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Interventions Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

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INTERVENTIONS ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

James MacAdam Brookins, Ed.D.

Concordia University – Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Committee Chairman, Marty A. Bullis, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted at a single-school, rural, K–12, Oregon school district with an enrollment of approximately 240. An action research methodology investigated the attitudes and perceptions of chronically absent students and their parents concerning factors that influenced attendance and absence. A sample of 20 students and 20 parents represented 80% of the eligible population and 9 of the 13 grades. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews, which were conducted before and after the first trimester of the 2015–2016 school year. Interventions during the trimester included daily attendance monitoring, parent contact for absences, check-ins, student self-tracking of attendance, and incentives. Eighty percent of participants improved attendance compared to the prior year, and 75% were not chronically absent. Ten individuals met the trimester attendance goal, and 6 had perfect attendance. The strongest factors influencing attendance were peer relationships, academic or intellectual interests, and staff relationships. The strongest factors influencing absence were medical issues, family decisions, and anxiety. A framework for attendance interventions is presented as are implications for staffing and framing conversations with students and parents. The study was unique because it investigated a consistent intervention strategy across all grades in a K–12 setting. The research may inform future investigations because of the comprehensive data and the potential transferability of the methods.

Keywords: chronic absenteeism, intervention, action research

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Frances Scott Brookins and Jack Eber Brookins, my parents, role models, and heroes. Mother and Father were tireless champions of education, dedicated community servants, and generous, compassionate human beings. Their adult lives were committed to service to education and to providing opportunities for all in their community. My parents' support and guidance instilled in me the belief that I could accomplish anything to which I set my mind. When I am faced with personal, ethical, or professional dilemmas, I ask myself—what would mom and dad do in this situation?

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Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Interventions Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Dissertation

Based on an Oregon Department of Education (n.d.) report, on October 1, 2014, 570,857

students were enrolled in Oregon's public schools. By applying the data available in Buehler,

Tapogna, and Chang's (2012) report on chronic absenteeism in Oregon, some alarming statistics

are revealed. Each day in Oregon, tens of thousands of students miss school. Statewide, on

average—kindergarten through 12th grade—131,297 students are absent. Of the 41,645

kindergarten students, 9,995 miss school. The outlook is even bleaker in the upper grades.

There are 43,432 juniors and 47,566 seniors in Oregon's public schools. Each day, 14,767 and

18,075 of them, respectively, are not in class. As I will demonstrate, these rates are higher than

the national average, but chronic absenteeism is a critical issue throughout the United States.

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) used available data to produce a report regarding chronic

absenteeism in the nation's public schools. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing more than

10% of school days, is often not recognized because reporting it is not universally required, and

the issue has reached a critical level before school staff become aware. According to Balfanz

and Byrnes, the state in which this study was conducted is one of only six that report statistics on

chronic absenteeism, but those six are not consistent in their reporting standards, a fact which

may further obscure the issues. For example, in this state at least some transfer students are

reported as chronically absent. Balfanz and Byrnes reported that both low-income rural and

urban students are at-risk. Early elementary and secondary students are absent more often than

students in the late elementary grades. In middle school, rates of chronic absenteeism begin to

rise, and they increase each year through the middle and high school years. Chronic absenteeism

is largely a school-specific problem; "a school can have average daily attendance of 90 percent

and still have 40 percent of its students chronically absent, because on different days, different students make up that 90 percent" (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 3).

History

Establishing an educated citizenry has been a concern for policy makers since the early days of settlement in America. In 1642, Massachusetts enacted a law that required that children and indentured servants learn to read English (Cook, 1912). According to Everhart (1977), during colonial days, families and social institutions were responsible for teaching fundamental literacy skills, and by the mid-18th century, 70–100% of adult males were functionally literate. Everhart explained that by the late 18th century, schools began to play a significant role in American life, but there was no central educational planning. Private and informal schools enrolled a significant number of students, and they set their own standards and curricula. Although reliable, comprehensive statistics were not readily available, Everhart was able to determine that in New York State in 1821, 90% of children aged five to 16 were enrolled in school. In New England in 1830, attendance rates ranged from 52–84%; in Ohio only 20% of white youth aged 5–19 were enrolled in school. In the industrial North and New England, over the next 20 years, enrollment grew substantially, doubling in some regions.

In the early 19th century, the growth of the factory system and the parallel immigration of illiterate migrants influenced the debate concerning the need for compulsory school attendance (Cook, 1912). Everhart (1977) explained that at the time, schooling was in large part connected to and influenced by the churches and was, in effect, a disjointed amalgamation of independent entities. Some influential individuals believed that a more uniform, organized system would develop students who were not only educated, but who possessed a common set of values that would benefit the developing nation.

The first compulsory attendance law was passed in Massachusetts in 1852 (Cook, 1912; U.S. Bureau of Education, 1914). The District of Columbia passed a compulsory attendance law in 1864, Vermont in 1867; by 1890, twenty-four additional states had passed similar statutes (U.S. Bureau, 1914). Compulsory attendance continued to spread throughout the Union until, around the time of World War I, the lagging states passed legislation. Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, and Texas passed statutes in 1915; Louisiana in 1916; and Mississippi in 1918 (Deffenbaugh & Keesecker, 1935). According to Cook (1912), early requirements generally mandated that students ages 8–14 attend school for terms of 12–20 weeks. The lowest required age was 6 and the highest 16; the longest school term was 30 weeks. Requirements were strengthened as the 20th century progressed. According to Deffenbaugh & Keesecker (1935), by 1934 thirty-two states required attendance by seven years of age (two at six) and 42 states required students to attend until at least age 16 (age 17 in six, 18 in five).

Heck and Blaine (1936) produced a summary of relevant literature related to school attendance. The authors described that as compulsory attendance laws became more stringent, attendance rates increased notably at both the high school and elementary levels, although they did not offer any explanation other than to refer to the increases as *school popularization*. However, non-attendance was a significant issue. Heck and Blaine concluded that social factors were extremely significant and influenced absence; the issues were not as simple as illness and work. The authors suggested that more research be conducted to reveal precise statistics regarding non-attendance, an examination of specific causes, and case studies regarding why individuals did not attend. Heck and Blaine also suggested that investigators conduct controlled research to discover effective interventions, as well as to study the effects of degrees of absence on student outcomes.

Problem Statement and Study Purpose

The study site for this investigation was a rural, K–12 Oregon school district, which had significant challenges regarding student absenteeism. Although average daily attendance met state standards, there were a large number of students who were chronically absent. This action research study endeavored to understand the perspectives of students and their parents or guardians concerning school absence; developed interventions to support students and their families regarding improved attendance; and established protocols, procedures, and practices that enabled the school to support and encourage regular attendance on an ongoing basis for all students.

Background

This study was conducted at a single K–12 school district. The district had an enrollment of 234 during 2014–2015 and was classified as a rural school by the Oregon Department of Education. Approximately 60% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Approximately 83% of students identified as Caucasian. The remainder of the students were approximately equally divided among the ethnic categories of Black, Hispanic, Asian-Pacific Islander, and Native American. There were no English Language Learners among the student population.

One of the district's challenges was excessive absenteeism by some students. Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing 10% or more of school days. The district's average daily attendance was 93.3% during the 2013–2014 school year. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) did not publish a school-level absenteeism report that year, but I was able to analyze the annual attendance report and determine that 44 students were chronically absent. The student count in 2013–2014 was 243 students. Calculation reveals that 18% of district

students met the chronic absence threshold during 2013–2014. The state rate for chronic absenteeism during 2013–2014 was 15.2%. Enrollment in the district decreased slightly in 2014–2015. The average daily attendance rate was 92.3%. The ODE report for that year reported that the rate of chronic absenteeism was 17.5%. The state chronic absenteeism average for 2014–2015 was 17.4%.

The district serves a geographic area of approximately 100 square miles, and the total population of the district is approximately 1000. The K–12 school is organized as a Charter District, which enables enrollment from outside the school district boundaries. Approximately half of the students reside within the district boundaries, and half are bused or commute from outside. Individual grade levels are capped at 21 students with a few specific exceptions. The district offers a traditional school curriculum, which includes daily K–12 music and physical education, and a 6–12 vocational education and careers curriculum. The school charter emphasizes health and wellness, natural resources education, and technology education. There are 22 licensed staff in the district, 19 of whom hold traditional teaching, administrative, or counseling licenses and four who hold charter registry teaching credentials (the school counselor also holds a charter license and teaches art). There is one teacher at each elementary grade level and one content specialist in each secondary area. There are two licensed administrators, a Superintendent–Principal who teaches one Advanced Mathematics class, and a half-time Special Education Director who also attends to some Assistant Principal duties. The school operates on a 4-day school week, and there are 150 student contact days each year.

Research Questions

How do students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of missing and attending school?

- What are the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by chronically absent students?

- What do students describe as important reasons that they regularly attend school?

- How do these reasons, perceptions, and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

How do parents or guardians of students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of their students missing and attending school?

- What are the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by parents or guardians of chronically absent students?

- What do parents or guardians describe as motivating factors regarding students' school attendance?

- How do these motivating factors and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

What implemented school interventions are the most successful concerning improving the attendance of chronically absent students?

- Why were the most successful school interventions considered effective?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this dissertation derives from my personal perspectives developed as an outgrowth of my professional work and reading of the extant literature. Because I am a school administrator, I am concerned with attendance in my own district. I want to support students, especially those who miss a large number of days, and help them minimize absences. Compulsory attendance is fundamental to American public education. In Oregon, ameliorating the chronic absenteeism crisis is a priority in education. Excessive absenteeism results in negative outcomes—academically, socially, and in the long-term. Absenteeism is

associated with factors that have been studied and may be overcome. Understanding the causes of individual student absences is central to developing effective interventions. Approaches that are individualized, respect student perspectives, and involve families; that are consistently applied; and that include a system of positive reinforcements may be effective in improving the attendance of this study's participants.

Establishing an educated citizenry has been a concern for policy makers since the early days of settlement in America. During colonial days, families and social institutions were responsible for teaching fundamental literacy skills (Everhart, 1977). In the early 19th century, the growth of the factory system and the parallel immigration of illiterate migrants influenced the debate concerning the need for compulsory school attendance (Cook, 1912). As compulsory attendance laws became more stringent, attendance rates increased notably at both the high school and elementary levels (Heck & Blaine, 1936).

The chronic absenteeism issue is a concern of the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and state lawmakers. In Oregon in 2009–2010, almost one fourth of kindergarten students were chronically absent, 2.5 times the national average. Although attendance improved in the middle grades, in 2009–2010 the chronic absenteeism rate among juniors was 34%, and among seniors it was 38% (Buehler, Tapogna, & Chang, 2012). The Oregon Education Investment Board (OEIB) recently partnered with Portland State University and the Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office in a research effort to understand the causes of chronic absenteeism and develop recommendations to help communities address the problem ("Oregon Education," 2013). A report by Upstream Public Health recommended that community-wide interagency cooperation, community-specific approaches, and institutional support structures may be effective in supporting students to attend more regularly (Henderson, Hill, & Norton,

2014). For legislators, however, these initiatives were not enough. In the 2015 session, a bill

was introduced that would have tied school funding to daily attendance rates beginning in 2016

(Spegman, 2015). It did not pass out of the legislature and did not become law, but I will

demonstrate later in this dissertation that legislative debate concerning this issue continues. This

study helped me reduce chronic absenteeism in my district, and proactively addressed what may

eventually become a funding-related problem.

Chronic absenteeism may lead to negative outcomes. Achievement may be negatively

impacted. Both standardized test scores and grades are influenced by absence (Gottfried, 2010).

Reading and mathematics are both vulnerable (Aucejo & Romano, 2013; Gottfried, 2014).

Chronic absence leads to reduced student engagement, and as early as kindergarten, it is a

predictor regarding that outcome (Gottfried, 2014). Understanding student engagement is

critical to understanding and preventing dropping out of school (Landis & Reschly, 2013).

Further, disengagement may be predictive of criminal behavior and substance abuse into

adulthood (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Although understanding the nature of the

relationships is complex, excessive absenteeism itself has been shown to be related to

criminality, substance abuse, unemployment, and reduced lifetime income (Jones, Lovrich, &

Lovrich, 2011). This study engaged in direct interventions that may positively influence

students' long-term academic, social, and economic outcomes.

Student absenteeism has been described as being influenced by individual, family,

school, and community factors (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sculles, 2014). Sheldon and Epstein

have developed a body of work that demonstrates involving families and communities may help

improve student attendance (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon, 2005;

Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Interventions concerning absenteeism must be individually targeted

to support the student and family to make a difference (Lauchlan, 2003). Understanding the perspectives of families and students in my district helped me develop school-specific approaches to addressing the problem.

Student voices have often been ignored as school leaders have attempted to craft policies and procedures to positively impact student attendance rates (Sculles, 2014). Listening and responding to students' concerns and points of view involves the most critical stakeholders in practices that directly affect them. Attending to student voices may enrich the conversations adults have with one another regarding changes in practice (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). The perspectives of students are increasingly being solicited because they are knowledgeable and effective contributors regarding school practices (Thiessen, 2006).

Intervening with chronically absent students is important. Incentives should be part of a comprehensive program that involves families in addressing issues; involving the whole school is important, and simple, inexpensive rewards may be of great benefit; school staff must plan intentionally, act consistently, and follow through on intervention efforts (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008). Efforts aimed at students directly have worked, and both one-on-one mentoring and small group interventions may be of value; building partnerships with families may increase the supports students need to be absent less frequently (Lochmiller, 2013). There was agreement among my staff that addressing absenteeism was a critical need, and they expressed their willingness to assist with this project.

Nature of the Study

This project was an action research study that sought to understand the perceptions of chronically absent students and their parents or guardians. The research sought to establish at the site attendance interventions that supported students regarding improved attendance. Action

9

research (AR) is an analytical research method designed to diagnose organizational problems or weaknesses and help educators develop practical solutions to address them. Historically, as summarized by authors such as Osterman, Furman, and Sernak (2014), van der Meulen (2012), and Zambo (2010), AR has not been widely accepted as a suitable methodology for doctoral research. However, as I will describe, AR is becoming more generally accepted, and graduate studies are being completed that are meaningful, important for organizations, and accepted by the academic community. Action research as a component of doctoral education helps school leaders develop the attitude that combining theory, data collection and analysis, and staff collaboration may effect meaningful and lasting organizational change.

In a 2011 report, van der Meulen argued that community-based AR was important to the individual graduate researcher concerning both professional practice and individual motivation:

Involvement and participation of the local community can provide for a more fulfilling and less estranged experience for students, . . . action research can acquire the benefits of partnership and collaboration with the knowledge that the study can lead to valuable social, policy, and/or organizational change. (p. 1291)

AR is a methodology that addresses specific issues in a social, community-based (in this case— educational) setting. Communities are best suited to identify issues that might be addressed utilizing an action research approach (van der Meulen, 2011). This perspective is supported by contemporary educational change theorists such as Fullan (2011). Change is supported and sustained when the people inside the organization identify the issues and assist in crafting the solutions (Fullan, 2011; van der Meulen, 2011).

Although AR may not be universally appreciated as a methodology suitable for doctoral research, it may be that the academic community needs to develop an understanding of the

practical, change-facilitating, rigorous projects that are being completed utilizing AR methodology. Osterman et al. (2013) argued that graduate research practice is influenced by dominant investigative paradigms, and that as university faculty explore and discuss the method and mentor graduate students who utilize AR, acceptance of the method as suitable for doctoral work will become widespread. Osterman et al. described AR and its usefulness:

> [It is] a collaborative problem-solving process that is consistent with equitable and effective leadership practice. . . . EdD dissertation research conducted according to this model would soon demonstrate . . . the effectiveness of action research in addressing real problems and its value as a leadership development experience. (p. 99)

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) has launched an initiative to elevate the status of the Ed.D. and promote its value as significant and appropriate preparation for future school leaders. Zambo (2010) described the Arizona State University Ed.D. program, which shortly after its inception discovered CPED and made AR the foundation of their doctoral research projects. Zambo discussed the experiences of the first two cohorts that finished the Arizona State programs. Students identified projects that were significant and meaningful in their individual settings. The Ed.D. candidate school leaders developed collaborative, on-going approaches to address issues and persisted to adapt organizational strategies to effect meaningful changes. Perhaps most significantly, Zambo captured the voices of the students who described the deep personal meaning they found in the AR process. Many students described that their projects led to one or more of the following outcomes: they affected their perspectives on leadership, increased their belief in the value of collaboration, made their work more student-focused, enhanced their understanding that school leaders could facilitate meaningful change, and deepened their commitment to their respective districts and schools.

11

Zambo and Isai (2012, 2013) elaborated further on AR as the foundational methodology for Ed.D. students at ASU. In the 2013 paper, the authors detailed the experiences of a single doctoral student and reiterated that individuals may find deep meaning in their work. The student:

> developed into an active leader. . . . She found an authentic problem in her workplace . . .[and] used the research skills and theory she learned at the university in untraditional ways. . . . she had to select ideas carefully and consider how they could be applied in her situation. . . . [and] blend her professional knowledge with the scholarship she reviewed . . Blending theory and practice, [she] discovered, framed, and developed an innovation. She built her action on the best theories available and in doing this, theory became applicable, useful, and real to her. . . . Being an action researcher helped [her] transform her practice, relationship with teachers, and workplace. (pp. 109–110)

In the case study, Zambo and Isai also discussed that students benefit from close faculty and peer collaboration. At ASU, leader–scholar communities foster close communication between peer researchers and their doctoral committees. ASU believes action researchers benefit from substantial support as they strive to foster meaningful organizational change in their individual settings.

Zambo and Isai (2012) discussed the experiences of faculty supervisors while working with action researchers. Their perspectives lend credibility to Osterman et al.'s (2013) argument that as university faculty become more familiar with AR as a methodology, they will grow in their acceptance of AR as an important research practice that fosters the development of site-based educational change agents. Zambo and Isai explained that students learned to establish theoretical underpinnings for their data-driven, collaborative interventions. Holding students

12

accountable during the process for reporting and discussing their research progress was beneficial. Establishing strong leader–scholar communities enabled staff to support students who were balancing work lives with academic research. Success of AR as a doctoral methodology depends on the strong commitment of both university faculty and their students.

Definition of Terms

Achievement—Measures of student academic progress; in this dissertation I discuss both standardized test results and grade point average

Action Research—An analytical research method designed to diagnose organizational problems or weaknesses and help educators develop practical solutions to address them

Attendance Intervention—A strategy, process, or procedure developed to support students regarding improved attendance

Chronically Absent—A student who misses more than 10% of school days

Disengagement—A decrease in attention, curiosity, and interest that negatively impacts student motivation when they are learning or being taught

Early Elementary Student—A student enrolled in grades K–2

Excused Absence—An absence from school due to illness, medical appointment, school activity, family emergency, or prearranged circumstances

Intervention—A process or procedure initiated and maintained to support students and families regarding improved attendance

Iteration—A repetitive data analysis procedure that increases the specificity of thematic description

Meaning—An education term derived from transformational learning theory that describes changes in a learner, which restructure their attitudes, beliefs, and world view (Mezirow, 2000)

Mid-level Student—A student enrolled in grades 3–6

Motivating Factor—An external support that benefits students regarding developing individual meaning concerning the importance of achieving personal educational goals

Qualitative Coding—Labeling qualitative data to indicate patterns or themes that emerge from data analysis

Student Attitudes—A student's predisposition to react or respond positively or negatively towards the educational environment, in this study, with particular regard to school attendance

Student Perceptions—A student's beliefs regarding the educational environment including the outcomes associated with specific behaviors, in this study, with particular regard to school attendance

Unexcused Absence—An absence from school that does not meet one of the criteria to be an excused absence

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study investigated, in a small Oregon school district, the perceptions of students and parents or guardians regarding the causes of chronic absenteeism and evaluated the effectiveness of interventions developed to ameliorate the issues. To establish a high level of background knowledge and a conceptual framework for this study I studied literature related to the development of compulsory attendance in the United States; conducted a comprehensive review of literature related to the relationship between attendance and achievement; and investigated contemporary issues regarding absenteeism, interventions to improve attendance, and an important consideration regarding educational reform—student voice. The literature search was conducted using Concordia University databases such as EBSCOhost, ProQuest, JSTOR, Sage, and Gale; Google Scholar; the University of Oregon educational archives; and the interlibrary loan services of the University of Idaho, the University of Chicago, and Texas Tech University. Documents consulted included academic journals, educational periodicals, bulletins, reports, manuscripts, dissertations, theses, and books.

Education of youth has been a community concern in America since colonial times. The early settlers mandated that young people become literate, which would allow them to meet the basic obligations of informed citizenry. As communities grew, to meet that need, requirements that communities create schools were established. Before there were laws that mandated compulsory attendance, schools were well attended by American youth. However, the educational system was a disjointed amalgamation of independent institutions, which were motivated by their own priorities and which developed their own curricula.

In the mid-1800s the first compulsory attendance laws were passed. By 1920, every state had an attendance law. A more cohesive educational system had been established, and some

degree of consistency in educational requirements and attendance requirements existed. The

expectations were not entirely uniform but a foundation was established, and the similarities

between states increased during the 20th century. The popularity of schools grew in the early

20th century as evidenced by increased enrollment. As enrollment grew, researchers began to

investigate the disparities between enrollment and attendance rates, and then to examine the

effects of attendance rates on student achievement.

To establish perspective, it is appropriate to analyze, from a historical perspective, early

work on the link between attendance and achievement. I will then argue that, currently,

attendance has a significant effect on student achievement, describe the importance of student

voice, discuss negative outcomes associated with problem attendance, discuss effective strategies

regarding attendance interventions that have been published in scholarly literature, and close the

literature review by discussing issues regarding chronic absenteeism in Oregon.

The motivations driving absences are viewed from the perspectives of school counselors,

social workers, other faculty, and educational researchers, and this review develops perspectives

concerning reasons students and families provided regarding why students missed school. This

current study will examine specific student and parent motivations at a single school site. The

current study will also examine the efficacy of interventions. The review of intervention

literature identifies practices that have been effective regarding improving student attendance,

some of which were incorporated in the current methodological design.

Attendance and Achievement

Early studies that examined the relationship between attendance and achievement were

conducted for a variety of reasons. Butler (1925), in his report of the results of a study of a

Missouri high school, stated that the attendance–achievement link was almost unstudied. Odell

(1923) described that there was a disagreement among his staff concerning whether attendance should be considered when evaluating whether students should be promoted. He conducted an investigation motivated by a desire to appropriately place pupils and sought to understand how important attending school was concerning student learning. Wetzel (1928) conducted a study in a New Jersey high school and sought to present data that might convince students of the importance of regular attendance; he demonstrated that students were negatively impacted by absences, irrespective of ability levels. Ziegler (1928) was a motivated graduate student who believed it was important to conduct an in-depth study of the relationship between attendance and achievement that relied upon, as he termed it, *scientific* data. Ziegler emphasized that most of the earlier work had relied on observation and experience rather than statistical analyses.

Ziegler's (1928) study was the most comprehensive examination of the relationship between achievement and attendance during the early 20th century. Ziegler's report was cited by future investigators as having been one of the most significant investigations in this area at the time (e.g., Deffenbaugh & Keesecker, 1935; Finch & Nemzek, 1940). He completed an in-depth study as part of his doctoral program that examined factors related to attendance and achievement, and he evaluated the links between them. Ziegler's results demonstrated that there was a significant relationship between attendance and both school marks and school progress (advancement to the next grade level). When Zeigler reviewed his participants' cumulative records, both school marks and attendance patterns showed some positive relation to pupil achievement and behavior prior to entering junior high. Ziegler also examined attendance in relation to marks in specific courses.

Odell (1923), who was cited by Ziegler (1928), conducted one of the first studies that attempted to analyze the statistical relationship between attendance and achievement. He

evaluated the relationship between student attendance, school marks, and standardized test performance. He examined the records of several thousand students in grades 1–8 and used correlative statistics to identify trends. Odell determined that the strongest positive correlation existed between attendance and school marks. A positive relationship existed between attendance and performance on achievement tests, but the relationship was small except for students who were poor attenders. When attendance improved, these students scored substantially higher on standardized tests. Odell's work was unique because he incorporated a standardized measure of achievement. His findings are important to this review of literature because they demonstrated that the standardized results might be improved if poor attenders reduced their numbers of absences.

Butler (1925) discovered a relationship between attendance and achievement, which led him to replicate his work using a larger sample and longitudinal data. Butler utilized descriptive statistics to examine the relationship between attendance and achievement during a 4-month period at one high school. Butler's sample consisted of 1,913 school marks, and the marks were normally distributed. The marking system consisted of five levels, and Butler demonstrated that students in the lowest group had the greatest average number of absences. As one moved up the achievement levels, each successive group had fewer average absences.

In 1936, Butler conducted a follow-up study. The 1936 sample was drawn from the same high school and included longitudinal data. At total of 23,958 marks were tabulated, and included data from September, 1929 to June, 1934 and included results from summer terms. The marks in the 1936 study were more delineated, because they included plus and minus grades, except that there was no plus grade at the highest achievement level, and a failing grade was simply failing, without plus or minus attached. Butler's 1936 results were aligned with those

that he tabulated in 1925. As one ascended the achievement ladder, each group had fewer average absences than the group below. Butler's second study reflected increased validity and reliability. The sample was larger; the achievement levels were more discriminating, and the results displayed a more precise distribution of findings. His evidence from the 1936 study strongly confirmed his 1925 work.

Wetzel (1928) studied the relationship between attendance and achievement at one high school where students were classified by ability level. There were 18 ability groups. Those with a rating below 50 and above 130 were grouped together; all other groups were constructed with five point ranges. At the school, it was typical practice that students would use this scholastic–ability index to compare themselves to others of similar aptitude. Wetzel presented results segregated by ability level that compared the achievement (on a 4-point scale) of students with perfect attendance, those who were absent or tardy 10 or more times during the year, and the average achievement of all students in the school. In all cases but one, students with the high absence rate scored below the school mean, and in the single case, the group scored just above the school mean. In all cases, students with perfect attendance scored above the school mean. This demonstrated that students of all ability levels were negatively impacted by missing school and that when attendance rates were high, academic achievement was greatly benefitted.

Researchers recognized the importance of demographic and socioeconomic variables on school achievement (Caldas, 1993). In the 1970s and 80s, a basic finding of investigations was that students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) had lower achievement than those of higher SES (e.g., Walberg & Weinstein, 1982; White, 1982). Many researchers believed SES and attendance were highly correlated, and results concerning relationships to achievement may have been blurred by collinearity, so researchers focused on SES (Lamdin, 1996). By the 1990s

assessment data was being collected at the state level, and research designs began to examine the attendance–achievement link utilizing large samples. It was important to understand how attendance affects achievement because of the potential policy implications. School staff may adopt strategies that increase students' willingness to attend school (Chen & Weikart, 2008). Altering policies and in-school practices are inexpensive ways to address the absence problem. An increase in average daily attendance may increase school revenue. A relatively small human resources input may yield substantial economic benefit in addition to contributing to students' academic success.

