Chronic Absenteeism

Co-Design Project Summary

In 2024, as part of its designing for community well-being practice, The Columbus Foundation sought to better understand the reasons why some high school students in Columbus are chronically absent from school. Through a co-design methodology—in which community "co-designers" with lived experience and expertise join our problem-solving team—The Columbus Foundation worked with young people to co-create innovative approaches to boost engagement around learning.

Chronic absenteeism is defined in Ohio as a student missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason—excused, medically excused, unexcused, and suspensions. Columbus City Schools has the highest chronic absenteeism rate among large urban schools in Ohio. In the 2023-2024 school year, the chronic absenteeism rate at Columbus City Schools was 54.5 percent, compared to the statewide rate of 25.6 percent. Chronic absenteeism is associated with negative outcomes on student's academic performance and overall well-being, including increased risk of dropping out of school, social disengagement, and future challenges securing employment opportunities.

For this project, four high-school aged young people joined The Columbus Foundation as co-designers. These young people either were considered "chronically absent" during the project or had been described as "chronically absent" at some previous point. Co-designers were recruited from a Columbus Metropolitan Library location where many of these young people spend their days when not at school.

In addition to the co-designers, The Columbus Foundation recruited approximately 25 other high school students who had had experience with chronic absenteeism to participate in interviews and share their experiences and perspectives. The co-designers helped with the interviews and helped The Columbus Foundation make sense of what was learned through these conversations.

WHAT THE TEAM HEARD FROM PARTICIPANTS

- These young people felt shame around not showing up to school and had deeply internalized that education is their only ticket to advancement.

- Logistical considerations—such as transportation, a need to make money, safety, and lack of sleep—create barriers to young people attending school five days a week.

- Young people demonstrate a sophistication in the calculations they make about their attendance, often weighing many factors in determining whether they will show up to school all day/every day.

- Summer school was seen by some young people as a better option than regular school, not as a deterrent to missing school.

- The value proposition of attending school must be high enough that young people are willing to overcome the barriers they face in getting to school and attending every class, every day; as it stands for the young people we interacted with, the value proposition is indeed not high enough.

WHAT THE TEAM LEARNED

Despite the fact that young people experience barriers that make showing up to school difficult, they did speak about times when they have actively overcome these barriers to get to the school building. We learned this happened in targeted instances (i.e., summer school) or when they were enrolled in specific programs (i.e., paid workforce development programs occurring at school).

The team distilled what they learned into three key insights:

1. Young people feel like they're being asked to overcome too many barriers to attend school five days a week.

   "The bus comes at 6:20 a.m. If I miss it, I'm screwed. My mom can't drive me. I just don't go."

   "I can't be going to school every day. Sometimes I have to make money during the day."

   "Sometimes it's best not to show up at school. Too much popping off. You can't leave."

2. Young people are constantly considering: Do I get enough out of school that it's worth overcoming the barriers to get there every day?

   "They expect you to be at every class. It's just too much."

   "It's like eight hours and it's just stressful."

   "School ain't for me. I could be making money."

   "Teacher hit me on the head with the paper because they don't let you sleep."

   "Of course I would go to school if I was paid, even if the teachers were boring and everything was the same."

3. Fixed mindsets—such as an "all or nothing" mentality, a lack of choice, or a lack of joy and engagement around learning—also present barriers.

   "I was good until second quarter and then it all went bad. I knew I missed too much. It's not worth it to even try. I will just have to lock in next year."

   "Once I started missing, I knew I couldn't come back that quarter. Why even try?"

   "There's no way to get back on track once you lose too much. I don't even know who you talk to."

   "I learned everything I needed to know in elementary school. High school is a joke."

WHAT PROTOTYPES THE TEAM DEVELOPED

The team paid attention to instances where young people willingly overcame barriers and showed up to workforce and summer school programs. We tried to learn what made those opportunities "worth it" and copy elements that resonated with young people. We created prototypes to test some of our assumptions and get clarity on what kind of interventions might make an impact for chronically absent high school students. As a result of what the team learned, it tried the following prototypes:

PROTOTYPE #1: DROP-IN SCHOOL

The premise: What if you had "drop in school" during the year? What if you could "do" school at the library? What if you decided when, how, where, and with whom you worked through assigned material?

Why we tried this: Many of the young people we spoke with had been chronically absent but also showed up at the library nearly every day. We wondered why they had such consistent attendance at the library but not at school.

We also heard from many of the young people how they enjoyed summer school more than regular school, because they felt like they had more choice around how they did summer school (specifically with regards to the pacing and teaching style of summer school). They explained that summer school was just learning and "no fluff." They felt like they could get the academic requirements done on their own terms and be more efficient and effective because they could determine the pacing. They also could focus on fewer classes at a time.

The reaction:

"I'd rather go to summer school than regular school. I just have to pass the test [in summer school]. I just want to get out of there as fast as possible. School is a waste of time for real, for real."

"It's super easy to go four days a week and super hard to go five."

"Yeah, this is interesting."

What we learned: We validated that young people are seeking autonomy and choice in how they show up to learn. Young people seem interested in learning on their own terms and not always in a school building or on a school timeline. Any school option that embeds choice around location or pacing seems valuable to students.

