A Program Evaluation of Attendance Policy and Procedure

At a Low-Income Elementary School with High Absentee Rates

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Professional Responsibility: This project has been reviewed by collegial professional peers and has been submitted for on-line publication before being evaluated by faculty members from Portland State University. I am the author and take full responsibility for the project’s contents and quality. This work serves as a baseline for my professional school counselor skills and demonstrates what I have done to develop and/or assess my actions directed toward serving students and schools. In other words, this is a snapshot or one indicator of my work at this stage of my career.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the results of an Action Research Project that focused on the effectiveness of attendance policies and procedures in a low-income elementary school with high student absentee rates.

Introduction

Pride Elementary School is located in an area checker-boarded with large apartment complexes, suburban home developments, ‘big box’ retail stores, and industrial sites. It is a Kindergarten through 5th grade school that has a highly transient population of 594 students (as of November 2004). According to the school’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) report for 2003-2004, student ethnicity was represented as White (77.8%), Hispanic (12.7%), Black (5.5%), Asian or Pacific Islander (3.1%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (0.9%). Reflecting a rapidly evolving trend toward diversification, this year’s student ethnicity (as of November 2004) is represented as White (72%), Hispanic (16%), Black (6%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (1%).

Pride is a low-income and high-needs school with elevated levels of enrollment in special programs. According to its NCLB report (2003-2004), 64.2% of the population participates in the Free or Reduced Lunch program (nearly twice the district average), 19.8% in Special Education programs (twice the average), and 12.1% in the Transitional Bilingual program (nearly four times the average). Although there isn’t hard data available yet, the principal, school counselor, and various school staff believe that participation in special programs has increased this year and will continue to trend that direction. Pride receives Title I funds to help meet its learning needs. In addition, the Pride facility houses the school district ‘Clothes Closet’ for families in need that have students enrolled in district schools. The regional homeless shelter
is located within the boundaries of the school, meaning that any children living at the shelter are enrolled at Pride. Spanish and Russian are the most common languages spoken besides English.

Absenteeism was identified at the outset of this project by the administration, school counselor, and various school staff as a problematic issue in need of urgent attention. Therefore, the primary purpose of this Action Research Project is to evaluate the effectiveness of school, district, and state attendance policies and procedures within Pride Elementary School’s unique environment. In addition, it will examine the effects of select short-term ‘enhancements’ in school attendance procedures and practices by looking for subsequent changes in absentee rates.

**Review of the Literature**

Chronic absenteeism is a nationwide phenomenon and a serious problem in our society that impacts the absentee student, the school, and society in general (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). On any school day eight percent of the nation’s school age population is truant from school, and in urban areas this figure can rise as high as thirty percent (Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, & Wright, 1984). Since the 1970’s absenteeism has been the most persistent problem that administrators face (Rood, 1989), and teachers often complain that it is unfair to be held accountable for student progress when the student is not available to be taught. Indeed, research on absenteeism suggests that it may be as important as any issue confronting schools today (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Absenteism refers to relatively high rates of absence, whether ‘excused’ or ‘unexcused.’ Truancy falls under the umbrella of absenteeism and is commonly defined as an unlawful absence from school without the parents’ permission or as excessive unexcused absences (Bell et al., 1994). Both absenteeism and truancy can be typed as either ‘chronic’ or ‘occasional.’
Absenteeism is a constant interruption of the learning process for students. The more absences a student accumulates, the less he or she can be expected to adequately participate in and understand classroom activities (Rood, 1989). Compared to regularly attending students, chronically absent students receive lower grades and show less than expected learning gains (Rohrman, 1993). Because schools are cultural institutions that contribute to the socialization of children into mainstream society, absenteeism is disruptive to this process as well (Bell et al., 1994). Possibly the most serious implication of chronic absenteeism is its correlation with dropout rates (Bell et al., 1994). It has also been linked with juvenile delinquency, and, according to a prison study, eighty-nine percent of adult inmates had a history of school truancy (Rohrman, 1993). Studies have found that truancy is also associated with juvenile and adult deviance including drug and alcohol abuse, marital problems, violent behavior, vandalism, as well as with lower-status occupations, less stable career patterns, and increased unemployment in adulthood (Bell et al., 1994). Adults who were chronically absent as children often cope with illiteracy, social alienation, poverty, and political powerlessness (Rohrman, 1993).