In the 1990s, work by Caldas (1993) and Lamdin (1996) demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between increased attendance and student achievement. Caldas (1993) completed a study of 1,301 elementary, middle, high, and combination (typically K–12) schools in Louisiana. His analysis demonstrated that the strongest process effect was seen with percent attendance, which was statistically significant at $p < .001$. Lamdin analyzed achievement in 97 public elementary schools in Baltimore, Maryland. His dependent variable was performance on the California Achievement Test (CAT) in the spring of 1989. Lamdin completed a school level regression analysis, which accounted for potential collinearities between related factors. In every case, the attendance effect was statistically significant at $p < .05$, and in eight of nine analyses at $p < .01$.

Subsequent to the foundational work in the 1990s, a body of research began to grow that investigated the relationships between attendance and achievement. Meyers (2000) reported on analysis of achievement in Minnesota from 1996–2000. Meyers's analysis looked at the data from several points of view including student performance level and ethnic demographics. His summary conclusion regarding attendance effects was that there was a statistically significant

relationship between attendance and achievement for nearly all groups and that attendance effects are greater for mathematics than for reading.

The correlational approach continued in the work of Roby (2004) who conducted a study of Ohio schools and looked at attendance without considering other input factors. While Caldas (1993) and Lamdin (1996) had cast a wide net to identify critical factors, Roby's design examined the attendance–achievement connection very directly. Roby conducted a study of 3,171 Ohio schools and analyzed the relationship between average attendance rates and school-specific results on state tests. Roby obtained 1999 data from the Ohio Department of Education for the schools in grades 4 ($N = 1,946$), 6 ($N = 1,292$), 9 ($N = 711$), and 12 ($N = 691$). He calculated correlation coefficients between attendance and achievement, and then used a t test to evaluate statistical significance. At all grade levels, Roby found the relationship to be statistically significant at $p < .01$.

The foundational correlative work by Caldas (1993), Lamdin (1996), and Roby (2004) precipitated a body of active work in this area during the last decade. Projects utilizing this basic methodological approach have formed the basis of contemporary graduate research by doctoral candidates. McBride (2009) examined the relationship between achievement and attendance at 30 urban high schools in one southeast Texas school district. McBride's study was constructed to examine whether achievement on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was predictive of attendance rate. He framed the question conversely from other investigations: is achievement predictive of attendance? McBride examined achievement in reading, mathematics, and science. A linear regression was completed to test the hypotheses, and a statistically significant relationship was demonstrated at $p < .001$.

One study of a small, Oregon school was found in the extant literature. Phillips (2006) investigated the relationship between attendance and mathematics achievement in one school district and evaluated differences between Caucasian and Hispanic students. Phillips examined Oregon state assessment results at the benchmark years, grades 3, 5, 8, and 10. His sample included 657 students, very nearly equally distributed between the four grades. Phillips ranked students according to mathematics achievement and compared the upper and lower quartiles using correlative methods. Phillips's findings indicated that the relationship between attendance and mathematics achievement was significant at $p < .01$ at the 10th grade and $p < .05$ at the third grade. Interestingly, Phillips also discovered that only at the 10th grade was there a statistically significant difference in attendance rates between the upper and lower quartile.

Graduate research in Georgia utilized a correlational approach similar to Roby (2004) and like Phillips (2006), focused on mathematics. McCrary (2010) advanced the body of knowledge by analyzing achievement in terms of the specific domains in mathematics. McCrary examined the mathematics achievement of seventh grade students at three middle schools and analyzed whether those who were truant (missed more than 15 days) performed significantly differently than those who were absent less frequently. Results from the Georgia Mathematics Criterion-Referenced Competency Test were evaluated based on the overall results as well as at the domain level for numbers and operations, data analysis and probability, geometry, and algebra. Data were collected for a sample of 726 students and a two-tailed t test was used to compute p values. McCrary showed a statistically significant ($p < .05$) relationship for the overall score, numbers and operations, and algebra. The result for data analysis and probability did not meet the researcher's criterion, but was significant at $p < .10$.

Zamarripa (2010) examined factors that influenced achievement at 101 Texas High schools that housed grades 9–12, had enrollment between 900 and 1,999 students, and had school at-risk percentages greater than or equal to 60. Zamarripa used scores on the mathematics portion of the TAKS as her dependent variable. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to evaluate the relationship between achievement and selected factors. The results demonstrated that attendance was the factor of greatest influence. Attendance and achievement were shown to be significantly correlated at $p < .001$. Like Phillips (2006) and McCrary (2010), Zamarripa demonstrated that there were statistically significant correlative links between mathematics achievement and attendance.

Parke and Kanyongo (2010) examined the effect of attendance on mathematics achievement in grades 8 and 11 in a large, urban Pennsylvania school district. They aggregated 2004–2005 attendance, mobility, and state test data for one urban Pennsylvania school district. Parke and Kanyongo created four categories—stable attenders, mobile attenders, stable non-attenders, and mobile non-attenders. Stable students did not change schools during the year; attenders were present at least 95% of school days. Data were analyzed using a two-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA). The attendance effect on mathematics achievement was statistically significant for both grades at $p < .001$. Attendance effects were consistent across racial lines, socio-economic status, and family background. Regular and stable school attendance improved academic achievement. Parke and Kanyongo's findings were significant because they began to demonstrate the complexity of the attendance problem. Attending school was important for children, but so was consistency and stability.

Gottfried (2010) analyzed 7 years of longitudinal data from a large, urban school district and explored the relationship of attendance to achievement at the student level. Gottfried

discussed the work of Caldas (1993), Lamdin (1996), Borland and Howsen (1998), Roby (2004), and Sheldon (2007), who used aggregate data to demonstrate the achievement–attendance correlation, and explained that it was important for investigators to explore the relationship at the individual level. Gottfried evaluated the connection based upon both student GPA and achievement test scores. The findings demonstrated that in a carefully conducted investigation it was possible to demonstrate that attendance and achievement were significantly related at the individual student level. Gottfried described a statistically significant relationship for both teacher-based (GPA) and standardized test achievement. Gottfried claimed that his quasi-experimental design provided evidence of causality in the relationship, which was an important advancing of the nature of conclusions in the attendance–achievement literature.

Aucejo and Romano (2013) used mathematical modeling to examine the importance of attendance as an influential factor regarding state test (end of grade) achievement. They examined North Carolina data to evaluate whether student attendance or days of instruction prior to testing had greater effect. They gathered data for students in grades 3 and 5 from the school years 2006–2010. Their sample size was 382,835 students, and the number of observations was 1,008,575. Aucejo and Romano's work was important, because it analyzed longitudinal data at the individual level and discriminated between the effects of excused and unexcused absences. The effect of absences on achievement was the critical factor and was statistically significant at $p < .01$ for both reading and mathematics.

Student Voice

Contemporary investigators have established that student perspectives lend valuable insight concerning organizational reform efforts. Yonezawa and Jones (2009) stated "students are an excellent source of data" (p. 206). According to Sculles (2014), student voices have often

been ignored as school leaders have attempted to craft policies and procedures to positively impact student attendance rates. Listening and responding to students' concerns and points of view directly involves the most critical stakeholders in practices that directly affect them. Attending to student voices may enrich the conversations adults have with one another regarding changes in practice (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). According to Thiessen (2006), the perspectives of students are increasingly being solicited because they are knowledgeable and effective contributors regarding school practices.

Unfortunately, many educators are unwilling to involve students in reform because some organizations are mired in top-down leadership practices, or because the adults believe students are too immature to make meaningful contributions (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). According to Gunter and Thomson (2007), students understand both themselves and school practices well. Students make conscious and strategic choices regarding compliance or non-compliance with school expectations. Even when students are consulted about policies, they may not fully accept the restrictions they impose. Therefore, gaining buy-in is critical if changes are to be effective for specific individuals.

Each student is a unique individual. When students participate in reform, it gives them power concerning the process. Teachers and administrators cannot reach their goals without students' commitment and participation (Scanlon, 2012). Sculles (2014) conducted an investigation to draw out student voices regarding chronic absenteeism so that school leaders may improve the ways they intervene regarding attendance issues. Sculles advanced the body of understanding regarding chronic absenteeism by undertaking her study at the middle school level. Although some work had been done with high school students, Sculles believed it was important to understand how to intervene with younger students, while there was sufficient time

to influence their behavior before they began jeopardizing high school advancement and graduation. Sculles also believed that additional studies should be undertaken at the elementary level, a result this study accomplished.

Sculles (2014) showed that students and their parents or guardians were willing to openly discuss why they were absent and ways the school might support improved attendance. Although Sculles's sample was small ($N = 5$), it reached her target for participation. Sculles's investigation had a purpose similar to one of this current study, to describe student and parent or guardian perceptions regarding chronic absence. There were also important methodological similarities between Sculles's work and mine. Sculles conducted initial and follow-up interviews with students and parents or guardians while taking notes and recording most conversations. The data was analyzed using an iterative process, which identified important themes. I expected to find perspectives concerning absenteeism similar to those described by Sculles and the extant literature. One student's attendance issues are different from another's, and each set of circumstances is unique and complex. Absenteeism is driven by a combination of personal, school, family, and community factors (Chang & Romero, 2008; Cole, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sculles, 2014). To make a difference, interventions concerning absenteeism must be individually targeted to support the student and family (Lauchlan, 2003).

Further Ramifications of Absenteeism

I have discussed the negative impacts of student absenteeism on achievement. In this section I will discuss some of the negative educational, social, and life outcomes associated with chronic absenteeism and truancy. Chronic absenteeism is a "nascent" (Gottfried, 2014, p. 55) area of research; studies of truancy are well documented in the extant literature. Some additional

ramifications of absenteeism are explored concomitantly with interventions in the section that follows immediately subsequent to this one.

Early elementary. Gottfried (2014) explained that studies regarding chronic absenteeism are virtually nonexistent. Examining the effects of chronic absenteeism means evaluating the effects of absence without regard to the reasons students miss school. Gottfried examined large-scale, nationally representative data and identified students who were chronically absent from kindergarten. He then evaluated the effects of chronic absenteeism on those students' academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Gottfried utilized data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), and his sample included 10,740 students who were enrolled in kindergarten during the 2010–2011 school year. Two academic measures evaluated mathematics and reading achievement. Six socio-emotional measures included four related to social skills (approaches to learning, eagerness to learn, interpersonal skills, and self-control) and two related to problem behaviors (externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors).

Students were assessed twice during the kindergarten year, fall and spring. This provided consistency regarding the evaluation of the socio-emotional factors. It also allowed Gottfried (2014) to evaluate within-year academic growth in mathematics and reading. In the spring, teachers reported student absenteeism within discrete groupings. Gottfried defined *moderate chronic absenteeism* as students who missed 11–19 days, and *strong chronic absenteeism* as students who missed 20 or more days. The nature of the ECLS data allowed Gottfried to include commonly accepted family and student covariates as control measures in his calculations.

Achievement data revealed that chronic absenteeism was negatively correlated with reading and mathematics achievement, and that strong chronic absenteeism had a greater effect size than moderate chronic absenteeism. Regression analysis demonstrated that the effect was

significant at $p < .01$ in mathematics at both absenteeism levels, and it was significant at $p < .01$ for strong chronic absence in both subjects. The effect on reading achievement for moderate chronic absenteeism was significant at $p < .10$.

On the socio-emotional scales, strong chronic absenteeism produced significant effects at $p < .01$ for three of the six measures. Approaches to learning and eagerness to learn (social skills) and internalizing behaviors (problem behaviors) were negatively impacted. For moderate chronic absenteeism, internalizing behaviors was significant at the same p value. Depression of eagerness to learn was significant at $p < .05$. For social skills, these results indicated that chronically absent students demonstrated these positive characteristics less frequently than their regularly attending peers. Concerning problem behaviors, significant results indicated an increased frequency of internalizing behaviors. The effect was almost twice as great in strong chronic absenteeism when compared with the moderate level.

"Behaviors reported in the internalizing scale reflect feelings of disengagement and isolation. Along with the two statistically significant social-skills scales, it does appear that chronic absentees have lower levels of educational engagement and higher levels of social disengagement" (Gottfried, 2014, p. 69). Chronic absence leads to reduced student engagement, and as early as kindergarten, it is a predictor regarding that outcome. In this current study, it was a critical priority to identify and involve, as participants, chronically absent students in the early elementary grades. The effects of chronic absenteeism are significant for young students, and academic and socio-emotional outcomes are adversely impacted within a relatively short time period. Missing school is impactful for older students also.

At-risk behavior. Henry (2007) analyzed anonymous data gathered from more than 11,000 eighth and 10th-grade students in relation to the response variable recent truancy. Henry

28

utilized Monitoring the Future (MTF) data from 2003. MTF data has been gathered since 1975, and is primarily concerned with evaluating the beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes of students regarding drug use. Henry was able to demonstrate that school disengagement was a strong contributing factor regarding truancy, drug use, and delinquent behavior. Henry et al. (2012) sought to advance the understanding of school disengagement by developing a school disengagement warning index that derived from eighth and ninth grade students' records a predictive measure concerning disengagement. Motivation for this effort stemmed from a desire to offer schools an opportunity to intervene with at-risk students when there was yet sufficient time to potentially prevent drop-out by addressing behaviors such as chronic absenteeism and truancy. Henry et al. were also able to identify short-, medium-, and long-term consequences of disengagement.

Henry et al. (2012) evaluated official student records and assigned risk value points for five objective factors—grades, standardized test scores, grade retention, absences, and student behavior. Students were assigned a score ranging from zero to five based on the number of factors they exhibited. Data from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS) was analyzed to evaluate the prevalence of problem behaviors. The RYDS followed students from the seventh or eighth grade until approximately 23 years of age. During that time, students and caregivers were repeatedly interviewed at 6-month intervals until approximately 18 years of age, and then annually from approximately ages 20–23. The population from which Henry et al.'s sample of 911 participants was derived was approximately 75% male and 25% female. The sample gender demographics were not reported. The proportions of individuals in each risk group (0–5) who displayed specific delinquency related outcomes were reported during middle adolescence (ages 15–16), late adolescence (ages 17–18), and early adulthood (ages 21–23). The

29

calculations included controls for demographic variables, parental variables, and baseline delinquency.

The outcome factors were problem alcohol use, problem drug use, official arrest, serious property crime, and serious violent crime. In all age groups, negative outcomes generally increased with the number of predictive risk factors. In the early adulthood group there was a positive correlation in every case above two risk factors. In the middle adolescent group, only one behavior showed a decrease as the number of risk factors increased; serious property crime dipped between the zero factors and one factor level. In middle adolescence, serious violent crime was lower with four risk factors than with three, and serious property crime was slightly lower at the two and four risk factor levels than at the levels preceding. The relationship between the warning index and the outcome variable was statistically significant in 13 of 15 cases. The exceptions were problem alcohol use in middle adolescence and serious property crime in early adulthood. Chronic absenteeism is a symptom of school disengagement, and addressing this issue at the study site facilitated the reengagement of students who were at great risk for negative delinquent outcomes.

Talented and gifted. Disengagement is not limited to the highest risk groups. Landis and Reschly (2013) studied the phenomenon among talented and gifted (TAG) students. Disengagement reaches a zenith when students drop-out. TAG drop-out is frequently preceded by underachievement. As a TAG student progresses through the grades, recognizing the warning signs of underachievement requires careful attention. TAG students who underachieve may be meeting grade level benchmarks and earning high grades. When identified, TAG students are in the top few percentiles (usually above the 95th) in an identified area; failure to maintain commensurate achievement may indicate increasing disengagement.

Landis and Reschly (2013) discussed engagement in the academic, cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. In each area, there are warning signs that may be addressed by school staff. A TAG student who consistently does not pay attention in class is not academically engaged. Similarly, failure to complete class assignments and homework are disengagement warning signs. When a TAG student fails courses and becomes credit deficient, a school-level response is important; counselors, teachers, and administrators must take notice. Cognitive disengagement may be revealed through ongoing dialog. TAG students who express that they are bored, who state that assignments are not challenging, who have low educational and career goals, or who do not use time wisely may be displaying signs of disengagement.

Affective disengagement may be evidenced by problematic relationships. Nonexistent peer relationships, or relationships with poor peer models are warning signs. Adult relationships are significant. Disengaged TAG students perceive that their parents and teachers do not care. According to Landis and Reschly (2013), it is not clear that this perception is a reality, but student feelings in this regard are important indicators. There is conclusive evidence that TAG students who have strong bonds with their parents and school staff tend to be very successful. Behaviorally disengaged TAG students may fail to develop effective study skills, they may sleep in class, and they may accumulate discipline referrals. A decrease in extracurricular involvement may be evidence of disengagement. Behavioral disengagement is recognizable, and several of these behaviors are related to attendance. Being tardy, skipping class, and chronic absence are potential indicators of behavioral disengagement. When a TAG student starts missing school with increasing frequency, disengagement is a strong possibility.

Truancy. Jones et al. (2011) recently conducted a literature review concerning truancy and discussed the implications for educational practitioners. Jones et al. stated that there is

general agreement that truancy is the absence from school without valid excuse, but because schools and states vary in how truancy is reported, it is difficult to quantify the extent of the problem. Truant students share characteristics with chronically absent students. Males, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students exhibit greater rates of truancy. Truancy increases in the upper grades. Characteristics may be identified as early as primary school that are predictive of future truancy. Family, school, and community factors are important. Early intervention may be effective in preventing later problematic attendance behaviors.

Truancy has negative effects in a number of domains, which are well documented by Jones et al. (2011). The individual's educational attainment is impacted. This is correlated with decreased future earnings, higher unemployment, and lower status, less stable careers. Chronically truant students marry at a younger age, have more children, and their relationships are less stable than the non-truant. Throughout life, truant students have more mental health and substance abuse issues. They are at greater risk for personal injury. Truancy is correlated with deviant and anti-social behavior, including criminal activity and drug and alcohol abuse. There is great risk associated with missing school. Studies of truancy have been numerous and wide-ranging. Studies such as this current one, which examines chronic absenteeism, will help educational professionals understand the impacts of absences beyond the well-studied domain of the unexcused absence.

Interventions regarding disengagement and potential truancy should start in the early grades. They must address student, family, community, and school factors. These approaches will be examined in-depth in the section that follows.

Interventions

In this section I will discuss the literature concerning school refusal, chronic absenteeism, and studies that evaluate the efficacy of intervention practices intended to improve student attendance.

Attendance interventions have been shown to be effective, and the validity of many strategies has been confirmed by research. Lochmiller (2013) provided recommendations to the Illinois Department of Education, which included summaries of some effective programs. Efforts aimed at students directly have worked, and both one-on-one mentoring and small group interventions may be of value. Building partnerships with families and engaging in community education and outreach may increase the supports students need to be absent less frequently. Efforts aimed at improving school climate and staff–student relationships ameliorate the disengagement some students feel regarding school. Lochmiller recommended a three-pronged approach to intervention concerning excessive absence. Schools must monitor attendance carefully and intervene before absence becomes excessive. A multi-tiered strategy that includes both prevention and intervention should be developed in site-specific fashion. When incentives and communication do not improve attendance, supports for individuals must be tailored to assist an individual student regarding improved attendance.

Lauchlan (2003) discussed interventions that addressed the spectrum of factors that influenced chronic absenteeism. Lauchlan sought to advocate for approaches that identified the functions of absenteeism for individual students. He cautioned that staff may need to target their approaches to understanding elementary and secondary students differently. Nonetheless, Lauchlan also described a three-pronged strategy for thinking about attendance interventions. First, school leaders must think about supports at the organizational level. If students feel unsafe

at school, then climate initiatives may be effective. It is important to attend to student–teacher relationships. Improved relationships may be influential regarding improved attendance. Staff should recognize students for attending school, but should do so directly and discretely rather than in a group setting such as a classroom. Students benefit from having an adult assigned as a check-in mentor, an individual with whom they develop trusting and open communication.

Second, an individualized approach to intervention is necessary. These supports will vary dependent upon individual need. Some students may benefit from relaxation strategies, which help them reduce their stress concerning school demands and expectations. Some students benefit from coaching regarding self-statements. Similar to social stories, self-statements help students to think clearly about the school environment and lay aside misperceptions about how they are viewed. Eventually, students learn to engage in positive, rather than negative, self-talk. Additionally, the school must individuate regarding reintegration of students who have been excessively absent. Some students may need to reintegrate in gradual fashion and work their way back to full attendance in step-wise fashion. Others may be brought back full-time immediately, and in these circumstance the school and family must be willing to work past confrontations with the student that may result from stringent expectations. Decisions regarding reintegration must be carefully considered. There is a balance to be drawn between too much too soon and a student suffering academically because of missing class.

Third, group interventions are important for all stakeholders. Group interactions help students develop social skills. Many non-attenders have low self-esteem and perceive themselves as socially inept. Group interactions combined with skill training allow students to practice appropriate behavior in a safe setting. Parents may benefit greatly from coaching regarding parenting skills and addressing school refusal. Coaching enables parents to learn to

give clear and direct instructions to their children. They may also learn to offer praise when it is appropriate to reward positive behaviors, and to ignore tantrums and defiance. School staff may benefit from similar professional development. Effective interventions will combine strategies from the three areas to support individual students and realize the "value of individualised programmes of intervention according to each pupil's needs" (Lauchlan, 2003, p. 144).

In some settings, school social workers have significant responsibility regarding intervention with students who are frequently absent. Research by social workers has provided information that is useful in understanding and intervening with students who have attendance challenges. Studies by Kearney and Bates (2005) and Dube and Orpinas (2009) investigated absence as school refusal behavior and described aspects of the phenomenon that are relevant to the framework of the current study. From the perspectives of social workers, excessive absenteeism is a complex problem, leads to negative outcomes, and requires individualized interventions if students are to improve their attendance behavior.

Dube and Orpinas (2009) discussed the negative outcomes of non-attendance and cited Caldas (1993) and Lamdin (1996) when they explained that reduced achievement and increased drop-out are among the consequences. Dube and Orpinas conducted a pilot study to evaluate whether a model of refusal developed in a clinical setting had utility in the general educational setting. Dube and Orpinas developed a sample of 99 upper elementary and middle school students who had been referred for attendance problems. They utilized social worker observations and student self-reporting scales to gather data and conducted statistical analyses to generate school refusal profiles. Dube and Orpinas provided a thorough description of their methodology and reported details of their statistical analyses.

Dube and Orpinas's (2009) findings concerning the student refusal profiles informed the design of this current study. They found that 61% of the sample missed school to gain tangible positive reinforcement; 17% had a multiple profile, meaning they missed because of a combination of positive and negative reinforcement; 22% did not fit into a profile category. Examples of positive reinforcement were watching television, playing video games, or gaining parental attention. Negative reinforcements were avoiding or escaping behaviors; students may avoid anxiety generated during school activities or flee from specific threats such as bullying or judgment by staff. Dube and Orpinas found that there were no significant gender differences in school refusal behavior.

Dube and Orpinas (2009) concluded that most absences described as refusal were positively reinforced. They urged that practitioners seek to understand the reinforcement mechanisms specific to students. When students are disengaged from school, when they find it boring, or when they do not connect with adults, they may seek positive reinforcement elsewhere. Dube and Orpinas's study was small and confined to one school district. Nonetheless, their findings were similar to those found in the clinical setting, which may indicate that this model is relevant in the general education setting. The authors encouraged further study of this model in other settings. Additionally, Dube and Orpinas cautioned practitioners that the 22% of students who did not fit into the positive or multiple profiles should be followed very closely as a better understanding of these students as individuals might reveal that they, in fact, are motivated by some reinforcement scheme.

Kearney and Bates (2005) explained the nature of school refusal and described approaches regarding intervention that benefit students. In their discussion, the authors described approaches that might help school staff recognize refusal and effectively intervene to

improve attendance. It was those recommendations for school personnel that informed the framework for this current study. Kearney and Bates explained that school staff, such as principals, counselors, and deans, must be able to assess the scope and severity of refusal behavior, because they are frequently the first to recognize it, long before clinical interventions are initiated. School refusal potentially has both short- and long-term consequences. In the short-term, grades may suffer, families may be impacted, and legal consequences are possible. In the long-term, social maladjustment may lead to disrupted interpersonal relationships, economic disadvantage, and mental health issues.

Like Dube and Orpinas (2009), Kearney and Bates (2005) described school refusal as multi-faceted. There was a family component. Some parents were unaware that an attendance problem existed; others were apathetic, did not trust the school, and hesitated to acknowledge that a problem existed. A third group was hostile toward the school. They did not accept that absenteeism was a problem and may have refused to discuss the issue with staff. For some, life circumstances such as violence, drug abuse (parent or child), or homelessness rendered school attendance a low priority. Kearney and Bates recommended that school staff engage in polite, professional communication when they recognize attendance problems. Parents should be educated regarding the potential ramifications of continued absence, invited to confer with staff regarding issues, and provided an accurate assessment of their student's current attendance status. In difficult cases where the caregivers are resistant, the school must be persistent in establishing contact and may benefit by attempting to connect the family with resources that might assist them. Doing so displays caring and concern and may lead to a more positive working relationship.

Kearney and Bates (2005) explained that school staff must work to understand individual cases of school refusal. There may be an underlying problem. Discussing the matter with students, parents, and teachers may be revelatory. Reviewing school records may uncover clues. A psychologist or social worker may conduct assessments or observations and report their findings. Kearney and Bates (2005) concurred with Dube and Orpinas (2009) that the reasons for school refusal were frequently avoidance, escape, or pursuit of positive reinforcement. At the study site, better understanding the individual students and families will enable me to more successfully develop effective interventions.

Kearney and Bates (2005) described a hierarchy of intervention. If a family is in crisis, that must be resolved first. When the impediment is resolved, a school-based intervention may proceed. Kearney and Bates advocated for "a problem-solving, capacity-building, team approach" (p. 212). Potential interventions should be evaluated in terms of the function of the child's behavior. A student with anxiety, a child who is being bullied, and one who prefers to stay home and watch television all require different interventions. Staff must focus on the individual's needs and teach appropriate skills and replacement behaviors.

Kearney and Bates offered specific suggestions for schools. They described school-based, frontline responses such as monitoring attendance closely, providing immediate feedback to parents regarding absences and tardiness, rewards for meeting attendance goals, a temporary reduction of the assignment load, and involving the student in extra-curricular activities. Kearney and Bates also described more general goals such as creating a positive and supportive school culture, providing instruction tailored to individual student needs, and developing strong working relationships with families. These types of responses and goals are similar to some of those utilized as interventions in this current study.

