TITLE: Reducing Chronic Absence: Making Equity Strategies Specific, Adaptive, and Evidence Based

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ABSTRACT:

The UIC Center for Urban Education Leadership (CUEL) brief builds from recent CUEL analysis of schools that have proven most challenging to improve in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In this research brief, CUEL researchers make the case for "high churn" schools to adopt an evidence-based stance as they seek to address the issue of chronic student absence, one of the key factors that shape the learning experiences of a portion of students in "high churn" schools.


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The Center for Urban Education Leadership (CUEL) is a research and development center housed in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago in Chicago IL, USA. The center is directed by Dr. Shelby Cosner. The center includes researchers, developers, and policy advocates with expertise in educational leadership, organizational development, continuous improvement, and equity/social justice. The center is driven to use its expertise and passion to IMPACT the lives of PK-12 urban students locally and throughout the world. Independently and in collaboration with other research/development organizations, CUEL has secured over $16 million to fuel a broad assortment of research and development projects. Learn more about our work at: https://urbanedleadership.org/

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Executive Summary

Student attendance problems have numerous causes and serious consequences for student learning outcomes. **Chronic absence (CA)** is a critical indicator of these problems. Based on our research, we recommend that large urban school districts, such as Chicago Public Schools (CPS), consider chronic absence to be one of the single most important targets in its efforts to better serve students and families in its high-need neighborhood schools. Chronic absence is especially relevant today given that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused more students to be chronically absent. However, chronic absence is not a new feature for many schools and communities in large urban school districts. Large urban school districts have the opportunity to recognize in this continuing crisis a historic failure to learn how to support schools equitably. This especially applies in communities where economic instability (a condition that tends to underlie chronic absence as we elaborate below) has, is, and will continue to be the norm. The Black student population has suffered the most from this failure. With the pandemic ongoing, urban school districts can begin to organize to improve educational opportunities within the context of economic instability. Specifically, for schools and districts to reduce CA to improve learning outcomes, district and school leaders need to embrace principles of adaptive leadership and cycles of inquiry, better tailoring organizational capacity to the needs of specific families and schools. A range of different literatures, from studies of leadership for equity to specific responses to CA, can inform leaders and teachers in their efforts to respond more effectively to specific local causes of CA.

In this brief, we use available literature as well as collaborative research undertaken by the Center for Urban Education Leadership (CUEL) and CPS to address a set of questions relevant to CA. Although we draw on some of our research within CPS and we write this in our direct service to CPS, we view these findings as relevant to large urban school districts throughout the US. The questions that we investigate and address in this research brief are:

1. What does the research and practice literature tell us about chronic absence in terms of its root and proximal causes, consequences, and remedies?
2. In what ways are these findings illuminated by our collaborative research?
3. What can schools do? That is, what kinds of systems and supports can schools put in place to support students who struggle with chronic absence?
4. What can large urban districts (CPS and other such districts) do? How can the district identify and prioritize supports for the schools who deal with populations most likely to struggle with chronic absence?

Introduction

Variability in student attendance is a clear challenge to achieving equitable student learning outcomes in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), particularly because it negatively affects low-income students and students of color at disproportionate rates. Chronic Absence (CA) is a relatively new measure/indicator of student attendance, though low student attendance has long been recognized as an obstacle to school success.[1] Attention to CA represents a significant shift in policy around student attendance and has increased in research and policy circles over the last ten years. Unlike average daily attendance rates, with which educators are much more familiar, chronic absence is an individual student measure and, importantly, is predictive of individual student outcomes.

This research brief is also shaped by a larger study conducted by the Center for Urban Education Leadership (CUEL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago in collaboration with CPS and funded by the McCormick Foundation. That study found that instability in educational experiences marked by indicators of CA, student mobility, and students in unstable housing is characteristic of one-third of CPS elementary schools, which we termed "high-churn" schools.[2] Of these three indicators, chronic absence is the most amenable to school-based remediation and reduction (and absence can also be related to mobility and homelessness as separate causal factors). Following that analysis, our efforts to understand the problems of variability in student attendance have led us to focus on CA in CPS as a key construct that is caused by a variety of factors, has serious consequences for equity of student learning outcomes, has no single remedy, and yet is addressed more effectively in some schools rather than others.[3]

This brief attempts to answer the following central questions about how schools, districts, and their partners in leadership development can respond more effectively to chronic absence in our schools:

1. **What does the research and practice literature tell us about CA in terms of its root and proximal causes, consequences, and remedies?**
2. **In what ways are these findings illuminated by our collaborative research?**
3. **What can schools do? That is, what kinds of systems and supports can schools put in place to support students who struggle with chronic absence?**
4. **What can CPS, and other similar districts, do? How can the district**

[1] See for example, Kerbow, D. (1996). *Patterns of urban student mobility and local school reform.* Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED402386.pdf. Today, two national organizations that provide resources on the history of CA are offered by Attendance Works (https://www.attendanceworks.org/mission/) and the Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center (http://new.every1graduates.org/). They foreground elementary and secondary school absence, respectively. We follow Attendance Works in using the term Chronic Absence instead of "chronic absenteeism" in this paper, as it identifies a systemic phenomenon rather than implying a syndrome that can be located in individual persons.

[2] Walker, L., & Tozer, S. (2020). *Toward the continuous improvement of Chicago's high-churn elementary schools: Understanding the data.* Center for Urban Education Leadership.

[3] Walker, L., & Tozer, S. (2020). *Toward the continuous improvement of Chicago's high-churn elementary schools: Understanding the data.* Center for Urban Education Leadership.

identify and prioritize supports for the schools who deal with populations most likely to struggle with chronic absence?

Each of these four main questions raises sub-questions that must also be addressed. In summary, however, we can say that the research tells us much more about the causes and consequences of chronic absence than it does about effective remedies. Chronic absence has root causes in systemic racism and poverty, and schools with the highest concentrations of high-poverty students—particularly Black, Latinx, and Native American—are those most likely to experience high levels of CA, along with schools with high numbers of students with disabilities. **The systemic root causes to CA manifest themselves in more <u>proximal</u> causes at the local school and district level, varying from family mobility to homelessness to parent work schedules, lack of childcare, and lack of transportation to school. In various places in this brief, we point to the kinds of proximal causes that have been unearthed by researchers and practitioners who have carefully examined this issue. Because of the variability of proximal causes that stem from these root causes within districts and even within schools, it becomes critical to gather information about these more immediate causes before taking action**. Data collected at the district and school levels becomes critical to forming responses that actually address the problems that families are facing. For example, while racism and poverty are likely to contribute to various causes such as higher concentrations of homelessness, less access to childcare, and greater transportation obstacles in some neighborhoods rather than others, each of these proximal causes of CA requires a different response.

