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Chronic Absenteeism:

How Philanthropy can Support "Everything, Everywhere, All at Once" Solutions

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> Funders at the forefront of advancing systems change are shifting from being at the center of social change efforts to being a facilitator, connector, and learner in a larger ecosystem of actors who are working to create lasting, systems-level change.
>
> *Embracing an Ecosystem Approach for Philanthropy*

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as a critical challenge for preK-12 systems, significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.* Affecting approximately one-third of all K12 students, this challenge is particularly pronounced among marginalized communities, leading to profound academic and long-term socioeconomic consequences.[1] Consistent school attendance is the foundation for student success. Even missing a few days every month can impact learning and subsequent outcomes for students. Chronic absenteeism starting in pre-K and kindergarten is associated with lower proficiency levels in reading and math and social and emotional development.[2]

When students are chronically absent from school, they not only miss crucial academic time, but their social and emotional wellbeing also suffers. Chronic absenteeism can isolate students and increase feel-ings of disconnection from their peers and teachers.[3] If students are missing school frequently due to under-lying personal or family challenges, then feelings of anxiety or distress can exacerbate this isolation. When students' academic, social and emotional efficacy decline, students feel less of a sense of belonging and less compelled to return to school. The social and emotional disruptions caused by chronic absenteeism impact both students who are chronically absent and the students who do come to school.

Chronic absenteeism affects students of all back-grounds but, as is the case across the education field, this issue impacts marginalized students the most. Schools serving greater proportions of non-white students and students experiencing poverty are more likely to have high levels of chronic absenteeism.[3] Not only are students of color and students from low-in-

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The lasting effects of the pandemic on chronic absenteeism

Students who have never been chronically absent are **7 times more likely to read on grade level by the end of the third grade and 9 times more likely to graduate from high school on time.**[4]

* Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days–regardless of if the absence is excused (e.g., for illness) or unexcused. This definition is standard across 45 states, with the other five states setting a specific number of days missed or leaving it up to school districts to define. (Blad 2023); https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html

come backgrounds more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, but they are also more likely to face punitive measures as a result. Black and Latine students, as well as students with disabilities, are more likely than their white and other non-white peers to be sent to truancy court as a result of chronic absenteeism.[5] High levels of chronic absenteeism are widening opportunity gaps and deepening educational inequities across the country.

The challenge of chronic absenteeism is incredibly complex. School, district, state and other system leaders are taking steps to design more equitable solutions by naming and exploring the root causes of chronic absenteeism, engaging with those most proximate to the problem (including students, families and educators), and tailoring solutions to community, school and family contexts. Still, this is not enough to solve the diverse and formidable issues keeping students from regularly attending school.

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires attention to "everything, everywhere, all at once" to understand and address the ecosystem of root causes. Amidst barriers like housing and food insecurity, generational poverty, lack of transportation, unengaging and irrelevant instructional practice and materials, not feeling a sense of belonging and simply no longer believing in the value of schools, there is also the reality that our current school systems are overwhelmed. Academic recovery from the pandemic, significant teacher shortages and burnout (including the challenge of chronic absenteeism for adults), and dealing with the often self-inflicted wounds of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding cliff create what sometimes seem like insurmountable barriers to mak-

ing lasting change. Though we need and want students in school now, the many changes necessary to keep them in school and bring students back will take time.

How do we encourage students to attend school regularly while we try to work on everything, everywhere, all at once? Philanthropy can play a powerful role in helping to catalyze schools and systems to find, develop and implement innovative solutions to this significant challenge.

Tackling chronic absenteeism requires funders to partner differently with communities

When we saw that this year's chronic absenteeism rates were shockingly similar to last year, with schools fully reopened, it flagged that this is a clear system problem, and we need to do something about it before it becomes the new norm. We believe there is a clear need for a national reset on the importance of school attendance, and it is critical to consider this from a multi-faceted approach, not just one solution.[6]

Meghan McCormick, Research & Impact Officer, Overdeck Family Foundation

The root causes of chronic absenteeism vary and can be highly localized, contextual and cross-cutting. Across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified particular challenges to school attendance, including family unemployment, the growing digital divide, and food and housing insecurity. Perhaps even more

fundamentally, the sudden transition to remote learning during the pandemic surfaced and increased the need for schools to create a sense of belonging for students, a space for building strong relationships with teachers and a space for engaging in collaborative learning with peers.[7] Students require and deserve learning to be relevant and interesting to them, and they need schools and educators to support them in achieving their goals.

