

Masking Attendance: How Education Policy Distracts from the Wicked Problem(s) of Chronic Absenteeism

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Joshua Childs¹  and Richard Lofton²

Abstract

Traditionally, education policy focuses on reforms that address class size, teaching and learning within classrooms, school choice, and changes in leadership as ways to improve students' educational outcomes. Although well intentioned, education policy can distract from the multi-layered causes that impact achievement and opportunity gaps, and how students' life circumstances can affect their school attendance. Students who miss school frequently are less likely to be impacted by even the most robust and comprehensive education reforms. This paper discusses how the root causes of chronic absenteeism are complex and that policy distractions can stifle solutions to solve school attendance issues. As a wicked problem, chronic absenteeism, requires a conceptual framework that helps to organize policy responses within all levels of the educational system, as well as expansive to include other social sectors within public policy.

Keywords

chronic absenteeism, wicked problems, policy

¹University of Texas at Austin, USA

²Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA

Corresponding Author:

Joshua Childs, The University of Texas at Austin, 1912 Speedway, D5400, Austin, TX 78712, USA.

Email: joshuachilds@austin.utexas.edu

Introduction

Over the past decade the discussion on school attendance has shifted from deficit-models of why students miss school, to a recognition of the in-and-out of school factors that influence students' attendance. Traditionally, education policy has focused on teacher quality, student academic outcomes, and teaching and learning experiences within classrooms as a way to address the disparities that exist within U.S. K-12 education. Policy solutions to those issues have typically operated with the assumption that students are attending school regularly, therefore school attendance was often *absent* when it came to school improvement efforts (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kearney et al., 2019). However, researchers have shown the impact of school attendance on academic achievement and educational opportunities (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Plasman & Gottfried, 2020), and the need for policy responses that recognize the importance of school attendance on students' well-being.

Traditionally, interventions and approaches to improving attendance have focused primarily at the individual student level, such as changing behavior or attitudes about attending school (Childs & Grooms, 2018; Gee, 2018). While focusing on individual students can lead to personalized supports that can lead to improved attendance outcomes, individual interventions can distract from the multi-layered causes of chronic absenteeism and the reasons why students miss school, such as neighborhood and socioeconomic conditions that typically are beyond students' control. This has led to some districts to ignore or minimize their attendance issues because, according to the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), most schools have average daily attendance rates (ADA) that are 90% or higher (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2017). ADA can be a distraction to a larger attendance problem that is being masked by a 1-day count of a school's overall attendance. Even in a school that has an average daily attendance rate (ADA) of 90% or more, 20% of the school's students could still be chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008). Students who are chronically absent, missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, reveal systemic school and district problems that policy interventions have either not been designed to address, missed altogether, or have been ineffective in improving attendance. Also, because many states allocate funding to schools based on their ADA, chronic absenteeism becomes a "problem hidden in plain sight" (Bruner et al., 2011). This has distracted many states from tackling chronic absenteeism with proper policy and legal responses, even when federal law such as the Every Student Succeeds Act allowed for states to improve accountability systems and organizational capacity to address school attendance. With between 5 and 7 million students chronically absent

annually (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2017), proponents have shown the importance of discussing and addressing chronic absenteeism and school attendance concerns within education (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018). While it is widely known that student success in school is predicated on regular attendance, and research has discussed the reasons why students miss school, further research is needed to investigate how chronic absenteeism impacts how policy responses are designed and implemented for particular student populations.

In this article, we explore the research literature on the reasons why students miss school. Based on these reasons, we conceptualize chronic absenteeism as a wicked problem (Weber & Khademian, 2008) within education, and how interventions to solve school attendance issues can be distracted from appropriately limiting the impact of chronic absenteeism on students. We argue that a wicked problems framework, theoretically grounded within the public administration literature, provides a useful lens for unpacking the complexity of chronic absenteeism and understanding the potential impact of solutions for improving student attendance.