The research therefore tells us that districts and schools can take actions that can help reduce CA. Prominent among these are building school capacity for strong instructional culture and climate, particularly in the P-2 and high school years that are most vulnerable to CA, developing strong relationships with families, and foregrounding the uses of data to inform responses to CA. Districts can develop approaches to CA that support such school-based efforts, partly by developing and supporting school leadership that is equipped to address CA, and partly by developing accountability measures that are not punitive but are instead problem-solving focused. As Robert Balfanz of the John Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center says: ""As we make this more of an issue, we have to guard against falling back into seeing it as something to be handled legally and punitively and recognize that it should be handled with good data and problem solving — and that sometimes our own policies are counterproductive and we've got to fix them."[4]

[4] Smith, C. (2021, May 20) Chronic Absenteeism Is a Huge School Problem. Can Data Help? *Governing Magazine: The Future of States and Localities*. Retrieved from https://www.governing.com/now/chronic-absenteeism-is-a-huge-school-problem-can-data-help

The Need for Greater Specificity: Causes and Consequences

In 2017, an informative webinar hosted by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Education Laboratory provided useful context about CA while also affirming that the research base on effective remedies is inadequate.[5] The webinar presented prominent researchers as well as state policy officers in a discussion of the state of knowledge and policy in CA. Some of the key findings shared in the webinar include:

- Chronic absence is a more useful metric than average daily attendance for understanding why attendance is low and addressing its causes.
- While the Federal measure of CA is 15 missed school days, 32 states (as of 2018) used 10% of missed school days as the benchmark.
- The first national report on CA was not conducted until 2016 by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, revealing that 14% of students nationwide are chronically absent. But there was great variation among districts, schools within districts, and grade levels—with PK-K and high schools showing the greatest incidence of CA.
- It is critical to learn what the causes of CA are in a given context, as CA has a range of different proximal causes such as attendance zones, parent work schedules, availability of before-and-after school childcare, transportation, and school culture and climate factors. We elaborate a broad range of proximal causes that have been unearthed in relation to CA just below and on pages 9-11, providing additional insights into potential causes of CA.
- Just as there is no single cause for CA across different settings, there are no go-to solutions that can be counted on, and especially no single solution; it is likely that a combination of responses will be necessary to reduce CA in any given setting.

The need for greater specificity in understanding the impact of race and poverty on school outcomes has been a major focus of research conducted by CUEL in collaboration with principals and other leaders in CPS. This study, funded by McCormick Foundation, found that instability in educational experiences marked by indicators of CA, student mobility, and students in unstable housing is characteristic of one-third of CPS elementary schools, which we termed “high-churn” schools.[6] Of these three indicators, CA is the most amenable to school-based remediation and reduction (and absence can also be related to mobility and homelessness as separate causal factors).

Schools facing high rates of chronic absenteeism can struggle to meet chronically absent students’ needs, which then impacts school performance. Within CPS, high-churn schools as a whole are the lowest performing schools in the district according to achievement test scores and districts accountability metrics. High-churn elementary schools perform largely in the **lower half** of the CPS School Quality Rating Program (SQRP) accountability system, while stable schools almost uniformly perform in the upper half. Almost all elementary schools identified for *intensive support* or as “chronically low performing” in recent years are high-churn. Only 44% of predominantly Black enrollment schools that are high-churn sustained Level 2+ SQRP ratings by the end of a five-year period.[7]

[5] Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory (2018): Webinar on what research tells us about reducing student chronic absenteeism. October 25. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/ (Downloaded July 28, 2021).

[6] Walker, L., & Tozer, S. (2020). *Toward the continuous improvement of Chicago’s high-churn elementary schools: Understanding the data.* Center for Urban Education Leadership.

[7] A CPS Level 2+ rating and above is required for Good Standing accountability status. Level 2 and 3 ratings earn Provisional and Intensive Support.

This compares to 82% of schools with predominantly Black enrollment that were NOT high-churn; that is, they were stable in enrollment and attendance.

These descriptive data indicate that race and poverty by themselves are less explanatory of poor school performance than race, poverty, and churn combined. This by no means diminishes recognition of the effects of racism and poverty in our schools; to the contrary, it elaborates those effects in terms that create additional, nuanced problems of practice for teachers and leaders. When racism and poverty translate to student mobility and absence, for example, the problem of practice is framed more specifically than institutional racism.

In CPS, average CA rates for high-churn schools in 2018 were 21%, while for stable schools (not high-churn) they were 11%. Below are additional data on differences in CA between these two types of schools.[8]

- 80% of stable schools had absence rates below 15% in 2018 compared to 26% of high-churn schools.
- 54% of high-churn schools had absence rates of 20% and above compared to 5% of stable schools.
- Rates of CA are highest for the district's lowest-performing schools. Collaborative Schools, which the district has identified as among its lowest-performing schools to provide enhanced supports, have average rates of 28%.

In an assessment of CPS' progress toward achieving its vision goals from SY18 to SY19, the University of Chicago Education Lab found that attainment toward the district's attendance goal of 96.5% in SY24 declined by 15.1% (0.5 percentage points) over three years. In our analysis of average school attendance rates, declines were much greater for high-churn schools than stable schools. Also, rates of CA increased much more for high-churn schools than stable schools.[9] The Education Lab found that declines in attendance were greatest for three groups of students, each of which saw a 0.8 percentage point drop: Black males, English Learners, and Black females. These are all pre-pandemic data points. There is every reason to believe that high-churn schools experienced the greatest losses in enrollment and attendance districtwide during the pandemic.

In CPS and the nation as a whole, the absence of a commitment to using data to locate specific causes in specific schools and districts and the use of student absence as an accountability measure, which increased as a

[8] Walker, L., & Tozer, S. (2020). *Toward the continuous improvement of Chicago's high-churn elementary schools: Understanding the data.* Center for Urban Education Leadership.

