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Student's Perspectives of Chronic Absenteeism in a Suburban High School

Herbert Allen Gray

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STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN A
SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my children James, Jonathan, Judah, and Josey, who gave up time with their Boppa while I wrote for countless hours and gave me much needed encouragement. Most importantly, my wife deserves recognition. She has been my biggest supporter since I began this process. She has pushed me when I needed it, edited countless times, and cheered me on when I felt I couldn't go on. Thank you, Sherry.

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ABSTRACT

For many students, school attendance is a critical issue. There have been several studies conducted concerning attendance numbers. These studies have shown that poor attendance often affects grades, graduation rates, and socioeconomic status post-high school. The purpose of this study was to first investigate the reasons behind absences and attitudes towards school and classes because of missed days. The second purpose was to determine if a weekly mentoring meeting had any noticeable effect on attendance. The targeted pool of students consisted of those who had been identified as chronically absent the previous semester. An initial set of open-ended questions and a demographics questionnaire were used to gather preliminary information. Afterward, students were asked to participate in weekly meetings to discuss reasons behind any occurring absences the previous week, and if any opportunities arose that were not taken advantage of and why were they not taken advantage of. Some findings were 1) peer relations, school environment, and classroom subjects affect students' experiences in school, 2) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, students were unaware of the accumulation of absences that had amassed the previous school year, 3) personal decisions highly influence a student's decision to miss school, 4) many of the students had no concern for days missed, and 5) having a weekly mentoring meeting had a positive effect on decreasing the number of days missed.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

High school graduation is highly affected by attendance (Balfanz, 2016). Chronic truancy is a detriment to academic success. Chronic absenteeism, for a student, can be detrimental not only to grades in school but also is linked to problems once they are no longer in school. Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007) tie poor attendance rates and dropping out of high school with higher rates of unemployment, reduced income, poor health, and higher mortality rates. A study conducted by Burgess et al. (2002) used data on 1,117 people in the workforce, which consisted of days missed in high school and their current returns: wages, further education, workforce participation, and crime rate. They discovered that truancy is negatively related to education and positively linked to employment and crime. Considering this data, educators need to play a critical role in helping students attend school and understand why days are missed.

Hollywood and other outlets often portray skipping school as inconsequential, with no bearing on one's future. The following is the description of the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*:

Ferris Bueller. Larger than life. Blessed with a magical sense of serendipity. He's a model for all those who take themselves too seriously. A guy who knows the value of a day off.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off chronicles the events in the day of a rather magical young man, Ferris (Matthew Broderick). One spring day, towards the end of his senior year, Ferris gives in to an overwhelming urge to cut school and head for downtown Chicago with his girl...and his best friend...to see the sights, experience a day of freedom, and show that with a little ingenuity, a bit of courage and a red Ferrari, life at 17 can be a joy. (Hughes, 1987)

This was Ferris's ninth sick day. The school system he was in had a set number of days that could be missed before failing a grade occurred. The movie consisted of Ferris enjoying the day and outwitting the principal to avoid getting in trouble and possibly failing or having to attend summer school.

The following conversation between a student and his father was overheard in the stands of a sporting event in a large rural high school:

Father: And why do you need to take this test next weekend?

Son: If I make a high enough score on it and I keep my grades up, I have a good chance of getting accepted to a good college and possibly getting a scholarship.

Father: You're not going to college. When you graduate high school, you are going to work for my painting company.

What motivation does this student have to continue to go to school? He could defy his dad and go to college and possibly be excommunicated by his family. His second option could be to not take the test, continue with his classes, and

graduate high school. Another option is not to continue with high school or attend school sporadically and work on the days he is not at school. What part does cultural motivation play in situations like this? Urdan et al. (2007) describe this type of family obligation as a cultural factor and as a definition of self: either independent or interdependent. How do the parents/guardians compare the value of workforce participation with the gains of higher education? The parents/guardians can either see higher education for their child as a means of helping the family unit, or their child can somehow “repay” the parents for their upbringing by participating in and carrying on something the family has worked hard creating.

Borders et al. (2004) state “Unfortunately, parents, teachers, and children rarely agree on child problems” (pp. 547-548), and beliefs concerning absences are not excluded from this thought. Senge (2012) stated that “we adopt those beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, plus our past experiences” (p. 101). Senge called these ladders of inference. There can be many ladders for each group based on individual experiences. Both students and parents/guardians have different ladders of inference, while both ladders may have some similarities. For a student, the following may be on the ladder:

Observations: My teacher sighed when I asked for missed work.

Assumptions: My teacher feels it is a hassle to get the work I missed. I am a bother to the teacher.

Beliefs: The teacher does not care that I am present.

The following may be on the ladder for a parent:

Observations: My child does not go to school. I don't need what the school is currently teaching for my job.

Assumptions: School does not meet the needs of my child.

Beliefs: The classes are too hard. My child does not need school.

Unfortunately, there are many other observations, assumptions, and beliefs that occur for everyone upon their ladder of inference. As educators, we need to learn to see what factors influence students and their desire to attend school.

Problem of Practice

Students often need encouragement to attend school, and both parents/guardians and students need to understand the importance of their attendance. At other times, students may not fully comprehend the impact that absenteeism may have in the present concerning school and even later in life. Understanding a student's perspective of a non-cognitive soft skill, such as being present, is needed to comprehend how change may be instituted.

Considerable research deals with the effects of missing school and its correlation with grades in those classes missed (Balfanz, 2016; DeBaun & Roc, 2013). Balfanz and Byrnes (2006) explain that being present in the classroom is critical to the education and development of children. Balfanz (2016) and DeBaun and Roc (2013) conducted extensive research that shows a close correlation between grades and missed class time, especially in the upper grades. Developing good attendance habits throughout school tends to carry into the workplace where research correlates days missed in upper grades with

economic success later in life (Burgess et al., 2002; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). However, there is little research dealing with understanding “why” days are missed. Some claim that attendance problems start when students become freshmen and are thrust into a more rigorous setting with higher stakes than in elementary and middle school. Stress from trying to maintain a high GPA, more structured classes, sports, and standardized testing can cause anxiety about school attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2016; DeBaun & Roc, 2013). Then as more absences build-up, more stress occurs, and a cycle is created. Other factors affect student attendance practices. They may experience peer pressure and as their bodies mature, sexual pressure. Having greater freedoms such as driving may also lead to school absences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research is to explore the reasons behind student absences identified as chronic or truant. According to Hand et al. (2017), “teachers play a significant role as a source of support for students, and that the school years are a time of identity for students making these years critical for personal and professional development” (p. 933). Secondly, I feel that a mentoring program will help the student understand the effects of accumulating a growing number of absences in a course and better attend school. If patterns can be identified in advance before they become chronic, steps can be taken to help students develop the soft skill of attending school. Having input from a mentor to encourage school attendance would be helpful because the mentor can encourage school attendance and help the student understand the possible

results of continued absences. As a result, having been provided suggestions concerning specific attitudes and demeanors of students will help further reinforce the need to attend classes.

Having input from the student in understanding why a day was missed, then looking at suggestions as to what may have prevented that specific absence, may help schools and school districts prevent certain types of absences. Due to COVID-19, these types of preventable absences need to be explored. Early data shows that the number of chronic absenteeism and truancy cases have been on the rise due to distance learning (Nathwani et al., 2021; Tarkar, 2020). These absences are occurring because students are either not turning in work to prove attendance or are not showing up to virtual class meetings at all. What, if anything, can a school do to alleviate these situations? Understanding students' perspectives coupled with a mentoring program may help in decreasing these absences.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories are the focus of this research: Expectancy theory (also known as the theory of motivation or rational intention theory) and self-determination theory. Both theories deal with motivation but from different perspectives. Vroom developed the expectancy theory in 1964, which focused on workplace motivation. Deci and Ryan developed self-determination theory in 1985, which focused on the types of motivation, not just the degree of motivation discussed by Vroom. Another theory that arose out of Vroom's expectancy theory that focused on student motivation in schools was called expectancy-value

theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Fan (2011) stated that expectancy-value theory is used in “focusing on an expectancy-value model or achievement choice” (p. 50) in school-aged children/adolescents.

The expectancy-value theory was developed by Wigfield and Eccles (1992) as it pertains to an individual’s self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and interest. Wigfield and Eccles (1992) state expectancy theories have often been used in predicting and understanding work behavior, whereas the expectancy-value theory focuses on children’s and adolescents’ ability-expectancy beliefs.

Both theories deal with motivation and attitudes which can be applied to the behaviors in the organizational and social settings of schools. Using these theories will identify key factors that do and do not motivate students to attend school.

Research Questions

The research questions were developed to investigate if there are detriments to absences occurring from a student’s perspective. The research questions further explored students’ reason(s) for their chronic absenteeism and determine if they understood/perceived impact on their immediate future.

RQ 1: From the perspective of the student, what is the perceived impact of poor school attendance on the student’s immediate academic performance?

RQ 2: Does a weekly mentoring program affect the number of absences for chronically absent or truant students over a period of time?

Positionality

Positionality of the researcher, according to Herr and Anderson (2015), describes the role of the person doing the research in relation to the participants and their setting. For this exploratory research, I am an insider. I have taught in a classroom setting for over twenty years and at the school where the research is being conducted for over ten years, which qualifies me as an insider. Secondly, I currently have one or more students in my classroom or have previously taught some students that qualify for the study, thus qualifying me as an insider. I have first-hand knowledge of the importance of the soft skill of being present. If an educator is not present in the classroom, there is very little teaching going on. Likewise, if the student is not present, there is little learning going on and opportunities will be lost. Having a job that requires my presence demonstrates personal knowledge of requirements and qualifies me as an insider.

I also can empathize some reasons for chronic absenteeism. As an educator, I have had to sit through training sessions and classes where all material was a review of prior knowledge and have often asked, “Why am I here?” I have heard fellow educators express similar complaints to which department heads and administrators respond “Just go to the training. It’s just another hoop we have to jump through.”

Research Design

The research took place in a large, suburban high school located on the outskirts of the capital city in South Carolina. This action research study followed a mixed-methods design. The researcher collected data from students identified

as chronically absent or truant the semester before the study in which data was gathered. The researcher collected qualitative data through initial and weekly questionnaires and quantitative data from the school's attendance officer to determine participant eligibility as well as attendance data over the six weeks of the study. The attendance data of students who participated in the six-week mentoring program were then compared to students who elected not to participate in the mentoring program as well as those not chosen for the study or who were ineligible.

Participants, once selected, were interviewed. The set of research questions determined if students understood the consequences of their absence from class/school. Students then responded weekly to a questionnaire regarding any absences and the reasons for their missing school. Weekly meetings took place with the students to ascertain if any absences occurred and the perceived consequences of any absences, including possible pressure to make up missed classwork and any implications on upcoming assessments. If no absences occurred that week, there was a discussion of strategies to help students understand the importance of their thoughts and attitudes toward school and school attendance.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study has several parts. The first was to examine students' reasons for their chronic absenteeism. This aspect of the study gave the researcher a basis for possible interventions later.

Another significance of the study was to contemplate intervention strategies that may increase attendance based upon the reasons students gave for their absences and concepts of future impact as determined by the answers to the research questions. Results of the study guide determine future interventions because they respond directly to student's responses and correlate with the reasons for their absences.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is determining when a student is absent and what number of absences become severe enough to be considered "chronic"? Unfortunately, the definition varies from state to state and even district to district. Rafa (2017) defined chronic absenteeism as "a measure of how much school a student misses for any reason-including excused, unexcused, and discipline-related absences" (p. 2).

A second limitation may be the willingness of the student to complete the questionnaires and participate in the weekly mentoring program. Private matters and personal information may contribute to students' unwillingness to share such information. For example, Grant et al. (2013) conducted a study in Malawi in which menstruation was linked with female absenteeism. Female students may be reluctant to share that information with a male researcher.

A third limitation of the study is the sample size and the time frame. The study initially invited 24 participants, 22 of whom elected to complete the initial questionnaire. Of those 22 students who completed the initial questionnaire, 11 elected to participate in the weekly mentoring program sporadically. The weekly

meetings occurred once a week for six weeks. A longer time frame and having a greater number of participants would have allowed for a more detailed study of the effect on attendance and attitudes toward absences by students.

Definitions of Terms

The following key terms were defined for the purposes of clarity and consistency.

Absenteeism -The number of days students are not present in school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Attendance -The number of days of school a student is present (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Attendance Policy - A policy outlining the specific requirements for student's attendance throughout a school year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Chronically Absent - Students who miss 18 or more days out of a 180-day school year or nine or more days out of a 90-day semester (or 10% or more) for any reason (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Excused Absence - An absence classified as having an acceptable excuse as explained by an attendance policy. These may include school-related trips, religious reasons, medical excuses, or parent notes (up to a certain number) (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Truancy - An intentional, unjustified, unauthorized, or illegal absence for an extended period, usually in succession (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Unexcused Absence - An absence classified as having an unacceptable or non-existent excuse as explained by an attendance policy (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

For this study, chapter two is split into two main sections. The first part will focus on definitions and understanding what absences and truancy are and their impact in terms of present impact and possible future impacts. The second part of the study will look at factors that contribute to absenteeism and truancy with a partial focus on school dropouts.

Historically, student attendance has been closely linked to student achievement and graduation rates (Crespo, 1984; Garcia & Weiss, 2018; Gardner et al., 1999). Data have pointed to a link between chronic absenteeism in upper grades and workplace aspirations after school has been completed (Burgess et al., 2002). Many factors have contributed to missed days in the classroom. Rafa (2017) stated, “While official state definitions vary, the definitions provided reflect the common understanding of each term” (pp. 2). Unfortunately, these classifications of days missed by students have often varied from state to state, and even district to district (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012a).

Various databases reviewed to obtain the literature included ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE Collections, Google Scholar, Educational Database, Governmental Databases, and The University of South Carolina Library and Database. The literature reviewed consisted of peer-reviewed articles,

government/school district data, books, and scholarly articles dealing with truancy, chronic absenteeism, and the data surrounding the past, present, and future of students who were considered as such.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are two theories that helped guide the framework of the research. These two theories are self-determination theory and expectancy-value theory.

Self-Determination Theory

The specific theory that guided this research was the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory (SDT) focuses on the types, rather than just the amount, of motivation, with attention to autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and motivation as predictors of performance, in this case, non-attendance of school. SDT also examines people's life goals or aspirations, showing differential relations of intrinsic versus extrinsic life goals to performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Reeve (2012) argued and concluded that SDT in an educational setting was evident. Reeve (2012) and Marić and Sakač (2014) asked students to self-report their motivations for academic achievement. Data showed students responded well to teachers who helped them achieve their goals rather than teachers who tried to control them. This allowed students to self-determine, thus providing context for using SDT in a school setting. Reeve (2012) further explained SDT as “a macrotheory of motivation comprised of five interrelated minitheories—basic needs theory, organismic integration theory, goal contents theory, cognitive evaluation theory, and causality orientations theory” (p.

1). Each mini-theory plays a vital role in a student's motivation in attending school-present and future.

