different activities together into one activity statement, which required applying multiple codes to some activities (i.e., the coding was not mutually exclusive). Counting the presence or absence of different activities offered a more uniform approach to analyzing the data. I thus summarized the percentage of districts with that activity type present. In the findings section, I also integrate examples of activity statements for each activity type to qualitatively illustrate and more richly explain the activities that districts planned.

In addition, I qualitatively analyzed the root cause assessment sections for attendance goals. For each goal in their school improvement plans, Partnership districts conducted a root cause assessment that included an analysis of existing data, a narrative of existing strengths and challenges, and an "if/then" statement to articulate a theory of action. For this study, I examined the root cause elements related to districts' attendance goals. I started by writing analytic memos to describe the root cause assessments of each district, and then wrote a summative memo to identify key themes in the districts' root cause assessments across the districts. I use this qualitative analysis to contextualize the quantitative analysis of planned activities in the improvement plans.

Findings

Existing Attendance Practices

Figure 2 shows Partnership district principals' responses about attendance practices during the 2022-23 school year. In the following sections, I discuss the results for different types of practices, integrating findings from the case studies and observations for greater context and meaning.

[Figure 2 here]

Communication with Students and Families

Principals reported using communication-based strategies most frequently. Seventy-two percent of principals reported communicating the importance of attendance with students frequently, and about 61% reported contacting parents about their children's attendance frequently. In addition, 19% of principals reported frequent home visits, though 48% reported doing so infrequently. Finally, 37% of principals reported frequently meeting with families to help make a plan for their children's attendance, though 57% reported doing so infrequently.

In our case studies and observations, district and school leaders described communication-based practices in detail. Some district and school leaders described communication to notify parents about their children's attendance. For example, a principal in one district explained that "teachers call [the parents of absent students] every day, and we have auto calls [to the parents of absent students]." Similarly, a leader in another district explained that they "have someone here in the district providing emails and letters to send out to students who've been out [of school for] many days." Others described explaining the importance of attendance to students or parents. For example, a principal in one district explained that their school frequently uses mini-conferences with students to try to encourage them to improve their attendance: "We'll meet with the kids, and we have grade-level meetings…We'll bring up research, the importance of attendance, the direct correlation of attendance and learning, attendance and grades, things like that." As these examples

show, the communication practices were often one-directional and emphasize informing or motivating parents and students.

Incentives and Other School Culture Practices

Incentives were also a common strategy reported by principals. Forty-four percent of principals reported using attendance incentives frequently, and 49% reported using them infrequently. School and district leaders did not discuss incentives in case studies interviews or during planning meetings. Based on the existing literature, those who reported using incentives frequently may be using a type of weekly reward for attendance (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018), whereas those who reported infrequent incentives may be using periodic awards or recognition for attendance (Robinson et al., 2021). In terms of other culture and climate practices, pairing students with adult mentors was a relatively infrequent practice. In addition, providing an engaging curriculum or instruction was the least frequent practice of those asked on the survey, suggesting a delineation for most principals between attendance and instructional practices.

Providing Resources and Social Services

Compared to communication and incentive practices, fewer principals reported frequently working on providing resources that might help families overcome barriers to attendance. For example, 36% reported connecting families with social services frequently and 29% reported providing transportation frequently, though a majority of principals reported using these practices infrequently rather than never. An exception is providing clean clothes or uniforms to students: 50% of principals reported doing this frequently, and 44% reported doing this infrequently. It is important to note that providing uniforms is a practice largely within school or district control, whereas providing social services or transportation requires coordination with external resources.

In our case studies and observations, some Partnership districts did provide examples of a supportive and case-oriented approach, focused on removing barriers to attendance and providing resources to students and families. For example, a leader of one district shared their approach:

> They [a team of district-level community liaisons] talk with the county, and they make home visits and figure out why. Well, maybe it's because the students didn't have any clean clothes. So they do things to address those problems, so our students can be here so they can get back in the classroom. Attendance is one of our focuses…especially because we have a lot of students who are experiencing poverty or even homelessness.

Similarly, a principal in another district described a case-by-case approach to uncovering and addressing student barriers to attendance that they want to expand:

> [This year] we're sending out our school liaison and enrollment coordinator, five families at a time…the goal is to bring parents in. We've had fifteen parent meetings where we called the parents in because we were concerned…We go deeper and find out why [their children are missing school], for example, housing insecurity. We go look for partners to help provide resources to families…For next year we want to have this system/approach for attendance in place on the first day.

These case-work approaches to improving attendance differ from communication- and incentive-based approaches described by other districts and reported as the most frequent practices by principals. However, as the examples above also highlight, such efforts are costly and time-intensive, often requiring dedicated personnel. These resource and capacity issues contrast with low-cost and easier-to-implement communication strategies.