[9] For high-churn schools, median school attendance rates declined 0.60 percentage points; the median rate for stable schools remained the same. Rates of CA increased more for high-churn schools compared to stable schools: 1.35 percentage points versus .80 percentage points. Notably, declines in attendance and increases in chronic **absence** were greatest for high-churn schools that had improved to a sustained Level 2+ rating on the accountability system in the previous five years, 2015-2019.

policy response since the passage of the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, can reinforce the stigmatization of schools that already face considerable burdens developing trust and organizational capacity in their communities. Illinois only recently began to report CA rates for schools and now uses these rates to determine a school's accountability status under ESSA. Use of CA in accountability systems means that schools are now responsible for addressing individual student attendance problems. This shift creates the need for school leaders to develop expertise in diagnosing and responding to the broad range of issues that contribute to attendance problems. It also creates the need for the system to better support and resource schools' and school leaders' efforts to improve individual student attendance. As Connecticut is now demonstrating, states can also play a role in supporting district efforts to collect data to inform better responses to CA.[10]

Since the 2018 webinar discussed above, the research literature has continued to affirm that schools and districts can have a positive impact on CA but it remains thin on the "how." One example is the recent, highly publicized research by Grissom and colleagues[11] that repeatedly emphasizes that one of the clear benefits of strong school principal performance is positive impact on student attendance, but how principals accomplish this is not discussed, and only one citation is offered in support of the contention that principals can make a difference to CA. Grissom et al. also cite research showing that principals of color can have a positive impact on the attendance of students of color, so there is a causal inference to be drawn there, but the "how" of school impact on attendance is not extensively researched. One exception to this is Kearney's work, which underscores the view that reducing chronic absence requires a multidimensional, collaborative approach among stakeholders or multi-tiered support systems.[12]

Lessons from Practice: Additional Insights into Proximal Causes

After two years of meeting with school and district leaders in a Networked Improvement Community focused on learning to lead more effectively in high-churn schools, we at CUEL have found that the lessons from practice are consistent with the lessons from research. Also, our research identified specific information about the difficulties and positive prospects of leading schools high in chronic absence. In general, practitioners concur that developing organizational capacity for instructional improvement is difficult when considerable administrative and staff resources are redirected to issues of attendance, that low attendance correlates with delayed progress in learning, that attendance in the earliest grades is weakest, that district policies governing enrollment and budgeting may contribute to CA, and that district supports and expertise specific to school and student needs are required but under-resourced. We also saw significant variation in causes of CA as well as variation in schools' ability to address those causes. Principals concur that there is no one remedy for CA, but that it requires concerted efforts by all school staff, especially teachers and leaders, and working with families and community agencies is essential to reducing its incidence.[13]

[10] Smith, C. (2021, May 20) Chronic Absenteeism Is a Huge School Problem. Can Data Help? *Governing Magazine: The Future of States and Localities.* Retrieved from https://www.governing.com/now/chronic-absenteeism-is-a-huge-school-problem-can-data-help

[11] Grissom, J., Egalite, A., & Lindsay, C. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research.* Urban Institute.

[12] Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2020). A multidimensional, multi-tiered system of supports model to promote school attendance and address school absenteeism. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *23*(3), 316-337.
Kearney, C. A. (2021). Integrating systemic and analytic approaches to school attendance problems: Synergistic frameworks for research and policy directions. In *Child & Youth Care Forum* (pp. 1-42). Springer US.

[13] Walker, L., & Tozer, S. (2020). *Toward the continuous improvement of Chicago's high-churn elementary schools: Understanding the data.* Center for Urban Education Leadership.

One such community agency active in CPS is Illinois Action for Children (IAFC), which has been working in the North Lawndale community on the problem of chronic absence for three years and has made progress learning how to serve schools and families seeking to address this problem. When IAFC started their work, they were unable to find guidance in the literature about best practices and effective strategies for engaging with families of chronically absent students. They had to conduct inquiries into needs, develop their own strategies, and devise ways to track progress. They've done considerable root-cause and proximal-cause analysis work to understand barriers for families, and they track their impact through changes in student attendance records. The first big challenge IAFC encountered, however, before causal analysis could be undertaken, was lack of school-based systems and structures to report on attendance data to support referrals to IAFC and follow-up.[14] Here are the kinds of data-related questions that schools will need to address to better understand CA in a local context:

- Who is responsible for attendance data, and how is this person held accountable?
- Is the data reliable? For example, are absences changed to tardies when they need to be? (Data reliability is important when talking to families.)
- Is the school leader making sure attendance tracking/monitoring is a priority and not just one of many other responsibilities?
- How can the data be organized and shared for referral purposes given existing school technologies?
- Is the data being shared in a timely enough fashion to intervene with a family?
- What do teachers know about patterns of absences for a child? Again, timeliness in sharing this information is important.

IAFC stresses that building parent/guardian relationships with school staff at all levels is critical for the work to develop. Their emphasis on data systems and family relationships echoes messages from the research literature. IAFC has learned a lot about the variety of barriers to attendance that families encounter and effective strategies to respond to them. The agency says that most people assume transportation is the primary cause, but they have found that there are multiple barriers and a need to understand and intervene on a case-by-case basis. Among the range of barriers as proximal causes to consistent attendance they encountered are these:

- Transportation and mobility issues
- Jobs with nontraditional work hours
- Illness
- Lack of quality support systems
- Students experiencing anxiety
- Awareness of missed days
- Lack of relationship between parent and school
- Domestic violence
- Unstable housing
- Medical appointments
- Gun violence in the community
- Transient and homeless families that are difficult to contact[15]

IAFC has found that these different kinds of causes are responsive to very different kinds of interventions, that the interventions must be tailored to the causes, and that collaboration with schools and families is essential. For example, providing bus cards and facilitating parent carpools had an impact when the proximal cause was transportation, and helping parents advocate for changing more suitable work hours addressed employment issues. For the problem of unstable housing, IAFC provides

[14] R. Jones, Community Connection Program Manager, Illinois Action for Children (personal communication, April 2, 2019)

[15] R. Jones, Community Connection Program Manager, Illinois Action for Children (personal communication, April 2, 2019)

families with renter's rights legal assistance and housing resources, and helps families navigate through utility service resources. All of these are very different strategies to address different proximal causes, and as one Chicago Network Chief pointed out, repeated "nudges" to parents would not have been enough in any of these cases.

What Can Schools and Districts Do?

In July 2021, Education Week sounded the alarm for post-pandemic back-to-school preparations with the headline, "An Action Plan for Confronting Chronic Absenteeism This Fall." [16] The article begins:

> If students aren't in school, they can't learn. That has to be the starting theory of action for district officials putting together their return-to-school plans for the upcoming year. Before the pandemic, federal data from 2017-18 showed that more than 8 million K-12 students were chronically absent—defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year. Now there's emerging evidence that rates surpassed that during the 2020-21 school year, as students turned off from lackluster remote learning, cared for relatives, or sought jobs to keep their families afloat.

