Since the early part of the 20th century, American schooling has been mandatory, with states enacting and enforcing their own compulsory education laws. Compulsory education laws have made missing school more problematic. While school attendance may seem fairly straightforward to most, it can become difficult to tease apart when examined within an urban context. This paper attempts to analyze all the different components of attendance, from the vague statewide policies to the daily challenges experienced by various stakeholders, including policy makers, school personnel, parents\(^1\), students, and law enforcement. In a city where cultural norms and attitudes shape the systems that are in place, citywide initiatives that proactively address the issues related to attendance are needed. We chose to focus on Memphis because of its position as a historically struggling city on the cusp of widespread education reform. Memphis faces many of the challenges that are common in inner cities, but it has its own unique set of circumstances that create the school issues we see today. Currently, there is a climate of change in Memphis as a smaller county school district is being forced to absorb a larger city system, an attempt to move beyond a difficult past and toward a more progressive educational future. Attendance, one factor in this education reform, bears investigation because of the role it plays in the equation.

\(^1\) While we will consistently use the terms “parents” or “parent” in this paper, we are referring to all persons serving as legal guardians, including but not limited to, one or both biological parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents, and other relatives.
Evidence suggests that there are both practical and theoretical issues surrounding attendance that are quite complex and worthy of academic study. For example, there are definitional debates about missing an excessive amount of school. Most are familiar with the term *truancy*, which refers to a predetermined number, which differs by school district, of unexcused absences for a school year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Relying on truancy as the only measure of absences becomes problematic when there are also large numbers of excused absences, those deemed legitimate, in schools every day. *Chronic absenteeism*, a more encompassing measure, has been adopted by education scholars because it factors in both excused and unexcused school absences. Only six out of fifty states even calculate chronic absenteeism, however, and these six states compute chronic absenteeism differently. Some states define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of the school year while others say a student is chronically absent if he or she misses more than a month of school during the year. Nationally, the educational world is beginning to recognize chronic absenteeism as a problem that is just as prevalent as truancy.

Further complicating attendance data collection, most districts utilize and publish an attendance “rate” that fails to paint the complete picture of attendance patterns, especially chronic absenteeism. This percentage, called *average daily attendance (ADA)*, is “the total number of days of student attendance divided by the total number of days in the regular school year” (“Average Daily Attendance,” n.d.). Therefore, if a school has a 95% ADA, it could still have 40% of its students chronically absent, because on different days, different students comprise that 95 percent. Many school districts cannot even produce the correct data to determine whether or not individual students are chronically absent since students are grouped within the ADA (Chang & Romero, 2008).
While tracking attendance can be difficult, researchers have detected trends in absenteeism and have in turn linked these patterns to student performance. Nationally, the highest rates of absenteeism are reported in kindergarten, 6th grade, 9th grade, with the highest rate in 12th grade. High absenteeism rates in kindergarten may reflect the family’s adjustment to sending their child to school, and attendance improves significantly in the mid-elementary grades (3rd and 4th) as they become more accustomed to the rhythms of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Similarly, high absenteeism in 6th and 9th grades suggests that these “transition years” may offer a new set of challenges for students and their parents (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). For example, school start times differ by grade level in many districts, and this may be a hard adjustment in addition to entering a new school with new peers, policies, and academic and behavioral expectations. While it does not seem surprising, high school seniors miss the most school, possibly because seniors over age 18 do not have to attend school under specific compulsory education laws and therefore are not subject to the legal implications of skipping school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Alternatively, seniors who do not plan on attending college may seek opportunities to begin working and earning income instead of completing high school.

High school seniors who miss exorbitant amounts of school have probably been chronically absent for much of their school careers. Evidence shows that the same students who are chronically absent usually demonstrate this pattern over multiple years. In Florida, a cohort of 6th graders’ attendance was tracked throughout their middle and high school years, and the data show that for the students with the worst attendance records, the average cumulative absentee rate over the seven year period was 171 days — almost an entire school year missed. (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). When the same students are chronically absent throughout their
school years, the cumulative effect is staggering, and this absenteeism can lead to academic failure.

Absenteeism is a predictor of academic success as early as kindergarten. Chang and Romero (2008) report that chronic absences in kindergarten are associated with lower academic performance in 1st grade and again in 5th grade, a trend that is especially startling in light of generally low attendance in kindergarten. Later on, ninth grade attendance predicts students’ academic performance, which in turn predicts high school graduation rates. In fact, chronic absenteeism is the strongest predictor of dropping out of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

America is currently focused on preparing students for a competitive global economy, and many are concerned with the poor academic performance of our students when compared to students from other countries. With this in mind, attendance should be looked at as a possible factor in this performance equation, especially in light of the startling rates discussed earlier.

One thing is clear: being in school matters. It matters for all students, but it may matter the most for students who are already economically disadvantaged. Students from low-income families gain the most from being in school and have the most to lose academically by missing school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). When a middle-class child misses school, he or she has the at-home resources necessary to catch up, while a student from a low-income family may not have as many supplemental educational opportunities outside of school. Many poor families are concentrated in urban areas, and these areas often report up to one-third of students as chronically absent, showing that disadvantaged students are missing large amounts of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In fact, the majority of research on absenteeism has come out of cities with large urban school systems and high concentrations of poverty like Baltimore, New York City, Boston, and Atlanta. Although slightly smaller, Memphis, Tennessee, resembles
these cities in many ways, yet research on attendance issues has not been conducted here, making it an ideal subject for examining the aspects of chronic absenteeism and truancy in a high-poverty urban area with its own cultural identities and challenges.