Expectancy-Value Theory

A second theory used in the research was the expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The expectancy-value theory was underpinned by Vroom's Expectancy Theory and was developed to examine motivation in a school setting. Expectancy theories have often been used in predicting and understanding work behavior; however, Lloyd and Mertens (2018) made an argument to add social context into Vroom's version of expectancy theory. In Gagné's theory of instruction [Appendix A], Driscoll (2005) explained under Event 2: "a similar case is holding an expectancy about what is to learn will influence subsequent processing of information related to that expectancy" (p. 373). Taking this perspective into account, there is a value of the theory in a high school setting.

Expectancy-value theory (Minor, 2005) deals with motivation in a school setting, unlike Vroom's theory which deals with workplace motivation. The expectancy-value theory was developed because of the intertwining of different learning theories and pre-existing motivational theories. Minor (2005) stated that Vroom's research into developing expectancy theory indicated that "organizations viewed as providing a means to achieving important goals were considered to be more attractive" (p. 103).

According to Barba-Sánchez and Atienza-Sahuquillo (2017), Vroom defined motivation "as a product of an individual's expectancy that a certain effort

will lead to intended performance, the instrumentality of this performance in achieving a certain result and the desirability of this result” (p. 1100). Another way to view this is:

Expectancy (perceived probability that effort will lead to good performance)

X

Instrumentality (the belief that there is a connection between activity and goal)

X

Valence (the degree to which rewards are valued)

=

Motivation (reason to perform) (Whittington, 2014, p. 11)

Barba-Sánchez and Atienza-Sahuquillo (2017) further explained that Vroom distinguished between “first-order valence or work role and second-order valence and work role outcome” (p. 1100).

Nimri et al. (2015) used an expanded model of Vroom’s theory, including the “five components: expectancy, extrinsic instrumentality, intrinsic instrumentality, extrinsic valence, and intrinsic valence” (p. 1) and applied them to the public sector to examine motivation. All five components are useful in a closer examination of student motivation (Nimri et al., 2015). Thus, expectancy-value theory brings the social context needed and focuses on a school setting. Ghazvini and Khajepour (2011) stated that “students adopting an intrinsic motivational orientation used cognitive strategies and self-regulating processes”

to “increase their trust in their own abilities” (pp. 1040-1041). Expectancy-value suggests that students are motivated to work harder if they believe their effort results in a good performance, better grades, and that performance leads to a reward - promotion of grade level, college scholarships - , and that reward satisfies a need worth the effort - better future job, better college acceptance - (Whittington, 2014).

Case One: Self-Determination Theory

Two cases highlight the benefits of both expectancy and self-determination theories in a school setting. The first case in the school setting took place in a high school in a study of problematic behavior. Borders et al. (2004) stated “expectancies, or anticipations of likely consequences for a given action, result from individuals’ learning history and then become the basis for future behavioral choices” (pp. 539). Borders et al. (2004) also argued in their research that expectancy-value theory research is often limited because there is a focus on a single behavior and what is expected surrounding that behavior. They surmised that problem behaviors would relate to positive expectancies about misbehaving. Some adolescents misbehave because they seek attention or some other type of benefit from misbehaving. These benefits include “being popular, exercising power over peers, [and] avoiding unpleasant academic demands” (p. 541). As a result of perceived positive results from problematic behavior, students continue those behaviors.

Borders et al. (2004) attempted to replace the problematic behavior with an alternative behavior that gained either the same (positive) result or a result

that was better than the already gained result. Borders et al. (2004) explained this as an expansion of the “traditional expectancy-value theory to examine the contribution of two competing expectancies” (p. 545). Part of the replacement benefit dealt with a belief that academic achievement produces valuable alternatives as well as positive behaviors which result in less discipline.

The data collected by Borders et al. (2004) relied on self-reporting data in the form of a questionnaire collected from the students being studied. The data did not show a change in academic expectancies or a change in behavior expectancies and problematic behavior. Borders et al. (2004) thought that since adverse behavior has existed for several years, there are resulting academic deficiencies which students may feel are too much to overcome.

Case Two: Expectancy-Value Theory

The second case (Shepperd & Taylor, 1999) dealing with school and students took place in an undergraduate setting and compared individual performance and group performance. In the group performance study, group size/number of contributors was manipulated. Shepperd and Taylor (1999) found that people typically exerted greater effort when they thought their efforts were “indispensable yet [loafed] when they [perceived] their efforts as dispensable” (p. 1148). They made an argument that expectancy-value theory provides a “simple, elegant framework for understanding and predicting low motivation and effort in collective settings” (pp. 1148-1149). Two experiments were conducted where parameters were changed, and individual results and attitudes were measured. Results in both cases showed that people put greater effort into the assigned

task if they felt their work would be valued. However, if an overall group grade was to be assigned, there was a tendency for loafing by some individuals either because they felt like their contributions would not matter or another individual would take over the project.

Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

Some of the major challenges for schools are chronic absenteeism, truancy, and low graduation rates (Garry, 1996; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). It seems that schools contend with this issue yearly with little hope in sight. There needs to be an understanding of the terminology used with absences and how terms are viewed in individual schools and across the United States to help focus on the problem of chronic absenteeism.

Attendance Policy

Before comparing chronic absences and student truancy from state-to-state and district-to-district, there needs to be a careful examination of attendance policies. Per state laws, each school district needs to develop and enforce some type of attendance policy. Looking at several policies, there are some noticeable differences. Smith (1998) looked at the data surrounding a new attendance policy that was implemented the prior year in the Newport News Public School located in Virginia. According to this attendance policy, more than five days of unexcused absences for elementary students resulted in a referral to the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. At the middle and high school levels, more than five days of unexcused absences in a marking period resulted in a failing grade for that marking period. In addition to the policy of a failing grade for

the marking period, after the 18th absence, the student would not be promoted to the next grade and possibly received a reference to the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. Whereas, in Lexington School District Two located in South Carolina, the policy for failing a class, which resulted in not being promoted depending on the class failed, was 10 days of unexcused absences, or five days of unexcused in a semester class (Lexington School District Two Handbook, Policy JH).

Another aspect of attendance policy is how schools handle situations when a certain number of days are missed. School districts often vary greatly in their policies concerning absences. The following are two examples of how school districts handle absences. Newport News Public School (Smith, 1998) required either a face-to-face, telephone, or some other means of communication with parents once a specific threshold was met. Lexington Two, on the other hand, instituted an attendance contract where if a student has failed a class due to absences the previous semester/school year, they would receive their original grade if they do not miss any unexcused days the next semester (Lexington School District Two Handbook, Policy JH). However, this policy only applied to classes that the student would have passed if not for missing days, not if a failing grade was earned due to poor grades. During the school year, Lexington Two also used attendance make-up days, where students could attend school on a Saturday to log seat-time to make-up hours missed in the classroom (Lexington School District Two Handbook, Policy JH). These make-up days did not benefit in helping with classroom grades, closing the achievement gap, or increasing

classroom knowledge, only in preventing students from failing a class due to attendance issues.

Absence Type

There is confusion from state to state and district to district in defining the terms of absences. There are three classifications of absences that are used in missed school identification: excused, unexcused, and suspension (Balfanz, 2016). Birioukov (2016) argued there needs to be another set for absence data: voluntary and involuntary. Skipping and cutting would fall into the voluntary absences, while planned, sick days and doctor/other appointments would fall into the involuntary category. Schools and school districts determine the classification of absences and assign them accordingly.

The two main types of absences by districts are either excused or unexcused. For most schools, the following fall into excused absences: illness (with a doctor's note), chronic/extended illness, prearranged appointments (state agencies), family death or emergencies, and religious observations. Suspensions and expulsions are where there are some differences between schools (Holt & Gershenson, 2019). Some schools count the days missed as excused absences while others count the days as unexcused. The districts in which the days are considered unexcused are only considered as such for a determination on whether class credit is given, not for truancy laws (deJung & Duckworth, 1986). Another difference is that some schools accept parent/guardian notes for excused absences, some districts only accept a certain number of

parent/guardian notes, and other districts do not accept parent/guardian notes (Pomerantz, 2004).

The classification of excused and unexcused is so important, especially at an elementary school level. In an elementary school setting, having a high level of excused absences indicates the overall possibility that these students would be actively engaged in school if they were present while having a high level of unexcused absences may be an indication of disengagement (Gottfried, 2009). Gottfried (2009) contended that knowing the types of absences at an early age with a comparison of academic performance, might enhance the development and implementation of policy and “interventions for at-risk students” (Gottfried, 2009, p. 393).

Another discrepancy concerning absences is the point at which they occur during the school day. Elementary students in Lexington School District Two located in West Columbia, South Carolina received an overall grade for each subject in their grade levels. An abundance of absences rarely resulted in the retention of a grade at the elementary school level. However, failure of either their mathematics class or their Language Arts class resulted in retention of middle school and high school grade levels. If a student were to consistently miss the first period of a school day, and that block was either of the required subjects, then they could be present for the school day, but still fail the class due to class absences. Missing one class period does not translate into the school reporting the absence for an entire day (Balfanz et al., 2008; Gottfried, 2009). As a result,

failure for missing one class may not be reported in the overall school data for daily attendance.

Chronic Absenteeism

Researchers define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason (Balfanz, 2016; Jacob & Lovett, 2019). Balfanz (2016) found that a state's definition of chronic absenteeism ranges from missing 15 to 21 days as being chronically absent. In a school year, 10% missed days typically translates into 18 days. The U.S. Department of Education Education's Office for Civil Rights (2016) survey used 15 or more days to define chronic absenteeism. These 15 days consisted of all days that a student was not present at school for any reason.

The following was printed in a 2018-2019 student handbook at Airport High School located in South Carolina:

According to state law, a child is considered truant if they have 3 consecutive unlawful absences or a total of 5 unlawful absences.

Once a student becomes truant, the district is required to develop a written intervention plan with the parent/guardian (p. 4).

The handbook was not updated for the 2019-2020 school year.

Within the same district at Brookland-Cayce High School, the following was originally posted in their 2019-2020 student handbook and was in their 2020-2021 student handbook:

Under the guidance of the federal Office of Civil Rights, the South Carolina Department of Education is now requiring all districts to

report students who are “chronically absent.” **Chronically absent** students are defined as having missed 10% of the total days within a school year... As part of these new requirements, South Carolina students will now be considered “absent” if they miss 50% of their instructional day for ANY reason, regardless of the classification of the absence as excused or unexcused.

This means Lexington Two students must be present for at least half of the instructional day to be considered “present” for that school day.

(p. 6)

Note that chronically absent is not the same as truant. It may seem at first glance that the two schools have different policies in place, but according to the differing definitions, they cover two different areas. This is where some confusion enters the legal system and why understanding the differences of excused versus unexcused absences plays a role. For purposes of most school district reporting and government studies, no distinction is made between an excused absence and an unexcused absence. Also, there is no set policy on which type of absence needs to be reported (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012a). Some schools report both types of absences, while other schools report only unexcused absences.

Attendance and Achievement

It is often said by educators that students must be present to learn (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b). The educational system realizes some absences are out of the student’s control, hence the classification of absences. As a result, within the school system, there are different consequences associated with each.

However, both types of absences do represent missed school days. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012a) estimated that within a given school year, between five and eight million students miss school regularly, with many of that number missing more than 10% of the total number of days, thus labeling them chronically absent.

There have been many studies that show a strong correlation between learning and regular school attendance (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Garcia & Weiss, 2018; Nichols, 2003). In a study conducted for the Economic Policy Institute by Garcia and Weiss (2018), they found that the difference in math scores varied by .3 standard deviations from students who did not miss any days and those who missed three to four days of school the month before a given assessment. In comparison, they found there to be a .1 difference in standard deviation between those missing no days and those missing one to two days the month before the given assessment. They then expanded on the scores based on days missed for the entire school year and categorized by sex, socio-economic, race, etc. For Hispanic and non-ELL students, there was a difference of .74 standard deviations in assessment scores for those students who missed more than ten days than Hispanic and non-ELL who missed fewer days.

There were similar results for the three poverty-status groups (nonpoor, somewhat poor, and poor). Those students who were present scored higher than those who missed 10 or more days (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Crespo (1984) discovered in the Montreal school system in Canada that “every day, approximately 6% of all students were absent. In low-income areas, the percentage [climbed] to 9%” (p. 175).

Impact of Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism often has a chain reaction of events that often affects not only the person, but outside entities as well (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b; Crespo, 1984; Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013).

Cost to Schools

When a student is chronically absent, or more so truant, there are resources that a school must commit to dealing with discipline and monitoring student's attendance. Many schools commit funds to hire an Attendance Interventionist. The following is the job description of an attendance specialist at the Gilbert Unified School District in Arizona:

The job of Attendance Specialist is done for the purpose/s of registering children; collecting and maintaining student attendance information at the assigned site; meeting district, state, and federal requirements relating to attendance processes including parent notification; preparing and distributing attendance reports and materials; providing clerical support at the school site; and communicating various information regarding activities. (p. 1)

These workers keep track of the number and types of absences of all students at a school. This is accomplished by attendance systems where classroom educators handle taking roll at the beginning of each class using various computer attendance systems. These interventionalists monitor excessive days and attempts to contact parents/guardians during the school day that absences occur. They also handle classifying the days missed as either excused or

unexcused. They are also the ones responsible for contacting the legal system to handle truancy and presenting the legal data to courts.

Legal Systems

The legal system and court systems can become overloaded with cases if there are too many truancy cases presented. The juvenile justice system can be overwhelmed by the number of juveniles being incarcerated due to the possibility of illegal activities being committed instead of students being in school (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2006). When a school's graduation rate is low, there are steps and resources committed to studies that will hopefully improve the graduation rate (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Federal monies are often tied to test scores and student graduation rates as well (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Future Repercussions of Poor Attendance

There are other aspects to be considered concerning chronic absenteeism. Crespo (1984) states, "Besides the organizational difficulties it creates (recuperation, discipline, etc.), school absenteeism is considered...to be one of the main paths of dropping out" (p. 175). Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013) expand on this further by saying, "The act of dropping out, therefore, must not be understood as a single event but an outcome of disengagement, often long before the dropout finally stops coming to class" (p. 56). Students can begin a dangerous cycle of missing school, disengagement from learning, and risky behavior that can then begin to spiral out of control. This ultimately leads to dropping out.

Burgess et al. (2002) followed a cohort of students ranging from 14 to 21 years of age for 14 years, starting in 1979. After either completing high school or chronically absent students or dropping out, the impacts became obvious. The results were that those who exhibited a higher number of truant days tended to be unemployed more, worked and engaged in higher criminal activity, and were more likely to use illegal drugs than those who were not truant. Likewise, Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013) found that out of recent high school dropouts, 16% were unemployed, and 32% lived below the poverty line. Dropouts most commonly find jobs in the construction, food services, and landscaping industries. Besides having a bleak economic outlook, dropouts face a worse social outlook (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). According to the 2006-2007 data collected by the General Social Survey, 33% of recent female dropouts gave birth as a teenager, 13% of male and female dropouts were either separated or divorced, 32% reported being unhealthy, and 22% reported being unhappy. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012b) stated “one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get these students in school every day” (p. 4).