Punitive Practices

In terms of punitive practices, referring students or parents to court for truancy was among the least frequent activities. Sixteen percent of principals in the Partnership district reported using truancy court referrals frequently and 33% reported doing so infrequently, but the majority of principals reported never doing so. Data from district observations offers a mixed story on the infrequent use of court referrals. Some district leaders explicitly stated that they did not want to

threaten families with court referrals to send families to court. As one principal put it, "We don't want the state to come down on you and cancel social services." On the other hand, other principals and district leaders described truancy court as a potentially useful form of accountability for parents but described limited follow-through from the court itself during the pandemic. As one principal put it,

> They are no longer going after parents or holding them accountable in county…Before the pandemic, we were taking parents to court for truancy…Since that's not in place it's an accountability issue. We can only do so much at the school level. We send out attendance letters, schedule attendance meetings, create attendance plans. As far as the county, they are really behind because of COVID-19.

Thus, the share of principals who reported never issuing court referrals could be deflated due to temporary changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. School and district staff may have still contacted families with the threat of court referral, even if they ultimately did not make official referrals to the court (E. B. Edwards et al., 2023).

Planned Attendance Activities

In the following sections, I present the planned attendance activities for the subset of Partnership districts with an attendance goal. I summarize the presence of different types of activities in three categories (organizational infrastructure, staffing, and specific practices), and include example statements and excerpts from their root cause assessments sections, as well as case study data when relevant, for additional context.

Developing Organizational Infrastructure for Attendance Practices

Planning and Implementing Organizational and Data Systems

In their school improvement plans, districts placed a great emphasis on developing organizational infrastructure for attendance practices. Eighty-two percent of the districts included an activity around planning and implementing organizational systems. For example, one district

stated that it would "develop, strengthen, and utilize a system of attendance supports," and another district similarly stated that it would "develop, communicate, and implement cohesive attendance policies and procedures." For about one-third of districts, these planning and implementation activities were tied to a tiered approach to attendance. For example, one district stated that it would "establish and implement common school improvement plan strategies for tiered attendance intervention." Similarly, another district stated that it would "communicate and implement [an] MTSS framework."

In addition, 64% of the districts included an activity related to data systems. For example, one district stated that it would "establish an attendance success team to monitor the implementation of attendance protocols, [early warning systems] data, and attendance goals." Another district stated that it would "conduct quarterly attendance data reviews…and modify tier 2 and 3 intervention plans based on need." These statements highlight how districts are planning to monitor both attendance and chronic absenteeism rates and the implementation of new attendance systems.

[Figure 3 here]

The strong emphasis on developing district- and school-based organizational systems for attendance is reflected in the root cause assessments in the improvement plans. The large majority of districts concluded from their root cause assessments that their schools need to establish a more systematic approach to attendance. For example, one district wrote:

> If a school-wide attendance system is implemented which monitors attendance data to identify students in need, then relationships with families can be strengthened, targeted supports can be identified and available resources reviewed, so that families are connected with supports needed to address barriers and improve on-track attendance.

Another district stated, "To decrease the percentage of chronically absent scholars, we need to develop a strategic plan that holds families accountable and keeps them engaged." Other

statements emphasized the need for "a proactive universal approach to attendance," to ensure "students are targeted properly for MTSS interventions," and to "provide more effective interventions for our absent students."

The need for new or better organizational systems is also reflected in the case study and observational data. Some districts described being in the early stages of developing attendance-related systems and routines. For example, one district leader shared that while there are several initiatives happening at the high school level, their district does not "have any consistent approaches to improving attendance." They expanded on this by saying:

> Our high school has several actions that they're working on to improve their attendance, and one is utilizing our school resource officer. We do have that in the district, and I think we're going through another process of trying to figure out how that person can best support the entire district…I haven't heard of anything happening at the middle school anymore or even at the elementary, but I know that we all want to get on board with having a uniform approach to dealing with student absenteeism and trying to tackle that in the younger grades where we can change those behaviors for students and parents.

Other district leaders explained that they have had attendance systems in place but want to strengthen implementation. For example, another district leader said:

> [We're focused on] resetting expectations for attendance communications and chronic absence interventions. The district has expectations for what we do for attendance, but it has not been implemented with fidelity…This includes attendance committees, team responsibilities, tighter processes for attendance tracking and reporting, staff communications, more home visits and family meetings, incentives, and family communications about the importance of attendance.

Finally, some districts had well-established attendance systems and routines. Yet, the magnitude of attendance issues created challenges for implementation. One district leader put it this way:

> Our attendance teams [at each school] have processes for what they do—steps once they have 3 absences, 5 absences, 10 absences. Here's all the things you do. The problem is that we get so far into it that we're like, "Well, what do we do for the students who have 32 absences?" Looking at this year [since the pandemic], we were kind of expecting things to be back to normal. Attendance is not…We have

to go back to the drawing board and figure out if we need to do something different. We have been talking about that at a district level, honestly, we haven't landed on something that we know is gonna work. It's a big problem, and we don't necessarily know how to solve it.

In sum, the case study and observational data, along with the root cause data, help explain the emphasis on planning organizational systems for attendance. Many districts described a lack of existing systems or viewed their current systems as inadequately designed or implemented.

Community and Agency Partnerships

Compared to these internal organizational systems activities, relatively few districts planned to engage external organizations as part of the organizational infrastructure for attendance. Eighteen percent stated that they would engage with community partners. Typically, districts simply stated "community partnerships" as an activity, though one district did list specific partners that it had in mind. In addition, 14% of the districts stated that they would engage with agency partners. Two districts planned to work more closely with county-level truancy officers: one stated that it would work with a regional "truancy coordinator to align with [the] county process," while the other stated that it would invite the county truancy officer to the district once per week "to support proactive attendance strategies with students and their families." In addition, one district planned to engage the "Pathways to Potential" program sponsored by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, which places case workers in schools to connect families with social services.

