

# CENTERING FAMILY VOICE IN ABSENTEEISM

A FOCUS GROUP REPORT



**MAY 2025**

[greatmnschools.org](https://greatmnschools.org)

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# KEY INSIGHTS

- Parents and guardians often perceive their child's attendance differently from recorded absenteeism rates, **highlighting a gap in communication and awareness.**
- Parents and guardians feel schools have not done enough to **clearly communicate sick policies.**
- Students and families **do not feel a strong sense of belonging in schools,** leading to lower prioritization of classroom time.

## SUMMARY

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, consistent attendance rates for K12 students have plummeted. In Minnesota, **only 75% of students consistently attend school compared to 86% in 2019.** While school and ecosystem leaders are examining root causes and solutions, they have not included a strong family voice.

To understand parent and guardian perspectives on absenteeism, Great MN Schools **conducted focus groups with Minneapolis families, involving more than 130 participants, most of whom self-identified as low income and/or Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC).** In the conversations, we found that parents and guardians:

- **Misperceive how often their children are missing school** and the impact that it has on their education.
- **Want clearer communication from schools and a stronger sense of belonging** for their students and themselves, emphasizing a need for continued efforts to foster safe, inclusive learning environments.

This report explores these insights and includes subsequent recommendations such as to distribute information to families, schools, and systems leaders to curtail chronic absenteeism in Minneapolis.



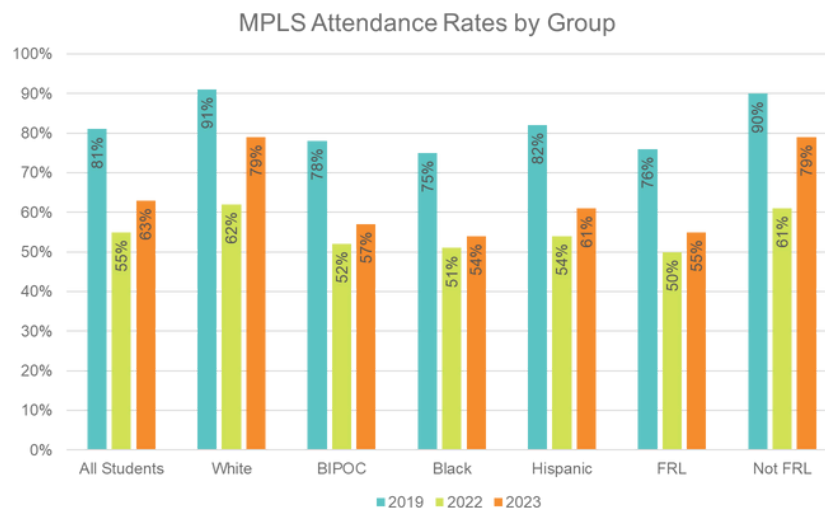
# INTRODUCTION

## NATIONAL & LOCAL TRENDS

Consistent attendance is crucial to student success. **Students who are chronically absent are less likely to meet academic benchmarks, graduate from high school, and engage in school.** Research suggests that middle school students who miss more than two weeks of school only have a 66% likelihood of beginning high school on track to graduate compared to a 92% chance for students who miss two or fewer weeks. By 9th grade, a week's absence each semester equates to a more than 20% drop in a student's probability of graduating from high school.

As schools returned to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance rates lagged pre-pandemic levels. Preliminary data from the 2023-24 academic year indicates **national chronic absenteeism rates remain 50% higher than they were in 2019.** In Minnesota, statewide absenteeism rates are 79% higher than in 2019. **In Minneapolis, just 63% of students attended school consistently in 2023, compared to 81% in 2019.**

The data is dire for Minneapolis students from marginalized backgrounds. Even before the pandemic, **BIPOC students were chronically absent at more than twice the rate of their White counterparts.**



The same is true for students who qualify for free and/or reduced lunch (FRL) compared to students who did not qualify. While consistent attendance rates are inching back toward pre-pandemic levels, **BIPOC and low-income students in Minneapolis are still chronically absent nearly half of the time (47%).**



## LEGISLATIVE STUDY GROUP

In 2024, Minnesota commissioned a legislative working group – the Student Attendance and Truancy Legislative Study Group (SATLSG) – to **examine the root causes of chronic absenteeism and explore policy solutions**. This SATLSG included state legislators, school and district representatives, and community and advocacy group employees and volunteers. Their discussions emphasized the complexity of truancy and the need for a holistic, multi-sector, collaborative approach that involves legislators, educators, community organizations, and families. The SATLSG’s emphasis on **family engagement as a key strategy to lower chronic absenteeism** mirrors insights from rigorous studies. However, while the SATLSG underscored the importance of family engagement and acknowledged families are crucial stakeholders in reversing chronic absenteeism, **the SATLSG did not center family voices in its discussions**.