Schools and systems struggle with this due to competing priorities and constraints during and emerging from the pandemic. These challenges, in combination with a "shifting norm" around the importance of sending students to school regularly–a generally unquestioned critical practice before the pandemic but one that seems to be dropping off now–make up many of the root causes of chronic absenteeism.[8]

Root causes of chronic absenteeism[9]

Barriers

- Chronic and acute illness
- Family responsibilities or home situation
- Trauma
- Poor transportation
- Housing and food insecurity
- Inequitable access to needed services
- System involvement
- Lack of predictable schedules for learning
- Lack of access to tech
- Community violence

Disengagement

- Lack of challenging, culturally responsive instruction
- Bored
- No meaningful relationships to adults in the school (especially given staff shortages)
- Lack of enrichment opportunities
- Lack of academic and behavioral support
- Failure to earn credits
- Need to work conflicts with being in high school

Aversion

- Struggling academically and/or behaviorally
- Unwelcoming school climate
- Social and peer challenges
- Anxiety
- Biased disciplinary and suspension practices
- Undiagnosed disability and/or disability accomodations
- Caregivers had negative educational experiences

Misconceptions

- Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused
- Missing 2 days per month doesn't affect learning
- Lose track and underestimate TOTAL absences
- Assume students must stay home for any symptom of illness
- Attendance only matters in the older grades
- Suspensions don't count as absence

Because of its highly contextualized and localized nature, the solutions to chronic absenteeism must engage students and families directly **and** they must also address ways the school, district, and wider public understand and impact school-going behavior. To achieve far-reaching, systemic and sustained change— and address diverse root causes requiring everything, everywhere, all at once—school districts, with support from states, community partners and funders, must take an "ecosystem approach" to tackle both local and systemic aspects of the problem.

What do we mean by an ecosystem approach? Achieving far-reaching and systemic change requires attention to all of the factors that converge to create situations preventing children from attending school. Schools must attend to issues of **readiness to learn** (adequate nutrition, health care, personal safety and family support for learning as well as adequate and safe transportation to and from school), the **relevance of learning** to students' lives (instruction and learning materials that take into account students' lived experiences, culture and aspirations for the future) and **school climate** (safe and encouraging conditions for learning).[10] For philanthropy specifically, FSG describes a shift to an ecosystem approach with funders serving as "facilitators, connectors, and learners in a larger ecosystem of actors who are working to create lasting, systems-level change."[11] This includes approaches such as considering multiple perspectives from across the ecosystem and supporting multiple organizations to come together and develop collaborative solutions. Addressing these factors or approaching the work piecemeal, in siloed or isolated ways, will not lead to sustained systemic change that will truly turn the tide of absenteeism.

Districts that have adopted comprehensive approaches emphasizing partnerships with students, families and communities—through ongoing outreach and individualized support for students who are chronically absent or are at risk for chronic absence—have started to see notable reductions in their chronic absenteeism rates. These approaches innovate and build upon supports that provide transportation and meals, attend to learning conditions and school climate and provide appropriate training and support for school staff.[12] (See Appendix for examples of initiatives focused on school-based supports to address chronic absenteeism.)

State education agencies (SEAs) can provide data, resources, and guidance for improving attendance and technical assistance for more comprehensive initiatives, such as community schools. States can also identify districts that have more success in raising their attendance and provide peer learning opportunities for these districts to share their strategies. Ohio's Stay in the Game! Attendance Network led by the Cleveland Browns Foundation, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, Harvard's Proving Ground and Battelle is an example of an ecosystem approach that includes efforts to campaign, connect and convene experts and supporters to improve attendance. A coherent and fully aligned network supports contextualized district campaigns, builds cross-sector partnerships, accelerates district capacity through peer-to-peer learning, and underscores best practices and policies.