In quality terms, absenteeism is a waste of educational resources, time, and human potential. It causes rework and waste for teachers who spend class time re-teaching lessons which take instructional time away from students who attend regularly (Weller, 2000). In one of Weller’s examples, a teacher who must re-teach four students in a class of twenty students for twenty minutes cost the school system $857.60 of teacher expertise by taking paid ‘direct instruction’ time away from 16 other students who were not absent from school. Also, the extra time spent going over absentee work reduces teacher planning periods and opportunities to provide individual assistance. As a result, teachers with students who have higher absentee rates view teaching less positively than those having lower rates. In addition, absent students miss the
information resulting from peer and teacher interaction that is a valuable part of the learning experience and cannot be replicated when teachers re-teach the material (Weller, 2000).

High absenteeism is also costly in terms of the efficient use of administrator time (Weller, 2000). Many secondary schools have administrators assigned part- or full-time to manage attendance and discipline problems. Clerical staff are also employed to help these administrators with record keeping. Home-school officers are sometimes employed to make daily telephone calls to parents and visit students’ homes to verify the legitimacy of their absences. These salaries and travel costs are expensive and take monies away from instruction.

Chronic absenteeism has serious repercussions for a community as well. It is linked to high daytime burglary rates, auto theft rates, and vandalism (Rohrman, 1993). High absentee rates also reduce state funding for public schools, as many school systems receive state monies based at least partly on the number of students who regularly attend (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Ultimately, the cumulative effects of absenteeism may decrease public confidence in the school system’s product, translating into lack of increased financial support for public schools and increased enrollments in alternative forms of schooling.

Traditionally, absenteeism has been viewed as caused by a single problem that was located in the domains of either the student, the structure of the school, or the family and community (Cimmarusti et al., 1984). Reflecting this view, the existing literature consists primarily of studies of the relationship between absenteeism and single or multiple variables from only one of these possible domains.

Student-based studies of absenteeism suggest that frequently absent students are more likely than other students to report lower academic self-concepts and self-esteem, have a higher prevalence of anxiety or neuroticism, are less likely to be successful in their relations with peers,
and are more likely to engage in antisocial activity in the classroom (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998). Factors about the individual student that contribute to absenteeism and truant behavior include: school phobia, poor social and emotional functioning, ethnic or racial dissonance, failure to learn, a learning style not in pace with the classroom, learning disabilities, and health problems which are often a symptom of underlying social or emotional problems (Bell et al., 1994).

Family-based studies suggest that the families of children with high absence rates are less likely to be well functioning and more likely to be characterized by unhealthy relationships and greater conflict (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998). Studies linking family characteristics to student absenteeism have been inconclusive and suggest that family practices, rather than family structure, affect student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Several of the factors that are important are parental knowledge of truancy, family attitude towards education, family socio-economic status, family parental situation, child abuse or neglect, and parenting skills (Bell et al., 1994). Parents of chronically absent students score significantly higher on scales of over-protectiveness, overindulgence, and rejection, and are less frequently and actively assisting their children with homework. In addition, children from lower-class families may stay at home to care for siblings.

School-based studies suggest that nonattendance is more likely when students believe that the classroom environment is chaotic or boring, that teachers don’t listen to them, or that there are no academic consequences (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Contributing factors of absentee behavior that are within the school’s control include areas of policies, rules, curriculum, and teacher characteristics (Bell et al., 1994). Teachers with high absentee rates score higher on ratings of rejection and over-protectiveness, and have classrooms that rate high in
competitiveness and teacher control and low on teacher support. In addition, attendance policies in schools with low attendance often lack adequate reporting, recording, follow up, or consistent enforcement of consequences.