In its final report, the SATLSG highlighted eight topics for the Legislature to explore that will help reduce chronic absenteeism. Meanwhile, this Great MN Schools report outlines recommendations to alleviate concerns raised by families.

## FAMILY FOCUS GROUPS

In fall 2024, Great MN Schools partnered with eight family-facing Minneapolis community organizations to conduct focus groups with low-income BIPOC parents and guardians of K12 children. The goal was to **gather, analyze, and share qualitative data to ensure that families' perspectives were meaningfully included in the broader absenteeism conversation**.

The data from conversations with 135 focus group participants revealed complexities in the relationships between families/students and schools. Families report communication gaps around chronic absenteeism, often underestimating both their child’s absences and the school’s attendance trend. Participants shared myriad reasons for lower attendance, including unclear sick policies, travel challenges, and a decreased sense of belonging in schools.





# DATA ANALYSIS

Research Design

Participant Overview

Section A - Understanding Absenteeism

Section B - Illness & Sick Policy

Section C - Travel Challenges

Section D - Sense of Belonging

Section D.1 - Mental Health

Section D.2 - Culturally Insensitive Teachers & Staff

Section D.3 - Support for Parents & Guardians

Section E - What Families Want to See

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a **qualitative research method** to understand family perspective on chronic absenteeism following the COVID-19 pandemic. Great MN Schools partnered with eight family-facing community organizations to conduct 16 focus groups; each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Facilitators asked up to 16 questions, probing **families' understanding of chronic absenteeism and gathering insight into several theories for decreased attendance rates.**

Facilitators conducted most focus groups in English and in person, though some were in Spanish and a handful were virtual. Many included translators in the room.

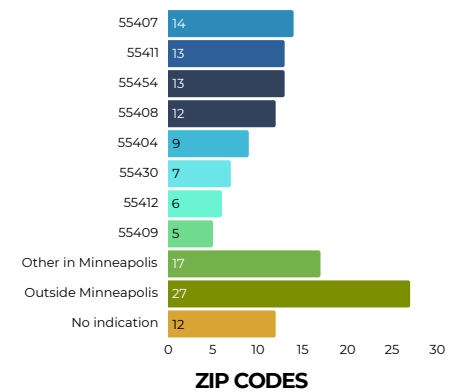
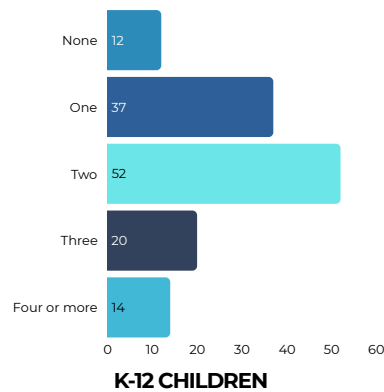
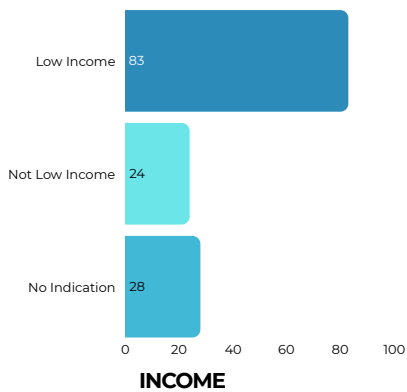
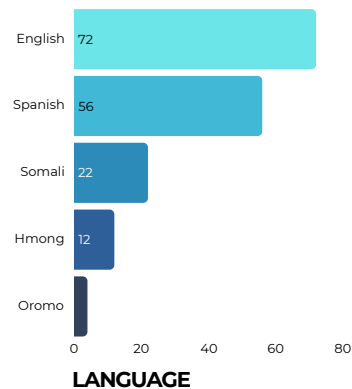
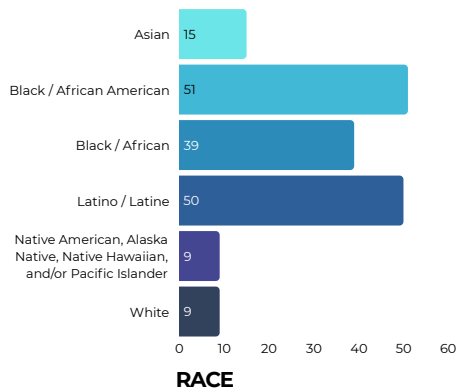
Participants completed consent forms and self-identified their demographic information to allow disaggregation of insights across various identities while maintaining participant anonymity.

