

AN ANALYSIS OF INTERVENTIONS FOR CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS IN
GRADES 6–8 WITHIN MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN SOMERSET, NEW JERSEY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Seton Hall University
2019

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
DEDICATION	6
CHAPTER #1 : INTRODUCTION	7
BACKGROUND	8
THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	10
THE PROBLEM STATEMENT	11
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	12
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	12
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	13
LIMITATIONS	14
DELIMITATIONS	15
DEFINITIONS OF TERMS	15
CHAPTER SUMMARY	16
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	17
INTRODUCTION	17
EXISTING REVIEWS	18
REVIEW METHODS	19
NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CODE/LAW/STATUE	19
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IMPACT ON EDUCATION	20
ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED IMPACT ON EDUCATION	21
STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM	22
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM CASE STUDIES	24
CONCLUSION	30
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	34
INTRODUCTION	34
THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	35
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	36
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	37
DATA ANALYSIS PLAN & CODING SCHEME	40

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS **42**

INTRODUCTION	42
SAMPLE POPULATION SUMMARY	43
UNDERSTANDING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM	44
EXPERIENCE WITH CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM	45
ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL IMPACT ON THE SCHOOL	47
EMERGENT THEMES	48
INTERVENTIONS	48
FAMILY & COMMUNITY	49
COUNSELING	51
POLICIES AND COMMUNICATION	52
MENTORSHIP	54
INCENTIVES	55
SUMMARY	56

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS **59**

INTRODUCTION	59
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	60
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	61
STUDY LIMITATIONS	63
RECOMMENDATIONS	64
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE	66
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	68
CONCLUSION	68

REFERENCES	71
APPENDIX A – LIST OF CODES FOR RESEARCH	73
APPENDIX B - INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS	74
APPENDIX C – LETTER OF SOLICITATION	76
APPENDIX D – INFORMED CONSENT FORM	77
APPENDIX E - IRB APPROVAL LETTER	79

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to find effective, efficient, and practical interventions that can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students.

This study explored the definition of chronic absenteeism, along with the impact chronic absenteeism has on education, economically disadvantaged students' impact on chronic absenteeism, strategies to improve chronic absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism case studies that have been utilized in schools across the nation.

Interviews were conducted with educators in order to gain a clear understanding of their perceptions/beliefs regarding the impact educators can have on strategies to support students who are chronically absent. An interview protocol was designed prior to the interview that focused on questions pertained to the educator's perceptions and beliefs.

The results of the study afforded valuable information for educators to support students and families that are chronically absent. The results also allowed for clear recommendations to be suggested to educators, along with recommendations for future studies in order to take this research even further.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so blessed—not by the accomplishments I have achieved, but by the love and support of the people around me. I have accomplished many goals in my life; and I have always had my family, friends, and colleagues support me throughout my educational journey. There is a phrase, “Iron sharpens Iron,” and I have tried to keep people around me that enhance who I am. To my friends and colleagues that have gone down this educational journey prior to me, I want to thank you for sharing your wisdom and for having encouraged me to obtain this educational doctorate degree.

To Dr. Daniel Gutmore, I met you when I enrolled in the Ed.S. program nearly 10 years ago, and I was impressed by your approach and by your passion to lead educators at that time. Even today, I still see the same enthusiasm towards educational leaders and the profession of education. Therefore, you have modeled to what I hope to be. Thank you for your willingness to help guide me in the right direction. You have instilled the confidence I needed to complete my dissertation—and for that, I will be forever grateful.

To Dr. Frank Asante and Dr. Rashawn Adams, thank you for those long talks we had over the years. Our conversations have empowered me to become an administrator and to now obtain my doctoral degree. You have inspired me in so many ways, and I want to say I appreciate your friendship—as it is essential to the soul.

To Mr. Daryn Plummer—the guy that I have known since I was five years old—I appreciate you for always pushing me by your words and actions. Your unconditional support is truly felt, and I want to make sure I say THANK YOU!

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this research study to my family. Both of my parents only earned North Carolina High School diplomas in the late '60s, then immediately moved to New Jersey. Ever since then, they have provided for my siblings and me by working tough jobs. As I have reflected over the years, one of the true joys of my life is to put a smile on my parents' faces.

To my siblings, Greg, Louis, Mark, and Nicole: You will never truly know how much you mean to me. You have encouraged and motivated me over the years, and I truly appreciate your unconditional love.

To my wife Rebekah, my son Isiah, and my daughter Nia: You have been my reason why I have pushed myself to reach these goals. Rebekah, I can remember when you started graduate school and I saw you working towards your goal. Consequently, I had to dig deeper and challenge myself to do the same. You have not only been the love of my life but you have also been my life partner who pushes me to the best person I can be. Thank you!

Nia and Isiah, I hope you realize that you are one of the reasons why I am doing this. I hope I have modeled to you that you can accomplish anything in life as long as you are willing to put in the work for it. I hope I have modeled to you what a father should be. I pray that you have witnessed me as I have worked hard to accomplish my goals in life. Therefore, I hope you know that the bar has been raised for you—not to be like me, but better.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Chapter 1: Introduction

Students who are chronically absent are defined as being students who miss 10% or more school days within the 180 mandated days that schools should be open (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). Chronic absence from school can lead to a host of negative consequences—including less-than-optimal performance in the classroom, increased risk for school failure, dropping out of school, being involved with the wrong crowd, and engaging in behaviors and activities that are illegal (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). Consequently, if a student does not come to school and does not receive an education, they cannot learn at the same rate as their peers who are coming to school regularly. This increases their risk for less-than-desirable learning outcomes.

Important to understanding the situation is determining what the successful interventions related to improving attendance are. Additionally, we need to know the answers to questions such as: Do these interventions differ between elementary, middle, and high school? Do chronic absenteeism interventions differ between high-performing districts and low-performing school districts? Do chronic absenteeism interventions differ between public school districts and parochial schools?

Several variables are related to why a student is chronically absent. However, many educators and schools have struggled to find the most effective solutions. Despite significant efforts and millions of dollars having been spent by schools, communities, states, and the U.S. federal government to reduce truancy over the past 20 years, there is little evidence that any positive impact has been made on school attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Simply put: All students matter. Whether you are a student who comes to school every day and who achieves academic success, or whether you are a student who does not come to school consistently and struggles to achieve academically, you matter. Educators must find a way to better support these students and their families. Chronic absenteeism matters because attending school is the law, yes—but more importantly, we must be able to understand the reasons why students are chronically absent. In order to best support students and their families academically, socially, and emotionally. Building an understanding of how to identify the successes and failures of chronic absenteeism interventions is a good place to start because this is what educators can control. Educators cannot control family values or the cyclical impact of one's family history. However, an educator can control what a school can do to support families to better understand the importance and value of coming to school. The Australian Government Department of Education and Workplace Relations (n.d) states, “Schools have an important responsibility in helping to nurture and teach future generations and families trust schools to provide educational foundations for their children’s future.”

Background

For many students, each school year is difficult enough as it is. Chronic absenteeism is an issue that affects all age levels. However, it begins to increase during middle school (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012). According to the U. S. Department of Education (1998), 15% of public school teachers report that student absenteeism is a “serious problem” at their school. Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report that “Chronic Absenteeism affects an estimated five to seven and a half million students each year” (p. 17). *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) is now utilizing chronic absenteeism as another data source used to evaluate schools and school districts (ESSA, 2017). Before this act, the federal government did not require states to report or measure chronic

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

absenteeism. However, most states do report daily attendance. Six states (Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon, and Rhode Island) reported chronic absenteeism before ESSA was approved. However, only four states (Maryland, Rhode Island, Florida, and Georgia) published data to their state website (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012). As mentioned by Attendance Works, four% of the nation's schools have half of the nation's chronically absent students.

Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% of the school year, or a month of school (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). There are several reasons why students do not attend school. These include illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, some students do not attend school in order to avoid being harassed, bullied, or intimidated. Additionally, some students do not attend school because they, or their parents, do not see the value of their being at school (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012).

Description of the Community

The community in Somerset County for this study is located in central New Jersey. In 2008, the community for this study was considered as being one of the best towns to live in due to its vast diversity. According to the CNN Money (2008) website, this community was named the fifth best place to live in, in America. The community's racial diversity index is 331.1, which is 233.1 above the national average (CNNMoney, 2008).

The school district for this study in Somerset County consists of eight elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The district in Somerset County has two public charter schools that span from K–12 and K–10, respectively. There are three parochial/prep schools in Franklin Township that are PK–8.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

This township in Somerset County has many different diverse needs and interests. Each middle school for this study, whether it is public or private, operate differently; and performance reports are obviously different for all schools. In terms of this research, the researcher will analyze interventions for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey.

The Purpose of the Study

This research aims to find out what effective, efficient and practical interventions can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students. Furthermore, how are these interventions utilized across various settings? Are they designed and implemented similarly or differently? For instance, do interventions look different in high-performing school settings than they do in low-performing school settings? Relevant interventions, for schools that are facing chronic absenteeism concerns, are vital in order to encourage the correct behavior when exhibited. Every school has different issues. Therefore, a correct intervention is needed in order to address the root cause. Sheldon & Epstein (2004), in their study, shared that chronic absenteeism is highly correlated with schools' poverty levels. Schools serving a greater numbers of students in poverty had higher rates of chronic absenteeism than did other schools in 2000 ($r = .375, p \leq .02$) and in 2001 ($r = .321, p \leq .05$)” (p. 46). Additionally, understanding the support or interventions that are available, and identifying which one is effective for certain school settings (such as public schools or parochial schools), will provide insights for educators—insights that may not be readily available. Sheldon & Epstein (2004) conducted a longitudinal study and shared their finding that chronic absenteeism is more problematic in secondary schools than it is in elementary schools. Schools are not hesitant to initiate programs, but they are reluctant to find

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

the appropriate programming that fits their needs due to lack of knowledge or funding available to them.

The Problem Statement

The topic of chronic absenteeism is important. One reason for its enhanced importance to schools is because, on the newly revised *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) regulation, chronic absenteeism is a documented category that schools are being held accountable for. This is something people care about, and educators are perplexed as to how to solve this issue. Outside of school law, educational institutions cannot force students to come to school. However, they are being held accountable for when students are not coming to school. That in itself is why people/educators care about this topic.

There is a correlation between low grades and chronic absenteeism as well as between students' having mental health issues and their being chronically absent. According to Khalid (2014), "Students who are attending classes on a regular basis ... get higher grades and marks on examinations than [do] those students who were absent from classes." Educators do realize students are absent every day. However, are school districts and communities doing all that they can to effectively support those students who are absent? What is so interesting about this topic of chronic absenteeism is the question of whether, although educators know it exists, do educators really have the time to put in the energy and effort needed to correct the problem? Educators are already responsible for juggling so many responsibilities. Is it their responsibility to ensure students come to school, too?

Educators can utilize the data from this research to better understand the gaps we have in supporting chronically absent students in different school settings. Many districts are not effective in supporting students who are absent. Having a clearer understanding of where

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

educators are coming from will enable schools and school districts to better support students who are chronically absent, and better support the families of those students.

Research Questions

This research aims to identify the most effective and significant interventions schools in Somerset, New Jersey which educators can use to support chronically absent students and their families.

Implementation Questions

1. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?
 - A. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in public/charter schools within Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?
 - B. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in parochial/preparatory schools within Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?

The Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is to provide educators with insight into how to differentiate the appropriate interventions for supporting chronically absent students. I believe that knowing the answer to my research questions will be useful to future researchers because I believe that educators need to know how much to support students and their families in order for them to understand the value of coming to school. Chronic absenteeism is essentially being placed in the same category as Math and Language Arts scores in terms of how the states are

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

evaluating schools. Understanding what the research says; adding to the research; and providing possible solutions for educational practices can be very useful in the field of education.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains the importance of human beings having their basic needs met in order to be motivated. These basic needs are as follows: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs (Jerome, 2009). The aim of this study is to find out what effective, efficient, and practical interventions can help educators. However, such interventions will more than likely start by ensuring that students' needs are met so that they themselves are motivated to come to school.

The physiological needs are the true basic needs that a student or person seeks. Whether it is food, water, or health, if these needs are not met, then the odds of effective attendance are unlikely. For example, many students are absent for medical reasons. Therefore, they do not have the motivation to come to school.

If the safety and security needs are not satisfied, students may feel uncomfortable coming to school. Demir (2016) states, "Many students have the sense of being bullied or harassed in schools[;] therefore[,] they don't feel motivated in coming to school. In a school environment where students do not feel a commitment to school, they would not want to attend, resulting in increased feelings of alienation."

The need for love/belonging is another powerful motivator. If a student does not have the feeling of being accepted and appreciated, the student may not be willing to come to school. The importance of building positive relationships is paramount in today's schools. Bouchard & Berg (2017) mentions, "A sense of belonging is a relationally derived psychosocial construct that has

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

been used to describe the “sense of fit” or “feelings of acceptance” that an individual feel[s] to one’s community.”

Similarly to love/belonging, building an atmosphere where students have strong self-esteem is important. A school environment that builds one’s self confidence allows a student to be proud of who they are and what they are going to do. Akin and Radford (2018) write, “Educators can create positive learning environments [in order] to build and support student[s]’ self-esteem[and] resilience[,] [both of] which contribute to [students’] positive mental health and student[s]’ academic and social success.”

The last of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is Self-Actualization. The basic need of Self-Actualization is met when all the other needs prior to this are met. If families and schools are able to provide the appropriate interventions, then the students are then able to be the person each is born to be; or students are able to achieve what they have sought after (Jerome, 2009).

In schools, we see many students achieve; and we see some students who lack achievement due to several reasons, including chronic absenteeism.

Jerome (2013) writes, “The aforementioned theory may be applied to the roles of organizational cultural and human resource management in improving employee’s performance despite some criticism or limitations of the theory.” If families and schools can provide these basic needs, it may be possible to find effective, efficient, and practical interventions that can help educators support students who are chronically absent.

Limitations

The researcher will collect data by conducting interviews and by using chronic absenteeism data from the New Jersey Department of Education website (NJDOE). Interviews will be limited to middle schools within Somerset, New Jersey and will be conducted with

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

principals or the principals' designees. One limitation in utilizing this instrument is the assumption that all principals interviewed would answer questions honestly and accurately. Another limitation in regards to the interview instrument is the assumption that all principals or designees interviewed would have a plan or policy to support students who are chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism data pulled from the NJDOE will only focus on schools that are located in Somerset, New Jersey.

Delimitation

The design of the study was delimited, as only principals or designees and their views of the intervention survey were processed. The study will not survey teachers or district level leaders. The rationale behind limiting the study to school-based principals or designees is to gain clear insight into how chronic absenteeism interventions are supporting students in their own schools. District-level leaders may have a different perspective because they may view the intervention progress through a district lens.

Definition of Terms

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – the most recent version of the United States' federal education law. The primary goal of this law is to improve educational equity for students from lower-income families by providing federal funds to school districts serving poor students.

Chronic Absenteeism – students who miss 10% or more of school days within the 180-day school year.

Truancy – the action of staying away from school without a good reason.

Urban – an educational setting referring to schools in metropolitan communities that typically are diverse and are characterized by large enrollments and complexity, many of which are struggling with growth.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Rural – an educational setting characterized by geographic isolation and a small population size.

Suburban – characterized by a population of middle-class white majority students whose parents have moved from the inner city areas in generations past to find open spaces or to get away from crime-ridden streets.

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) – a group of states working together to develop a set of assessments that measure whether students are on track to be successful in college and careers.

Economically Disadvantaged Students – students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches or other forms of public assistance.

Socio-Economic Status – of, relating to, or involving a combination of social and economic factors.

Parent-Teacher Organization / Parent-Teacher Association (PTO/PTA) – a formal organization composed of parents, teachers, and staff who are intended to facilitate parental participation in a school.

Special Education – a form of learning provided to students with exceptional needs, such as students with learning disabilities or mental challenges.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 reviews the introduction, background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations/delimitations, and definitions of terms.

The aim of this study is to find out what effective, efficient, and practical interventions can help educators support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Each secondary school year is difficult enough as it is. Chronic absenteeism is an issue for all age levels, However, it begins to increase in middle school (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012). According to the U. S. Department of Education (1998), 15% of public school teachers report that student absenteeism is a “serious problem” at their school. This research aim is to find out what the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in schools in Franklin Township to increase attendance and achievement are. Nationally, almost 20% of students in high school are chronically absent, as compared to more than 12% of students in middle school. The chronic absenteeism rate was lowest for elementary school students, at 11% (Contrast, 2013). Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report: “Chronic Absenteeism affects an estimated five to seven and a half million students each year” (p. 17).

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) is now utilizing chronic absenteeism as another data source to evaluate schools and school districts (ESSA, 2017). Before this act, the federal government did not require states to report or measure chronic absenteeism. However, most states do report daily attendance. Six states (Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon, and Rhode Island) had reported chronic absenteeism before ESSA was approved, but only four (Maryland, Rhode Island, Florida and Georgia) states had published data to their state website (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012). Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% of the school year, or a month of school (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). There are several reasons why students do not attend school. These include illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, some students who will not attend school do this to avoid being harassed, bullied, or intimidated. Additionally,

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

some students do not attend school because they, or their parents, do not see the value in being at school (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012).

The classification of being economically disadvantaged is ascribed by government institutions allocating free school or reduced meals to a student who is a member of a household that meets the income eligibility guidelines for free or reduced-price lunches. This study will examine the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in Franklin Township schools to increase attendance and achievement. Educators can utilize the data from this research to better understand the gaps we have in supporting chronically absent students. Many districts are not effective in assisting students who are absent. Having a more precise understanding of the data will enable schools and school districts to better support students who are chronically absent, and better support their families.

The purpose of this study is determining the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey (Franklin Township) in order to improve attendance. This literature review study will be structured according to its featuring of peer-reviewed educational journals and state reports from online databases and online websites. The study will be organized by focusing on interventions for chronically absent students—interventions that are used by school districts and communities to improve attendance and achievement.

Existing Reviews

Various studies examine the impact of chronic absence on students; with others examining how being economically disadvantaged has had an impact on student achievement. Specifically, there are studies that focus on strategies for improving attendance or diminishing chronic absenteeism; how being an economically disadvantaged student has impacted student

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

achievement; how being a chronically absent students has impacted student achievement; and educational reports that have shaped laws that schools and school districts must now follow. For this literature review, the focus of the research will paint a picture that defines the law; describes the educational impact of students being chronically absent and economically disadvantaged; and provide possible strategies to support students who are both chronically absent and economically disadvantaged.

Review Methods

Educational journals and reports were collected from various online databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, and EBSCOhost. All scholarly articles were gathered and stored in the Mendeley platform for organizational purposes.

New Jersey Department of Education Code/Law/Statue

The New Jersey Department of Education (2017) states, “Chronic absenteeism is defined in New Jersey’s *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) [s]tate plan as the percentage of a school’s students who are not present for 10% or more of the days that they were “in membership” at a school” (p. 2). Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report, “Chronic Absenteeism is particularly prevalent among students who are low-income, students of color, students with disabilities, students who are highly mobile, and/or juvenile justice-involved youth—in other words, those who already tend to face significant challenges and for whom school is particularly beneficial” (p. 5).

The New Jersey Department of Education (2017) reports that students learn their best and achieve their best if they are in school. Furthermore, research indicates that student absences does impact a student's ability to achieve in school and has a strong correlation between low-performing students and students who drop out of school. Additionally, chronic absenteeism forecasts other potential issues students may face. Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report, “Chronic

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Absenteeism is caused by a variety of issues, including chronic health conditions, housing instability, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and unsafe conditions in school, among many others” (p. 30).

On December 10, 2015, *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), which is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the New Jersey Department of Education has identified chronic absenteeism as its indicator of school quality and success for accountability. Therefore, chronic absenteeism will be another data source to evaluate schools and school districts, which will be included in each district’s annual School Performance Reports for kindergarten through grade 12 as of 2016-17, per ESSA Sec.1111 (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017).

Chronic Absenteeism impact on Education

Specifically aligned with the aim of this study, authors Balfanz and Bynes (2012) state, "Achievement, especially in math, is very sensitive to attendance. Attendance also strongly affects standardized test scores, graduation and dropout rates” (p. 4). Furthermore, in the research article, *The Effects of Early Chronic Absenteeism on Third-Grade Academic Achievement Measures* supports the strong correlation between math standardized test scores and chronic absenteeism. In Read More’s (2015) interview with Sam Matteson an author from the study, *The Effects of Early Chronic Absenteeism on Third-Grade Academic Achievement Measures* states, “After controlling for the main factors we identified, each day of absence correlated with a 0.4-point reduction in math scores and a 0.2-point reduction in reading scores for the typical student. A student who is absent for 14 days, twice the average number of absences statewide, will score 4 to 7 points lower than students missing the average number of days.”

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Logically, if students are not in school, they cannot learn at their best potential. Gottfried (2009) mentions, “Chronic absenteeism is the primary cause of lower academic achievement, even when the absences are “excused” or understandable.” Research even indicates that chronic absenteeism plays a part in widening the achievement gap. According to Balfanz and Byner (2012), “Chronic absenteeism increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels” (p. 6).

Economically Disadvantaged impact on Education

Balfanz and Byner (2012) report that chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among low-income students. Students who are characterized as economically disadvantaged may be described as being at a low socioeconomic status (SES). Socioeconomic Status (SES) classification addresses socioeconomic disparities in education. Crosnoe (2009) states, “School composition is more straightforward to manipulate, at least within school districts, than are other contextual factors such as school climate” (p. 710). Many students enter kindergarten already at a disadvantage due to low socio-economic status. With income inequality rising over the last 30–40 years, high-income families make 11 times more than a low-income family does. Therefore, the resources provided for a student in a high-income family far outweighs the resources of a student in a low-income family (Reardon, 2013). Taking the time to truly understand students who are economically disadvantaged and in need is so vital. In an interview, Hedy Cheng, Director of Attendance Works, stated, “It is important to have a strategy for the lowest-income students, who are the most vulnerable to absenteeism and [who are] dropping out”—“If you want to justify this new investment, you need to make sure the students are there” (p. 11).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Strategies to improve Chronic Absenteeism

In the report completed by the US Department of Justice, the US Department of Health and Human Services, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the US Department of Education which is entitled *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism* (2015), a portion of the scholarly publication discusses possible strategies to eliminate chronic absenteeism. The federal government created a four-step action plan to support schools and school districts in their reduction of chronic absenteeism (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). These steps are as follows:

- 1) Generate, and act on, absenteeism data
- 2) Create and deploy positive messages and measures.
- 3) Focus communities on addressing chronic absenteeism.
- 4) Ensure responsibility across sectors.