**Why Memphis?**

Memphis, Tennessee is a sprawling city with a population of 652,050 located in the mid-south region of the United States; Memphis is located in Shelby County, which has a population of 927,644 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Memphis has struggled and continues to struggle with a high poverty rate, reporting approximately 26% of individuals living below poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Close to one quarter of the population is under the age of eighteen (school-aged children), and about 42.1% of this group lives under the poverty level. In 2010, about 13.4% of the civilian labor force in Memphis was unemployed, which is startling when compared with a national level of about 9.3% for that same year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). According to the Tennessee Offices of Research and Educational Accountability, there were a reported 3,725 homeless students enrolled in schools in the greater Memphis area during the 2010 school year (Potts, 2012). The racial breakdown in Memphis is: 63.3% Black or African American, a vast majority, 29.4% White, 6.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 1.6% Asian or Pacific Islander. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With these demographics in mind, many of the issues that characterize the city are carried into the public schools system each day.

**Memphis City Schools**

Until very recently the former Memphis City Schools (MCS) and Shelby County Schools (SCS) operated as two separate systems but are now part of one unified school district\(^2\) as of July

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\(^2\) The consolidated school district is officially named “Shelby County Schools,” but we will use the term “unified school district” in order to avoid confusion between the former SCS and MCS and the post-July 1, 2013 singular district.
1, 2013. These two systems differed in size; the Memphis City School District serving about 101,696 students in over 200 schools and the Shelby County School District included only 52 schools with 45,050 students in 2012. Shelby County residents are often considered wealthier, with a median household income of $46,102, compared with $37,172 for residents of the city of Memphis. This socioeconomic contrast is even starker when individual suburbs are considered, like Germantown, a suburb with a population of 38,844 and a median household income of $112,979 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). These differences are apparent in the educational systems, with Memphis City Schools reporting 85.1% of its students as “economically disadvantaged” and Shelby County reporting a significantly lower 38.6 percent (Tennessee Department of Education [TDOE], 2012). These differences are especially shocking in terms of student performance and outcomes data. For example, in 2012, SCS reported a 4.8% high school dropout rate\(^3\), and MCS reported that 16.4% of its students dropped out between 9\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\) grades, revealing an enormous disparity between the two systems. Similarly, only 27.6% of MCS students in grades 3-8 scored at or above proficiency in math on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) exam in 2012, while 57.4% of SCS students in the same grades reached this level. The 3\(^{rd}\)-8\(^{th}\) grade reading and language arts scores show a similar pattern, with 61.3% of SCS students scoring at or above proficiency and 29.2% of MCS students doing so (TDOE, 2012). The racial breakdowns for these systems are indicative of a city that has experienced the migration of white citizens from the city center to the suburbs, with MCS and SCS each containing 82.7% and 37.4% African American students in 2012, respectively. Memphis City Schools had 7.3% White, 8.6% Hispanic, and 1.4% Asian or Pacific Islander

\(^3\) The “cohort dropout rate” refers to the number of students who enter high school in 9\(^{th}\) grade and drop out of school prior to their peers’ graduation.
students; Shelby County Schools, in contrast, had 52.3% White, 5.0% Hispanic, and 5.0% Asian or Pacific Islander students in its system (Tennessee Department of Education [TDOE], 2012).

The school consolidation in Memphis has attracted national attention because it is a unique situation for a smaller school district (Shelby County) to absorb a larger district (Memphis City). The *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954 required that all states integrate their schools, but many southern states failed to follow through with the mandate. Memphis was no exception, where desegregation-related court cases were still complicating matters through the 1970’s (Pohlmann, 2008). Memphis experienced significant white flight to eastern suburbs following busing desegregation, with over 30,000 white students leaving the Memphis City Schools by 1974 (Branston, 2011). As the school demographics above indicate, Memphis has been living with de facto segregation in its schools. This has resulted in a general decline in the quality of Memphis City Schools, and both the nation and State of Tennessee have recognized Memphis as a center for educational change.

In 2010, the State of Tennessee won over $501 million as part of President Obama’s *Race to the Top* grant, which was designed to aid America’s failing schools and spur innovative education reforms. Through this grant, half of the funds went to individual school districts and half to the state of Tennessee. The Tennessee Department of Education received a waiver from the federal government to create a new accountability system for its schools; the main goal of this system was to identify which schools in the state were the worst in terms of performance. Every public school in the state was placed in rank order according to the following metric of TCAP performance:
Once the calculations were run, this determined the new bottom 5% of schools in Tennessee; 85 schools fit in this category and 68 of these 85 schools are located in Memphis. The Achievement School District (ASD) is a statewide district responsible for bringing schools in the bottom 5% to the top 25% in five years. Clearly, over the years, different schools will comprise the bottom 5 percent, but the goal is to raise the percentage of students statewide that are performing at or above proficiency on the TCAP. Chris Barbic, the Superintendent of the ASD, explains that there are currently 10% of students in the bottom 5% of Tennessee schools who are considered proficient, and the long-term goal is that the bottom 5% of schools will have 50-60% of students reaching proficiency (personal communication, July 10, 2013). The ASD essentially “takes over” these lowest-performing schools and operates them independently of the local district. The ASD can either operate the school themselves or subcontract a charter organization to administer the school. The ASD has completed its first school year (2012-2013) with six schools across the state of Tennessee, five of which are located in Memphis (C. Barbic, personal communication, July 10, 2013).

The school merger and the presence of the ASD are two examples of education reform in Memphis today. Reformers want to raise the bar in Memphis, setting higher expectations for teacher effectiveness, academic performance, and the general attitude about education. In order for Memphis’ schools to improve, every variable in the equation should be examined. One easily overlooked factor is school attendance, and this factor could play a major role in student outcomes and educational reform in Memphis. No matter how many changes are made to schools in Memphis, if students are not attending school regularly, those who could feel the impact most may not be reached. The first step to understanding attendance issues in Memphis
is by looking at the state and district-level policies and procedures that are in place for schools to follow.