Great MN Schools deployed a reflexive thematic analysis to the notes taken during focus groups, **identifying common themes for each question. The report highlights the most significant themes.**

# PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

This study examines qualitative data from 135 focus group participants who self-identified their race, income level, home language, zip code, and children's ages.

## PARTICIPANTS IDENTIFIED THEIR DEMOGRAPHICS AS FOLLOWS:



Focus group participants over-index on low-income and BIPOC by design as chronic absenteeism is most acute for these groups.

## SECTION A

### UNDERSTANDING ABSENTEEISM

Parents and guardians are **severely underestimating how often their children miss school**. When asked how often their students missed school in the most recent academic year, 19% of parents and guardians said their students missed one month or more of school (i.e., their student was chronically absent).

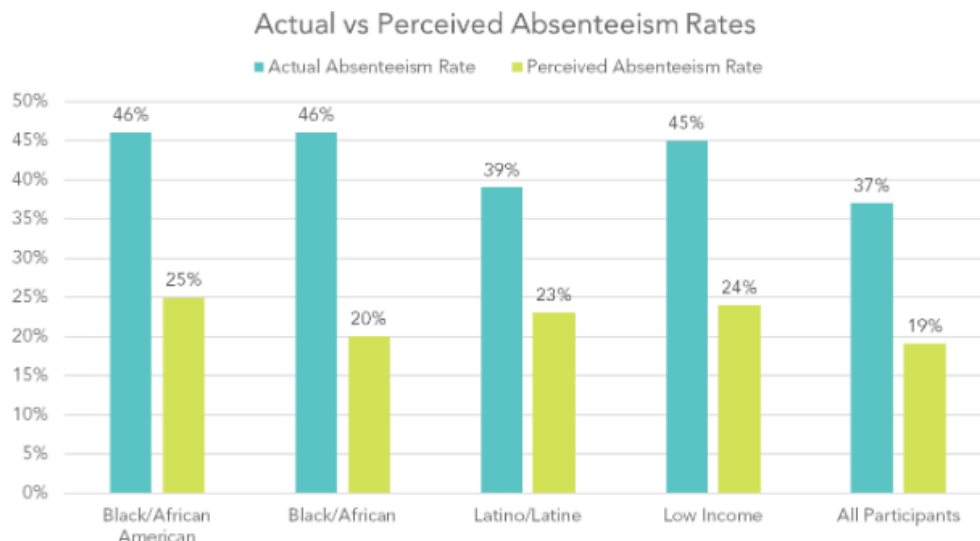
# 19%

Percent of parents who believe their students miss 1 month of school or more

# 37%

True rate of chronic absenteeism in Minneapolis

Similarly, data from the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey revealed that 24% of students in Minnesota believed they were chronically absent. **However, the true rate of chronic absenteeism in Minneapolis was 37% and 30% for the state.**

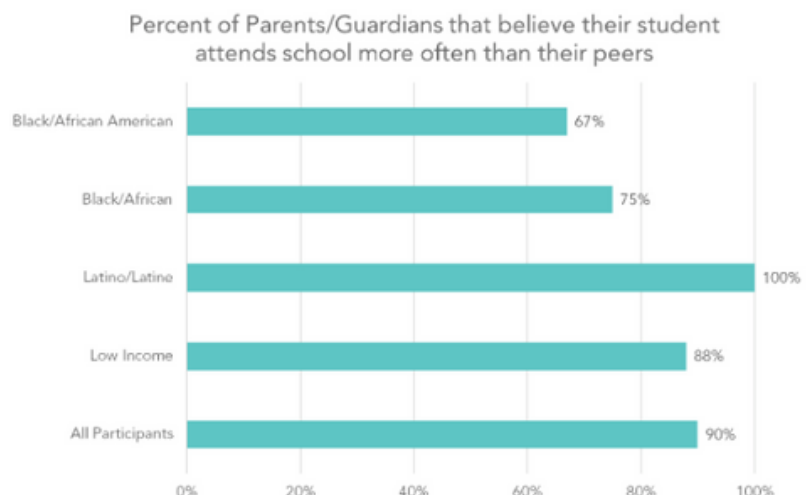


# 90%

of participants said they think their student attends school more than their peers.