Generating and acting on absenteeism data is essential to identifying the problem. In order to provide appropriate support, one must understand where to start. The different governmental departments structure these action steps by first prioritizing the warning prevention and intervention systems that identify students who are chronically absent. Furthermore, they also emphasize the importance of finding ways to increase access to support services for students and to explore a partnership with an agency that is consistent with state and federal laws (US Department of Justice et al., 2015).

The next step discusses creating and deploying positive messages and measures. This step focuses on implementation and engagement strategies such as counseling and mentoring to improve chronic absenteeism. In this component, they also caution schools to stay away from punitive messages and measures (US Department of Justice et al., 2015).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

The third step of the action plan revolves around focusing communities on addressing chronic absenteeism. This step encourages schools to work with the community to raise awareness about the impact of chronic absenteeism. This can lead to collaboratively working with the community on potential solutions (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report, “State and district policies need to encourage every student to attend school every day and [to] support school districts, schools, nonprofits, communities, and parents in using evidence-based strategies to propel all students to attend school daily” (p. 7). Furthermore, the local municipal such as the mayors and governors can have critical roles to play in leading inter-agency task forces to help every student attend every day (Balfanz & Bynes, 2012). Additionally, the third step expresses the importance of training school staff and community partners in how to analyze chronic absenteeism trends. Lastly, it addresses the need for resources that can be used to effectively develop strategies to eliminate chronic absenteeism (US Department of Justice et al., 2015).

The final step of the action plan involves ensuring responsibility across sectors. Establishing communication that expresses chronic absenteeism affects the whole community. The method must be evaluated, so that progress toward eliminating chronic absenteeism is monitored. Finally, it highlights the importance of working together (US Department of Justice et al., 2015) states, “working together as a community so that everyone feels responsible for successfully addressing the underlying cause of chronic absenteeism” (p. 6).

In addition to a strategic approach, schools can develop incentives to promote and motivate students to attend school. (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004) states, “Schools that conducted a greater total number of attendance-focused activities were more likely to decrease the percentage of students who missed twenty or more days of school each year” (p. 44). There are a

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

multiplicity of ideas to motivate and reward students for their attendance. These strategies are encouraged to help establish a positive school culture oriented towards attendance. Balfanz and Bynes (2012) mention, “Attendance incentives are most effective when [they are included as] part of a comprehensive approach that includes outreach to families with more significant challenges to attendance. Incentives should be part of creating a school-wide culture and emphasis on attendance and accompanied by a commitment to ensuring students are engaged in the classroom once they show up” (p. 9).

Schools and school districts have a responsibility to get families actively involved so they can support students in their quest to have better attendance. Helping parents understand how to have a discussion with their children about attending school regularly, the importance of volunteering at school, and becoming a member of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) / Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) have all been shown to be positive strategies for lowering absenteeism at school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Duckworth & DeJong, 1989; Lee, 1994; McNeal, 1999). Furthermore, when schools and school districts develop and implement programs that are partnerships between the school, families, and the community, studies have indicated that a higher percentage of students score proficiently on standardized tests and that a lower percentage of students within a school have discipline issues (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Ultimately, by creating a more positive school environment, this encourages students to come to school.

Chronic Absenteeism Case Studies

Sheldon and Epstein (2004) conducted a longitudinal study on the impact that family and community involvement has on chronic absenteeism. The longitudinal study was conducted over two years from 1999 to 2001. It focused on elementary and secondary schools, large and small

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

urban areas, and suburban areas and rural areas. The average school enrollment for all the schools studied was 650 students. Of the students who were surveyed, 51% of the students received a free or reduced lunch, and 20% of the students came from families that spoke English as a second language. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University did this research (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

The dependent variables in this study were described as schools that reported students who missed 20 days or more in school during the 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 school year. NNPS reported the change of increase or decrease of their chronic absenteeism.

The independent variable in this study was described as schools that implemented at least fourteen attendance-focused activities during the 2001 school year. Ten of the activities represented involving families and community members in supporting student attendance. The four other attendance-focused activities involved encouraging students through the use of incentives or through the use of correcting chronically absent students, which involved engaging them in counseling or after-school programs.

The study utilized a survey, which was completed by the school respondents. School respondents completed a Likert Scale survey to describe whether they felt the study was effective in improving student attendance. The study results indicated there was, on average, a 0.5% decrease in chronic absenteeism in comparison with the prior school year, when implementing the attendance-focused activities. The study also shows that schools that performed more than eight attendance-focused activities they were more successful than those schools that did not. Furthermore, the study shared that chronic absenteeism is more problematic in secondary schools than it is in elementary schools. Therefore, when utilizing the attendance-focused strategies, elementary schools had a (0.8%) decrease in chronic absenteeism and secondary schools had a

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

(0.4%) increase in their chronic absenteeism. The report also indicates that large urban (7%) areas have more chronic absenteeism than do rural areas (3.1%). However, both areas showed a (1%) decrease in chronic absenteeism when implementing the attendance-focused activities.

Sheldon and Epstein (2004), in their study, shared the finding, “Chronic absence also is highly correlated with schools’ poverty levels. Schools serving more poor students had higher rates of chronic absenteeism than [did] other schools in 2000 ($r = .375, p \leq .02$) and 2001 ($r = .321, p \leq .05$)” (p. 46).

The University of Utah’s Utah Education Policy Center (2012), conducted a study that had two data sets. One was a cross-sectional which included all Utah public school students, and the other was a longitudinal study that followed the class of 2010 cohort for five years from their 8th-grade year until graduation. The purpose of the cross-sectional study was to examine the relationship between chronic absenteeism and predictor variables such as Low Income, Special Education, English Proficiency, and Racial Minority status. Additionally, the purpose of the cross-sectional study was to examine the relationship between chronic absenteeism and covariates, which are Homelessness and Mobility status. Lastly, the cross-sectional study focused on the relationship between chronic absenteeism and outcome variables such as Dropout Rates, GPA, and Reading Levels.

The results of the cross-sectional relationship between chronic absenteeism and predictor variables such as Low Income, Special Education, English Proficiency, and Racial Minority status all resulted in high odds. The study explained that if any indicator had an odds ratio of over one (1), this would indicate that a student in this category would be more likely than otherwise to be chronically absent. Odds Ratio rates were as follows: Low Income (1.9), Special Education (1.7), English Proficiency (1.2), and Racial Minority (1.4) status.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

The results of the cross-sectional relationship between chronic absenteeism and covariates, which are Homelessness and Mobility, all resulted in high odds ratios. Odds Ratio rates were as follows: Homelessness (2.5) and Mobility (4.2) status.

The results for the cross-sectional study that focuses on the relationship between chronic absenteeism and outcome variables such as Dropout Rates, GPA, and Reading Levels all resulted in significantly correlating with chronic absenteeism; and in all cases, adverse outcomes were associated with chronic absenteeism (Utah, 2012). The results were as follows: Odds of reading below grade level was 1.7 times higher, Dropout Rates were 7.4 times higher, and GPA decreased .854 on average.

Within the longitudinal study, the University of Utah's Utah Education Policy Center reported that it is important to remember that chronic absenteeism is defined as being when a student is absent 10% or more within a given school year. The longitudinal study consisted of 35,508 students. Of these, 9,847 (27.7%) were chronically absent for at least one year of the five-year study. Furthermore, of these chronically absent students, 5,015 (51%) students were chronically absent for two or more years (Utah, 2012). This study identifies that chronic absenteeism is not just an isolated matter. It indicates that many students are showing a pattern of being chronically absent.

The University of Utah's longitudinal study showed that 25% of high school seniors who were chronically absent ended up dropping out of school. The Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah (2012) stated, "A study of public school students in Utah found that a student who is chronically absent in any year between the eighth and twelfth grades is over seven times more likely to drop out of school than [is] a student who was not chronically absent" (p. 9). The longitudinal study further describes the correlation between chronic absenteeism, GPA, and

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

dropping out of school. The results shared show that there is a positive correlation between chronic absenteeism and dropping out. Many educators can attest to how students are in middle school being a clear indication of how they are going to be in high school. Chronic absenteeism displays the lack of value that a student may be placing on education. Balfanz and Byner (2012) report, “Chronic absenteeism is a powerful predictor of those students who may eventually drop out of school.”

Just as marijuana is a gateway drug to other more harmful drugs, chronic absenteeism is the gateway to other poor choices in life. Chronic absenteeism connects with dropping out of school; and dropping out of school leads to the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances in the adolescent years.

The Utah Education Policy Center at the University of Utah (2012) states, “70% of the relationship between chronic absenteeism and dropping out can be accounted for by the indirect effects (i.e., chronic absence influences grades, which, in turn, influence dropping out)[;] and 30% of the relationship between chronic absenteeism and dropping out is completely independent of GPA” (p. 13).

Nauer, Mader & Robinson (2014), completed a study entitled *A Better Picture of Poverty: What Chronic Absenteeism and Risk Load Reveal about New York City Lowest-Income Elementary Schools*. The study researched 748 elementary and K-to-8 schools. 130 schools were defined as suffering from “persistent chronic absenteeism.” This was further described as schools, on average, having one-third of the students missing 10 or more days—equivalent to almost a month of school. The longitudinal study spanned over five years. During that period, 33 schools averaged a 40% rate of chronic absenteeism. In this study, it was reported that during the 2011–2012 school year, only 11% of the students with “persistent chronic absenteeism” passed

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

the state standardized assessment Common Core-aligned math and reading tests. The pass rate for the elementary and K-to-8 schools was 30% citywide (Kim Nauer et al., 2014).

The study also reported the connection between students who are chronically absent and what the author characterized as “total risk load.” Total risk load is described as students who are economically disadvantaged. The study devised a risk load instrument of 18 indicators from census data and other data sources (Kim Nauer et al., 2014). The study focused on what they termed as being “deep poverty.” Instead of just focusing only on students who were on a free or reduced lunch program, these researchers looked at students who were living in temporary homes; at students whose families were facing allegations of abuse or neglect; and at the stability and viability of the school itself (Kim Nauer et al., 2014). It is indicated in this study that chronic absenteeism strongly correlates with being at a school with larger risk loads. (Kim Nauer et al., 2014) states, “The incidence of persistent chronic absenteeism strongly corresponds with where deep poverty is most virulent and entrenched in students’ lives, where it matches up with and contributes to school dysfunction, and where ameliorative social supports like those envisioned for the city’s new community schools are most badly needed” (p. 3).

The study also reports schools are reducing chronic absenteeism at different rates because each school addresses the risk factors differently. Different schools have various risk factors such as teacher turnover, administration, safety, and security. All of these factors also contribute to chronic absenteeism. Therefore, the data shows schools with reducing chronic absenteeism differs because each school handles the risk factors in their own way.

Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi, and Chen (2012), collected and analyzed attendance data to determine the daily attendance rates in Indiana public schools from the 2003–2004 to the 2009–2010 school year. Furthermore, The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy looked at the

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

chronic absenteeism of Indiana students and the impacts on achievement during this longitudinal study. The data were collected and organized into subgroups such as the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+); and groups based on graduation and dropout rates. The data results determined that attendance is a critical factor in academic achievement for students of all ages. The ISTEP+ for grade 8, indicated that students who missed less than 2.5% of school days had an average scale score of 571 in Math; students missing 2.55% of school days had an average scale score of 555; students missing 5% to 10% of school days had an average scale score of 536; and students missing 10% or more of school days had an average scale score of 507. All in all, students with higher attendance rates scored higher on the Math and English/Language Arts portions of the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) than did students with lower attendance rates (Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi, & Chen, 2012). The study also indicated that the results remained consistent with looking at sub-group such as Free-or-Reduced Lunch, Special Education, and English as a Second Language.

Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi, and Chen (2012) also analyzed the connection between attendance and graduation rates. As absenteeism increased, graduation rates decreased for the students in Indiana. The data indicated that of students who missed 2.5% or less of school days, 88% graduated on time. Of students in the 5% to 10% absence range, only about 64% of students in this group graduated from high school. For students who missed over 10% of school days, the rate declined significantly, with only 24% graduating (Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi, & Chen, 2012).

Conclusion

This research aims to find out what the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions are that have been used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey (Franklin Township) to improve attendance. It is very evident that Chronic absenteeism is a topic that is

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

relevant to today's education. Chronic absenteeism has been ignored for so long in United States schools, and now it has developed into an epidemic across the nation. The background research has defined how chronic absenteeism is connected to economically disadvantaged students, student achievement, and dropout rates. Chronic absenteeism is the first sign identifying that a student is at risk. Recently, laws, statutes, and policies have been revised under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) to support students, and families of students, who are chronically absent. The New Jersey Department of Education (2017) reports that students learn their best and reach student achievement if they are in school. However, the fact remains that if a student is not in school, they can't learn. Nationally, almost 20% of students in high school are chronically absent as compared to more than 12% of students in middle school. The chronic absenteeism rate was the lowest for elementary school students, at 11% (Contrast, 2013). Balfanz and Byner (2012) report that "Chronic absenteeism affects an estimated five to seven and a half million students each year" (p. 17). The new ESSA regulations represent a step being taken to make states, school districts, and schools more accountable. However, identifying, understanding the causes and understanding the outcomes of students who are chronically absent is vital to providing appropriate solutions.

The US Department of Justice, the US Department of Health and Human Services, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the US Department of Education, in a report entitled *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism* (2015), identified approaches to tackling chronic absenteeism strategically. Such approaches included always starting with data to identify a problem; creating and employing positive messages; involving the community; and partnering with municipalities to ensure support (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is research relevant to

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

providing suggestions and support for students who are chronically absent and to assisting schools which face this issue. Sheldon and Epstein (2004) state, “Schools that conducted a greater total number of attendance-focused activities were more likely to decrease the percentage of students who missed twenty or more days of school each year” (p. 44). The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University completed this study with positive results; and they supported implementing attendance-focused activities, which can help with decreasing chronic absenteeism.

More specifically, this research aims to study the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in Franklin Township schools to increase attendance and achievement. Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report, “Chronic absenteeism is particularly prevalent among students who are low-income, students of color, students with disabilities, students who are highly mobile, and/or juvenile justice-involved youth—in other words, those who already tend to face significant challenges and for whom school is particularly beneficial” (p. 5). In all studies, being economically disadvantaged is almost synonymous with chronic absenteeism, given its impact on student achievement. Within the literature, sub-groups ranging from Special Education to English as a Second Language all had a negative influence on student achievement.

Ultimately, it is reported in the background research that strategies are not going to be effective unless schools and communities come together. The US Department of Justice et al. (2015) urge the importance of “working together as a community so that everyone feels responsible for successfully addressing the five-year underlying cause of chronic absenteeism” (p. 6).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Patterns of Research

The collection of research for this literature review was a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Much of the literature shared in this study was a select group of quantitative studies that examined chronically absent students in various parts of the United States. However, the literature that influenced this study the most was *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism*. This study by the federal government outlines a step-by-step process for schools and school districts to take in order to support students who are chronically absent.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Students who are chronically absent are defined as being students who miss 10% or more of school days within the 180 days mandated that schools should be open (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). Chronic absenteeism on the part of students can lead to a host of negative consequences including less-than-optimal performance in the classroom, increased risk for school failure, dropping out of school, being involved with the wrong crowd, and engaging in behaviors and activities that are illegal (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). Consequently, chronic absenteeism on the part of a student can result in a failure to learn at the same rate as their peers who are attending school regularly and can increase their risk for less-than-desirable learning outcomes.

Important to understanding the situation is determining what the successful interventions related to improving attendance are. Additionally, we need to know the answers to questions such as: Do these interventions differ between elementary, middle, and high school? Do chronic absenteeism interventions differ between high-performing districts and low-performing school districts? Do chronic absenteeism interventions differ between public school districts and parochial schools?

Several variables are related to why a student is chronically absent. However, many educators and schools have struggled to find the most effective solutions. Despite significant efforts and millions of dollars having been spent by schools, communities, states, and the U.S. federal government to reduce truancy over the past 20 years, there is little evidence that any positive impact has been made on school attendance (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Simply put: All students matter. Whether you are a student who comes to school every day and who achieves academic success, or whether you are a student who does not come to school consistently and struggles to achieve academically, you matter. Educators must find a way to better support these students and their families. Chronic absenteeism matters because attending school is the law, yes—but more importantly, we must be able to understand the reasons why students are chronically absent. In order to best support students and their families academically, socially, and emotionally. Building an understanding of how to identify the successes and failures of chronic absenteeism interventions is a good place to start because this is what educators can control. Educators cannot control family values or the cyclical impact of one's family history. However, an educator can control what a school can do to support families to better understand the importance and value of coming to school. The Australian Government Department of Education and Workplace Relations (n.d) states, “Schools have an important responsibility in helping to nurture and teach future generations and families trust schools to provide educational foundations for their children’s future.”

The Purpose of the Study

This research aims to find out what effective, efficient and practical interventions that can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students. Furthermore, how are these interventions utilized across various settings? Are they designed and implemented similarly or differently? For instance, do interventions look different in high performing school settings than they do in low performing school settings. Relevant interventions for schools that are facing chronic absenteeism concerns are vital in order to address the correct behavior exhibited. Every school has different issues therefore, the correct intervention is needed to support the root cause. In

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Sheldon & Epstein (2004) study, it was shared, “Chronic absence also is highly correlated with schools’ poverty levels. Schools serving greater numbers of students in poverty had higher rates of chronic absenteeism than other schools in 2000 ($r = .375$, $p \leq .02$) and 2001 ($r = .321$, $p \leq .05$)” (p. 46). Additionally, understanding the supports or interventions that are available and identifying which one is effective for certain school settings such as public schools or parochial schools will provide insight to educators that are not readily available. Sheldon & Epstein (2004) conducted a longitudinal study and shared that chronic absenteeism is more problematic in secondary schools than elementary schools. Schools are not hesitant to initiate programs but they are reluctant to find the appropriate programming that fit their needs due to lack of knowledge or funding available to them.

Research Questions

This research aims to indicate what the most effective and significant interventions are that schools in Somerset, New Jersey can use to support chronically absent students and their families.

Implementation Questions

1. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?
 - a. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in public/charter schools within Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?
 - b. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used within parochial/prep schools Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Research Design and Methodology

The method of research would be a qualitative design. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) refer to qualitative research as being descriptive in nature—with the goal of what they term ‘multiplying realities’ and developing understanding. For this research of analyzing interventions for chronically absent students, it is vital to paint a clear picture of what schools are doing and not doing. The research design that would be used is a narrative study, which is described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) as a study in which the researcher enters and spends a considerable amount of time in schools, with families, in neighborhoods, and in other locales learning about the educational concerns held by stakeholders. In other words, the researcher feels he/she will best learn when the topic is observed in the setting in which it occurs. Furthermore, the research design for this study will be the constant comparative method. This design is appropriate because the author will utilize multiple data sources such as interviews and data from the New Jersey Department of Education website. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define a constant comparative method as being “a research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytical induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of the study” (p. 73). Utilizing multiple forms of data will provide a clear description of interventions for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey.

The school district for this study in Somerset County consists of eight public elementary schools, two public middle schools, and one public high school. The district in Somerset County has two public charter schools that span from K–12 and K–10, respectively. There are three parochial/prep schools in Franklin Township that are PK–8.

There will be five middle schools in this study. This set will consist of both public and private schools, which will operate differently and will have different performance reports.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

The traditional public school and the public charter school in this study are considered to be diverse in nature. The public school in this study has students from many different nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds (“SearchForSchool @ rc.doe.state.nj.us,” n.d.). The parochial school and the private school in this study are tuition based. These schools have tuitions that range from \$7,800 to \$40,800.

Furthermore, the traditional public school operates under a board of education comprised of elected officials who monitor and approve the school’s policies. The public charter school and the parochial/prep school operate under a board of trustees that monitors and approves the school’s policies as well.

The grade range for this study will be grades 6–8. Educators in this study will be defined as building principals and/or their designees. This targeted grade level is relevant because middle schools are the foundation of secondary schools, and chronic absenteeism is more prevalent in secondary schools (Sheldon & Epstein (2004). Furthermore, this provides a clear alignment to understanding educators’ perceptions and beliefs on the impact that educators can have on strategies to support students who are chronically absent.

Interviews will be conducted with educators in order to gain a clear understanding of their perceptions/beliefs on the impact that educators can have on strategies to support students who are chronically absent. An interview protocol will be designed prior to the interview that will focus on questions that pertain to the educator’s perceptions and beliefs. The questions will be developed in a focus group setting that will consist of a panel of experts who are familiar with chronic absenteeism.

The focus group format will be based on the book *Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews* written by Richard A. Krueger. The four characteristics within the Focus

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Groups are participants, environments, moderator and analysis and reporting (Krueger & Krueger, 2002). The participants will consist of a panel of experts such as teachers, school counselors, parents, and administrators. The environment will be a comfortable setting such as an open classroom, and the focus group discussion will be audio recorded. A moderator will be assigned to lead the discussion utilizing a prepared set of questions. The analysis and reporting will be done in a systematic and appropriate manner to help develop the appropriate questions for the overall study. As the focus group discussion begins, the moderator and the researcher will welcome the participants and the researcher will provide an overview of the topic. The moderator will then review ground rules and lead the discussion (Krueger & Krueger, 2002). The participants will be informed that all discussion will be audio recorded. The participants will utilize chart paper within their groups to develop questions for the focus group activity. The moderator will then lead open discussion for the whole group to summarize what each group has discussed. Each group will be assigned to have a discussion on a pre-determined topic on chronic absenteeism. Each group will have one of the following topics: Non-Responsive Parent/Low Socio-Economic Status, Medical Issues/504 Plan, and Suspension/Climate & Culture (Krueger & Krueger, 2002).

For the study, grades 6–8 in up to 5 middle schools located in Somerset, New Jersey will be selected. The focus will be on those schools that show a downward trend in chronic absenteeism according to the New Jersey Department of Education website. The goal of this study is to interview up to five educators, which will consist of at least five principals and/or their designees. The researcher's aim is to conduct interviews in five different middle schools (whether public or private) in order to obtain perspectives on chronic absenteeism specifically, and how they impact strategies to support chronically absent students. Interviews are expected to

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

last between 30–60 minutes and will take place either in person or over the phone. An interview protocol will be designed prior to the interview that will focus on questions that pertain to the educator’s perceptions and beliefs. These questions will have been developed in advance, within a focus group setting, with the aid of a panel of experts familiar with chronic absenteeism. One example of a question such a panel might develop could be, “How do you [the principal or designee] feel that student chronic absenteeism impacts your classroom/school?” Additionally, there will be questions that will focus on the educators’ perceptions and beliefs that pertain to strategies for supporting chronically absent students. For instance: “What has been your experience in supporting students who are chronically absent?”