What social workers describe as school refusal frequently manifests itself in chronic absenteeism. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) reported on chronic absenteeism in the nation's public schools. Balfanz and Byrnes discovered that students who attended regularly were more successful. Mathematics learning was greatly impacted by absence. Standardized test scores, graduation rates, and drop-out rates all improved when attendance improved. They reported that schools that recognized and aggressively addressed the absenteeism issues in a comprehensive fashion saw quick success. Incentives were successful when they were part of a comprehensive program that involved families in addressing issues. Involving the whole school was important, and simple, inexpensive rewards were of great benefit. Balfanz and Byrnes discussed some strategies that were successful and identified characteristics they had in common. Successful schools tracked attendance closely, sought to understand why individuals missed school, and developed strategies for assisting those students. Successful schools built relationships with students and families, and they engaged communities in their efforts. The schools committed to learning which interventions were effective, and to an ethic of continuous improvement regarding their intervention practices. This action research project emphasized most of these priorities.

Chang and Romero (2008) conducted an investigation regarding chronic absence in the early-elementary grades. They defined chronic absence as a student missing more than 10% of school days and chronic early absence as involving students in grades K–3. Chang and Romero conducted a review of extant literature, evaluated the most current national attendance data, studied attendance in nine school districts, and spoke with professional experts familiar with chronic early attendance issues. The investigators explained that chronic early absence affected academic performance long-term. Even when a district attendance rate was high, specific

schools, grades, or classrooms had attendance problems. It was critical that each site sought to understand the local issues because multiple factors were present; a comprehensive understanding was vital to developing effective interventions.

Chang and Romero (2008) provided an in-depth analysis of issues surrounding chronic early absenteeism. They sought to identify both causes of and solutions to the problem. Characteristics of the school, families, and communities contributed to excessive absences. Schools that had a clearly defined approach to addressing attendance issues, communicated clearly and involved families in addressing the problems, and focused on engaging, effective instruction reduced rates of chronic absenteeism. Families may not understand the negative effects of absences on young children. Whether the problem is lack of resources, chronic illness, or parents' personal negative histories regarding schooling, interventions must be tailored to meet the needs of individual families. Community factors must be addressed similarly. High rates of violence, unemployment, poverty, and drop-out combine to create a community that may not adequately value formal education and leave children with few role models who encourage educational attainment.

Chang and Romero (2008) offered advice to schools seeking to ameliorate chronic absence and described specific programs that had been successful. They advised that school staff must plan intentionally, act consistently, and follow through on intervention efforts. Schools must plan for the success of every student; schools are diverse settings, and no group should be marginalized. Parents must understand that attendance is important, and students should be rewarded for their efforts to be in school. When absences begin to occur, staff must reach out and seek to help, no matter the need. Schools may identify resources and systems of support of which parents are unaware. Successful intervention programs share common

40

characteristics. They have people who are focused on attendance issues. Successful programs connect with students and families and seek to address their individual needs. Successful intervention practices often include systematic positive reinforcement for improved attendance behavior.

Steven Sheldon and Joyce Epstein were described by Chang and Romero (2008) as investigators who had done important work concerning developing effective parent partnerships to help ameliorate attendance issues. Sheldon and Epstein have developed a body of work that demonstrates involving families and communities may help improve student attendance (e.g., Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2005; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). They have also demonstrated that these partnerships may positively influence state test achievement (Sheldon, 2003) and mathematics learning (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Sheldon and Epstein (2004) explained that chronic absenteeism negatively impacted students, and that ultimately it may lead to dropping out; this finding was confirmed by other investigators (e.g., Barry & Reschly, 2012; Dube & Orpinas, 2009).

Sheldon and Epstein (2004) believed that research regarding effective absenteeism interventions was neglected, and that work in this area should be completed so that schools would understand what worked, because reducing absences increased positive student outcomes. Sheldon and Epstein collected data from 39 schools regarding chronic absenteeism and specific interventions used to address the problems. Their study was motivated by prior research that demonstrated practices such as student incentives, effective school–home communication including identifying a school contact person, attendance workshops, and after-school programs were effective in improving attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). They posited that schools

41

must establish comprehensive strategies regarding attendance practices and remain committed to the efforts.

Sheldon and Epstein's (2004) sample consisted of 29 elementary and 10 secondary schools. The sample represented a cross-section of urban, suburban, and rural settings; and it contained schools that ranged in enrollment from 135 to 1753 students. The sample was demographically diverse in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Respondents reported whether they had utilized any of 14 specific attendance interventions, 10 of which involved families or the community; four focused directly on connecting with students. This sample may have demonstrated a bias toward effective interventions, because it consisted of schools involved with the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University; participants were required to complete baseline and follow-up surveys and were offered incentives to participate.

In spite of potential biases, the analysis was revelatory concerning potential promising practices. A mixed-methods design used qualitative techniques and described demographic and partnership characteristics in relation to attendance. Quantitative regression was used to analyze how interventions affected attendance over time. Sheldon and Epstein's (2004) results confirmed and extended the findings from their 2002 study and demonstrated that effective interventions may be extremely site specific; what works in one school may be very different than what works at another.

Sheldon and Epstein (2004) determined that chronic absenteeism was greater in urban settings, high-poverty schools, and at the secondary level. The more attendance-focused activities a school conducted the more attendance rates improved. Interestingly, while elementary schools were able to reduce absences, secondary schools were not. Also significant

was the finding that, while school staff did not necessarily believe that focusing their efforts toward the parents was effective, such interventions were shown to be statistically significant predictors of improved attendance over time. Other investigators have examined specific types of interventions or various aspects of the attendance issue.

Asking parents about their perspectives concerning absences may yield significant insights. Powell (2012) cited Dube and Orpinas (2009) and Epstein and Sheldon (2002) when she justified her rationale for developing a study regarding parents' perceptions in relation to their students' absences. Powell used a researcher-developed, Likert-type survey that grouped absences as being caused by individual, family, school, or community factors. She included an open-ended question that asked the respondent to rank the top three reasons a student had missed school. She sent invitations to respond to 132 parents or guardians of students who had missed 20 or more days during the preceding school year. Families were contacted by telephone before they received the survey and approximately 1 week later to encourage their participation. Powell used descriptive statistics to analyze her survey data and coding strategies to group the open-ended responses.

Powell (2012) found that the top six survey responses were all individual factors: reasons such as illness, anxiety, and lack of motivation. One school factor, teacher characteristics, and one community factor, negative role modeling, were ranked numbers seven and eight. Powell developed three themes from her coding methods. The most inclusive theme was individual medical, mental health, and behavioral issues. She labeled a theme individual characteristics and included lack of motivation (the most frequent survey response) in that category. Her third theme was external circumstances, which included school climate, family issues, and teacher characteristics.

Powell's (2012) findings were not as important to this current research as were her methods. Powell's goal of obtaining meaningful insight regarding parent attitudes and practices was a goal of the current study. Powell's study had shortcomings. Her response rate was low, less than 20%, in spite of the fact that she included self-addressed, stamped envelopes with her surveys and, alternatively, provided families the option of completing the survey on-line. Her research-developed survey was not piloted or evaluated for validity. Self-report surveys may be biased due to response set, the tendency for respondents to provide the answers they think are most acceptable (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). Powell's use of both survey and open-ended response data represented the beginning of an attempt at triangulation of her data, but she did not develop that method fully, nor did she seek independent verification of her coding results (Creswell, 2013). In spite of the weaknesses, Powell's methods represented a sincere effort to understand parents' points of view, and the procedural shortcomings may be ameliorated. As has been demonstrated in this review of literature, the more information that is available about families, the more likely it is that interventions will be successful.

Blevins (2009) demonstrated that parents and students are willing to participate in investigations that examine absence issues. In a study of one high school population of 1,335 students, no parents opted-out from allowing their students to participate. Blevins's response rate for her survey was 69% on a day when 9% of students were absent. This demonstrated that approximately one fifth (22%) of students declined to participate. A large majority of students at Blevins's site were willing to provide input concerning attendance issues.

Blevins (2009) gathered data regarding a wide variety of factors that influenced student absence. Students gave input regarding their health status, relationships with school personnel, attendance policies, school safety, drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, and a number of

additional issues. Blevins was able to demonstrate the statistical significance of several of her hypotheses at an alpha of .001. Had she used a more traditional significance level such as $p < .05$, even more of her findings would have been significant. "The students were very open in their discussions with me about their reasons for being absent" (Blevins, 2009, p. 15). When an investigator has developed relationships and asks the right questions, meaningful data may be obtained.

Understanding the underlying reasons behind excessive absenteeism is also a concern of international investigators. In Jamaica, Cook and Ezenne (2010) investigated the perspectives of chronically absent students, their parents, and school staff. Cook and Ezenne referenced Dube and Orpinas (2009) and Kearney and Bates (2007) and described school refusal as one underlying cause of absences. The authors' findings agreed with Dube and Orpinas and Kearney and Bates (2005; 2007) that absenteeism had diverse root causes and was driven by combinations of positive and negative reinforcement systems. Cook and Ezenne developed a sample of 71 schools, which represented all six of Jamaica's educational regions. From these schools they established groups of adults (staff and parents), created focus groups, and gathered data from interviews. The researchers chose 10 schools, all in close proximity to Kingston, which had very serious absenteeism problems and created focus groups of students, identified by administrators as having been frequently absent, from which they gathered some of their interview data.

Cook and Ezenne (2010) chose the focus group design because it allowed them to gather data from diverse groups, members of which had different perspectives regarding student absences. Additionally, the discussion-based method allowed participants to explain the reasoning behind their thinking. Researchers utilized a semi-structured interview process and were encouraged to ask follow-up questions during group meetings to elicit in-depth responses.

45

Although the authors did not precisely describe how they gathered data, their reporting implied that they made an audio record that was transcribed for coding purposes; Cook and Ezenne quoted group interactions directly several times in the report and stated precise values for the number of data points they collected. Their focus group-based quantitative techniques were instructive concerning effective methodology and informed the design of this current study.

Cook and Ezenne's (2010) analysis created groups that were directly parallel to those developed by Powell (2012). Their reasons for absences were described in terms of school, family, individual, and community factors. The findings pertaining to the Jamaican schools were similar to those I have discussed in this literature review, but they also displayed some problems unique to the island. Most of the sample schools were in rural, low income areas, and there were significant unique factors. Some students travelled as many as nine miles to school and had to pay for transportation. There were cases of extreme poverty, and sometimes families chose to send only their secondary students to school because in the upper grades students were suspended if they missed school. There were infrastructure problems, and sometimes the lack of fresh water affected both family health and personal hygiene. A number of parents simply did not see school as the top priority for their children; they needed children to work, babysit, or carry water.

Cook and Ezenne (2010) utilized a qualitative case study design, gathered interview data, and completed a coding analysis. Interestingly, they applied quantitative techniques as they developed their findings. "Selected statistical techniques were used to analyse and identify the root causes of student absenteeism at the primary educational level. The quantification of qualitative data enabled the comparison of quantitative and qualitative results" (Cook & Ezenne, 2010, p. 41). This strategy allows researchers to clearly identify the most significant factors

influencing absenteeism. Understanding the most important causes regarding non-attendance allows school staff to choose specific interventions. The current study sought to precisely identify site-specific critical factors and effectively address them.

When Chang and Romero (2008) identified effective interventions, they named the Check and Connect strategy and incentive-based programs as being valuable. Cole (2011) conducted an action research project that utilized descriptive statistics and qualitative methods to evaluate the efficacy of a Check and Connect and incentive-based intervention. Cole's sample consisted of five kindergarten students and five second grade students who had been absent between seven and 14 days during the first semester of the 2010 school year. At each grade there were three females and two males; the sample included Latino, Caucasian, and African–American students. A 6 week intervention at the start of the second semester involved daily check-ins with a member of the student advisory team (SAT), weekly rewards for perfect attendance, and a culminating pizza party for students who missed 2 or fewer days during the intervention period. Administrators, office staff, and counselors were involved with the SAT in a coordinated effort to demonstrate to parents and students a culture of caring and concern.

An analysis of attendance records showed that the average number of student absences decreased from 8.8 prior to intervention to 1.7 during the intervention period. Seventy percent of students improved their attendance. It is important to consider that the intervention represented approximately one third of a semester, and therefore the average number of absences in the full second semester would be higher. Additionally, if 3 of 10 students did not improve their attendance, then most of the other seven missed 0 or 1 days for the average to have come down so far. Cole did present data graphically, which allowed readers to evaluate these issues. She

presented a bar graph that showed individual attendance for the 6 weeks prior to and the 6 weeks during the intervention. For those for whom the program was effective, it was very effective.

Cole (2011) discussed feedback regarding the program that demonstrated broad support among students, teaching staff, and members of the SAT. Students reported that their favorite part of the program was the incentives and that rewards motivated them to come to school. Additionally, they reported that their behavior improved, they enjoyed school more, and that the check-ins elevated their self-concepts. Ninety percent of staff members (SAT team and faculty) found the program extremely or highly effective. Eighty percent described the incentives as extremely effective regarding improving attendance. Seventy percent related that the program was extremely or highly effective in increasing academics. Seventy percent of staff found the check-in cards beneficial. There were no negative responses from staff to any survey questions. The remainder of the responses not detailed above listed aspects of the program simply as effective, except for a small percentage of non-response (approximately 5%). Although Cole's study was small and of limited duration, it demonstrated that check-ins and incentives may be effective, and that studying a larger sample for a longer duration is warranted. This current study gathered post-intervention data from participants and staff to evaluate perceived effectiveness and identify potential adjustments for subsequent cycles of the action research.

Bickelhaupt (2011) reported that daily check-ins and a system of positive behavior supports were effective in improving the attendance of a group of chronically absent first grade students. Bickelhaupt also described that communication with the parents regarding attendance issues improved during the intervention and that overall rapport with the family was enhanced. Paik and Phillips (2002) explained that the Victoria, Texas school district had a certified teacher

48

in each building working as a parent liaison. The liaison monitored attendance issues, conducted home visits, taught parenting classes, and intervened directly with students.

Rivard (2013) reported the results of a year-long study of the efficacy of an intervention program with sophomore, junior, and senior students at a suburban–rural comprehensive high school. Thirty-one students were recommended to the intervention program because of issues with attendance and academics; 19 were male; 12 were female. There were 12 sophomores, seven juniors, and 12 seniors. Rivard did not consider other demographic or personal characteristics in evaluating the data. Students in the program met as a group with the intervention teacher most weeks during the year in 20 minute sessions. The intervention teacher was selected based on her work with at-risk students and developed all materials for the program. During group sessions, discussions were held concerning attendance and academics, goal setting and life planning, study skills, and test taking. The teacher also met with students individually and helped facilitate conversations with teachers of classes in which students were struggling.

Rivard (2013) collected data from school databases and used t tests to determine statistical significance of pre- and post-intervention values at $p < .05$. Rivard found that GPA improved ($p = .001$) and tardiness decreased ($p = .03$) at statistically significant levels. Attendance improved, but only minimally, and the decrease was not statistically significant. Rivard's findings demonstrated that an intervention program may be partially effective, even when it is not perfectly designed. This study's methodology will incorporate a discussion component, but will also be more multi-faceted and utilize additional interventions which the literature review revealed are effective.

Small group meetings may provide an alternative to individualized Check and Connect strategies and be effective for helping students be accountable for improving their attendance.

Webb-Landman (2012) conducted an action research study with elementary students who were frequently absent. Although Webb-Landman's school was larger, it shared important characteristics with the study site in this investigation: it was a Title I school; the free and reduced lunch rate was approximately 60%; there was a high rate of chronic absenteeism. Weekly small group meetings were combined with incentive programs and student self-tracking over a 9-week period. Although the sample was small ($N = 18$), almost three fourths (72%) of students improved their attendance during the intervention period. Teachers' perceptions were that most students improved their self-concept and attitude toward school; some concept and attitude scores remained unchanged.

Both investigator notes documenting the group sessions and student survey data provided specific information regarding student behavior, student attitudes, and why the interventions were successful. Some students stated explicitly that being accountable to the group and to the attendance tracking was an important reason for coming to school. The student survey revealed that 15 of 18 students believed the group helped them like school more (three were neutral) and 16 of 18 believed the group helped them improve attendance (two were neutral). Webb-Landman's (2012) study was small, but demonstrated that an action research approach to intervention may be effective and that small group check-ins may be an effective and efficient means of establishing meaningful student accountability procedures.

Fitzpatrick-Doria (2013) conducted an action research study at one school that utilized a multi-tiered approach to improving attendance in the early elementary grades. She combined student incentives, parent communication, and community awareness. She reported the effects of the interventions during the first phase of implementation of an action research cycle, which

spanned 33 instructional days. Fitzpatrick-Doria discovered that attendance rates improved in seven of the eight classrooms she studied.

Fitzpatrick-Doria (2013) took a simple quantitative approach to analyzing her data. She reported some descriptive statistics and computed a limited number of correlations. However, Fitzpatrick-Doria did not report on a test of statistical significance concerning her results, and her discussion of findings was problematic. She misspoke concerning her interpretation of correlational findings when she described a negative correlation as establishing there was no relationship between variables. She attributed causality to her interventions regarding improved attendance. Fitzpatrick-Doria's investigation contained strong elements and a similar study, with more attention to appropriate analysis and interpretation, may be valuable. Additionally, Fitzpatrick-Doria acknowledged that studies investigating student attitudes must be conducted. The methodology of this current study incorporated the incentive and parent communication components of Fitzpatrick-Doria's study.

Maynard (2010) conducted a meta-analysis that identified why Rivard's (2013) intervention may have been partially effective and how it may have been improved. Maynard determined that behavioral interventions were effective, but they were more effective when combined with parental involvement. She showed that attendance groups were effective, but they were more effective when combined with a system of rewards. Maynard undertook a quantitative study that sought to identify effective interventions through meta-analysis of extant literature.

Maynard's (2010) meta-analysis synthesized findings from 11 experimental, nine quasi-experimental, and 13 single group pretest-posttest studies; five of the studies were from outside the United States. Maynard employed strict selection criteria regarding inclusion of studies in

51

the analysis, independent cross-checking of coding data, and in-depth statistical analyses. She

supplied details in her report, which allowed readers to critically evaluate fine details concerning

her work, and discussed both the strengths of and problems with her analyses. Maynard's work

moved research concerning attendance interventions forward, because it was a quantitative

synthesis of intervention findings.

Maynard's (2010) results may be simplified into practical terms. Interventions were

effective. The effects were not always statistically significant, but attendance rates never

decreased when schools intervened; interventions always resulted in increased attendance.

Behavioral interventions were the most effective strategies, and they were enhanced by parental

involvement. A large-scale effort was not required to produce meaningful results; simple

interventions were effective. It was unclear whether punishments were effective, but family

therapy and mentoring were not. Maynard discussed the problematic nature of conducting what

was the first quantitative meta-analytic review of intervention research, but did make

recommendations concerning addressing the problems. These assist practitioners in developing

strategies. According to Maynard, schools must intervene, and persist in intervening. Staff must

examine closely what they are doing, augment what works, and discard that which does not.

Practices must be incorporate behavioral interventions and should include a reward component.

Attendance groups may be effective if several students are having attendance problems. It is

critical that programs involve parents. Schools must effectively communicate with parents and

educate them concerning the importance of their children attending school.

This review of intervention literature has highlighted the importance of comprehensive

programs that involve a broad cross-section of staff and parents (Chang & Romero, 2008;

Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). It is important to offer students tangible rewards for improved

behavior (Chang & Romero, 2008; Cole, 2011). Rivard's (2013) successes relied solely on

students having been motivated by connecting to their intervention teacher. The single

intervention had some effect, but a more comprehensive approach may have been much more

successful. Strategically combining interventions to address excessive student absences may be

more effective than a single approach (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kay, 2010).

Oregon Issues

Over the last few years, there has been an increased awareness in Oregon regarding the

state's high rate of chronic absenteeism. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE),

community agencies, journalists, and school districts have been actively studying and addressing

the chronic absenteeism crisis. The widespread nature of the problem is becoming more clearly

understood. Recommendations are being developed that may inform schools concerning

interventions. Individual schools and districts are implementing strategies that are yielding

positive results. Two comprehensive studies have been completed that document and detail the

extent and characteristics of chronic absenteeism in the state (Riddle, 2014). Buehler et al.

(2012) examined data from 2009–2010, and Hammond (2014) completed the most recent study

and utilized ODE data from 2012–2013.

Buehler et al. (2012) disaggregated data and identified high risk groups; some of these

sub-populations were present at the current study site. Economically disadvantaged students are

twice as likely to be chronically absent in the primary grades when compared with their

advantaged peers. The gap narrows slightly as students get older, but poor high school students

are still 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent than are their non-disadvantaged peers.

However, because chronic absenteeism rates are highest in the high school years, almost 40% of

economically disadvantaged high school students are chronically absent. The study district was

at substantial risk. At the study site, almost 60% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. In Oregon, special education students are second only to Native Americans in their rate of chronic absenteeism; the rate is slightly higher than for the economically disadvantaged. At the study site, slightly more than 1 in 6 students qualified for special education services.

Additionally, Buhler et al. (2012) longitudinally examined two student cohorts and analyzed attendance patterns and the relationship between chronic absenteeism and state test achievement. ODE maintains a longitudinal database, and students who were in kindergarten and fifth grade beginning in 2004–2005 were tracked until they reached fifth and 10th grades respectively. For the younger students, attendance improved over time, but the worst kindergarten attenders also had the worst attendance in fifth grade. For the older students, after a 1-year drop in absence rate, attendance steadily worsened as they progressed toward and through high school. For both groups, attendance rate in the first cohort year was predictive of attendance rate in the final year of the analysis.

Concerning achievement, Buhler et al. (2012) found that all students improved their performance over time, but that students who were chronically absent in kindergarten were unlikely to achieve as well as their peers who were not absent as frequently. The same pattern was seen with the older students, although the baseline for comparing attendance was the year with the best rate, sixth grade. The data was consistent for both reading and mathematics. Because these were two distinct groups of students, and the results were consistent between them, the data suggest that there is a strong relationship between poor attendance and later depressed state test achievement.

Buehler et al. (2012) conducted an in-depth analysis of the results of chronically absent kindergarten and first grade students in relation to later reading achievement; in Oregon, state

tests begin in the third grade. Students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade had the poorest reading achievement in fifth grade, followed by those chronically absent in the first grade only and then those chronically absent in kindergarten only. This means that at this current study site, intervening with early elementary students regarding improved attendance may significantly impact their achievement throughout elementary school. It also means that it is important to help students transitioning from elementary to middle school maintain lower rates of absenteeism (typical of late-elementary students) as they progress through the middle years.

Hammond (2014) conducted an analysis of ODE data that showed the chronic absenteeism rate in Oregon decreased approximately 5% between 2010 and 2013 to 18%. However, one third of students missed between 5% and 9% of the school year, only slightly below the chronic absenteeism threshold. The positive gains represented that some schools had found mechanisms to successfully intervene, while others continued to suffer with abysmal rates. In one Columbia County K–12 district, where I worked prior to moving to the study site, during 2012–2013 forty percent of first-grade students and 72% of juniors and seniors were chronically absent. The absenteeism problem is not geographically isolated; it is present everywhere in the state. The most noticeable pattern was seen on the Oregon Coast, where almost all districts had chronic absenteeism rates above the state average. The absenteeism problem was the worst in rural schools. At some, almost half of students were chronically absent; the study site is classified by ODE as a rural district. Low-income students continued to be chronically absent at a rate 50% higher than their non-disadvantaged peers; the study site has a high proportion of low-income families.

Hammond (2014) described success stories, which included high-poverty schools. A Beaverton elementary school had one of the lowest chronic absenteeism rates among low-income schools in the state. When the staff noticed absences accumulating for a student, the principal made contact with the parent. In this school, relationship building and parent education regarding the importance of regular attendance were effective. At an elementary school in Portland with a 79% economically disadvantaged rate, parent contact was also central to attendance interventions, but some students also participated in daily check-ins with the school counselor. Teachers called and thanked the parents when attendance improved. Relationship building involved both adults and children.

In the same district, a high-poverty middle school had one of the best attendance rates in Oregon. School staff checked attendance every morning, and a secretary called the parents of absent students every day. The counselor and principal stepped in as soon as a student missed 3 or 4 days. Sixth grade students who had attendance problems in the past were put on a check-in system at the beginning of their first middle school year. A Portland-area high school had one of the lowest large-school chronic absenteeism rates, combined with one of the highest low-income graduation rates, in the state. This school utilized direct check-ins to clarify consistent attendance expectations and to provide tangible rewards when students did attend school. If attendance problems continued, the school involved parents, and the student may have been required to sign an attendance contract, which sometimes included signing in at the office every day. Many strategies similar to those utilized by these successful schools are described in the methodology chapter of this dissertation.

The chronic absenteeism issue has garnered attention from Oregon legislators and community advocacy organizations. Various perspectives have been advanced regarding how

decision makers may respond to the issue. In the 2015 legislature, a bill was proposed to tie school funding to daily attendance rates; advocates explained that this approach had been successful in other states; detractors feared that this legislation would further destabilize tenuous funding mechanisms (Spegman, 2015). The bill stalled in committee, but revenue and fiscal impacts were completed ("Oregon Legislative," 2015). The discussion was renewed in the legislature's February, 2016 thirty-five day session. On February 5, the House Education Committee advanced House Bill 4002 to the full House. That bill directs the Oregon Department of Education to develop a plan to address the chronic absenteeism issue (Hammond, 2016).

Henderson, Hill, and Norton (2014) produced a report for Upstream Public Health that described characteristics of Oregon's chronically absent students and provided recommendations to community and educational leaders. Henderson et al. relied on Buehler et al.'s (2012) report as a source concerning characteristics of these students, and discussed strategies for intervention from a public health perspective. The recommendations for intervention were discussed in relation to Oregon attendance initiatives. Several of their priorities engaged students and families at the school level and thus relate to this current study. Transparency concerning the chronic absenteeism issue provides accurate information to all stakeholders. Resources must be allocated to meet critical social service needs. Policies must support student attendance both positively and proactively; schools must not focus only on punitive responses. Schools should seek to understand the context and causes of an individual's chronic absenteeism. Interventions should be individualized and their effectiveness must be evaluated on an on-going basis and adjusted as necessary. Henderson et al.'s recommendations are important considerations for the development and implementation of this study's methods.

Riddle (2014) produced a report for the Children's Institute and also relied on Buehler et al.'s (2012) analysis. Riddle provided recommendations for action, and described in case studies the practices of schools that were successful regarding ameliorating chronic absenteeism. One of Riddle's case studies involved a small, rural school, which had almost 90% economically disadvantaged students and a chronic absenteeism rate 5% below the state average. To effectively intercede regarding problematic attendance, the school emphasized family engagement, staff collaboration concerning intervention strategies, incentives and positive supports, and accurate real-time data analysis. Each of these strategies was incorporated in the methodology of this current study.