Three main themes arose when participants were asked the **main reasons their students missed school**:

1. Illness
2. Travel Challenges
3. Sense of Belonging





## SECTION B

### ILLNESS & SICK POLICY

Thirty-three percent of participants said they did not understand their school's sick policy, when asked about the latter. More specifically, parents and guardians feel confused about how to determine if an illness is severe enough to warrant an absence.



Some caregivers opt to keep their student at home regardless of illness severity because they feel that that choice is more likely to follow school protocol than sending their child to school. One parent said she kept her student home for two weeks after testing positive for COVID-19. Some participants revealed that their schools had never shared a sick policy with them.

***“I don’t think the school understands their own policies. Sometimes the nurse will ask the teacher if a student should go home, and the teacher will have different priorities than the rules as parents understand it”***



## SECTION C

### TRAVEL CHALLENGES

Multiple participants identified challenges related to travel logistics that include a **lack of backup transportation, concerns around safety, and weather hazards**. Schools that go above and beyond to provide transportation earned praise from focus group participants (e.g., schools that offer doorstep bus stops or pay for rideshares).

Many parents and guardians shared that they are often working in the mornings and cannot provide transportation if their child misses the bus or if the bus does not arrive. The latter was especially true for single parents. Other participants said they did not have access to a car, so even if they wanted to drive their student to school, they could not.

Participants also raised **concerns about physical safety and transportation**. Unsafe neighborhoods and public transportation leave parents and guardians feeling wary about their children’s safety.

**Weather was another common factor in this category.** Parents and guardians feel uneasy driving their children to school when it snows or there is other inclement weather.



***“Even though I don’t live that far, the weather makes it challenging.”***

## SECTION D

### SENSE OF BELONGING

Focus group data shows students' sense of belonging is a common cause of absenteeism. Included in the "sense of belonging" category are:

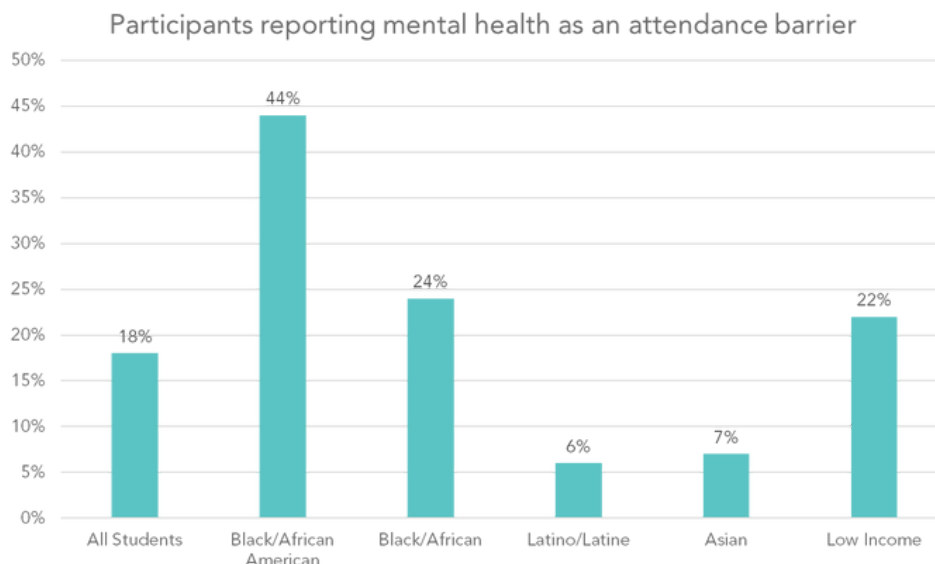
- Mental health
- Teachers and staff who struggle with cultural affirmation
- Lack of support for parents and guardians

These themes reflect a K12 education system that has lagged on creating a sense of belonging and psychological safety for low-income and BIPOC students and families. Sections D.1 through D.3 detail how these themes arose in focus groups.

## SECTION D.1

### MENTAL HEALTH

**Eighteen percent of participants indicated that mental health is a barrier to attending school.** Most significantly, it is a pressing issue for Black/African American participants, who were three times more likely than other participants to report mental health as an attendance barrier.