The article begins with a discussion of our review methods as it relates to defining chronic absenteeism and wicked problems. We then describe the complexity of chronic absenteeism as a policy through a wicked problems framework to emphasize the multi-faceted nature of this education issue. We discuss the intersection of poverty and chronic absenteeism and use that relationship to underline the importance of chronic absenteeism in education and public policy conversations. This leads us to providing a conceptual framework of wicked problems that helps to explain what we call the “black box” of chronic absenteeism; the reasons why students miss school and their interconnectedness to one another. We contend that chronic absenteeism, and the nature of its root causes, is a public policy priority that requires innovative solutions and collaboration to mitigate its effects on students’ educational opportunities. Furthermore, our framing allows for discussions and approaches to chronic absenteeism to be presented in anti-deficit ways that focus more on the reasons why students miss school, and the necessary policies that will lead to students attending more regularly.

Note on Review Methods

We explored research from 2000 to 2020 on chronic absenteeism, and included articles that were theoretical, conceptual, or empirical. While chronic absenteeism has only been recently defined (Chang & Romero, 2008), our search timeframe allowed for opportunities to find literature in other disciplines such as public health, social work, and sociology that could

inform how we conceptualize the root causes of chronic absenteeism. We refined our search criteria using ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Google Scholar database, by focusing on the keywords of “chronic absenteeism,” “school attendance,” “truancy,” and “student attendance” (Yoon, 2020). Our initial search yielded over 3,000 entries; therefore, we decided to focus only on peer-reviewed journal articles that specifically discussed causes or influences on student attendance. This helped to narrow our search and to find articles that focused at the intersection of causes or reasons and attendance. Within these parameters, we ended up with 63 articles that could be included in our critical literature review. We organized the articles similar to Gottfried’s (2014) schema that categorized the reasons why students miss school in dimensions related to zones of a student’s daily life. This influenced our discussion of the black box of chronic absenteeism, while also helping to orient our conceptual framework of wicked problems. Our search for articles in public administration and public policy assisted in organizing the wicked problems framework and support our inclusion of chronic absenteeism as a public policy issue.

The Black Box of Chronic Absenteeism

A student who is chronically absent can miss 10% or more of the school year for either being excused, unexcused, or suspended from school (Chang & Romero, 2008). In a traditional 180-day school year this can be as few as 18 days (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In most districts, excused absences are considered to be valid, verified by the school or exempted by district policy, and include missing school due to illness or injury, family emergency, religious holiday, or school outing (Birioukov, 2016). Unexcused absences are deemed unverifiable by school officials, and include missing school due to transportation issues, sleeping in, skipping class, or arriving late (Gottfried, 2009). Since the implementation of zero tolerance policies in schools beginning in the 1990s, there has been an increase in exclusionary discipline through suspensions (Hutt; 2018; Kyere et al., 2020). Suspensions, both in-school and out-of-school, are dismissals from learning environments due to behavioral or academic reasons (Kayama et al., 2015). Also, suspensions can result from accumulating unexcused absences (Holt & Gershenson, 2019). The degree to which a student is considered absent can vary by school and district, because they can use their own discretion on how to record a student’s attendance (Chu et al., 2019). For example, one district might excuse an absence for work reasons, while another district may say it is unexcused. The demarcation of student attendance by schools and districts may reflect preconceived notions about certain students. “Privileged” students, typically

seen as more academically motivated, are more likely to have their reasons for missing school seen as legitimate (Gottfried, 2009).

Schools use attendance as a way to capture evidence of potential challenges for students, while certain states use attendance as a metric for calculating school funding (Reyes, 2020). While the majority of states use average daily attendance (ADA) to calculate overall school attendance, ADA captures only a specific point in time and does not account for students missing consecutive days in school or a period of days over a span of several months (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). A student could miss 1 to 3 days a month during the entire school year, and still would be chronically absent (Chang & Jordan, 2011). Therefore, chronic absenteeism has been incorporated as a measure of attendance into state accountability systems and as an indicator of school quality and student success (Dougherty & Childs, 2019).