Not only are there personal repercussions, but there are local economic and community repercussions as well. Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013) point out the sizable financial and non-financial benefits of a higher rate of student attendance. The figures show that there was roughly an increase in \$226,700 in lifetime earnings for a student that stayed in school until age 18 over dropping out at age 16 (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013). That is less local income tax

revenue being brought in and fewer monies that schools bring in due to millage. In data presented by Gottfried and Hutt (2019), the California Attorney General's office stated, "that in the 2014-15 school year alone, school absences cost California school districts \$1 billion" (p. 3). In three years, California school districts have over \$4.5 billion. Not only are local economies affected but state finances are also impacted early on.

Chronic Absenteeism: An Old Problem in Search of New Answers

From Tom Sawyer to Ferris Bueller, "playing hooky" and "skipping school" have often been viewed with a lighthearted and carefree attitude or as downright defiance of authority. As early as the late 1800s, educators have focused on absenteeism and truancy. In 1898, roughly 25% of juveniles jailed in the Chicago House of Correction were for truancy (Jacob & Lovett, 2019). Researchers tried many interventions to deal with chronic absenteeism and truancy, but despite the school and state efforts, these behaviors still occur.

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012b) believed that there is a strong assumption that most students attend classes every day. Because of this strong belief, many state administration departments, school districts, and school principals are unable to tell how many students have missed 10% or more days in a school year. Unfortunately, the result is that measurements are not often taken concerning school days missed. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012a) discovered that only six states collect data and address the issue of chronic absenteeism. Because of reporting methods, "A school can have average daily attendance of 90 percent and still have 40 percent of its students chronically absent" (Balfanz &

Byrnes, 2012a, p. 3). The national rate is predicted to be that 10% of students are chronically absent, but because of the reporting methods, they tend to think that this number is conservative and that the rate may be as high as 15% of students being chronically absent. Hamlin (2020) asserted that nearly 15% of American students are chronically absent from school. This is roughly 5 million to 7.5 million students missing 18 or more days in a school year.

Extremes: One case of Dealing with Chronic Absenteeism

Unfortunately, chronic absenteeism and truancy have been weaponized by some school districts. Sojoyner (2016) explored a policy implemented in the Los Angeles County School system that began in 1991. This policy was initially introduced in a section where Blacks composed 55% of the population, and it was used to target these communities. To initiate this policy, Sojoyner (2016) stated that a “mythical world reality” was created “whereby Black and Brown students were the locus of devices and criminal activity associated with truancy” (p. 81). The policy evolved into the Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT) and was established in 2004. One part of the policy allowed for a creation of a School Attendance Review Board (SARB), which consisted of probation officers, law enforcement, and mental health officials, who would oversee students who had accumulated 15 or more days of unexcused absences. There would be contact with the parents/guardians and the students to keep track of attendance. If there were no improvement in attendance, a Penal Code 272 case would be opened, and the parents/guardians and the student would appear before the Los Angeles Superior Court for prosecution.

Sojoyner (2016) refers to this as a School-to-Prison Pipeline that mainly focuses on Black populations and is used to limit the mobility and freedom of Black people. Sojoyner (2016) goes on to explain that these schools have become a “hyper-criminalized surveillance and sheer repression” (p. 74) of Black communities in their reporting to county prosecutors and that the schools “wield seemingly limitless power against aggrieved populations” (p. 71). The School-to-Prison Pipeline has been studied by others as well (Daneshzadeh & Sirrakos, 2018; Farrall et al., 2020; Gray, 2019) and has been shown to target different groups of varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds using chronic absenteeism and truancy of these groups as a focus to identify these students.

The educational repercussions in and out of the classroom will continue to increase year after year if those who are charged with educating children do not begin to understand this phenomenon and develop ways to deal with this growing problem. Understanding chronic absenteeism is just the beginning of this process.

Influencing Factors of School Attendance

Many factors blend into why students fail to attend school. Unfortunately, many students who miss 10% or more days per school year, have a higher chance of dropping out. McNeal Jr (1997) stated “failing to distinguish between different types of factors that affect dropping out (i.e., dropout, pullout, and pushout)” (p. 209) is part of the problem that educators and school systems have in dealing with chronic absenteeism. These distinctions need to be closely examined to start understanding what leads up to a student’s decision not to

attend school to prevent absences from becoming chronic and the possibility of students dropping out.

Student Factors

Many issues influence a student's choice to attend school. As the student gets older, these influences tend to manifest more often because "liking school, compliance with school routines, marks, and academic self-image all spiral downward the longer children are in school" (Alexander et al., 1997, p. 87). Bryk and Thum (1989) described students who are chronically absent, truant, and eventual school dropouts as having lower grades and test scores, tending to do less homework, having more disciplinary problems, are generally alienated from school, having different background characteristics from others enrolled in school, and have poor academic backgrounds. Because of this, personal belief factors begin to play a role in attendance or lack of attendance. Balkis et al. (2016) believe that poor academic self-perception plays a vital role in student attendance. At an early age, children are often excited about attending school and learning. However, once students begin to fall behind in lessons and grades, they begin to have lower academic self-perception, which can result in a negative attitude toward future-oriented academic goals (Balkis et al., 2016). This negative attitude concerning academic ability and achievement can then turn itself into a negative attitude toward teachers and school which in turn "may negatively impact the motivation to attend school" (Balkis et al., 2016, p. 1827) as well as manifesting itself into a lack of motivation for an academic future.

Another factor that plays into poor attendance for students is emotional instability (Havik et al., 2015). Havik et al. (2015) contend that these students have difficulty in social situations with or when making and keeping friends. These students tend to be shy and socially withdrawn and often have problems with peer relationships. Another aspect is their emotional instability coupled with negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression. This can present itself at any point in a child's schooling and can lead to problems at any time. Kearney (2008) pointed out that often anxiety can come from changing schools, not only moving but being promoted in a grade that requires a move of buildings. Emotional factors not only play a role in the student and their decision to attend school/classes but can have a school-level effect as well. These students have been identified as more at risk of being chronically absent as well as dropping out of school.

Peer Groups

Hartnett (2007) contends that peer group identity influences school attendance. Unlike socially withdrawn students who have problems with peers, there are peer groups that tend to miss school. According to Hartnett (2007), "Since teenagers often look for love and acceptance through peer identity groups, particularly as culture erodes, peer group identity becomes a central factor in the process of development" (p. 36). These peer groups do not have to be negative to influence school attendance. For example, sports teams often must leave school early if they need to compete at schools where traveling a long distance is necessary. The marching band often accompanies the team's sports.

These same bands may march in national parades and may miss school days due to travel. ROTC programs and other academic teams not only compete locally but may have national competitions that require more travel time that cause more missed school days. Students who have a dislike for schooling but have athletic/mental/artistic ability may join these groups not only for social reasons but because many times these days missed are often classified as excused absences and do not negatively affect days missed in school systems. Negative peer groups that tend to have a detrimental effect on attendance are gangs (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Reid, 2013).

Student Health

A fourth factor that may affect students' attendance is health conditions and chronically poor health. Hamlin (2020) contended, "Student health issues, such as long-term illness, asthma, and obesity, influence the number of days a student misses during the school year" (p. 3). Although many schools classify medically excused absences as valid reasons to be absent, for the purpose of labeling students as chronically absent, they still need to be considered. Asthma and other respiratory-related illnesses are one of the leading causes of absences due to health (Kearney, 2008). Kearney (2008) also grouped illicit drug use (including tobacco and alcohol), binge drinking, DUI, risky sexual behavior, attempted suicide, and poor nutrition as risky health behaviors as these tend to lead to poor health in students and their development. However, Kearney (2008) cautioned as to which causes the other: Is chronic absenteeism caused by risky health behaviors or are the behaviors a result of chronic absenteeism?

Family Factors

Parental and family factors have potentially the most important role in a child's school attendance (Balkis et al., 2016; Havik et al., 2015). Even more so, Alexander et al. (1997) pointed this out by saying, "parent attitudes appear to be the most consequential" (p. 94) aspect in predicting school attendance. Negative attitudes by parents/guardians have the most detrimental effect (Breda, 2014; Havik et al., 2015) and can cause a shift in their child's attitude. In short, parent's/guardian's attitude toward school directly influences students' perceptions of school. Listed among these negative attitudes mentioned by Breda (2014) and Havik et al. (2015) are:

- Displaying an unfavorable attitude toward scholastic attainment
- Never inquiring about homework assignments
- Not attending parent/teacher conferences
- Non-existent discussions about school-related activities
- No significant time allowed to focus on schoolwork in the home environment
- Little to no support for after school extra-curricular activities
- No monitoring of school attendance

Another family factor that plays into chronic absenteeism is socioeconomic status. Kearney (2008) states it plainly: "American youth from families of lower income levels are much more likely to miss school than their peers" (p. 458). Ready (2010) also correlated living in poverty and children being "25 percent more likely to miss three or more days of school per month" (p. 272). Ready

(2010) explained that children born to unmarried teenage mothers are more likely to be chronically absent from early elementary school as well because of the correlation between unwed single teenaged mothers and poverty. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012a) studied “homelessness, movement between foster care placements, and temporary dislocation associated with home foreclosure or inability to pay rent “(p. 30) as a link between absenteeism and housing instability.

Lacking reliable transportation due to the inability of maintenance or wildly fluctuating gas prices (Jennings et al., 2009) may lead to missed school days as well. Bryk and Thum (1989) identified lower socioeconomic status and households with few educational resources as having a higher chance of being chronically absent and more likely to drop out than households that had higher levels of income. Students, especially those in high school, are sometimes responsible for taking care of younger siblings when daycare cannot be afforded, may have children of their own, or are working full time or part-time jobs to help supplement the family income (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b; Ready, 2010). Another link to poor student health is the inability to afford proper health care or physician services (Ready, 2010). While there are many reasons for socioeconomic status, there has been a link between income and the educational level of one or both parents (Balkis et al., 2016; Havik et al., 2015), in that the higher the educational level, the higher school attendance is for those children.

Another aspect of the family factor mentioned by Alexander et al. (1997) links a possibility for students’ anxiety and stress levels to what they call “Family

Stressors” (p. 88). These are disruptive family events that include, but are not limited to: divorce, marriage, parental/guardian illness, family member death, adults joining the household, adults leaving the household, military deployment, residential moves, and school transfers. These family stressors can affect children of any school-age and at any time of the school year, often without warning.

School Factors

There are many aspects of schools that can contribute to the problem of chronic absenteeism, and schools are an “important piece of the dropout mosaic” (McNeal Jr, 1997, p. 210). Balkis et al. (2016) pointed out four major themes found that may play an important role in motivating students to attend school: school climate, academic environment, discipline, and relationship with teachers.

School climate is considered to have the strongest effect on student absenteeism in a school setting (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b). McNeal Jr (1997) used school size as a major predictor since if there were more students enrolled in a school, it made it more difficult for students to engage in a school environment. In larger schools, there is a more diverse population of students with different cultural backgrounds which make it harder for a school to set up a consistent school character and culture itself that makes it more difficult for students in their peer interactions (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Deitrick et al., 2015; Hartnett, 2007).

Curriculum and the theories surrounding academics in schools need to be challenging, but not to the degree that negatively impacts students. Bryk and

Thum (1989) saw the “increased differentiation in school experiences that result from a ‘shopping mall’ curriculum” (p. 356) as a major contributor to student engagement. If a curriculum is too strenuous, students with poor academic backgrounds may become bored with school (Havik et al., 2015), while if the expectations are so high as to be perceived as unattainable, the rate of absenteeism increases (McNeal Jr, 1997). Another aspect of the curriculum is if it does not stimulate the student’s interest or the subject matter, it seems unlikely to hold any future benefits (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Students with above-average academic backgrounds may not feel the need to attend class because they already know the material and will pass the class with sporadic attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b).

School discipline in schools has a two-fold effect. Some schools may handle unexcused absences and truancy in their policies ineffectively. This may cause a disconnect between the student and school (Hartnett, 2007). Hartnett (2007) goes on to explain that the reasoning behind this is that if students do not feel like they are being supported by the system, they become discouraged and feel disconnected. High school students who drive may not attend school if they know they are going to be late just to avoid the hassle and sometimes disciplinary measures because of tardiness (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b).

Research has also linked discipline with absenteeism. Absenteeism is higher in schools where there is a greater incidence of discipline problems. However, attendance rates are higher in schools where students feel safe and think of discipline as fair and effective (Bryk & Thum, 1989). Bohanon et al.

(2009) noted that “behavior problems (e.g., defiance, tardiness) also [have been] associated with a higher probability of dropping out...another lens through which to identify disengagement...is that of student behavior” (p. 31). Balfanz et al. (2015) made a note of this by stating, “Over the past several years, research in several states...and several large U.S. city school districts...[have] identified out-of-school suspensions as one of the primary indicators of high school dropout” (p. 17).

Lofstrom (2007) noted that several schools with a higher percentage of minorities were likely to produce a higher number of dropouts. Sojoyner (2016) attributed this to the hyper-criminalized surveillance by some schools and the creation of school district police to patrol and issue citations for misdemeanor offenses such as fighting and tardiness. This is part of the School-to-Prison Pipeline in the Los Angeles Unified School District that was used to mainly target Black populations. McNeal Jr (1997) asserted that schools are not havens from violence, perceived threats do affect academic achievement and hinder a sense of well-being, and missing school is acceptable behavior in more problematic schools. McNeal Jr (1997) also discovered that these schools initiated little questioning or counseling when students are absent to the point of being chronically absent in many inner-city schools. In considering school safety as an aspect of school climate, students tend to focus on incidents that occur at schools such as crime, violence, and bullying as well as their perception of safety in the classroom, hallways, and bathrooms (Hamlin, 2020). Even if not witness to

these events in the school, they still take into consideration reports of such activities as well as school harassment, verbal abuse, and discrimination.

Educator Factors

How teachers conduct their classes employing classroom order, structure, or organization and the association of classroom management shows a link with school refusal (Havik et al., 2015). When teachers contribute to a positive school climate by addressing a student's academic, social, and environmental needs, there is an increase in attendance (Hamlin, 2020). However, non-attendance and truancy appear to be related to having strained and conflict-ridden teacher-student relationships (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). If students do not feel welcomed, they will not want to attend school. In a survey given to chronically absent students, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012b), found that "more than half of the students reported they did not believe that any of their teachers miss them or notice when they are not there" (p. 32). Teachers can contribute to the school climate and need to make it a welcoming environment. Another contributing factor to a positive classroom setting might correlate with the student/teacher ratio (McNeal Jr, 1997).

Additional School Factors

Three other aspects that affect school attendance are conditions of the school buildings, the physical environment around the school, and school bus transportation (Deitrick et al., 2015; Hamlin, 2020). Schools can have a physical appearance that presents a welcoming environment. School gardens have been shown to increase students' desires to attend school and an increased positive

view of the school, especially among elementary-aged students (Waliczek et al., 2001). Bus transportation may affect school attendance early in the school year. If a bus route is changed from one school year to the next, and there was a lack of communication detailing the changes to families over the summer months, it can take a week or more for the new bus information to be received (Deitrick et al., 2015).