Furthermore, all interviews will be recorded and transcribed using the Sony Audio Recorder Application. All transcripts will be coded so that the names of the participants and their school district will be kept anonymous and will remain confidential. The audio recordings and transcripts will be saved on a flash drive that will be locked in a safe when it is not in use.

The perceptions of the proposed five middle schools and five principals and/or designees may not align with the perceptions of other school districts in New Jersey. This may be considered as being a limitation. However, the information gathered could be viewed as being valuable data, not least due to its utility to the individual school district that is participating in this research.

Data Analysis Plan & Coding Scheme

As mentioned above, all interview audio recordings will be transcribed and coded. The audio recording will be done by a computer application called Sony Audio Recorder. The coding on the transcript will define the type of educator providing their perception, and there will be a different code that describes the category as relating either to academic performance or to strategies. Lastly, there will be a code that will be used to describe their perception of how it

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

influences the category in a positive or negative manner. Each question will specify whether it correlates either with academic performance or with interventions to support chronically absent students. Most importantly, there will be a team of three coders to assist in analyzing the data to ensure accuracy. Each of the analysts for this research will compare their codes on a master list. A discussion on what was analyzed will occur in order to develop triangulation of data.

The data analysis plan clearly addresses the research questions because it is closely aligned with what the focus of this research is all about. Each research question is aligned to the educators' perception/belief of how the perceptions/beliefs of educators impacts interventions to support students who are chronically absent. Each interview will provide thorough insight into the educator's beliefs regarding chronic absenteeism, and each survey will provide supplemental data support. However, this research can provide clarity to see if the perceptions from different school districts are the same or whether they vary.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This research aims to find out what effective, efficient and practical interventions can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students. Data collected through five interviews with middle school principals in Somerset, New Jersey consisted of several questions that were categorized into four components—namely, understanding chronic absenteeism, experience with chronically absent students, the impact of chronic absenteeism in the classroom/school, and interventions for students who are chronically absent.

As mentioned previously, an interview protocol was designed prior to the administration of interviews that focused on questions pertaining to the educator’s perceptions and beliefs. The questions were developed in a focus group setting that consisted of a panel of experts who are familiar with chronic absenteeism.

The focus group format was based on the book *Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews* written by Richard A. Krueger. The four characteristics within the Focus Group are participants, environments, moderators and analysis and reporting (Krueger & Krueger, 2002). There were 10 participants in total who comprised a panel of experts such as teachers, school counselors, parents, and administrators.

Table 1

Focus Group Participants

Participant Role/Expertise	Quantity
Assistant Principals	2

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Dean of Students	1
School Counselors	3
Parent	2
Community Member	1

Sample Population Summary

The study's participants were middle school principals in the Somerset, New Jersey area with middle schools that consisted of students in grades 6–8. One administrator was serving as a principal at a public school, one administrator was serving as a principal at a public charter school, and three administrators were serving as principals at private schools in Somerset, New Jersey. All principals who were interviewed had over 20 years of experience in education.

In the effort to keep confidentiality and anonymity among the principal participants within this study, codes were developed and utilized. Each code was developed to represent each of the public and private schools, the title of the participant in the interview, and the identification code for the district. Coding is the process by organizing data into sections or chunks of text and assigning categories or phrases to each (Creswell, 2014).

All schools in Somerset, New Jersey Franklin Township area participated in this study, with the exception of one public school due to a conflict of interest. One public charter school opted not to participate in this study. All codes used do not indicate which school or principal is being represented.

After each interview, the participants' words were analyzed to express their perceptions and beliefs of their understanding of chronic absenteeism, their experience with chronic absenteeism and the impact chronic absenteeism has had on their school. However, the major

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

findings for this research are focused on interventions, incentives, policies, and communication. This is where the common or emergent themes were developed by the most referenced words or phrases that represented the most effective interventions for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey.

Understanding Chronic Absenteeism

Students who are chronically absent are defined as students who miss 10% or more school days within the 180 mandated days that schools should be open (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017). Even though the state law is clear as to what constitutes chronic absenteeism, all five participants' perceptions of their knowledge and understanding of chronic absenteeism varied. In terms of their background, the five participants were working at either public or private schools. However, all have students in the Somerset, New Jersey area. Each principal had experiences with students and families of students who were chronically absent from school. Some principals have a greater number of students who are chronically absent (depending on their type of setting) or who have a history of chronic tardiness at their school. However, with principals' combined 100-plus years of experience, they were able to articulate the challenges and triumphs of chronic absenteeism.

PUPD1 shared her understanding of chronic absenteeism: “I look at students who are absent for ten days within a short period of time ... chronically absent ... students who are at risk, [who] have gaps in their education, [who] do not like school because they have had a bad experience or experiences” (June 17, 2019).

PUCPD4 shared a similar understanding of chronic absenteeism, as follows: “If a student is absent or has been absent for ten days or more, [then] the child is considered [as being] chronically absent” (July 10, 2019).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

PRPD2 explained her understanding of chronic absenteeism in terms of two categories. She mentioned, “The one category would be consecutive absences and a concern as to what would be the reasons for those days in a row where a child would be absent. The other [category] is a pattern of absences” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 stated his explanation of chronic absenteeism by articulating, “I guess we would pick a number of days absent consecutively or in a trimester, and I think you'd probably put the number about—probably above five, maybe seven or ten times in consecutive where there's not an illness that we know of, not a death in the family if a student has to travel for a long distance, something like that, but an unexplained absence of a student for longer than—I'll say five days, a full week's worth of absentees in a row” (July 1, 2019).

PRPD5 mentioned his description of being chronically absent mainly in terms of being chronically tardy. He states, “My biggest chronic absentee or lateness is middle school (with) a twenty-five-minute window that the kids would be here on time, and I still have a very high percentage of tardiness” (July 12, 2019).

The principals’ perceptions of chronic absenteeism were different. The principals did acknowledge there were some criteria for their respective schools. However, the two public school principals were similar, and the three private school principals were not as structured in their understanding.

Experience with Chronic Absenteeism

All the principals interviewed may have different perspectives as to how to define chronic absenteeism, but all have shared experiences as to the reason why a student may become chronically absent.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

PUPD1 shared that one of the reasons students are chronically absent is due to nonresponsive parents. She stated, “A lot of it is nonresponsive parents. I also think that those nonresponsive parents are single parents because they're trying very hard to support their children” (June 17, 2019).

PRPD2 expressed, “I happen to be in my 31st year as a building principal, and I found from my research that it's not as uncommon as I thought and that is a child who does the parenting in the home. And that would be the child of a bipolar parent ... the one category that definitely gives us enough reason to always investigate chronic absences is when the child becomes the caretaker” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 mentioned that a reason for chronic absenteeism in his school is medical issues. He explained, “This was a single-family household. Mom and dad have divorced, but this was a medical issue. Not as in sickness, but a mental health issue where the young man refused to come to school” (July 1, 2019).

PUCPD4 stated, “One reason would be family-related reasons. In some cases, it's transportation or in some cases, the family structure. They go overseas a lot when they have a wedding ceremony or funeral or pre-funeral stage, whatever. And then they stay long over that and, in that case, they bring their kids because they want their kids to get exposed to their culture, to learn their culture, their routines, and all that” (July 10, 2019).

PRPD5 explained that in his school, chronic tardiness is caused by traffic. He states, “I would absolutely have to say the traffic. Traffic would be the key one. It's the excuse I hear all the time” (July 12, 2019).

Even though the principal's school settings were vastly different from one another, their experiences with chronically absent students were similar. The principals shared the reasons why

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

a student may be chronically absent, and they all mentioned common stories that they are challenged with when faced with the dilemma of chronic absenteeism.

Academic and Cultural Impact on the school

All the principals provided their views on the academic and cultural impact that chronic absenteeism has on the school and/or classroom environment. Additionally, they shared how students perform in the classroom and how teachers may teach them differently.

PUPD1 stated, “Culturally it affects the school because when students are in and out, teachers are more apt to blow them off and not really want to support their educational needs or their social-emotional needs” (June 17, 2019).

PRPD2 commented, “I believe individual classrooms are where the culture of an entire school starts. I think of each individual classroom as a piece on a quilt and the whole school [as] being the entire quilt in its entirety. And I think if there are pockets of weakness where there’s not a total presence of all the students, therefore the ownership of all the students in that room it does impact the whole school” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 shared, “They recognize, at least at our place, where the numbers are such that there are 40, 35, 40 kids in the grade level. Students notice when somebody's missing”—“It impacts a classroom when you're doing collaborative work and your partner is not there. And now the teacher—it impacts the teacher because now the teacher has to look out for that student” (July 1, 2019).

PUCPD4 explained his view by stating, “When it happens in the classrooms, it impacts the instruction. And instead of the teacher focusing on instruction, then the teacher has to deal with more classroom-management-related matters. And of course, then it impacts the learning

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

for all the kids in the classroom. It impacts the learning environment within the classroom, and they're all tied into each other” (July 10, 2019).

PRPD5 echoed the sentiment, “So our class sizes are very small, so when you have twelve, thirteen kids in a class and two are late, it not only reduces the class size, it reduces the conversation within the classroom” (July 12, 2019).

By majority, principals agreed the chronic absenteeism has an impact on a school environment. The principals shared how it impacts school culture, and they shared specifics on how it impacts a classroom routine in a negative manner.

PRPD2 clearly summarizes: “With teachers of middle school, and I think it’s probably one of our weaknesses in middle school across the nation, I don’t think it’s peculiar to (my school) but I think there’s a tendency for us to want students to be more independent, to act more responsibly. And so that many times when the child in middle school is absent, the attitude from their instructors might be well, make that up on your own” (June 18, 2019).

Emergent Themes

Interventions

There were several interventions utilized in the public/charter and parochial schools in Somerset, New Jersey. The public/charter school principals referenced Family & Community 11 times, which was recognized as the most important intervention utilized for chronically absent students. The Family & Community category was followed by Counseling, which was referenced 10 times. Policy & Communication was referenced six times, followed by Mentorship and Incentives, which were referenced five and four times, respectively. With the public schools’ utilization of these interventions, the percentages of chronically absent students increased for one public school and decreased for the other public school. **PUPD1**’s school increased from a 6.5%

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

chronic absenteeism rate in the 2016–2017 school year to a 7.8% chronic absenteeism rate in the 2017–2018 school year. **PUCPD4**'s school decreased from a 4.8% chronic absenteeism rate in the 2016–2017 school year to a 1.8% chronically absent rate in the 2017–2018 school year (“SearchForSchool @ rc.doe.state.nj.us,” n.d.).

Table 2

New Jersey Department of Education – School Performance Report – Chronic Absenteeism

School	Chronic Absenteeism Rate 2016–2017	Chronic Absenteeism Rate 2017–2018
PUPDI	6.5%	7.8%
PUCPD4	4.8%	1.8%

Note. This data is from New Jersey Department of Education (“SearchForSchool @ rc.doe.state.nj.us,” n.d.)