Riddle's (2014) recommendations were directed at state leaders, but may be interpreted in a way that emphasizes critical school priorities. Attendance data must be accurate, available, and communicated effectively to families and stakeholders. Education may be beneficial for parents, communities, and school personnel. School staff may benefit from training regarding effective supports for chronically absent students, and from professional development that improves their understanding of the problem and the characteristics of these students and their families. Families and communities may benefit from education and coaching that helps them understand why regular attendance is critical. They may also benefit from training that improves their ability to respond effectively to students they know are missing school. Schools must develop policies, procedures, and practices that enable them to understand chronic absenteeism at the individual level and intervene effectively on a case-by-case basis.

Summary

In the early 20th century, investigators examined the relationship between attendance and achievement by examining achievement measures such as school progress (promotion rates),

58

school marks, and, to a lesser extent, standardized achievement measures. Many of these researchers suggested that further examinations of the relationships be conducted. However, until the late 20th century, few studies were conducted that examined the problem. In the 1990s, a body of research began to develop that used correlative measures to examine the attendance–achievement link. Over the last 20 years, this line of investigation has grown considerably, and specific lines of inquiry, such as the relationship between attendance and achievement at the individual level, have been pursued.

There are negative outcomes associated with problem attendance beyond reduced academic achievement. Chronic absence in the early grades negatively impacts socio-emotional development and self-regulation. In the truancy literature, both short- and long-term risks are associated with missing school. Truant students are at higher risk for health problems, relationship difficulties, and delinquent or criminal behaviors. Truancy reduces educational attainment, which is correlated with lower lifetime income, higher unemployment, and unstable career prospects.

Because communities and schools are concerned with attendance, research has been done that investigates why students miss school and how schools may increase student attendance rates. Research concerning these issues formed the basis of an aspect of this current study. Non-attendance has been demonstrated to be related to individual, family, community, and school factors. Factors underlying individual instances of absenteeism differ from one another, and the more clearly school staff understand a case, the better prepared they are to intervene effectively. Similarly, school interventions should be developed that are unique to the site. Some practices, such as close attendance monitoring, consistent response, incentives, broad staff involvement,

parent contact and education, and persistence of effort form the foundation of many successful attendance intervention efforts.

Oregon has a chronic absenteeism problem, among the worst in the country. The magnitude of the issues and the characteristics of the chronically absent are being studied intensely. Although some success stories exist, problems persist, and addressing this issue must become a priority for every school if it is to be solved. Students of color, special education students, rural students, and the economically disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable. Successful school interventions in Oregon have combined individualized understanding of causes and contexts, consistent school-based attendance tracking and response, effective partnerships with families and communities, educational outreach concerning the importance of attendance, and systems of positive, student-centered incentives.

The following chapter will outline an action research methodology that sought to improve the attendance of chronically absent students. At a specific small school site, an investigation examined student and parent perspectives concerning the factors that contributed to student absences. I am the school's superintendent–principal, and as a researcher developed interventions to improve attendance. Changes in attendance rates are reported in Chapter 4. Post-intervention participant interviews and a teacher survey evaluated the perceived efficacy of the action research interventions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was grounded in my understanding of the relationship between school attendance and student achievement and my interest in addressing the challenges my district faced because of some students' chronic absenteeism. Although it did not reveal causality, the literature review demonstrated that achievement was negatively impacted by student absence and that the impact was more severe when absences were unexcused (Gottfried, 2009) or absenteeism was chronic (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The literature review also revealed that strategic interventions assisted students to improve attendance (Bickelhaupt, 2011; Cole, 2011) and that effective intervention strategies shared some common characteristics (Chang & Romero, 2008; Maynard, 2010).

The methods described in this chapter were derived from an evaluation and application of techniques described in the extant literature. The approach was action research; I sought to understand deeply the perspectives and attitudes of students who were chronically absent and to identify interventions that helped them to improve their attendance (Creswell, 2013). This project completed one cycle and began the second of a longer action research effort. Data was gathered from school records, and by using surveys and interviews. Themes and topics were identified using an iterative coding process, which is described in the data analysis procedures section of this chapter. Individual attendance patterns of chronically absent students are reported both pre- and post-intervention.

This chapter describes the purpose of the study and research questions. I then detail the instruments used, the study sample, and the data procedures. Following the specific procedures, I review the potential findings, the study limitations, and the ethical concerns regarding this investigation.

Purpose

      The purposes of the proposed study were to explore in one rural Oregon school district the reasons, from student and parent or guardian perspectives, that students attended or were absent, and to identify and implement interventions that would be effective in supporting students and families regarding improving attendance. Additionally, post-intervention, I sought to describe student and parent or guardian attitudes and perceptions concerning the efficacy of the intervention strategies, and teacher perceptions concerning the intervention efforts.

      The study progressed through three phases. In the initial phase, which took place prior to the start of the 2015–2016 school year, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of chronically absent students and their parents or guardians and explored in-depth their thinking regarding chronic absenteeism, and I gathered students' and parents' or guardians' input regarding potentially effective interventions. In the second phase, which occurred during the first trimester of 2015–2016, some school staff and I implemented interventions designed to effect participant students' attendance behavior. During this phase I continued to explore with students, during weekly check-ins and in some cases during small-group meetings, how they felt about attending school. In the final phase of data collection, following the end of the trimester, I gathered information from students and parents or guardians concerning how their attitudes toward attendance changed and the efficacy of the intervention strategies; I also surveyed the teachers of participants concerning the strengths and weakness of the intervention effort.

Research Questions

      How did students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of missing and attending school?

- What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by chronically absent students?

- What did students describe as important reasons that they regularly attended school?

- How did these reasons, perceptions, and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

How did parents or guardians of students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of their students missing and attending school?

- What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by parents or guardians of chronically absent students?

- What did parents or guardians describe as motivating factors regarding students' school attendance?

- How did these motivating factors and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

What implemented school interventions were the most successful concerning improving the attendance of chronically absent students?

- Why were the most successful school interventions considered effective?

Instrumentation

Interviews. Interview data was collected using an interviewer-completed instrument. Interviews were semi-structured and utilized interview guides that contained questions that were consistently asked of all participants during each phase of interviews. I utilized reflective listening and non-directive probes and encouraged participants to communicate their full thinking regarding each topic (Creswell, 2013; Fowler, 2014). With participant permission, interviews were recorded.

The initial interview script contained three demographic questions—student sex, student grade level, and years of attendance at the school. The rest of the questionnaire comprised Likert-type and open-ended questions. The purpose of this instrument was to gather data regarding the attitudes of students and their parents or guardians concerning reasons for absences, motivation for attendance, and intervention supports that may have improved student attendance. This data provided information concerning individual, family, school, and community factors (Chang & Romero, 2008; Powell, 2012) that influenced absence and attendance in the rural, low-income setting. The data also identified specific attendance supports that were beneficial for the district's families and students. The final interview script comprised Likert-type and open-ended questions. The instrument provided data related to the study's essential components, student attendance rates, and attendance attitudes.

Operationalization of Variables

In this study, chronic absence was defined as a student missing more than 10% of school days. The potential participant pool was drawn from the 2014–2015 Oregon Department of Education school-level report regarding absenteeism. Students who were included in the report were enrolled in the study district on May 1, 2014 and were enrolled at least 75 days in the district during 2014–2015. The study site operated on a trimester system and a 150-day school year. A chronically absent student who attended the full school year missed more than 15 days during 2014–2015. Students who were chronically absent during the first trimester of the 2015–2016 school year missed at least 5 days (the trimester was 46 days long). This study reported specific attendance rates as the percentage of days attended. Chronically absent students fell below the 90% attendance threshold.

Subsequent references to parents or guardians in this report have been shortened to parents; readers may assume this phrase refers to either. Three of the participants lived with at least one grandparent rather than at least one biological parent.

Study Population and Data Procedures

The population for phase one of this study was all students enrolled in the district at the start of the 2015–16 school year and their parents. The target population for the first action research cycle of this study were students enrolled in the study district who were chronically absent during the 2014–2015 school year and their parents. A subset of students who were chronically absent during the first trimester of 2015–2016 and their parents were invited to participate in a second cycle of action research, and their initial interviews were completed prior to this study's conclusion. There were 25 students who met the 2014–2015 criteria to participate in this study. Each of these students and their parents were recruited to participate. Twenty families consented to participate; all persisted through the study term. Five students who were absent during the first trimester of 2015–2016 and their parents participated in initial interviews prior to this study's conclusion. That sample served as a form of triangulation concerning the data gathered during the first cycle's initial interviews.

Defining the population based on chronic absenteeism was a purposive sample, and all individuals who consented to participate were included. This purposive sampling selected participants strategically because of their ability to inform the investigation; participants in this study were representative of the larger population of chronically absent students at the study site (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

The participants completed semi-structured interviews concerning the reasons students missed school, attitudes regarding school absence, and perceptions of how the school might

support students in improving attendance. The interviews were composed of both Likert-type and open-ended questions. The Likert-type responses were tabulated, and the open-ended questions were analyzed using coding procedures to identify patterns, from which I developed specific themes. These students and parents had the opportunity to explain at length their attitudes and perceptions concerning school absence and attendance.

After I gathered initial interview data for the study, the school office staff and I implemented intervention strategies beginning on the first day of school. Attendance was closely tracked on a daily basis and a comprehensive school attendance report was downloaded weekly. I compiled a full record of student daily attendance for the K–12 school during the entire term of the study. Office staff contacted parents by telephone (or occasionally in person if the parent came to school) on the same day that a student was marked absent. Staff kept a record of whether they make personal contact or left a voice mail message. The study participants were offered an incentive program that involved them tracking their own daily attendance using a monthly calendar. Students who had perfect attendance for a week received a small reward each week that they met the zero absences goal. Students who had two or fewer absences during the first trimester of 2015–2016 were invited to an ice cream party after the end of the trimester.

A second component of the intervention was to regularly check-in with individual students (Bickelhaupt, 2011; Cole, 2011). I met with each student in my office on at least a weekly basis to discuss life at school and review weekly attendance sheets. In an intervention similar to that described by Rivard (2013), high school students were involved with me in bi-weekly focus groups. In addition to attendance behaviors, the focus groups discussed course progress, goal setting, and post-secondary planning. I assisted students regarding connecting effectively with the teachers of classes in which they were having difficulty.

In cases where absences persisted at a rate likely to result in a chronically absent designation, I made personal contact with parents. First contact was by telephone and I attempted to understand the issues impacting the student so that the school might offer appropriate supports. In cases where attendance continued at a high rate and chronic absenteeism was imminent or actual, I arranged to conference with parents at school.

At the end of the intervention period, trimester attendance data for the participants was compiled. I compared and presented the pre- and post-intervention attendance rates and described the types of changes that occurred. For the pre-intervention rates, I included both the whole-year and first trimester data for 2014–2015. After the end of the first trimester, semi-structured interviews were conducted to evaluate whether the reasons students missed school, and attitudes regarding school absence, had changed. The interviews also explored the efficacy of the components of the intervention strategy. The data was analyzed using coding procedures to identify patterns, from which I developed specific themes. Additionally, teachers of participants completed a survey to explore their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the study and to identify adjustments that might improve subsequent action research cycles.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative. I identified the investigative approach of this study as the initial phases of an action research effort. I sought to understand the factors underlying chronic absenteeism, and insofar as interventions were effective, the supports that led to improved attendance. This study was completed in phases, and thus a combination of analytical methods were required. Data was gathered using both surveys and interviews, and there were some differences in how I worked through the data for each.

The teacher survey contained Likert-type, short answer, and open-ended response questions. The initial and final participant interviews were semi-structured, and I used non-directive probes to elicit in-depth responses to the questions on the interview guide. Interviews were recorded each time a participant permitted it; all interviews were recorded except the second half of one initial parent interview. Check-ins and small group interactions were less formally structured. If a student wanted to discuss an issue, that topic became the primary focus of a check-in. In other cases we discussed topics such as attendance, course progress, teacher and peer relationships, and concerns students had raised during their initial interviews. More than half of the check-ins were recorded. Recordings of interviews and check-ins were transcribed verbatim onto comprehensive summary documents for each type of interaction.

I engaged in an iterative coding process of the transcribed summary documents, a process Creswell (2013) described as a "data analysis spiral" (p. 182). I read the data in an attempt to identify trends and made initial notes about my perceptions. Subsequently, I categorized responses into specific categories and themes using ATLAS.ti software. After an initial round of coding, I reevaluated the data and analyzed the relationships and differences between categories. This spiraling technique continued through several iterations until I felt I had fully and accurately represented the data set.

Parallel to the data spiral, I began to interpret what I was seeing. This interpretation began before that data spiral was complete, and then was brought into coherent form as I prepared to present findings. The goal was to "discover the larger meaning of the data. . . . the researcher . . . link[s] his . . . interpretation to the larger research literature" (Creswell, 2013, p.187). The analysis was presented as prose in the results and discussion, and it included direct quotes from the participants.

Quantitative. The interviews and survey responses, in part, contained objective and Likert-type data. The objective data quantified student gender, student grade, and years of attendance at the school. Some demographic data was gathered from school records. This data was tabulated. The Likert-type data was also tabulated, and averages were calculated for each question and response category. I sought to identify important themes and trends in the responses. Data is presented in visual form in Table 1 in Chapter 4 and as charts in Appendices D, F, and G.

In this report I present numerical data regarding student attendance rates in Table 2 in Chapter 4 and in chart form in Appendix E. I report the specific attendance rate for each chronically absent student during 2014–2015 as the percent of days attended. Both the first trimester and annual rate are reported. The attendance rate for each participant student during the first trimester of 2015–2016 is also reported. The study discussion evaluates important trends regarding changes in attendance rates.

Expected Findings

Each phase of this study revealed results that were important concerning aspects of the investigation. Initial and final interviews explored, in-depth, the attitudes and perspectives of students who were chronically absent as well as those of their parents. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 I describe their perspectives regarding school absence and attendance. I report the attendance patterns of participant students during the term of the investigation. Discussion of the post-intervention interviews and teacher surveys evaluates the efficacy of specific interventions and reports on teacher, student, and parent perceptions regarding the school supports.

Limitations of the Research Design

Credibility. This study methodology was developed subsequent to a thorough review of extant literature. The procedures and analyses were based upon contemporary research techniques. The sample selected for in-depth case study was purposively selected and represented students who were chronically absent, as well as their parents. The research techniques and sampling methods lent credibility to this study.

The data collected for this study was appropriately narrow in scope and was limited to only that which was necessary to address the research questions. Data was held in strict confidence. Interviews were conducted and the data was compiled by one individual, thereby eliminating bias related to multiple investigators' involvement. Data gathering and analysis was conducted in a fashion that lent credibility to this study.

Addressing attendance issues was a universal priority among school staff at the study site. Both the teaching faculty and support staff expressed an interest in and a willingness to support a unified attendance effort. The staff who had responsibility regarding the intervention effort were all directly involved in monitoring or intervening regarding attendance issues. The study site was small. All staff members interacted with one another on a weekly, if not daily, basis. The intervention staff interacted with one another daily. Close communication increased the fidelity of intervention implementation and contributed to this study's credibility.

Transferability and external validity. This number of participants in this study was relatively small. The findings reflect the characteristics of participants at the study site and are not generalizable. The in-depth interviews provided a rich and thick description (Ponterotto, 2006) of individual participants' attitudes and motivations. The coding analysis revealed characteristics shared by participants (Creswell, 2013). In-depth case findings were revelatory

concerning individual students. The study has some limited transferability, particularly in settings with similar demographic characteristics.

Ethical Issues

Conflict of interest assessment. There was no substantial conflict of interest in this study. I was the school administrator. School administrators have been charged with responsibility for ensuring that students attend school. The study was designed to contribute to improved attendance among chronically absent students. This investigation sought to understand why students missed school and to reveal interventions that were effective concerning improving attendance. Improved procedures and interventions contributed to the development of best practices within the organization and became a consistent part of organizational routines.

Researcher's position. Chronic absenteeism was a phenomenon that was motivated by different factors for each individual. Excessive absence occurred because of unique combinations of individual, family, community, and school factors (Chang and Romero, 2008; Powell, 2012). When the office staff and I became well acquainted with the specific influences affecting a student, then we could more effectively assist the student and family to improve attendance.

According to authors such as Maynard (2010) and Sheldon (2007), an effective intervention program has required components. The school staff consistently monitored attendance and communicated with students and families when absences occurred. Students and families were informed regarding the importance of regular attendance and the effects of absences on achievement, school progress, and student engagement. Effective interventions included incentive and check-in components.

Ethical issues in the proposed study. It was a consideration that the researcher was also responsible for assigning consequences for unexcused absences. No student was penalized for being honest and revealing potentially incriminating information during data collection. However, for parents and students, willingness to participate may have been affected. It is possible that individuals were reluctant to be entirely forthcoming concerning the reasons students were absent and their feelings regarding school attendance. To address this issue, the semi-structured interviews were conducted at sites selected by the participants, surveys were anonymous, and all data was kept in strict confidence.

Summary

This methods chapter details the procedures I used to study attitudes concerning chronic absenteeism, and the interventions I implemented to address the issue in one rural, K–12, Oregon school district. One purpose of the study was to reveal student and parent attitudes and perspectives regarding both absence and attendance. I gathered interview data concerning factors that influenced chronic absenteeism, and I analyzed the motivations and reasoning of students who were chronically absent and those of their parents. I implemented interventions intended to improve attendance. Subsequently, I evaluated their efficacy—I gathered participant student, parent, and teacher perspectives regarding the intervention process.

Data were gathered using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and by reviewing school records. I compiled the survey, interview, and school record data. I directed the interventions as a function of my role as the school administrator, and involved specific school staff who had day-to-day attendance responsibilities. The study site was small, which promoted effective communication among the involved parties and fidelity of intervention implementation.

The methodological design and methods described in this chapter, which are grounded in contemporary research techniques derived from extant literature and prior research, were found to be appropriate to the research study. The next chapter will describe the data analysis and results.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

This study was an action research effort that addressed chronic absenteeism at a single rural, Oregon, K–12 school. I sought to describe the attitudes and beliefs of students who were chronically absent during the 2014–2015 school year and their parents regarding absenteeism and attendance. I also intervened with the student participants in an effort to improve their attendance during the first trimester of the 2015–2016 school year. The following research questions guided this study.

How did students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of missing and attending school?

- What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by chronically absent students?

- What did students describe as important reasons that they regularly attended school?

- How did these reasons, perceptions, and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

How did parents or guardians of students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of their students missing and attending school?

- What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by parents or guardians of chronically absent students?

- What did parents or guardians describe as motivating factors regarding students' school attendance?

- How did these motivating factors and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

What implemented school interventions were the most successful concerning improving the attendance of chronically absent students?

- Why were the most successful school interventions considered effective?

Data for this research project was gathered from interviews before and after the research term, check-in conversations during the research term, school records, and a teacher survey after the study term. With the exception of one half of one initial parent interview, participants permitted recording of our interactions. The recordings of the conversations were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were first analyzed by hand, and then uploaded into ATLAS.ti software where the remainder of analysis took place. The transcripts were evaluated using recursive qualitative coding, whereby important themes, categories, and relationships were identified. The iterative process resulted in deep analysis of the material, which segregated disparate relationships and consolidated associated themes. The developed qualitative structure is detailed in the remainder of this chapter, and illustrative quotations are incorporated and provide readers primary source evidence (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) regarding my interpretations. This chapter is organized in a manner that addresses research questions or related research questions sequentially, and data is presented to facilitate answering these questions. I also report student attendance rates prior to and at the end of the study term.

I was the superintendent–principal at the K–12 study site. As such, I was directly responsible for ensuring that students attended school. The school staff believed that there were attendance issues in the school district. My background research revealed that the district chronic absenteeism rate was roughly the same as the State of Oregon average, which was the highest among the 6 of 50 states that Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) identified as reporting chronic absenteeism data. During the study, I was solely responsible for gathering, collecting, and compiling data. Other staff members had limited roles concerning contacting parents and recording absences, but I accessed those records and evaluated them.

There were no negative consequences for students who were participants in this study other than those faced by all students who were tardy or absent unexcused. My role as superintendent–principal provided an insider's perspective regarding the absenteeism issues, and it lent credence that I had the authority to make decisions concerning the attendance of students. During the term of the study I developed deeper relationships with all of the participants, and I opened channels of communication with the student participants, which offered future benefit.

Description of the Sample

Population, Sample, and Demographics

Data that guided the identification of the eligible population for this study was obtained from the Oregon Department of Education school-level absenteeism report as described in Chapter 3. At the time of publication of that report, enrollment at the study site was 228 students. Of those, 22 did not meet the standard of 75 days of attendance, and did not meet that criterion for inclusion in this study. Based on full school enrollment, 42 of 228 students were chronically absent—18.4%. The official rate, based on the days of attendance criterion, was 17.5%, 36 of 206 students. Both of these rates were close to the state chronic absenteeism average for 2014–2015, which was 17.4%.

A population of 36 chronically absent students were evaluated concerning their eligibility to become participants in this project. Five of the 36 were seniors and were not contacted regarding participation. I contacted the remaining 31 families, and six indicated their student would not be returning to the study site in 2015–2016. The number of students who met the eligibility criteria defined in Chapter 3 was 25. One of those students was 18 years old and qualified as an adult participant. With that adult student, and parents of the other 24 students, I reviewed the purpose and scope of the project, and explained the requirement for informed

consent. Twenty families agreed to participate, including the parent of the adult participant—a participation rate of 80%.

I assumed my eligible population would comprise students in grades one through twelve, but because of kindergarten retention this was a K–12 study. Demographic characteristics are detailed in Table 1 immediately following. However, the number of participants in this study was small, and to protect the confidentiality of the participants results will be reported without identifying students' specific grade levels. The general age of students will be indicated by using the terms early elementary (EE, grades K–2), mid-level (ML, grades 3–6), and high school (HS, grades 9–12). Because grade-bands contain multiple students, each is assigned an identifying number. For example, there were six early elementary participant students. In the table they are designated as EE1 to EE6. The other grade-bands reflect a similar sequential numbering pattern. Readers should not assume that this pattern designates any age or grade within a given band; confidentiality concerns preclude specificity beyond this level.

Readers should recall from Chapter 1 that the study site was a K–12 charter school and that approximately one half of the enrolled students lived outside the school district boundaries. The final column in the table indicates whether participants resided in-district, or were registered as charter students and resided outside the district boundaries. The appendices of this report detail some results in chart form. Those charts are ordered consistently from chart to chart, align with the order of this demographics table, and each student's place on the chart aligns with his or her parent's data.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants

Grade	Sex	Ethnicity	Absence Rate '14 –15	Economically Disadvantaged	Residence
EE1	Female	White	19.2%	Yes	Charter student
EE2	Female	White	10.4%	Yes	Charter student
EE3	Female	White	10.8%	Yes	Charter student
EE4	Female	Hispanic	13.6%	Yes	Charter student
EE5	Female	White	14.4%	No	Charter student
EE6	Male	Amer. Indian or AK native	10.25%	Yes	Charter student
ML1	Female	Hispanic	15.6%	Yes	Charter student
ML2	Male	White	13.2%	No	Charter student
ML3	Male	White	10.4%	Yes	Charter student
ML4	Male	Multi-racial	20.6%	Yes	In-district
HS1	Female	White	12%	Yes	Charter student
HS2	Male	White	20.6%	Yes	In-district
HS3	Female	White	16%	Yes	In-district
HS4	Female	White	12%	Yes	Charter student
HS5	Male	White	10.4%	No	Charter student
HS6	Male	White	10.1%	Yes	In-district
HS7	Female	White	11.2%	Yes	Charter student
HS8	Female	White	12%	No	Charter student
HS9	Female	White	11.2%	No	Charter student
HS10	Male	White	18.4%	Yes	Charter student

Research Methodology and Analysis

Action Research

This project was an action research study that sought to understand the perceptions of chronically absent students and their parents and that sought to establish at the site attendance interventions that supported students regarding improved attendance. Action research (AR) is an analytical research method that diagnoses organizational problems or weaknesses and helps staff develop practical solutions to address them. The nature of the study section of Chapter 1 of this dissertation described from a theoretical perspective why AR was an appropriate methodology for this project. I identified a problem of practice at the study site, developed a plan for

intervention, implemented the action plan, and gathered data regarding the efficacy of the practices and procedures. At the end of the study term, participants and staff provided feedback concerning possible improvements regarding moving this work forward. This research design created a framework at the study site that allowed the work to continue through subsequent AR cycles.

During this research project, there was no substantial deviation from the method described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. Details concerning the research protocol were explained in that chapter. There was one slight unplanned addition to the methodology when students in an early elementary class and a mid-level class asked to meet with me sometimes as groups. Because the students were enthusiastic about these opportunities I permitted it. Those group discussions were fruitful and produced meaningful data. I discuss this modification in more detail later in this chapter. Additionally, regarding the Likert-type questions, some early elementary students were unclear of the meaning of the words agree and disagree. I explained to them that if they thought the statement was true they agreed, and if they believed it was false they disagreed. I used the terms very, very true and very, very false when I explained strongly agree and strongly disagree. I was convinced that these students understood, and replied to the prompts appropriately.

Data Sources and Analysis

The data for this project were derived from school and student records, teacher surveys, and interview transcripts. I examined the state attendance reports derived from required school submissions to the Oregon Department of Education. I reviewed student enrollment records, and I tracked daily individual attendance during the study period. I conducted interviews with all participants (students and parents) prior to and after the first trimester of 2015–2016 (the study

79

term). Participants permitted recording during all interviews with the exception of one half of one initial parent interview. I recorded many, but not all, of the weekly check-ins with students. I recorded most of the small group meetings with high school students. I offer additional detail later in this report concerning the small groups that spontaneously formed with early elementary and mid-level students; those meetings were also recorded.

I generated verbatim transcripts of the interviews and check-ins by carefully reviewing my recordings. I was very deliberate during this process, and listened to sections of recordings as many times as necessary to produce transcripts that were accurate, word-for-word records. The initial interviews totaled approximately 11 hours, the final interviews approximately seven and one-half hours. I recorded approximately seven hours of check-in conversations. The transcripts of the recordings represent a rich body of primary source data, which I discuss in the remainder of this dissertation.

In the final month of the study period, I identified a subset of students who were chronically absent during the first trimester who were not already study participants. I obtained consent from five parents and students and conducted initial interviews with those participants as a cross-check on my initial interview data. Those students were in kindergarten, third, fourth, 10th, and 12th grades. All participants in this subsample, 25% of the full study sample, permitted recording of the interviews. Those interviews were converted to verbatim transcripts that were analyzed in the same manner as other transcripts, which I describe in the following paragraphs. No significant differences were found between these interviews and the full-study initial interviews, and the data from them is not presented in this report.