Still, further exploration is needed on the inside and outside of school factors that influence chronic absenteeism. By understanding the causes of chronic absenteeism, we can begin to design and implement sustainable attendance policies that focus on eradicating systemic problems that impact students. Interventions have varied by location, funding, and political will (Kearney & Childs, 2021). Yet, research has shown that some of these interventions can be limited in scope, be inadequate to address the systemic and root causes of chronic absenteeism, ignoring the lived experiences of students who miss school frequently (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018).

We analytically organize the black box of chronic absenteeism as (1) student well-being, (2) school environment, (4) family dynamics, (5) neighborhood conditions, (6) poverty. This follows a similar strategy Gottfried (2014) deployed to show how chronic absenteeism affects different aspects of students' daily lives. We further posit that the root causes impact students' access to academic and social opportunities. Each of these causes is influenced by a student's age, social context, and experience with school (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). For example, an elementary-aged student may not attend school regularly if they do not have an adult who can drop them off consistently or ensure that they arrive safely and on time at school. The causes of chronic absenteeism are numerous and span multiple organizational levels within the education system (Gottfried, 2014). Each root cause is influenced by other causes and can produce compounding factors that impact student academic and social outcomes.

Student Well-Being

Understanding how to support the well-being of students has gained prominence in education (Alvarez, 2017, 2020). Schools and districts have seen an

increase in resources to prevent suicide, school violence, bullying (in-person and online), and mental illness (Embrey & Rosiak, 2020). Schools have also invested in designing interventions that improve student engagement, as research has shown a direct connection between attendance and student engagement (Chang & Romero, 2009; Gottfried, 2011a, 2014). Detachment, withdrawal, or academic and behavioral difficulties are a few well-being issues that can negatively impact student attendance (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006). Marzano et al. (2011) found that students who disengaged from school believed that the benefits of education were not worth regularly attending. Refusing to attend school can have long term implications on students' physical and mental health (Kearney, 2008). Wood et al. (2012) found that students who exhibit mental health issues one school year are more likely to be chronically absent the following year. Another psychological influence on absenteeism is social anxiety disorder or social phobia. Social phobia has been defined as exhibiting anxiety in large groups of people or performance anxiety in front of peers (Kearney, 2008; Tyrell, 2005). For students, social phobia can lead to students refusing to attend school due to a reoccurring fear or anxiety, which may spawn specific school-related phobias (Kearney, 2008; Tyrell, 2005). Students with high anxiety are likely to have phobic reactions to school as a result of inflated perceptions of threat, such as separation from parents, social evaluation, or academic difficulty (Kearney, 2003; Wood et al., 2012).

The physical health of students affects school readiness, school engagement, behavior, academic performance, social relationships, and overall attendance (Basch, 2011; Gottfried, 2014). Asthma is the leading health-related cause of chronic absenteeism (Lear et al., 2008). Students with moderate to severe asthma are far more likely to miss school and fall behind academically than students who do not have asthma (Moonie et al., 2006; The Facilities Gap, 2007). Oral health also contributes to chronic absenteeism, and students with significant oral health complications miss nearly 51 million hours of school each year (Pourat & Nicholson, 2009; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Growing concern has also grown as it relates to childhood obesity, and research has shown students who are obese tend to miss more school (Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005). Obesity, just like other physical health complications, is impacted by other health conditions such as asthma, joint problems, type-2 diabetes, and sleep apnea (Story et al., 2006).