The article concludes with six recommendations for action, including "Consider using 'nudges' to find and connect families," and "Relationships, relationships, relationships." While there is nothing especially amiss in such recommendations, they don't begin to tell us enough. **As demonstrated in the Five Essentials work of the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR), relationships certainly do matter, but greater attention is needed to the kinds of relationships that actually build school organizational capacity—such as teacher-to-teacher trust, and teacher-to-principal trust, and therefore can lead to improved school outcomes.[17]**

While CA has been recognized as a national problem for some time, and most states collect data on absenteeism, its importance has been highlighted by the remote learning environment of the pandemic years of 2020-21 and by the challenges of returning to school in Fall 2021. However, the importance of CA was apparent in the data well before the pandemic. The pandemic has raised the level of awareness and concern about attendance issues that in 2006 led the Annie E. Casey Foundation to support the founding of Attendance Works, an organization dedicated in part to CA.[18] That there has been so little specific attention to the problem of CA reminds us that just as systemic racism is importantly responsible for the high rates of CA in schools with concentration of high-poverty students of color, systemic racism is apparent in the historic lack of attention to the data, despite the immediate and predictably inequitable consequences for student learning outcomes.

What Can Schools Do?

In the face of these systemic root causes and highly variable proximal causes, what can

[16] Sawchuck, Stephen (2021, July 15). An action plan for confronting chronic absenteeism this fall. *Education Week.* Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/an-action-plan-for-confronting-chronic-absenteeism-this-fall/2021/07?utm_source=nl&utm_medium=eml&utm_campaign=eu&…

[17] Bryk, A., Sebring, P, et al (2010) *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press.

[18] https://www.attendanceworks.org

schools do? More specifically, what kinds of systems and supports can schools put in place to support students who are affected by chronic absenteeism? Based on the existing research and lessons from practice, we offer the following provisional insights, all of which require system supports that we will also address.

1. **Collect and Analyze Data:** First and foremost, schools should commit to collaborative data collection and analysis as fundamental to problem identification and continuous improvement. Prior to the investigation of proximal causes, this means initially addressing the kinds of data issues surfaced on p. 9 of this brief. Schools will then need to allocate time investigating proximal causes, and this brief sheds important light on the kinds of issues that should be investigated. Without collecting data on the proximal causes of CA within a school, it will not be clear what types of factors are contributing to CA (e.g., unstable housing, lack of childcare, lack of transportation, domestic violence, lack of family awareness of absences, illness, weak school culture/climate, weak relationships with families and/or students). This may require developing new leadership and staff capacity in the school, but without implementing cycles of inquiry for continuous improvement, each of the following actions will be severely limited in its effectiveness. The leader who can lead such inquiry processes will inevitably exhibit adaptive leadership, because the solutions to each school's problems of practice are not simply technical problems for which ready-made answers exist.[19]

2. **Enlist Families & Community Agencies in Understanding CA Causes and Devising Solutions:** A central part of the data collection therefore requires working effectively with parents and community agencies to understand the specific causes of CA within each school. This will require outreach and communication with families who can serve as informants about what is causing absence and what kinds of solutions are possible (see discussion of Illinois Action for Children experiences in this brief). That is, families can help schools understand the causes of CA and this information will be important to developing solutions that are situated within and aligned to the proximal causes and are not imposed on families but instead co-constructed with them. While there is some evidence that specific approaches to informing families about student absences can have a positive impact, most forms of "nudges" and incentives studied do not show effects. Several important exceptions are worth noting. For example, large-font, reading-level-friendly information about student attendance patterns proved to have an impact on students and siblings, as most parents underestimate their students' rates of absence.[20] Additionally, various targeted text messaging and phone call approaches have been linked to reductions in CA.[21] Beyond the scope of communication, mentoring programs for students at risk of CA have also been associated with

[19] Heifetz, M., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009) *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Harvard Press.

[20] Rogers, T., & Feller, A. (2018). Reducing student absences at scale by targeting parents' misbeliefs. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *2*(5), 335-342.

[21] Lavigne, H., Caven, M., Bock, G., Zhang, X., & Braham, E. (2021). *Exploring implementation of attendance supports to reduce chronic absenteeism in the Providence Public School District* (REL 2021–099). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

reductions in overall CA levels within schools.[22]

3. **Develop Nuanced Understandings of the Five Essential Supports in CA Contexts:** Although the CCSR Five Essentials are all relevant to building the kinds of school capacity necessary to support students experiencing CA, it is critical to call out how each of those supports needs to be understood differently in the context of high CA. What counts as "normal" family and community engagement, for example, is not likely to be sufficient in the CA context, which requires family and community engagement that intentionally gathers data on CA causes and enlists families in devising solutions. Cycles of inquiry are critical to understanding how such variables as instructional climate and family engagement in each school can respond to the needs of students directly affected by CA. Prior CUEL research that identified high churn schools in CPS makes clear that high-churn schools with weak organizational capacity have greater difficulty improving than those with stronger capacity. **Weak organizational capacity as indicated in the Five Essentials can therefore be understood as part of the cause of or contributor to high CA.**
4. **Develop Nuanced Understandings about Instructional Approaches:** CUEL's prior research that identified high churn schools in CPS also demonstrates that it is not just the absent students, but also their peers, who suffer from the effects of CA in terms of quality of coherent, continuous instruction, as demonstrated in school-wide achievement patterns that school principals attributed in part to instructional disruptions, increased behavioral problems, and diversion of administrative resources in high-CA schools. School leaders therefore need to conduct cycles of inquiry around instructional improvements that are responsive to the specific challenges teachers experience. For example, how can instruction be differentiated for high-CA students in ways that do not disrupt learning for other students? Teachers need to be a part of the data collection as well as part of solution-finding.
5. **Identify and Use Existing Resources:** School leaders and teachers need to take advantage of existing resources that specifically address high-quality P-2 programs as well as high-school instructional and SEL climate. This is because young children and high school students are most negatively affected by CA, which has a negative effect on early literacy and correlates highly with high-school dropout.[23] Tailoring instructional quality, SEL supports, and family engagement to these grade levels requires use of different kinds of resources, some of the most promising of which are appended to this (in addition to the 2021 edition of the NAESP *Building P-3 Learning Communities*, or the 2021 McIver & Balfanz volume on continuous improvement in high schools referenced

[22] Lavigne, H., Caven, M., Bock, G., Zhang, X., & Braham, E. (2021). *Exploring implementation of attendance supports to reduce chronic absenteeism in the Providence Public School District* (REL 2021–099). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

[23] See, for example, Ehrlich, S., Gwynne, J., Pareja, A., & Allensworth, E. (2013). *Preschool attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with learning outcomes and reasons for absences.* University of Chicago: Chicago Consortium on School Research.
Also: MacIver, M. A. & Balfanz, R. (2021). *Continuous improvement in high schools*: *Helping more students succeed.* Harvard Education Press.
Also: Levin, S. & Bradley, K. (2021). *Understanding and addressing principal turnover*. NASSP and Learning Policy Institute.

below, or the Attendance Works web resources).