**State Attendance Policy**

Attendance policies and procedures are typically set forth by the state in very broad terms and are then interpreted and specified at the district level. According to the Tennessee Department of Education Division of Data and Communications (2012), a school must contact parents after a student has missed five aggregated days of school without excuses, since Tennessee considers a student truant after five unexcused absences. The state requires that districts submit attendance data to an electronic system every 20 days in order to hold districts accountable. From what we can tell, Tennessee offers a system called SMS PowerSchool to track student data and encourages districts to purchase and use SMS to make data collection more uniform at a state level, but it is not mandatory to purchase it. Through SMS, each student is assigned a Personal Identification Number (PIN), which, in theory, facilitates recordkeeping for individual students. Student PINs also enable school administrators to track transfer students who move to different schools (Tennessee Department of Education Division of Data and Communications, 2012). Therefore, if an individual student changes schools within or across district lines, his or her new teacher(s) and school administration should have access to all previous academic, behavioral, and attendance data, including tardies, suspensions, and expulsions.

**Memphis Attendance Policy**

The unified school district’s attendance policy distinguishes the difference between excused and unexcused absences. For an absence to be considered excused it must fit into one of several scenarios found in the student handbook and be turned into the school by a parent in
writing within two days of the absence (Shelby County Board of Education, 2013a). The district defines truancy as, “unauthorized absence from school,” mailing an official letter after the student accumulates five unexcused absences (Shelby County Board of Education, 2013b, p. 1). To minimize the number of truant students, the district requires each school to clearly and proactively communicate the importance of attendance and the consequences of absenteeism. Methods may include sending letters to parents and school wide attendance meetings at the beginning of each year. Schools are also encouraged to have resources for students to talk about attendance related issues and to offer incentives and other programs that promote attendance.

The procedure for communicating with families about preventing and handling truancy is complicated, but the general flow of responsibility requires action by the school, administrators at the district level, and the District Attorney’s Office as the number of absences increases. After the fifth absence, the district generates a letter requiring the parent and the student to attend a meeting with the Student Attendance Review Team (SART). Typical SART participants are a teacher, guidance counselor, and a member of the administration. SART’s main goal is to create a Parent/Student Action Plan (PSAP), a written agreement signed by all members that recognizes causes for absences and provides the family with resources to help alleviate the barriers to attend school. (Shelby County Board of Education, 2013b). If parents do not comply within three days of receiving the school district’s notice, the case is immediately referred to the District Attorney as a legal matter.

**Role of Law Enforcement**

Once a student accumulates ten or more unexcused absences, the case is transferred from the school system to the District Attorney’s Office (D.A.) and becomes a legal matter of the state. When a student is considered truant, his or her parent is held liable under the compulsory
education law and could be convicted of a class C misdemeanor. The D.A. informs the parent that there are possible legal repercussions and mandates his or her presence at a community-level meeting called the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB). The goal of SARB is to refer the family to appropriate services in order to help them address the causes of the truancy and to reduce the student’s absences. The D.A. offers two courses of action: referral to Juvenile Court or a second chance to follow the PSAP that they previously agreed to, making changes to the plan if necessary (Shelby County Board of Education, 2013b). While this is the official protocol, schools aim to prevent their students from reaching the point where truancy becomes a serious issue, intervening in-house (A. Leslie, personal communication, July 3, 2013; E. Forbes, personal communication, June 25, 2013). Similarly, even if a family is referred to the District Attorney’s Office, their stated intention is not to simply convict parents, but to actually get to the root of the truancy and ensure that students are attending school regularly. Although these written policies exist, it is important to examine and question how these policies actually manifest themselves into daily practices at the school level.

**Policy Meets Practice**

Although schools are provided with the state and district policies, there is some flexibility in how individual schools implement their own day-to-day attendance procedures. If a school is large enough, it has a separate attendance office with a staff member whose job is to handle attendance affairs on a daily basis. This attendance officer oversees the school’s SMS PowerSchool data, approves excuses, holds teachers accountable for entering attendance into the system, and sometimes works in a counseling role in cases of chronic absenteeism/truancy. In other smaller schools, a school secretary in the main office may handle attendance, but the tasks are the same regardless of who is in charge.
The attendance officer is the official administrator responsible for dealing with attendance issues, but other school personnel often go to great lengths to ensure students are in school. In some schools, teachers and principals will go directly to students’ homes in the summer to meet their students and speak with parents about registering children for school, sometimes providing them with school supplies or uniforms (A. Leslie, personal communication, July 3, 2013; E. Forbes, personal communication, June 25, 2013). When school personnel reach out to families on a personal level, it creates a trusting relationship from the beginning and facilitates communication if and when future problems arise. If parents see that someone is invested in their child’s education and cares about his or her well being, they are more likely to see the value in attending school regularly (A. Leslie, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

Even with help from school officials, agencies, and other resources, children in Memphis face challenges that are unique to the city and directly affect their ability to attend school. Individual schools’ efforts to increase attendance can only go so far if the community at large is not supportive of the education system. It is also important to note that while some schools intervene to reduce the number of families who appear in court, others may be so overwhelmed by truancy that they do not interfere with the system and rules that are in place, sending higher numbers of families to the District Attorney. Many of the challenges and barriers related to absenteeism are highly interconnected and complex, and they paint a picture of the culture of public education in Memphis.

**Cultural Attendance Barriers**

The Memphis school system is certainly reflective of a city with a high poverty level, with all but fourteen of the former Memphis City Schools qualifying for Title I status (TDOE, 2012). As part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Title I is a compensatory education
program designed to assist schools with large percentages of high-poverty and academically at-risk students. Under Title I, state and local agencies work with the school in order to better students’ chances of meeting the rigorous state testing standards (TDOE Federal Programs Division, 2012). One key Title I service is free or reduced lunch for students, and in the majority of Memphis schools, breakfast is also provided daily. For impoverished students, these free meals should incentivize attendance, but there are still challenges to receiving them.