School Environment

The social and physical environment of schools can have considerable impact on school attendance (Childs & Grooms, 2018). Students who believe that

adults care about them are more likely to thrive academically and socially (Brendtro et al., 2002; Marvul, 2012). Sugrue et al. (2016) found that positive student-teacher relationships influence attendance. Poor building maintenance, outdated curricula materials, and dilapidated exterior features effect the physical environment and can influence how students engage with their school (Branham, 2004). Students who are required to be physically present in unappealing or decaying school buildings can trigger emotional stressors, and lead students to exhibit school refusal behavior (Wood et al., 2012). Some school environments may cause students to avoid school altogether because they feel unsafe, both physically and mentally, from their peers or adults in the building (Kearney, 2003, 2008). Policy logics on chronic absenteeism recognize that less instructional time can be an indicator of students falling behind and possibly dropping out of school (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Schools that lack the infrastructure to support violence prevention, conflict resolution, or other problem-solving programs are likely to see higher rates of chronic absenteeism in students (Kearney & Childs, 2021).

Students of color face more challenges than their non-white peers when it comes to attending school regularly (Gee, 2018). This leads to disparities in school attendance, where students who are Black, Latinx, Multiracial, Pacific Islander, and Native American are chronically absent more than their white counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Students from this background are more likely to be exposed to risk factors within schools that can lead to chronic absenteeism, and also experience limited interventions that could help improve their attendance (Childs & Grooms, 2018). Limited educator training can make non-white students feel isolated in classrooms, and this becomes exacerbated when school attendance becomes a problem or return back to school from an extended absence (Gottfried, 2019).

Family Dynamics

Families exert considerable influence on students' academic and attendance outcomes, especially students of elementary age (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). These experiences can shape how children view school and engage with educators throughout their K-12 experience. Also, parents' expectations and aspirations for their children shape how school attendance is seen within the family (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009; Brown & Iyengar, 2008). Due to systemic inequality and situations beyond their control, some parents need additional support to establish consistent school-going routines for their children. Some families have parents who must work multiple jobs, are in school themselves, or undertaking a variety of roles simultaneously that prevents them ensuring that their child is attending school regularly. While some may

believe that the burden of school attendance, especially for younger children is the responsibility of parents and guardians, sometimes the lack of information about the importance of school can cause families to be unaware about the benefits of regular school attendance. For example, some parents believe that Pre-K and kindergarten as extensions of day care and not necessary grades for their child's educational development (Chang & Romero, 2008). Schools and districts that fail to provide information to parents about the consequences of missing school during the elementary years are likely to see many of those students become chronically absent in middle and high school. Even with information and resources, establishing consistent routines can be difficult for some families. Housing and living arrangements, employment hours, medical reasons, custody issues, or disruptive living situations all contribute to why students miss school frequently (Gottfried, 2014). Single-parent households have additional burdens that are likely to result in their children being chronically absent from school (Gottfried, 2009, 2011a, 2014). For many single parents, they are maneuvering between multiple roles with limited or no other adult help and may need additional resources to ensure that their children attend school regularly.

Neighborhood Conditions

Neighborhood conditions impact educational, physical, and social-emotional developmental outcomes of students (Milner et al., 2017). It is within the confluence of chronic absenteeism and neighborhood context that the inequality and sharp disparities in resources associated with segregation by place must be considered (Sampson, 2012). Social structures within neighborhoods yield unintended consequences that impact students' school attendance (Sampson, 2012). Harding et al. (2011) articulated that examining the social, economic, and cultural processes that contribute to neighborhood characteristics is critical when considering the influences on chronic absenteeism that affect students. Some neighborhoods have unsafe levels of crime that make the journey to school unsafe (Sharkey, 2010). Some of these safety issues could be contributed to by community members, or by those sworn by law to protect and serve the community. This tension creates an environment where students' ability to arrive safely to school could be impacted (Timperio et al., 2006). Unsafe neighborhoods, either due to violence or negative interactions and experiences with neighbors, impact students' attendance and their mental and physical health (Rubens & Fite, 2013). Students who witness or are within environments where frequent acts of violence occur, can develop post-traumatic stress disorder or exhibit biological responses that deter them from attending school (Massey, 2001, 2004).