Philanthropy—including national, state and local funders—can play various roles in responding to the chronic absenteeism crisis and supporting an ecosystem, including investments in research, policy, advocacy, professional development, direct services and strategic communications. Funders can also use their roles as convenors and influencers to heighten awareness, build momentum and reflect on what funders and grantees are learning through this work to build understanding and expertise.

Do Now, Build Toward:[13] A framework for thinking about how philanthropy can support efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism

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Working on chronic absenteeism gave us an opportunity to do what we do best - unify, convene, collaborate and help celebrate students and families for the efforts they are making… We have to move away from dealing with chronic absenteeism to focusing on work that can become preventative and early interventions. Also, this is a team sport, there is a role for everyone and everyone has to take ownership. It has to be a community effort.[14]

Renee Harvey, Vice President & Executive Director, Cleveland Browns Foundation

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Addressing chronic absenteeism requires "everything everywhere all at once." We need and want students in school now, but it will take time to accomplish the many changes that will keep students in school and bring students back. Education Resource Strategies' "Do Now, Build Toward" framework, developed to guide systems leaders through adapting teaching and learning during COVID-19, offers a frame for thinking about philanthropy's role in tackling chronic absenteeism. At its heart, the "Do Now, Build Toward" strategy consists of choosing a set of "doable starting points" for immediate implementation but designing these starting points with "a longer-term vision in mind—a

defined vision [that flows] through to clear strategies that are based on research and lessons learned from past experiences."[15]

Recognizing that addressing chronic absenteeism will require "everything everywhere all at once," how might philanthropic partners engage differently? How can we set the table for the urgency of now to build towards new ways of working in our systems? Though there are myriad ways to apply this framework can apply, below we identify three critical opportunities for funders to "Do Now, Build Toward":

1		Foster near-term and longer-term solutions that address student engagement and sense of belonging in school
2		Invest in programs, tools and resources to support asset-based family engagement in schools
3		Support local education agencies (LEAs) and state education agencies (SEAs) to integrate leading indicators of chronic absenteeism into their data systems

Opportunity 1

Foster near-term and longer-term solutions that address student engagement and sense of belonging in school

Do Now: Listen to students to identify the mundane or irrelevant core classes

Build Toward: Culturally responsive high-quality instructional materials with engaging educators.

Research shows that students become increasingly disengaged and bored as they advance through school, in part because they don't see a relationship between the curriculum and their lived experience and because they don't feel a sense of ownership over their own learning.[16] To address this, schools and districts are working towards keeping students engaged by introducing culturally relevant curricula that reflect the experiences of diverse students; and career and technical education-focused curricula that are more directly related to work and life beyond school. Pedagogy and school structures that center student voices contribute to increased engagement.[17]

Many funders recognize the need to re-engage students in school and have started shifting their strategies to focus on the development and adoption of high-quality, culturally responsive instructional materials, the creation of equitable learning environments, efforts to increase postsecondary attainment and the creation of educator apprenticeships and professional development programs to improve teaching and learning, among many other initiatives. These are longer-term strategies. As important as high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) are, many school districts are in the early adoption phase, and effective, full implementation of these materials will take time. Funders can support school districts with the goal of full HQIM implementation in the long term, but in the short term, building towards this can look like supporting districts to use attendance data to identify the subgroups or grade bands with attendance and engagement challenges. Then funders might support districts to build structures to enable listening to students to better understand the barriers they are experiencing, particularly related to engagement with instructional materials, sense of belonging and learning conditions. Funders can facilitate opportunities for schools and districts to work with school communities to find ways to make schooling more relevant and engaging for students.

In the appendix, we highlight examples of funder-supported, school-based initiatives focusing on some of these strategies, particularly student supports (including home visits), school culture and climate, professional development and school-family partnerships. These efforts help provide schools with information from students about the challenges they face and how schools can make schooling more relevant and engaging.