**Tardiness.** Memphis, like other school districts, staggers school start and end times, with some elementary students’ instructional time beginning as early as 7:30 a.m. In order to eat breakfast, these children need to arrive at school early. If students arrive any later than 7:30 a.m. when school officially starts, they not only have missed out on a good meal, but they also have missed out on valuable instruction time. For Elizabeth Forbes, a fourth grade reading teacher at Peabody Elementary School in Memphis, tardiness is a major issue, especially because her classes are not “self contained” and she has already finished with her first group of students by 9:00 a.m. She reports that roughly one-third of her students arrive at least 45 minutes late each day and expresses frustration that her students are missing almost half of their lesson (personal communication, June 25, 2013). Tardiness not only affects the students who are arriving late, but it also disrupts the classroom as a whole, reducing instruction time for all students as the teacher focuses on the tardy students. For older students, chronic tardiness may become a reality when they are responsible for their younger siblings. If a parent is at work in the morning, it is the older sibling’s task to wake other siblings up and help them get ready, ensure they make it to school on time, and stay home with them when they are sick. Unfortunately, many teenagers become truant and even drop out of school because they have other roles to fill like caretaking and earning income for the family. A lack of resources like alarm clocks and cell phones may
also contribute to tardiness, especially in cases when students are responsible for waking
themselves up and getting themselves to school.

**Transportation.** In Memphis, elementary students who live within one and a half miles,
and middle and high school students who live within two miles of their school are not provided
with transportation to and from school (Transportation Eligibility Requirements, 2013). This
poses a challenge for many of Memphis’ families, especially since they are held responsible for
getting their children to school on time. Families generally have two options: parents
transporting their students in their own vehicles or students walking to school. While driving
students to school is probably preferable, it is not an option for families who do not own a car or
have to share a car among several family members. Additionally, many parents work and may
not be at home when their children are waking up for school, especially people who work
overnight or early morning shifts. This leaves students, often very young ones, responsible for
waking themselves up and getting to school on time. Forbes comments, “During the winter, it is
dark at 7:15. These kids are getting up. Very few of them have been woken up by their parents”
(personal communication, June 25, 2013). For students who walk, darkness, weather, and traffic
can make getting to school physically challenging. In Memphis, it rains a great deal in the
winter and spring, and schools anecdotally report lower attendance rates associated with
inclement weather. Safety can also become an issue when students live in neighborhoods with
no sidewalks or have to traverse across busy streets, train tracks, and gang territories.

**Peer Influences.** As students get to their middle school years, peer influence and gang
violence are relevant social issues that can affect attendance. In fact, some feel that bullying and
the presence of gangs are major reasons why students no longer want to be in school (M.
Cervetti, personal communication, July 5, 2013). When students are not promoted to the next
grade, they are more likely to repeat again, resulting in situations where they are significantly older than their classmates. These “overage” students are typically behind academically and feel socially awkward with their much younger classmates. (M. Cervetti, personal communication, July 5, 2013). This could be a leading cause of truancy, which over time, can easily contribute to dropping out of school.

Students can also feel academically out-of-place at school. Sometimes students feel that there is a social stigma attached to being “too smart” or seeming “White” when showing interest in school, especially if they are excelling academically (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). This is easy to understand, especially among adolescent boys who feel this could possibly affect their social standing. In contrast, if a student is noticeably performing below his or her peers, staying at home may avoid embarrassment such as struggling to read aloud in class. This may be more common among elementary students who are eager to learn and impress their teachers and classmates. Peers may also influence each other to act out in school, which can result in suspensions that further remove students from the classroom.

**Suspensions.** During the 2011-2012 school year, there were 26,115 suspensions in Memphis City Schools (TDOE, 2012). While this statistic does not clarify what type of suspensions were given (in-school or at-home), students who are suspended are still missing instructional time when they are suspended, regardless of where they are. Also, it is common for many students to have multiple suspensions per year, which translates into multiple days out of the classroom. Oftentimes, at-home suspensions can exacerbate absenteeism and truancy, since a parent has to come directly to the school to clear the student’s suspension by signing paperwork at the end of the suspension period. Forbes identifies this as a “major obstacle,” elaborating that if parents cannot make it to the school to clear the suspension, the student can
end up missing more days of school than originally administered (personal communication, June 25, 2013). At-home suspensions place the responsibility on parents to not only clear the suspension but also to monitor students when they are out of school. Many working parents cannot be at home to enforce the punishment of being suspended, essentially giving suspended students a “free pass” from being in school; this may result in students finding themselves in even more trouble since they are both out of school and unsupervised. When those students discover that a suspension means unsupervised time out of school, they may act out in order to receive an at-home suspension and further avoid being at school. Of course, there are families who strictly enforce at-home suspensions with restrictions such as no television or extra academic work, but again, when the responsibility shifts to the parent, it leaves room for inconsistencies in the way at-home suspensions are run.

The Achievement School District, in its efforts to raise standards in all aspects of education, emphasizes that students need to be in school to learn. Aspire Public Schools, a charter organization that is poised to run its first elementary school as part of the ASD in Memphis in the fall of 2013, has its own philosophy about behavioral expectations and discipline. Allison Leslie, the Executive Director for Aspire in Memphis, says that they try to have a “growth mindset about all students….building relationships…to understand why there is disruptive behavior” (personal communication, July 3, 2013). Aspire believes in relaying behavioral expectations to students early and that a proactive approach to attendance and disciplinary problems is better than a reactive one. Aspire sees at-home suspension as a fairly ineffective strategy for dealing with behavioral issues and tries to create alternative punishments, such as picking up trash during recess, or making parents come sit with their students at the school on a Saturday, in order to show children how their actions affect other people. Aspire’s
administration is trying to reduce the use of suspensions and hopefully more schools will adopt these strategies so that the system does not inadvertently increase absenteeism rates. While behavior can be shaped at the school level, many students face barriers at home that are out of their control, such as family mobility and homelessness.