Empirical evidence has shown that parents connected within a community, and with strong networks of support, leads to better educational outcomes for their children (Harding et al., 2011). These neighborhood networks can provide additional resources that can provide opportunities for increased school attendance (Gottfried, 2014). While the impact of parental unemployment can have positive consequences (e.g., spending more time with children and their education-related activities), it can also have negative consequences (e.g., increasing the stress that children face daily). These negative consequences can cause children to question the value of education long-term due to watching their parent's lack of success, thus hindering any positive school attendance outcomes (Levine, 2011). Gottfried (2014) found that "stronger neighbor social networks have the potential to increase the likelihood that students arrive at school" (p. 4).

Poverty

Educational researchers have examined poverty as an influential factor on students' educational experiences and outcomes (e.g., Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Horsford et al., 2018; Milner, 2015). Researchers have studied poverty as a way to examine the complex issues that people face, uncover the assumptions that are associated with poverty, and to acknowledge the dynamic and often constantly shifting processes that are related to racial injustices, social exclusion, material needs, and economic hardship (Boak et al., 2020). Policymakers have consistently since the Coleman Report identified poverty as one of the central determinants of student success (Milner, 2015). National data reveals that in high-poverty schools, chronic absenteeism is three to four times higher than in schools that are better resourced (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). While there is a general understanding that poverty impacts chronic absenteeism, more research is needed to unpack the complex and persistent nature of poverty and how it impacts school attendance. Until then, poverty will be seen as an individual-level factor that students are at the mercy of, and interventions may be slow or non-existent at tackling both chronic absenteeism and poverty. This has resulted in federal and state policies that have been slow at fully addressing poverty and its influence on student learning, academic performance, and attendance (Milner, 2015; Noguera & Wells, 2011; Payne, 2008).

Roughly 12.8 million American children and 17.5% of children in 2017 live in poverty (McLaughlin & Rank, 2018). The Department of Health and Human Services guidelines reveal that household poverty can consist of a family of four who makes under \$26,200 a year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Students and their parents who live in these

households can struggle to ensure that basic needs like food, shelter, housing, clothes, and transportation are met. Students who live in poverty experience conditions that can be difficult to mitigate in order to attend school frequently (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). In geographic regions where concentrated poverty is high, racial discrimination enacted through policies, laws and practices can complicate school attendance. Finally, living in poverty brings about a particular language that is oftentimes deficit-based and shows a lack of empathy for students who are placed within a difficult situation (Howard, 2019). This can lead to blaming specific students, especially those of color, and their parents for their lack of attendance. This can further exacerbate social exclusion, racial discrimination, and economic hardship due to how conversations about poverty could influence the way people and policies interact with students, and distract from focusing on the intersection of poverty and chronic absenteeism.

Chronic Absenteeism as a Wicked Problem

The black box of chronic absenteeism reveals how multifaceted chronic absenteeism is, and provides a conceptual understanding that dispels the myth that students are primarily missing school due to their own choices. In fact, this myth that has permeated education has served as a distraction that has slowed the necessary resources, time, and policies toward improving attendance. The black box reveals that there is not one singular cause of chronic absenteeism, but instead shows how every cause is connected to one another. Also, it further provides further evidence that chronic absenteeism is not just a school problem, but a systemic issue that implicates multiple social sectors. Without a full understanding of the black box, policymakers have been distracted to really implementing solutions that could improve student attendance. Instead we have seen the presence of punitive attendance policies that disproportionately affect Black and Brown students. While there have been considerable effort and attempts at improving attendance, schools and districts still lag when it comes to improving the opportunities and resources that help students attend school daily.