Recent evidence clearly suggests that absenteeism is a multi-causal problem within a ‘context of actions’ that is comprised of the interactional and reciprocal relationships between the domains of the child, his or her family, and the school he or she attends (Cimmarusti et al., 1984). Epstein & Sheldon (2002) expand this context to include the community in which a child and his or her family live. In spite of convincing and growing evidence for reciprocal influence models, there are sparse studies designed to investigate them. One such study examined several variables from multiple domains and found that absent students can be distinguished from regular attenders based on a combined set of variables (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). These students are less likely to be socially competent in their relations in class, to perceive school experiences favorably, to perceive cohesion in the family, and to perceive parental acceptance. They are more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior in the classroom, and more likely to perceive parental discipline as lax or inconsistent. They are more likely to perceive stronger attempts by parents at control, to experience family conflict, and to feel inferior academically, socially, and personally. The study suggests that targeting a single area for intervention is unlikely to be effective, and that success is more probable if parents, students, and school personnel share in the task of identifying solutions to the problem.

Although dropping out of school has drawn more research attention than absenteeism, results of these dropout studies point to the need for schools to address problems with student attendance early (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Though defined by a single event, dropping out seems to reflect a long process of disengagement that often begins at an early age. In fact,
students who eventually drop out are absent more often than other students beginning as early as first grade. Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey (1997) found that dropouts average 16 days’ absence in the first grade as compared to 10 days for graduates. Because each additional day absent is estimated to increase the likelihood of dropout by about 5 percent, this six-day difference implies an increase in the odds of dropping out by about 30 percent. Similarly, patterns of academic performance and involvement appear to be established as early as first grade (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992). The high accuracy with which elementary data identifies potential dropouts likely reflects family attitudes toward education since the elementary student who is not in school is absent with the parent’s knowledge and at least tacit consent (Barrington & Hendricks, 2001). Because the social context within both the family and classroom appear to be important in how these patterns get established and maintained, early intervention at the elementary level involving students, families, and schools working together is likely the most effective strategy in addressing absenteeism at all levels.

Illness often serves as an escape from a stressful school environment for early elementary children who are chronically absent (Pennebaker, Hendler, Durrett, & Richards, 1981). The convergence of various social forces on the child during the early years of school can be stressful on less sociable children and lead to physiological complaints, particularly if the school has climate issues. Findings indicate that the parent’s view of the child clearly influences the number of days per year that the child attends school. Parents who consider their child to be ‘not sociable’ may be more likely to let the child stay at home when they complain of illness in order to avoid unpleasant interactions at school.

Historically, interventions for absentee behavior have been targeted at three areas: the individual student, the family of the student, and the school (Bell et al., 1994). Individual
counseling interventions involving self-esteem enhancement, contingency contracting, cognitive therapy approaches, and self-management strategies have been shown to be effective. Supportive instruction involving extra tutoring and attention has also had success. In contrast, interventions involving punishment such as suspensions, lower grades, extra homework, missing recess, or restrictions from special activities do not appear to reduce the number of days absent, and may have the unintended effect of increasing the motivation to withdraw from the punishing source (Baker & Jansen, 2000). Group counseling in the form of attendance groups appear to be effective in reducing absenteeism by replacing punishment with incentives and rewards for attending, and have been shown to improve attendance, develop more positive attitudes towards school and learning, and enhance self-esteem. Groups also allow school counselors and social workers greater efficiency by reaching several students at once.