The extent to which these five sample strategies require district supports should be self-evident. We will elaborate on examples of such district supports here.

What Can Districts Do?

How can CPS as a district identify and prioritize supports for the schools who deal with populations most likely to be affected by chronic absenteeism? Seven major areas of district-level support emerge from the literature, from CUEL research, and from a 2020 series of "meaning-making" convenings that CUEL conducted with key CPS units in the context of our high churn research.

1. **Reconsider the Accountability System**: The CPS Office of Accountability needs to revise the accountability system so that it supports, rather than primarily penalizes, high-CA schools. When schools with high CA rates are given low accountability ratings, it can exacerbate the problem as parents perceive the school negatively.
2. **Provide Targeted Socialization and Development for High CA (High Churn) School Principals (and Leadership Teams):** Principal supervision from the Network Chiefs should provide developmental support to high churn principals and their leadership teams that relate to the five school-level CA areas of attention identified above. High churn principals and their leadership teams are likely to benefit from engagement in professional learning communities (PLCs) or Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) with other high-churn leaders as they engage in cycles of inquiry to better understand proximal causes and devise and test solutions. Such communities would likely support greater knowledge generation and diffusion.
3. **Provide Developmental Supports to Network Chiefs:** Network Chiefs, and particularly those who supervise high-churn schools, also need specific training in how to develop coherent support for these schools and their leaders. If Network Chiefs tend to be selected from higher-performing school leadership roles, the question arises: *How many Chiefs have experience leading high-churn schools, and what can be learned from them?* Identifying this as a specific problem of practice for the district will require not just the Office of Network Supports to implement specific actions, it will also require cross-department problem-identification and planning that engages expertise from other CPS departments such as Teaching and Learning, Diversity, Family and Community Engagement, and others. A NIC to address just this set of issues would again potentially make a key contribution to practice-change at the nexus of Network Chiefs and principals. Network Chiefs who supervise a significant number of high-CA schools should be engaged in a PLC to develop their own knowledge and skills for supporting such schools.
4. **Strengthen Principal and Teacher Retention in High-CA (High-Churn) Schools**: Issues with teacher and principal retention, which are more common in high-churn schools, are likely to challenge a high-churn school to improve and sustain organizational capacity,[24] which in turn is likely to undermine efforts at reducing CA. The scant literature that exists sheds light on new teacher retention in urban schools

[24] Levin, S., & Kathryn Bradley, K., (2021) *Understanding and addressing principal turnover.* NASSP and Learning Policy Institute.

and points to the utility of higher-dosage teacher mentoring programs that provide racial/ethnic alignment between new teachers and their mentors.[25] Because this literature base is particularly thin, organizing a NIC of Network Chiefs to address this problem of practice would potentially be of value to CPS. A related question implied by Levin and colleagues (2021) could be addressed by Chiefs as well: *what kind of readiness is essential before a principal should take the reins of a high-churn (high-CA) school?* As we discuss below, CUEL high-churn research leads us to discourage the district from placing highly inexperienced school leaders into high-churn schools until this issue is better understood.

5. **Strengthen Principal Preparation and Staffing Relative to Leading High CA (High Churn) Schools**: With more knowledge about the leadership of high-churn (high-CA) schools, CPS and its preparation program partners should consider the kinds of academic and clinical experiences that are of value to those who will eventually lead high-churn schools. Given the weakness of the literature as a guide to exactly what principal practices are most critical in preparation and development for responding to high-churn (high-CA) schools, a clear opportunity exists for CPS to engage in new knowledge generation, especially because considerable variability in performance can be found in high-churn (high-CA) schools in CPS. What can we learn from such variations? Until such preparation has been proven effective, placement of inexperienced principals in high-churn (high-CA) schools should be an exception rather than the rule.[26]
6. **Engage in District-Level Disciplined Inquiry into Key Policies and Practices:** CPS needs to conduct disciplined inquiry into the role that elements of school enrollment management, budgeting, and school choice policies play in exacerbating CA. School choice policies, for example, encourage mid-year school transfers in and out of schools, disrupting continuity of attendance and affecting school budgets year to year. A second example is the frequency of Pre-K children attending schools that are not their destination schools for kindergarten, exacerbating already high rates of CA in the P-K years, in part by complicating all-important family/school relationships.[27] Finally, resource allocation can disadvantage schools that are struggling the most with student attendance and that need resource supports the most.[28]
7. **Elevating Public and Professional Awareness of Root Causes of CA:** Finally, it is possible that a critical element in framing the CPS response to CA will be for the district to acknowledge the historical and community roots of the persistence of

[25] Caven, M., Durodoye, R., Jr., Zhang, X., & Bock, G. (2021). *Variation in mentoring practices and retention across new teacher demographic characteristics under a large urban district's New Teacher Mentoring Program* (REL 2021–100). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

[26] Burkhauser, S., Gates, S.M., Hamilton, L.S., & Ikemoto, G. S. (2012). *First-year principals in urban school districts: How actions and working conditions relate to outcomes.* New Leaders. RAND Corporation.

[27] The earlier cited Consortium study on pre-K attendance (Ehrlich, et al. 2013) shows the lowest rates of attendance for 3-year-olds, next-lowest for 4-year-olds, then 5-year-olds.

[28] See, for example: Sepanik, S., Zhu, P., Shih, M., & Commins, N. (2021). *First-Year effects of early indicator and intervention systems in Oregon.* National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at IES: Institute of Education Sciences/Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. REL 2021 097 U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/REL_2021097.pdf.

CA data in systemic racism, poverty, and past district policies as a way to clear a path to systemic data collection on the variability of proximal causes to be conducted by the district and by individual schools.