Community and Environmental Factors

Students who live in differing neighborhood conditions (social, economic, and physical), the age of the houses, and having high levels of violent crimes have a higher incidence of absences than students who do not live in those conditions (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b; Deitrick et al., 2015). Neighborhoods with a higher crime rate experience increased concerns for safety if students need to take public transportation, thus increasing the likelihood that they will not be present at school (Hamlin, 2020). Attitudes of the community towards education are a contributing factor to student absenteeism as well (Balkis et al., 2016). If a student feels “alienated [as] a result of socioeconomic forces that reach beyond the school” (Bryk & Thum, 1989, p. 356), there may be a link with the community and other economic characteristics that contribute to the perception that dropping out is more beneficial than graduating (McNeal Jr, 1997).

Environmental conditions also play a role in student attendance. Rain, snow, and extreme heat and cold may play a role in public transportation issues, where there are multiple connections (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b). Varying weather patterns and changing seasons can lead to pollen and mold counts

being high. Dust, vermin, and dampness causing asthma and other respiratory problems can develop in localized areas (Kearney, 2008). In a school setting, there can be high levels of indoor nitrogen dioxide, chemical pollutants, low outdoor ventilation, high classroom carbon dioxide levels, high ozone levels, and particulate matter that can contribute to these problems as well (Kearney, 2008). Deitrick et al. (2015) detailed a situation in Clarion County Schools outside Clarion, West Virginia, the location of the Clarion Coke Plant. Most students had asthma because of the “environmental conditions in the community, with some of the worst fine-particle pollution rates in the country” (p. 11). Coupled with poor access to medical care and lack of facilities to treat conditions, many students missed a high rate of school days at the three buildings within the district (Deitrick et al., 2015).

Special Consideration: COVID-19 and Technology

Considering recent events, not only in the U.S., but worldwide, COVID-19 has increased the problem of chronic absenteeism, but not in the way of classroom attendance. In an article originally published in *The New York Times* in early April 2020 and later reprinted in various newspapers nationwide, Goldstien et al. (2020) found that the more recent problem to be students “missing class-not logging on, not checking in or not completing assignments” (p. 6A). Both larger and smaller districts experiences a “subset of students and their parents [who] have dropped out of touch with schools completely” (p. 6A). In early June 2020, *The State* newspaper out of Columbia, South Carolina, reported that 16,085 (about two percent of the state’s public-school population) students

were “off-grid” and were unable to be contacted once remote learning had begun (Cueto, 2020). This was attributed to a lack of nationwide wireless internet network systems and low socioeconomic families being unable to afford either the technology required for remote learning or the technology required to access the systems available (Dooley et al., 2020). Shenoy et al. (2020) explored how technology, coupled with distance learning, affected student engagement and student/teacher relations during virtual schooling in India.

Non-Factors

Research shows that there is little association between access to school transportation or a once-a-week delay in school start times to absenteeism rates (Hamlin, 2020). However, there is research suggesting that having a start time of 8:30 am for high schoolers does improve overall attendance for students (McKeever & Clark, 2017). It is also noted that when schools deliver alerts and information to parents/guardians using an automated system that there is a slight improvement to no improvement in student absenteeism (Hamlin, 2020). Garba (2011) showed that the geographic location of a school had no outcome on student attendance when comparing similar schools within the same state. Reeve (2012) pointed out that “classroom conditions sometimes support but other times neglect and frustrate students’ motivation, engagement, and positive classroom functioning” (p. 1). Unfortunately, some conditions that are favorable for one group of students may hinder another group when it comes to motivation in attendance. Research also shows that peer groups within schools can have a more powerful impact than parents in shaping school attendance values

(Hartnett, 2007). These peer groups can be, but not only, clubs, sports teams, even a student's circle of friends. There is still more research that needs to be completed before factors can be determined or ruled out as causes for non-attendance.

Summary

Federal, state, and local agencies, as well as school boards, emphasize student achievement. Often tax dollars are tied to these achievement rates. As a result, much time, effort, and money are spent to ensure that students achieve goals set forth by state and federal mandates. Unfortunately, as student absences mount, achievement and test scores drop because of missed instruction time.

McNeal Jr (1997) stated, "Research indicates that low achievers, racial and ethnic minorities, males, older students, working students, and students from lower socioeconomic status and/or single-parent households are more likely than their peers to drop out of high school" (p. 209). Chronic absenteeism and high truancy rates are two of the main indicators for dropping out of high school. Often, research conducted finds that there is not one specific element that contributes to absenteeism, but that there may be multiple reasons that are intertwined and woven together that can cause students not to attend school. Considering the research, there is not a universal solution, and there needs to be a closer examination for each reason and the underlying cause(s). Individual schools need to work with state and federal agencies to handle specifics in how

to deal with individual cases and not to have blanket policies as each case is unique.

Many factors contribute to increased attendance rates. Research shows that as attendance rates increase, so does achievement. Students who are chronically absent and truant are more likely to drop out of school, and these rates are higher in lower socioeconomic communities. Chronic absenteeism and truancy have been problematic for schools for many years for all grade levels and studies have been conducted dealing with the outcomes of missing school. Unfortunately, there are not many recent research data dealing with the specifics concerning chronic absenteeism.

Newer research for these reasons is needed because of the changing times. From a school standpoint, there is little that educators can do to battle chronic absenteeism because parents are ultimately responsible for their student's behavior. Considering this, experts highly recommend a partnership with schools, family, and community in working together to find solutions together that allows them to fight chronic absenteeism together. This can be accomplished by beginning to discover the reasons leading up to the decision to be absent from school.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of this action research, mixed-method study, was to investigate the reasons behind why students identified as chronically absent miss school and to see if a weekly mentoring program decreased the number of absences occurring for students involved in the study. Students identified as chronically absent met once a week with a mentor, during which, students shared their reasons for absences that may have occurred as well as why an opportunity for an absence was not taken during the same time frame. A secondary, minor aspect of the study showed that attendance numbers increased for students involved in the study. After the study, attendance numbers were compared with those students identified as chronically absent but not selected to take part in the study to see if there was an improvement during the study time frame.

Overview of the Study

Because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, student absenteeism increased. Some of the reasons were due to school closures and the move to online learning. In a recent study, Santibañez and Guarino (2020) assumed that students lost the three months (about 60 instructional days) immediately following school closures in March and made the following projections for when students returned in the fall of 2020:

- Students could lose 32% to 27% of the expected yearly learning gains in English/Language Arts
- Students could lose 63% to 50% of the expected yearly learning gains in mathematics (p. 393)

Thus, there needed to be developed a way to help students attend class more frequently to make up the losses in yearly gains and to prevent losses in current yearly gains.

Action research has its foundations in traditional research; however, it is its own style of research. McNiff (2017) explained, “The action research family is wide and diverse, and different people hold different perspectives about what action research is, what it is for, who can do it and how” (p. 5). Both McNiff and Dustman et al. (2014) agreed that action research can be used by anyone in any walk of life in any job to find solutions to everyday problems. Reason and Bradbury (2005) also shared this view by saying “A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives” (p. 2.). Reason and Bradbury (2005) added that “action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment” (p. 2).

Research Design

This action research study utilized a mixed-methods research design measuring a weekly mentoring program’s ability to increase student attendance

numbers as compared to similar students not involved in the weekly meetings and measuring data concerning attitudes towards attendance and days missed. Together, the quantitative data of attendance numbers and the qualitative data of students' responses warranted a mixed-methods approach.

Qualitative research is designed to gather data to try to understand an identified phenomenon. Before student selection, using exploratory research was an integral part of the researcher's purpose of investigating the causes of students' chronic absenteeism in a high school setting. Stebbins (2001) described exploratory research as "the preliminary research to clarify the exact nature of the problem to be solved" (p. 3). This exploratory research was used to ensure additional research was taken into consideration during an experiment as well as determining research priorities, collecting data, and homing in on certain subjects which may have been difficult to take note of without exploratory research. In this study, exploratory research was part of exploratory action research as described by Dikilitas et al. (2015), because it explored issues in and around the classroom and did not interfere with everyday teaching unlike action research, which immediately starts a small-scale research project and attempts to measure results. Dikilitas et al. (2015) continued:

Only after a first exploratory research phase has been completed are teachers guided to consider trying to resolve emerging issues by implementing and evaluating new actions, which themselves are grounded in and justified by findings from the first, exploratory phase (p. 47).

Action research was used because, according to Herr and Anderson (2015), the goals of action research include the following:

1. The generation of new knowledge
2. The achievement of action-oriented outcomes
3. The education of both the researcher and the participants
4. Results that are relevant to the local setting
5. Sound and appropriate research methodology. (p. 67)

To gather qualitative data, I felt that qualitative exploratory research was best to focus on the understanding as to the “why” absences were occurring. This study followed the ethnographic research design of a qualitative study in that by design the research questions allowed students to voice their perspective on individual absences and past patterns of absenteeism. These perspectives helped the researcher make educated determinations and give possible solutions which lead to action research being implemented to develop programs to benefit future students who may be in similar situations.

Quantitative data was gathered by obtaining weekly attendance numbers of the students volunteering for the study during the duration period. These numbers were then compared to attendance numbers for those asked to participate in the study but declined, those students qualifying for the study but not selected, and the students who were not eligible for the study.

Research Setting

The research took place in a rather large suburban high school located on the outskirts of the capital city. The school population was 1,375 students with

approximately 578 students who had taken all virtual classes the prior school year. Of the students attending face to face instruction, the following was the population breakdown:

- 49.2% male / 50.8% female
- 42.5% Caucasian / 33.5% Black / 17.4% Hispanic / 6.6% Other
- 14.3% Special Needs
- All students were issued Chromebooks at a one-to-one ratio

Because the school was in a low-income area, there was a common perception that students either missed school due to having jobs to support their family, remained home and watch younger siblings, or missed school-provided transportation.

Research Rationale

The rationale of the study was to contemplate intervention strategies that may be helpful to increase attendance based upon given reasons of absenteeism and concepts of future impact as determined by the answers to the research questions. Results of the study will help determine future interventions because it came coming from students and served as a link as to why an absence occurred with possible solutions and what may help with attendance. Secondly, having a weekly meeting with a mentor to discuss a range of topics may help the student focus on personal thoughts and beliefs that may affect their attitudes toward being present in school and classes. These mentoring sessions may also help determine if the development of an elective class during the school day could be

beneficial for students identified as chronically absent and truant as a method to help improve school attendance.

The Economic Policy Institute (Garcia & Weiss, 2018) and the American Education Research Association (BinSaeed et al., 2009; Hamlin, 2020) both conducted studies about absenteeism and how it affected academic performance. There is much to be said concerning absenteeism, factors associated with it, and the academic/economic impact of it. Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007) tied poor attendance rates and dropping out of high school with higher rates of unemployment, reduced income, poor health, and higher mortality rates. The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion also conducted a study by Burgess et al. (2002) to look at possible correlations between chronic absenteeism in upper grades and found that truancy was “a function of the estimated economic returns from work, crime, and school” (p. iii).

Some of the major challenges for schools are chronic absenteeism, truancy, and low graduation rates (Garry, 1996; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). It seems that schools battle this problem on a yearly basis with little hope in sight. There needs to be an understanding of the terminology used with absences and how terms are viewed in individual schools and across the United States to help focus on the problem of chronic absenteeism.

Student Selection

At the beginning of the study, a list of students missing 10 or more days the previous semester was obtained from the attendance office with permission obtained from administration and guidance from the school's Attendance

Interventionalist. The reason behind selecting 10 or more days the prior semester was because the school was on a four-by-four schedule meaning students took four classes daily per semester. As a result, there were 90 days per class, and if a student were to miss 10 days, this was 11% of the class. Not only was instruction time lost, but the student can also be retained for having an excessive number of absences, which for the district was having five or more unexcused absences. After chronically absent students were identified, they were then selected using stratified random sampling to avoid potential bias that may occur through other approaches with the strata being freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior. Stratified random sampling is the process of sampling from groups (strata) of similar individuals within the population separately. Then these separate “subsamples” was combined to form the sample (Starnes & Tabor, 2018). Approximately 10% of each stratum was selected. The reason for small numbers was to avoid saturation of data where no new information was being learned from the data being received. Peck et al. (2016) explained that a small sample size is enough to represent the whole population.

Once potential students were identified and selected, their parents/guardians were contacted requesting permission to use their students in the study. Once verbal permission was granted, an informed consent letter [Appendix B] was sent home. Classroom teachers at the school being studied were chosen using random sampling. A letter requesting participation in the study was sent to both students [Appendix C] and teachers [Appendix D] selected for the study.

Intervention Selection

The mentoring sessions were selected from lessons the school had tried in a whole school setting a few years prior to the study. I felt that there could be a benefit of selecting lessons that focused on concerns found in the literature concerning chronic absenteeism.

Mentor Selection

Teachers attended an in-service training explaining the usage and teaching techniques of the lessons. Teachers who had not attended this training were excused from the mentor selection process. Selecting teachers who had been trained ensured the lessons were presented in a consistent manner.

The next selection criteria identified teachers that had an observed positive student/teacher relationship. From this group, myself and seven other teachers were randomly selected. As students returned their signed consent forms, they were randomly assigned to a mentor sharing the same lunch period. Eleven students elected to meet weekly, with five of the mentors. There ranged from one to three students assigned to each mentor. The mentors had classroom experiences ranging from six to 24 years. The five teachers taught in the following subjects: Mathematics, English, Science, Foreign Language, and an Elective subject.

Intervention

I decided to implement a weekly mentoring program for six weeks to discuss student absences [Appendix E]. As a secondary effect, this would hopefully increase student attendance. During this meeting, students were to

discuss with their mentor the perceived impact in the classes that were missed and the reasons behind the absence as directed by a weekly questionnaire [Appendix F]. These discussions were intended to be open-ended, which allowed flexibility of the participants to answer the questions without bias or steering towards perceived answers. The participants wrote down their answers on the provided questionnaire. If no days were missed, then the discussion focused on if there were any days that the student had the opportunity to miss and why the opportunity was not taken. These discussions followed the same formatting as if days had been missed. The discussions aimed to help the student focus on the benefits of being present and hopefully identify adverse consequences of not being present. Also, these discussions will be used in future studies that will focus on reasons behind absences and strategies to promote class attendance based on specific reasons and thought processes of students.

After the discussion of the weekly questionnaire, the mentor walked through a brief lesson that focused on life skills and student attitudes, as well as the thought process behind those attitudes. These lessons were intended to get the student to start thinking about why they make the choices they make, how their attitudes may have been formed, how to cope with stress, and how to reflect upon those ideas. These lessons were intended as a self-reflection for the students to internalize the answers and were not intended as an open discussion. If the student wanted to discuss their answers and thoughts, it was not discouraged. However, answers were not forced nor were verbal explanations required. The following were the titles of the weekly lessons:

- Week One: Pressure from the Outside
- Week Two: Pressure from the Inside
- Week Three: Choosing Attitudes
- Week Four: Freedom and Responsibility
- Week Five: Effective Decision-Making
- Week Six: Minding Mindsets

Procedures

Before selecting the participants for this study, the researcher gained permission from the Instructional Review Board (IRB) to conduct a study using human subjects. Once permission was granted from the IRB, research participants were selected to participate in the study using stratified simple random sampling. After students were selected, a phone call was made to the student's parents/guardians explaining the research, and verbal permission was obtained. After verbal permission had been granted, written consent forms about the research study and approved by the IRB were given to both parents/guardians and research participants. Both parents/guardians and students were given adequate opportunity to read, understand, ask questions, and consult with the researcher before the forms were signed. Emphasis was placed that permission was completely voluntary and that students could refuse to participate in the study or leave at any time during the study without penalty or adverse consequences. If a student was 18 years of age or older and was selected for the study, a parental consent form was not required. A signed copy of the consent form was provided to the participants.