Family interventions for absenteeism have typically attempted to either alter a dysfunctional familial situation or simply achieve more parental involvement in their child’s education (Bell et al., 1994). Family therapy that enables children and their families to resume healthy growth and development has proved to be effective. Equally important and effective is involving parents in the education of their chronically absent children. In fact, families are now being recognized as an important influence on student attendance and an important resource for decreasing chronic absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Parental contact by the school serves to improve attendance (Bell et al., 1994), including home visits in more severe cases (Baker & Jansen, 2000). Providing families with a school contact person with whom to discuss attendance or other issues proves to be a consistently effective practice (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The degree to which schools overcome the challenge of communicating effectively with diverse groups of families is related to gains in student attendance and declines in chronic
absenteeism, as is providing workshops for parents on attendance and related matters. When severe cases of chronic absenteeism persist with little or no parental response, court referrals or other sanctions may be effective in pressuring the parents to ensure the child’s regular attendance and to impress on the child the concern the school has for each individual student (Barrington & Hendricks, 2001).

School-based interventions that have been effective in reducing absenteeism include installing a system for monitoring and recording absences, creating an alliance with teachers and parents committed to reducing truancy, maintaining consistency in imposing penalties, creating and supporting intervention programs, expansion and improvement of attendance staff and monitoring, establishment of a student-attendance service center, creating a make-up work policy for all absentees, scheduling attendance assemblies, involving truants in extracurricular activities, and rewarding or publicizing good attendance (Bell et al., 1994). Schools that rewarded students for improved attendance reported positive changes in attendance from year to year (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). In addition, schools that offered after-school programs reported greater increases in average daily attendance and decreases in chronic absenteeism.

Teachers can be an effective part of school-based intervention by setting an example, maintaining accurate attendance records, creating a pleasant environment, creating a classroom-attendance reward system, and considering individual student’s capabilities (Bell et al., 1994). A classroom environment that includes effective instruction and management techniques such as mastery learning, stated learning objectives, varied delivery, periodic evaluation and feedback, and critical thinking skills are effective in drawing students to class (Rood, 1989).

Because the child, family, school, and community are all involved in creating a context of absenteeism, multimodal interventions that address these issues of context and relationship may
offer the best possible outcome (Cimmarusti et al., 1984). Multimodal approach to truancy intervention should include the following elements: (a) Schools must assess the needs of students, families, educators, and administrators before instituting a program to reduce absenteeism; (b) a cross section of school personnel, students, and community must be involved in developing the program; (c) students must be able to direct and develop a program where social influence is a major factor; (d) policies must be specifically directed towards habitually absent students; and (e) programs and policies must be evaluated frequently (Bell et al., 1994).

According to a review of the literature by Bell et al. (1994), the first and most important step in multimodal intervention is to assess the causes of the problem and the individual needs of the student and establish a program accordingly. The second step is to meet with the family to assess the extent to which the absentee behavior could be due to familial circumstances, conflicts, or dysfunctions. It is key at this point to involve the parents in the child’s education and attendance problem through creating a cooperative and direct relationship between school faculty and parents, implementing a system to notify parents of absences, and involving them in school activities. The third step in this intervention program entails changes within the school system regarding attendance policy, school and classroom climate, teacher expectations, and consideration of alternative schedules for those students who are extremely averse to attending regular class or that have legitimate circumstances which prevent them from attending. In severe cases, community agencies may become involved in managing the chronically absent. This involves such resources as social workers, juvenile probation officers, and the courts (Rohrman, 1993). These professionals make home and school visits and sometimes schedule hearings to develop a plan of intervention with the school, the parents, and the student.
A very recent study by Epstein & Sheldon (2002) supports earlier research on multimodal interventions and suggests that elementary schools that are interested in improving attendance will benefit from a comprehensive approach that includes students, educators, parents and community members as partners in addressing the issue. This massive study of 39 elementary schools found that the quality of family, school, and community ‘partnership programs’ was associated with rates of student attendance. Effective programs link partnership activities with important school goals using six types of involvement: (a) parenting; (b) communicating; (c) volunteering; (d) learning at home; (e) decision making; and (f) collaborating with the community.