A Three-Dimensional Framework for Responding to CA

Research by CUEL reveals that despite the dearth of literature on how to combat CA, there are numerous related literatures that can help inform school leaders and policy makers about CA causes, methods of causal analysis, and possible interventions. These literatures come from journals in different disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, school leadership) and across boundaries of theory, practice, research, and policy. Examples from these related literatures are provided in Appendix 1. **They illustrate that school leaders who want to address CA effectively will not find sufficient guidance in the CA literature alone, because the wider literature that informs strong leadership practice is critical to requisite leadership understanding and practice.** For example, leaders who seek to address CA effectively would benefit from understanding literature on building school organizational capacity, effective instructional leadership, building P-2 learning communities, equity-focused and anti-racist leadership, building strong relationships with families and community, and so on. In addition to the *Interventions* literature and related literatures illustrated in Appendix 1, we have included in Appendix 2 an executive summary of a recent overview of these literatures.

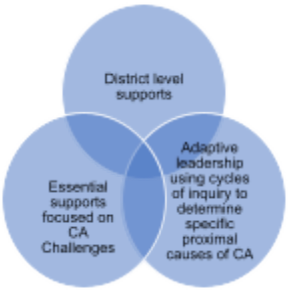
For a problem of practice like leadership for reducing CA in schools, the research literature is relatively inchoate, and the proximal causes of the problem vary from school to school and district to district. **Three dimensions of the wider leadership literature therefore become especially important.** One of these is the construct of **adaptive leadership**, which places a premium on leaders recognizing that the solution to a given problem is not readily available and must be a product of leadership learning in collaboration with others.[29] The second is the literature on **organizational capacity**, which addresses how leaders can create instructional and organizational cultures that support adults and children effectively throughout the school.[30] Third is the literature on **continuous improvement**, which informs leaders about how they can take disciplined, collaborative steps to use cycles of inquiry to investigate root and proximal causes of a problem of practice, collaboratively plan solutions, and assess the progress of those solutions in addressing the problem effectively.[31] We will turn to the importance of this continuous improvement literature shortly.

Because there is no single root cause for CA, but a variety of causes that vary with grade level, neighborhoods, and family conditions, a range of different strategies are required to reduce CA. Arriving at those strategies requires **adaptive leadership** committed to learning through collaborative cycles of inquiry using principles of continuous improvement. Such

[29] Heifetz, R. A., Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world.* Harvard Business Press.
[30] For example, Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E. L., Luppescu, S. S., & Easton, J. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement. Lessons from Chicago.* The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
[31] Smylie, M. A. (2010). *Continuous school improvement*. Corwin. Also Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

adaptive leadership will need to tailor widely recognized school capacity-building strategies to the challenges of CA, and will be more effective if supported by district policies and practice. These three dimensions are represented in Figure 1:

Figure 1: A Three-Dimensional Response to CA



One premise of this 3-dimensional response is this: what we already know about school capacity-building applies to schools with high CA as well as to schools with lower levels of CA. As Leithwood and colleagues (2019) recently wrote:

> School leadership improves teaching and learning, indirectly and most powerfully, by improving the status of significant key classroom and school conditions and by encouraging parent/child interactions in the home that further enhance student success at school.[32]

The importance of building school organizational capacity for improving instruction and improving parent and community relationships is largely undisputed. However, as principals emphatically attest, the challenges to building strong school capacity and strong student outcomes in a high-absence school are <u>different</u> from those encountered in a low-absence school.[33]

Figure 2: Focusing the Five Essentials on Challenges of CA

Figure 2 illustrates how capacity-building strategies such as those reflected in the Chicago Consortium on School Research Essential Supports can be tailored more specifically to meet the challenges of a high-absence school.[34]

A second premise of the 3-dimensional model is that principals can become skilled in the use of cycles of inquiry consistent with prevailing principles of continuous improvement. While many different models of cycles of inquiry have been developed since Shewart's first representation of Plan/Do/Study/Act in the 1930s, our evidence at UIC is that principals can become skilled at a cycles-of-inquiry model that emphasizes collaborative inquiry and planning. A useful application of this model to the problem of chronic absence is represented in Figure 3. In addition, MacIver and Belfanz have authored a new volume on continuous improvement in high schools, focusing continuous improvement methods on chronic absence in high schools.[35]

[32] Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management,* 28(1), 27-42, p. 8.
[33] Walker, L., Tozer, S. (2020). *Toward the continuous improvement of Chicago's high-churn elementary schools: Understanding the data.* Center for Urban Education Leadership.

[34] Bryk, A., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E. L., Luppescu, S. S., & Easton, J. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement. Lessons from Chicago.* The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
[35] *MacIver, M. A. & Balfanz, R. (2021). Continuous improvement in high* schools: Helping more students succeed. *Harvard Education Press.* For a good discussion of Shewart's PDSA work in the 1930s, see *Smylie,* M. A. (2010). *Continuous school improvement*. Corwin.

Figure 3: Cycles of Inquiry to Address Causes of CA at School Site

A third premise of the 3-dimensional model, therefore, is that districts can either support or undermine school-based effort to build capacity through tailored Essential Supports and the use of cycles of inquiry. Five actions that Chicago Public Schools Central Office can take to empower schools to be more effective in reducing CA are:

- **Change accountability policy** to support, rather than penalize, schools high in CA
- **Implement cycles of inquiry** at district level: what are the patterns of CA by grade level and by Network? What data can districts best collect, analyze, and provide?
- **Collaborate with institutes of higher education** to ensure principal preparation, selection, and evaluation for effective leadership of high-CA schools
- **Focus LSC and Network Chief development** on support for school-based cycles of inquiry that involve parents and community agencies in the inquiry and planning processes
- **Support communities of professional practice** or Networked Improvement Communities for Chiefs and principals to continue developing in their problem-solving and adaptive leadership capacities

With or without strong district supports, a clear **challenge** to the success of the 3-dimensional model is the capacity of individual school principals to engage in the kind of adaptive leadership that is (a) skilled in leading a school toward continuous improvement of its organizational capacity, as represented in part by the Five Essentials, and (b) skilled in leading collaborative cycles of inquiry in general and more specifically to chronic absence. This is a challenge to principal preparation programs and to school districts alike, because these two agencies lead the preparation and ongoing development of principals. For example, Chicago Public Schools already collaborates with principal preparation programs to prepare principals who are able to meet the specific challenges of CPS. Further, CPS Network Chiefs are charged with developing and assessing principals' capacity to meet those challenges. Schools and students will benefit as existing processes become more specific about CA as a critical challenge, particularly in specific South and West Side Networks. More explicit CA focus is also needed in principal preparation programs, in Network Chiefs' collaborations, and in LSC efforts to take more specific leadership capacities into account in their principal selection and assessment roles.[36]