Staffing for Attendance Practices

Many districts also planned to hire staff to address chronic absenteeism. Fifty-seven percent of districts planned to hire or continue to fund attendance-focused personnel (Figure 4). For example, one district stated, "The district will hire an attendance intervention specialist or reallocate existing human resources to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of this position."

Another district stated that it "will employ a family engagement liaison to work with families to reduce barriers to student and family attendance." Other districts simply stated, "attendance agents," "attendance liaison," or "parent liaison" as an attendance activity.

[Figure 4 here]

In addition, 21% of districts stated that they would hire a social worker or school counselor, and 29% stated that they would hire behavioral staff such as a "behavior interventionist." In some cases, districts planned for these personnel would explicitly support attendance issues. For example, one district stated, "[the] counselor will work with students on academic, behavior, and attendance needs…the district does not have a counselor…having a school counselor improves [test] scores, makes post-secondary decision-making more informed, decreases disciplinary referrals, and improves attendance." Similarly, another district stated that it would use a "social worker" to "decrease…absenteeism and behavioral disruptions." In most instances, however, these positions appear to focus more on student behavior and social-emotional development and were captured as part of attendance goals because the district included attendance as part of a broader "whole child" goal.

Specific Attendance Practices

Finally, compared to organizational infrastructure activities, specific attendance practices were less present in districts' plans (Figure 5). Family engagement practices were an exception, appearing in 61% of the district's plans. Many districts stated a generic activity. such as "parent and family engagement," "engage students and parents," or "create annual calendar of parent engagement events." Others, however, specifically stated that they planned for family engagement to inform, educate, or communicate with parents. Specific examples include "parent involvement workshops," "create parent education sessions," "parent university," and "family engagement…

promoting the importance of education, attending school, and family engagement in their children's education." Thus, these family engagement activities can be seen to an extent as communication-based strategies.

[Figure 5 here]

Incentives, resources or supports, and communications were the other specific attendance practices include in the plans. Thirty-nine percent of districts included an incentives activity. For example, one district stated that they would "create and purchase attendance incentives," and another stated that they would "offer prizes and incentives for classrooms with 100% weekly attendance." Other districts simply stated "incentives," "attendance incentive program," or "recognize good and improved attendance."

Thirty-six percent included an activity for providing resources and supports to students or families. Some of those districts specifically identified a type of resource or target population, for example, "student transportation" or "homeless student supports." Others stated generally that they planned to provide resources or supports. For example, one district stated that it "will create…and implement a student support system," and another listed "case management support for students staff and families."

Twenty-five percent included a specific communication activity. Some districts indicated the purpose of communication. For example, one district stated that they would make "attendance calls of celebration, calls of concern, [and] communications of expectations [to parents]," and another district stated that it would "provide personalized early outreach." Other districts simply stated that they would conduct communication, such as "mass text, email, and voice communications [to] parents"; or that they would "create an attendance communication system."

Finally, twenty-five percent of districts include an unspecified MTSS practice. These activity statements were distinct from other MTSS statements because they emphasized a specific practice rather than developing an attendance system. For example, one district listed "tier 1 strategies…tier 2 supports…[and] tier 3 intensive supports." The presence of these unspecified MTSS practices is a reminder that additional specific practices may be implicit in district's stated intention to develop organizational systems for attendance. Still, compared to those organizational infrastructure activities, most types of specific practices were less present in the plans.

Discussion

Despite growing attention to chronic absenteeism in educational policy, practice, and research, there is little empirical evidence on the specific attendance practices that districts use. This study offers evidence of the type of attendance practices that high-absenteeism districts in Michigan have used as well as the attendance-related activities they have planned to do. For existing attendance practices in 2022-23, the districts in this study were using communication-based strategies most frequently. Many also used attendance incentives, and some focused on providing resources such as social services and transportation. In terms of planned attendance activities, most districts with an attendance goal planned to create new organizational infrastructure and hire attendance personnel, in line with districts identifying a lack of existing organizational infrastructure in case study interviews and as part of their root cause assessments. Fewer districts identified specific types of attendance practices they planned to implement.

While the findings primarily catalog existing and planned attendance practices, institutional and organizational perspectives can help us consider why districts have used or planned to take these approaches. For the practices that districts already use, they may

gravitate toward practices that align with existing knowledge, routines, and institutional arrangements. For example, educators have lots of experience communicating with students and parents, but they do not have the expertise nor direct authority over resources and services that address social and economic inequalities. They may also reflect an institutional logic of families, or the idea that families are first and foremost responsible for students, and thus communicating this responsibility is an important step for improving attendance.