Transcripts were initially coded by hand, and I made marginal notes that highlighted important points and named emerging themes and categories. The initial interviews were

reviewed three times in this fashion, at which time I identified and purchased ATLAS.ti software to facilitate further qualitative analysis. At that time, the initial interviews were loaded into ATLAS.ti, and further analysis took place using the software program. The check-ins, final interviews, and round two initial interviews were uploaded into ATLAS.ti after an initial round of hand coding, and further analysis took place using the software.

I had not used ATLAS.ti prior to this project. Several rounds of initial interview coding produced ATLAS.ti transcripts that I called absence attitudes, motivations (for attendance), (significant) quotations, themes, and absences. The absences analysis coded the transcripts only for occurrences of school, individual, family, and community factors. The ATLAS.ti analyses generated a set of codes and memos that I used during later analysis of the check-in, final interview, and round two interview transcripts. My comfort level with the software grew as my coding analysis progressed. During analysis of these later documents, I was able to work within a master file for each and use a more focused coding strategy that synthesized the strategies I had developed working with the initial interview data. These later transcripts were also subjected to several rounds of recursive coding until I believed I had comprehensively identified and categorized trends, themes, quotations, and categories. My coding analysis is presented in the presentation of data and results section of this chapter using headings, subheadings, and quotations that emerged from the qualitative work.

Summary of the Findings

Several types of data were utilized during this research project. Empirical data, which included attendance rates and participant demographics, was gathered from school and Oregon Department of Education records. Participant interviews and teacher surveys both provided

quantitative Likert-type results. Check-in conversations, interviews, and teacher surveys provided qualitative primary source information.

The empirical data revealed that chronic absenteeism at the study site roughly paralleled nationwide trends. The highest rates of chronic absenteeism occurred in the early elementary and late high school grades. Nationwide, chronic absenteeism was the lowest in the middle grades, and when examined K–12 formed a u-shaped curve, with the lowest rates in the fifth grade (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The grade distribution of the participants was presented above in Table 1. The intervention effort at the study site was successful. Three fourths of the 20 student participants were not chronically absent during the first trimester of 2015–2016. Eighty percent of participants improved their attendance compared to their 2014–2015 annual rate.

Likert-type data obtained from students' and parents' initial interviews revealed that most students liked school, but a majority of students stated that they missed school sometimes when they were not sick or going places with their families. A majority of parents believed it was acceptable for students to miss school for unexcused reasons. The data obtained from the final interviews showed that a majority of participants believed that participating in the project was beneficial and that the school supports helped students improve attendance. The teacher Likert-type data demonstrated that the study did not greatly impact participation in class and that participation in the project was beneficial. Comprehensive summary of the Likert-type data was presented as histograms in Appendices D, F, and G.

The qualitative data obtained during this project was recorded as verbatim transcripts of interviews and check-ins and a record of open-ended responses to the teacher surveys. The transcripts and teacher records are primary source material. This data provided the basis for a rich and thick description (Ponterotto, 2006) of the findings and was the foundation for the

discussions that comprise the remainder of this dissertation. Because the transcripts represented over 25 hours of recordings and contained approximately 88,000 words, careful analysis of them was required. I chose to engage in an iterative qualitative coding process, both by hand and using software; additional details regarding those methods were presented previously in this chapter.

The analyses revealed that the strongest factors that motivated students to attend school were peer relationships, academic engagement, and staff–student relationships. The strongest factors that contributed to absences were illness and medical appointments, family decisions and priorities, and student anxiety—individual and school-related. Regarding the successes of the intervention project, the most important factors were incentives, principal involvement, and increased motivation toward and success in school. This brief summary of findings cannot reveal the breadth and depth of the data. The remainder of this dissertation explores the data at great length.

In reality, this study produced results that were consistent with many of the findings identified during the review of extant literature, which was described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Chronic absenteeism was the result of a combination of factors that were somewhat unique to individual students and their families. This research project allowed me to identify those individualized circumstances and, where it was appropriate, develop targeted approaches regarding working with those students and families (Lauchlan, 2003). The comprehensive list of factors motivating absence and attendance was longer than that presented above, and although some factors did not occur frequently, they had great importance in individual cases. Similarly, although some interventions were more widely recognized as effective than others, the list of successful practices was longer than presented above, and for some students, a less frequently

named intervention was the most important. The success of this school-based intervention project was the result of a multi-pronged approach that addressed a combination of individual, family, and school factors (Chang & Romero, 2008; Cole, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sculles, 2014). Because of the setting, less emphasis was placed on the community-level factors. The study site was located in an unincorporated area. Charter student participants who resided outside the district boundaries lived in unincorporated areas and five municipalities.

<center>**Presentation of Data and Results**</center>

Initial Interview Likert-Type Data

The pre-intervention interview contained three questions that generated Likert-type data. The responses to those questions was presented graphically in Appendix D in Figures D1, D2, and D3. The full questions corresponding to the axis labels in the data charts may be found in the interview scripts in Appendix A. Both students and parents were asked whether the student liked school and whether they thought the school could do more to support improved attendance. Students were asked whether they ever missed school when they were not sick or with family, and parents were asked if they believed it was appropriate for students to miss school for unexcused reasons.

Participants were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the specific statement on the interview script. To facilitate graphic presentation, these responses were converted to numbers: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Figure D1 represents the student data. Figure D2 represents the parent data. Figure D3 represents the average response values for both groups. The value in each x-axis label specifies the students' grade-band level. The student and parent graphs are aligned so that each family occupies the same horizontal spot on the charts.

<center>84</center>

A general analysis of these results demonstrated that most students liked school, and that their parents also believed that was the case. Twelve students admitted that they sometimes missed school when they were not sick or with family, two were neutral, and six said they did not. Ten of the parents believed it was okay for students to miss school sometimes for unexcused reasons; one was neutral. The other nine disagreed, but none of the parents strongly disagreed with the statement.

Only six students disagreed that the school could do more to support their attendance; five were neutral; nine agreed or strongly agreed. In contrast, 11 parents disagreed, one strongly disagreed, and three were neutral; only five parents thought the school could do more to support improved attendance. Thirty percent of students disagreed that the school could do more to support their attendance, 60% of parents did. Parents were more certain than were their children that the school could not do more to support improved attendance.

Factors Motivating Student Attendance

The following research questions guided aspects of this study. What did students describe as important reasons that they regularly attended school? What did parents or guardians describe as motivating factors regarding students' school attendance?

Initial pre-intervention and final post-intervention interviews with students and parents, and check-in visits with students, provided data that revealed some of these reasons. The scripts for the semi-structured interviews may be found in Appendices A and B. Several of the questions provided opportunities for the attitudes and beliefs of participants to emerge. Check-in discussions were unstructured, and during them I used probing questions to explore topics that emerged. From this point forward, to enhance participant anonymity, in some direct quotes

gender specific pronouns and names have been replaced with capital letters or generic terms enclosed in brackets.

Peer relationships. For both students and parents, during the initial interviews, the most commonly named motivating factor regarding attendance was peer interaction. A high school boy said that when students are absent, they "miss being with friends and being part of their class." A high school girl had a longer term vision of her social relationships. "I'm in high school now and some of the friends that I have now might follow me into my future. So, it's good to get social time in." The same young woman explained that peer interaction was important regarding academic engagement. "I like working with my peers . . . I learn better . . . I can get different opinions from other people, and if I have a question I can get . . . answers from multiple people in . . . five minutes . . . [instead of] one answer from my teacher."

Among the student participants, 70% made statements that described how and why relationships, school, and attendance were interrelated. An early elementary student explained that they liked beginning and ending the day with friends. "The bus has lots of your friends and you can like sit by them and talk." An early elementary girl articulated a common theme when she said, "I like recess. I like to play tag and play games with other kids." A mid-level boy succinctly summed up many students' feelings when he said, "Well, everyone likes recess."

The importance of social interactions was revealed further as the term progressed. During a check-in conversations, a mid-level boy explained, "It's also that kids this year, you know my friends and that stuff, we have a lot more stuff to talk about. And a lot more stuff to do because we are getting older." Some students had struggled socially in the past, and the check-ins provided an opportunity to work on those skills in ongoing fashion. We discussed students' perceptions regarding why they thought relationships were problematic, ideas concerning

86

interpersonal communication, and specific strategies for working with peers. Those efforts were successful for many. A high school boy shared, "I've got people that were mean to me and they've turned around being, you know, normal. [I] probably have a lot more friends than I have been and have good relationships with people that I thought would never work out." A different high school boy described that he was less lonely this year and that things were "better than . . . last year. I have a few friends—not too many, not too few. That's alright with me. It's getting better, now that I have friends to talk to."

During the final interviews I asked students directly what motivated their attendance during the study. A high school boy said simply "the people that I get to hang out with." A high school girl stated explicitly that her peers had noticed her improved attendance. "I have definitely gotten more encouragement, not only from just the staff but also from my family and my friends." A mid-level student made a definitive statement regarding their motivation to attend. "I get to see my friends." A classmate described the social aspects of participating in the study. "It's sort of like a challenge; you could say, . . . it's sort of like competition. It's like who can stay in the longest? . . . Who can come to school every day more than the other person?" This student continued to explain. "I think it was that I didn't have to do this alone. Because, you know, I'm not the only one in our class that does this. I don't want to be the only one to do something in our class."

Almost all parents articulated the importance of peer relationships regarding their students' attendance; 85% of parents discussed this theme during the initial interviews. Some parents explained that their children had previously been socially isolated, and that having friends made them want to come to school. A parent of a high school boy said, "It's his friends now. At first he had . . . issues. He was a little shy, so it took him a little bit, and now he's got

87

friends, . . . so I think he's . . . more comfortable . . . in social settings." A parent of a high school girl explained that her daughter's social relationships were increasingly important to her school attendance. "Within the last year [she's] started . . . to bloom socially and start getting a friend base . . . I think that part's getting stronger now. She's . . . coming into her own personality and getting strong friends and so . . . , as that strengthens, . . . she enjoys it." The mother of the girl who described long term friendships and working with others during class shared that being away from her friends had a deleterious impact on her psyche. "When she has to stay home, if she's sick for a week or something, she gets so depressed having to stay here. She depends on that social aspect of school to keep her happy and active." A high school parent explained that for her daughter, working with her peers provided both short-term motivation and long-term benefit. "She likes the social aspect of it more than anything. . . . She thrives on being . . . mature, . . . and being in control of things, and . . . she gets a lot out of . . . student leadership . . . where she can . . . practice her leadership skills."

Some elementary parents believed that peer relationships helped their children develop an identity outside the family dynamics. A parent of an early elementary student explained that the family had recently moved from an extremely rural location to one much closer to the school. "She likes interacting with the kids, her friends. Especially before we moved into this house, [there weren't] other little girls." Another early elementary parent described how school helped her daughter explore her self-concept:

> She likes to have people to hang out with that are her age. . . . Being the one right
>
> below . . . the only brother, . . . she pretty much has to do what he tells her . . . That's just
>
> the role they're in at this age. And so I think that she likes to have a place where she can
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> be her own person and speak her own mind and do her own thing.

88

An early elementary parent stated succinctly that her daughter likes school because, "She likes being with people. She likes her friends." A different early elementary parent took that idea one step further. "[M] gets excited to come to school because . . . [M]'s going to come see . . . friends. [M]'s excited about being in the [next] grade and having all of his same friends in the same class."

Some parents explained that relationships with students in other grades were important to their children. A mid-level parent said, "After a little while of being mentored himself he really looks out for the little kids. But I think . . . a mentor, older than him . . . would definitely . . . be something, because he doesn't connect." A high school parent described the value of their child acting as a mentor. "He really has gravitated to the little people. . . . He sees things happening to them that happened to him and he doesn't want to allow that. . . . Being allowed to help the little people has really brought him up."

During the post-interviews, some parents discussed how the importance of relationships had evolved. The parent of the high school boy who said he had never expected relationships to work out stated, "He seems to be doing better with some of the kids he was not getting along with. . . . His attitude changed there . . . That had a big influence on how he was dealing with things . . . I think he's doing better there." A mid-level parent shared that improved attendance was beneficial concerning social relationships. "He feels better that he's involved more with the kids, that he's having more interaction with them." The parent of the high school boy who said he had more friends this year believed that the student's improved relationships were motivating regarding attendance. "I think he was getting along better with some members of his peer group, and that heightened his desire to be at school, even to ride the bus." Improved peer relationships may be motivating for some students concerning attendance.

Academic engagement. Academic engagement was a motivating factor, and it was described during the initial interviews by 45% of both students and parents. This code was applied to those responses that specifically identified classes or subjects to which students were drawn, or to responses that referenced academic learning as a positive aspect of the school experience. During the pre-interview, a high school student made a strong statement about the value of learning:

> I know that if I had a choice to do my work, but I knew that it would help me in the end, it would help my future, I would do it. Even if wasn't going to affect my grade or anything like that, I would still do it, because it's part of making myself better so I can succeed in the future.

Many students named their favorite subjects. A mid-level student said, "I like learning, reading and art and science the best." Different students are motivated by different subjects. Another mid-level participant stated, "I do sort of like doing math." Even very young students may have favorite subjects. An early elementary student said, "I like math."

An early elementary student not only named a subject, but described that she was looking forward to how the teachers would structure some classes during the upcoming year. "I like math. I like [my] grade. We trade classrooms. The first graders go into kindergarten and the kindergarten gets to go into first grade." High school students also explained that what happened during teaching was motivating. A high school student said, "Mr. [X] [and] Mr. [Y] keep it fun, keep it lighthearted. Ms. [Z] . . . I'm really happy to be in that class, 'cause she's having a good time. We're all having a good time. We're learning too because of it." Another high school student explained, "We get up; we do projects; we socialize with each other; we work together;

90

we do teamwork; and then when it gets down and serious we already know the information 'cause we have been working with our peers."

During the initial interviews, many parents were very aware of their students' favorite subjects. A mid-level parent said, "[D] just definitely . . . loves reading." An early elementary parent stated, "She likes math, some reading, and . . . she really liked when they were studying penguins." An early elementary parent also recognized the value of teaching strategies during prior years. "When she was in kindergarten she would go up to first grade for reading and she was very, very proud of that. . . . She really liked that, the fact that she got to go into first grade for reading." Parents were aware, however, that learning had deeper meaning than just mastering school subject matter. The evidence revealed that intellectual growth and skill development led to enhanced self-concept for younger students. Some elementary parents made poignant statements to that effect. An early elementary parent stated, "She is doing pretty good at reading. . . . And then she likes to read everything. If she can see that there's a word on the piece of paper she'll try to read it." Another early elementary parent explained, "When she is able to accomplish something, like when she gets all of her homework done one day, she comes home and she's, you know, ecstatic. And she really likes it." Academic achievement builds meaning for students regarding the value of school.

During check-ins, students frequently discussed specific courses or their academic progress. A mid-level student appreciated having elective classes. "I really like my new classes since I actually get to do different classes instead of sit in one classroom all day. . . . The . . . class I really look forward to is home ec., and I really like industrial arts." A mid-level student described what consistently being in school meant. "It feels awesome to know I have been at school . . . I learn more and I get more stuff in my brain. . . . Missing 1 day of school is like

91

missing 1000 days of school. I've learned that." A high school student explained that our

discussions motivated him to develop more effective strategies for monitoring his assignments.

"I'm writing down all my assignments in my phone, [and] on paper too, so I have two different

sources of what I have to do." A mid-level student used a study reward, a whiteboard, to

accomplish the same thing. "I . . . connect[ed it] to my desk to help remind me of stuff. I

usually put on assignments that [are] due, . . . so I know when assignments [are] due and it will

remind me . . . I erase them when they're done."

Specific course progress was a frequent check-in topic, and as the term progressed,

students noticed that better attendance meant better grades. The study benefits were obvious to a

high school student who had failed several courses the previous year. "In everything . . . I

passed. It took a lot of work and a lot of help but I'm proud. I passed everything!" Another

high school student stated, "If you have good attendance then you won't fall behind . . . I'm

looking at my grade report . . . and I'm like, . . . I got a 34 out of 36 on a test. . . . It makes me

want to do 10 times . . . better." A high school student described that, because he was in school

almost every day, "My grades are better this year because I am actually focused on work and I

actually have time for myself. . . . And I can create time for myself to work."

Younger students also noticed that attendance affected academics. I spoke with a mid-

level student shortly after their only two trimester absences. "I missed one last week and the

week before that. I kind of got behind." I asked if their long-term perspective on the trimester

was different than their short-term one, and the student acknowledged "being here helps." Even

non-specific statements demonstrated that students' self-concepts were benefitted by improved

attendance and achievement. An early elementary student was proud when they talked about

how perfect attendance had helped them succeed. "I've been doing good this year. I'm a good

92

kid and I've been learning. I've learned stuff." A mid-level student said, "I don't know my grades actually. I feel like I'm doing good." Another mid-level student said that grades were "fine right now. I'm getting passing, doing alright work. . . . Not straight A's, but I have A's and B's. I can't get A's in every single class I have. I'm not that good."

The academic benefits of improved attendance are both tangible and intangible. Many students described improved grades, a tangible result. Some discussed feeling more successful and expressed strong motivation derived from their accomplishments, a less tangible, but important influence on students' internal states. I have provided some data that described students' feelings concerning their self-concept and self-esteem. My own perceptions in this regard were more subjective, but because I knew the students well, I am confident stating that a majority of students elevated their beliefs in themselves as students.

Learning. A somewhat related code, likes learning, was indicated in the interview transcripts when that specific phrase was used (e.g., "My student likes learning;" or "I like to learn"), or when non-curricular academic interests were described. Thirty percent of students and 25% of parents made these types of statements. Although most statements were quite general, some individuals made more precise comments. A high school statement extended the generality. "I like to learn. I like knowledge and being smart. I like knowledge." One high school parent said, "I just think he really wants to learn, and he wants to learn what he wants to learn. . . . There's a big side of him that likes the whole learning I think." This student also described non-curricular interests. "I get to just kind of learn. I get to pick a book in the library that has something I didn't know yet in it and I would look at it for a little bit." A high school student described some specific interests:

Books and stuff on my computer are my main interests. I love books, especially sci.

fi./fantasy. I have a laptop. I use it constantly. I love both. I read a lot of books, but I

prefer books in my hand. It feels more natural to me, I guess. I am really interested in

Japanese and German traditions and things of that sort, so anything like that would be

interesting.

A mid-level student also discussed specific interests. "I am actually interested in Egyptians. I

kind of took some pictures and I need some help to find out about their experience." Learning

often takes place outside of classrooms and the formal curriculum.

It was clear during the post-interviews that some participants' thinking regarding

attendance had evolved. A high school student explained that the project was beneficial in

helping him realize "there was a purpose for being here. It's not just make to make my life

miserable. Each day is valuable. . . . School's important and you can't take it for granted 'cause

you're not going to succeed." Another high school student said "I think part of it is just coming

to school every day . . . in the mindset that I'm here to work, and . . . do my homework. . . . I

think that being here in this environment is important to getting work done." A high school

parent explained that awareness changed the student's thinking. "I think the idea of bringing up

the facts of the importance meant something to him other than not saying anything. I think it

brought up the issue of—yeah, it's important to go to school."

Students like school. A category of response that I called positive feelings was unique

to the parent group. Forty percent of the adults made generalized, non-specific statements

regarding their child's enjoyment of school. An early elementary parent said, "Once she's here

she loves being here. It is the leaving mom initially in the morning that she struggles with and

she has some anxiety . . . first thing in the morning. . . . Once she's there and warmed up she's

94

fine." The parent of a high school student shared that the family had discussed attending elsewhere year, but decided against it. One deciding factor was the student's feelings about the study school. "What he tells me is that it's routine and that it feels right to him to be there." At times parents described motivation in terms of generalized feelings rather than specific factors.

Activities and athletics. Activity-based experiences and athletics were perceived as motivating. Forty-five percent of parents and 25% of students described these types of experiences as influential regarding attending school. This category included secondary athletic programs, but it also included clubs, student government, drama, and robotics. A high school student said, "Last year I did volleyball and I liked that. And I did drama; that was nice." A high school student was discussing that they had to come to school to practice or compete in athletics when they stated very simply, "Sports are a big part." The parent of a teammate stated, "They need to be here at least part of the day to practice or [play in] a game." Additionally, when individuals mentioned an activity-based class as motivating, and it was described in contrast to more academic pursuits, that response was coded into this category. At the study site, these examples included the 6–12 vocational arts classes, and the K–12 music and physical education programs. A mid-level student said, "I like PE . . . so that's fine, and like music; I really like music. . . . [and] projects."

Parents also recognized the value of activity-based schoolwork and extracurricular activities. The parent of a mid-level student (not the one described above) shared that her student was excited, because he would be old enough to join the robotics team. "Robotics, he definitely likes that kind of stuff. He is interested in building a robot for bot wars. . . . He's really interested in robotics." A high school parent described wanting their student to be more involved at school, and was pleased that at least they had found one thing that was engaging.

"Game night was very motivating to him and we tried to make that available to him whenever it was possible." An early elementary parent mentioned several activity-based interests in one sentence. "She likes coloring, recess, likes singing, like when we come to the concerts and that—dressing up." When asked about their student's favorite things at school, the parent of the mid-level student who mentioned music did not mention any academic subjects, but did state, "He brings home his band [practice sheet]. He plays his instrument at home, practices to get a better grade here."

Staff relationships. Positive relationships with staff members were important motivating factors for students. Slightly less than half of participants discussed the importance of these interpersonal connections. Some participants identified a single teacher as a very important person; others named several staff who were positive influences. A number of paraprofessionals, bus drivers, teachers, administrators, the counselor, and office staff were among the named individuals.

A high school student described how important the teachers were. "The teachers were really nice. Most of them seemed to believe in you, even if you didn't believe in yourself, so that helped a lot." This theme was echoed by other high school students. "Our teachers are really good at being supportive and giving us the help that we need." Another said, "I like some of the teachers, how they interact with students." Yet another high school student praised a specific teacher. "He's constantly trying to help people . . . He gives great examples of what you should do and still keeps it funny. He keeps it lighthearted in the room, and it makes you want to learn. It makes you want to listen." This student's parent was also fond of the teachers and staff. "You and the staff out there have been phenomenal with him . . . He has high regards for everybody out there. It's a matter of knowing the key things to do or say."

Many staff members connected with students. A high school parent said, "I can't remember the counselor's name. . . . But he . . . knows the counselor, and opened up a lot." This student said, "The support from the teachers helped me want to come back to school. It means that sometimes if I was just down and didn't want to come to school their support would help me." A mid-level student had also connected with their teachers and the counselor. They said they liked school because, "The teachers are very nice. And [the counselor], I love [the counselor]." A mid-level student was talking about adults in general when he said he liked "the nice people here, . . . my teachers . . . and other people." A high school parent recognized that many adults were involved:

> I think that you all have really gone the extra mile—you and [Mrs. A] and [Mrs. B] and [Mrs. C]. . . . [Mrs. B] was wonderful with him. . . . She would come and sit with him in the cafeteria and talk to him. . . . I know he spent more time maybe than most kids in the library. . . . That's been able to be a refuge for him. . . . I have no heartburn with anybody here, and that's not common.

Elementary parents were very aware of how important staff were to the children. Some statements were very simple, as when an early elementary parent said, "She really loved [her teacher]." Others provided more in-depth insight. A different early elementary parent said:

> Her . . . teacher was amazing, and she even wrote her a note that she took home and said I'm going to miss you tomorrow if you're not here. And she kept that on her desk, and every day she would look at it. So the teachers really encouraging them to come. I mean, if a teacher doesn't make the classroom fun then it's really hard for a kid who would rather be with their mom to want to leave that and want to go so school.

A mid-level parent shared, "[R] had a very good relationship with [the] teacher. And actually all the staff I should say . . . [R] feels comfortable and confident when [attending] here."

Future benefit. A response concerning attendance that was unique to secondary students and their parents was future benefit. Interestingly, the parents mentioned educational benefits influencing future outcomes as motivating three times more often than did the students. It is not unreasonable to think of this result as representative of the hierarchy of individual priorities. Parents were actively engaged in thinking concerning future hopes and benefits related to educational attainment. Children, who are in an earlier stage of psychological development, are present-oriented. The students were aware that improved attendance affected their course grades, but during this study, did not focus as frequently on the long-term outcomes related to academic achievement. To this point, reported percentages have been based on a participant pool of 20 students and 20 parents, and grade differences have not been segregated. Future benefit was named by 1 of 2 middle school students and their parent. Although it was mentioned by only 2 of 10 high school students, 6 of the 10 high school parents stated that children were motivated to attend because of future benefit. This was most frequently described as preparing students for college, but there were also responses that linked educational attainment and meaningful learning to career satisfaction and increased income.

The middle school student recognized that there was long-term benefit related to attendance. "I like being here so I can have something to do with my life." This student's parent also expressed a future-oriented perspective. "It's up the parents to get the kids to school. It's not the school's responsibility to get 'em here. . . . It's their responsibility to learn so they can better themselves once they get out of school." A high school student discussed that some students might miss school for work, but that he did not think that was the best choice. Some

98

decided "to make money off of a job instead of going to school and further your education. I guess maybe money would be more important, but you make money off of a better education . . . It's part of making myself better so I can succeed in the future." This student's parent discussed that higher education has always been part of the family plan:

> [He's] going to [college] next year. I think . . . he'll be ready for that kind of transition because I've been preparing him since he was little for college. I've been talking to him . . . since he was . . . three. . . . He knows that he has to go . . . and that he's going to do well.

Parents were more focused on future benefit when discussing motivating factors than were the students. The parent of a student said that the student was motivated to attend because, "She knows that she has to do it in order to go on to college, so I think that makes . . . her think about that she has to get through this year in order to go on to [university]." A parent of a younger high school student shared:

> She's also very college minded, has big aspirations on what she wants to do in life. . . . She wants to be a zoologist. . . . She's going to start out at [community college] for a couple years. Especially since there was a new law that's . . . passed . . . She can get 2 years' worth of free school there and we will qualify financially. So she's going to go to [community college] for a couple years and then transfer up to [university].

Another high school parent described future plans. "She has plans to go to college. She has plans to . . . become an RN . . . , I know she does have plans to go to college. . . . That's part of what high school is, preparing for college."

Summary regarding attendance motivation. In general, participants believed that students liked school. They were strongly motivated by social relationships—most strongly by

their peer alliances, but also by staff interactions. Many students were motivated by traditional

academic successes, but some also valued non-curricular learning or activity-based classes.