In summary, schools are more likely to improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism with three broad strategies: (a) taking a comprehensive approach to attendance with activities that involve students, families, and the community; (b) using more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing activities; and (c) sustaining a focus on improving attendance over time (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Methodology

At the beginning of this project, Human Subjects approvals were obtained through Portland State University’s Research Review Committee and the Department of Research and Evaluation of the school district. The project qualified for a waived review from the PSU committee, with the following exemptions claimed: 1) research was conducted in an established educational setting, involving normal educational practices; and 2) the research project was subject to the approval of the principal of the school and was designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine possible changes in or alternatives to school programs or procedures. Only school-wide pre-existing data was used, and confidentiality was appropriately protected.
The methods and procedures used here involved gathering and analyzing pre-existing attendance data for the 2004-2005 school year as well as the previous two years. The most germane data sets analyzed were the ‘average daily attendance’ for each year and the percent of students ‘chronically absent’ (twenty or more days of school) each year. Data was gathered through baseline and final surveys completed by the principal with the help of myself, the school counselor, and the attendance secretary at the beginning and end of the project. Ongoing data was obtained throughout the project from the attendance office of the school with the principal’s consent. Information regarding state, district, and school attendance policies and procedures were obtained through the school district Attendance Specialist and the school attendance secretary.

The data gathered was analyzed for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness of attendance policies and procedures at Pride Elementary School and formulating recommendations for the future. Hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of the policies and procedures were primarily formulated based on the data and were tested (with severe timeline limitations) through select short-term ‘enhancements’ to the current policies and procedures. These short-term enhancements were guided by current research and were put into action using a school ‘attendance drive’ approved by the principal for one month. This attendance drive included (a) presenting current research findings, data analysis, and resulting recommendations at a school staff meeting; (b) sending a letter to all parents/guardians regarding the importance of attendance, the school’s policies and procedures, and helpful contact and resource information; and (c) classroom contests that rewarded the classrooms at each grade level that improved their attendance the most, had the best overall attendance for the year, and had the best classroom poster advertising the drive.
Program Background

In the state where Pride Elementary School is located, state law requires parents/guardians of all children between the ages of eight and eighteen years of age to have the child attend school. In addition, if a parent enrolls a child who is six or seven years of age in school, they have the responsibility to see that the child attends for the entire time school is in session, unless the parent formally removes the child from school. State law also requires school districts to take the following actions when a child who is enrolled in school has ‘unexcused’ absences: (a) notify parent/guardian by phone or in writing on the first unexcused absence in any month, (b) schedule a parent/guardian conference to discuss the reasons for the absence and actions necessary for attendance on the second unexcused absence in any month, (c) enter into a formal agreement with the student and parent/guardian regarding attendance or make a referral to a community truancy board after the fifth unexcused absence in any month, (d) file a petition in the Juvenile Court alleging a violation of the law by the parent/guardian, the child, or both no later than the seventh day of unexcused absence in any month and/or not later than the tenth day of unexcused absence during the current school year, and (e) file a contempt motion if a student is not in compliance with a court order resulting from a truancy petition.

School district policy states that all student absences require a parent/guardian to make either a personal contact or provide a written excuse to the school’s attendance office in order for absences to be excused. A list of valid reasons for excused absences is disclosed to parents at the beginning of the school year. All student absences that are not excused within three days of the student’s return to school will not be excused unless approved by a school administrator. When a student is absent from school for five or more consecutive days due to health conditions, a note from a healthcare provider must be provided to the school or the absence may be classified as
unexcused. Excessive excused absences, unless an agreement has been made with the school principal, shall not be permitted if deemed to cause a serious adverse effect on the student’s educational progress. All absences that are not excused are considered unexcused by the school district.

The school district fully complies with state law regarding compulsory attendance and unexcused absences. The district does not add additional policy regarding unexcused absences. However, district policy requires that its schools will attempt to notify the parent/guardian daily by phone or voice-mail whenever a child is absent from school.