The focus group discussions on declining mental health among students align with data collected from the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS). [Analysis of the MSS](#), which is conducted every three years and most recently in 2022, found **increased reports of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts**. Students experiencing poverty were 32% less likely to have a two-week span without depression symptoms.

”

*“To talk about mental health, we need to have conversations, say that they are “just like us”, need to make it okay to talk about mental health so we can include it in attendance, mental health is not something we talk about”*



Physical safety plays a role in attendance. Whether due to an **unsafe neighborhood, fear of bullying, or concerns of school shootings, parents and guardians feel their students are not in safe environments.** Many participants said they have experienced heightened awareness of safety since the pandemic, which aligns with the most recent MSS data that revealed **fewer students feel safe at school, and more students are being bullied.**

## SECTION D.2 CULTURALLY INSENSITIVE TEACHERS & STAFF

A common thread is the **lack of cultural affirmation students and families feel from schools.** Said in multiple ways by multiple participants, students do not feel seen or heard.

Parents and guardians told stories of teachers and staff who viewed their children – often black and brown students – as hostile. **They feel teachers do not understand their community and escalate or dismiss students’ concerns instead of resolving them.**



”

*“Lot of teachers don’t understand this community, teachers are automatically sending them home... I don’t want to build a relationship with a teacher that doesn’t value my voice and doesn’t understand me... I have to explain to my 17 year old son, a big black kid, how to cater his language to ask his white teacher. You come off combative.”*

## SECTION D.3

### SUPPORT FOR PARENTS & GUARDIANS

Parents and guardians told us they do not have the support they need to help their children thrive in school. Participants told us they are **overwhelmed, have limited capacity, and do not know where to go for help.**

While parents and guardians are their child's first teacher, many people new to the United States and the U.S. education system **feel like they do not have the skills or knowledge to support their children in school.**

*"How can I help if I don't understand it myself?"*

”

Embedded into this theme is the mental distress some parents and guardians face themselves.

## SECTION E

### WHAT FAMILIES WANT TO SEE

Participants praised many of the available community supports; multiple people said organizations such as the YMCA of the North, Boys & Girls Club, and Big Brother/Big Sister created welcoming places for students.

**Parents and guardians are seeking stronger communication from schools. More specifically, they want communication of sick policies,** as detailed in [Section B](#), and information on how to access resources. Non-English-speaking participants cited the need for better resource-sharing and communication from schools.

Finally, participants requested an **increase in individualized outreach to students and families in need.** Multiple participants shared success stories of their schools reaching out to their students individually to ask why they were attending school. The mere effort of asking showed students and families that the teachers, staff, and administrators care about them.



”

*"It would be nice for teacher to approach student and tell them they are watching out for them"*





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## REVIEWING CURRENT RECOMMENDATIONS

The SATLSG presented their recommendations in December 2024. They were as follows:

1. Explore Consistent Definitions around Attendance
2. Explore Coordination Among State and Local Agencies
3. Explore Community Engagement - Cultural/Lived Experience School Credit
4. MDE Recommendation – Explore Increased Data on Attendance
5. Explore Increased Data Sharing Between School Districts and County Governments
6. Explore School Staff Dedicated to Truancy Reduction
7. Explore Transportation of Students to and from School
8. Explore Community Support (i.e. hiring outside services for schools)

These recommendations offer a strong foundation to combat absenteeism at the legislative level. **Incorporating family perspectives into future policy discussions can further enhance their impact.**

Based on our focus group findings **the recommendation with the highest potential to reduce attendance barriers is “Explore School Staff Dedicated to Truancy Reduction”**. A dedicated staff person could help improve communication of sick policies, listen to families and elevate their barriers to attendance, and reach out to students individually to address their needs.

Another recommendation with strong potential based on parent and guardian feedback is **“Explore Transportation of Students to and from School.”** However, the resources needed to implement such changes at a systemic- or district-level would be substantial and likely be cost prohibitive.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

While the SATLSG recommendations are a good starting point to solve the absenteeism crisis, there are two critical points missing:

1. **Families' misconceptions** about their students' attendance rates and the impact on learning, and
2. **The deterioration of mental health post-pandemic** – particularly in Black/African American communities – and the effect that has on students' and families' sense of belonging in schools.