Extra-curricular activities and athletics were important to the secondary students, which was not

surprising; school-based extracurricular opportunities had not been available to elementary

children at the study site. Parenthetically, the school robotics program expanded into the

elementary school during the term of the study, and had the initial interviews taken place at a

later time, this may not have been exclusively a secondary phenomenon.

Also unique to secondary participants was the perspective that school offered future

benefits. References to college or career were only mentioned by one fourth of the 12 secondary

students, but they were discussed by over half of their parents. Unique to the parent group were

generalized, non-specific statements regarding the fact that children liked school. Almost half of

the parents made some type of general statement that children attended because they liked it.

Attitudes Concerning Absence

The following were three of the research questions that guided this study. How did

parents or guardians of students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of their students

missing and attending school? What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school

absence described by chronically absent students? What were the most prevalent shared

attitudes regarding school absence described by parents or guardians of chronically absent

students?

Initial interviews with students and parents provided data that revealed some of these

reasons. The scripts for these semi-structured interviews may be found in Appendix A. Several

of the questions provided opportunities for the attitudes and beliefs of participants to emerge.

Some of the questions were specific regarding the students who participated in the study. Other

questions probed attitudes and beliefs concerning student absences generally. The study

methods attempted to answer the research questions and revealed attitudes, beliefs, and

perceptions regarding school absence. It was from these frames of reference that these results

are discussed.

Medical issues. Illnesses and medical appointments were treated as excused absences by

the study school. These were also accepted by both students and parents as frequent, acceptable

reasons for missing school. One hundred percent of participants stated that sickness happens.

Parents expressed contrasting perspectives regarding illness and absence. Some said if students

were not contagious, were not vomiting, or did not have a high fever then they should go to

school. A high school parent stated they would keep their student home for, "legitimate

sickness, not just not feeling good that day, but really being sick. A lot of things in life we do

when we're not feeling well. So I don't think that's a good enough excuse, but legitimately

sick." Other parents had a diametrically opposing point of view. These parents expressed

resentment for parents who sent students to school who transmitted pathogens to their children.

They felt like their students did not have strong resistance to disease, and they would come home

with something that kept them out of school for several days. An early elementary parent said:

> I know that a lot of parents send their kids to school even if it's questionable, but I don't
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> feel that exposing other kids to illness is okay, and because other parents do that my kid
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> ends up coming home with something and she gets pneumonia very easy. . . . Any time
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> she gets a little cold it turns into pneumonia. So I am very careful with her. If she even
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> slightly acts like she is sick she is home. I know that a lot of parents think, well she only
>
> has a runny nose, [but] I keep her home.

Medical appointments were a reality of life for families. Almost all parents and students discussed missing school to visit the doctor, dentist, orthodontist, or physical therapist. The study school operated on a 4-day week, and almost every person explained that they made a conscious decision to try and schedule appointments on Fridays, but that doing so was not always possible. An early elementary parent said, "It's very important for them to be at school. I really try to do most of their appointments on Fridays. There are certain appointments that . . . don't work on Fridays. . . . I switched their dentist because . . . they didn't have them [Friday appointments]." Many families stated that when they had to schedule an appointment during school, they made a concerted effort to arrange it to minimize students' time out of class. A mid-level parent stated:

> Sometimes the schedule has been like . . . nine o'clock in the morning or two in the afternoon. What I've tried to do is make it as early as I could or as late as I could where [it does not impact] the bulk of the day. Most of the time . . . I try to make them in advance, as far in advance as I can so I just have the perfect timing, you know, the perfect day so it doesn't interfere with school.

A high school parent said:

> Medical appointments and dental appointments, but again, those don't have to be a whole day either. They could be just the time of day that the dentist [is available]. And what I would hope is that when we're planning those things we plan them for first thing in the morning or in the afternoon so that it's either just the beginning of school or just the end of school that she would miss. That would be my hope.

An early elementary parent explained, "I try to be good about scheduling my appointments for Friday . . . Sometimes I can't . . . so . . . I try to fit it in as late as possible . . . so it doesn't . . . interfere with . . . school, or . . . they get a majority of the day."

However, some students who had to visit specialists or therapists were forced to attend appointments when they were available, and these circumstances resulted in absences. The student of the above early elementary parent said, "I had to leave school to go to the dentist and . . . I had to go to the dentist in the morning so I had to miss school." A high school student discussed her complex medical history. "I have a lot of health issues. I'm anemic. I get cysts in my ovaries, like really bad, they're not fun. So I miss school a lot for that kind of stuff." A mid-level student had chronic health issues. "His physical therapist, the scheduling—once in a while the only time we could get them was during school." A high school parent explained that her student missed school because of "doctor's appointments that we can't get scheduled outside of school hours . . . Fridays . . . they normally don't have school, and that's when their dentist and orthodontist aren't in."

Some families also stated, particularly regarding dental appointments, that in the last couple of years, since the passage of the Affordable Care Act, it had become more difficult to schedule appointments at convenient times. A mid-level parent said, "With the whole adoption thing and state insurance and stuff it can be challenging to get into the dentist . . . So when you can get in you've got to get in." The mid-level parent who struggled with scheduling physical therapy concurred. "With so many people getting into dentists that didn't get to see dentists. . . . It was very hard this past year to have a dentist appointment where it was complimentary to [the school] schedule." Families were forced to take appointments when they could get them, because the providers were busier, and there were fewer options.

Additionally, many participants explained that in the rural school setting, a medical appointment required much more time out of school than it would in an urban setting. Travel time was one issue. The nearest providers to the school were at least a half-hour away, and the major urban center offices were farther than that. A high school parent stated, "I really feel a lot of her attendance was for appointments. . . . Thinking back on it, . . . both my kids had a lot of appointments and it's difficult to get them back here." Some parents did not feel it was critical to return to school if the school day was nearly over. A mid-level parent said, "The whole day is gone by the time you take two kids to the dentist and then feed them lunch and then it's like what's the point in driving all the way out there for an hour of school." A high school parent agreed. "As far as appointments, . . . by the time we get to the appointment, and they get through the appointment, and for me to drive them out here, school would just about be over." They were also aware that the later hours of the day at the study site are dominated by elective and non-core classes. An early elementary parent said, "I've gone up and picked them up half-day. . . . I will . . . pick them up after lunch and take them to an appointment, knowing that they're only missing PE, music, and extensions. . . . But they've got . . . their reading and that important stuff."

Another critical travel issue was cost. The cost of fuel was not an issue for all families, but some were very open regarding the expense of making an extra trip and stated that they would keep their students home for the day because they could not afford to drive back and forth twice. A high school parent stated, "There's not a way usually for us, financially, to get her out to school after the doctor's appointment. We can't afford the gas, so she ends up missing the whole day for an appointment that was at two o'clock."

Family. Family issues and priorities impacted student attendance. Student participants identified these types of family issues 40% of the time, but parents mentioned them more than twice as often. Students stated that these events happened, but for many parents, family decisions took precedence over school expectations, and adult participants did not hesitate to articulate that perspective. Some circumstances were recognized by the school as important and impactful, and consequently were readily excused. Representative examples included death in the family, critical family illness, and other family emergencies that required the student's presence at home. There were other family matters that parents stated would take priority, whether or not the school viewed them as excusable.

Many parents believed they should have the right to control students' attendance, and that the school should not question their judgement. One parent said, "I don't understand why they're not excused if we're communicating about it. So it doesn't make sense to me. . . . If we call in it should be excused." Another stated:

> I think it's gotten back to where parents don't really have the say as far as, you know, I
> want to take my child here, but if I take her then she . . . gets punished at school. It's just
> sad I think. Because if I want to take my daughter out on her birthday, if she hasn't
> missed a ton of school, that should be up to me if I want to do that.

Students also articulated that sometimes family was more important than school. A high school student explained, "If it's family; there's a family emergency [and] my family needs my support. Then at that time I'll be like, well, it's my family. They need me. I can catch up . . . My family is important to me."

A parent described her reaction when an early elementary student was distressed. "They're only young for so long and when they're having a hard day and really wanting to be

105

home with you; I have a really hard time telling her she has to go. . . . I'm kind of a softy."

Another elementary parent articulated a similar perspective and that the student would stay home "if she was feeling like she needed time alone with me or needed to talk with me."

It was common for participants to describe visits with extended family. A parent explained their student would miss school "if family was coming into town and it was the only opportunity . . . to see them. We've got family that live out of the state, so . . . I think that it would be suitable for me but maybe not for the school." Another parent said, "There's been sometimes when we've had a relative fly in from Alaska and she's missed school to go to the airport or things like that."

Many parents were adamant that family recreation and family vacations were acceptable reasons for absences. Participants described that simple day trips were important. "We took them out for 1 day on a Thursday because my mom took them to Great Wolf Lodge. It's really cheap on Thursday, but it's not cheap on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday." Another parent said, "We do birthdays and I've noticed lately that all the schools say, no, that's not excused. If you say that to them, they say that's an unexcused absence." A parent described a student need that impacted attendance. "Shopping, an important shopping trip—I think we had to get shoes. . . . I guess it was kind of important. He didn't really have shoes at that point."

One parent described their family's hunting and fishing trips:

I think that as a family, . . . 'cause I don't get vacations during the summer, . . . we'll have to figure out somewhere to take vacations, and I think they're very important. I mean, those experiences last forever, so yeah, I think that hunting is important to some families. It is to ours—fishing, camping.

106

Another parent echoed the theme that children are only young once, and the family tradition concerning hunting trips was important. "It's important to spend time with your kids. They're only small for so long. . . . family vacation, which ours is usually hunting season."

Other parents emphasized that students may learn things on vacation that they do not learn in school. "Last year she missed school for a week because her grandparents took her to Florida. . . . It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, so therefore it was acceptable for me." A high school parent explained that they recognized that this type of family choice may be in conflict with the school's standards. "We were going on a vacation and . . . I wasn't going to cancel the vacation for an unexcused absence. . . . She ended up getting unexcused absences . . . I think there [are] some family situations that life calls for that may be considered unexcused." Another parent stated strongly, "There are times when a child learns a lot more . . . on vacation . . . That may not be an excused absence, but actually they're learning and . . . they're becoming . . . well-rounded by getting out and doing things in the world."

Stress and anxiety. Anxiety and stress were impactful regarding absence. These factors were sometimes related to school responsibilities, and sometimes they were a result of non-school stressors. In this section I discuss both the school and individual factors. School-related stress was significant for many; older students expressed strong opinions concerning this factor. A high school student said, "I think the classes I have trouble in—they stress me out really bad." Another high school student stated, "It's hard for me to focus on . . . what they're teaching so that I can understand it. It's stressful not being able to understand everything . . . I want to get my work done but it's hard when I don't understand." Sometimes students did not like the way classes were taught. "Just sitting there in class having to repeat what they say makes you want to

107

fall asleep. So it gets boring and then you lose focus and then you no longer want to be there anymore." A different high school student wanted learning to be fun:

It's the classes I don't want to deal with. Some teachers I've been with, they just don't make, they make the day kind of like . . . , I know this school isn't necessarily supposed to be fun, but . . . it's been proven already that when you're having a little bit of fun learning something you're going to . . . remember it better.

Other students spoke about very specific school stressors. One high school student did not like to present in front of the class. "I've missed for like a speech or something, to have to do a presentation in front of the class." Another high school student described peer behavior. "[They] just didn't want to go on certain days because . . . there was something . . . that they really didn't want to do. . . . When we had poetry there was one dude who wouldn't come to school . . . [because] he didn't want to do poetry." Another student also recognized this behavior and said students were absent "to not to go to certain classes. I mean like, for instance, if somebody didn't like history, [they] might skip at least that class."

Parents recognized that these school-related stressors were real for their children, both generally and in relation to specific subjects or activities. One student had recently returned to public school after being homeschooled. "He hated to go. I think he feels very uncomfortable here. I think he feels inadequate." Another student had previously lived with a different parent, and her attendance during that time frame had been very sporadic:

She was very intimidated by the classroom and the work . . . It was a little intimidating at times for her. . . . She was intimidated by the tests . . . that day, or she knew she didn't get her homework done. We've since talked about that and created a support network and I think we've got it . . . but we didn't catch it for a while when it was happening.

108

The parent of the student who did not like presentations agreed that absence was driven by "having to give a speech." Another believed there was anxiety related to specific classes. "He gets really upset. A couple of them have been about PE. It's certain things that he just doesn't want to do." One parent spoke about test anxiety:

> There may be something she doesn't want to deal with at school that day. Tests have been—she may know the material, but when it comes to tests . . . , it's just one of those things that's a mental block that she struggles with. And so I think for her yes, that there's an anxiety over tests, and if she doesn't feel like she's prepared I think it's easier to not go to school that day than to try and struggle through the test.

Stress and anxiety were also significant individual factors that influenced absences. These cases included diagnosed and undiagnosed issues that did or did not have related special education eligibilities. Older students articulated some of these issues in ways that demonstrated considerable self-understanding. During the initial interview, a high school student who did not have a diagnosis explained that he missed school because, "I did have some emotional stress at some points that caused me to collapse, so I wouldn't go those days when I was really feeling bad. . . . At some points I could barely get out of my bed." His parent recognized there were problems developing, but never mentioned anxiety. "He is not . . . as easy to deal with now as he was . . . We are having an increasing amount of trouble . . . He doesn't do anything bad. . . . It's that he is starting to not recognize that we have any authority over him."

For this student, anxiety became a strong theme. Being heard, the expression of his student voice, was important to him, and during our discussions it was clear that he was willing to be very honest. In the final interview, he told me his favorite thing about participating in the project. "I did enjoy the first survey. I did enjoy being able to say some of those problems I

had . . . That was nice. It was good that you took an interest and it was good to talk." I knew by then that his needing to talk went well beyond the initial interview. During a check-in he said to me, "Personally, I don't care. I don't want to live anymore. I don't see any point in it. . . . It makes it really hard to continue if I don't really care about anything anymore, which I don't." For me, red flags went up right and left. We had a very long, open, and emotional discussion, and I learned that he had no plan, no means, and no imminent intent, so we discussed getting him professional help. I asked if he had ever spoken with a therapist:

> No, I have not. I don't know if I can. It's the first time I've felt like that in a long time. I'd like to give it a shot. I'd like to give it a shot, but money is still a pretty big issue for the family. We do not have very good insurance. . . . I'll probably talk to [my parents] about it this weekend as well. I'll try to talk to my grandparents about it.

I followed up this conversation a short time later. The student spoke about discussing this with his parent. "He didn't verbally reject a counselor, but he doesn't like the idea. He thinks it will brand me for the future and being able to get a job or something like that. He doesn't believe medical records will stay private." This study did not resolve every issue for students, but it opened the door on some unrecognized ones. Work with this family on this issue continued through and beyond the study term.

There were other students who were very honest about their issues. Although they may not have expressed the prior student's level of distress, they recognized that their attendance was sometimes impacted. A high school student shared, "I have anxiety so I . . . go to my primary doctor, get checkups and see how I'm doing. . . . I am . . . supposed to be going to a doctor right now because I am bipolar. . . . That is where my temper comes from." Another student who had a diagnosis said, "Sometimes I won't . . . want to go. It's just a . . . feeling that it's . . . not gonna

work out right . . . anxiety. I . . . have feelings about . . . things sometimes . . . just not feeling up

to it, not feeling like I want to get out of bed." The parent recognized this as well. "He gets

anxiety really bad. . . . when he gets so upset, I can't force him to go to school. . . . We start

arguing about it and I get him upset, and then I get upset, and then anxiety kicks in." A high

school student said that the primary reason they had missed school was because, "I was kind of

depressed and . . . there's just a lot of times where I didn't really want to get out of bed at all, so

that was mainly why—just some self-issues."

> There were high school students who did not discuss these issues, yet parents did:
>
> He gets down all the time. . . . There's . . . very traumatic experiences. . . . his reasoning
>
> for being absent, his depression. [He] doesn't function when he's depressed. . . . And
>
> when he's depressed I hate to see him go because then he's not absorbing anything that's
>
> positive . . . He doesn't know which way to go. . . . I really think if he's in deep
>
> depression he shouldn't go.

Another high school student did not mention anxiety, but the parent did. He said his daughter

frequently missed because of:

> stress, which can give you that false sense of sickness. . . . She's been dealing with some
>
> stressful issues. . . . I think sometimes . . . transferring to a new school, a small school, a
>
> school that's so close knit—sometimes feeling like an outsider in the school. I think that
>
> part of the stress she felt and maybe some of the anxieties that she was [feeling were
>
> because of] coming to [the new] school.

An autistic high school student barely mentioned anxiety affecting attendance, except when he

had broken up with a girlfriend or a scary movie kept him awake. He talked at great length (and

I have quoted him) regarding fatigue, peer relationships, and school-specific stress. His parent,

however, directly addressed emotional anxiety, unrelated to these other factors, closely related to being on the spectrum:

There's been times when there's been a lot of distress, or stress, and he needs to just stay quiet. And that takes the stress off him, and it takes the stress off of me, because then I don't have to worry about if he's going to school. Is he going to blow? Is he going to be quiet? How's he going to deal with the day? If he is extremely stressed out I don't want him to go to school.

Although younger students did not describe anxiety factors, their parents did. A mother said her mid-level student "takes things pretty hard at times. . . . He can get very emotional about things, even if it's that he thinks he hurt someone's feelings. . . . There's sometimes where it's too hard on him. . . . He had to take off for that." Sometimes their statements were very matter of fact. An early elementary parent said that her daughter sometimes missed because of "anxiety issue[s] and wanting to stay with me." A mid-level parent stated, "Mentally maybe [W] hasn't been ready to come and . . . just needed to be home and be with me and get through it." An early elementary father said his student had missed "due to the stress that we have had in our home, from what they've had to go through with . . . mine and my ex-wife's issues. . . . The situation that I had that's impacted our family with their mother."

Staff conflict, skipping, and fatigue. There were factors influencing absences that were mentioned less frequently, although parents and students openly stated that they caused students to miss school. Conflict with staff, fatigue, and faking illness or skipping were all mentioned by about one fourth of participants. Conflict with staff was a school-related factor described in the literature review of this dissertation. A high school student described troublesome relationships with teachers. "A couple of the teachers I butted heads with. I was like, alright, do you just not

112

like me? . . . I'm trying to get your help but you're blocking me out. Why should I even come to

your class every day?" Another high school student said, "Relationships is part of it, . . . Maybe

a dislike of a teacher. . . . Avoiding people you don't want to be around." He continued to

describe his frustrations with the teacher's behavior in one class. "Offer more time to help

students. . . . Help the students instead of focusing on your work all the time . . . You're still a

teacher. . . . You're . . . working, that's great but . . . you have a job to do. You should do the job

correctly."

A high school parent who had been in the district for many years and sent several

children to the school explained that although things seemed to be better now, she had removed

her student from the school for a few years because of "taunting and bullying . . . including from

staff. It's not as bad as it has been. . . . It was one of the worst cases of bullying . . . in a lot of

years, not only by peers, but staff as well." Another high school parent said their student missed

school sometimes because, "He resents deeply any imposition of any kind of authority over

him . . . He's . . . intelligent enough to realize you don't always have that option. And so he

doesn't publically tilt at windmills, but he may privately rail a bit." Elementary students had

these same issues. An early elementary parent talked about a previous teacher, and how

sometimes her daughter would want to stay home:

> As much as I think [she was] great, she was very strict and [my daughter] had a really
>
> hard time with that. I think it's because we don't parent that way, and so it was kind of
>
> all new for her to have a teacher that was pretty black and white.

Another early elementary parent saw an even stronger reaction that led directly to the chronic

absenteeism:

Something happened with . . . the teacher . . . towards the middle of the year that . . . got

her where she would really not go, that she would throw absolute fits. Try to get her on

the bus, she would rip my clothes off trying to get her on the bus—screaming, kicking,

stuff that I've never ever seen my child do, when she . . .loved school at the beginning of

the year [and was] excited to go.

Concerning reasons for absences, in the literature review I summarized a study that found that

school-related factors were not as common as individual factors, but that conflict with a teacher

was the most powerful school factor (Powell, 2012). The data revealed that this issue was

present at the study site.

Students were also very open that sometimes they chose to miss school. Parents realized

that this happened. High school students had developed firm perspectives on this. One said, "If

I decide not to go then I'm not going to go. I'm a stubborn person." Another stated, "Kids are

just going to do what they please." A high school student explained, "Students that don't want to

go to school are choosing not to go . . . I did the same thing for a while . . . If you want to try and

change that? Some students . . . [are] not going to change, because they . . . don't care."

Skipping was not a purely high school phenomenon. An early elementary student said,

"[We] like home and we like to play." This student's parent recognized that, "Sometimes he'll

pretend like he doesn't feel good or he's sick. . . . He's actually made himself throw up before so

he didn't have to go to school." A mid-level student said that, "Sometimes I don't feel like going

to school so I say I'm sick. . . . [I'm] pretending to be sick." This student's parent was talking

about the top reason her student missed school when she stated:

Number one would definitely be the faking, and it's kind of a sore subject because [Z]'s

the kid that wakes up every morning and something hurts. To the point where towards

114

the end I finally just had to say, go to school, and if . . . [Z] didn't have a fever, then you need to go.

A high school parent said about her daughter, "She fakes sick and stuff so that she doesn't have to go . . . We didn't realize she was faking sick and the reasons why." A high school student talked about cutting out on the last half of the day. "They have things they'd rather do. They would maybe be like—I'm hungry and I don't want to deal with school food so they ditch." Another high school student talked about skipping. "Sometimes I just want to stay home. . . . I just don't go to school because I don't want to, . . . just to miss school, need a break." This student's parent admitted that, "Kids are lazy and don't want to get out of bed." A high school student talked about a positive reinforcement, an individual factor, associated with staying home "just to be lazy and watch a movie and have a good time."

In the rural setting, fatigue was a factor. As I mentioned when I discussed transportation issues in the context of medical appointments, committing to travel to the charter school meant days were sometimes very long. A mid-level parent explained:

Another thing is lack of sleep with [M]. [M] has a hard time going to sleep at night and we've actually talked to [the] doctor [who] suggested melatonin which we tried. But, [M] gets nightmares from it so we don't do that. I just feel like [M] doesn't get enough rest, and it is an early morning. We're getting up at 5:45 every morning and then we try to keep them active in playing sports and things. Baseball is a good example. Our baseball games didn't end . . . until 8:30 at night. The kids weren't getting home and into bed until 9:30, 10. [That] is way too late to get back up. Not that it's an excuse, it's just another big issue for us.

An early elementary student said sometimes it was, "seven o'clock and I have to go back to bed. I'm really tired . . . I woke up and it was time for school. My mom . . . tells me to go back to sleep and wait until later." This student's parent shared that sometimes they missed because, "[W]'s too tired. . . . [W] didn't go to bed like [W] should have, didn't go to sleep like [W] should have. [W] stays up in [the] room and plays like [W]'s not supposed to." A mid-level parent said, "There are some mornings where he's like, aww, I don't want to go to school, but I think it's more he's tired. He's really not a complainer about going to school." A high school student stated that at times, "I'm just plain exhausted, . . . I want to get out of bed sometimes, and my body's just like no. I don't want to. I'm tired. I just don't want to go. I'd be exhausted." This student's parent explained that the issue was:

> Exhaustion, lack of sleep. There are times when he just can't sleep and so that's really important. He needs to be able to put away all the electronic crap and get his mind mellowed down to be able to go to sleep, and sometimes that's really hard for him. And I can tell. I can tell when he has woken up in the morning, and I'll look at him and I'll be like, oh, you're not functioning. And I don't want to give him that excuse. But he knows. He's very easy to read. . . . I know when he's just down and out. He's not crabby; he gets a look in his face and I know he's just absolutely exhausted. He's spent. . . . If he is stressed in the evening and he can't get to sleep, it's really hard to get him up in the morning, and I'll just let him sleep.

Summary regarding absence factors. Student absences are individualized phenomena and at the study site were influenced by school, individual, and family factors. Because of the diverse geographic distribution of participants, community factors did not clearly appear to be influential. I did not tabulate data concerning the specific reasons each student and parent

reported that children were absent prior to the study, but I collected data concerning the top three reasons students missed school during the 2 prior years. Because this section's research questions focused on shared attitudes and perceptions, I have discussed those findings in narrative form.

Students missed school because of illnesses and medical appointments. Parents differed in their opinions regarding what *sick enough to miss school* meant. Some believed if children were not running a fever or vomiting, they should attend. Others kept their student at home with fewer symptoms, and some of those adults expressed frustration with those who sent students to school when there was risk of infecting others. Medical appointments were a necessity of life, especially for those who had chronic health issues. Parents attempted to schedule appointments so that school was minimally impacted, but that was not always possible. At the rural study site, distance caused more or longer absences than it would have in an urban setting closer to providers' offices. In some cases, parents did not perceive that making two long trips to and from school provided significant benefit if students would only attend for a small part of the day. In other cases, the financial ramifications of making extra trips was untenable, and students would not attend school at all if they had an appointment, even if it was late in the day.

Many parents believed that family priorities were acceptable reasons to miss school, and they did not care if those conflicted with school expectations. All recognized that circumstances such as death in the family and family medical emergencies were excused absences. In other cases, such as family vacations, day trips, and holidays from school, some parents believed the school should excuse those absences if the parents communicated about them. Some parents had very strong opinions in this regard and stated that their point of view would win out if push came to shove.

Stress and anxiety caused students to miss school. Both school-related and individual factors were described. In the literature review of this dissertation I discussed studies such as those by Dube and Orpinas (2009), Kearney and Bates (2005), and Powell (2012) that described school-related anxiety. During the study, this type of stress was most often related to specific courses or types of activities. A small number of students reported a problematic relationship with a specific teacher or teachers. These authors also explained anxiety might be an individual factor, not related to school stress, and some study participants were absent for this reason. I discussed results in which students expressed both diagnosed and undiagnosed anxiety.

Some participants had skipped school. Some did not always feel school was important that day. Others wanted a day off to do something they perceived was more fun. Skipping was also sometimes an avoidance behavior. Avoiding a class or a teacher was described in the previous paragraph, but some students also discussed avoiding other students. Both high school and elementary students revealed that they had feigned illness so that they could stay home. Fatigue was described by a minority of students and parents, but for those who mentioned it, it was perceived as highly impactful. Sometimes students were too exhausted to come to school.

Developing Interventions

The following were two of the research questions that guided this study. How did these motivating factors and attitudes [regarding attendance] inform possible school interventions? How did these reasons, perceptions, and attitudes [regarding absence] inform possible school interventions?

During the initial interviews, students and parents were asked about supports that might motivate improved attendance. The literature review in Chapter 2 of this dissertation described interventions that have been shown to be effective. Extant literature supported a multi-pronged,

site-specific approach to attendance interventions. I considered participant input in light of this theoretical framework, and developed an intervention plan. In this section I discuss the participant data that informed my choices in relation to the components of the intervention strategy: incentives, daily attendance monitoring, parent communication, attendance self-tracking, principal–student relationship building, and regular check-ins.

