

Ohio's Consistent Secondary-School Overperformers on Chronic Absenteeism

Commonalities among middle/high schools that consistently beat their poverty-typology peers, and candidate explanations from the research literature

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About this brief

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This is an independent analysis of publicly available Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (ODEW) data. It was not produced, reviewed, or endorsed by ODEW, and its findings should not be read as an official ODEW analysis, finding, or determination. The underlying screening workbook and full building-level detail are available on request.

Purpose

A companion statewide screening analysis identified Ohio middle and high schools whose chronic absenteeism rate consistently runs better than expected for their district poverty/urbanicity typology — a "Consistent Overperformer" in every year the building has valid data (minimum two of the three years studied, SY2021-22 through SY2023-24). This brief asks a follow-on question: do these 87 buildings have anything in common, and does the research literature offer a plausible account of why?

This is a descriptive, exploratory read of an existing dataset — not a new study, and not a causal claim. It is offered as a starting point for further inquiry, not a finished conclusion.

Why this analysis matters

Chronic absenteeism has become one of the most consequential and most persistently misunderstood problems in Ohio education. It now drives a portion of every district's report-card rating under Ohio's revised accountability rules, it is the subject of a new statewide policy mandate (House Bill 96 required every district to adopt a compliant chronic absenteeism policy by August 1, 2026), and — as this engagement's own statewide regression established — it is one of the strongest predictors of achievement, independent of poverty. The default explanation offered for a district's absenteeism rate is almost always its poverty level or urban/rural setting, and that explanation is not wrong: the underlying regression behind this brief confirms poverty, mobility, and discipline are all real, statistically significant drivers, net of typology.

But an explanation that operates only at the level of statewide averages has a real limitation for anyone trying to act on it: it tells a superintendent or school board what to expect, not what to do. A district serving a high-poverty population that is told "your typology predicts high absenteeism" has learned very little about how to respond. This building-level screen exists to answer a different, more actionable question — not "why is absenteeism higher in poor and urban districts on average," but "which specific buildings, serving comparably difficult circumstances, are nonetheless doing meaningfully better than their peers, year after year?" Those 87 buildings are, in effect, existence proofs: concrete evidence that a typology category's average outcome is not its ceiling.

That distinction matters for at least three practical audiences. For district and building leaders designing MTSS and attendance interventions, a peer-matched list of outperforming buildings is a more useful starting point for a site visit or a practice-sharing conversation than a statewide coefficient table — it names real schools whose approach might be worth studying directly, not an abstract statistical control. For policymakers and funders (including the groups engaged elsewhere in this project, such as Policy Matters Ohio's work on the Fair School Funding Plan), it is a caution against treating typology-driven funding formulas as the whole story: two variables this analysis flags as differentiators — student mobility and, within typology, a lower current economic-disadvantage rate than the 2013 label implies — are patterns a funding mechanism keyed only to a stale poverty label cannot see. And for the broader research conversation this engagement has already contributed to (see the companion manuscript below), it turns a population-level finding into a set of testable, named cases rather than leaving the practical implications implicit.

This kind of screening also isn't unprecedented — it extends a line of work arguing that a raw absenteeism rate is an incomplete way to judge a school. Liu (2022), in a Fordham Institute research report, proposed a school-level "attendance value-added" measure and found schools that "beat the odds" on attendance once individual students' prior achievement, prior absenteeism, discipline history, and neighborhood characteristics are accounted for, using data from one large California district. This brief pursues the same underlying idea — identify schools whose attendance outperforms what their circumstances predict — from a different point on the precision-versus-scale tradeoff: a simpler, typology-adjusted peer comparison applied to every secondary building in Ohio, with a multi-year consistency requirement Liu's design did not include. The two approaches are complementary rather than competing: Liu's is deeper on individual-student covariates, this one is broader in scope and closer to something a state agency or ESC could reproduce and maintain on an ongoing basis.

The buildings

87 secondary buildings (45 high schools, 42 middle schools) were notable overperformers — at least one standard deviation better than their same-grade-band typology peer group — in every year they had valid data, out of 1,342 Ohio middle/high school buildings screened. They are spread across the poverty spectrum (Small Town–Low Poverty and Rural–Average Poverty typology categories are most represented, with real numbers also present in Urban–Very High Poverty), but two clusters stand out.