Districts' plans to create new organizational systems and hire attendance-specific personnel align with organizational and institutional perspectives on coherence, legitimacy, and logics. The emphasis on organizational system-building is reminiscent of efforts to create instructional systems that are both technically rational (i.e., well-aligned with policy demands) and ritualized (i.e., well-institutionalized to buffer from external pressure) (Spillane et al., 2019). Indeed, a clear and documented attendance system—especially a widely-promoted model such as MTSS—helps both to deal with technical uncertainty about how to improve attendance (Yurkofsky, 2022) and to legitimate district efforts in the face of external pressure (Crowson & Deal, 2020). Further, districts' instinct to hire attendance professionals and establish attendance systems that are parallel to instructional systems reflect a logic of professionalism, or the idea that personnel will develop technical expertise and exercise autonomy in their roles to solve attendance problems.

Taking account of the districts' current and planned practices, and considering these institutional and organizational interpretations, it is unclear that new investments in attendance infrastructure and practices will lead to substantially lower chronic absenteeism. If districts develop attendance approaches that prioritize identifying and meeting the needs of chronic absent students, the question is whether they will be able to effectively identify

those needs and connect students with the appropriate resources and supports. For example, recent evidence from one urban district shows that new early warning data systems will not lead to improved attendance without follow up resources and practices that adequately address students' barriers to attendance (Canbolat, 2024). The plans provide limited concrete detail about whether this will be the case, but one piece of evidence is the relatively limited stated plans to strengthen partnerships with agencies and community organizations that can provide those resources and services. This casework-intensive approach will require investing in effective external partnerships, clear organizational routines, and strong school-family relationships (Hine et al., 2023; C. Kearney et al., 2023).

Further, keeping in mind the potential pressure for coherence and legitimacy and influence of professionalism logics, districts may ultimately continue to prioritize communication-based and incentive-based practices to improve attendance. One can imagine attendance professionals working similarly to teachers—isolated from their colleagues, expected to use their technical knowledge and school-based resources to improve outcomes for the students assigned to them—and based on instinct and institutional influences, turning to practices that are lower-cost, easier-to-implement, and within-their-professional-capacity (E. B. Edwards et al., 2023; Lenhoff & Singer, 2022).

Family engagement activities, for example, were the most common specific practice that the districts planned to use. It makes sense that many districts are planning for family engagement, since there is evidence that stronger school-family relationships are associated with lower rates of chronic absenteeism (e.g., Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). In addition, those events could serve as points-of-contact through which schools strengthen school-family relationships and work to identify and address persistent barriers to attendance. Yet,

districts' (albeit brief) descriptions of those activities suggest that these sessions will be more reminiscent of traditional parental involvement initiatives, which impose responsibility on families rather than fostering equitable family-school support and collaboration (Ishimaru, 2019).

To the extent that other high-absenteeism districts are in a similar position with developing their attendance initiatives, they should strive for an "ecological" approach. This would mean acknowledging the complex and interconnected causes of absenteeism, prioritizing intensive efforts to identify and alleviate barriers to attendance, and forging external partnerships and cross-sector collaborations to ensure there are resources and services available for students (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022). An ecological perspective does not mean that districts should abandon easy-to-implement and cost-effective practices such as effective communication with families (e.g., Bergman & Chan, 2021; Robinson et al., 2018). Rather, they should keep the promise of those practices in perspective in order not to overinvest time, resources, and expectations; and they should avoid extending the theories-of-action underlying those practices to unproven and counterproductive efforts that will require even more time and resources, such as incentives (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018; Robinson et al., 2021).

Districts can adopt an ecological approach even within the parameters of more familiar frameworks. For example, Kearney and Graczyk (2022) recommend adjusting the MTSS approach in high-absenteeism districts. The most significant change is perhaps the rethinking of Tier 1 universal strategies, which tend to be school-wide practices to foster a positive school culture and climate (Jordan, 2023). Kearney and Graczyk suggest that Tier 1 be expanded to include *community-wide* practices, such as ensuring safe and reliable

modes of transportation. Thus, districts would prioritize identifying out-of-school barriers to attendance and partnering with external agencies and community organizations to address those barriers as universal (rather than specialized) practices. The community schools model also offers a template for foregrounding the integration of social services and resources with educational efforts (Covelli et al., 2022).

In districts where most students are chronically absent, an ecological approach to chronic absenteeism will be costly and personnel intensive. It demands policymaker support for district leaders via allocating additional funding and facilitating collaboration between agencies and sectors (Lenhoff & Singer, 2022; Shiller, 2024). Still, in the absence of an ideal funding and policy context, districts can still decide to prioritize an approach that is supportive rather than communicative, incentivist, or punitive (E. B. Edwards et al., 2023), and begin to build their organizational infrastructure around those kinds of attendance practices.