**Student mobility and homelessness.** Nationally, one in six students have been in at least three schools by the end of third grade (Chang & Romero, 2008). This high mobility rate is also characteristic of Memphis, with approximately 30% of Memphis City School students changing schools at least once each school year (M. Cervetti, personal communication, July 5, 2013). There are many causes of mobility, but family-related issues seem to be the most prevalent. Low-income families may struggle to maintain stable or adequate housing and suffer from job loss and inconsistent income. Because of this instability at home, many students continuously move in with different relatives or family friends around the city in an attempt to create a more stable living situation. This mobility has become so prevalent in Memphis that it has affected the language associated with home life. In fact, school registration forms in the unified district typically ask where the student “stays” instead of asking for a permanent address (J. Bass, personal communication, July 31, 2013). While efforts are made by the district to keep the children in their original schools, many times they has to transfer schools due to distance or other circumstances. Determining who is mobile is easier said than done, and Cervetti notes, “a kid might be here [a school] at the beginning, but move somewhere all year long, and then come back at the end of the year. He’s not going to be counted as moving since he was there at the beginning at the end,” (personal communication, July 5, 2013). Since students in this situation are not technically considered mobile, they are not factored into the 30% mobility rate, suggesting that this is probably a conservative number.
Many students who are mobile also experience homelessness, which can make attending school regularly difficult and lead them to miss more school than their peers. In fact, “homeless students are more likely to repeat a grade, be placed in special education, and fail academically, all of which can lead to dropping out. Nationally, fewer than 25% of homeless students graduate from high school” (Potts, 2013, p. 3). Additionally, homeless students may have poor hygiene, clothing, and school supplies, which may cause them to miss more school because they are embarrassed. In Tennessee during the 2009-2010 school year, a mere 16% of homeless students met or exceeded proficiency in math and 28% were considered proficient in reading on the TCAP (Potts, 2012). For a city with such a large number of homeless youth (approx. 3,793), these barriers are particularly relevant to Memphis.

Apart from homelessness, mobility itself can have detrimental effects on academic performance. Evidence shows that students who transfer schools often are more likely to repeat a grade than their non-mobile classmates, and “children who had changed schools four or more times by 8th grade were four times more likely to drop out than those who remained in the same school, regardless of socioeconomic status” (Potts, 2012, p. 12). Not only do mobile students experience academic setbacks when they transfer schools, but the entire classroom can also suffer when teachers attempt to give new students the extra time they need to adjust. Teachers are not the only adults affected by mobility; principals rely on certain enrollment numbers to maintain funding and personnel, and high transfer rates can quickly affect the school as a whole. For example, a school needs 500 students enrolled to have an assistant principal, but if a neighborhood housing project closes, families may change residences and transfer to different schools, causing enrollment to decline and jeopardizing funding along with the assistant principal’s position (M. Cervetti, personal communication, July 5, 2013).
Chronic illness. Poor health, which disproportionately affects low-income students, is one of the leading causes of student absenteeism. Low-income students will miss more school due to illness than their higher income peers because they cannot access or afford appropriate health care as easily. They are also more likely to live in areas with environmental pollutants, which can trigger chronic conditions such as asthma (Chang & Romero, 2008). Nationally, asthma is the number one cause of school absenteeism, contributing to over 14 million school absences a year. “The burden of asthma is disproportionately borne by low-income populations, minorities, and children in inner cities” (Levy, Heffner, Stewart, & Beeman, 2006, p. 1). Since Memphis has a high percentage of children living in poverty, asthma can affect many of its students’ ability to attend school. In 1997, Memphis City Schools and Le Bonheur Children’s Hospital formed a partnership to reduce the negative effects of pediatric asthma in Memphis, including excessive absenteeism. A research study analyzing the effectiveness of this Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP) was conducted to determine how increased asthma education, weekly health monitoring, and extended coordinated care affected school attendance. The results showed that students in the CSHP missed an average of 4.38 days of school per year, whereas their peers not enrolled in the program missed 8.18 days on average (Levy et al., 2006), indicating that the CSHP was successful in reducing health-related absenteeism. While illness will always be a reason that children miss school, it seems as though some schools in Memphis have made some efforts to reduce illness-related absences. The continuation of this program in the school system is uncertain, but chronic illness was not referenced as a major reason for absenteeism during our personal communication.

Parent involvement. Parents play a significant role in their children’s success, and they are a part of the attendance equation. In the early years of a child’s education, responsibility is
heavily put on the parent rather than the child; however, the extent to which parents can or cannot fill this role differs by family. Elementary-aged children are still excited to be at school and see school as a safe place. A six-year-old is usually not absent out of his or her own doing since young children typically are not responsible for their own care. Whether or not people agree with the role of law enforcement in education, because children are minors, parents are the ones who are held legally responsible for truancy. While truancy is an issue, parents are sometimes able to avoid these repercussions by providing thorough excuses for each absence — even large numbers of days at a time. Since the district does not keep track of excused absences, but focuses on truancy, it is easy for chronically absent students with parents willing to write notes to fall through the cracks and not get the help they need. As to be expected, when students get older and gain more independence, parents play a different role in their education. Parents may be needed less for hands on help like transportation and attending school events, but they are still crucial in emphasizing the importance of education and helping children succeed academically and socially. While parents do differ in their levels of engagement with their children’s schools, this “apathy” is often blown out of proportion in Memphis and has created a “blame game” regarding the failure of our schools. Parent engagement is an important factor in improving and supporting schools, but the school district has not made a concerted effort to systematically ensure that every family is being reached; this parent outreach is occurring in many schools, but it seems to be done on an individual school basis, leaving out many families.

**Incentives, Interventions, and Initiatives**

As attendance continues to be a topic of concern, different cities across the country have implemented initiatives in order to both raise awareness and reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy. While the approaches of each initiative may differ, many share key features that make
them successful. These successful initiatives use incentives, streamline data collection and analysis, promote public awareness, identify and address student needs, and utilize mentoring. In Memphis, the most widespread attendance program is run by the District Attorney’s Office, and it is currently the only initiative through which to measure Memphis’ success in addressing absenteeism compared to other cities’ strategies.

