

REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM



Critical Exposure

Washington, D.C.

90

Average number of students served

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Foundations
- ▶ National Endowment for the Arts grant
- ▶ DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities grant
- ▶ Individual donations

Promoting youth voice and connection

In a survey of school districts during the 2023-2024 school year, nearly 9 in 10 district leaders reported at least a modest level of chronic absenteeism in their schools. Chronic absenteeism — generally defined as students missing 10% or more days of school — is a pervasive issue affecting students across grade levels. From its effect on students' academic performance to disproportionately affecting systemically disadvantaged students, chronic absenteeism has raised the alarm of many and is not an issue that schools should be left alone to solve. Afterschool programs are an opportune partner to strengthen students' connection to school, improve school-day attendance levels, and keep young people on track toward a bright and promising future.

Overview

Critical Exposure is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that teaches Black and Brown youth how to effect change within their schools and communities through the power of photography. The organization offers a range of programming, including paid afterschool and summer programs, to develop the political education, organizing skills, and storytelling skills of D.C. youth. From including young people in the interview process for prospective staff to equipping students with the tools needed to lead citywide campaigns, Critical Exposure amplifies youth voice at every level of its operations.

A typical day for students

Critical Exposure is open to D.C. youth aged 14 to 20. Twice a week, students in the Youth Organizing Collective (YOC), one of Critical Exposure's several programs, come from schools in almost every D.C. ward to the Critical Exposure office, where they can eat snacks, do schoolwork, and socialize with their peers before jumping into programming. As co-creators of their space and program, youth rotate responsibilities, including tasks like setup and timekeeping. During Critical Exposure's weekly sessions, youth learn about a variety of topics, including understanding systems of oppression and deconstructing dominant narratives, while developing a number of skills pertinent to political organizing, such as policy analysis and testimony writing. Storytelling lies at the heart of each lesson as students develop both technical photography skills and how they can use photos as powerful organizing tools. Weekly sessions also give youth a space to apply the skills they've learned by identifying and narrowing their campaign work. This year, youth are organizing around issues related to youth safety in their communities.

Program characteristics

Guided by the belief that youth perspectives and participation are valuable and necessary in catalyzing change, Critical Exposure embeds youth voices at every level of its organization, from operations to programming, to ensure youth feel confident in their abilities to lead changes both within and outside of their programs.

Youth in Critical Exposure's programs are not merely participants but are co-creators of the program experience, as staff intentionally involve youth in decision making. For instance, youth in the YOC, an advanced year-round program, develop interview questions and conduct interviews with youth who have completed the introductory program, Stories for Action. This allows current members the opportunity to meet incoming youth and gives prospective youth the chance to hear about current members' firsthand experiences in the program.

Not only do members get to interview their peers, but they also play a vital role in the hiring process for adult staff. During the final stage of the interview process, candidates must facilitate a lesson in which youth are active participants and evaluators of the candidate's organizational fit. In addition, staff frequently seek and implement students' formal and informal feedback, including improvements to the program and approval of products for external audiences. Program staff notice that involvement in these "behind-the-scenes" opportunities allows students to develop a deeper sense of enthusiasm and investment in the collective as a whole.

Youth voice and agency are also central to Critical Exposure's various programs and are incorporated in diverse ways, from leading programming to driving the direction of projects. During the summer, six to eight youth already involved with Critical Exposure participate in the Summer Youth Facilitation Institute (SYFI), where they build their leadership and facilitation skills by working in pairs to offer Critical Exposure's introductory curriculum to other high school-aged youth in summer partner programs. During the summer of 2024, youth participating in SYFI also helped develop the 2024-2025 YOC curriculum, which they chose to focus on cultivating safety in D.C. schools and communities. Youth in YOC work with staff to identify issues that they care about and develop campaigns to address them. Previous campaign goals that members worked to achieve have included bringing financial literacy curricula to D.C. Public Schools (DCPS), removing school resource officers from schools, and implementing a pilot restorative justice program within DCPS. By addressing issues directly impacting their school communities, students develop a renewed investment in their schools as they find their voices elevated through Critical Exposure's programs.

Challenges

Estimates for the 2023-2024 school year show that 9.4 million students, or nearly 1 in 5 students, are chronically absent.

States' chronic absenteeism levels remain higher than pre-pandemic. Every state, including Washington, D.C., has experienced a substantial rise in chronic absenteeism rates when comparing the 2021-2022 school year to four years prior.

Adverse effects on students' educational trajectory. Chronic absenteeism in the early grades puts students at risk for delays in social skills, increased absenteeism in later grades, and grade retention. In middle and high school, academic consequences include negative impacts on high school graduation and enrolling in and persisting through college.

Consequences reaching into adulthood. Adverse academic outcomes — such as poor educational achievement and dropping out of school — that are associated with chronically absent students are also linked to long-term financial instability and limited social mobility, which are associated with poor mental and physical health.

Chronic absenteeism affects all students, but there are students who are more likely to be chronically absent. Due to root causes that intersect with the experiences of students with marginalized identities — including barriers to get to school, an aversion to and disengagement from school, and misconceptions about the impact of absences — students experiencing poverty, students of color, and students with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to be chronically absent.

Read [How Afterschool Programs are Building School-Day Engagement and Improving Attendance](#) to learn more.



Outcomes

Critical Exposure's 2023-2024 post-program survey found that 84% of their participants believe their voice matters, and 100% felt safe and included within the organization. When asked, "Why or why not would you recommend [Critical Exposure] to your friends?" members commonly highlighted the fun and welcoming environment that their peers and Critical Exposure staff create, with quotes that include that the program feels like "a second home" and that it's a place where youth can "build up their confidence."

Program history

Critical Exposure was founded in 2004 by Heather Rieman and Adam Levner, two former educators who were disillusioned by the lack of government accountability in addressing the stark inequities within low-income schools. The pair founded Critical Exposure to support youth in these communities to document the racial and socioeconomic disparities in their schools. What began as an effort to raise awareness has since evolved into a program that not only allows youth to document these issues but also involves them in creating the solutions they wish to see. Through youth-led campaigns, Critical Exposure has helped secure millions of dollars to improve schools across the U.S. and has worked with local agencies and policymakers to address critical education issues affecting D.C. students.

Recommendations

for more intentionally incorporating youth voice:

- ▶ **Meaningfully use youth feedback.** While it's important to routinely collect feedback from program participants through surveys and check-ins, it's even more important to let students know that their opinions and perspectives are valued by reflecting on and implementing their suggestions, even if the feedback comes from one student.
- ▶ **Involve youth in all aspects of your organization.** To foster connectedness, youth need to feel that they can meaningfully contribute to their environments. Ensure that youth have a say in decision making, particularly for factors directly impacting their experience, to create a program that youth feel represented in and want to return to.