Opportunity 2

Invest in programs, tools and resources to support asset-based family engagement in schools

Do Now: Messaging campaigns and direct texting to families to keep students in school and bring absent students back to school

Build Toward: Partner with families and community engagement groups to change mindsets about the value of school

Given the highly contextual and local root causes of chronic absenteeism, some of which go beyond the school, engaging families and the wider community in efforts to eliminate the barriers to attendance is critical for success in any effort. Establishing and maintaining sustainable partnerships with families and community engagement groups that can help inform and re-educate families about the implications and impacts of chronic absenteeism is an important goal to build towards. Philanthropy can support a wide range of community and family engagement efforts that bring together the assets of schools and communities, such as support for advocacy campaigns to change policies and practices that exacerbate chronic absenteeism,[18] engaging community-based organizations to support the message that regular school attendance is important and removing barriers to attending, for example, libraries cross-messaging and sharing talking points, healthcare organizations offering weekend or evening hours so students don't need to miss school to make appointments, among others.

Centering those proximate to the problem of chronic absenteeism—students and families—has led to better and more sustainable solutions, but relationships take considerable time and attention to build. In the short term, many schools and districts have implemented more immediate messaging campaigns and direct texting to families to share positive messages about students, encourage students to attend school and keep families aware of their student's attendance. This kind of personalized attention to specific students and their families addresses the immediate need to keep students coming to school while also laying the foundation for strong and supportive school-family partnerships. Funders can support these short-term efforts with funding to train school staff or hire school- or district-based family engagement specialists or attendance specialists to conduct effective and culturally responsive family outreach and/or by providing technological solutions that allow quick and easy messaging (in various languages) to students and families. These efforts will build toward supporting deeper capacity-building for reciprocal family/school/community relationships to regain trust that is necessary for longer-term change.

In the appendix, we highlight examples of funder-supported initiatives that support schools and districts in facilitating school-family partnerships, including resources for home visits, a process for co-designing local strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism in specific neighborhoods and a collective action network that engages statewide community partners to generate powerful messaging around attendance and support local school, district and community efforts to address barriers to attendance.

Opportunity 3

Support LEAs and SEAs to integrate leading indicators of chronic absenteeism into their data systems

Do Now: Take action after two absences

Build Toward: Update your early warning systems to include chronic absenteeism

Over the last decade, federal and state mandates have led to better record-keeping on attendance by states and districts, driving urgency to address this issue as the reality of the increasing numbers of chronically absent students has set in. While data collection has improved, there are still gaps in state, district and school early warning data and in the capacity of states, districts and schools to use the data collected to implement effective solutions.[19]

Many districts already have early warning data systems that commonly consist of data on course grades, attendance, behavior, etc., which districts use to identify individual students who may be at risk for chronic absenteeism. Most of these systems, however, do not include student-level data related to the root causes of chronic absenteeism (e.g., students' sense of belonging, relevance of school to their lived experience, etc.). While many schools and districts are starting to collect these types of data, these efforts are often at an early stage and reflect "grow your own" processes and practices that aren't necessarily tied to evidence-based practice. More field-building and building to scale around this could have a powerful impact on the problem.

As a "build toward" investment, funders—with the advantage of a wider perspective and access to specific research and data expertise—are uniquely positioned to catalyze or build capacity to improve data systems, research and tools to better understand and address chronic absenteeism, especially as a proactive measure to support students before they become chronically absent, and to support innovative thinking with resources to experiment with new or refined solutions. In the short term "do now," funders can support dissemination of local examples of systems that provide more proactive identification of students before they become chronically absent (i.e., after two absences), or connect districts/states in learning communities to share, adapt and test different approaches to collect data and use it for decision making. Taking preventative action may go a long way towards addressing chronic absence.

In the appendix, we highlight an innovative K12-higher education research partnership grant designed to deepen understanding of the barriers to and facilitators of attendance and perceptions about the district's current interventions. The partnership worked to revise attendance policies and provide resources to district staff to develop stronger interventions.