**Memphis Truancy Reduction Initiative**

The major attendance reform program being implemented in Memphis is the District Attorney’s Truancy Reduction Initiative, which was founded by District Attorney General Bill Gibbons in 2006 in an effort to prevent juvenile delinquency by lowering truancy rates (Pitts, 2010). Juvenile crime in Memphis was a major issue at the time, and the District Attorney’s Office discovered that one quarter of this crime was occurring between 7:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. during the school day, suggesting that the youth committing those crimes were not in school (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). Once the D.A. made this connection between truancy and juvenile delinquency, it became apparent that there was a need to identify and reach out to these at-risk students. Gibbons also felt a personal connection to the issue, as he was a truant student himself, inspiring him to start a “crusade…to mentor middle school kids” (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). He was able to finish school and start a successful career in government because of the support of mentors in his life who encouraged him to value education and earn his diploma. It is important to note that those significant mentors were not family members but, in his case, were a teacher and a benefactor. This personal story, combined with successes from across the country, influenced Gibbons’ decision to implement a mentoring-based truancy reduction program in Memphis.
Gibbons sent Harold Collins to Washington, D.C., to be trained by the National Mentoring Network, an organization that has helped form similar programs across the country, so that he could be equipped to launch an initiative in Memphis. The D.A.’s team decided to begin working in middle schools because those students are in their, “formative years…. and if we could cut if off at the middle school level, then we felt like we had a better chance of them graduating from high school,” Collins explains (personal communication, July 18, 2013). Memphis City Schools provided the D.A. with the three middle schools with the worst attendance rates. The Truancy Reduction Program began its first year in 2006-2007 in those three schools, called “target schools.”

Since the target schools are part of the program, they contact the District Attorney’s office when a student has accumulated five unexcused absences, labeling him or her as “at-risk” for truancy. The parent and student are called to a meeting with the D.A.’s team and are given the option to volunteer to participate in the mentoring program, which will provide the student with an adult mentor who will both monitor the student’s attendance and build a personal relationship with him or her. If they decline the offer to enroll in the program, the D.A.’s office makes it clear that the child’s attendance record will still be monitored closely as a student in a Truancy Reduction School. Should the student’s truancy continue, Collins informs parents that they are, “subject to being arrested and prosecuted under the law” (personal communication, July 18, 2013). For participating students, their progress is assessed after one year, and if they adhere to the program’s rules their case will be dismissed. Mentors are encouraged to maintain their relationships with students even if the case is dismissed.

Mentors for the program are often recruited from churches, local businesses, and other organizations, and one must be at least 18 years old, have a high school diploma, and be able to
commit at least eight hours a month to personal contact with the child in order to be a mentor. Once candidates undergo criminal background checks, they participate in orientation and several hours of training with Collins and the Truancy Reduction staff (Pitts, 2010). The District Attorney’s Office coordinates and funds some outings and events for students and mentors, like Memphis Grizzlies basketball games, visits to the National Civil Rights Museum, and trips to the Memphis Zoo. In addition, the program has a relationship with the Memphis Public Library that provides participating students with a special library card labeled with a District Attorney’s symbol on it, which allows them to visit the library without a parent. The main goal of a mentor is to make sure that, “no matter what obstacles, no matter what issues that arise, school is the number one agenda” (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). Mentors are encouraged to establish a consistent and trusting relationship with their students, empowering them to make their own decisions while knowing they have support from another person. The program allows mentors to have direct access to the students both in and out of school, and mentors often come by the school to eat lunch with their mentees and check on their academic progress and attendance. Each Truancy Reduction School is also equipped with an Advocate, an employee of the District Attorney’s office who acts as a liaison between the school and the D.A.

Since the was program piloted in the original three middle schools in 2006, the Truancy Reduction Initiative has expanded into nine Memphis middle schools and two elementary schools. In its third year, the program saw a decline in enrollment numbers, which Collins explains as a positive change, since this indicates that fewer students in target schools were at-risk for truancy (personal communication, July 18, 2013). Even after the program’s first two years in three middle schools, the D.A. saw a reduction in truancy from an average of 18 days a year per student to 6.8 days after the program was introduced and then 5.6 days once paired with
a mentor (Roberts, 2013). As the original Truancy Reduction Schools showed improvement, the initiative began to gain recognition in the community, and one middle school principal requested that the D.A. become involved with his new school after seeing its success at his former institution.

When the program stabilized at the middle school level, the D.A.’s office turned its attention to some of the elementary schools that typically feed into their target middle schools. Program administrators realized that it was vital for them to implement an early intervention strategy once they became aware of some extreme cases of truancy at the elementary level. In January 2013, 118 families at Shannon and Westwood Elementary Schools combined received letters from the D.A.’s office regarding their truancy (Roberts, 2013). These staggering figures revealed that truancy is a relevant issue among young children, and the Truancy Reduction Initiative began to monitor attendance at these target elementary schools. At the elementary level, students enrolled in the program are not paired with a mentor, but an Advocate does work in each school to promote parent involvement and student attendance. This program emphasizes that a parent should be a child’s primary mentor and the one who should emphasize the importance of education at a young age. The D.A.’s office offers parenting classes and access to other family services to provide families with a foundation of educational expectations for the coming years (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). While they have only been in elementary schools for a few months, implementing this aims to create academic and social benefits for the long term, hopefully lowering truancy and dropout rates in older grades.

The students in this truancy program are considered at-risk for truancy, and mentors are trained to detect any barriers or risk factors that students face that may prevent them from attending school daily. If, for example, a mentor feels as if his or her student may be suffering
from homelessness, he or she can contact the D.A.’s office so that they can connect the family with services such as emergency housing, soup kitchens, or non-profits like the Memphis Inter-Faith Association. A benefit of the program being run by the District Attorney’s office is the numerous connections it has and continues to make with services throughout the city, but these program-specific connections are only available to students enrolled in the truancy reduction schools (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013).

In a mentor recruitment pamphlet, Shelby County District Attorney Amy Weirich states, “my office could handle truancy cases like every other crime. However, we see an opportunity in these situations to not only enforce the law but also enrich the life of a young person” (Shelby County District Attorney’s Office, 2013). In order to enrich young lives, the program works to emphasize high standards for all the stakeholders in a child’s education. Large signs hanging in the front of every Truancy Reduction School that read, “This is a District Attorney’s Truancy Reduction School. All students are expected to attend school daily,” illustrate these high standards (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). The program works with teachers directly, providing them with attendance books to hold them accountable for tracking attendance regularly. The D.A.’s office informs teachers that these books must match the data that is put in the system and they may be audited at any time to ensure that the data is consistent. While this may seem somewhat extreme, the program operates under the philosophy that sometimes an authority figure needs to enforce consequences in order to motivate change.