Data Collection, Measures, and Tools

After the permissions had been granted by the parents/guardians, each student was given an initial questionnaire [Appendix G]. The questionnaire was worded in such a way that determined if attendance was an issue, not only the prior semester but in prior years as well. The questionnaire also helped ascertain if the student saw attendance in a positive or negative light as well as their perspective on the impact of class performance in the foreseeable future.

During the six-week research period, the attendance of each student being studied was closely monitored. At the end of each week, there was a face-to-face mentoring session with the students involved in the research. Before each session, the students filled out a form indicating if any absences occurred, the reason(s), and the consequences of missed days. If no absences occurred, a separate form was completed asking for any perceived benefits from being in class each day. This set of questions was the same for each absence, helped determine the reason(s) for the absence, and gauged if there are any perceived advantages/disadvantages from absences. Afterward, there was a dialogue between the researcher and student where a discussion ensued about the answers to the questions that were filled out on each form. These sets of questions were given each week whether an occurrence of an absence happened or not.

After the study, data from those involved in the study were compared with those students identified as chronically absent not involved in the study. The average number of absences was then compared to determine if any

improvement was shown for those involved in the study. This comparative data was used to help validate the research as described below.

Validity and Reliability

Discovering the reasons for absences is one key to developing programs and interventions to keep students in school. The interview process and questions, as well as the absence questionnaire and mentoring sessions, were designed to elicit details from the participants.

In a qualitative study, the information can help researchers “understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing” (Eisner, 1991, p. 58). Thus, reliability can be measured in terms of credibility, neutrality, and consistency. By using a comparative quantitative aspect, the quantitative part of the research can be used to triangulate the different parts of the study and strengthen the qualitative aspect of the study (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) contended triangulation lends credibility, neutrality, and consistency of the data collected, which allowed for comparison of data collected by other similar studies, thus ensuring the reliability of the present study.

Before the research, based on literature concerning chronic absenteeism, three themes were developed: cannot/will not/do not (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b). Under these initial themes, subthemes pairs were developed with an underlying theme for each. As participants answered various questions, their responses were placed into one of the themes. If a response did not fit into any of the developed themes, they were assigned a separate theme and placed into a miscellaneous subtheme. After analyzing all the miscellaneous responses, other

subthemes with their own underlying themes were developed. In this way, all responses were classified. If any unique responses did not fit into any subtheme, they were identified as an outlier.

Design and Safeguards

There are two concerns in this study. The first concern was if the mentor had any influence outside the study. The mentor should not have been a current teacher of the participant which could unduly affect their current class grades, nor should they have been a current coach of a student-athlete who may affect playing time or participation in an event. This is to avoid possible bias of power relationships with participants (Millwater & Ehrich, 2008). The mentor should not have influence in either of these areas.

The second concern was the perception of the students involved in the study by other students. The students involved in the study should not have been identified in any way as being truant and/or chronically absent to those outside of the study. Confidentiality was a must.

To protect the participants, the aforementioned procedures were followed. The *Belmont Report* (U. S. Department of Health and Human Service, 1979) ensured confidentiality and privacy as well as protection from coercion or undue influence. An informed consent form was reviewed with each participant in detail and any questions were answered before they signed the informed consent form.

Due to the sensitive nature of chronic absenteeism, students may not have been willing to participate in the study. Students may also have personal reasons that they may not be willing to share information with parents/guardians

or those in a leadership position at the school in which they attend. As a result, there must be safeguards to ensure privacy. All face-to-face meetings were conducted in an environment where everyone felt safe to voice their opinions and beliefs without fear of sanctions or reprisals.

Information that the students provided was not shared with anyone outside of the study in a way that could identify them as the source of that information. During the transcription of the data, all identifiers were eliminated and only the researcher and individual teachers knew which data pertained to which individual(s). Information was then stored on a separate storage device to which only the researcher had access to. The only time information was shared was if the researcher or teacher had been made aware of a situation that put a minor in danger. Educators are mandatory reporters, and parents/guardians, as well as the students, were made aware of this before the intervention process began.

Researcher's Role

For this research, I am an insider. I am convinced, based both on research and my own experience, that the positionality (gender, race, and class) of both instructors and learners shape how classroom dynamics unfold and how knowledge is constructed in a learning environment. In terms of my own teaching, the fact that I am a White man from a middle-class background, socialized to value relationships, affects my teaching and how students relate to me, and the various positionalities of the students affect the way they relate to each other classifies me as an insider as well.

Due to the level of relatability between myself and my subjects, as well as my belief that an understanding of these students as more than students is necessary, I feel that I am qualified to conduct the study.

The role of a researcher is extremely significant in any qualitative research design. I am the chief collector and analyst of the data collected. I have 13 years of experience at the school where data is to be collected and have 24 total years' experience as a classroom teacher. Additionally, I have witnessed the adverse effects of missed days on a student's understanding of missing taught material, not only on imminent tests but on future classes as well.

Even though some students involved in the study were former students of the researcher, this had no impact on the study since it explored the reasons behind current absences. There was a diligent effort to ensure that none of the students involved had a current teacher as an advisor during the time of the study.

Data Analysis Strategies

For both initial and weekly questionnaires, coding was used to group the responses. These coding groups were based on the groupings recognized by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012b), as well as subgroups recommended by Birioukov (2016). The main groups were:

- Cannot come to school – This is due to uncontrollable circumstances (illness or other obligations)
- Will not come to school – This is in order to avoid adverse situations (bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment)

- Do not come to school – This is because the student doesn't see the value of school or they have something else they would rather do (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)

Secondary groupings included internal and external perceptions as well as people and environment (Birioukov, 2016).

Summary

Chapter three described the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study. Data collection methods were explained as well as who the subjects were and how they were selected. Means of establishing credibility were also discussed to ensure the validity of the research. A detailed explanation was given as to the analysis of the qualitative data and how adaptations would be made during the study should the need arise. Ethical consideration was given to the human subjects regarding their protection during the study and afterward.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Overview of Study

The purpose of this action research was to seek an understanding concerning perceptions of school attendance and the consequences of absences of students who have been identified as chronically absent. An initial questionnaire was given to students involved in the study to determine the types of factors surrounding absences and decisions not to attend school. Typical characteristics of chronically absent students involved personal illness. Having student input shortly after absences occurred gave insight to helping the education system prevent an excessive number of absences from occurring for certain students and their situations. Secondly, students attended meetings weekly with a mentor to discuss absences, their occurrences, and participated in a life skills lesson. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from an initial questionnaire and weekly questionnaires.

Strategy

As an intervention strategy, students were asked to participate in a six-week program with a teacher who would serve as a mentor. During these meetings, students were given a questionnaire asking if any days had been missed the prior week. If absences did occur, the reason for the absence was gathered and if there were any perceived consequences because of missed

class time. Next, students were asked if any opportunities occurred for an absence, but the opportunity was not taken. The students were asked for the reason as to why they did not take advantage of the opportunity.

After the discussion concerning absences, the prior week had taken place, the mentor presented one of six life lessons with the students in their small group depending on the week of the study. The lessons were intended to help the students think about absenteeism and their mentality concerning school. Questions were not expected to be answered aloud, just things for students to consider.

General Findings

Demographics of Participants

At the school where the research was conducted, 256 students were identified as being chronically absent the prior semester. This represented approximately 19% of the student population. Of the 256 students, 63 were freshmen, 70 were sophomores, 66 were juniors, and 58 were seniors. From each grade level, six students, or approximately 10%, were asked to participate in the study for a total of 24. Of the 24 students, 22 students participated in the initial questionnaire part of the study. The following tables represent the demographics of the 22 students:

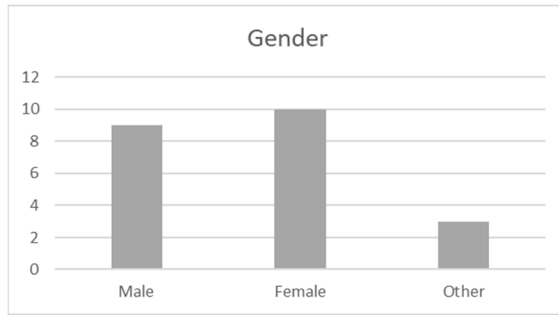


Figure 4.1 Student's Gender Identity

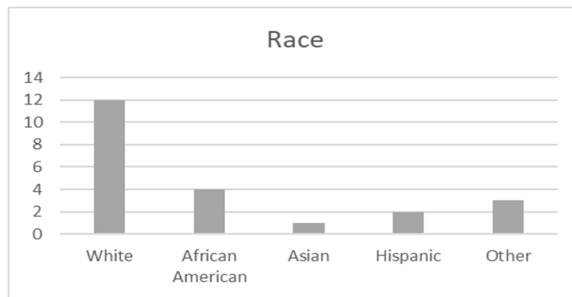


Figure 4.2 Student's Ethnicity

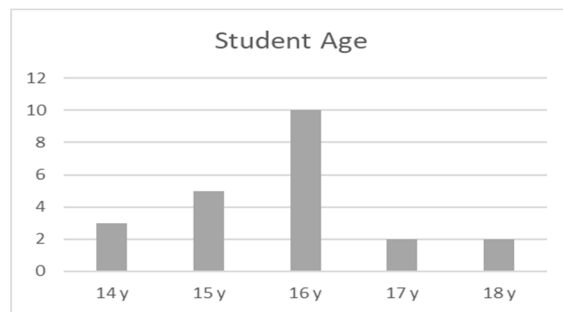


Figure 4.3 Age of Students

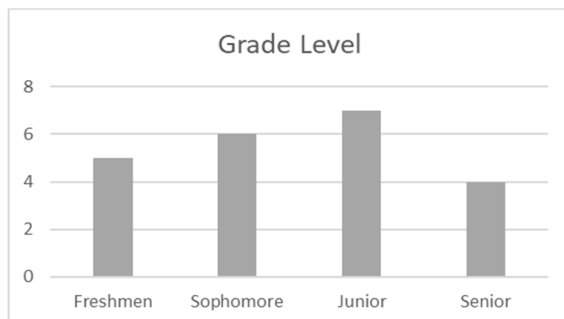


Figure 4.4 Grade Level of Participants

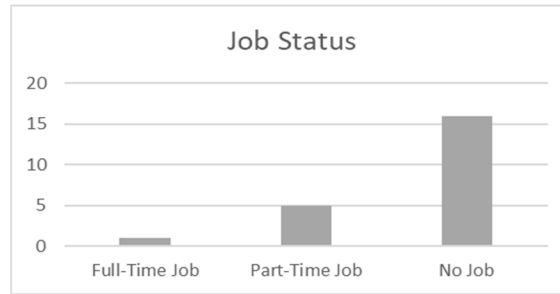


Figure 4.5 Student's Work Situation

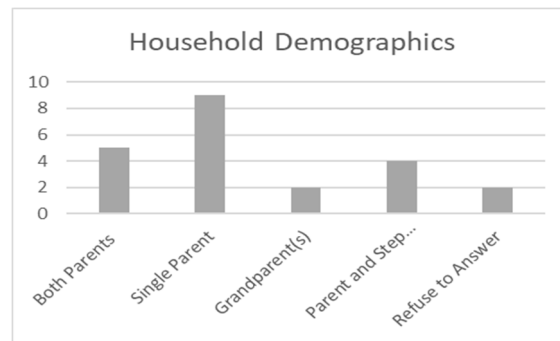


Figure 4.6 Household Makeup

Seven students knew their grade point average, which ranged from 2.3 to 3.85. Lastly, five students acknowledged having to repeat a previous grade, with three of the grades being their freshmen year, another their junior year, and one grade in elementary school (third grade).

Discussion of Initial Questionnaire Responses

The initial questionnaire was made up of 23 questions [Appendix D]. These questions explored students' perceptions ranging from likes and dislikes concerning school, classes, and friends. All the questions were open-ended which allowed multiple free responses as well as allowing students to answer without introducing bias into their responses. Each of the following tables highlights what the researcher felt were the focus questions. Coding, according to the cannot/will not/do not grouping (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b), was used to

group responses into similar categories and specific responses were included to highlight the grouping. There may have been more than 22 responses per question since students were allowed to have more than one response per question.

Table 4.1 Grouping of Questions

Question Groupings	Major Themes	Subthemes
Grouping One		
What are some things you really like about school? (Q1)	Will Not Attend (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)	People Environment (Birioukov, 2016)
What are some things you really dislike about school? (Q2)		
Grouping Two		
Tell me about the kind of things that keep you away from school. (Q6)	Cannot Attend Will Not Attend Do Not Attend (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)	
What kind of things keep you away from school? (Q19)		
What were the reasons you missed that many days? (Q22)		
Grouping Three		
What is difficult about going to class? (Q12)	Will Not Attend Do Not Attend (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)	Other People Environment Personal Thoughts (Birioukov, 2016)
What is easy about going to class? (Q13)		
Grouping Four		
What is difficult about being absent from school? (Q16)	Will Not Attend (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b)	Internal Thoughts External Situations (Birioukov, 2016)
What is easy about being absent from school? (Q17)		

Grouping One

The first grouping centered around questions one and two. Question one was “What are some things you really like about school?” and question two was “What are some things you really dislike about school?” There were two main themes surrounding these two questions: people and environment.

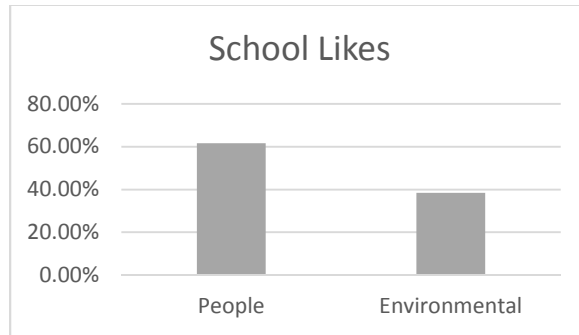


Figure 4.7 Question One Comparison

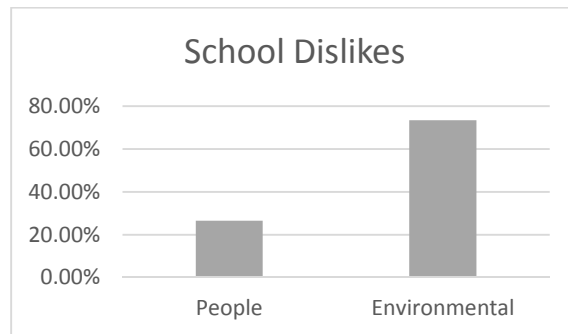


Figure 4.8 Question Two Comparison

In comparing the likes and dislikes, students liked hanging out with their friends and the interactions they had with others. Students in the survey tended to like their teachers (eight responses) more than they disliked their teachers (six responses). The starting time of school and the class schedules had a high response rate (five responses) for school dislikes. The students who responded

negatively towards beginning time felt that having a school start time of 8:50 am was too early at the high school level.