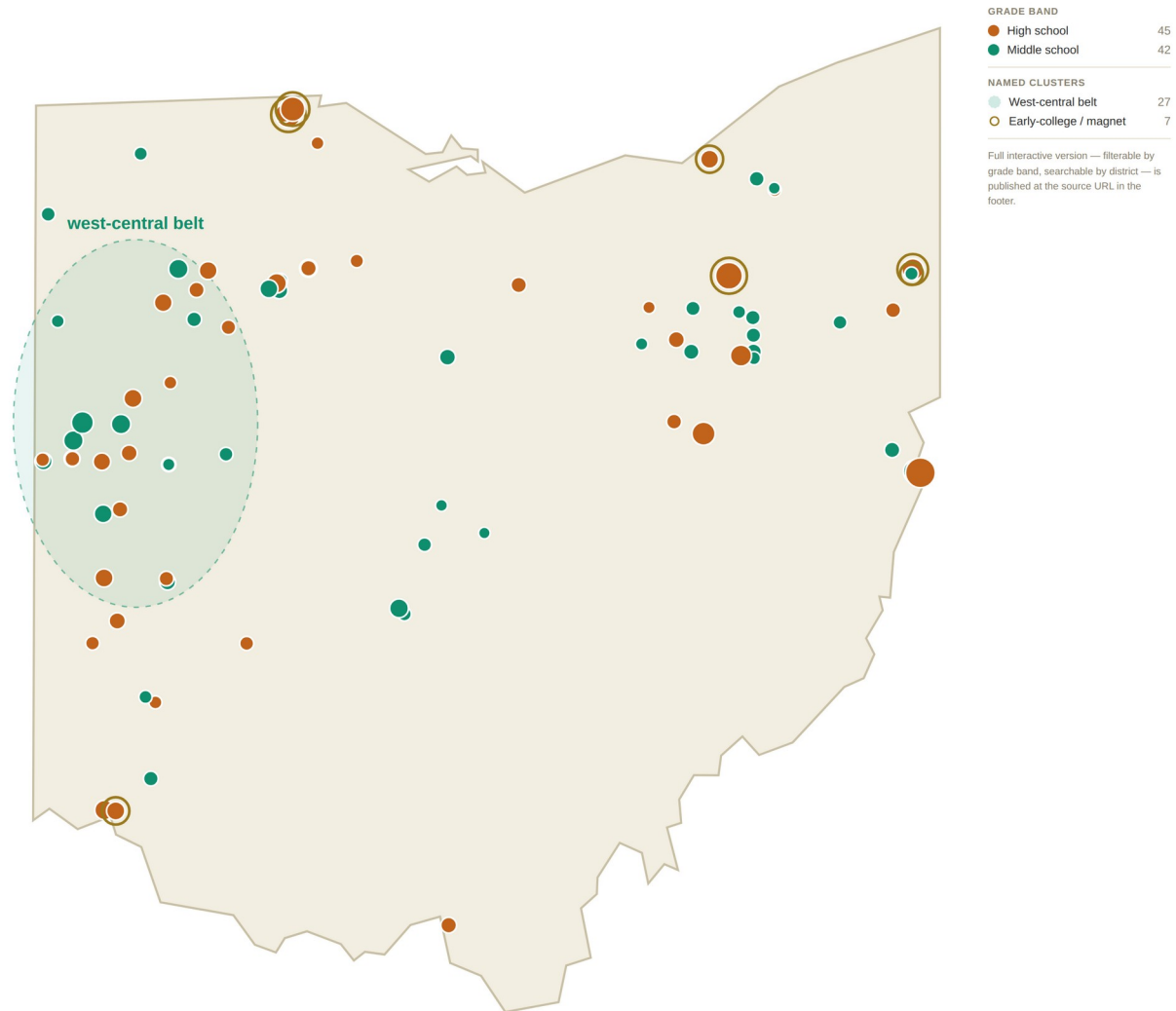
This screen covers middle and high schools only, by design, not because elementary schools were considered and found unremarkable — see Limitations for why.

A west-central Ohio cluster. Just under a third of the list (27 of 87, 31%) sits within a tight band of counties — Mercer (8), Putnam (6), Auglaize (4), Shelby (3), Darke (3), Allen (2), and Van Wert (1). These are small, often parish-anchored rural and small-town districts: Coldwater, Marion Local, St Henry, New Bremen, Fort Recovery, Versailles, Anna, Russia, Kalida, Ottawa-Glandorf, and St Marys City among them. Several districts appear twice or more, with more than one of their buildings independently qualifying.