The parochial school principals referenced Family & Community and Policy & Communication 9 times each. These categories were recognized as the most important interventions utilized for chronically absent students. However, Policy & Communication is something the private school principals mentioned is not well structured. Family & Community and Policy & Communication were followed by Counseling, which was referenced 6 times. Incentives and Mentorship were referenced two times each. It must be noted, due to the three private schools participating within this study, that their chronic absenteeism data was not available on the New Jersey Department of Education School Performance Report website.

Family & Community

Schools, for a very long time, have understood the importance of building a relationship with families and communities when working with students. Epstein (2011) stated that “over the last 40 to 50 years of the 20th century ... family-school connections in the United States [have changed]. These changes involved more parents [participating] in their children’s education beyond preschool, [official and public recognition of] parents as ‘teachers,’ and [an] increased ...

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

need for better communication between [the] home and [the] school” (p. 26).

PUPD1 shared, “We were also able to go to an area that was more community[-oriented,] when we looked at the demographics as to where our students were[,] and we were able to go and talk to those parents about the importance of coming to school” (June 17, 2019).

PRPD2 expressed, “Actually, community members for us in a Catholic school environment[—]we belong to a parish[,] and there are actually senior citizens who have taken an active role in getting to know some of the students who would prefer to be home rather than in school” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 simply stated when addressing chronically absent students, “I have to be able to work with the family [just] as well as I have to educate the students” (July 1, 2019).

PUCPD4, echoing a similar sentiment, shared: “Number one, working with the child, working with the family is important” (July 10, 2019).

PRPD5 commented, “Our PTO is good. It’s a little spread out, and it’s trying to do maybe too much fundraising, golf outings, and whatever. If we go to them and say, ‘Listen, this family is having a problem with lateness,’ they’ve offered things like carpooling” (July 12, 2019).

Regardless of whether a school happens to be public or private, the need for building a strong relationship between families, communities, and schools is vital. Epstein (2011) suggested, “This perspective assumes that schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and education of the child. Teachers and parents are believed to share common goals for their children[—goals] which can be achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together” (p. 22).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Counseling

Each principal spoke how important counseling is for students and families that are chronically absent and the willingness to provide social and emotional support.

PUPD1 stated about counseling, “The only plans that are in place are with our school counselors—and they do try very hard, on top of everything else that they do, to create some type of a plan for our students, like an intervention plan” (June 17, 2019).

PRPD2 shared, “Through the years, what I have found to be most successful is the personal approach with a student who’s chronically absent and a personal approach with a student first. I think that can come with words of encouragement and accolades when a child makes the right choice” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 further identified the utilization of outside agencies for counseling. He commented, “I wound up calling the Somerset counseling center, who [then] hooked us up with a therapist. The therapist went out and met with the [student] in the house” (July 1, 2019).

PUCPD4 explained, “There is a unit in the county. I looked at the FCIU, family crisis intervention unit. They play an active role in it if the families cooperate. We [also] have social workers who do a lot of home visits. We do a lot of work with the child. We have individual conferences with the child, with the parent. And in some cases, we use a—if we observe any kind of negligence from the parents, we work with the DCP&P” (July 10, 2019).

The principals interviewed shared that their first step when addressing chronically absent students is to communicate with the chronically absent student and the student’s family. Whether utilizing school counselors, social workers, or outside agencies, providing a level of social and emotional support is a key intervention measure in supporting a student who is chronically absent in Somerset, New Jersey.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Policies and Communication

Establishing rules and procedures should go without saying, but there should be parameters that we must all abide by. According to Attendance Works (2019), “Given the local influence on education in the United States, local policy is key to shaping what happens on the ground in school and communities. Regardless of state or federal requirements, school districts have the authority to see that chronic absence data are tracked, reported and addressed.” All principal participants have communication and policy protocols. However, depending on the type of school (being either public or private), some procedures may be more structured than others.

PUPD1 stated, “Basically they get letters from our school per our district protocols. There is a truancy officer in our district, and the truancy officers do look at the attendance. They correspond with the attendance clerk in our building.” **PUPD1** further shared that such policies are “not [communicated] often enough. We should definitely be communicating more than we do” (June 17, 2019).

PRPD2 shared that there is a handbook utilized in her school, and stated, “It really talks about the methods that a parent or a caregiver should follow for a child that’s absent, but it doesn’t talk about our support system.” She added, “The procedure that is in place in the school that I’m in right now is not as clearly defined as what I experienced in public school, and those supports are not in place.” **PDPD2** commented that their communication for the procedure was as follows: “Our communication is daily. We have a phone system, so if the child is absent the parent is contacted immediately, but we do not have the formal letters that would exist in public school” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 mentioned with his school attendance policy, “I would say that’s really at my discretion. I don’t have a policy such as a public school where you miss X amount of time and

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

something happens. [However,] after five [times coming] late to school, I will contact the family and say you need to get here earlier. But chronic absenteeism is not one of those things that happen[s] [to] us” (July 1, 2019).

PUCPD4 explained that, at his public school, “When the child is unexcused for more than 18 days in our district, the child has to repeat the same grade. In that case, what we've tried to do is to stand by our policies, not bend on them, and if we communicate the attendance matters to the parents during orientation open house—there's a big section in the student handbook.” He added for communication, “We send out notifications to the parents when they hit day four and day seven. They are being notified with a letter that the child has missed the school and the next course of action with the school plan. And then we invite parents for a conference. We talk to the parents; and after day seven, our social workers (will) go to the home” (July 10, 2019).

PRPD5 shared that at his school, they collect data. He explained that he himself does so and that he has an I.T. person who is in charge of implementing the policy in which three tardies constitutes early morning detention with the Principal. He spoke extensively about communicating the importance of coming to school and getting to school on time. He mentioned, “We have a new parent orientation where [both] I speak, [and] my boss speaks. Tardiness is definitely addressed right there. In any paraphernalia I'm going to send out in that first two weeks of school, tardiness is definitely addressed. Usually, [I do so] within the first month of September. I'm addressing the parking lot and tardiness” (July 12, 2019).

The principal participants spoke about the importance of Policy & Communication for attendance at their respective schools. Establishing ground rules is something all principals have in place. However, some may be more structured than others. Principal participants communicate

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

in different ways, but all get the message out to their stakeholders.

Mentorship

Many of the principals interviewed expressed that a form of intervention for students who are chronically absent is mentorship. Some of the mentorship programs were in the form of adult and peer mentoring.

PUPD1 explained, “We do have mentorship programs for our girls and our boys. And I think that shows them that they're valued, the Women to Girls’ program after school [and] the Franklin Youth Initiative [Boys’ Council]” (June 17, 2019).

PRPD2 added, “We do have peer mentors in the school, and they do address issues of students who not only are chronically absent but also ones who would want to be chronically absent” (June 18, 2019).

PUCPD4 expressed, “[We have a] college mentorship program in which we focus on attendance as well. As part of the college mentorship program, a small group of students is assigned a mentor. They are typically teachers and the teacher meet the kids on a regular basis” (July 10, 2019).

PRPD5 mentioned how their school uses a house system and within the house system students are empowered to become leaders. “So, we do the house system here...—like [the] Harry Potter House System—where we split the school into four different sections. You have a house leader. That’s usually an eighth grader. Your assistant house leader is usually a seventh grader” (July 12, 2019).

Just about all the principals utilized some form of mentorship to support chronically absent students. The principals expressed that students were empowered to assist a peer and help serve as a proactive measure.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Incentives

As mentioned previously, schools can develop incentives to promote and motivate students in attending school. (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004) states, “Schools that conducted a greater total number of attendance-focused activities were more likely to decrease the percentage of students who missed twenty or more days of school each year” (p. 44). There are a multiplicity of ideas for motivating and rewarding students for their attendance.

PUPD1 shared, “There was a lot of recognition that students received. They received a certificate. They received their name on a wall. And that motivated some of our students” (June 17, 2019).

PUCPD4 stated, “We do recognize students who have perfect attendance. We do a student assembly and we give them [a] certificate[—that] type of stuff” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD5 commented, “We do incentives for perfect attendance within a month. We do a point system for—a negative point system would be for tardiness. So, within the house system, you know if you’re late five days that might be minus five points for your house system” (July 12, 2019).

Incentives were not used in all principal participants’ schools.

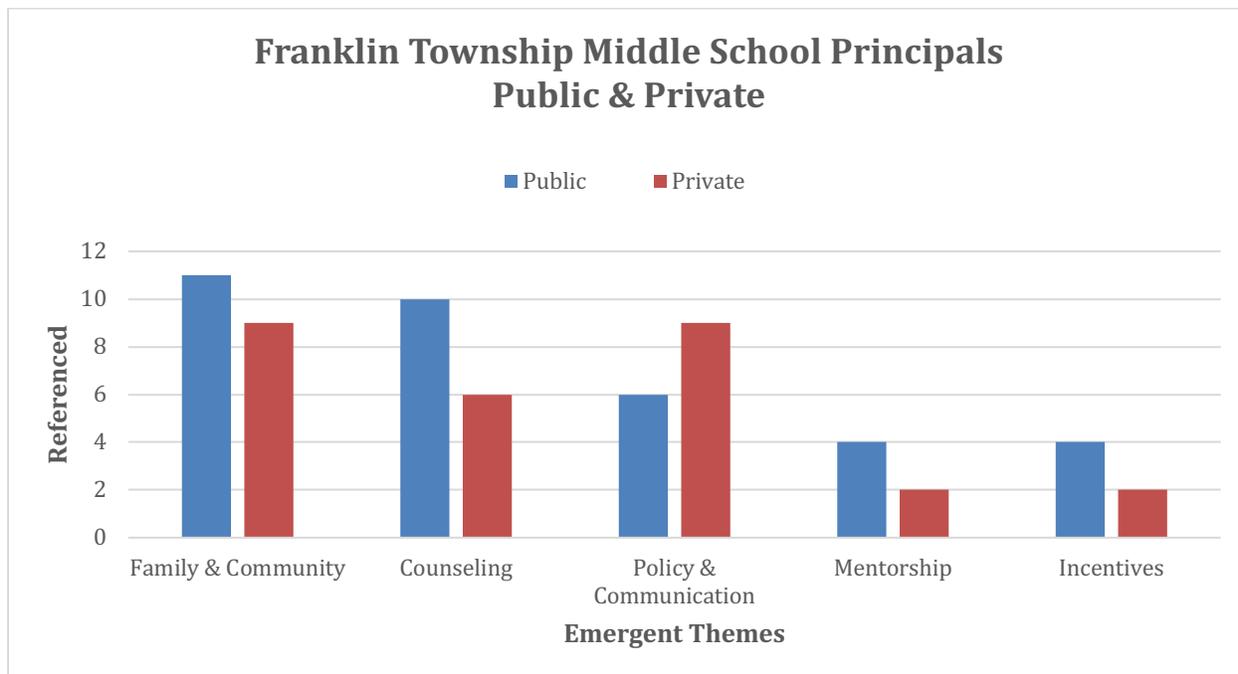
PRPD2 shared, “We do not have an incentive program in place” (June 18, 2019).

PRPD3 also shared regarding incentives, “No, I don’t think we do—no. I don’t know [why,] because it’s happened so few and far between” (July 1, 2019). However, the recognition awards that were established in the principal participants’ schools were very similar to one another, as they honored perfect attendance.