Concluding Comment

Student attendance problems have numerous causes and serious consequences for student learning outcomes. Chronic absence is a critical indicator of these problems. We recommend that the district consider chronic absence to be one of the single most important targets in its efforts to better serve students and families of

[36] Attendance Works offers professional development for school leaders in e-learning format, tailored to such CA mitigation strategies as fostering positive school climate, mobilizing staff and community partners, and using data effectively: https://www.attendanceworks.org/technical-assistance/e-learning-series-for-educators/

its high-need neighborhood schools. The pandemic has drawn attention to the ways in which economic instability in the lives of students and families affects educational opportunities, including attendance. However, attendance instability is not a new feature for many schools and communities in Chicago. CPS would be remiss in addressing its current enrollment and attendance challenges as a short-term crisis rather than reflective of the historic failure to learn how to serve and support schools in communities where economic instability has, is, and will continue to be the norm. The Black student population has suffered most from this failure. With the pandemic ongoing, the district has the opportunity to begin to recognize the educational impact of economic instability in Black communities, where schools have been difficult to improve, and organize itself to improve opportunities within the context of instability. One place to start is with a focus on CA. For schools and districts to reduce CA to improve learning outcomes, district and school leaders need to embrace principles of adaptive leadership and cycles of inquiry, better tailoring organizational capacity to the needs of specific families and schools. A range of different literatures, from studies of leadership for equity to specific responses to CA, can inform leaders and teachers in their efforts to respond more effectively to specific local causes of CA.

Appendix 1

In addition to intervention resources mentioned in this brief, we also recognize the growing literature on reducing chronic absence, particularly for young children. This literature is attentive to and provides tools and resources in support of practice. It is less attentive to leadership and organizational capacity development. We have selected twelve practice-oriented sources, several of which overlap with family and community engagement, including sources to assist with diagnosis and one that can provide leaders with perspective on measuring attendance.

Figure 4. Representative references on reducing chronic absence

Attendance Works. (2015). *Mapping the early attendance gap: Charting a course for school success*. https://www.attendanceworks.org/mapping-the-early-attendance-gap/
Balu, R., & Ehrlich, S. (2018). Making sense out of incentives: A framework for considering the design, use, and implementation of incentives to improve attendance. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk,* 23(1-2), 93-106.
Childs, J., & Grooms, A. (2018). Improving school attendance through collaboration: A catalyst for community involvement and change. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk,* 23(1-2), 122-138.
Epstein, J., & Sheldon, S. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *Journal of Educational Research,* 95(5).
Fiel, J., Haskins, A., & Lopez Turley, R. (2013). Reducing school mobility: A randomized trial of a relationship-building intervention. *American Educational Research Journal,* 50(6), 1188-1218.
Hancock, K., Mitrou, F., Tayor, C., & Zubrick, S. (2018). The diverse risk profiles of persistently absent primary students: Implications for attendance policies in Australia. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk,* 23(1-2), 53-69.
Hutt, E. (2018). Measuring missed school: The historical precedents for the measurement and use of attendance records to evaluate schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 23*(1-2), 5-8.
Lacireno-Paquet, N., & Kelly, K. (April 9, 2018). *At school, on time, and every day: What research tells us about reducing chronic absenteeism* (Blog). https://www.mathematica.org/commentary/rel-blog-atschool-on-time-and-every-day-what-research-tells-us-about-reducing-chronic-absenteeism
Lavigne, H., Caven, M., Bock, G., Zhang, X., & Braham, E. (2021). *Exploring implementation of attendance supports to reduce chronic absenteeism in the Providence Public School District* (REL 2021–099). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.
McConnell, B., & Kubina, R. (2014). Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: A review of the literature. *Preventing School Failure, 58*(4), 249-256.
MacIver, M. A., & Balfanz, R. (2021). *Continuous improvement in high schools: Helping more students succeed.* Harvard Education Press
REL Mid-Atlantic. (2018). *What research tells us about reducing student chronic absenteeism (Webinar).* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZFBIriOAFI&ab_channel=InstituteofEducationSciences
REL Mid-Atlantic. *Go-learn-grow: Improving the school attendance of New Jersey's youngest learners* (Data Tools). https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/tools.asp

Susman-Stillman, A., Englund, M., Storm, K., & Bailey, A. (2018). Understanding barriers and solutions affecting preschool attendance in low-income families. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 23*(1-2), 170-186.

Figure 5. Representative references that can <u>inform</u> responses to chronic absence

Category of Literature	**Illustrative Sample of Research**
Teacher Retention	Caven, M., Durodoye, R., Jr., Zhang, X., & Bock, G. (2021). *Variation in mentoring practices and retention across new teacher demographic characteristics under a large urban district's New Teacher Mentoring Program* (REL 2021–100). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.
Case studies of leadership practice	Okilwa, N. S., & Barnett, B. G. (2018). Four successive school leaders' response to a high needs urban elementary school context. *International Studies in Educational Administration* (Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM)), 46(1).
Equity-focused, anti-racist leadership practice	Rigby, J. G., & Tredway, L. (2015). Actions matter: How school leaders enact equity principles. In *Handbook of urban educational leadership*, 329-348. Spikes**,** D.D. (2018). Culturally competent and racially conscious professional development for school leaders: A Review of the Literature. *Teachers College Record,* 120(14), 1-17.
Policy and practice briefs	Welsh, R. (2018). Opposite sides of the same coin? Exploring the connections between school absenteeism and student mobility. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk,* 23(1-2), 70-92.
Concepts and Frameworks	Lomotey, K., & Lowery, K. (2015). Black students, urban schools, and Black principals. In M. Khalifa, N. Arnold, A. Osanloo, & C. Grant (Eds.) *Handbook of Urban Educational Leadership* (pp. 325-350). Rowan & Littlefield.
Accountability (and Turnaround)	Gannon-Slater, N., La Londe, P., Crenshaw, H., Evans, M., Green, J., & Schwandt, T. (2017). Advancing equity in accountability and organizational cultures of data use. *Journal of Educational Administration,* 55(4), 361-375.
Schools as Human Service Organizations	Phifer, L., & Hull, R. (2016). Helping students heal: Observations of trauma-informed practices in the schools. *School Mental Health, 8*, 201-205.
Diversity, SEL, and Learning	Allensworth, E. M., Farrington, C. A., Gordon, M. F., Johnson, D. W., Klein, K., McDaniel, B., & Nagaoka, J. (2018). Supporting social, emotional, & academic development: *Research Implications for Educators*. University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.
Interventions: Attendance and Mobility	Childs, J., & Grooms, A. (2018). Improving school attendance through collaboration: A catalyst for community involvement and change. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 23*(1-2), 122-138. Kearney, C. A. (2021, January). Integrating systemic and analytic approaches to school attendance problems: Synergistic frameworks for research and policy directions. *Child & Youth Care Forum* (pp. 1-42). Springer US.

