

Rethinking Educational Neglect: Supporting and Investing in Families to Thrive

Meghan Lutz BSW, MSW Candidate; Alexis Ewanga, BS, MSW Candidate; Cole Rauchman, BSW, LSW, MSW Candidate, Madori Scholten, BSW, MSW Candidate

Minnesota State University, Mankato, Department of Social Work - April 2024

ENGAGING PARENTS WITH CURIOSITY, PARTNERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Issue Statement

School attendance challenges are often rooted in systemic issues related to poverty, a lack of access to needed services and support, and biased reporting. These processes have disproportionately impacted Black/African American children, children of two or more races, and American Indian children in Minnesota. Minnesota demonstrates one of the highest disproportionality rates within child welfare in the United States. This is especially important as children of color most often face systemic issues which disrupt their education. The punitive child protection response to educational neglect in Minnesota does not improve school attendance. Instead, responses that focus on meeting the family's basic needs and building trusting relationships between the family and school system have been shown to reduce absenteeism. Minnesota must invest in these approaches to solve the root issues of educational neglect.

Two Approaches to Educational Neglect: Child Protection vs. Community Response

Instead of Punishment and Judgement... Imagine Curiosity, Partnership and Support

"When my youngest child was in kindergarten at a public elementary school in Evanston, Illinois, my first meeting with his teacher was tense. She immediately told me in a stern voice that my son had been absent for too many school days without a medical excuse...Before I could respond, the teacher gave me a strict warning: "If your son continues to miss school, I'm going to call a truancy officer to visit your home." The teacher's approach convinced me that she viewed me as an irresponsible mother who didn't appreciate the value of education and needed her intervention to raise my son properly." -Dorothy Roberts

Imagine if the initial response of the teacher was to be curious: Sharing her concerns, asking about how things were going at home, and inquiring about how she might help. This empathic response could lead to a better understanding of the situation and then activate a community response. An alternative community response would bring together the school social worker and other providers in the community to address educational and family needs. Together, the group explores concerns, barriers, and resources. Instead of punishment and judgment, an alternative community response prevents involvement in the child welfare system by engaging parents with curiosity, partnership, and support.

Roberts, D. (2022). *Torn apart: How the child welfare system destroys Black families – and how abolition can build a safer world*. Basic Books.

Chronic Absenteeism, Truancy and EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT

Each day absent is a missed opportunity to learn something that students will need to know for future academic and life success.

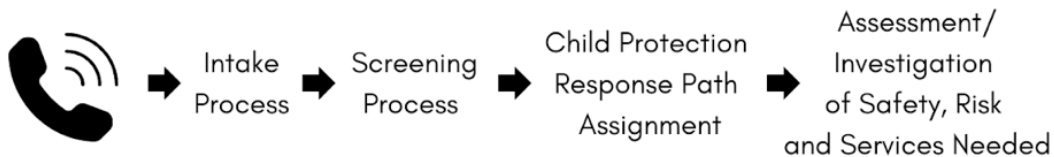
Chronic absenteeism is a [growing problem](#) in the United States. **Chronic absenteeism** is when a student misses at least 10 percent (16.5 days based on a 165-day school year) or more of the school days in a school year. This is the equivalent of missing one day every two weeks. Chronic absenteeism includes excused and unexcused absences. Under [Minnesota State law](#), when a child who is under 12 years old is absent from school it is presumed that the responsibility for the absence is the parent, guardian, or custodian. When a child is 12 years or older it is presumed that it is the child’s intent to be absent.

In Minnesota “[neglect](#)” of a minor includes “a failure to ensure that a child is educated”. Educational neglect is not the same as truancy. **Truancy** is chronic, unexcused absence of children 12 years and older. **Educational Neglect** is chronic, unexcused absence of a child 11 years and younger. In Minnesota education neglect occurs when a child under the age of 12 misses seven days or more of unexcused absences in a school year.

Kids who chronically miss school are at [serious risk of falling behind](#). Consequences include poorer academic performance, impaired social, emotional, and language development, decreased levels of school engagement, poorer peer relationships, increased likelihood drop out of school, poorer outcomes in adult life.

Minnesota’s Current Approach to Educational Neglect

Minnesota is one of nine states who administers responses for educational neglect through county social services. When educational neglect is suspected, [mandated reporters](#) (including professionals who work in Pre-K-12 education) are required to submit a report to the local county or tribal social services agency where the child resides.



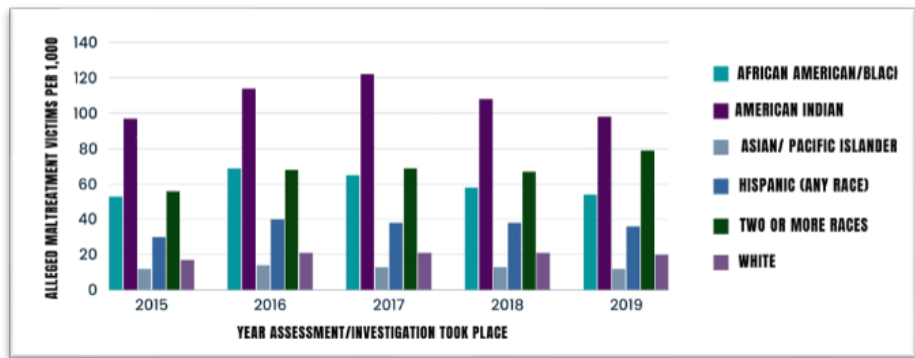
¹[Minnesota Department of Human Services](#) provides instructions for investigation and response in the *Minnesota Child Maltreatment Intake, Screening and Response Path Guidelines*. The figure documents the basic process starting with a report to the local county social services agency. Parents of reports “**screened out**” may be offered voluntary services. However, the report is maintained for 5 years. If the report is “**screened in**” a child protection family assessment is conducted to assess needs and determine what next steps are needed to ensure the child is attending school.