Pride Elementary School fully complies with both state and district attendance policy and does not codify any additional policies or procedures. Informally, the principal encourages the teachers to communicate regularly with parents regarding student progress and attendance. In addition, the principal and/or school counselor holds conferences with parents/guardians by phone or in person at the teacher’s request when attendance becomes an issue of concern.

Although attendance goals are not part of Pride’s School Improvement Plan, the plan does set goals regarding school climate that aim to encourage student and parent participation at the school. These policies and procedures will be discussed in following analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

Average Daily Attendance (ADA) for the current school year, the previous school year (2003-2004), and the year prior to that (2002-2003) was determined from the existing attendance data. This figure stayed relatively stable through this span of nearly three years, with ADA measures of 93.4% for the current year, 93.8% for 2003-2004, and 94.4% for 2002-2003. These figures may be even more stable than they appear due to the fact that the district transitioned into a new data management system for attendance and grading during 2003 and some of the data did
not transfer into the new system. It seems reasonable to conclude that ADA does not appear to be a worsening problem, although it certainly can be improved upon in future goal setting and planning.

The Percent of Students Chronically Absent (PSCA) was determined for the current school year and the previous two years using the pre-existing attendance data. Chronically absent was defined as twenty or more absences in a school year, a figure adopted from the work of Epstein and Sheldon (2002). In the 2002-2003 school year the PSCA was 4.9% and in the 2003-2004 school year it was 6.6%. In the current year (2004-2005), the PSCA was on pace to be 12.4% as of calculations made using data through March 1, 2005. This PSCA was calculated using a proportionally prorated number of 13 or more absences at that point of the year. This significant rise in PSCA may in part be attributed to the 2003 transition in data management systems mentioned in the previous paragraph, but is certainly a growing concern that needs to be addressed. Most stakeholders in this project who worked at the school were alarmed and deeply concerned about the fact that 12.4% of the students were chronically absent.

To further understand this chronic absenteeism, the 12.4% of the students who were on pace to be chronically absent by March 1 of the 2004-2005 school year were identified, and their pre-existing attendance data and attendance files were reviewed. These attendance files are kept by the attendance secretary to document letters sent home to meet the state compulsory attendance laws as well as to document parent conferences held with the principal. There were 74 students in the school who were identified by the data as chronic absentees among an overall enrollment of 594 students. These students appeared to be representative of the overall student population, so it was determined that the data would not be disaggregated by racial grouping.
The data was disaggregated by grade level and by classroom in order to examine the influence of age and classroom practices on PSCA data (see Figures 1 and 2).

*Figure 1* - PSCA disaggregated by grade level.

*Figure 2* - PSCA disaggregated by grade level and classroom.
The data for PSCA disaggregated by grade level shows that, in general, PSCA decreases as students progress through elementary school. According to the baseline survey completed by the principal, many students in this community are responsible for getting themselves out of bed, ready for school, and to the bus stop because their responsible parent (or parents) works two jobs or works a night shift. The data and survey seem to suggest that as students age, they become more successful at getting themselves to school. The unusually high PSCA figure for the Kindergarten grade level may be attributed to the fact that Kindergarten is half-day rather than full-day. This likely presents child care issues for many families in the Pride Elementary School community due to the predominance of families with lower socio-economic status.

The data for PSCA disaggregated by grade level and classroom show that there is very high variability in PSCA from classroom to classroom, even at the same grade level. This strongly suggests that individual classroom climates and teacher practices also vary greatly and interact with other factors (such as family circumstances) to influence PSCA. Future plans to address attendance issues at Pride may need to include providing staff development regarding teacher practices that promote good classroom attendance.