Whatever systematic approach that districts adopt, they should carefully monitor and evaluate their approach. Educators have spent decades upon decades gaining expertise and developing systems to monitor and improve instruction (Spillane et al., 2022). New attendance interventions might help decrease chronic absenteeism, but schools need robust processes and routines to ensure they are implemented with fidelity and strong data systems to assess their impact. Districts and schools should therefore keep coherence and capacity in mind alongside impact and effectiveness. For example, an intervention might be successful at a small scale but prohibitively expensive or too challenging to implement at a larger scale; or an intervention that is affordable and easy-to-implement school- or district-wide may ultimately have a small effect (Kraft, 2020). Relatedly, dedicating time and

resources to developing an organizational infrastructure for attendance interventions could strain the coherence of other efforts (Spillane et al., 2022). Districts in high-absenteeism contexts cannot afford to ignore student attendance, but they will need to continue to be thoughtful about balancing the magnitude of challenges they need to address with the scope of reforms they undertake.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

School Improvement Plan Coding Scheme for Attendance Activities

Category	Activity Type	Definition
Organizational Infrastructure	Data Systems	Data systems and data analysis
Organizational Infrastructure	Partnerships - Agency	Partnering with an agency (e.g., department of education, health)
Organizational Infrastructure	Partnerships - Community	Partnering with a community-based organization
Organizational Infrastructure	Planning and Implementation	Planning and implementing new organizational systems
Specific Practices	Communication	Communication with families/students
Specific Practices	Family Engagement	Family engagement to involve or inform parents or guardians
Specific Practices	Incentives	Incentives to shape attendance, behavior, academics
Specific Practices	MTSS (unspecified)	General MTSS actions (e.g., Tier 1 practices, Tier 2/3 interventions)
Specific Practices	Resources/Supports	Providing or connecting socioeconomic or mental health resources to families
Staffing	Attendance Staff	Hiring attendance-focused personnel (e.g., attendance agent)
Staffing	Behavior Staff	Hiring behavior-focused personnel (e.g., behavior interventionist)
Staffing	Social Workers/Counselors	Hiring a social worker, school counselor, or school psychologist

Note: This table excludes some items from the broader coding scheme that were not meaningfully present among attendance activities (e.g., academic intervention, academic curriculum).