One way to clarify families' misconceptions on attendance is to **create and distribute broadly a family-facing resource in multiple languages that details chronic absenteeism in Minneapolis and Minnesota**. Attendance Works has a [general family resource](#) that can serve as the foundation for such a tool. An outreach plan could also include a city- or state-wide attendance awareness campaign that engages local media, community groups, and visual storytelling to spread information on the absenteeism crisis.

Sharing a school-facing resource that details this report's findings can **help raise awareness about students' and families' diminished sense of belonging in schools**.

Other actionable recommendations are:

- Offer cultural competency training
- Invest in school climate
- Improve communication with families
- Share condensed version of [FutureEd's Attendance Playbook](#) for Minneapolis school leaders

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & RESEARCH

- [Attendance Playbook](#) (FutureEd)
- [Attendance Works](#)
- [Reducing Student Absenteeism](#) (EdResearch for Action)



# CONCLUSION

Chronic absenteeism is one of the most pressing post-COVID-19 pandemic challenges facing schools, families, and policymakers. While attendance rates are recovering, they have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, particularly for students from low-income and BIPOC communities. **This report amplifies family voices in the absenteeism conversation to ensure their perspectives are included in efforts to understand and resolve this issue.**

Findings from focus groups with 135 parents and guardians revealed that absenteeism is not simply a matter of student or family disengagement. Instead, it is a complex issue shaped by multiple factors. **Participants identified key attendance barriers, including unclear sick policies; transportation challenges; and a lack of belonging in schools due to mental health struggles, school climate concerns, and cultural disconnection.** Additionally, many parents and guardians underestimated how often their children missed school, highlighting the **need for improved communication between families and schools.**

School and legislative efforts to reduce absenteeism have focused on structural solutions, such as data tracking, truancy policies, and school-based interventions. While these efforts are crucial, **this report underscores the importance of highlighting family engagement in absenteeism solutions. Families are more than stakeholders—they are critical partners in ensuring students attend school consistently.**

Moving forward, schools, policymakers, and community organizations can build on the insights shared in this report. **Strengthening school-family communication, increasing culturally responsive practices, and addressing systemic barriers such as transportation and mental health support will be essential in reducing chronic absenteeism.** By fostering a collaborative, solutions-oriented approach, schools, legislators, community and advocacy leaders, and families can create learning environments where all students feel safe, supported, and encouraged to attend school every day.

A photograph of several students in a classroom setting. In the foreground, a student in a blue and white striped shirt is looking down at an open book. To their right, another student in a grey hoodie is also looking at a book. In the background, other students are visible, some holding papers or books. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a typical classroom environment.

# GLOSSARY

**Chronic absenteeism:** The percentage of students who miss 10% or more of school, regardless whether or not they were excused. Chronic absenteeism and consistent attendance are inversely related and used interchangeably throughout this report.

**Consistent attendance:** The percentage of students who miss fewer than 10% days of school, regardless of whether or not they were excused. Chronic absenteeism and consistent attendance are inversely related and used interchangeably throughout this report.

**Minnesota Student Survey (MSS):** A statewide survey jointly conducted by four Minnesota state government agencies. The survey is conducted once every three years and is offered to all Minnesota district and charter schools. It is most often administered in grades 5, 8, 9, and 11. In 2022, 51% of eligible students in Minnesota participated in the survey.

**Student Attendance and Truancy Legislative Study Group (SATLSG):** A legislative working group that was established to study and evaluate ways to increase student attendance and reduce truancy. The group's goal was to identify and include in its report any statutory changes needed to implement the group's recommendations.





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## ABOUT GREAT MN SCHOOLS

Great MN Schools is a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring every child in Minneapolis, regardless of race & income, attends a great school. We work alongside schools, families, and communities to create a critical mass of great schools, families that demand them, and systems that support them.

Great MN staff designed, facilitated, and analyzed the data for the report. Specifically, these four individuals led the efforts on this study:

- Javaris Bradford, Senior Manager of Community Engagement
- Hamdi Husein, Manager of Literacy
- Aleia Johnson, Outreach Coordinator
- La Lee Lo, Senior Manager of Data and Community Tools

Three of the four leads identify as people of color, two identify as women, two identify as coming from immigrant backgrounds, and two identify as non-English speakers.

## ABOUT OUR PARTNERS

This report would not have been possible without the generous time, effort, and stories shared by focus group participants. Great MN Schools partners with eight family-facing community organizations to gather a breadth of voices. We would like to thank the following organizations for their collaboration:





[greatmnschools.org](https://greatmnschools.org)

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