> What we need to collectively change is the overarching mindset. [We need to] dismantle the truancy mindset and cultivate the belonging mindset. [We need to] change school mindsets about the value of families. [This is a] call to action for family engagement and belonging. We need to get curious and build capacity to collect and use attendance data, disaggregated by grade, race and listen to families. And we need to prepare and support teachers to engage with families, especially across difference.[20]
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> *Malia Ramler, Program Officer, Heising-Simons Foundation*

Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is a critical challenge for our K12 education system, and a complex problem to solve as its root causes arise from across many systems. However, based on research and the examples we highlight in this paper, we know that this "everything, everywhere, all at once" challenge can be met. Philanthropy can be part of the solution by connecting and supporting an ecosystem of students, educators, families, community organizations, policymakers and grantmakers, all focused on ensuring that barriers to attendance are lifted and students have what they need—in and out of school—to thrive. We can solve the problem of chronic absenteeism if we start now and build toward a lasting and sustainable vision.

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Appendix

Examples of Funder-Supported Initiatives Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Concentric Educational Solutions
Focus: School-Based Change

EveryDay Labs is a national organization that works with more than 2000 schools nationwide to prevent student absences. The organization focuses on pre-K-12 students and fosters a supportive partnership between school districts and families to prevent absences. It keeps families informed of their student›s attendance and removes barriers by making information, resources and learning opportunities more available.

The program analyzes attendance trends at the district, school, and student levels and supports intervention management and tracking at the student and school levels. It also provides technology that enables busy educators to send personalized, supportive, and motivating truancy notices to students easily and quickly. Educators can access many professional learning opportunities to support district goals for attendance, learning recovery, and family engagement. The program provides experts to help school teams work more effectively, better understand data, and leverage evidence-based improvement strategies at each tier of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

EveryDay Labs meets the "strong evidence base" criteria for ESSR funding, suggesting a strong and proven success rate for alleviating chronic absenteeism.

Concentric Educational Solutions (CES) partners with schools and school districts to assess the situation and determine a course of action for implementing sustainable change. Addressing four components (Organizational and Leadership Development, School Culture and Climate, Student Support Services, and Special Education Support) with a focus on student achievement, CES applies a structured process for tracking and evaluating improvements quickly while leveraging the existing supports within an organization at every level.

CES also provides at home social and emotional learning support for families to better support students' social emotional development.

In a commitment to ongoing research and efficacy, CES partnered with the Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) at Johns Hopkins University to conduct comprehensive ESSA Level III studies within the Baltimore City Public Schools system to meet federal requirements. The research concluded that CES demonstrates "Promising" evidence for improving student outcomes.

In 2023, CES received $5 million in Series A funding from New Markets Venture Partners to hire and accelerate growth and build out its suite of services to support students in their homes and in schools.

EveryDay Labs
Focus: School-Based Data Collection and Interventions

EveryDay Labs is a national organization that works with more than 2000 schools nationwide to prevent student absences. The organization focuses on pre-K-12 students and fosters a supportive partnership between school districts and families to prevent absences. It keeps families informed of their student›s attendance and removes barriers by making information, resources and learning opportunities more available.

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EveryDay Labs is funded through charitable grants from organizations such as the United Way and other education foundations. Districts also fund their partnership with EveryDay Labs through federal, state and local funding (e.g., ESSR, Title I, Title IV, CARES, ARP). EveryDay Labs meets the "strong evidence base" criteria for ESSR funding, suggesting a strong and proven success rate for alleviating chronic absenteeism.

Parent Teacher Home Visit Program (Detroit)
Focus: Teacher/Family Relationships

The Harvard Family Research Project has identified the Parent Teacher Home Visit Program (PTHVP) as a best practice and as a national model for successful parent engagement. The PTHVP model is adaptable to a wide range of settings. The approach consists of two educators performing two home visits with each family per school year (one done in the first semester in the fall and one in the second semester in the spring). Teachers receive a $30 incentive per visit (visits must be conducted for at least 20 minutes).

The PTHVP model has been proven to end the cycle of blame between families and school staff by building trust and respect, instilling cultural competency and increasing personal and professional capacity for all involved. The model relies on the theory that parents and teachers maintain equally important roles as co-educators, and that parents are the experts on their child as an individual and that teachers are the experts on the curriculum that students must master for academic success.