Figure 1
Attendance and Chronic Absence Rates over Time in Michigan Districts
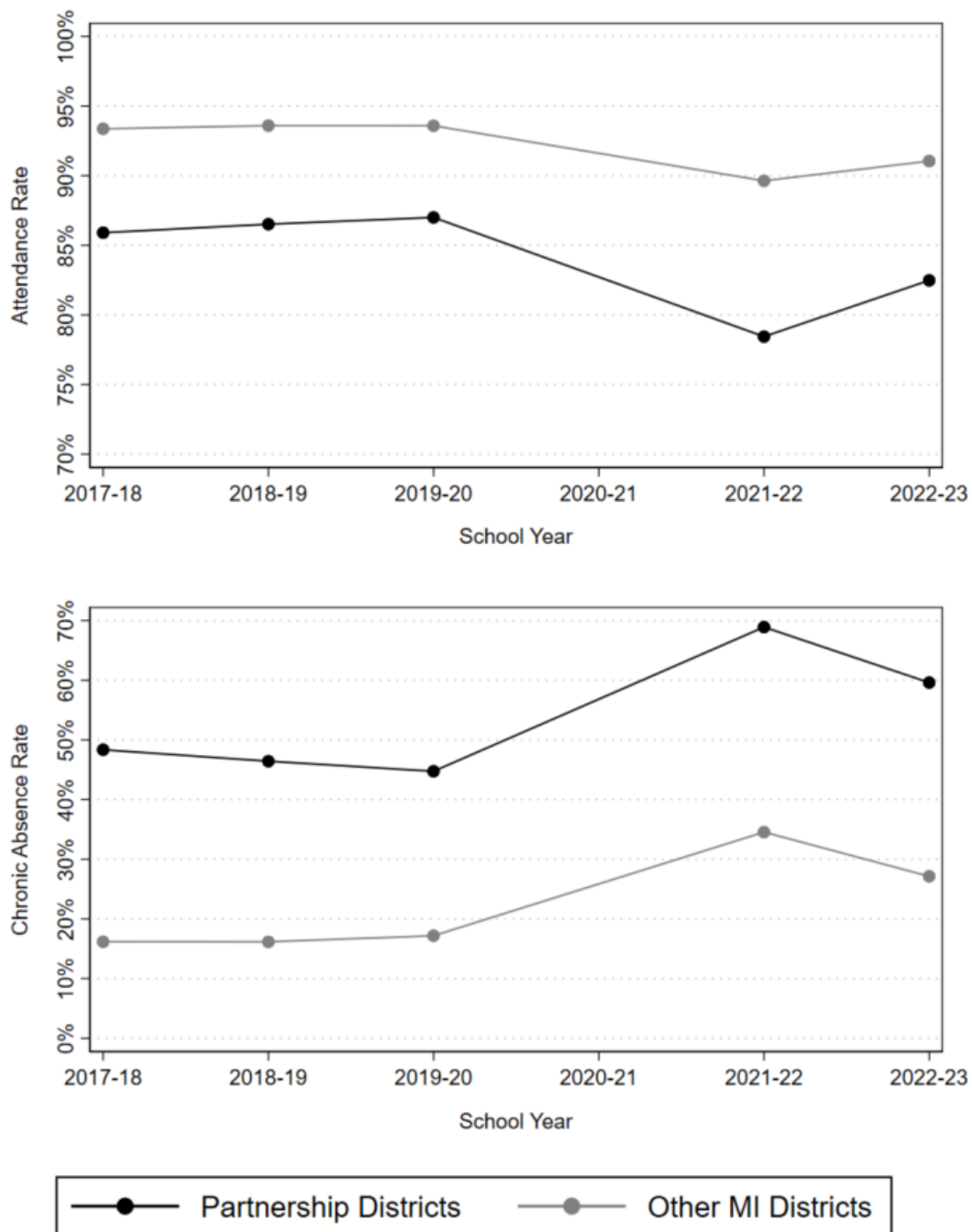
Note: Average daily attendance is calculated as the total number of days present divided by the total number of days enrolled. Students are chronically absent if they miss 10% or more school days. Attendance and chronic absence data for the 2019-20 school year are calculated for school days through March 12, 2020, after which attendance-taking was modified due to school closures at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Attendance and chronic absence data are missing for 2020-21 because Michigan adopted a modified criteria for counting student attendance in response to the pandemic in that school year.
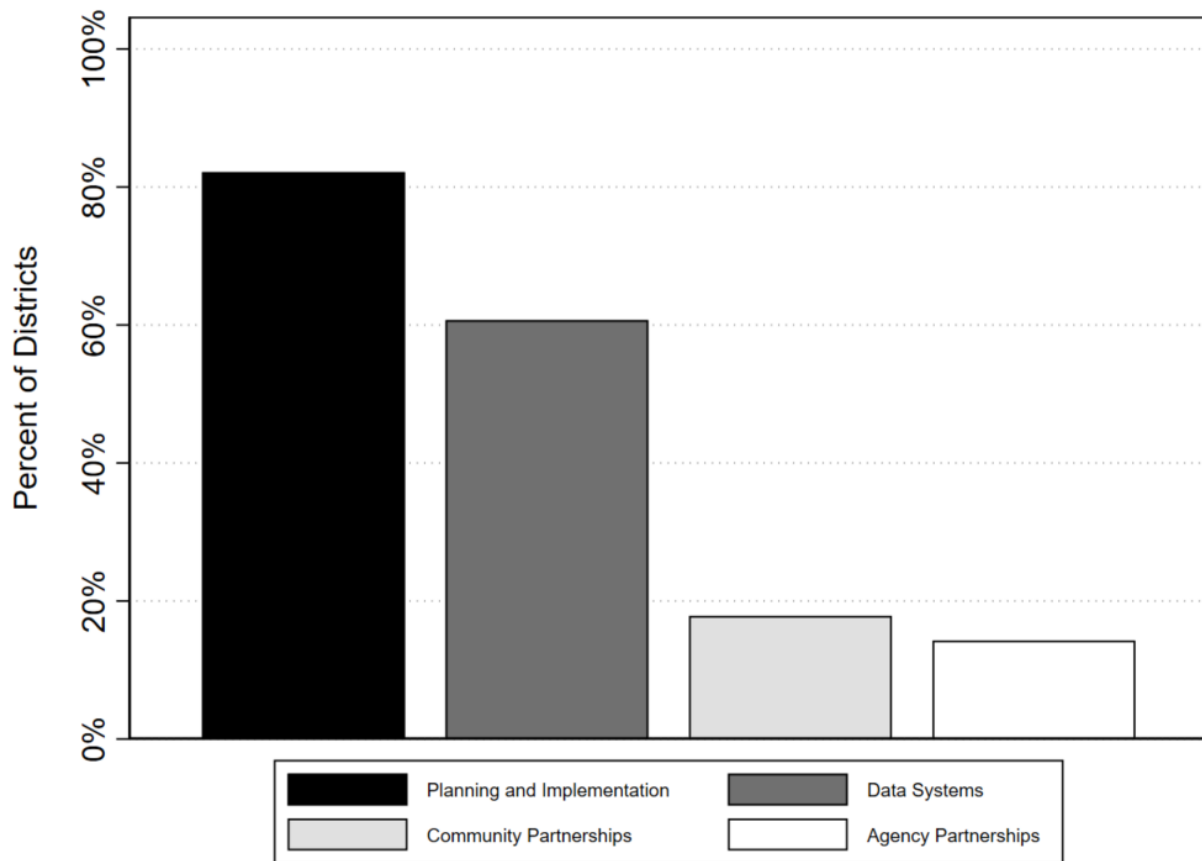
Figure 2