Grouping Two

The second grouping focused on questions six, 19, and 22. Question six was “Tell me about the kind of things that keep you away from school?” and question 19 was “What kinds of things keep you away from school?”, which were similar. Question six dealt upfront about absences whereas question 19 was asked after a series of questions that were intended to get the student thinking along the lines of missing days. Question 22 was “What were some reasons you missed that many days?” to see if the reasons aligned. These responses fell into the cannot attend school, will not attend school, and do not attend school categories (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b). Cannot responses included illness, household instability, transportation issues, and the need to work. Will not responses included avoidance of drama, unsafe conditions, and school factors such as avoidance of school staff or classroom assessments. Do not responses revolved around the student not seeing the value in being at school or just wanting to do something else.

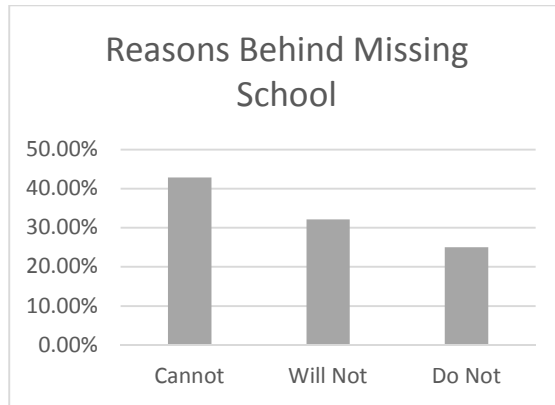


Figure 4.9 Question Six Comparison

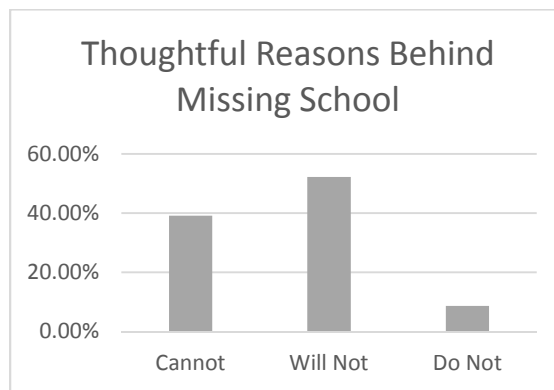


Figure 4.10 Question 19 Comparison



Figure 4.11 Question 22 Comparison

Most days missed fell into the cannot category. In this grouping, students were unable to attend school due to reasons outside their control, which were mainly personal illnesses. However, being asked questions that help them focus on school aspects, students tended to attribute not attending classes as more of an

avoidance of school situations. This fell more along the lines of the responses in question two.

Grouping Three

The third grouping focused on questions 12 and 13. Question 12 was “What is difficult about going to class?” and question 13 was “What is easy about going to class?” Since these absences involved cutting specific classes, the responses were grouped into three categories: other people, environment, or personal thoughts.

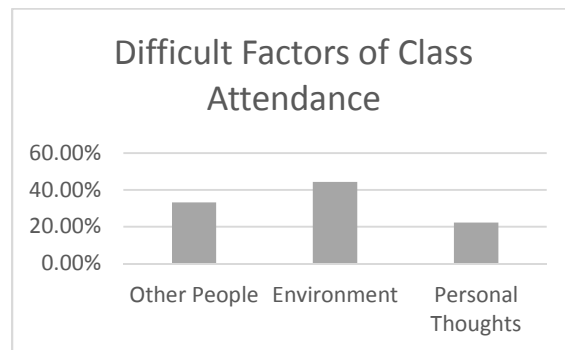


Figure 4.12 Question 12 Comparison

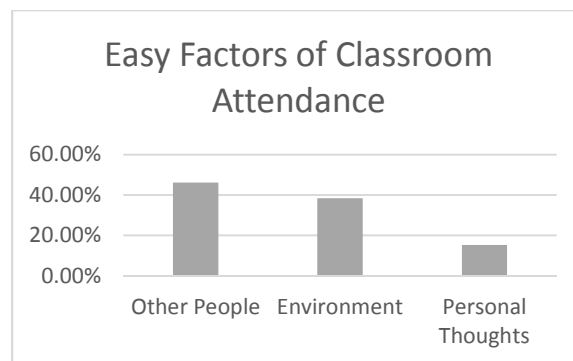


Figure 4.13 Question 13 Comparison

In this grouping of questions, it appeared that the environment made it hard for students to attend class. Students mentioned school start time, having to sit still for long periods, and doing the same thing day after day. Students found

classmates, friends, and teachers made it easy to attend class. Specific groups of people were mentioned in the easy answers, where “people” was the most common response in what made it difficult to go to class.

Grouping Four

The final grouping focused on questions 16 and 17. Question 16 was “What is difficult about being absent from school?” and question 17 was “What is easy about being absent from school?” This is significant because as there may be certain classes students either like or dislike, as questions 12 and 13 focused, these questions focused on school as a whole.

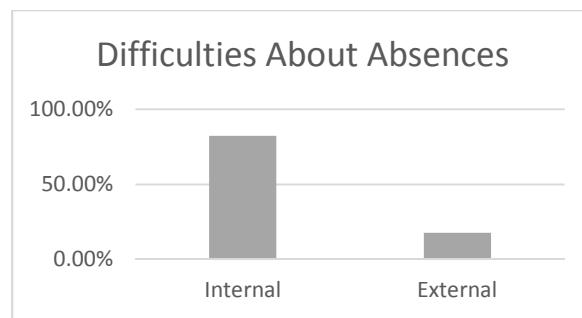


Figure 4.14 Question 16 Comparison

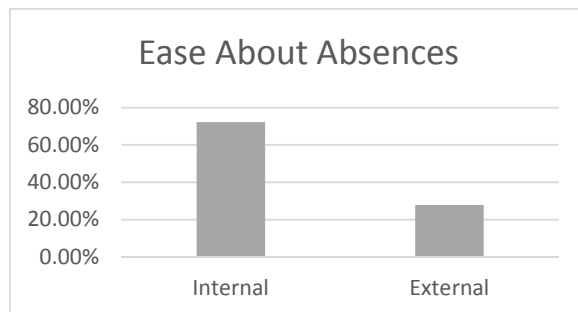


Figure 4.15 Question 17 Comparison

In this grouping, having to make up work was the most difficult aspect of missing school. At the school where the data was collected, classes were on a four-by-four schedule. This means students had four classes each day for a semester

and changed to four different classes the second semester. If a student missed a day, they would have four classes worth of work that may be needed to make up. One student stated that it was easy to make up the work and that it was worth missing the entire school day. Being away from school and relaxing was the highest response for what made it easy to be absent.

Miscellaneous Questions

The remaining questions focused on the student's thoughts and mentality towards friends, school, and teachers in general. Some of these questions were: "Tell me about your relationships with your school friends.", "What do you do when you miss school?", "Tell me about one class you really enjoy.", "Tell me about one class you really hate.", "Recount a day when you did not go to school. What did you do?", and "Describe your relationship with your teachers."

Based on the previous school year's attendance, students who missed 10 or more days were identified and a random sample from this group was selected. Question 21 asked how many days of school they missed the prior year. The following are the responses that students gave:

- Two students answered that they missed fewer than ten days, stating that it was from four to six days.
- Two students knew it was a large number, with one stating "definitely more than 20" and another stating "maybe half a semester."
- Two students felt that it was maybe ten days, while the rest were unsure.

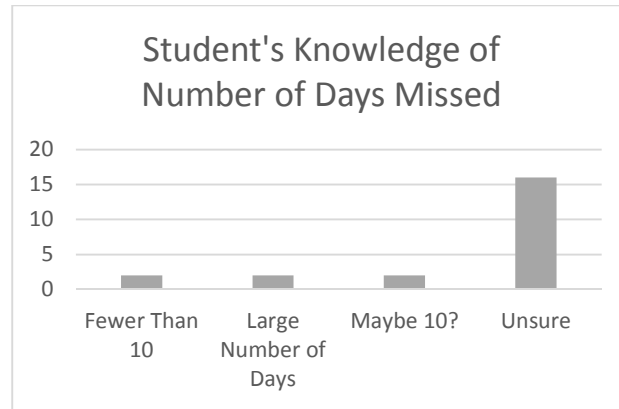


Figure 4.16 Number of Days Students Thought They Missed

The final question asked if missing days affected their mentality towards classes, and if yes, how so. One student declined to answer the question. Twelve students stated, “not really” and two expanded on their no answers by stating, “Even if I miss school I know I have to pass and have to complete the work I missed” and “I needed a break from school.” One student initially wrote down a “no” answer, but then stated, “Well, a little. It made me more stressed about classes and finishing school.” The remaining eight responses stated “yes.” These were their responses:

- Needed the time to work on myself.
- School doesn’t really teach me anything and teachers don’t care about you. A grade does not determine your worth.
- It puts me behind, so it makes me stressed and unmotivated to catch up.
- I was very behind in my school and felt like I couldn’t get back to where I needed to be.
- It made me want to skip more.

- I was afraid of what I might miss.
- Even if I miss school I know I have to pass and have to complete the work I missed.
- But only some classes. Some classes don't give you a break and give you work you don't have time to do.

Discussion of Weekly Questionnaire Responses

The 22 students answering the initial questionnaire were invited to meet weekly on Mondays during their lunch period. Monday was chosen as the day to meet because it was early in the week and as the discussion and questions asked about days missed the prior week. Of the 22 students, 11 students elected to participate in the weekly mentoring meetings. In a follow up with the students who did not participate in the weekly program, all but one student responded in similar statements that they did not want to be in school as it was, and they were unwilling to give up their free time during lunch with friends to sit and talk with a teacher in a classroom. The one student not responding just shrugged their shoulders without giving any verbal excuse. The following tables represent the demographics of the students participating in the weekly meetings.

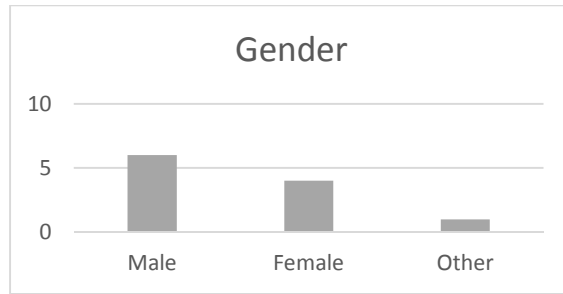


Figure 4.17 Gender Identity of Weekly Participants

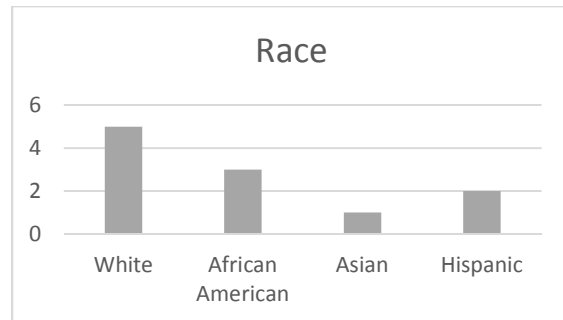


Figure 4.18 Ethnicity of Weekly Participants

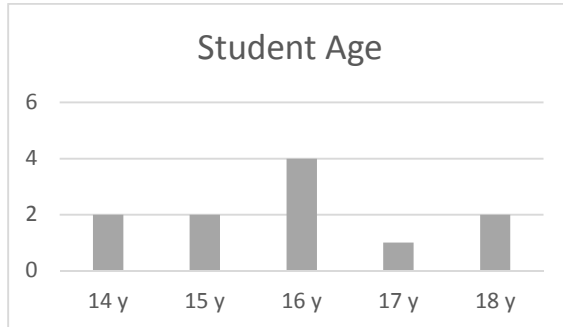


Figure 4.19 Age of Weekly Participants

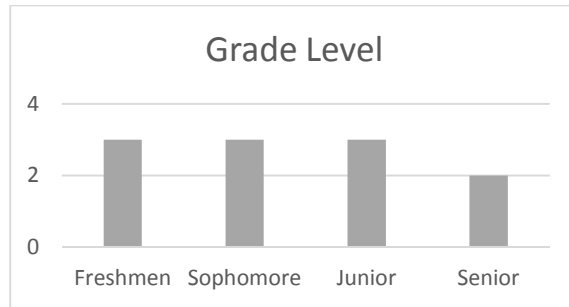


Figure 4.20 Grade Level of Weekly Participants

All 11 students attended the weekly meeting intermittently. During these meetings, there were discussions about absences that may have occurred during the previous week and the reasons they occurred. After the discussion concerning absences, the mentor walked through a mini life skills lesson with participants. Six students did not miss any days the prior week of the meeting. Eleven absences occurred among the remaining five students.

Question One

Question one asked for the reasons behind the absence. These are the reasons behind the absences:

- No reason given (three responses)
- Dentist/Dr. Appointment (three responses)
- I overslept
- I woke up late, then got a speeding ticket on the way to school
- Last Tuesday before the break because nobody else was coming, so I didn't come
- I had to babysit my nephew
- I missed the bus

Question Two

Next, question two focused on the effects of class performance for the days missed. These are the responses:

- Nothing really (seven responses)
- That I get more work I have to do and I get work missing that I have to do
- It affects my grades by not doing the work for the day I missed
- I showed up to school really late and had to spend the rest of the day in detention
- I missed a quiz in second block, but the teacher drops one quiz every 9 weeks, so it didn't affect my grade

Question Three

Question three asked if absences affected the way the student perceived the class and/or teacher. These are the responses:

- No (seven responses)
- I don't know what's going on
- No, I kept my cool
- No. I currently have good grades and my education is important to me
- No because she dropped the grade

Question Four

Lastly, question four focused on opportunities for absences to occur but were not taken, and why they were not taken. Two students answered that opportunities had occurred, one student saying he had several. When asked why

they decided to come to school, one student replied, "I have to. I am under court order to be here." And the second student responded they "rescheduled a doctor's appointment because I had a test scheduled and didn't want to have to make it up later."

Attendance

Because students did not attend every meeting over six weeks (27 days), attendance records had to be pulled to ascertain the true number of absences occurring for those students who elected to attend the weekly meetings and those electing not to participate in the weekly meetings. For the 11 students, there were a total of 36 days missed, mostly occurring on Mondays, for an average of 3.27 days missed per student over the six weeks. Two of the students did not miss any days over the time frame, with a maximum number of days missed being eight. However, for the 11 students who did not participate in the weekly meetings, there were a total of 73 days missed for an average of 6.64 days missed. One student did not miss any days over the six weeks, while the maximum number of days missed was 15.

