



**University Prep Art & Design Elementary School:  
Lessons Learned Applying the MTSS Approach**  
Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study #3

Felicia Brimage, the director of University Prep Art and Design Elementary School, (UPAD) embodies the shared leadership needed to get students to school every day, even during a pandemic. “I’m leading the building, however, we’re all in this together. I can’t do this work by myself... We celebrate one another, no matter if you are the custodian, a teacher, paraprofessional [or] receptionist. No one is more important than the other person,” said Brimage during an interview with Attendance Works.

University Prep Art & Design Elementary School (UPAD) is part of U Prep Schools, a public charter school network of ten K-12 schools created to fulfill a promise of achieving a 90% high school graduation rate and a 90% college acceptance rate of all high school seniors. University Prep Art & Design employs an Expeditionary Learning model that requires a commitment from the entire U Prep community of school leaders, teachers and staff who they call the “Crew.” The Crew works together to ensure the success of each and every child by addressing the social, emotional and academic needs.

Brimage is committed to letting the Crew at UPAD drive their approaches to school climate, student attendance and academic achievement. She is leading her school-based team to implement the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) strategy recommended to schools nationwide by Attendance Works. The three-tiered strategy is anchored by a set of foundational “whole school” supports to learning.

**Foundational Supports in a Pandemic**

Creating a welcoming environment for students and families in person and online is a top priority for Brimage and the Crew at UPAD. Brimage said, “*You can go in any class and truly see the love that they [teachers] have for our scholars. Those are our kids. It’s not the kids or them kids. We truly love what we do and we will go above and beyond.*” This culture of love and support enables teachers to connect with students during the pandemic.

**School Data Snapshot**



**Location: 10225 Third St., Detroit, MI 48202**

**Principal: Felicia Brimage**

**Grades: K - 5th**

**Total Enrollment: 403**

**Chronic Absence Rate (SY 19-20): 22%**

**Chronic Absence Rate (SY 20-21): data unavailable**  
\*During Covid-19 pandemic, attendance has been taken as two-positive engagements per week.

**Demographics (Race/Ethnicity): African-American - 99%; Caucasian, Hispanic and Other - 1%**

**English Language Learners: .01%**  
**Special Education: 10%**

- Unique Approach:**
- Shared leadership
  - Culture of deep care and support to students and families

The UPAD transition to virtual learning began with ensuring one-to-one access to laptops, and selecting an array of online learning platforms and tools. When students returned for virtual learning in September, managing laptops, internet access, online platforms, and having a consistent place to sign on were some of the persistent obstacles to learning. Teachers and students felt the stress and anxiety of learning during a pandemic.

Brimage described the level of stress for students this way. She said, *“Our scholars are very excited, but at the same time, some are experiencing stress, too. They're balancing things that they have to do at home, [such as] supporting their siblings at home, while trying to get an education. Some do not have that older brother or sister, or mom or dad, or auntie to help them navigate through things, due to parents who work from home and driving to balance things... The social, emotional piece is huge for our kids. Some of the scholars don't understand what's going on or they feel it, but we're trying to get them to articulate their feelings.”*

The stress teachers feel has many sources. They are carrying a heavy load preparing lessons for students, maintaining contact with parents and navigating technology in new ways. They must take the time to plan for virtual learning and anticipate the barriers students are facing. Fatigue and exhaustion are symptoms of the overload teachers are carrying, and they are encouraged by Brimage to empathize with the fatigue and exhaustion expressed by students and parents.

Virtual learning yielded an unexpected benefit for teachers. They were able to catch a daily glimpse of students' home life. When students were not online, teachers discovered that a student may be at grandma's house without their tablet, babysitting a sibling, at home sick, or their parents may not understand that attendance online matters. Teachers were encouraged to share what they learned about students and strategies they were using to get students online and participating in learning. Regular communication combined with finding new ways to use culturally relevant teaching to keep students engaged made a difference at UPAD.

### **Three Tiers of Support**

During Attendance Works Peer Learning Network (PLN) sessions, Brimage and her team worked with the three-tiered support strategy to organize their attendance data and take action to create a school going mindset for all students and their families. During these planning sessions, UPAD staff agreed that if a child is out of school for more than two days, teachers would be the first responders. The teacher would be the first person that a parent hears from. Social workers and school leaders joined with teachers to promote attendance, and the UPAD systematic approach to reduce chronic absence fit into the three-tiered approach.

Tier 1 represents universal strategies to encourage good attendance for all students.

Recognition and incentives for students, caregivers and teachers are the cornerstone of UPAD universal attendance strategies. The school hosts classroom celebrations, ice cream socials and pizza parties, and awards points to students to purchase items in the Mustang Bucks store. As part of their Tier 1 strategy, school staff focused on the prevalence of tardies for all students. The school explored the questions *“How do we incentivize the kids to be present on time when they're not the drivers? How do we incentivize them?”* said Brimage.