Frequency of Attendance Practices in Partnership Districts, 2022-23
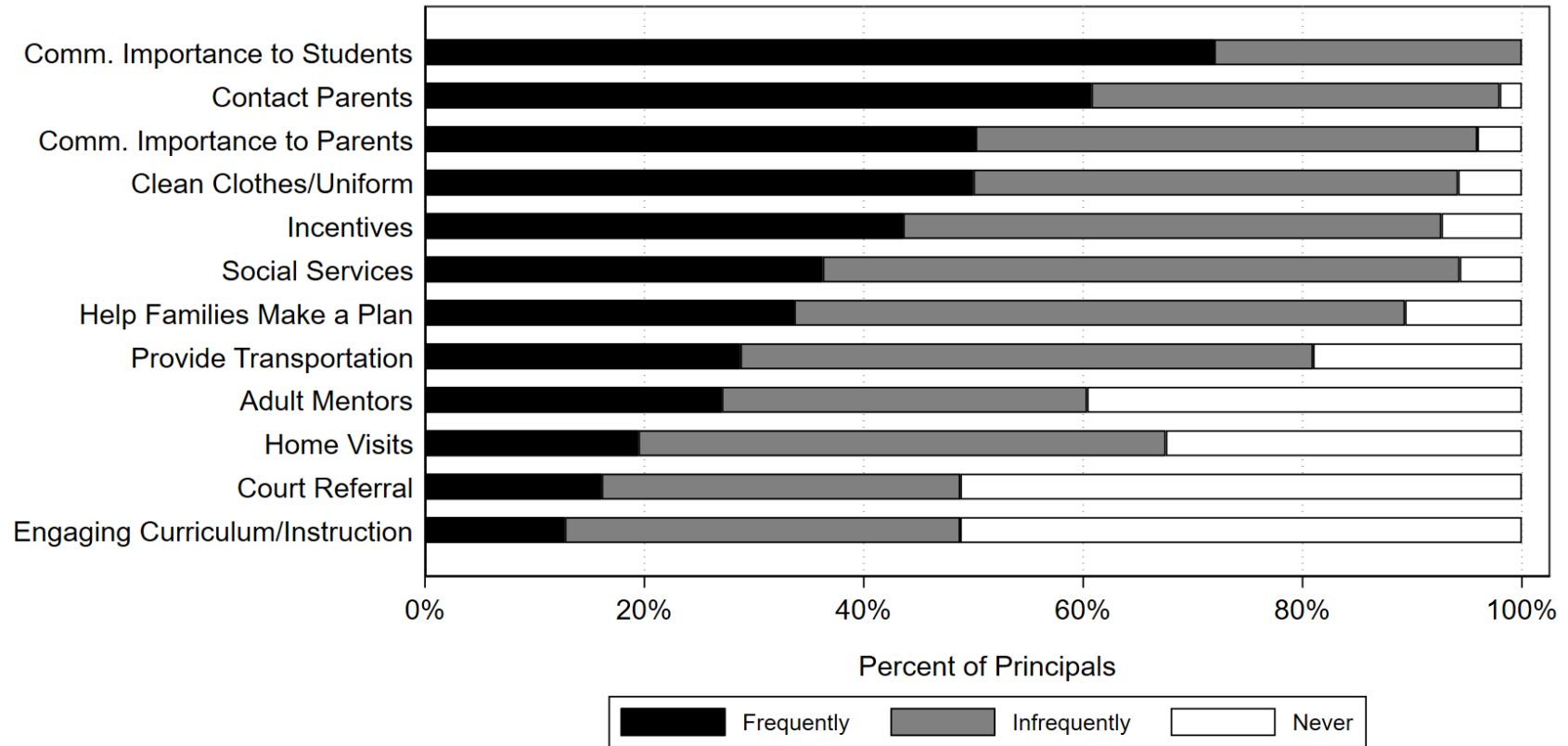
Note: Principals were asked, "How often do staff members in your school use the following practices to improve student attendance?" (*N*=170). For each item, principals selected one of the following options: daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, or never. Responses were further aggregated into three categories: frequently (daily or weekly), infrequently (monthly or yearly), or never.
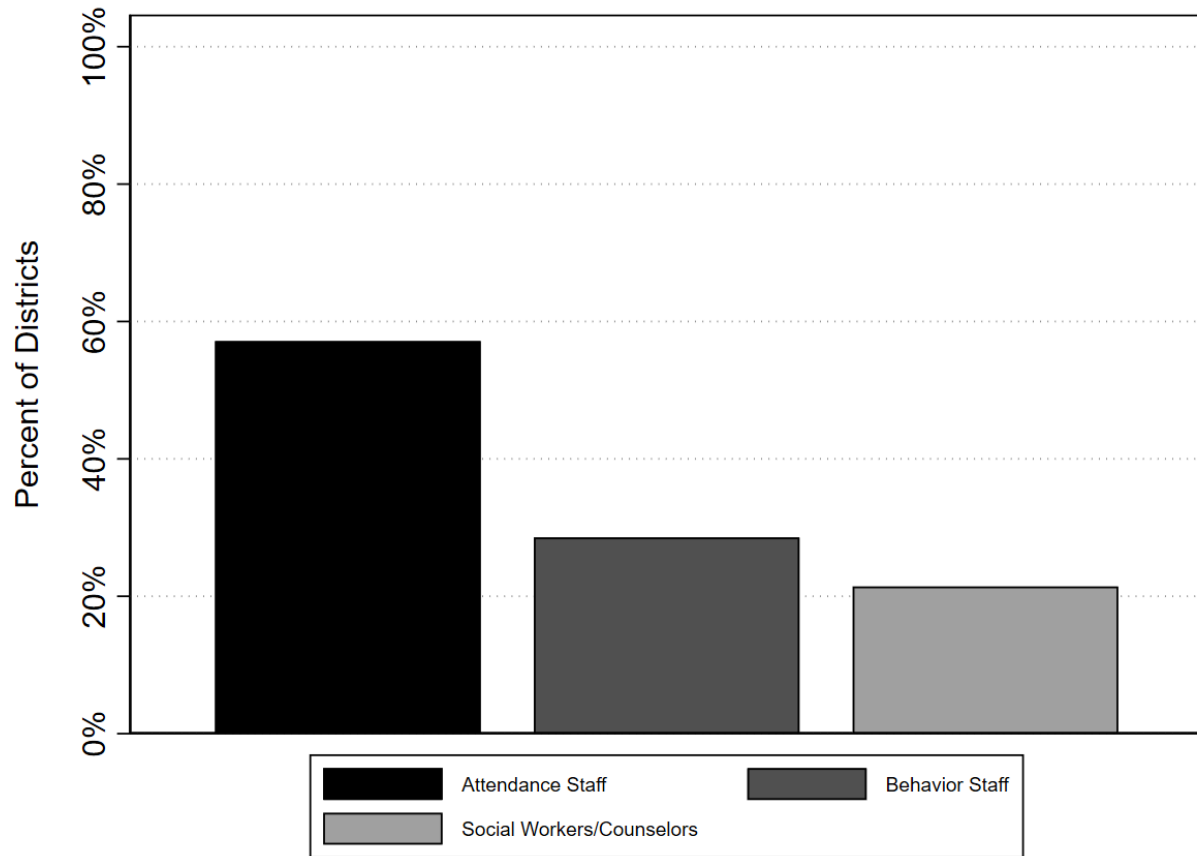
Figure 3
Planned Attendance-Related Organizational Infrastructure in Partnership Districts