Appendix 2

Executive Summary
Literature Essay on High-Churn Schools

Conceptualizing high-need schools for continuous improvement: High-churn schools as a prominent school need type

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In this bibliographic essay, which includes a supplement on resources for leadership preparation and development design, we explore how a range of literatures can inform our understandings of student instability in enrollment and attendance, the impact of such instability on P-3 students and their schools, and how school leaders might best respond to the distinctive student and organizational needs these conditions present. Literature reviews typically attempt to organize in summary form the knowledgebase of a field on a topic. The research, practice and policy knowledge that informs our understanding of high-churn schools exists in multiple bodies of literature that are not readily summarized. Yet, considerable literature applies that addresses how and why mobility, absenteeism and homelessness affect teaching and learning and outcomes for schools and students. This literature exists in separately explored topics, including student mobility, chronic absenteeism, homeless students, related issues of poverty, race, school-family-community connections, and efforts to improve high-poverty schools. We are particularly interested in the implications of these matters and any guidance they may provide to school leaders looking to respond effectively in churn conditions to student and organizational needs. This guidance also draws on other literatures, such as leading improvement in schools. In this essay, we attempt to show support across multiple literatures for the following tentative conclusions:

1. The popular term “high-need schools” obscures the reality that schools struggle for different reasons. It is unlikely that the same strategies are equally effective in different “need types.” One type of high-need school is “high churn,” characterized by conditions of high student mobility and absenteeism and resulting in distinctive challenges for leaders.
2. Conditions of high churn are central to why some schools persistently lag behind others in student learning outcomes. These conditions are closely related to interconnected issues of racism and poverty. Unless schools respond better to conditions of churn, inequities in outcomes by race and poverty will persist.

3. Because the problem of high-churn schools has not been sufficiently documented in the literature, it is important to recognize high churn as a boundary-spanning issue, one that requires attention to multiple bodies of literature if schools and school leaders are to understand and effectively respond to its challenges.
4. While professional standards in school leadership, and school leadership research more generally, do not address the specific problems of high-churn schools, school leader practices can be informed by research on such topics as: high-poverty schools, schools with high levels of mobility and homelessness, schools with chronic absenteeism, teacher leadership, early childhood education, and family engagement.
5. A bias toward positive findings in the leadership and school improvement literatures demonstrates that school leadership strategies can improve student outcomes. However, this focused attention on identifying solutions leads to the omission of discoveries that report on negative processes or outcomes. The field has an obligation to also attend to *non-positive findings* that make it possible to develop specific understandings of problems and that will broaden the exploration of policy and practice solutions.
6. Programs in leadership preparation and leadership development can benefit from using selected resources from the research literatures above, as well as others we identify. **At its heart, the focus on student churn is an effort to address educational inequities.** High-churn conditions caused by racism and poverty persistently interfere with student learning and create obstacles for most school-improvement efforts. In a supplement to this report, we recommend specific sources for leadership programs to consider using in leadership learning designs to better prepare principals for these schools.

Literature on student and school outcomes under conditions of high churn in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty is not new, but it has not yet been engaged by scholars who focus on school leadership development. The following summary points provide perspective on this disconnect while also serving to support the concept of the need for boundary-spanning to integrate knowledge and expertise to addresses this problem.

Student outcomes and churn: Literature on student outcomes related to school and residential mobility, absenteeism, homelessness and other risk groups experiencing instability has developed substantially over the last ten years. This literature informs findings about 3rd grade outcomes as predictors of educational progress and opportunity for children who live in poverty. It also complements policymakers' recognition of the importance of investing in early childhood education, which has resulted in prioritizing access to and quality of early childhood education services. But attention from policy and practice has been insufficient to conditions of instability that produce negative student outcomes and create challenges for early childhood education practices, including leadership.

School outcomes and churn: A small but significant body of work in the school improvement literature links school outcomes to conditions of high churn through school improvement processes. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, effective school researchers compared high- and low-performing schools that had similar socio-economic and racial characteristics to explore how school organizational features contributed to student achievement outcomes. The work they began culminated thirty-plus years later in research at the University of Chicago that validated five organizational supports as essential if school improvement efforts are to lead to student achievement gains. When the researchers further

distinguished high-poverty and high-minority schools using fine-grained measures available from census data, they encountered a serious difficulty with the assertion that high-poverty, high-minority schools can improve. This reinforced their findings that school organizational capacity does not develop in a vacuum, but rather is influenced by features such as school size and enrollment stability and by external factors, including local community context. This research on "truly disadvantaged" and similar schools is ten years old and has not been sufficiently developed. Follow-up research that explores how to identify truly disadvantaged schools, including through the use of indicators such as churn, does not explore how high churn affects schools organizationally and implications for school improvement and leadership practices. Related to this, although a recent informative literature links questions of student and neighborhood risks to school improvement outcomes, school organizational processes lie beyond its considerations.

Leadership and churn: While the literature on school leadership has developed substantially in the last ten years, it has also developed separately from the literatures described above. This essay explores why the literature related to churn is disconnected from school leadership research, including: boundaries in the leadership literature that focus on internal organizational development of instruction and learning; a bias toward positive findings that excludes other findings that are equally important to consider; and insufficient attention to topics of income inequality and poverty. Yet, more recently, the school leadership literature has begun to recognize the relevance of early childhood education, family engagement and socio-economic status for student outcomes, and the implications of these topics for leadership. Case studies of leadership related to student mobility and poverty are limited in number but provide an evidence-based starting place to understand practices and capacities for high-churn schools. Most of the case studies are recent products of the work of the International School Leadership Development Network, which focuses on high-poverty schools, and the International Successful School Principal Project. Several are the only other examples we found in the literature that directly treat the topic of mobility or poverty.

Engagement of school leadership scholarship with literature related to churn can be enabled by the concept of boundary spanning. Although this concept is used in different ways for knowledge generation vs. practice, it shares in common the intent to bridge boundaries to bring people and/or ideas together to manage work on complex problems. We envision leadership preparation and practice embracing the kind of boundary spanning that would not isolate leadership candidates within the literature represented, say, by the professional standards in leadership, but would delve into other literatures that fully characterize the problem of student and school outcomes in high-need contexts, as well as more recent equity-oriented leadership literatures.