**Discussion**

It is unfortunate that the school district is not the agency running the most widespread attendance program in Memphis, but for now, the D.A.’s Truancy Reduction Initiative is the first attempt to recognize and alleviate this problem. Many people in Memphis feel distrust with law
enforcement, so a program headed by a different organization may be more generalizable and well-received by families in Memphis. At its core, attendance is an academic and educational problem, so the school district or education-based organizations should see intervention as their responsibility. While the original focus of the Truancy Reduction Initiative was juvenile crime, the program has begun to see to the many benefits of regular school attendance, which has led to the implementation of the early intervention approach aimed at creating positive attitudes about school at an early age. This program, along with other educational reforms is Memphis, is young, but it is the major force taking on attendance issues in the city. The precedents of other urban areas offer a framework for measuring the extent to which Memphis is addressing attendance concerns.

**Incentivize Attendance**

On a daily basis, schools create preventative attendance programs that aim to reduce absenteeism through incentives, which are especially effective at the elementary and middle school levels. In Boston, students at a K-8 school who have attended at least 95% of the second quarter earn an invitation to an AttenDANCE social event. This type of program is effective because students at that age are excited about incentives and are eager to be part of something special. In its first year, AttenDANCE helped the school decrease its percentage of children with poor attendance from 30% to 23% (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), showing that these types of social event incentives can be at least somewhat effective in reducing absenteeism. Peabody Elementary School in Memphis utilizes a similar approach, finding that students’ attendance improves when an incentivized “sock hop” school dance is approaching (E. Forbes, personal communication, June 25, 2013). Other types of incentives may include small tokens like stickers and candy, attendance awards and recognition, ice cream socials, and competitions between
classrooms for the best overall attendance. Schools in Memphis should take advantage of incentives and other proactive ways to motivate students to come to school so that fewer families find themselves in the hands of the law.

**Streamline Data Collection and Analysis**

Another major component of attendance reform is streamlining a district’s data collection and analysis process. In New York City, Michael Bloomberg’s Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement realized that the school district was not making good use of the longitudinal data it already possessed. They have created a “data dashboard” that makes attendance data accessible in real time for parents, school personnel, and other community leaders to monitor children who are at risk for being chronically absent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 36). This is an important first step for improving attendance, because, as mentioned earlier, many districts find it difficult to track individual students. Therefore, technologies which enable school personnel to quickly identify the children who are chronically absent ensure more expedient interventions. Even though SMS PowerSchool enables Memphis schools to look at individual student data, it is likely that more can be done to make this information more accessible to other stakeholders besides teachers and attendance officers. For example, the school district should measure chronic absenteeism rates and student mobility carefully, as they can reveal more realistic rates of absenteeism. Although truancy is a major focus of the school system, actual truancy data and reports are not available to the public, so it is hard to understand how large the truancy problem is. Further, it remains unclear who is responsible for tracking individual students’ attendance at the district level and who initiates the intervention process.

**Promote Public Awareness**
Increasing public awareness and accountability can also increase student attendance. The Interagency Task Force in New York City advertises on busses and subway trains to heighten awareness of school attendance by posting signs that read, “It’s 9 a.m. Do you know where your children are?” Another part of the New York initiative motivates students to get to school by partnering with celebrities. Famous individuals like Whoopi Goldberg or New York Yankees players record wake up and get-to-school phone messages, reaching approximately 30,000 students each morning (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 35). We feel that this motivational strategy could be very effective in Memphis, especially among older students who own cell phones.

Memphis has a citywide campaign against absenteeism, although it does not have the same upbeat feel as New York nor is it advertised as well. The school district runs a truancy hotline that allows Memphians to report school aged children who are suspected to be skipping school, making regular citizens feel as though they have a role to play in the education system. We are unsure whether or not the hotline is used frequently, is effective in reducing truancy, or even exists since the school districts have consolidated, especially since the hotline is not effectively advertised to citizens. If the District Attorney’s program is going to be our most widespread and organized initiative, it needs to be more public about its presence in Memphis, which could help recruit mentors and hold the city accountable for education.

**Identify and Address Needs**

While awareness of actual attendance rates is important, significant changes cannot happen until the causes of absenteeism are identified and alleviated. As part of these initiatives, school districts work to connect families with appropriate resources to help aid the families’ individual needs (Chang & Romero, 2008). Types of services include health care, individual and family counseling, social work, and nonprofits that address specific issues like homelessness and
academic trouble. To engage parents in their children’s education, districts may offer attendance workshops and parenting skills classes, often as an alternative for legal repercussions. A program in Oahu, Hawaii, found that students of parents who enrolled in attendance workshops saw a decrease in absenteeism from 19.55 absences to 5.03 absences after six months (Chang & Romero, 2008). Many low-income families often lack physical resources that could make getting to school easier. A school district in North Richmond, California, has recognized this, providing families with simple items such as alarm clocks, rain gear, and bus tickets, a simple but widespread strategy that could aid many of Memphis’ students (Chang & Romero, 2008). Memphis is a city with hundreds of nonprofit organizations that aim to address certain needs in the community, but it is unclear how effective these nonprofits are in reaching students. The D.A.’s program does connect students with resources, but these connections are only available to students enrolled in the target schools, limiting the accessibility of these resources to only a handful of families. The school district needs to organize and publicize partnerships with organizations so that students in all of its schools have equal opportunity to get the help they need; this also includes a streamlined way to identify student needs, relying less on the generosity of individual teachers and principals and more on organized systems.