PROTOTYPE #2: GUIDANCE COUNSELORS ON LOCATION

The premise: What if you had a guidance counselor that met you at the library or another third location? They could tell you how you're doing in school, and you could ask them questions about how to stay on track.

Why we tried this: Some of the young people mentioned their close relationships with their guidance counselors. We wondered if we could leverage the guidance counselor relationship and take guidance counselors out of the building, in order to eventually bring young people back to learning.

"I check in with my guidance counselor regularly."

"My guidance counselor gets me."

"I go see my guidance counselor every day I'm there."

The reaction:

"Yeah, I like this."

"Sometimes I want them to help me be a better human being, maybe they don't just help me with school."

"I maybe want them to help me get a job."

"I maybe want them to just check on me. Yeah, this is interesting."

What we learned: The young people validated that guidance counselors matter and fulfill a need for students who have chronic absences. The young people we engaged with valued their guidance counselor relationships. We know there are great demands on guidance counselors and yet wonder: is there a corps of guidance counselor-type people who could be forward deployed in places where young people are? Could these guidance counselor-type figures be tied back into the schools so that young people can stay as connected as they want to be?

PROTOTYPE #3: REIMAGINING THE BARE MINIMUM

The premise: We asked young people to rate the effort they put into school in the past year. We wanted to get a sense of if they thought they were working hard or were just doing the bare minimum to meet requirements.

Why we tried this: We wondered if minimum expectations were higher, would these young people meet those? If there was an option to do less and still get by, would they take this option?

The reaction:

> "If I only do a one for effort, I don't get anything. If I am at a five for effort, I think I should get a money reward. A five looks like asking a lot of questions; asking for help; showing up every other day. For that, you should get $20 a week. If you show up every day *and* pay attention, that's a ten for effort. Then you should get $50 a week."

What we learned: The young people we spoke to independently connected their effort to what they should be getting in return. Young people were honest about their effort scores; having young people do regular assessments of their effort could be an interesting reflection tool. Giving young people an opportunity to be rewarded for their effort could also boost their performance.

PROTOTYPE #4: SMALL HABIT REMINDER

The premise: So many of the young people talked about the micro habits necessary to get them to school—going to bed on time, waking up on time, getting to the bus on time, etc. Some of the young people we talked to also mentioned that their mom or coach played a critical role in getting them where they needed to be, often offering constant reminders.

> "[My mom] always tells me that I wake up late. I'm already going to be late. That's how we start arguing."

> "My mom shouts, 'Bus will be here in 10. In five. Go now,' every day."

We also heard that many moms were present in the morning routine, but young people also told us how they regularly played online and videos games late into the night.

> "I never go to bed before the ams."

When we asked if mom or others ever gave them evening reminders to go to bed, we overwhelmingly heard young people say no.

Why we tried this: We wondered if a micro habit reminder might be helpful to young people in either assisting their mom or coach, or for times when their mom or coach couldn't be there. We tried:

• A nudge from someone the student cares about that reminds them of a micro habit they can take to get to school.

• Determining who the young person cares most about, then, in that person's voice, offer a push announcement (e.g., *"It's time to go to bed," "It's time to wake up,"* or *"The bus is five minutes out."*).

• Rewarding kids with prizes if they achieve the small habit step a certain number of times in a row.

Next steps: This prototype seemed to surprise young people the most. Mom or coach, so long as the young person cared about them, out of context seemed to make students pause and think about their choices. We think there was enough of a response that this prototype warrants further testing.

SUMMARY

Overall, the most surprising learning for our team was the shame young people had around not consistently showing up at school. Given this, no matter what interventions are tried, it is important that people working on this issue understand the shame and navigate it thoughtfully.

Additionally, the embrace of "all or nothing" thinking around school attendance means that interventions that highlight "there's always a way to come back" and "small steps matter are key." Borrowing from other areas that combat "all of nothing" thinking would also be beneficial.

The young people we spoke with experience barriers that make showing up to school every day hard. And yet, they do overcome these barriers when the value proposition of attending school is high enough. The current school value proposition does not seem to meet this bar for students who are chronically absent.

Similarly, young people chafe at rules in which they see no value but seem to thrive when they have choices about where and when to show up. Focusing on areas such as providing relevant content, rewarding students for their effort, and offering students more agency could increase the value proposition of school.

Finally, young people are not deriving joy from or engagement with learning as they are currently experiencing it. Across interviews, young people said they often cared about what they "got" out of showing up to school. Yet, even when prompted, they never spoke about joy in learning. Instead, they lamented the learning they were doing yielded no tangible "get."

FINAL CONCLUSION

Admittedly, chronic absenteeism at the high school level is a complex, multi-layered issue. This project centered the voices of young people who live this problem. It was only because of their honesty and willingness to help us better understand what was happening and to co-create ways that we might mitigate chronic absenteeism we were able to make the progress we did.

Noteworthy, the four young people who became team members with us asked that they be allowed to keep showing up every week to continue working on this project, seemingly because they so valued the way they were able to contribute and engage. They saw value in the process. Importantly, this work is now being used to inform The Columbus Foundation's Education Community of Practice and other efforts to address chronic absenteeism amongst high schoolers at the state level.

Design team:

The Columbus Foundation team: Heather Tsavaris, Dr. Mark Lomax, II

Designers: Latoya Jordan, Amanda Ussak