These questions prompted a shift to creating incentives for parents and students. They used grant funds to purchase gift cards, and raffled them for parents whose students demonstrated improved attendance or had perfect attendance. Brimage's favorite incentive event for students is a school dance which continued as a virtual

event during the pandemic. Brimage said, *“During the pandemic, we will highlight kids during our whole crew ceremonies and kids will participate in a dance-a-thon.”* Other virtual incentives and recognitions include virtual field trips and spirit wear activities, like Pajama Day.

Tier 2 provides early intervention for students who need more support to avoid chronic absence.

For Tier 2, UPAD implemented a series of outreach, tracking and early intervention strategies for students who missed 10-19% of school. For each student identified in Tier 2, UPAD staff developed an action plan to address the specific barriers and supports for the student and family. Outreach included robocalls, celebrations on social media, and wellness check-ins. Brimage said, *“I called the aunty, the godmother, the grandmother. To the point of, one of the parents said, ‘Look, my grandma says stop calling the house.’”* The team at UPAD is open to visiting families at home and giving them the materials and resources they need to get to school every day and on time.

Connecting with parents of students with early signs of chronic absence is the top priority. An engagement tracker helps staff to document their communication and work with families. The tracker was important for maintaining an “all-hands-on deck” approach. With the trackers, everyone was able to see contact notes and description of supports provided. The UPAD social worker and leadership team, community partners, work together to contribute to removing barriers to attendance.

Tier 3 offers intensive support for students facing the greatest challenges to getting to school.

For students who have demonstrated a severe pattern of chronic absence, missing 20% or more of school, the team at UPAD conducts a sit-down conference with parents. The conference is designed to reveal the pattern of absences, help parents understand the legal and academic risks of missing school, and develop an attendance plan. When speaking to parents, *“the biggest piece was just informing our families the importance of [attendance]. A lot of our families didn't understand, ‘Oh, my child is chronic after two or three times.’ What does that look like in a given month?”* said Brimage. The conversations revealed issues with waking up on time, transportation, and more troubling barriers that required working with social workers and external partners.

UPAD staff work closely with external partners to remove barriers that prevent students from being present and engaged in learning, in-person and online. Here are a few examples of the ways partners contribute to UPAD school going culture by removing barriers to attendance:

- Central Detroit Christian provides over 300 book bags filled with school supplies each year.
- Henry Ford Health Services will partner with UPAD to establish a school-based health center and they are raising grant funds to staff the SBHC with a registered nurse.
- Black Family Development offers parents mental health resources.
- Building Communities, a program of Wayne State University, educates parents about health and nutrition and provides teachers with information and activities they can share with students.

Additional services, such as employment access, housing and food distribution are coordinated by school social workers and staff. Staff and school leadership have one-to-one conversations with parents and showing parents the data made a difference. These conversations helped parents to be more aware, and more apologetic versus being absent from the situation. Brimage said, *“We noticed improvement happening for a lot of our scholars getting there. It was just good to see people actually try.”* Everyone was more connected to one another and more committed to working together to get students to school.

## Attendance Best Practices

The three-tiered system helped Brimage and her team to use data to take action. *“There’s so many ways that you could pull up information, but after attending the Attendance Works meeting and seeing what does at risk really mean, we started to monitor attendance in a whole new way. It just gave us an outlet for brainstorming attendance issues, our ideas,”* said Brimage. Specifically, they were able to accomplish the following:

- Create a welcoming school environment that relies upon teamwork and communication.
- Share attendance data with parents in a way that helped them to understand the impact of missing school.
- Tailor their engagement and response to students based upon their attendance behavior avoiding the pitfalls of focusing on the extremes -- students with perfect attendance or those who are severely truant.

This approach has resulted in school climate improvements and attendance gains at UPAD. From the school closures in March to the start of school, UPAD has been recognized within the U Prep network for their work on attendance. UPAD boasted 100% attendance on Count Day at the start of the 2020-21 school year.

*About the Every School Day Counts Detroit Case Study Series: In October and November 2020, Every School Day Counts Detroit and Attendance Works conducted interviews with school staff from five local public charter schools to document their efforts to sustain school attendance during the Covid-19 pandemic. The schools chosen represented diverse grade levels and were headed by leaders committed to implementing effective attendance strategies. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether these practices resulted in reductions in chronic absence rates given shifts in attendance taking practices and the challenging economic, social and health conditions facing families and communities during the pandemic. This work has been made possible by support from The Skillman Foundation and United Way for Southeastern Michigan investments in education and increased school attendance for all children in Detroit..*