Incentives. Participants explained that incentives or rewards were likely to be positively motivating. A high school parent made a statement that described one perspective concerning reward-based systems. "It's more important that there is something there and that they are being recognized than the actual thing they choose." A high school student also described the effectiveness of reward systems. "I was on a point card system a couple years back . . . I can get a reward and have fun . . . A positive incentive goes a long ways. . . . I always had a smile on my face." A high school parent stated that it was important that incentives resonated with the individual. "If he saw something that . . . he would consider as being important. . . . Just something that . . . would help him feel appreciated." Regarding incentives, an early elementary parent shared that having an attendance goal was significant and that it would benefit students if "you could get a ticket every week and then apply it towards buying something from Mr. Brookins's store. Because then . . . they really have their eye on the prize, and they really want that thing." A mid-level parent was confident that rewards would help. "I think it's fun. I think . . . some kids . . . can pull it off. It's a great idea to have . . . some sort of reward for kids that have good attendance."

I discussed the possibility of an incentive system with participants during the initial interviews. Both parents and students shared ideas regarding what they believed might be inexpensive, yet meaningful and effective rewards. I established a system whereby students

tracked their own daily attendance using a monthly calendar template, and for each week that a student kept perfect attendance, they earned a prize. What follows is not a comprehensive list of incentives, but it is representative. Most of the rewards were purchased at a discount store including toys, arts and crafts, books, puzzles, games, school supplies, food, and bottled tea. A few puzzles were purchased from an online retailer. Some incentives were purchased from a supermarket; there were always granola bars available, and high school students had the option of choosing a candy bar. During the 12-week trimester, among the 20 student participants, I gave out 189 prizes for weeks of perfect attendance. I also established a trimester-end reward, an ice cream party, for students who missed 2 or fewer days during the term. Ultimately, half the participants qualified for the trimester-long incentive.

Parent communication. During the initial interviews, parents expressed that they were very satisfied with communication from the office regarding their students' illnesses and absences. An elementary parent said, "You guys call me immediately if she's not at school. . . . You guys do a great job." When I asked if the school could do more to support attendance, a high school parent referenced communication. "I mean really, there isn't a whole lot you could—[the office] calls every time my kid is missing. And they've been great. It's never been an issue. . . . It's not a school problem at all." Another high school parent concurred when asked the same question. "The school always calls when she is gone, so I am aware if she is not there. I do not know what you could do to change anything." Parents believed that the school did a good job of keeping them informed when children were absent.

Parents were also satisfied with the office responses when students were feeling ill or anxious at school. An early elementary parent discussed the school adapting to a family need:

I think you guys to a great job. There's . . . times [you] called home and said she doesn't

feel well . . . if you want to come get her. And I said no, because by the time I had gotten

up there it would have been an hour left of school. [The staff] said, okay, I'll just keep

her . . . here and she'll be fine; we'll have her drink some water. . . . So I feel like you

guys are very supportive. I feel like you really try to help everyone, and you understand

the distance. And when it's at the end of the day it doesn't make sense to drive up there

and basically follow the bus home.

A mid-level parent had a similar perspective. "The school does a great job of encouraging [P],

and I know the office staff is really good at saying hey, . . . you're not feeling good, get some

fresh air, get some water. They give them options before calling home." A high school parent

explained what happened when the student had an anxiety attack. "They call me in the middle of

the day and say, hey, he just can't continue. There's been those situations." Parents were

satisfied with how the office handled attendance matters, but the office staff and I committed to

being even more diligent at the start of the 2015–2016 school year.

During August, I met twice with the office staff, counselor, and assistant administrator

regarding parent communication during the study. As a staff, we believed that formerly we had

tried to make calls home when students were absent, but were not always perfect regarding that

task. We made a plan that we believed would help us be more successful. We committed a time

window each morning for attendance calls. We prioritized student participants on the call list so

that if one of them was absent that family would be among the first calls made. We revised our

call log so that record keeping concerning absence contacts would be accurate. We established a

hierarchy among the five involved individuals, so that if someone was out sick or unavailable on

any given day, the calls would still be made. This communication protocol was implemented with 100% fidelity during the term of the study.

Additionally, I closely tracked individual participant attendance. I monitored attendance daily, and printed summary reports at the end of each week. Those reports were used to verify participant calendar self-tracking and as a basis for some check-in discussions. For a few students, absences persisted at a rate that put the child at risk for chronic absenteeism during the first trimester, and I made contact with the parents by telephone. Five students were chronically absent during the trimester. My original plan was to arrange meetings at school with parents if absences persisted, but circumstances evolved such that conferences were held with two parents.

I did not meet in person with the parents of an early elementary student who became chronically absent late in the term due to a bout of head lice, the parent of a high school student who was absent for 3 days twice and provided documentation from a doctor, or the parent of a high school student who was not chronically absent until the last few days of the trimester when they went to stay with a different biological parent and did not come to school. I did meet with the parent of a high school student who was attending at a rate approximately seven and one-half percent higher than the previous year, but was still chronically absent. Both this student's attendance and academic performance were placing them at risk relatively early in their high school career, and we continued working with the family into the second trimester. I met several times with the parents of a high school student who was missing school at a greater rate than during the prior year. This student was under a physician's care throughout the term. Interventions regarding school coursework completion, with the student and parents, were successful in this case in spite of the absences. As the trimester neared its end, the parents regularly picked their student up at school so he might stay after hours to catch up on work. This

122

pattern afforded me an opportunity to regularly check in with them. This student was able to

pass every class, which did not happen the prior year.

Principal involvement. A school administrator who becomes involved with students

and families may leave a lasting impact. An elementary parent described her own experience

when she was a student at the study school in the 1990s:

> We had this principal, . . . he was a friendly guy, but he was very stern. . . . He wasn't
>
> very approachable but he had a big heart. . . . Every single day the teachers would, if they
>
> noticed anything in class, it could be something so little as, you know, [someone] helped
>
> Johnny tie his shoes . . . It just was little things, anything that they saw they would call up
>
> the principal. And randomly he would pick a kid up to come up, and he had this big box
>
> of Ding Dongs. Biggest deal ever! And we would come up and . . . he would thank us
>
> for being a positive person and for doing the right thing. And he would say, hey your
>
> teacher said you did this today, and as a third grader that was HUGE. I remember going
>
> home so excited over a Ding Dong. But most importantly the principal would
>
> acknowledge that I . . . did something special.

A high school parent explained that, because of shared custody, raising awareness of the

absenteeism issue was important and appreciated. "It's something we should be talking

about. . . . She has missed school, and that's not okay. She's in high school now and it is

important for her to attend. I think that paying attention . . . will help." A early elementary

student talked about their first day of kindergarten, which was prior to the study term. They

mentioned this story again during the check-in conferences. I had a vague recollection of the

event, but to them, interacting with me that day was memorable and significant. "The first time

when I went here I really, really missed my parents, and I had to go in here. And you could even make me stop crying, and I was trying to stop crying. You did help."

A high school parent remembered my coming to the family farm the previous year when the family decided to re-enroll their child in the local school and end his time at a virtual school. "The first time you came through that door . . . there was something there that you see different in all kids. You see them as individual[s]. You're not putting them in these little boxes. . . . He doesn't want to let you down." An early elementary parent remembered our working through a problem the prior year when his child was not comfortable in the classroom and began refusing to come to school. "I brought some of the concerns . . . to yourself and to the counselor. [It] helped a lot by talking with her, taking her out of class sometimes, discussing . . . what was going on, and we finished off the year pretty well." A high school parent emphasized that making a meaningful connection with students was critical to shaping behavior. "I feel like just making sure that somebody takes the time to tell the kids . . . how important it is to stay on schedule. And when you get behind you're going to start missing out on those credits that you need." The high school student who lived on the farm and had attended the virtual school said, "Support would help me want to continue pushing to get going on my education. . . . Just being there when I need you guys. . . . Maybe once in a while I do need a push to get the support and keep going."

It was apparent that the principal working directly with students may have been meaningful and left a lasting impression. The extant literature described check-ins as important. When students met regularly with a staff member it served as a system of accountability. Second, as revealed in the student voice section of the literature review, attendance did not improve unless the student committed to the effort. Involving students and listening to their

concerns was a critical component of building buy-in. Third, when a student developed a close relationship with the school administrator, they had a forum where they were free to discuss concerns, challenges, successes, and hopes. To students, an administrator–researcher was a powerful figure, and in the best case, could be viewed as an advocate.

Check-ins. During the term of the research study, I checked in with every student at least once a week. At the minimum, at the end of the week, I had at least a brief conversation with each student to discuss whether or not they had earned a weekly reward. The participants quickly became comfortable coming in to chat with me, and I saw some of them even more frequently. After the first few weeks, I began having longer conversations with some of the students as time permitted. All students agreed to allow me to record these conversations and they became the basis for my check-in transcripts. We discussed issues such grades, attendance successes, relationships with teachers, and extracurricular activities. These interactions were largely unstructured, and I allowed students to frame the discussions if they had topics they wanted to address. With some of the students, I followed up on concerns they had raised during the initial interviews. The final interviews revealed that for some these visits were a meaningful part of the study protocol. I discuss those findings later in this report.

I also established peer groups at the high school level, and attempted to meet regularly so that these students could discuss topics with one another and establish peer-to-peer support. There were 10 high school participants. I formed a group of three freshmen, a group of four seniors, and a group of three composed of two sophomores and a junior. I had mixed success with these small groups. The seniors and I met regularly and consistently; all of them had high attendance rates for the term. We talked about classes and grades, future plans, how the study was working, and supporting one another. This strategy was similar to that employed by Rivard

(2013), but was not employed in isolation and was used in consort with a more comprehensive strategy as suggested by Maynard (2010).

The other two groups were not particularly successful. Of the five students who were chronically absent during the study, two were in the ninth grade and two were in the 10th grade. Because these were groups of three, there were many times when the intact group was not present on the days I planned to meet. Additionally, the interpersonal dynamics of these small groups did not lend itself to open and fruitful discussions. Two of the freshmen, although they were talkative when we met one-on-one, were virtually silent when we tried to meet as a group. The third freshman was a somewhat reserved individual, and when their peers were not talking in the small group setting, neither did they. About halfway through the study term, one of the freshmen had a change of placement and was scheduled almost full-time into our online program. At that point, this small group effectively dissolved.

In the sophomore–junior group, one individual had the lowest attendance rate among participants in the study. The remaining students were not particularly comfortable with one another. At the study school, grade cohorts attend most classes together, and these two individuals did not know each other well. Again, all three individuals were very open with me one-on-one. The group was frequently short at least one member, and conversations were somewhat strained and superficial when they did occur.

In retrospect, I believe I made the groups too small. I should have divided them five and five. I could have placed the one junior with the four seniors and then put the freshmen and sophomores together. The junior had a very high attendance rate and would have integrated well into the successful senior group. Although there would have still been attendance issues with the freshmen and sophomore group, there would have been a greater critical mass, which may have

allowed group work to proceed. Additionally, as the study term progressed, some friendships developed (not because of the study) among some of the sophomore and freshman participants. Previously, the freshmen were in the middle school, and there was not much opportunity for interaction with high school students. During the study term, because they were all high school students and shared some elective classes and extracurricular opportunities, some relationships developed. There was no way for me to know this would happen, but it did, and if I had made a different choice regarding grouping, I may have had greater success.

During the study, two other small groups naturally evolved. My original intent was to convene groups only at the high school level. However, because I usually distributed prizes on Thursdays (the end of our school week), if I had not come to their room at about the usual time, two mid-level students would come together to check on me. Eventually, when I came to the room to collect a student, both would jump up and come with me. I did not forbid it, and so a mid-level group came into being. The same thing happened in an early elementary grade. These students started coming to my office together at a regular time, immediately after their reading block on Thursdays. I also allowed this small group to form. In fact, one week these students chose having lunch with the principal as a reward. From that time forward there was a lunch every couple weeks, which sometimes also involved their friend in another grade who was a participant. During the final interviews, 75% of the students in this group called these lunches one of their favorite things about the study. A parent mentioned this also, and provided a confirming data point. "She really enjoyed having lunch in your office. . . . She REALLY enjoyed having lunch." This unplanned small group nourished a life of its own and persisted beyond the study period; lunches continued into the second trimester while this report was being written. For the early elementary and mid-level students, components of Webb-Landman's

127

(2012) elementary action research came into being, and they participated in periodic small-group meetings while participating in attendance self-tracking.

Absence Rates During the Study Term

Immediately following, Table 2 records the attendance behavior of study participants. For comparison purposes, individual attendance during the first trimester of the 2015–2016 school year is displayed alongside the 2014–2015 first trimester and annual rates. A rate above 90% indicates a student who was not chronically absent. The same data is displayed as a histogram in Figure E1 in Appendix E of this report.

Table 2

Student Attendance Rates During 2014–2015 and the 2015–2016 Study Term

Grade	Sex	2015–16 First Trimester Rate	2014–15 First Trimester Rate	2014–15 Annual Rate
EE1	Female	92.5%	86%	80.8%
EE2	Female	100%	94%	89.6%
EE3	Female	100%	87%	89.2%
EE4	Female	100%	93%	86.4%
EE5	Female	89.1%	84%	85.6%
EE6	Male	97.8%	92.6%	89.75%
ML1	Female	95.7%	86%	84.4%
ML2	Male	95.7%	85%	86.8%
ML3	Male	100%	87%	89.6%
ML4	Male	91.3%	74%	79.4%
HS1	Female	80.4%	88%	88%
HS2	Male	87%	86%	79.6%
HS3	Female	93.5%	93%	84%
HS4	Female	87%	92%	88%
HS5	Male	78.3%	84%	89.6%
HS6	Male	97.8%	Not present	89.9%
HS7	Female	100%	92%	88.8%
HS8	Female	100%	87%	88%
HS9	Female	93.5%	88%	88.8%
HS10	Male	91.3%	86%	81.6%

Fifteen of 20 participants were not chronically absent. During the study term, 17 of 20 participants attended at a higher rate than they did during the 2014–2015 school year. One

participant did not attend during the entire first trimester of 2014–2015. Of the remaining 19 participants, 16 attended at a higher rate than they did during the first trimester of 2014–2015. During the study, a strong majority of participants reduced their rates of absenteeism compared to the previous school year.

Regarding the students who were chronically absent during the study term, I discussed some of the reasons for their absences in the parent communication subsection of the developing interventions section of this chapter. Four of the five students had distinct circumstances that led to the higher absence rate. The early elementary student contracted head lice, which kept her home for a few days (our district has a *no nit* exclusion policy) and took her over the threshold by 1 day. Two high school students were under a doctor's care for extended illnesses. A high school student had very good attendance until the last few days of the term when they went to stay with a different biological parent and did not attend school. A high school student attended school at a rate 7.4% higher than during the first trimester of the prior year, but continued to miss at a rate above the chronic absenteeism threshold.

Final Interview Likert-Type Data

The post-intervention interview contained four questions that generated Likert-type data. The responses to those questions are presented graphically in Appendix F in Figures F1, F2, and F3. The full questions corresponding to the axis labels in the data charts are described in the interview scripts in Appendix B. Both students and parents were asked whether the student participation in the project was beneficial, whether the student increased attendance, whether attending every day was important, and whether the school supports helped.

Participants were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the specific statement on the interview script. As previously described,

to facilitate graphic presentation, these responses were converted to numbers. Figure F1 represents the student data. Figure F2 represents the parent data. Figure F3 represents the average response values for both groups. The value in each x-axis label specifies the students' grade-band level. The student and parent graphs are aligned so that each family occupies the same horizontal spot on the charts.

A general analysis of these results demonstrated that almost all participants believed participation in the project was beneficial. Two parents and two students were neutral; two students disagreed. The other 34 participants agreed or strongly agreed that participation was beneficial. It was interesting that the two students who disagreed were both early elementary students, and that one had perfect attendance while the other missed only 1 day. During this study, conversations with the youngest students sometimes required finesse on my part, and I sometimes had to clarify what I was asking. In this case, I did not ask the students to rethink or reconsider their responses; I accepted them at face value, and they did not embellish their answers. Because these were two of my most successful participants, it may have been interesting to ask them why they disagreed that the study was beneficial.

Regarding the prompt that asked if students increased attendance, 90% of students reported that they did. The two students who responded neutral and disagree accurately represented that their attendance rate decreased compared to the prior year. One said, "I wish I could agree, but I can't." The third student's attendance was fractionally lower (1%) than the prior year. Her response to the prompt was strongly agree, and during the interview she expressed very positive feelings concerning her attendance behavior and participation in the project. She was very proud that she did not miss school except for two illnesses when she was under a doctor's care. Her improved self-concept concerning her attendance behavior likely

130

overrode the fact that she missed slightly more school. Seventeen of the parents thought

attendance had improved, so the percentage of responses was accurate, but there were was slight

misalignment. One high school parent replied neutral, and when I revealed the actual attendance

data after the interview she was pleased to hear that attendance had increased by 5%. A high

school parent answered strongly agree, although the student missed a much higher percentage of

days than the prior year. When I revealed the true percentage they were surprised and stated that

the student's attitude and grades were greatly improved, and that they were somewhat shocked

that they had actually missed more school.

When asked whether attending every day was important, 19 parents agreed or strongly

agreed; one was neutral. Fifteen students agreed or strongly agreed; two were neutral. Of the

three who disagreed, two were again early elementary students. One had perfect attendance.

This again raises the question of whether or not she understood the question, because her parent

told me that this year she was very concerned about not missing school. When they were asked

whether the school supports helped, 15 students agreed or strongly agreed and four were neutral.

The one student who disagreed was the same early elementary student with perfect attendance

who disagreed that the study was beneficial. For the parents, 18 agreed or strongly agreed, one

was neutral, and one strongly disagreed. The disagreeing parent was that of a high school

student who was chronically absent. This student had increased attendance compared to the

prior year, and the parent agreed that participating was beneficial and strongly agreed that it was

important to attend every day. During the interview and during our personal conferences during

the study term, which were functions of the research protocol, the parent expressed frustration

that staff had been unable to identify strategies that motivated her student to attend every day.

Successful Interventions

One of the research questions sought to explore what worked during the study term. The relevant question was: What implemented school interventions were the most successful concerning improving the attendance of chronically absent students? After the first trimester ended, I conducted final interviews with all participants. The scripts for those semi-structured interviews may be found in Appendix B. Two questions were intended to provide data concerning this research question: What was the student's favorite thing about participating, and what were the most significant supports that improved attendance? Additional data was also obtained from relevant participant responses to other prompts during the interviews.

Rewards. Almost all participants, 90% of both students and parents, mentioned the weekly incentives. A high school student said that the most significant thing was "getting prizes; I guess that would influence anybody to come, getting a reward." A mid-level student, asked about significant supports, told me, "Prizes, because I wanted to get prizes for a reason." An early elementary student agreed when asked the same question. "Prizes, because . . . you buy the prizes for us. We get to take them and take them home." A classmate agreed. "We got to get prizes, and I was always excited."

When asked about significant supports, a mid-level parent said, "Because there was a reward for attending perfectly." The parent of another mid-level student stated, "He would receive a reward, and he was so excited to show me." This parent, the mother whose son wanted prizes for a reason, went on to describe how the student was thinking differently this year. He had said:

I can't miss any school unless I'm really, really hurt or really, really sick. I just can't miss any school because if I'm there, I'm supposed to be all week long, then I get to have

132

a reward for being there and doing what I'm supposed to be doing. And so he was very

persistent about that. He was just—that's the way it's got to be, and he was going to

make sure of it. His . . . favorite thing is that there are puzzles that he has earned, and

that they have a very big meaning to him. And it's proof that he's shown himself that he

can earn things by what he does.

The parent of the early elementary student above who mentioned taking prizes and taking them

home said:

[C] would just show me every Thursday . . . the prize he got for being in school and I

would encourage [C] . . . every now and then. You know, you don't want to not go to

school tomorrow because you won't get your reward at the end of the week, and that's

what we're trying to do. And, okay, yeah, you're right. . . . [C] was looking for

rewards. . . . I think that's really what was the motivation . . . , it was getting rewarded for

going to school.

A high school parent told me that they had discussed "the rewards he brought home. We talked

about that and how it was, just cheered him up. He mentioned that specifically in a positive way.

And there's always more negative than positive in his worldview."

Incentives were also a topic of discussion during check-ins. During the third week of the

trimester, a high school student told me, "I think this is going to die out after a while. I think the

rewards aren't enough to keep the high school kids here. I don't know what will be, but I think

it's going to die off." Near the end of the study, in my final small group meeting with a group of

students, we were discussing the upcoming end of the study and this same student complained,

"Why does it end? After this trimester we don't get prizes?" Late in the trimester two mid-level

students were in the office and one remembered the end of study ice cream party. "If you miss

133

more than two this trimester you don't get to do the party at the end. When is the trimester over? I can't miss any days . . . I'm going to make it."

Student–administrator relationship. I discussed that during the initial interviews and check-ins, participants believed that the direct involvement of the principal would be a significant factor. The final interviews provided data that confirmed this idea when 85% of parents and 60% of students talked about the student–principal relationship. A high school student shared:

> It was interesting that you wanted me to be part of the study. . . . I felt really honored. . . . It made me want to come to school more. . . . This was something I should really relish. . . . My principal wants to do a study [involving] me and . . . other students. . . . The kinship you and I have is kind of nice too. . . . It's really nice to have the superintendent on my side . . . I didn't want to let you down.

This student's parent also believed that the relationship was important. "He really likes you and wanted to make sure that things were done . . . You were making such an effort to make things good for him and the other kids . . . It was important to him—for you. . . . In that, he benefitted."

During the final interview I asked a high school student a follow-up question regarding our relationship, and asked if my having directly challenged her concerning her attitudes regarding absenteeism changed her thinking. "I think that kind of confrontation with me is really like—when people around me see that I'm not doing the best I can then it pushes me to do better and prove to them that I can do better." This girl's parent also felt that directly addressing the issue was an effective approach. "I think that just kind of calling her out on it and having her be aware of it probably really helped a lot." A high school student had a very high attendance rate until the last few days of the trimester when they went to stay with a different parent for several

days and did not attend school. I had perceived that our developing relationship had been a significant influence on this student's behavior and felt affirmed when they told me the most important support was "the fact that you were being so involved with it."

There were high school students who did not mention the principal relationship during the final interviews, yet their parents did. One said:

He does talk to you, so I think that having someone he can communicate with openly and honestly is very important for him. He has kind of stopped participating in class and doesn't want to talk to teachers . . . Now it's like you are the only one he is talking to.

Principal involvement was important for another high school parent:

And I felt safe were you were concerned where I'm not real trusting anymore of other people. You've been a lifesaver for me . . . You listen to him, and you also tell him when he's not right, and he takes that because not only do you tell him when he's not right you tell him when he is doing something okay and then you don't add but: you could do better, or you could have done this, or you could have done that. . . . You have a unique position because a lot of people . . . in the teaching [profession] . . . have a certain age group, but you've got 'em all.

Another parent shared, "Even though he says it doesn't matter to him, I think that when somebody kind of pays special attention to him it is good for him. I think he appreciates it." Another shared something similar, and thought that the relationship had ancillary benefits:

She would always tell me if she had a visit with you, or had a chat with you, or you made her feel better about something . . . I know that she came to visit you a lot this term and I know she enjoyed the support and the one-on-one contact. . . . I think this program opened [her] up to being able to talk to you about other things as well. It kind of opened

her up to another access point she had for assistance, because I know there's been other issues that have nothing to do with attendance, but there's been other issues that . . . came up and she . . . told me that she was able to go talk to you about it and how much better you made her feel . . . and it completely calmed down the situation. . . . So I think the program had a side benefit to it where it just kind of opened [her] up a little bit to another point of help and assistance at school.

This evidence suggested that some final interview conversations with older students and their parents fostered a depth of intellectual reasoning concerning the student–administrator relationship. The interactions offered students a means to think about the value of the relationship. I perceived during these conversations that there was emotional meaning for these students and parents as well. As I analyzed the data for this report, I read the transcripts, but I also had memories regarding the personal conversations. I experienced the interviews first person, but I also relived them as I listened to the recordings and carefully transcribed them. In most cases, I listened to some sections of the recordings several times so that I could create an accurate verbatim transcript. Because the final interviews were late in the process, my recollection of context concerning them was relatively fresh as I completed this analysis.

Elementary children made much simpler statements regarding working with their principal, from an intellectual perspective, than did older students, but many of those statements carried great emotional weight. I recalled being deeply moved by several of their simple utterances. An early elementary student who I did not know well at the start of the year stated at the end of the term, "I thought you were fun and I thought you were nice and very sweet" and then said her favorite thing about participating was "seeing you." She continued this theme when she talked about the most significant support. "You're the principal . . . I was always

excited, because you were nice, because you are a great principal and I like to see you all the time." A mid-level student described the aspects of the study they discussed with their parents:

I'd tell them if you talked to us or not. And then if you ever pulled us in, like you know when you sometimes come get me and [my classmate] and talk to us? . . . It was very nice that you pulled us in and talked to us and that you told us what was going to go on.

Their favorite thing about participating was that, "I get to see you every Thursday." Their classmate said, "It is fun to come in here and talk." Not surprisingly, in general, during our conversations, the youngest students made the simplest statements. When they were talking about the significant study supports, an early elementary student named "talking to you," and another early elementary student said that "talking to you helped a little bit." An early elementary parent described how getting to know the principal was important. Her daughter had been very quiet during our first meetings. "I think by getting to talk to you she felt more comfortable and getting to talk to you [became an important support]."

Several parents of the younger participants discussed the value of the principal–student connection. A mid-level parent said:

He told me when you two . . . would talk. He would tell me what you talked about . . . and all that stuff . . . between you two. . . . To him this was something that you and him . . . [were] participating together to a better goal for [him]. . . . What you've done, and his being so excited about being so involved about everything . . . you've been working with him about . . . , it just made a huge improvement.

An early elementary parent said, "The support and the things that you've been providing, techniques and little projects that you guys are doing, I think it had a lot of importance." Above, I quoted a mid-level student who had discussed our relationship with their parents. Their mother

137

told me, "[T] . . . realized how important it . . . was to . . . me, and to you, and to [Mrs. J] in the office. [T] is definitely a people pleaser, and . . . felt it was . . . important to all of us, . . . before [T] wasn't thinking like that."

Staff relationships. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed staff–student relationships as motivating concerning attendance, and I also described some of the staff-related issues that influenced absences. Those analyses were based on data obtained during the initial interviews. Although other staff members had a less direct role during this study than did I, their influences on and relationships with students were meaningful. In the final interviews, 30% of students and 40% of parents described the importance of the adults in the school community.