Note: Graphs show the presence of any planned activities by activity type in school improvement plans for Partnership districts with an attendance goal (*N*=28).
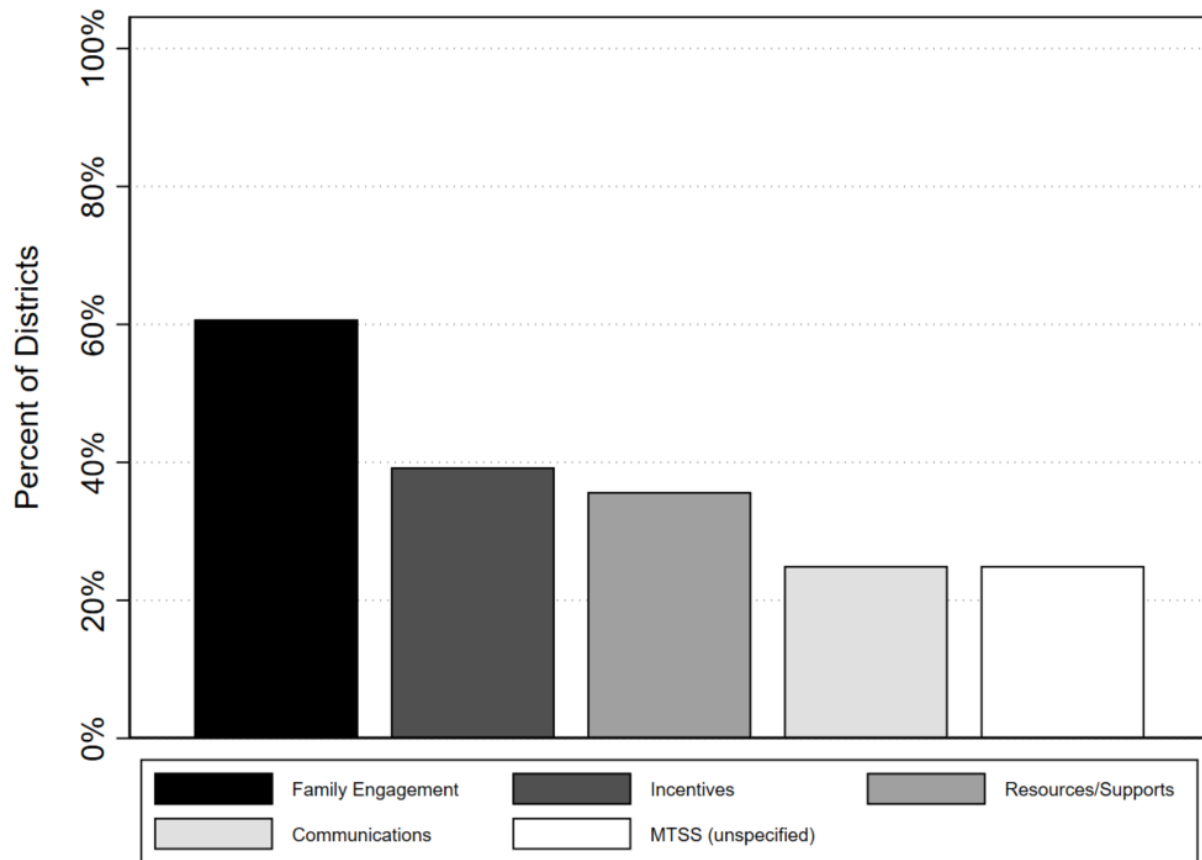
Figure 4
Planned Attendance-Related Staffing in Partnership Districts

Note: Graphs show the presence of any planned activities by activity type in school improvement plans for Partnership districts with an attendance goal (*N*=28).

Figure 5
Planned Specific Attendance-Related Practices in Partnership Districts

Note: Graphs show the presence of any planned activities by activity type in school improvement plans for Partnership districts with an attendance goal (*N*=28).