An urban application/magnet cluster. A smaller group of 7 buildings are early-college or selective-enrollment programs operating inside otherwise high-poverty urban districts: Akron Early College High School, Toledo Early College High School, Toledo Technology Academy of Engineering, Youngstown's Rayen Early College (both its middle and high school), Cleveland Early College High, and Clark Montessori High School (Cincinnati Public Schools).

Consistent Overperformers — geographic distribution (n = 87)

Ohio middle and high schools that beat their poverty-and-urbanicity peer group's chronic absenteeism rate every year they had data, SY2021–22 through SY2023–24. Point size scales with each building's average Z-score.



Building locations from ODEW/OGRIP's Public Schools location layer, matched by IRN. Full interactive, filterable version published at the source URL in the footer below.

What actually separates them from their peers

Comparing this group's 2023-24 building characteristics against their own typology peers (not just the statewide average) points to two variables doing most of the work — and, notably, they are the same two variables the earlier statewide regression on this dataset already identified as significant predictors of chronic absenteeism.

- Mobility rate is the sharpest, cleanest differentiator — and it holds even where poverty does not. Within Urban–Very High Poverty specifically, overperformers and their typology peers have a nearly identical median economic-disadvantage rate (100.0% vs. 100.0%), but a dramatically different median mobility rate: 3.7% vs. 18.5%. Statewide across the group, overperformer median mobility is 3.8% vs. 6.7% for all secondary buildings.
- Economic disadvantage runs lower than typology peers in the non-urban categories — Rural–Average Poverty overperformers show 15.3% economic disadvantage vs. 39.9% typology-wide; Small Town–Low Poverty shows 24.0% vs. 36.0%.

- Achievement (Performance Index Percent) runs well above typology peers across the board — most sharply within Urban-Very High Poverty (83.2 vs. 46.1), consistent with the well-documented, likely bidirectional relationship between achievement and absenteeism (Gottfried, 2014, 2019).

Enrollment size is a milder, secondary pattern (median 370 students vs. 440 for all secondary buildings) but is flagged here as a weaker candidate explanation — see Limitations.

Testing the "stale typology" explanation directly

The economic-disadvantage gap above is not just consistent with a stale 2013 typology label — it can be tested directly, since current building-level economic-disadvantage data exists for every building, every year. Aggregating 2023-24 economic disadvantage up to the district level (enrollment-weighted, since the typology is a district-level label) and ranking all 607 typology-classified Ohio districts by it shows that the categories still track current poverty in the right order on average — median current-poverty percentile rises cleanly from 6.0 (Suburban-Very Low Poverty) to 92.9 (Urban-Very High Poverty) — but the within-category spread is enormous. Rural-Average Poverty districts alone span nearly the entire statewide range.

Of the 87 overperformer buildings, all matchable to a district with complete current data, 72 (83%) sit below their own typology category's current-poverty median — by a median gap of about 19 percentile points. That is a real, one-directional skew, not a marginal effect. But it is not evenly distributed: every one of the 27 west-central cluster buildings (100%) sits below its typology's current-poverty median, by a much larger median gap of about 25 points. It is essentially absent from the urban early-college cluster — only 4 of 7 sit below their typology median, by gaps close to zero either way — because Akron City, Youngstown City, and Cleveland Municipal, the host districts for those selective programs, remain just as poor today as their 2013 label implies. Poverty drift is therefore a genuine, data-confirmed part of the explanation for the rural/small-town cluster specifically, but it does nothing to explain the urban magnet cluster, where self-selection remains the better-fitting story (see below).

One caveat: the current "economically disadvantaged" measure is not the same input ODE used to build the 2013 typology, which was a Census-based composite of income, poverty rate, home values, population density, and educational attainment. This is the best available current proxy for building/district poverty, not a literal recomputation of the original typology formula — so "below the current-poverty median for its typology" is a real, meaningful finding, but not the same claim as "this district would be reclassified today."