The complexity of chronic absenteeism lends itself to be examined through a conceptual lens that can offer insight on the various nuances that is embedded within it. Public administration literature defines complex social phenomenon that are difficult to solve as “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are complex, unpredictable, difficult to define or isolate on a single key dimension and challenging to solve once and for all (Agranoff & McGuire, 1998, 2004; Alford & Head, 2017; Weber & Khademian, 2008). Wicked problems have been used to describe societal

issues such as climate change, global terrorism, and poverty. Individually, the root causes of chronic absenteeism are not only in-school and out-of-school factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism, but also aid in the framing of chronic absenteeism as a wicked problem. As researchers, policymakers, and practitioners recognize the need for various social sectors to become involved in improving school attendance, a wicked problems framework communicates that chronic absenteeism is not solely a school or education problem.

As a multifaceted problem, with causes and implications across multiple facets of society, chronic absenteeism should be tackled like other wicked problems and not seen as an isolated educational issue, or be met with policies that serve to punish the symptom and not heal the causes. In addition, presenting an anti-deficit narrative about chronic absenteeism means recognizing the nuances of the policy problem and how those who are chronically absent may not be missing school by their own choosing; which distracts from addressing the root causes of poor student attendance.

Characteristics of Wicked Problems

The public administration research is rich with examples, case studies, theoretical arguments, and essays on wicked problems. Poverty, obesity, unequal access to health care, inequality, and climate change are just a few societal issues that have been labeled as wicked problems because they are complex, ill-defined, have an indeterminate scope and scale, and can be interpreted in different ways depending on one's point of view (Head, 2019). Kolko (2012) argued that wicked problems can be incomplete or present contradictory knowledge, present significant economic burdens on vulnerable populations, and are often interconnected with other wicked problems. Brown et al. (2010) recognized that more often than not, there is a risk in trying to solve wicked problems because the final solution can generate further issues of complexity. Thus, the complex nature of wicked problems can morph due to context or time (Rittel & Weber, 1973), and can reflect unpredictable physical, social, economic, and geographic environments (Gibson et al., 2013). Finally, some wicked problems are exacerbated by people, either due to the numbers involved or the diversity of people in terms of culture, opinions, beliefs, values, and judgments. For example, the number of climate change deniers has slowed progress on implementing sustainable solutions that could improve quality of living and natural resources for current and future generations (De Pryck & Gemenne, 2017).

Wicked problems are unstructured because the causes and effects are extremely complicated to identify and model (Weber & Khademan, 2008), a task which is further complicated by the fact there is typically little consensus

on the problem or its solutions (Crowley & Head, 2017). Each of the multiple root causes of chronic absenteeism can negatively impact student academic and social outcomes (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, 2013; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2011b; Gottfried, 2014). Therefore, the multiple and diffuse root causes of chronic absenteeism make it difficult to isolate critical components that can serve as guides for significant and sustainable program or policy responses. For example, research suggests that health-related absences among chronically absent students are typically associated with asthma, dental disease, or weight management issues (Kearney, 2003; Rothstein, 2009). These health problems can be attributed to where a student lives, their food security, and the amount of social services they have access to. Once students begin missing substantial amounts of school due to health problems, they frequently become disengaged from school, fall behind academically, and remain behind. Furthermore, these students can even develop psychological issues that can lead to further absences from school. If schools and districts are unable to recognize and account for the unstructured and often complex nature of chronic absenteeism, they will be ill-equipped to properly assess and engage in necessary systems-change endeavors that could improve school attendance.