Table 3

Emergent Themes—A Comparison between Public and Private Middle School Principals

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students



Summary

This research aims to find out what effective, efficient and practical interventions can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students. Data collected through five interviews with middle school principals in Somerset, New Jersey consisted of several questions that were categorized into four components—namely, understanding chronic absenteeism, experience with chronically absent students, the impact of chronic absenteeism in the classroom/school, and interventions for students who are chronically absent.

The study's participants were public and private middle school principals in the Somerset, New Jersey area serving at schools that consisted of grades 6–8. One administrator is a principal from Franklin Township Public Schools, one administrator is a principal from a public charter school, and three administrators are principals from private schools in Somerset, New Jersey. All principals that were interviewed had over 20 years of experience in education.

The interviews conducted with the principals allowed four components to guide the

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

study. These components are as follows: Understanding of Chronic Absenteeism, Experience with Chronic Absenteeism, Academic and Cultural Impact Chronic Absenteeism has on Schools and Interventions. Within the component of Interventions, five emergent themes were developed to specify what the most effective interventions used for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within the school of Somerset, New Jersey are. These emergent themes are as follows: Family & Community, Counseling, Policy & Communication, Mentorship, and Incentives. Of the five themes identified by the public and private school principals for this study, the most referenced theme that all principals identified with as being an effective intervention for chronically absent students was Family & Community.

Both public and private school principals identified Family & Community as being the most effective intervention for chronically absent middle-school-aged students. The relationships between the school and the student’s family and community are valued by public and private school settings. All principals spoke to the importance of including the family and community in order to help support the middle-school-aged student who is chronically absent.

The research also focused on counseling as an effective intervention for chronically absent students. Again, all public and private school principals were able to identify with this intervention as being a prominent strategy to support chronically absent students. The principals shared the counseling is not just school counselors but the importance of using social workers, Family Intervention Crisis Units and other outside agencies can be used, if needed, to support students and their families when the student is chronically absent from school.

The principals identified Policy & Communication as another effective intervention to support chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey. The private school principals referenced Policy & Communication and Family &

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Community as being their top interventions for chronically absent students. These themes were referenced nine times each by the private school principals. However, the public school principals identified Policy & Communication as being a third-tier intervention, as they referenced this theme only six times.

Of the emergent themes identified for this research, Mentorship and Incentives were the least referenced of all. Regardless of the need to motivate and encourage students to come to school, all five principals viewed these interventions as having comparatively less impact on improving the attendance for chronically absent students.

To conclude, all five principals shared their understanding of chronic absenteeism, their experience with chronic absenteeism, and the impacts that chronic absenteeism may have on the school. Each of the principals has over 20 years of experience in education, and their perspective and understanding of what chronic absenteeism differed. Even though their understanding of chronic absenteeism may be different, their experience as to why a student may become chronically absent was similar. All private and public school principals agreed that students who are chronically absent have an impact on the school. Their view on the level of impact varied between public school and private school. The public school principals' perspective was not only on how chronically absent students can impact the culture of a school and classroom but on how it will negatively impact the chronically absent student academically. On the other hand, the private school principals felt that chronically absent students can impact the school and classroom; however, since their schools are elite, the students are not impacted as greatly academically. As **PRPD3** stated: "Normally when parents are paying the kind of money they are [paying in order for their child] to come to school, they're usually on board. The student is usually on board" (July 1, 2019).

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This research investigated the perceptions and beliefs of five middle school principals in public and private school districts in Somerset, New Jersey. The aim was to find out what effective, efficient and practical interventions can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students.

This study explored the definition of chronic absenteeism, the impact chronic absenteeism has on education, economically disadvantaged students' impact on chronic absenteeism, strategies to improve chronic absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism case studies that were utilized in schools across the nation. Through the various literature, it is desired for the reader to develop a well-rounded understanding of chronic absenteeism. According to the U. S. Department of Education (1998), 15% of public school teachers report that student absenteeism is a “serious problem” at their school. Balfanz and Bynes (2012) report, “Chronic [a]bsenteeism affects an estimated five to seven and a half million students each year” (p. 17).

The crux of the study was to assess strategies or interventions that can support educators that have chronically absent students. Through the literature that was explored, a four-step action plan was discovered by the federal government which was created to support schools and school districts to reduce chronic absenteeism (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). This report suggested the fourfold need to generate, and act on, absenteeism data; to create and deploy positive messages and measures; to focus communities on addressing chronic absenteeism; and to ensure responsibility across sectors (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). The encouraging emergent themes collected through the principal interviews aligned with what some of the

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

literature recommended. The emergent themes from this study include the following: Family and Communication, Counseling, Policy & Communication, Mentorship, and Incentives.

Summary of Findings

The study's participants were public and private middle school principals in the Somerset, New Jersey area with schools that consisted of grades 6–8. One administrator is a principal from public school, one administrator is a principal from a public charter school in Franklin Township Public Schools, and three administrators are principals from private schools in Somerset, New Jersey (the Franklin Township area). All principals who were interviewed had over 20 years of experience each in education.

The interviews conducted with the principal, revolved around four components to guide the study. These were as follows: Understanding of Chronic Absenteeism, Experience with Chronic Absenteeism, Academic and Cultural Impact Chronic Absenteeism has on Schools, and Interventions. Within the component of Interventions, emergent themes were developed to specify what the most effective interventions used for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey are. As a result of the study, the emergent themes were Family & Community, Counseling, Policy & Communication, Mentorship, and Incentives. Of the five themes identified by the public and private middle school principals for this study, the most referenced theme that all principals identified with as an effective intervention for chronically absent students was Family & Community.

The principals interviewed were public and private middle school principals. Two principals interviewed represented public middle schools, and three principals interviewed represented private schools. Despite their schools' different sectors, and despite their having different experiences, the principals all identified Family & Community as being an intervention

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

that should be utilized to support chronically absent students in the middle school grades within Somerset, New Jersey. Furthermore, Counseling and Policy & Communication were identified as being themes of equivalent importance, to be utilized for chronically absent students.

Research Questions

Research questions were created to guide this study and to collect the perceptions and beliefs of the targeted participants on chronic absenteeism.

The overarching research question asks: What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance? To fully answer that question, chronic absenteeism within public middle schools and private middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey was researched. For each research question, specific outcomes are discussed below:

Research Questions A

- a. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in public/charter schools within Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?

The public/charter school principals referenced Family & Community 11 times in their interview. This was recognized as being the most important intervention utilized for chronically absent students. Family & Community was followed by Counseling, which was referenced 10 times. Policy & Communication was referenced six times. This was followed by Mentorship and Incentives, which were referenced five and four times, respectively. With the public schools' utilization of these interventions, the chronically absent percentages increased for one public school and decreased for the other public schools. According to the New Jersey Department of Education School Performance Report, **PUPD1**'s school increased from a 6.5% chronic absenteeism rate in the 2016–2017 school year to a 7.8% chronic absenteeism rate in the 2017–

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

2018 school year. **PUCPD4**'s school decreased from a 4.8% chronic absenteeism rate in the 2016–2017 school year to a 1.8% chronically absent rate in the 2017–2018 school year (“SearchForSchool @ rc.doe.state.nj.us,” n.d.).

Research Questions B

- b. What are the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used within parochial/prep schools Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance?

The parochial school principals referenced Family & Community and Policy & Communication were referenced 9 times each in their interview. However, Policy & Communication is something that the private school principals mentioned that is not well structured in their school setting. Family & Community and Policy & Communication were followed by Counseling, which was referenced 6 times. Incentives and Mentorship were referenced two times each. It should be noted, due to the three private schools participating within this study, that their chronic absenteeism data was not available on the New Jersey Department of Education School Performance Report website.

Therefore, the most effective kind of chronic absenteeism intervention used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance is Family & Community intervention. This speaks to the relationship between the school and the family and community. Both public and private middle school principals spoke to the importance of connecting with families and the community. **PUPD1** shared, “We were also able to go to an area that was more community[-oriented,] when we looked at the demographics as to where our students were[,] and we were able to go and talk to those parents about the importance of coming to school” (June 17, 2019). This public school principal shared the importance of getting out in the community and meeting families where they are to ensure the important messages about coming to school was

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

heard. Furthermore, **PRPD2** add, “Actually, community members for us in a Catholic school environment[—]we belong to a parish[,] and there are actually senior citizens who have taken an active role in getting to know some of the students who would prefer to be home rather than in school” (June 18, 2019). This private school principal reiterated how the community can play an active role in supporting a school.

Overall, the findings indicate that public and private middle school principals value Family & Community involvement within their schools, specifically that they value Family & Community involvement in supporting chronically absent students. It shall be noted that all schools valued Counseling as a top tier intervention as well. According to **PRPD2** shared, “Through the years, what I have found to be most successful is the personal approach with a student who’s chronically absent and a personal approach with a student first. I think that can come with words of encouragement and accolades when a child makes the right choice” (June 18, 2019).

Study Limitations

A total of five out of seven public and private middle school principals from Somerset, New Jersey participated in this study on the analysis of interventions for chronic absenteeism in grades 6–8. The emergent themes were derived from principals who participated in this study. However, they do not represent all the beliefs from all middle school principals in Somerset, New Jersey. This study also recognizes the differences in the structure of private and public schools. These settings have different school personnel and resources, which may cause an effect on the amount of support for chronically absent students. It is possible that all interventions shared by the principal do not accurately reflect what is occurring in their school with the goal of addressing chronic absenteeism. Finally, it is possible that researcher bias influenced the data

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

collection and the interpretation of what was expressed by the participants.

Recommendations

This study indicates a need to develop some of the suggested action plan steps by the federal government. Through the literature that was explored, a four-step action plan was discovered. This plan was authored by the federal government which created it to support schools and school districts in reducing chronic absenteeism (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). This report suggested a fourfold plan to generate, and act on, absenteeism data, to create and deploy positive messages and measures, to focus communities on addressing chronic absenteeism, and to ensure responsibility across sectors (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). The principals interviewed commented specifically on the importance of Family and Communication and Counseling; but they painted broad brush strokes regarding the general importance of Incentives and the collection of Data.

Data collection allows one to have a targeted approach in tackling a challenge. The Federal Government recommends that generating absenteeism data and acting on it is step one (US Department of Justice et al., 2015). Some of the principals in the study mildly touched on the usage of data. For instance, **PRPD2** stated, “The data is [collected]—our receptionist serves as that person—and that data is readily available any given day” (July 18, 2019). As mentioned previously, generating and acting on absenteeism data is essential to identifying the problem. In order to provide the appropriate support, one must understand where to start. The different departments of government structure this action step by first prioritizing the warning prevention and intervention systems that identify students who are chronically absent (US Department of Justice et al., 2015).

The utilization of incentives were slightly referenced by the principals interviewed.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

Principals in this study acknowledged that they use incentives for perfect attendance recognition; but other than that, it was not used. Sheldon & Epstein (2004) conducted a longitudinal study on the impact of family and community involvement on chronic absenteeism. The study showed schools that performed more than eight attendance-focused activities were more successful in decreasing chronic absenteeism than those schools that did not. Principals and/or designees should strongly consider developing incentives for their building to help encourage and motivate students to want to come to school and stay in school.