Problems with the Child Protection Approach

Taking a child protection approach to educational neglect puts parents and schools in an adversarial relationship. Rather than creating the conditions that a parent will reach out to teachers and other school personnel for support and help accessing resources, the child protection approach increases the likelihood that parents won't reach out for help, and if they do, be reported for neglect.

A child protection response is a punitive response that puts parents on the defensive, instills fear, and for families of color, disproportionately entangles them in the child protection system. Annual [Minnesota Department of Human Services \(MDHS\) child maltreatment reports consistently](#) document children identified as American Indian, African American/Black and Hispanic, and of two or more races are disproportionately reported to child protection and [screened in](#) for further assessment.

- The figure to the right, from a MDHS 2020 [Minnesota's Maltreatment Report](#), shows how maltreatment reports of American Indian, African American/Black, and Hispanic children are disproportionately result in assessment/investigation across all counties (2015-2019). Each family represented in the figure experienced at least one assessment or investigation by child protective services.



- Testimony given by Jill Kehaulani Esch (minute 43) [January 12, 2024 Legislative Task Force on Child Protection](#) documented disparities in child protection involvement, including that Minnesota has the highest rate of removal of American Indian children by child protection services in the United States.

Poverty: A Major Risk Factor for Educational Neglect

Incapacity or lack of resources to provide is not the same as an unwillingness to provide.

Poverty and parental child neglect are highly correlated. A 2023 report by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) explains the problem as: “Poverty produces material hardships for families. Such hardships often result in families experiencing [toxic stress](#), which can impede children’s [cognitive development](#) and parents’ capacity to meet the needs of their children”.

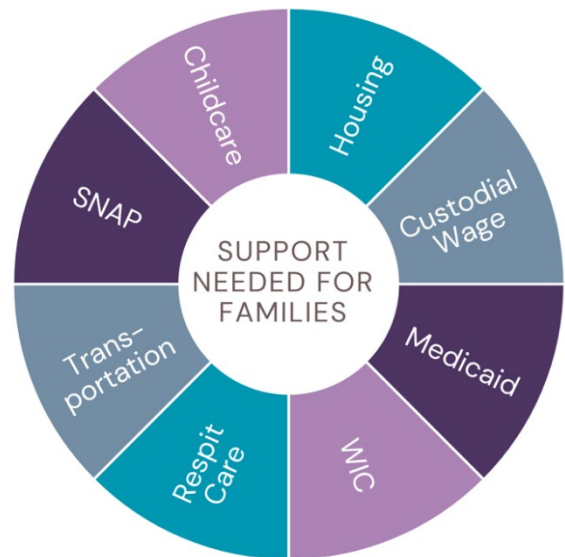
Poverty is experienced at [higher rates by people of color and people living in rural areas](#), which can contribute to [racial disparities within the child welfare system](#). Higher rates of poverty in a community are often [associated with more reports of abuse](#) which raises questions about the over-surveillance of poor families, particularly poor families of color contributing to their disproportionate child protection involvement.

The Solution: Support Families

Neglect, and its clear association with poverty, tells us that the more appropriate response to promote children’s success in school is support and access to resources that result in economic opportunity and security, housing security, food security, transportation security, social connection, good health and mental wellness.

Resources provided to families have increased parental efficacy, stabilized families, and better supported children and families to thrive.

- Creating greater access to Medicaid resulted in 422 fewer cases of neglect per 100,000 children younger than 6.
- Every \$1 increase in caregiver wages is associated with a 9.6% decrease in neglect reports for young and school-aged children.
- Subsidized child care led to a 16% decrease in the likelihood of a neglect report.



Traditionally, federal policy has separated these types of financial support to families from the resources allocated to child protection. This means that the resources that parents actually need, do not fall under the authority of child protection services.

Policy Position Statement

The child protection response to educational neglect in Minnesota does not improve school attendance. Instead, responses that focus on meeting a family’s basic needs and building trusting relationships between the family and school system have been shown to reduce absenteeism. Such a response aligns with the Minnesota Department of Education’s consistent attendance approach. For these reasons we recommend:

- Minnesota amend Minn. Stat. § 260E.17 to allow for an alternative community response with a mandated offer of services for reports screened in for educational neglect (HF4911/SF4747).
- Local child welfare agencies partner with community providers to offer services directly to families struggling with access to education and in compliance with state statute. Allow mandated reporters to be exempt from filing additional child protection reports related to attendance concerns while the family is actively engaged in child welfare services.
- The diversionary response include increased core supports and opportunities for financial assistance for families who voluntarily engage in services funded through grants provided to child welfare and community prevention initiatives.