Wicked problems are also described as “multiple, overlapping, interconnected subsets of problems that cut across multiple policy domains and levels of government” (Weber & Khademan, 2008, p. 336). Additionally, wicked problems are not isolated incidents or one-time occurrences. They can be reoccurring and can have different outcomes depending on a variety of factors and context. As people experience or witness wicked problems, there can be numerous solutions that are offered to mitigate their effects (Van Bueren et al., 2003). The cross-cutting nature of wicked problems leads to a high degree of uncertainty about amelioration strategies because engaging stakeholders provokes conflicting values due in part to the variety of worldviews, political agendas, professional backgrounds, traditions, and responsibilities that are represented in diverse coalitions (Weber & Khademan, 2008). The root causes of chronic absenteeism are interconnected, thus at certain times can implicate different policy domains, agencies, and social sectors simultaneously. Thus, isolating chronic absenteeism as a student motivational issue rather than a multi-faceted problem ignores the cross-cutting nature of chronic absenteeism. Targeted supports and interventions focused on healing just one root cause would be similar to treating only one life-threatening symptom of a deadly virus that can cripple multiple organs and systems of the human body. In fact, a singular approach can serve as a distraction that ignores the complexity and nuances of a policy problem that might need collaboration for solving.

Finally, a wicked problem is relentless, meaning that it is not likely to be solved once and for all, regardless of the amount of resources, authority, or expertise brought to bear on the problem (Weber & Khademian, 2008). Despite considerable efforts to solve them, wicked problems are persistent, and while sometimes they are ameliorated, these problems are never fully resolved (Alford & Head, 2017; Van Bueren et al., 2003). The consequences of wicked problems also affect other policy arenas (Weber & Khademian, 2008). Conventional structures and systems within the public sector are not designed to address the tasks of conceptualizing, mapping, and responding to wicked problems (Newman & Head, 2017), thus leading to temporary and imperfect resolutions when addressing these issues. Therefore, it remains to be seen if chronic absenteeism, and an overall sustainable model of school attendance, can benefit every student in K-12 education (Ansari & Gottfried, 2020).

Disrupting the Distractions of Chronic Absenteeism

COVID-19 and the disruption of in-person schooling has not only exacerbated numerous educational inequities (DeMatthews et al., 2020), but has also distracted attention toward immediate problems that have arisen since the start of the pandemic. While the needs of students, teachers, leaders, and communities has been a priority for policymakers during the COVID-19 pandemic, there still is a need to focus efforts on education issues that still exist even while schooling has been offered through virtual, remote, or hybrid models. So, while many students are not attending school in-person, there still are many students who have been chronically absent once schools shifted to online instruction once the pandemic began (Coker, 2020; Conrad, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 on education will be studied for quite some time and it remains an open question about how schools respond to the myriad of challenges exacerbated and created during the pandemic. This includes chronic absenteeism, and while recent federal legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have helped to make chronic absenteeism a policy imperative within education, thoughtful approaches to improving attendance will continue to be necessary if we desire to see students experiencing schools consistently.

Since the implementation of ESSA, states have adopted attendance metrics within their state accountability systems that require districts to report their attendance data. The federal government has also helped to spur national initiatives that focus on improving school attendance and on scaling interventions that are not punitive. For example, My Brother's Keeper was an Obama administration led program with an explicit focus on decreasing chronic

absenteeism rates among students of color (Sanacore, 2017). This included investing in peer mentoring, educator training, and resources tailored toward schools and communities to tackle chronic absenteeism in schools with a significant Black and Brown student population (Childs & Grooms, 2018; Kearney & Childs, 2021). Simultaneously, cross-sector collaborations were fostered between federal agencies, and featured as a promising model for state and local government agencies to work closely with one another to improve school attendance (Childs & Grooms, 2018; Bauer, 2018). Also, the Obama administration convened the first gathering of chronic absenteeism experts, education organizations, and relevant stakeholders to engage in conversations and provide policy recommendations about how to address chronic absenteeism in schools. This spurred state and regional convenings across the country that produced resources, formation of collaborations, new interventions, recommendations for state accountability systems, and creation of new attendance policies in schools and districts (Childs, 2017; Bauer, 2018). Many of these strategies were designed and implemented with the purpose of not only improving attendance, but also understanding and addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism. Numerous strategies over the last several years have shown an understanding of the complexity and multi-faceted dimensions within chronic absenteeism and have worked to improve not only attendance but other facets of students' daily lives. Collaborative approaches that support improvement in school attendance are necessary to address the complexity of missing school on students, as well as strengthen the implementation of district-level reforms (Lenhoff et al., 2020). Once schools, districts, and policymakers recognize chronic absenteeism as a wicked problem, and avoid being distracted by an individual student's attendance choices, interventions and strategies that are innovative and collaborative can be implemented to fidelity.