The importance of knowing one's students, staff, and community is vital in supporting a school. Providing one's school community what they need is a step in the right direction. A principal must analyze data in order to accurately understand where the school is deficient. A teacher must utilize data to provide targeted instruction. Therefore, as a school community, taking the first step in analyzing chronic absenteeism data and understanding what the needs are for a student who is missing school is vital. Consequently, it does not stop there. Once one gets a student back to school, how does one keep them there? Or, how does one become more proactive in inspiring students to come to school? Incentives are a research-based recommendation that suggests schools decrease chronic absenteeism for rewarding or recognizing good attendance. Principals are encouraged to establish and cultivate multiple incentive programs/ideas for their school, so that students know they are valued and appreciated in their school community.

The significance of the study is to provide educators with insight into how to differentiate the appropriate interventions for supporting chronically absent students. I believe that knowing the answer to my research questions will be useful to future researchers because I believe that educators need to know how much to support students and their families in order for them to understand the value of coming to school. Chronic absenteeism is essentially being placed in the

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

same category as Math and Language Arts scores in terms of how the states are evaluating schools. Understanding what the research says; adding to the research; and providing possible solutions for educational practices can be very useful in the field of education.

As educators share best practices to tackle chronic absenteeism, it will only provide additional tools to support students and families. There is no one solution. Every educator must understand every student is different. Therefore, every situation will need a different intervention that will align with the student's needs.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

It is important to keep in mind that this study included both public and private schools. These settings function differently but have similar needs to support students who are chronically absent from school.

More specifically, the traditional public school and the public charter school in this study are considered to be diverse in nature. The public school in this study has students from many different nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds (“SearchForSchool @ rc.doe.state.nj.us,” n.d.). The parochial school and the private school in this study are tuition based. These schools have tuitions that range from \$7,800 to \$40,800.

Furthermore, the traditional public school operates under a board of education comprised of elected officials who monitor and approve the school's policies. The public charter school and the parochial/prep school operate under a board of trustees that monitors and approves the school's policies as well.

Recommendation for Policy

As a result of this research conducted for this study, the following policies are recommended:

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

1. All public and private schools should establish attendance professional learning community teams to facilitate regularly scheduled meetings to collect, review, and analyze absenteeism data.
2. All public and private schools should report to their chronic absenteeism data to local school boards or to boards of trustees.
3. All public and private schools should communicate their attendance policy procedures and practices to local board of education or to board of trustees, parents, and school personnel.
4. All public and private schools should set aside financial resources from their local funds in order to properly support students who are chronically absent.

Recommendation for Practice

Based on the results and conclusions of this research, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Principals should create and implement multiple incentives to encourage students to attend school.
2. Principals should partner with community organizations to help establish mentorship programs and support services for families that have students who are chronically absent.
3. Principals should establish, for teachers, clear procedures designed to support chronically absent students academically.
4. Principals should dedicate school personnel to the goal of supporting chronically absent students' and their families' social and emotional

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

needs through counseling, home visits, and parent engagement training sessions.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is always necessary to delve deeper into research and continue to peel the onion until the root causes and solutions to issues are discovered. This particular study is meant for use by educators—specifically, administrators and/or designees—who seek strategies to limit chronic absenteeism. However, future research should be directed according to the following philosophies:

1. What are the perceptions of chronic absenteeism in relation to schools whose teachers are demographically members of a majority that does not match the school's minority student's demographics?
2. What are the influences that courtesy busing may have for students who are chronically absent?
3. What are the perceptions of schools with designated attendance teams or Professional Learning Communities as compared to schools that do not have them?
4. What is the impact that mentorship will have on student attendance?

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this study was to find the most effective chronic absenteeism interventions used in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey to improve attendance. Even with five principals being part of this research, the goal was accomplished by their willingness to share what is done in their schools that make them successful. Overall, their insight into interventions for chronically absent students for middle school grades will hopefully

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

benefit future middle school administrators in the Franklin Township area.

Family & Community is the intervention that all principals identified with and perceived as being an effective strategy to support students who are chronically absent. Regardless of whether a school happens to be public or private, the need for building a strong relationship between families, communities, and schools is vital. Epstein (2011) suggested, “This perspective assumes that schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and education of the child. Teachers and parents are believed to share common goals for their children[—goals] which can be achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together” (p. 22).

The principals interviewed communicated their perceptions and beliefs about chronic absenteeism. Their honesty about what is working and what is not working, what they have in place, and what they do not have in place crafted a clear picture as to the significance of this study. Principals identified that they have strong family and community relationships, as well as counseling services, in place. However, not all principals shared they have structured procedures or incentive programs for helping students to be motivated to come to school.

Lesson Learned

As the researcher, I have learned that administrators need to educate themselves and collect data on chronic absenteeism so that they can clearly understand how to support the student and their families in order to get all students to come to school consistently. An educator understands that if a student does not come to school, they can't learn. Therefore, I hope this research fosters a school environment that cultivates a team to target chronically absent students.

Furthermore, I have learned that there are policies and practices within private schools that can benefit public schools and vice versa. I believe it is important that schools that function in the same community share resources that can ultimately better all schools and in turn, have a

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

positive impact on the community in which they live.

Finally, I have learned that regardless of the public or private school setting, there is a need for community support. Including families and encouraging them to be even more engaged in the school community, and inviting the community-at-large to have a role in the schools, does have an impact on supporting students with chronic absenteeism. Someone once said, “On the journey of life, it’s okay to stop and ask for directions.” This research reminded me that it is hard to accomplish goals without the helping hand of others.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

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Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

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Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

APPENDIX A

List of Codes Used in the Research—Public/Private School Districts and Personnel

Type	Grade Level	Exp.	Position	Race	Gender	District Code	CODE
Public = PU	6–8	> 20 Yrs.	Principal = P	White	Female	1= D1	PUPD1
Private = PR	K-8	> 20 Yrs.	Principal = P	White	Female	2= D2	PRPD2
Private = PR	6–8	> 20 Yrs.	Principal = P	White	Male	3= D3	PRPD3
Public = PUC	K-12	> 20 Yrs.	Principal = P	White	Male	4= D4	PUCPD4
Private = PR	K-8	> 20 Yrs.	Principal = P	White	Male	5= D5	PRPD5

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

APPENDIX B Interview Guide



Interview Protocol Questions

Understanding Chronic Absenteeism

1. How would you define the criteria for chronic absenteeism?
 - a. How would you describe a student who is chronically absent?

Experience with Chronically Absent Students

2. Have you had students who were considered chronically absent?
3. What are some reasons students are chronically absent in your school? (Medical Issues, Climate & Culture, Suspension, Single Parents, Non-Responsive)
 - a. Do you believe HIB is cause of chronic absenteeism?

Impact on Chronic Absenteeism in the Classroom/School

4. How do you feel student chronic absenteeism impacts the school (culturally & academically)?
5. How do you feel student chronic absenteeism impacts your classrooms?
6. [Regarding] students who are chronically absent, how are they performing in your classes?
7. [Regarding] students who are chronically absent, do teachers teach them differently than other students?
 - a. Does a student who is chronically absent have an academic plan to make-up missed assignments?

Interventions for Students who are Chronically Absent

8. What has been your experience in supporting students who are chronically absent? Or, in what ways can an educator help a chronically absent student not be chronically absent?
 - a. What incentive programs do you have to support [students with] chronic absenteeism?
 - b. Do you have PTO/Community members who can help support families/students who are chronically absent?

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students



- c. Do you have Transportation supports for students who are chronically absent?
 - d. Is there any type of mentorship programs that can be provided for chronically absent students?
 - e. What proactive interventions or supports are utilized before students become chronically absent?
9. Is there an Attendance PLC in your school?
 - a. Is data collected on students who are chronically absent?
10. What are the policies and procedures that are carried out for students who are chronically absent?
 - a. How often do you communicate with families to inform them that their student is chronically absent?
11. Are there student engagement programs from outside of your school that support chronically absent students? (Interfaith Counseling/Family Counseling/Peer Mentor)
12. Have you had experiences that helped a student who was chronically absent [and who had] become a nonattendance issue?
13. Is there a truancy officer in your district?
 - a. If so, how are the truancy officer's services used to address chronic absenteeism?

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

APPENDIX C

Letter of Solicitation



Dear _____

I am currently enrolled at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, in the Executive Ed.D. program as a doctoral student in the College of Education and Human Services, Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy. My aim is to conduct a study the analysis of interventions for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey. Accordingly, I am writing to invite your participation in a semi-structured interview that is needed for this dissertation study.

My research study is a qualitative case study to find out what effective, efficient and practical interventions can help educators in Somerset, New Jersey support chronically absent students by facilitating their coming to school and being productive students. Data collection will be through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews.

The interview will be approximately one hour and your responses will be recorded electronically for the purpose of transcription. All identifying characteristics and responses will be coded to protect your anonymity. Recorded data will be securely stored on a thumb drive and stored in a safe in my home to ensure its security.

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this study. Only the principal researcher will have access to the codes that match interview responses to data.

If you agree to serve as a participant in the study, please read and sign the attached Informed Consent Form. If you have any questions, please contact me at 908-420-6976. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your anticipated cooperation.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Solomon
Executive Ed. D. Program
Seton Hall University
400 South Orange Avenue
South Orange, NJ 07079

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form



Informed Consent

The following information is provided in the doctoral research study conducted by Nicholas Solomon. The researcher is affiliated with Seton Hall University as a doctoral student in the Executive Ed.D. Program.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to analyze the interventions for chronically absent students in grades 6–8 within middle schools in Somerset, New Jersey

Procedures:

Participants will participate in an interview regarding their views and experiences on interventions for chronically absent students who will last approximately 30–60 minutes in duration. The interview will be audio-recorded for transcription and content analysis of the responses by the researcher.

Instruments:

Interviews will be conducted for each participant. An interview protocol will be used to guide the interview to maintain validity of the questions that are being asked to participants. A sample question would be as follows: How do you feel student chronic absenteeism impacts your school?

Voluntary Nature:

Participation in this study is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. You can refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

Anonymity:

There is no anonymity, because face-to-face interviews with the researcher will be conducted. No names of participants, schools in origin or district will be used.

Interventions for Chronically Absent Students



Confidentiality:

Every precaution will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of participating individuals and their responses. The researcher and dissertation advisor will be the only ones to view the interview transcripts. Any information obtained through this study connected with the identity of the subjects or the schools will be used solely by the researcher and kept strictly confidential.

All data will be stored securely on a USB memory key and kept in a locked safe in the researcher's possession. Upon completion of the study the data will be kept on a USB memory key and secured in a safe within the researcher's possession for at least 3 years.

Risks or Discomforts:

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study.

Benefits:

The benefit of this study will be its' potential to assist administrators and district stakeholders to make informed decisions based on research when considering, planning, and implementing interventions for chronically absent students.

Contact Information:

Any questions concerning this research or participation in the study may be directed to the researcher, Nicholas Solomon at nicksolomon21@gmail.com or to the researcher's mentor, Dr. Daniel Gutmore at daniel.gutmore@shu.edu. Questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to Dr. Mary Ruzicka, Director of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board of Human Subjects Research at 973-313-6314 or by email at irb@shu.edu.

I hereby give my consent to participate in the interview and acknowledge that it will be audio recorded. I further understand that I will be given a copy of this Informed Consent Form for my records.

Signature of Participant

DATE