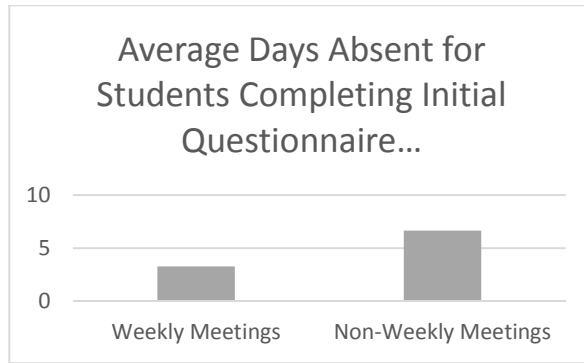


Figure 4.21 Comparison of Average Number of Days Absent Over the Course of the Study

Additionally, there were 234 students identified as chronically absent who were not selected to participate in the study. Over the six-week study period, these students averaged 5.86 absences. The remaining 1,114 students not eligible for the study averaged .73 absences over the course of the study.

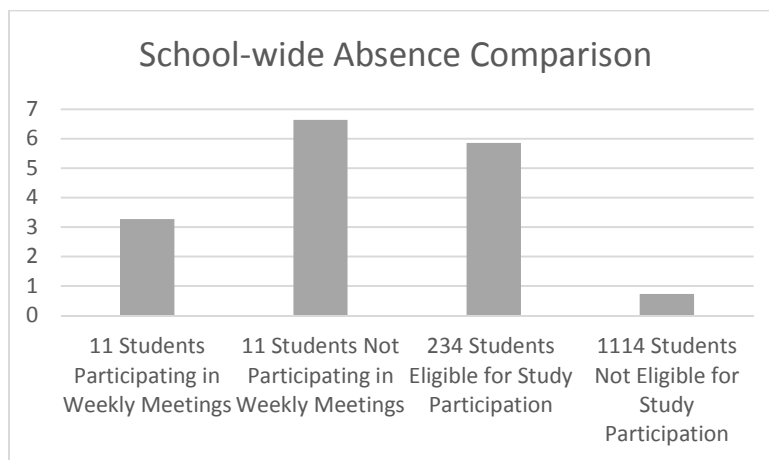


Figure 4.22 School-wide Comparison of Absences Over the Course of the Study

Analysis of Data

Meanings Behind Findings

For a large group of students who have an attendance problem, there was a general feeling expressed that they wish to be present. However, there were situations out of their control that kept them away from school. Many of the students selected for the study lived in single-parent households. In addition to this, the area surrounding the school had a low socioeconomic status with a rather large rural area being served. Many of these students relied on bus transportation to get to school. If school transportation was missed, there was no way to get to school. Also, many of the students expressed no concern about missing days due to the ease of finding missed assignments.

One drawback was that an estimated 15% of the students do not have internet access at home. Even though students were issued a Chromebook on a one-to-one ratio, this posed a problem for students to get the work on the day that was missed. It was possible to obtain the assignments once they returned to school, but students often experience stress concerning making up the work if multiple days were missed.

Research Questions

There were two research questions presented for the study:

RQ 1: From the perspective of the student, what is the perceived impact of poor school attendance on the student's immediate academic performance?

RQ 2: Does a weekly mentoring program affect the number of absences for chronically absent or truant students over a period of time?

Findings Addressing RQ 1

Over half of the students in the study did not see school absences as having an immediate impact on their subject grades. Several students stated that due to the current nature of classes and teachers posting their work online, it was easier to make up the work. One deterrent was missing classroom instruction and not getting the one-on-one help, thus getting somewhat behind in the class.

Findings Addressing RQ 2

There was strong evidence that having a weekly meeting with a mentor improved school attendance. Even though students did not attend every week, absence numbers decreased by 50% for those who met with a teacher.

Supplemental Analysis of Data

An additional analysis of students' thoughts warranted analysis surrounding responses in question two. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the district's high school start time was 8:00 am. The time was moved to give classroom educators more time to set up for virtual classes before having students present in classroom meetings. Three years before this change in start time, the district discontinued a Wednesday delayed start of 10:00 am. The district had analyzed data and discovered that most absences for high school students occurred on these delayed start days. Yet after doing away with the delayed start days, there still was no improvement in overall absences.

Summary

A summary of the research findings is presented in this chapter. In looking at the responses across the initial 23 questions, there were underlying themes

concerning past absences. Furthermore, the weekly questions in the mentoring meetings brought into focus current perceptions surrounding absences and their effects. The next chapter will discuss the findings and draw conclusions based on the research information.

CHAPTER FIVE

Implications

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons behind students identified as chronically absent, their thoughts about absences, and their perceptions on the impact of grades and attitudes towards school. Secondly, a group of chronically absent students was assigned to a mentor to discuss absences in a weekly meeting to see if attendance numbers improved. The data collected showed that many of the students surveyed did not perceive absences as being a detriment to their current classes. Data collected also showed that meeting with a mentor had a positive impact on school attendance. Chapter five will discuss the findings to the literature and other studies concerning chronically absent and truant students.

Results in Relation to Literature Review

Chapter two outlines influencing factors of school attendance. The student's responses to several questions in the initial questionnaire and weekly interviews supports what had been found in the research. Firstly, concerning student factors, students responded that relations with administrators and school rules are major dislikes as well as tests and schoolwork in general. Having hard classes and having to learn things they are not interested in learning are also factors that keep students away from school. In contradiction to Balkis et al.

(2016), none of the students expressed a negative attitude concerning academic ability. The student's main concern about missing days were having to make the work up and falling behind. Havik et al. (2015) contended that a student's emotional stability comes into consideration for students to go to school or not. In every question in the initial questionnaire dealing with what kept students away from school, some mention of mentality comes up as a response for at least twenty-five percent or more of the total responses. Many absences in the student factors were due to either personal or family illness the prior year. During the school year, the district being studied had hybrid schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students missed in-person days due to infection or having to be quarantined due to close contact. Instead of being present, students had to attend virtually, which involved logging in to a live class session. Students express either an unwillingness to attend these virtual classrooms or overslept and missed classes. This overlaps with the family factors. At this point, parental involvement in their child's education is important. Only one student mentions parental involvement by saying that missing school makes them "stressed because my mom doesn't want me to miss school."

School factors also plays a major role in the student's decision to miss school. Very few of the students express any concern with missing days. This is because their teachers posted lessons or some sort of video outlining the work to be covered in class each day. If they are not at school, all they needed to do was to watch the lessons posted each day. This seems to be in direct conflict with missing virtual days, but the videos can be accessed at any point in the school

day, whereas virtual classes are time-specific for attendance. McNeal Jr (1997) and Balkis et al. (2016) pointed out that school climate plays an important role in school attendance, especially relations with teachers. In this survey, eight students indicate their teachers make coming to school easy, and six students claim that their teachers make it hard for them to attend school. Two students mention the uncleanliness of the school making it hard to come. One student that mentioned the uncleanliness of the building has asthma, and the condition of the school may play a role in their inability to attend school due to health issues.

COVID-19 and Absences

With the advent of COVID-19, it seems that students may be more willing to miss school knowing that lessons and work will be posted online. Before COVID-19, students needed to make an individualized effort to obtain missing notes and catch up on assignments. The district in which the school was being studied started requiring educators to post daily assignments as well as some sort of lesson accompanying those assignments outlining and/or teaching the assignment. Many of the students feel no pressure or remorse about missing a school day because it was now easier for them to catch up on missing work and turn in assignments.

Because COVID-19 caused school systems to scramble and devise a new platform of teaching, this has opened new opportunities and reasons behind school non-attendance. Before COVID-19, virtual schooling was mainly used by homeschooling parents who wanted their children to learn subject matter that was better taught by an individual with a degree and a more in-depth knowledge

in the field being taught. These students involved in the virtual school system had the desire to be virtually present and parents were more aware and involved in their children's attendance. Unfortunately for students who do not want to be present in school already, this may have opened an opportunity to not attend those virtual classes they may have needed to take.

Because COVID-19 and the effects of new ways of presenting material in and out of a classroom setting are new, there is a paucity of literature exploring this phenomenon considering online and virtual classes. However, there are data starting to emerge showing that virtual schooling and online classes are hurting student attendance (Nathwani et al., 2021; Tarkar, 2020). More research and data collection are needed concerning the impact of COVID-19 and the policies implemented by school systems.

Lastly, transportation and school start times were an issue for some of the students. The school being studied has an 8:50 am start time. McKeever and Clark (2017) link a start time of later than 8:30 am and an improved effect on attendance rates. Two students habitually miss the bus which caused an excess of absences. However, Gottfried (2009) found that "riding the school bus appears to be linked to fewer absences" (p. 242) and "children in rural locations tended to exhibit better school attendance [when] compared to other forms of transportation" (p. 243). In these two cases, the students admit that they either overslept or forgot to set their alarms, but still attributed non-attendance to missing the bus.

Practice Recommendations

Once students are enrolled in school, this must be followed by attending school regularly and, in turn, followed by regular class attendance. Lack of school attendance has many aspects, and it cannot be addressed all at once. Small parts need to be dealt with individually, and it could take years to improve. In one aspect of the data, several students' responses attribute missing an entire school day due to their attitudes and feelings towards certain class subjects.

For students responding with "boring lessons", there needs to be meaningful access to education. One factor that may lead to students' feelings about a subject being boring is that many educational systems employ what is referred to as a spiral curriculum. Harden (1999) describes a spiral curriculum as having "an intricate revisiting of topics, subjects or themes throughout the course. A spiral curriculum is not simply the repetition of a topic taught. It also requires the deepening of it, with each successive encounter building on the previous one." (p. 141). If spiraling is not handled efficiently by the classroom teacher, the retouching upon subject matter may not be a "deepening" and could merely be a rehashing of what has been previously taught. Likewise, for students responding that "hard subjects" keep them away from school, the spiraling may not have been properly handled in that if or when a student has been exposed to a theme for the third time, there may have been a repetition of taught material in the first two experiences with the second exposure lacking the depth needed for a full comprehension needed for the third and subsequent aspects of the lesson.

In this situation, understanding the school structure is necessary. There is not a universal implementation of a solution to this underlying problem. Each school, after identifying a chronically absent student as either being bored or finding a subject hard, needs to analyze the curriculum involved.

For a smaller school that may have only one or two educators in each subject department, collaboration must occur to compare what has been taught in an earlier class or classes, what is currently being taught, and what is necessary for understanding the next level of the subject. In a smaller school's case, they could assign the student to have one teacher for a subject for the student's entire high school career. However, for larger schools where there are multiple educators in each subject department, the spiraling of themes gets much harder. In these situations, there needs to be two or three teachers in each department to handle curriculum selection.

Districts with multiple high schools could hire an individual at the district level to act as a liaison to coordinate curriculum between the schools. These individuals could then work together to make sure that the spiraling is handled efficiently, and that repetition and omissions are at a minimum. This can be handled by having quarterly meetings with all teachers within a department to discuss what has already been taught in the classes to ensure little overlapping has occurred and to make sure that what is needed for the following revisiting has been taught. Larger schools could also assign students to have one teacher per subject for their entire school career as well, but the logistics could be much more complicated.

Secondly, schools should implement a weekly mentoring meeting held during the school day. These meetings should be capped at three students per session to encourage authentic reflection and discussions concerning absences. The data collected shows that the students who attend, at least part-time, the mentoring sessions exhibit less than half the number of absences as those students electing to not participate in the mentoring meetings.

Schools need to develop a safe and respectful school climate, teach critical social skills, help students establish an engaging relationship with a peer or adult, and implement individual and small group positive behavior support plans. These aspects should supersede the development of standalone or broad initiatives for addressing attendance. Having an alignment between reasons behind absences and generating a program specific to behavioral support can be effective in decreasing student absences.

Implementation Plan

After the conclusion of the study, the researcher will approach the district's current Chief Instructional Officer with the data and research concerning spiraling teaching practices. From here, there should be further conversations within departments driven by data collected each year at the schools, paying attention to specific subjects truant students find "boring" or hard. If spiraling has occurred, it may help identify areas of redundancy or omittance. The curriculum can then be analyzed, and teaching practices can be studied to eliminate one of the many aspects of chronic absenteeism and truancy.

Secondly, the findings will be shared with the school's administrative team, guidance department, and the Attendance Interventionalist. It will be highly recommended that chronically absent students be identified as early as possible during the school year and placed in small groups that will meet weekly with a teacher/mentor to discuss life skills that will help improve the student's attendance and their mentality towards absences. These small groups can meet either short term, six to seven weeks, or long term, depending on the life skills being presented. The program can also expand beyond the six skill lessons presented in the study. Depending on the number of students eligible for the intervention, there may be a need to meet on different days of the week. Additionally, the students may have the opportunity to meet on those different days. There could even be an incentive for seat-time recovery credit for their attendance of the meeting to help improve their attendance numbers.

Reflection on Research Process

Upon reflection of the research, the responses met expectations. Many of the students didn't seem to know the number of days they had missed or perceive any impact upon their grades. For the most part, they justified missing days because they needed a break. However, there were a couple of students who were upset at having to miss days. There seemed to be a bit of frustration because of missing the bus or having health issues that kept them away from school. There seems to be a misconception that chronically absent students do not want to be present at school, and that is not the case for all chronically absent students.

One major change for the research would have been not to have chronically absent students meet during the school day for research purposes. The disadvantages in this situation far outweighed the advantages. Having weekly meetings to discuss occurring absences shortly after their occurrence was beneficial because reasons were fresh in their memory. However, the most obvious disadvantage was trying to gather data concerning absences during school hours from students who do not regularly attend school.

Personally, the researcher gained insights into the overall structure of absences and how some students perceive school. Many times, there is so much more behind why a student decides to miss or is caused to miss school. The idea behind this study began before the COVID-19 pandemic caused many schools to go virtual. In the year leading up to the research gathering portion, the school being studied offered completely virtual schooling the entire school year and a hybrid school year which became full-time face-to-face instruction in November 2021. Many of the current students of the researcher not involved in the study knew of the study itself. They wanted to give data, but because they had not missed enough days to be considered chronically absent, they were not considered for the study. Several expressed surprise because they knew that had missed many days due to not logging into virtual lessons or completing work. This lends credence to the literature review concerning types of absences and the situations surrounding how they are input into the system. When schools initially went virtual, teachers in the district being studied were told to take attendance but the attendance numbers would not be held against the students.

After about six weeks, some students found out that they would not be held accountable for attendance numbers, word eventually got around, and online attendance dropped. This may have led to the next school year for those students attending all virtual to wrongly believe attendance numbers wouldn't be held against them, hence a large number of chronically absent and truant students in the 2019-2020 school year. This also may have led to students truly not knowing how many days they missed the previous year as addressed in question 21.

There are so many factors that lead to whether a student is absent or not. Professionally, educators need to understand that sometimes there are circumstances outside a student's ability to control. With the onset of COVID-19 and quarantine, absences are so much more than either excused or unexcused.

Limitations

One key limitation of the study was the small sample size in the weekly meetings (N=11). This was probably because the weekly meetings were held during school hours with students who already don't regularly attend school. It was difficult to obtain commitments from students who tended to be absent from school and classes. The study focused on an equal number of students from each grade level, which made it easy to see similarities for absences but made it difficult to generalize the absences for specific grade levels. After the study had concluded, the researcher asked a student who did not participate in the weekly meeting the reasons they had not met, to which the student replied: "I already

don't want to be in class. Why would I want to miss lunch and being with my friends just to sit and talk with a teacher about not being here?"