Chronic absenteeism is more than just a student or school level issue. Communities and social sectors are affected by students not attending school regularly. The black box of chronic absenteeism and its root causes warrants a wicked problems framework that can provide useful insights on properly implementing interventions that can mitigate the impact of chronic absenteeism. As a wicked problem, chronic absenteeism solutions should be targeted at dismantling systems that hinder students from attending school regularly or reproducing deficit narratives about students who have to miss school. Not every student who misses school does so by their own choosing, and the wicked problems framework provides an opportunity for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to understand the complexity of chronic absenteeism. This involves not only understanding the root causes of chronic absenteeism, but also recognizing the interconnectedness of chronic absenteeism with other

dimensions of students' daily life. Our conceptual organization of chronic absenteeism recognizes the limitation in illuminating and accounting for the root causes that lead students to be chronically absent. For example, we understand that isolating a specific root cause as a reason why a student is chronically absent may distract from the numerous other issues that could also be contributing to school attendance but are being masked because of the severity of that one root cause. However, we argue that a wicked problems framework affords future research to explore the validity and utility of policy solutions that could address chronic absenteeism, especially those that are sustainable and scalable. The multi-faceted nature of the wicked problems framework offers an opportunity for multi-faceted solutions that can help improve school attendance for students.

Chronic absenteeism will continue to be a persistent problem for a variety of reasons. Chronic absenteeism is linked with other wicked problems such as poverty, and by even attempting to address chronic absenteeism, the policy solutions might need to engage with 'larger' wicked problems that were either anticipated or appeared suddenly. While we are encouraged at the utility of the wicked problems framework as applied to chronic absenteeism, we are well aware that our focused analysis may frame the effects of chronic absenteeism on students too narrowly with other educational issues out of view. We recognize the novelty and newness of the attendance literature, and the opportunities that exist for scholars who want to engage in modeling and empirical research that examines the solutions to chronic absence. The wicked problems framework is useful for identifying issues and solutions within a given policy or social sector. However, the wicked problems framework is limited in education research (Childs & Grooms, 2018). We see wicked problems being a useful conceptual tool to study education inequality, teacher quality, school leadership, school improvement, and policy distractions that ignore the prevalence of chronic absenteeism in schools.

Our concluding comments summarize arguments for the relevance of wicked problems as an approach to make sense of the root causes of chronic absenteeism. The emergence of chronic absenteeism as a key negative outcome within education suggests that research should be focused around uncovering every aspect of this phenomenon. As Chang and Romero (2008) and others have previously suggested, chronic absenteeism was, until recently, an overlooked problem within education, not just from a research side but also when it comes to policy and practice. The value of a wicked problems perspective for understanding and supporting efforts that address student attendance may be recognized in the way it illustrates the seriousness of chronic absenteeism, and how it is empirically linked to other facets of education, public policy, and other research fields. More generally,

we believe the present analysis contributes to the broader literature in public administration by illustrating some ways in which wicked problems may be a useful tool for addressing educational issues that have risen to prominence over the past several years.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iD

Joshua Childs  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4181-0360>

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Author Biographies

Joshua Childs, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Educational Policy and Planning Program in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. His research examines collaborative approaches that involve community organizations and stakeholders that have the potential to improve academic achievement and reduce opportunity gaps for students in urban and rural schools.

Richard Lofton, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of education at the Center for Social Organization of Schools and Johns Hopkins School of Education. His research examines the importance of uncovering systemic inequalities, illuminating agency, and developing relationships with students and their parents for academic success.