PTHVP was first implemented in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) in the 2013-2014 academic year in two schools. The following year it was in four schools and the 2017-2018 academic year, 29 schools. 3,758 students participated in the program across 45 schools in the 2019-2019 school year. Participating schools showed a greater average decline in student enrollment than non-participating schools in the DPSCD from 2017 to 2019. As of 2018-2019, 93 percent of parent participants indicated their relationship is stronger with their child's teacher because of the PTHVP and 90 percent of teacher participants indicated their relationship is stronger with their students' families because of the PTHVP.

The national PTHVP program is funded by AFT, NEA, Silver Giving, Stuart Foundation, Kaiser Permanente and CTA Institute for Teaching.

All Kids Thrive
Focus: School-Community Partnerships

LLaunched in 2018, the Princeton Area Community Foundation awarded $3 million in grants to 10 nonprofit and school partnerships that work to reduce chronic absenteeism in the Princeton, New Jersey region. Each partnership was awarded a $300,000 All Kids Thrive grant that was paid out over five years. These grants were designed to reduce administrative burdens on schools and nonprofits, allowing them to focus on impact.

The ten partnerships awarded these grants were among 18 teams that received $12,500 planning grants in 2018. As part of that planning process, the teams were required to conduct focus groups with students, parents and educators to learn more about the causes of absenteeism in our region. Based in part on those survey responses, the teams developed individualized strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism in schools, including plans to: create a laundry facility at a Trenton elementary school; provide volunteer translators for parents; determine which students are most at risk, including kids with chronic illness, and develop personalized plans to help them; match students with mentors; and feed students breakfast before the school day begins. Key to this plan is community involvement. The partnerships awarded All Kids Thrive grants have designed plans that require parents, educators, students and nonprofit leaders to work together to help keep kids in school. Often that means providing services for entire families.

The George H. and Estelle M. Sands Foundation, NJM Insurance Group and Verizon financially support All Kids Thrive.

Stay in the Game! Attendance Network
Focus: Statewide Collective Action

SStay in the Game is a statewide attendance movement designed to shift the mindset and culture of attendance in Ohio and elevate attendance to a statewide and community-owned priority through positive messaging and an ongoing public campaign. The initiative supports the development of partnerships across education, community, philanthropic, sports and business sectors to support Ohio's attendance work.

The initiative›s goals include building a dynamic peer-to-peer learning community for schools and districts that supports ongoing access to information from attendance experts and practitioners. The initiative provides advocacy and support through toolkits, campaign materials, incentives and activities to augment state resources/guidance and elevate proven and promising practices and policies for boosting attendance and lowering chronic absenteeism.

Stay in the Game! Attendance Network is funded by the Cleveland Browns Foundation, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, Harvard›s Proving Ground, Battelle, Columbus Crew and FC Cincinnati.

SFUSD/UCBerkeley
Focus: K12-Higher Education Research Partnership

In June 2020, the University of California, Berkeley, and the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) received a grant to pursue a research agenda to reduce inequalities in chronic absenteeism and address academic difficulties and school dropout. The partnership analyzed administrative records and conducted in-depth interviews with youth to deepen understanding of the barriers to and facilitators of attendance and perceptions about the district's current interventions. The team used youth-led participatory action research with three peer resource sites to leverage youth perspectives about school climate and help the partners develop and implement new interventions.

SFUSD leaders committed to using the study findings to address high and disparate chronic absenteeism rates as they revise attendance policies and provide resources to district staff. The grant also allowed the team at Berkeley to advance a plan with the potential for significant institutional shifts, including confirmed support for community-engaged scholarship as part of the promotion, tenure, and merit advancement process from the Chair of the campus-wide Budget Committee and the Berkeley Academic Senate Committee; the creation of a campus-wide advisory group for research-practice partnerships; and increased valuation of research done in partnership among deans from three different schools.

This project received support from the William T. Grant Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Spencer Foundation. The grant period ends in May 2025.

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