Utilize Mentoring

Many initiatives that are implemented across the country utilize mentors as a way to reduce truancy and chronic absenteeism. In some cases, mentors are professional social workers employed by the school district to work within the school to support students and parents and encourage them to attend school daily. In other programs, mentors are community volunteers who commit a certain amount of time per week to see students both in and out of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The main goal for these mentors is to form a trusting relationship with at-risk
students who may lack positive support at home. It is important to note that a district does not implement these programs in all of their schools; rather, they identify target schools based on poor attendance. Because many elementary schools feed into certain middle schools, mentoring programs usually work within these “feeder patterns” in an attempt to emphasize the importance of attendance early on to alleviate issues that arise later in a child’s education. Mentoring programs have produced impressive results in cities like Atlanta, where their mentoring initiative cut the percentage of students missing more than fifteen days of school in half between 2001 and 2006. Also, in Minneapolis, nine target elementary schools that implemented a mentor program significantly reduced absenteeism and tardiness and saw increased student and parent engagement (Chang & Romero, 2008). While Memphis’ program is relatively young, the D.A.’s office has implemented a mentoring program that looks very similar to older, successful programs in other cities on paper. The main question is if mentoring will work to change the attitudes and pre-existing notions about attendance in Memphis, successfully meeting the program’s goal to work in an early intervention strategy that maximizes student potential. This concept of mentoring has proven effective, but Memphis should work to make this option more generalizable to students in the entire district, not just in target schools.

**Conclusion**

After examining the policies, the daily practices, and the cultural aspects of education in Memphis, it is clear that more than one factor is at play when discussing attendance issues. Memphis has many unique characteristics that blur seemingly rigid state and local policies to create a much more complicated reality. A distinctive example of this is the “Labor Day phenomena” in Memphis’ urban schools. While the Memphis school year officially begins between early and mid-August, there are large numbers of children who do not show up to
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school until the Tuesday after Labor Day. This may seem shocking, seeing that students could be missing up to a month of school, but anecdotally, this is a well-known phenomenon that has been occurring for years. Not only is this a violation of compulsory education laws, but it also automatically puts children at a disadvantage both academically and socially. This is a major issue because the first few weeks of school are crucial for adjusting to the expectations and rhythms of school. Administratively, this is a perfect example for how cultural practices can supersede policy. The state of Tennessee requires official attendance data from the first twenty days of school, but in Memphis, it is acceptable and common for teachers to keep attendance in unofficial paper rosters until after the first twenty-day period. Additionally, enrollment numbers at the beginning of the year determine how many teachers and other staff are employed, so when an influx of students arrives after Labor Day, this offsets the budget that had already been determined for the year. The “Labor Day myth” illustrates how specific cultural behaviors can influence multiple aspects of a single system.

Whether positive or negative, cultural beliefs are a common thread in conversations about education in Memphis. In a city with a 32% dropout rate in 2010 and 16.4% rate in 2012, it can seem like “education is not premium and valued in our community, and if there’s a parent without a high school diploma then it’s not going to be important for the kid to go to school because the parent doesn’t value education” (H. Collins, personal communication, July 18, 2013). In situations where parents were dropouts themselves, it is easy to see that they may feel the educational system failed them and that it may also hurt their children. This is why the school system itself, not another agency like the District Attorney’s Office, needs to create an environment where parents and students can trust that their voices are being heard and the quality of education is preparing children for the future. Many believe that if instruction is
engaging and high quality, families will be more motivated to be at school regularly and will see
education as the valuable investment that it is (E. Forbes, personal communication, June 25, 2013; C. Barbic, personal communication, July 10, 2013).

In America, we often take our free public education system for granted, but refugees who come here from countries where schooling is less accessible and affordable place a higher value on education. These families will overcome many obstacles, from speaking little to no English to not having a driver’s license, in order to be at school every single day, making truancy seem shameful (Refugee Empowerment Program, personal communication, July 17, 2013).

Sometimes, cultural beliefs can make it difficult for necessary changes in education to occur due to high neighborhood pride in Memphis’ communities. With large-scale educational changes like the school merger and the presence of the Achievement School District, Memphis is having to reconcile with its past and look toward the future. As one administrator puts it, “Memphis is anemic when it comes to self-esteem” (A. Leslie, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

Significant efforts are being made from multiple fronts to raise the bar of what it means to offer children in Memphis a quality education, and ensuring they are at school regularly is the first step.

Since attendance is so highly correlated with academic performance, and children in high-poverty urban environments are more likely to be chronically absent and truant, it is crucial to understand the reasons why students in Memphis miss school. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) make a distinction between different reasons why students are absent, categorizing students as those who cannot, will not, and do not attend school. When students cannot attend school it is usually due to unpredictable events and family instability such as chronic illness, frequent mobility, and family obligations, all of which are relevant barriers for students in Memphis.
Many students simply will not go to school to avoid feeling unsafe, embarrassed, pressured, or socially out of place due to bullying, gang presence, and academic performance. These can especially lead to truancy in middle school as peers play a more influential role in students’ lives. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) state that there are children who do not go to school simply because their parents do not yet see the value of education in early grades, which can affect students academically and influence them to skip school on their own when they are older. While this sometimes occurs in Memphis, there are attempts to change these attitudes and increase attendance.

The truancy reduction initiative is a starting point for attendance reform in Memphis in that it recognizes attendance as the complicated issue that it is. By utilizing an early intervention approach, the initiative attempts to hold different stakeholders accountable for our students’ success. In order to raise the standard for school attendance, the program regularly monitors attendance data so that individual children at risk for truancy can be identified and helped early on. For students growing up in poverty, life can be particularly unstable and the presence of trustworthy and reliable mentors can give students the self-esteem they need to feel as if they have control of their own lives. As discussed above, however, we feel that the program is not able to reach as many students as an initiative run by the school district could, regardless of how successful it is. For many people, attendance is a very one-dimensional topic, an aspect of education that is easily overlooked because going to school regularly seems like an obvious course of action. But when attempting to understand attendance in Memphis, it is clear that the city’s culture permeates all aspects of the issue, from written policies and “off the record” practices to the numerable reasons why Memphis’ students are not in school.
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