How "overperformer" was defined: Z-scores in plain terms

Overperformance was measured with a Z-score rather than a raw percentage-point gap, because peer groups vary enormously in how much they naturally spread out, and a flat point-based threshold would ignore that. For each typology category × grade band × year, $Z = (\text{peer group mean rate} - \text{building's actual rate}) / \text{peer group standard deviation}$. A building needed $Z \geq 1.0$ in a given year — its actual rate at least one standard deviation better than its own peer group's typical spread — to count as a Notable Overperformer that year; "Consistent Overperformer" requires clearing that bar in every year the building has data (minimum two).

Stratifying by peer group and screening for statistical outliers this way is sometimes called "positive deviance" in the education and public-health literature. Seeley, Foster, Zuckerman, and Peterson (2023), for example, used a comparable poverty-stratified outlier approach statewide in Oregon to identify high-poverty schools that unexpectedly excelled on a kindergarten readiness assessment — a different outcome than chronic absenteeism, but the same underlying logic of comparing schools to poverty-adjusted expectations rather than to a single statewide bar.

This matters in practice because secondary peer groups range from a standard deviation of about 4 points (Suburban-Very Low Poverty middle schools, a tight, low-variance group) to over 21 points (Urban-Very

High Poverty high schools, a wide, volatile group). A flat “10 points better than peer average” threshold would be nearly impossible to clear in the tight group and trivial to clear in the volatile one. Standardizing by each peer group's own spread puts every building on comparable footing regardless of which typology/grade-band group it belongs to.

In percentile terms: under a normal distribution, $Z \geq 1.0$ corresponds to roughly the top 16% of a group. Checked empirically against the actual 2023-24 secondary data rather than assumed, the real cutoff runs close to that but varies by group — from about the top 10.5% (Urban-High Poverty schools) to about the top 18-19% (Urban-Very High Poverty middle schools, Small Town-Low Poverty high schools), reflecting each group's own skew. Averaged across the 16 typology/grade-band groups, roughly 14% of secondary buildings cleared the $Z \geq 1.0$ bar in 2023-24 — matching almost exactly the 182 of 1,307 (13.9%) Notable Overperformers among buildings with current-year data, a useful internal consistency check on the method.

The 87 Consistent Overperformers are, by definition, buildings that cleared that already-selective bar in every year they had data. Their average Z-scores run well beyond the qualifying threshold — the top of the list (Steubenville High School, average $Z = 3.07$) is roughly three standard deviations better than its peer group's typical spread, a level that would be exceptionally rare under a normal distribution (under 0.1% of a group) and, with real peer groups of only 100-130 secondary schools, represents genuine standout performance rather than statistical noise.

What the research literature suggests

Mobility and school connectedness. A 2019 *Frontiers in Psychology* study of Los Angeles County elementary students found that students who moved homes frequently showed lower school connectedness, reduced perceived academic ability, and greater involvement in school conflict — factors the broader literature already treats as predictors of chronic absenteeism. This is the best-supported explanation for the urban overperformer subset specifically, where poverty is effectively held constant and mobility is the variable that differs.

Family and community engagement. Research summarized by Education Week found that schools with strong family-school trust and parent involvement before the pandemic saw absence rates roughly 6 percentage points lower than comparable schools, and a 39% smaller increase in chronic absenteeism through the pandemic recovery period — with the effect holding consistently across poverty levels and school sizes. This plausibly fits the west-central Ohio cluster of small, tight-knit communities, though it is circumstantial: family engagement was not itself a variable in this dataset.

Self-selection in early-college and magnet programs. A lottery-based randomized study by the American Institutes for Research — comparing lottery winners to non-winners to control for selection bias — found Early College High School students had meaningfully higher postsecondary enrollment and completion rates than otherwise-comparable peers. This is attendance-adjacent, not a direct measurement of K-12 absenteeism, so it should be read as evidence these programs have a real engagement effect rather than direct proof of the absenteeism finding.

Consistency with the existing statewide model. The two variables that most clearly separate this group from their typology peers — mobility and (within-typology) economic disadvantage — are the same two the earlier statewide regression on this data already found to be significant predictors of chronic absenteeism, net of typology. For the rural/small-town cluster, this now has direct confirmation (see “Testing the ‘stale typology’ explanation directly,” above): all of that cluster's economic-disadvantage gap is real, measured drift, not an assumption. For the urban magnet cluster, the same drift is not present — that subset's overperformance is better explained by program self-selection than by a stale poverty label.