Examining the attendance data for the 74 students identified as chronically absent (through March 1, 2005), it became apparent that most of their absences were excused by parents following attendance policy and required procedures. Only 16.2% of these students had attendance files maintained by the attendance secretary to document letters sent home to satisfy the state’s compulsory attendance law. This does not seem to be attributed to poor follow through by the attendance secretary, since she receives computer-generated reports of unexcused absences monthly and sends letters home as required for every student. What this seems to suggest is that the state’s compulsory attendance law, by focusing only on unexcused absences,
is failing to address crucial attendance issues for 83.8% of the Pride students identified as chronically absent. This also suggests that parents have become adept at following the law by ‘chronically excusing’ their children in order to stay under the radar of a law which has now been in effect for ten years. In fact, school attendance data for the 2004-2005 school year (through May 19) shows that 96.1% of all student absences were excused and that only 3.9% of student absences were unexcused. Pride Elementary should take this into account when developing its own future plans for addressing its attendance issues.

Additional data suggests that Pride Elementary does little beyond state required attendance law and district policy to intervene on behalf of chronically absent students. Only 29.7% of chronically absent students receive any type of intervention at all. Intervention is defined here as documented instances of letters sent home to parents; action plans for attendance developed in parent conferences with the principal, school counselor, and/or teacher; and student participation in group counseling activities. These findings strongly suggest that the school needs to develop a strategic plan to address its absentee problem that is codified into official school plans, policy, and procedure; that is ‘bought into’ by the staff; and that addresses the enormous gaps left by the state’s compulsory attendance law, which greatly defines district policy.

The working hypothesis deduced from this data analysis is that state attendance law and subsequent district policy is ineffective and that much needs to be done at the school level to address attendance issues. This should include frequent communication and engagement with parents beyond what is required by law, and staff development to address ‘best practices’ regarding promoting good classroom attendance.
Due to the very short timeline involved, short-term and temporary ‘enhancements’ to the attendance policy were implemented at Pride Elementary in the form of an ‘attendance drive’ as outlined in the Methodology section of this paper. Part of this month-long attendance drive involved sending home a ‘reader-friendly’ flyer to every household in the school community stressing the importance of attendance (with supporting research), what parents can do to promote good attendance, and a list of parent resources including important and relevant phone numbers and contact names. This flyer was only available in English because the district would not allow them to be translated into Spanish and Russian due to liability issues. The attendance drive was advertised on the school marquee and on the home page of the school web site (with a link to the flyer in pdf format). The drive was kicked off at a staff meeting where I presented the results of my literature review (promoting best practices), the data analysis presented in this section, and recommendations for future planning. As previously mentioned, classroom contests were initiated for the drive that involved prizes for most improved classroom attendance at each grade level, best overall attendance for the school year at each grade level, and best classroom poster promoting the attendance drive.

Prior to the attendance drive, Average Daily Attendance (ADA) was 93.4%. At the conclusion of the attendance drive, it was determined that the ADA during the month of the drive was 94.0%. This very slight increase may or may not suggest that the drive was a successful intervention for improving attendance.

**Summary of Results**

Results of this program evaluation study suggest that the state compulsory attendance law for Pride Elementary School is woefully inadequate due to its emphasis on addressing unexcused absences. The law does not intervene on behalf of most chronically absent students at Pride
because their absences are excused. In addition, the district attendance policy does not effectively address chronically excused absences. It simply states that “excessive absences, unless an agreement has been made with the school principal, shall not be permitted if deemed to cause a serious adverse effect on the student’s educational progress.” The policy leaves it to teachers to request conferences with parents to address attendance issues at their own discretion. Furthermore, it allows chronically absent students whose absences are often excused to slip through the cracks. The school does not have defined attendance goals or a current plan to deal with issues of attendance, and 70% of chronically absent students do not receive any form of intervention from the school.

Data regarding the Percentage of Students Chronically Absent (PSCA) suggest that chronic absenteeism is on the rise at Pride Elementary and is now at an alarming level. In addition to the ineffectiveness of state law and district policy mentioned previously, PSCA data disaggregated by grade level and teacher suggest that a wide variety of ‘climates’ and teacher practices exist from classroom to classroom and that these differences may contribute to increasing or decreasing the likelihood of good student attendance.