Recommendations for Future Research

There needs to be continued collection of existing and new data that enables districts and schools to answer attendance-related questions. Some of the questions should include, but are not limited to:

- What are current attendance rates?
- Which students (gender, race, socioeconomic status, current grade level, etc.) are present and are not present?
- When are students missing the most days (time of day, month, day of the week, class period, etc.)?
- What are the reasons behind each absenteeism (excused vs. unexcused, cannot attend school vs. will not attend school vs. do not attend school, etc.)?

Using this data, schools can identify existing practices and strategies that could be adapted and put into practice to help achieve an outcome of desired attendance rates. These practices need to be monitored frequently to help identify other possible systematic barriers to school attendance.

The Theory of Mentoring

Another recommendation is to explore the use of mentoring programs in further depth. According to mentorship theory (Ragins & Kram, 2007), there are new paradigms in place to describe mentoring relationships to help with variations in their purpose, structure, and quality. Three of these shifts focus on:

- Mentoring occurs within the context of developmental networks
- There is a dyadic and reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships and the critical role that mutuality and reciprocity play in relationships structure, processes, learning, and outcomes
- Recognition that mentoring relationships fall along a continuum of quality (Ragins & Kram, 2007, p. 660)

Aschenbrener and Johnson (2017) found “that existing mentorship programs lack adequate research...yet the limited research does demonstrate potential promise” (p. 14). Mentoring can be a useful tool in helping improve student attendance.

Why Does it Matter?

Because the school where the research is considered to have an overall low socioeconomic status (SES) and a low on-time graduation percentage, approximately 80%, it is important to examine ways to increase school attendance. Low attendance numbers are an indication of an early exit from school (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Sosu et al., 2021). Sosu et al. (2021) stated “children from families with lower SES face several structural barriers that affect their developmental and educational outcomes...provide insight into how family SES can lead to increased risks of school absenteeism” (p. 4). Having a low SES should not be a hinderance to school attendance. Exploring the will not/do not mindsets (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012b) with mentoring may help students graduate, thus breaking the cycle of low-income situations.

Summary

Absenteeism for students is a complex intertwining of thoughts, attitudes, and circumstances. Through this research, there were found to be a wide range of reasons behind absences and a student's decision to miss school. There was mixed reasoning behind missing due to the nature of online classes and the ease to make up work. Many of the students did not perceive any immediate consequences to their absences, and a few seemed to relish the fact that they missed school. For one student, there were strong emotions in their responses. This student was a senior and lived in a single-parent household, and that one parent was in the advanced stages of bone cancer. For this student, they saw no value in being in class and grades were inconsequential. Even though this may be an extreme case, how can a school emphasize the importance of school and class attendance when a student is faced with this? As educators, we need to work together with students to try in reducing absenteeism and work on truancy intervention programs. Understanding why a student decides not to attend classes and school is just a first step.

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APPENDIX A: GAGNÉ'S NINE EVENTS OF INSTRUCTION

Gagné's book, *The Conditions of Learning*, first published in 1965, identified the mental conditions for learning. These were based on the information processing model of the mental events that occur when adults are presented with various stimuli. Gagné created a nine-step process called the events of instruction, which correlate to and address the conditions of learning. The figure below shows these instructional events in the left column and the associated mental processes in the right column.

Table A.1 Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction

Instructional Event	Internal Mental Process
1. Gain attention	Stimuli activates receptors
2. Inform learners of objectives	Creates level of expectation for learning
3. Stimulate recall of prior learning	Retrieval and activation of short-term memory
4. Present the content	Selective perception of content
5. Provide "learning guidance"	Semantic encoding for storage long-term memory
6. Elicit performance (practice)	Responds to questions to enhance encoding and verification
7. Provide feedback	Reinforcement and assessment of correct performance
8. Assess performance	Retrieval and reinforcement of content as final evaluation
9. Enhance retention and transfer to the job	Retrieval and generalization of learned skill to new situation

APPENDIX B: INFORMED PARENT AND STUDENT CONSENT LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

CONSENT FOR CHILD TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT

Student's Perspectives of Chronic Absenteeism in a

Suburban High School

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

Your child is invited to volunteer for a research study conducted by Herbert Allen Gray. I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education, at the University of South Carolina. The University of South Carolina, Department of Education is sponsoring this research study. I am currently in my fourteenth year teaching mathematics at Airport High School. The purpose of this study is to gather student input concerning absences to ascertain reasons behind absences in hopes of conducting a later study specific to types of absences. A secondary goal is to explore if a mentoring program will help reduce the number of absences in students who have been identified as either chronically absent or truant. Your child is being asked to participate in this study because s/he missed 14 or more days of school last semester. This study is being done at Airport High School and will involve approximately 24 volunteers.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree for your child to participate in this study, they will do the following:

1. Complete a survey about attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions concerning school and school absences.
2. Participate in weekly mentoring meetings with a teacher and up to two other students.
3. During the weekly meetings, fill out a survey outlining any absences the prior week and opportunities for absences to occur.
4. Have his/her weekly discussion audio-recorded in order to ensure that the details are accurately captured.

DURATION:

Participation in the study involves 6 mentor meetings over a period of 6 weeks. Each meeting will last about 20 minutes.

LOCATION:

Meetings will take place in your child's assigned mentor's classroom during their lunch period every Monday.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS:

Loss of Confidentiality:

There are no risks anticipated in connection with this study; however, there is the potential for a breach of confidentiality. Specific safeguards to protect confidentiality are described in a separate section of this document.

BENEFITS:

This research may help researchers understand reasons behind why students do not attend classes and regularly miss school.

Your child may benefit from participating in this study by increased classroom attendance.

COSTS:

There will be no costs for participating in this study.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS:

Your child will not be paid for participating in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS:

Information obtained during this research may be published, but your child will not be identified. The information gathered during the meetings will be stored on a password encrypted thumb drive. Transcribed information will not be connected to participants' names as pseudonyms will be used. Only the individual conducting the research and your child's mentor will know who the pseudonyms are connected to. Study information will be securely stored in locked files and on password-protected computers prior to placement on the thumb drive.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Participation in this research study is voluntary and is not connected with regular school activities or grades. Your child is free not to participate, or to

stop participating at any time. If s/he withdraws from this study, the information already provided will be kept in a confidential manner. If you wish to withdraw your child from the study, please call or email the principal investigator listed on this form.

I have been given a chance to ask questions about this research study. These questions have been answered to my satisfaction. **If I have any more questions about my participation in this study, or a study related injury, I am to contact Herbert Gray at 803 345-5746 or email sassafras_tea_7@yahoo.com.**

Concerns about your rights as a research subject are to be directed to, Lisa Johnson, Assistant Director, Office of Research Compliance, University of South Carolina, 1600 Hampton Street, Suite 414D, Columbia, SC 29208, phone: (803) 777-6670 or email: LisaJ@mailbox.sc.edu.

I agree to have my child participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form for my own records.

If you wish for your child to participate, you and your child should sign below in the appropriate signature area.

Printed name of Student

Printed name of Parent/Legal Guardian

Signature of Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian _____
Date

Signature of Student _____
Date

APPENDIX C: STUDENT INVITATION LETTER

Dear Student

Congratulations! You have been selected to participate in a study that is looking at student attitudes concerning school absences. If you choose to participate, you will need to meet with an assigned teacher in their classroom during your lunch period either on Friday or Monday (they will let you know which day). On those days, all you will need to do is discuss and answer 4 questions concerning absences with them. I will be providing pizza and drinks on those days for your inconvenience of meeting during lunch. If you decide to participate, please have your parents/guardians sign the enclosed consent form. You will need to sign it as well. Once it has been signed, please return it to me (Room 201) as soon as possible. Also enclosed is a short questionnaire that will help me understand your thoughts about school. Please be completely honest in your answers. I will be the only one reading your responses and all data sent to the University of South Carolina will be completely anonymous. Here is the teacher who will be discussing your weekly answers with you:

Mr./Mrs. <Mentor's Name> (Room XXX)

See them on _____ when they are wanting to meet.

Once again, I hope you choose to participate in this study. The last meeting will take place before Christmas break, so it is a very short study.

Mr. Gray

APPENDIX D: TEACHER INVITATION LETTER

Mr./Mrs. <Mentor's Name>

You have been randomly selected as a teacher who has (XX) lunch to help in my research project. Feel free to decline as there are alternate teachers. If you choose to help, I ask for one day a week for you to meet with three students during lunch to help them fill out an initial questionnaire and a weekly questionnaire concerning absences or lack of and attitudes. I am planning on ordering 2 pizzas for your group since you/they are meeting during lunch. I will have forms printed out for each student and have designated them a letter for confidentially reasons. I have tried to assign you students you do not currently teach. I do ask that all data gathered over the course of time be considered confidential. I am leaving it up to you whether you meet on Monday or Friday for the six meetings. The following are students assigned to you:

<STUDENT 1> (Student)

<STUDENT 2> (Student)

<STUDENT 3> (Student)

Please let me know your willingness or denial by Thursday, November 11.

Thank you very much!

Mr. Gray

APPENDIX E: WEEKLY MENTORING SESSIONS

Week 1: Pressure from the Outside

Initial thought: “Stress is a response to a threat from an outside source”

How true are these statements for you?

- It’s hard for me to calm down when I get stressed.
- Sometimes stress helps me focus and gets things done.
- My biggest stress comes from my own fears or worries.
- I avoid things that cause me stress.
- I have healthy ways to deal with stress.
- I feel the need to control everything at all times.
- School triggers stress in my life.
- I get stressed when I think of my future.
- I could be better at coping with stress.

Stress management methods:

- Finger count breathing
- Re-frame
- Baby steps
- Talk to a mentor or someone you trust
- Sleep
- Think ahead

Week 2: Pressure from the Inside

Initial thought: “Have you ever made a situation bigger in your mind than it really is?”

Mentally, make a list of:

- Things you can control
- Things beyond your control

Coping strategies:

- Reach out beyond your peers to an adult, mentor, counselor, or teacher
- You don't have to own it
- Write down your racing thoughts
- Accept when things are out of your control but focus on what you can control

Week 3: Choosing Attitudes

Initial thought: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitudes in any given set of circumstances.” ~ Viktor Frankl

Think about the following: Would you rather...?

- Always be 10 minutes late or 20 minutes early?
- Be sentenced to jail for a year, or lose a year off of your life?
- Have all traffic lights turn green on your approach, or never have to stand in line again?

- Have an easy job working for someone else, or work incredibly hard for yourself?
- Be able to win at everything but be unhappy, or lose at everything with happiness?
- Give all your possessions to charity, or have no sense of integrity?
- Would you rather be off the charts intelligent and homeless, or foolish but live in luxury?
- Eat unlimited sushi or tacos for life?
- Give up bathing or electronic devices for a month?

Are the following true or false? Attitudes are formed and expressed by either:

- How we feel
- What we think
- What we do

Week 4: Freedom and Responsibility

Initial thought: “The Statue of Liberty on the East Coast should be balanced with a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.” ~ Viktor Frankl
 Identify from the following list the words that go along with responsibility:

Table E.1 Words associated with Responsibility

Honesty	Stubborn	Structured	Reliability	Easy	Demanding
Awkward	Tedious	Truth	Complicated	Freedom	Difficult
Stuffy	Painful	Boring	Intense	Authentic	Future

Based on the words you chose, think about the following questions:

- Why did you choose the words you did?
- Why would some people avoid taking responsibility?

- How is taking responsibility the same as taking ownership?

Here are some phrases people say when they're not taking ownership. Do any hit home with you?

- I don't have time.
- I'm not smart enough.
- I'm just not a morning person.
- The coach won't play me because she has her favorites.
- It's too late to try now.
- My teacher hates me. Why bother?
- It's not my fault. You're too sensitive.

Week 5: Effective Decision Making

Initial thought: "It doesn't matter which side of the fence you get off on sometimes. What matters most is getting off. You cannot make progress without making decisions." ~ Jim Rohn

How hard are the following decisions for you? Are some easier than others?

Table E.2 Personal Decisions

Getting out of bed	Brushing your teeth	Choosing what to wear	Going to bed at a reasonable hour
Doing homework/studying	Saving money	Getting a job	Helping when you see someone being mistreated
Turning off your phone	Where to eat lunch	Going to school	Sharing a concern about a peer with authorities
Snooze button	Doing chores	Choosing friends	Choosing a college
Cheating	Exercising	Turning on Netflix	Turning off Netflix

Consider the following questions:

- What makes some decisions easier than others?
- What do you consider when making decisions?
- Do you consider yourself decisive, or someone who analyzes things to death?

Week 6: Minding Mindsets

Initial thought: “Fear of failure...”

Answer the following statements with: “This is me!” or “That’s not me!”:

- I’m not good at math.
- I have social anxiety.
- It’s never too late.
- I’m always late.
- I can take feedback.
- Things never go my way.
- I’m terrible at learning names.
- I can do better.
- I worry about what other people are thinking of me.
- This is going to suck.

Think about your responses to the “That’s me!/That’s not me!” responses. Do any hit home with you? How is it affecting you? If you were to flip the script, would it change your mindset?

APPENDIX F: STUDENT WEEKLY QUESTIONNAIRE

Weekly Interview Questions

1. Did you miss any days last week? _____

If yes, what were the reasons?

2. If any days were missed, what are the affects it has on your class performance (grades, performance, etc.)?

3. Did the absences affect the way you perceive the class and/or teacher?
How so?

4. Did any opportunities arise that would have allowed you to miss school that you did not take advantage of?

If yes, why did you not take advantage of those opportunities?

APPENDIX G: INITIAL STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questionnaire

1. My gender is ___ Male ___ Female ___ Other.
2. My age is ___ 14 ___ 15 ___ 16 ___ 17 ___ 18 ___ 19 ___ 20
3. My race/ethnicity is a. ___ White b. ___ African American c. ___ Asian d. ___ Hispanic e. ___ Native American f. ___ Other
4. My current level of education or grade in school is _____
5. My grade point average is _____
6. I repeated or was held back in the _____ grade.
7. I currently work a. ___ full-time b. ___ part-time c. ___ not working
8. I work at _____
9. My long-term educational goal is _____
10. My long term goal is to become a _____
11. I live with _____

Student's Perspectives of Chronic Absenteeism in a Suburban High School Questionnaire

Date: _____

Place: _____

Participant: _____

Questions

1. What are some things you really like about school?
2. What are some things you really dislike about school?
3. Can you give some examples of what kinds of things happen at school with you and your classmates?
4. Tell me about your relationships with your school friends.
5. How do you feel about your relationships with your school friends.
6. Tell me about the kinds of things that keep you away from school?
7. What do you do when you miss school?
8. How do you feel about your classes?
9. Tell me about one class you really enjoy?
10. Tell me about one class you really hate?
11. Describe your relationship with your teachers?
12. What is difficult about going to class?
13. What is easy about going to class?
14. Tell me about your grades?

15. How you feel about your grades?
16. What is difficult about being absent from school?
17. What is easy about being absent from school?
18. Recount a day when you did not go to school. What did you do?
19. What kinds of things keep you away from school?
20. How did you feel about your decision to miss school?
21. How many days of school did you miss last year (excused and unexcused)?
22. What were some reasons you missed that many days?
23. Did missing days affect your mentality towards classes? If yes, how so?