A statewide companion: the APA-formatted manuscript

This brief's two-variable finding (mobility and economic disadvantage) is not a standalone observation — it is the same relationship this engagement already established at the population level and wrote up as a full APA-formatted research manuscript, “Building-Level Correlates of Chronic Absenteeism in Ohio Public Schools: A Statewide Multivariate Panel Analysis, SY2021-22 through SY2023-24” (Fuller, 2026). That manuscript reports the underlying cluster-robust OLS regression (chronic absenteeism regressed on academic performance, mobility, economic disadvantage, disability status, English-learner status, racial/ethnic composition, discipline, district geographic typology, and year; $n = 9,578$ building-years; $R^2 = 0.764$) and situates it in the published literature on chronic absenteeism, and is the natural next document to read for anyone who wants the full statistical case behind the pattern this brief describes qualitatively. It is an independent manuscript, written to a standard suitable for peer review but not yet submitted for or subjected to it. It is publicly posted at drmikeyspsychology.com/Ohio_Chronic_Absenteeism_APA.pdf, and is cited in full below.

Limitations

- This is ecological (building-level) correlation, not individual-level or causal evidence. It cannot say that any specific practice caused a building's lower absenteeism.
- The geographic and program-type clusters are pattern-matching against publicly known characteristics of these communities and programs (small-town cohesion, selective enrollment), not variables directly measured in this dataset — family engagement in particular was inferred, not measured.
- The poverty/urbanicity typology used to define "peers" is from 2013. Current data confirms real poverty drift for the entire rural/small-town cluster (see above), but the current "economically disadvantaged" measure is not the same input ODE used to build the 2013 typology (a Census-based composite of income, poverty, home values, density, and educational attainment) — this is the best available current proxy, not a literal recomputation of the original formula, and it found no comparable drift for the urban magnet cluster.
- School size should not be over-credited as an explanation: the cited family-engagement research specifically found its protective effect held across all school sizes, suggesting size alone is not the operative mechanism here.
- A "Consistent Overperformer" designation requires only two years of data at minimum; a few buildings in this group have exactly two years, which is a shorter track record than the rest.
- This screen covers middle and high schools only, not elementary. Chronic absenteeism follows a well-documented U-shaped pattern by grade level — low through elementary, rising sharply from roughly sixth grade through senior year — so elementary and secondary buildings sit on fundamentally different baselines shaped by different drivers (declining parental oversight as students age, the ninth-grade transition, older students' competing demands). An earlier, ungated version of this screen that mixed all grade levels together found that grade span, not performance, was doing much of the work: elementary buildings were structurally overrepresented among "overperformers" simply because their absenteeism rates run lower to begin with, not because their results were more exceptional relative to true peers. This brief instead compares each building only to same-grade-band peers within its typology. A comparable grade-band-matched screen for elementary schools would be straightforward to produce as a companion piece but has not been — no elementary-level conclusion, positive or negative, should be inferred from its absence here.

Source and method note

Findings are drawn from a statewide panel built from ODEW's own public Building Details, Achievement, and Discipline files for secondary (middle and high) schools, SY2021-22 through SY2023-24, joined to the 2013 ODE District Typology and screened against typology × grade-band peer groups (Ohio_Building_Chronic_Absenteeism_vs_Typology_Expected.xlsx, Secondary_Building_Summary and Building_Detail sheets), cross-referenced against the underlying panel for characteristics not carried onto the summary sheet (economic disadvantage, mobility rate, performance index). The current-poverty percentile analysis was computed directly from the same panel (enrollment-weighted building-to-district aggregation, statewide percentile ranking across all 607 typology-classified districts, joined by District IRN); the Z-score/percentile check was computed directly from the 2023-24 secondary Building_Detail rows. The map above uses the same building-location data as the interactive "Consistent Overperformers" map artifact. No new data collection was performed for this brief. Literature and data citations are listed below.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

This brief was produced with the assistance of Claude (Anthropic). Claude wrote and executed the data-cleaning, merging, and statistical code underlying the screening analysis and this brief's supporting recomputations, conducted the literature search cited above, and drafted this document's text. Michael Fuller retrieved all source data directly from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's public reporting systems, selected the research question and the screening methodology, and reviewed and takes full responsibility for the accuracy of every figure, citation, and claim in this document. Every statistic in this brief was independently re-derived directly from the underlying source workbook, not assumed to carry over from an earlier draft.

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