The data results from the ‘attendance drive’ enhancements at the end of the study show very slight improvements in Average Daily Attendance and are largely inconclusive, in great part due to limitations that will be discussed later in this paper. However, the presentation of this project’s literature review, data analysis, and policy evaluation with school staff at the aforementioned staff meeting has generated much dialogue and awareness in the school regarding attendance issues. Many teachers have provided feedback regarding the presentation that indicates their appreciation for this study’s effort towards addressing an issue that is of nearly unanimous concern among Pride staff. The Kindergarten staff has since met and begun to
develop an action plan for addressing their high PSCA numbers. In addition, the principal has made addressing attendance issues a key part of her proposal for next year’s School Improvement Plan. In the final survey completed by the principal, she states the following regarding the staff presentation and project as a whole:

I believe that your charts and your explanation have made it very clear to staff how the lack of steady attendance has impacted students at [Pride] and how important it is for staff to be more diligent about helping kids to come to school. As staff work with me on setting goals for next year, I certainly will ask them to consider this as one of the areas to focus on.

Limitations

Qualitative data for this project was limited to the surveys completed by the principal and communications with the staff. A parent survey regarding the difficulties of getting children to school would have been highly valuable by informing the issue from the perspective of the community. This was not possible due to Human Subjects restrictions and lack of resources for such a large undertaking.

The timeline of this study was far too short to comprehensively design the policy enhancements and to adequately test the effectiveness of implementation. This was due to delays in gaining Human Subjects clearance within the already limited time frame given to complete the project. In addition, the enhancements were not developed by all stakeholders as part of a school initiative on defining attendance policy and procedure. Therefore, implementation within the classrooms was voluntary (although supported and encouraged by the principal) and was not required or expected.
Other limitations with the policy enhancements include: (a) lack of teacher follow-through in spite of unanimous concern regarding attendance issues, (b) district refusal to translate parent communication flyers into Spanish and Russian in order to reach the considerable ESL population, and (c) implementation occurring at the end of the school year after routines have been established within classrooms and households. A much more comprehensive, long-term, and formally implemented policy enhancement would be recommended for future studies regarding effectiveness of strategies aimed at improving attendance.

**Recommendations**

The most plausible conclusion from this study is that state law and district policy are woefully inadequate at addressing issues of chronic absenteeism. Pride elementary would serve itself well to develop a long-term strategy and plan for addressing the attendance issues that are unique to the school, especially regarding the high number of chronically absent students. This plan should take into account the fact that most chronically absent students have their absences excused by their parents and therefore are not violating the current law or policy.

Research suggests that developing an effective attendance plan will most likely be accomplished by bringing all stakeholders to the table, perhaps through forming a school, family, and community partnership. In addition, any plan developed and adopted by the school will be more likely to improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism if it (a) takes a comprehensive approach to attendance with activities that involve students, teachers, families, and the community, (b) uses more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing activities, and (c) sustains a focus on improving attendance over time. Including mechanisms for ongoing, data-driven evaluation in the attendance plan would be highly recommended to accomplish a sustained focus on improvement. This may even involve working with the middle
and high schools in the community to keep data over several years in order to look for long-term trends and correlations to attendance at the secondary school level, which in essence creates a longitudinal study.

Parent communication is likely to be a key factor in improving attendance at this high-needs school. Many parents in the community would benefit from school support through individual meetings to help develop plans for good student attendance, parenting classes, frequent communication from teachers, and awareness of applicable community resources. Although some members of the school staff currently provide this support, it would serve the school and community well to make this support a part of the school’s plan to improve attendance.

Lastly, because there appears to be a wide variety of classroom practices influencing attendance at Pride Elementary, staff development activities would be recommended as part of any attendance plan. These staff development activities should aim to promote successful implementation of the plan and to alert staff as to best practices in promoting good classroom attendance.
References