A high school student nearly left the school early in the year, but decided against that in part because of his relationships with adults:

> One of the things I appreciate about being respected at this school is that the teachers
>
> don't feel like teachers, they feel more like colleagues instead of just assign[ing] you
>
> work. I get along well all of my teachers and . . . I don't feel like I'm a second class
>
> citizen at this school. I feel like I'm a priority which makes me feel very good. I
>
> absolutely consider all of my teachers to be a significant relationship. They're fantastic.
>
> They are helpful, friendly, [and] understand me.

A high school student and I had been working on communication skills during the study term. One emphasis had been to self-advocate with staff and to seek help when he had difficulties. As the term progressed, he developed interpersonal skills (examples, although anonymized, are cited elsewhere in this chapter) and improved his working relationships with staff. In his final interview he told me, "Teachers are here to help. They don't spend their time wasting on somebody who's going to [not try]. They're there to help you. They're not there to make your

life miserable." This student's parent spoke at great length about the staff during the final interview. She spoke about several teachers, an administrator (not me), and classified staff; and she provided specific detail regarding positive examples that influenced her child during the term. In summary, she felt that the most important thing was "somebody always being there for him, . . . [he] looks forward to going to . . . class. . . . He doesn't have the same nasty attitude . . . that he did. He wants to work . . . I was really excited . . . and . . . well, gosh, that was encouraging."

When asked about significant supports during the study, a high school student recognized her teachers:

I've gotten a lot of encouragement for coming to school—my teachers definitely. They really supported me and my work. I know that going into [one elective] I was not confident at all. I didn't want to come to school Tuesdays and Thursdays because I didn't really want to do that class. But, [the teacher kept] telling me: you're good at this; you have a talent for this; keep doing it; you're doing great. His support and . . . approval really encouraged me to do better. And . . . most of my other teachers do that also. But just getting their approval definitely encouraged me to come.

A few elementary students said during the final interviews that the teachers were important to them. An early elementary student made one of her simple, gentle statements when she was asked about supports that helped her improve attendance. "My teacher said that it was good. That felt good."

A high school parent praised the teachers who worked with a boy who had an extended illness, and was chronically absent, to make sure that he passed his classes:

His . . . teacher helped him and [another] teacher gave him a sponsor so he could be here working late after school. He has grown to really like [the first teacher]. Something he's done or said has—[our son] now thinks he's a great teacher and he didn't at first. He didn't like that class at all. Now he is positive. I don't know, something he's done. And of course he's always liked [the second teacher]. . . . And I think he likes [math]. I think she's been real good for him. She's cracking the whip a little bit and he seems to not mind that. He seems to respond to that, no question.

An early elementary student became more outgoing during the study term. Her mother was talking about the little girl's interactions with staff and her growing confidence when she said, "She talks to [Mrs. K] every day. . . . She's just getting more to where she feels at home there, . . . doesn't feel, like, so alone. When she comes home she talks a lot about it, like you guys are old buds." A minority of participants described staff relationships when discussing study interventions, and most staff had indirect responsibilities concerning the research, but some individuals provided evidence that school adults impacted children's attendance decisions.

Calendar. Self-tracking of attendance was an intervention that I provided for all students, but did not associate with any requirement or reward. I did talk about the calendars during check-ins, and learned that most students were keeping them, but that some were not. All elementary and middle school students were provided stickers to mark their daily progress. High school students were offered stickers, and a few took them, but the majority preferred to hang the calendars in their lockers and mark them by hand. I collected the calendars at the end of each month when I distributed the new ones, and offered to laminate them so the students could take them home to their parents. Nine of ten K–6 students kept their calendars faithfully and chose to

140

take them home. A slight minority of high school students kept their calendars faithfully through the entire study term, and only one wanted theirs laminated.

In the final interviews, about half the K–6 students mentioned that keeping calendars was important to them, and most of those emphasized that they liked the stickers. Only three high school students discussed the calendars, but for those individuals the calendars had significant meaning. No parents mentioned the calendars during the final interviews. A high school student said the calendar was her favorite thing about participating. "I like keeping track of my days, so that helped me personally. . . . It helped me keep track of how many days I was coming. I liked that. It helped me see my progress." Another high school student said the calendar was an important support. "The calendar helped me keep . . . clear how many days I missed. It also helped me improve my grades by knowing what day I missed and what I needed to go back and look for. It helped a lot."

Students had also talked about the calendars during check-ins. A mid-level student said, "Keeping the calendar is good, easy. It feels good to put a sticker on. That means I'm not skipping school." I asked a mid-level student how it felt using the stickers to keep track of their own attendance. "Awesome. There's no way to explain how it feels. It feels awesome to know I have been at school and I can see I've been here." A classmate said, "I look forward to putting stickers on the calendar," and when I mentioned laminating it he said, "My mom would like that." A high school student missed only 1 day during the study, but explained he was keeping the calendar in case he got sick or something and needed to know what he missed. "I've been keeping [the] calendar. It's in my locker. I mark the calendar every day in my locker." Self-tracking was not important to everyone, but for some it provided positive reinforcement or was an organizational resource.

Summary regarding successful interventions. Some interventions were recognized as successful by a majority of participants. The weekly incentives were described by almost all parents and students. The student–administrator relationship was discussed by almost all parents and a majority of students. During the study, I was the primary contact for students. However, in other school settings and circumstances, as recommended by Chang and Romero (2008), specific individuals may be assigned responsibility for coordinating intervention efforts; someone must coordinate tracking and intervention.

Other staff members were not as directly involved with interventions as I was, yet at the end of the study students said that many adults were important regarding supporting their attendance. In the intervention effectiveness section which follows, I discuss teacher perspectives in more detail. Students believed teachers and staff were important, and understanding how the teachers perceived the study was beneficial. The self-tracking intervention was more important to K–6 students than it was to older participants, but some high school students were strongly affected by the calendars. Almost all K–6 participants mentioned the calendars, and they liked earning and collecting stickers. The high school students who discussed self-tracking described satisfaction at seeing their improvement and the utility of the calendar as an organizational tool. I did not tie rewards to calendar maintenance, but have considered increased emphasis regarding this intervention as the work moves forward.

Intervention Effectiveness

The action research method is an approach that attempts to understand problems of practice and develop practical solutions that result in organizational improvement. Action research is a cyclic methodology, and as one cycle ends the researcher must determine what worked and what did not. Adjustments may be made prior to the subsequent cycle commencing,

and an overarching fundament of the method is an orientation toward continuous improvement. The following was one of the research questions that guided this study: Why were the most successful school interventions considered effective?

After the intervention phase of this study ended, a teacher survey was administered. That survey may be found in Appendix C. Responses to the survey provided data that was helpful concerning evaluating the research question. Prior to presenting the results of my analysis, I briefly discuss the level of teacher involvement. That knowledge may inform the reader regarding judgement concerning the reliability of results. It may also benefit practitioners who are considering addressing chronic absenteeism in their own settings.

The teachers had limited knowledge regarding the methodology or the procedures during data collection. In the spring of 2015, I shared with the staff that I would be implementing interventions with select chronically absent students at the start of the school year. I told them slightly more detail would be provided during the August pre-service. During pre-service week I explained the reward-based system, the student attendance calendars, and my plan for accomplishing regular check-ins. I explained that my study was governed by IRB approval, that I would be working within the approved protocols, and that I could not deviate from those methods. I asked the staff for help in three areas. I emphasized the need for confidentiality during the intervention phase and requested that the work not become a topic of casual discussion. I shared that non-participants were likely to learn who was participating as the term progressed, and asked that the faculty protect the participants' psychological safety by stopping any teasing or group discussion that might arise. I asked the staff to remember during the term that the study was occurring and told them, although they would have almost no role, that I would ask them to complete a survey at the conclusion of the project.

Teacher surveys. The survey was administered to all teachers who had at least one participant in a class during the first trimester. The N for the survey was 17. The survey consisted of Likert-type and open-ended prompts and may be found in Appendix C. The survey was anonymous, and I had no means of determining which survey came from whom. In the K–12 setting, different teachers developed varying levels of understanding regarding the study as the term progressed. For example, the K–6 teachers knew exactly who was involved, because they taught self-contained classes for most of each day, and every week I would come to the room and collect students for conversations and prize distribution. One secondary teacher, who taught seniors during a course called senior seminar, knew who was involved because it was during that period that I took the senior participants for our group meetings. The rest of the secondary staff and the elective specialists (PE, shop, music, and Spanish) were less likely to know who was involved, because no single teacher was impacted consistently.

The elementary teachers had the same group of students almost all day every day. When a few students were gone it was obvious. In the small school, the secondary specialists taught six different classes each week. Several of them taught grades 7–12. Class sizes at the study site were about 20 students, and the secondary teachers saw approximately 120 students each week. The high school student participants represented all four grades. Whereas an elementary teacher had a couple of students who were involved, there were 10 high school participants, and many secondary teachers had all 10. The PE and music specialists had even more participants enrolled in their classes, because they taught K–12. They taught all elementary students every day, and because some high school students were enrolled in their courses, those teachers had the largest number of participating students in their classes.

In retrospect, it may have been beneficial to have been able to identify who filled out each survey, or at least to know if a survey came from the elementary, middle, or high school. Nonetheless, the teachers provided meaningful input and offered some constructive suggestions for moving the work forward into the next cycles of intervention. For the Likert-type prompts, teachers were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the specific statement on the survey. To facilitate graphic presentation, these responses were converted to numbers. The Likert-type teacher survey data is summarized in Appendix G in Figures G1 and G2.

Most teachers believed participation in the project was beneficial for students. Five teachers responded neutral to this prompt, but the other 12 agreed or strongly agreed. Regarding the prompt that stated the project did not take too much time away from class, two teachers were neutral, and 15 agreed or strongly agreed. When teachers were asked if students improved their attendance, two disagreed and three were neutral; the other 12 agreed or strongly agreed. The teachers had not been presented with attendance data, so they were giving their general impressions. In reality, 80% of students did improve their attendance.

The teacher responses reflect those individual's perceptions concerning the study. Students improved their attendance and the project was beneficial for them. Class time was not highly impacted. Other than two responses from teachers who may not have known attendance actually improved, there were no negative feelings concerning any of these three questions. For me, this represented an agreement that this work was worth doing and should continue.

In their comments, some teachers made strong statements endorsing the work. One teacher said:

The students in my classes as a whole were more productive, focused, and motivated to do better. Students were in class on time far more often and had a positive attitude. Students were more engaged. Students turned in more assignments than in previous terms. Students seemed to respond well to greater adult attention and interactive help in overcoming issues and concern toward school.

One teacher explained that the participants' behavior had effects that extended to their peers, an outcome associated with social network theory. Christakis (2010) demonstrated that one interpersonal interaction rippled outward through a social network at least four times, and influenced people not directly involved in the interaction. "The students participating (the majority) were more positive and this did affect the class(es) as a whole." Another teacher believed that the study affected participants' academic performance. "It seemed to have an overall positive effect. Students in the study seemed more prepared for class."

Some comments indicated that teachers wanted to be more deeply involved, and that the program should be expanded going forward. One teacher said there should be "more information given to teachers." Another teacher agreed and also advocated for involving more students. "Allow teachers to be aware of students in the program. Make the program year-long. Get more students into the program." A teacher made a suggestion regarding getting more students to buy-in when they said I should "maybe find if there are some more individualized incentives for some of the kids who opted out." The teacher surveys did not contain any comments that were highly critical of the work, but they did offer critiques that suggested minor adjustments going forward.

There were responses that affirmed that the study was beneficial for the students and that they appreciated their principal being involved. One teacher said that, "Students seemed excited

that they were being mentored and their attendance did matter." Another shared that, "Student[s were] aware of being in school and [were] excited when they walked in the room. They also looked forward to meeting their mentor for the one-on-one and positive reinforcement." Yet another explained, "They liked the prizes and being part of the group participating. They seemed to enjoy the positive interactions with Mr. Brookins." A teacher believed that this work did make a difference. "Seniors were (on the whole) more positive about attending and more conscientious. . . . Students and the seniors had better grades/comprehension due to better attendance." This was another teacher data point that implied social network influences affected students other than the participants. Another said, "The students wanted to come to school to meet the expectations." Two teachers noticed academic benefit because it was apparent the project was "getting kids in the classroom and more aware/concerned about academic progress" and it was "motivating students to improve attendance and success in school."

Student self-esteem. Based on the data provided by the final interviews, there was evidence that some students were thinking differently about themselves and about school. To me, these represented increased self-esteem and advanced self-concept. This data was included in this section because it was a product of study involvement rather than having been a direct intervention per se. These statements expressed thinking or feeling that there was personal motivation for attending school; three fourths of the 12 secondary students expressed these ideas. For example, a high school student said, "It felt good to . . . see how it's going. . . . Showing up . . . and . . . knowing that what I'm doing, there [are] rewards. . . . Now I'm [working] to my abilities and . . . showing up, there's a purpose for it. . . . It's nothing to take for granted." A high school student said, "It made me want to come to school more. I had more ambition in what I

147

was planning to do which was get through my senior year of high school." This student's parent noticed a difference:

> It encouraged him. We got right to the, oh, I don't want to go, and I said okay, it's up to you and it was his choice. It was his decision, and he said, okay, yeah, let's go. . . . It seemed important to him to make it happen. I think that that motivates him, because he sees how important something is. He's a senior, . . . and he's ready for school to be done. . . . He seemed . . . impressed with hey, I did this. I'm there. . . . It's important to him if he recognizes he's making an impression.

Another high school student named her favorite thing about participating. "I think it's the self-improvement and the self-reward I have." This student's mother explained why she thought her daughter's perspective had changed. "She's such a perfectionist that . . . if she thinks she didn't do something right she tries to fix it. . . . She is very driven and . . . amazes me every day with her trying to succeed and be who she wants to be." A high school student said her favorite thing was "the outcome of it, the improvement. . . . Support and I guess approval really encouraged me to do better."

The mid-level participants also shared improved attitudes. A mid-level student explained, "It's just that it helps me motivate and keep going. . . . I think what I'm doing right now, not like the prizes and stuff like that . . . would help motivate me to work towards something and help me out through the year." His classmate said that he was "trying really hard, . . . trying to focus, . . . trying my hardest." This student's parent said her son was personally impacted by "his hard work of being there, making the effort. . . . He was so excited about being there and that was a really great thing for him."

The elementary students did not make statements that fit into this category, but their parents did. An early elementary parent was describing the changes he had noticed in his daughter. "She was just excited to go to school and to do her classes, . . . she's been really ecstatic this year that she has perfect attendance. She's constantly bragging about that." A mid-level mother said, "[L]'s been doing so well, . . . and [is] just really proud . . . , and I was proud of [L]." An early elementary parent believed participating affected self-esteem. "I think it made her feel special, being something that she got to do."

School motivation. The final interviews also revealed that the study impacted school motivation. Again, this analysis was included in this section because it was a product of project involvement. Some of this data was included early in this chapter in the section regarding factors motivating attendance. In that section I presented evidence that compared and contrasted data as the study progressed. I engage in a less elaborate treatment here.

I discussed the school student who said, in part, "There was a purpose for being here. . . . Each day is valuable. . . . You can't take it for granted." I also described the high school student who decided, "Part of it is just coming to school every day . . . in the mindset that I'm here to work, . . . being here . . . is important." An early elementary student thought the project was important and stated that, "I missed a lot of school last year and that affected my education. I thought it would help me to go to school a lot more and help me with my learning."

A high school parent noticed a difference. "The attitude, his willingness to come has been better. . . . He even says I know I need to go. I'd rather not go but I need to, so I'm going to." Another high school parent noticed a change. "I think it was helping her to motivate to get to school every day. We didn't have the problem with her trying to play sick or anything like that this term. . . . She . . . understands the importance of school." A high school parent named a

149

specific program that had influenced motivation. "I know part of what's helped her is the work study she has now where she goes to school . . . and then goes to work. That has, for her, been very beneficial. It has kept her more focused I think." An early elementary parent shared, "She's been just really motivated to be at school this year, a lot more than last year. . . . When we get up in the morning, it's, oh, gotta get up, can't miss the bus. There's never any arguments, or her grumping." An early elementary parent also emphasized his daughter's increased focus on her attendance. "She talks a lot about school. . . . She's always been concerned about not missing school, but especially now." The data revealed that the participants noticed changes in student motivation associated with participation in this study.

Academic performance. Increased achievement was not frequently mentioned during the final interviews, but about one fourth of participants stated that improved attendance improved achievement. Some students made very straightforward statements in this regard. A mid-level student said, "I increased my learning." This student's parent noticed the difference. "It's once [M]'s behind, catching up is not easy. In anything, I always tell [M] that. If you get behind in school . ; ." Another mid-level student said things were going better, and that missing school had meant lower grades; "It is 'cause you can also get behind on homework." Yet another mid-level student stated, "It helped with grades." His parent explained, "The things he's doing at school, he's feeling better . . . because he's been more involved. Or more there . . . when they're talking about it, or reading about it, or working on it. He's there more, so he feels better about that education-wise." High school students had a little more to say. One shared:

> You have to be here to keep your grades up. Before this study, . . . when I was skipping
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> school a lot, I had like A's and B's, sometimes a C here and there. And I don't know if

150

it's because of this study or because it's my senior year and I just want to get out, but I

have all A's.

Another high school student said:

I want to get better attendance. I know I missed a lot of school last year because of

doctor's appointments and stuff . . . I wanted to make sure that I was actually coming to

school and getting better grades. . . . Getting to where I needed to be and actually

remembering the information. . . . Just getting better with school, . . . I felt like this was a

good way to get started with that.

It was not a majority of participants who mentioned academics, but those who did recognized

that better attendance corresponded to improved achievement.

Summary regarding why interventions were effective. The research question that

guided this section asked why successful interventions were effective. From the teachers'

perspectives, there were no negatives associated with the project. It did not negatively impact

their classrooms. Participants improved their attendance, and it was beneficial for students in

other ways as well. My judgement was that the teachers thought the effort was worth it, and

there would be benefit to continuing the work. Their suggestions implied that many believed a

more whole-school approach was necessary, and staff needed more information to participate

effectively in this work. I concluded that in moving the work forward, a collaborative, team

approach would effectively identify additional next steps and enhance buy-in by all concerned.

The interventions worked for students because they provided both tangible and intangible

benefits. In a prior section, I discussed some tangible rewards such as weekly prizes and

improved relationships. In this section, the evidence demonstrated that many students improved

their grades, a tangible benefit. I also argued that participating provided less tangible benefits.

151

Student self-esteem was positively impacted, and students' motivation to attend school increased. Evidence revealed that students were feeling good about attending more regularly. Students were also more aware that there was a purpose for school, and that attending provided them increased opportunity to harvest the benefits. Students wanted to get up and come to school, and their parents noticed the difference.

Chapter 4 Summary

In this chapter I presented demographic data concerning the school absenteeism characteristics and the study participants. The study site had chronic absenteeism characteristics that roughly paralleled national trends, and the chronic absenteeism rate was near the Oregon average. The intervention effort at the study site was successful. Three fourths of the 20 student participants were not chronically absent during the first trimester of 2015–2016. Eighty percent of participants improved their attendance compared to their 2014–2015 annual rate.

Likert-type data obtained from students' and parents' initial interviews revealed that most students liked school, but a majority of students stated that they missed school sometimes when they were not sick or going places with their families. A majority of parents believed it was acceptable for students to miss school for unexcused reasons. The data obtained from the final interviews showed that a majority of participants believed that participating in the project was beneficial and that the school supports helped students improve attendance. The teacher Likert-type data demonstrated that the study did not greatly impact participation in class and that they believed student participation in the project was beneficial.

The qualitative data obtained during this project provided the basis for a rich and thick description of the findings. I described the qualitative coding process I used to analyze the data. The analyses revealed that the strongest factors that motivated students to attend school were

peer relationships, academic engagement, and staff–student relationships. The strongest factors that contributed to absences were illness and medical appointments, family decisions and priorities, and student anxiety—individual and school-related. Regarding the successes of the intervention project, the most important factors were incentives, principal involvement, and increased motivation toward and success in school. Student absences are individualized phenomena and at the study site were influenced by school, individual, and family factors. They were somewhat unique to individual students and their families. This study produced results that were consistent with many of findings identified during the review of extant literature, which was described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Some interventions were recognized as successful by a majority of participants. The weekly incentives were described by almost all parents and students. The student–administrator relationship was discussed by almost all parents and a majority of students. Students said that many adults were important regarding supporting their attendance. Interventions worked because they provided both tangible and intangible benefits.

From the teachers' perspectives, there were no negatives associated with the project. It did not negatively impact their classrooms. Participants improved their attendance, and it was beneficial for students in other ways as well. The teachers thought the effort was worth it, and there would be benefit to continuing the work. Many believed a more whole-school approach was necessary, and staff needed more information to participate effectively in this work. Moving forward, a collaborative, team approach should be utilized.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In this final chapter of the dissertation I will briefly discuss some of the seminal literature that relates to this study and also discuss contemporary research that I identified subsequent to the inauguration of my research project. I will briefly summarize this study's methodology and the results in relation to the research questions. I will then discuss and interpret the results I presented in Chapter 4. I will follow those reasoned interpretations with a discussion of the results in relation to the literature. The final sections of this chapter, immediately preceding the conclusion, will discuss the limitations of this study, the implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Results

The following research questions guided this study.

How did students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of missing and attending school?

- What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by chronically absent students?

- What did students describe as important reasons that they regularly attended school?

- How did these reasons, perceptions, and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

How did parents or guardians of students describe the reasons for and their perceptions of their students missing and attending school?

- What were the most prevalent shared attitudes regarding school absence described by parents or guardians of chronically absent students?

154

- What did parents or guardians describe as motivating factors regarding students' school attendance?

- How did these motivating factors and attitudes inform possible school interventions?

What implemented school interventions were the most successful concerning improving the attendance of chronically absent students?

- Why were the most successful school interventions considered effective?

Seminal Literature

The full conceptual framework for this dissertation was detailed and supported with evidence in Chapters 1 and 2. Excessive absenteeism results in negative outcomes, both academic and socio-behavioral. Understanding individual student absences enables effective intervention. Addressing chronic absenteeism is a priority in Oregon, where the study school is located.

In the following section I will briefly review seminal work that contributed to the development of the literature review and the study methodology. Many of these researchers have published additional academic work that I have not cited in this dissertation, which may be beneficial for those interested in one or more of these framework areas. The literature I reviewed for Chapter 2 of this dissertation was not fully representative of some of the authors' areas of expertise, and this review provides additional insight regarding some individuals' publications.

Attendance and achievement. In the early 20th century, research was conducted that examined the relationship between absence and achievement. In 1923, Charles Odell published one of the earliest studies that utilized statistical analysis to demonstrate the attendance–achievement relationship. Odell incorporated a standardized assessment as one outcome measure. Carl Ziegler completed doctoral research in 1928 and sought to demonstrate scientific

findings by utilizing statistical analyses rather than observation and experience. In 1926, Charles Butler examined the relationship between attendance and school marks for a sample of over 1,900 students. Eleven years later, he completed follow-up research using a much larger sample ($N = 23,958$) of longitudinal data with more discriminating academic data. These studies showed a strong relationship between attendance and achievement. Over the next two decades these studies were cited by subsequent researchers who recommended that research in this area continue, but little work was done to further this field of research until the late 20th century.

In the mid-1990s aggregate, state-level, standardized achievement data had begun to accumulate. Foundational work was completed in 1993 by Stephen Caldas, and in 1996 by Douglas Lamdin, which argued for the achievement–attendance link. This was followed with a 2004 study by Douglas Roby that seemed to verify Caldas and Lamdin. These seminal studies precipitated extensive subsequent work in this area. The strongest contemporary work has been completed by Michael Gottfried. Over the last several years, Gottfried has researched and written extensively about attendance and achievement. Gottfried has developed sophisticated statistical models that purport to demonstrate effects at the individual level, whereas Caldas, Lamdin, and Roby demonstrated school-level effects. Gottfried has also advanced study of the effects of chronic absenteeism, an area he described as a "nascent" (Gottfried, 2014, p. 55) field of study.

Ramifications of absenteeism. Steven Sheldon and Joyce Epstein have developed a body of work that describes absenteeism in terms of individual, family, school, and community factors. They have worked together, independently, and have partnered with other researchers. They have described the negative outcomes associated with chronic absenteeism that include effects on achievement, school completion, and life outcomes. Sheldon and Epstein's work is

also relevant to the interventions section immediately following, because they have described effective school practices and approaches to intervention. Sheldon and Epstein are frequently referenced in contemporary academic literature, which is evidence that their work is highly regarded by academic researchers.

Hedy Chang is, at the time of this writing, the director of Attendance Works, a national organization that strives to reduce chronic absenteeism. Chang's 2008 work with Mariajose Romero, which described the impacts of early chronic absenteeism, is cited in this dissertation. Chang has been writing about issues related to early childhood education for over three decades. I also mention Chang in the subsequent Oregon issues section, as she was a co-author of the seminal study in Oregon related to the chronic absenteeism phenomenon.

School psychologists and social workers describe that some chronically absent students refuse to attend school. My research required me to understand the perspective of school refusal behavior. Shanta Dube and Pamela Orpinas are faculty of Georgia State University and the University of Georgia, respectively, who have been professionals in the field of public health. Both have a long record of research related to, among other topics, behavior issues in schools. I cited a 2009 paper by Dube and Orpinas that discussed student factors influencing school refusal. Christopher Kearney is the chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His earliest work slightly predates that of Orpinas, and his record demonstrates an even more tightly focused emphasis on school refusal. In this dissertation I cited two papers Kearney wrote with Michelle Bates that have informed educational professionals regarding school refusal.

Interventions. This study integrated practices identified during research to develop interventions such as collaborating with participants, incentives, and attendance tracking. This

section reviews important work concerning intervening with chronically absent students. Above I referenced Sheldon and Epstein, who have contributed to intervention theory and have described the influence of community, school, family, and student factors (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Sheldon, 2007). In the conceptual framework I discussed the importance of student voice as one component of intervention development. In the results section of this dissertation I recorded quotes that represented student, parent, and teacher voices. Dennis Thiessen has been researching and writing about education for more than 30 years. Thiessen has authored papers and books that focus on student and teacher perspectives when examining educational issues. In the literature review I cited a 2006 paper by Thiessen that argued students may be effective change agents if school leaders listen to them and respond to their concerns. However, Thiessen's body of work is much more comprehensive and significant regarding the importance of involving those affected as part of the decision making of school leaders.

As educational professionals strive to remain current concerning interventions to address chronic absenteeism, it is important to remember the utility and efficiency of referencing online resources. By completing an internet search, individuals may find regional collectives that coordinate localized efforts. At the national level, Chang's Attendance Works may be found on the web at www.attendanceworks.org. The U.S. Department of Education website has resources informing chronic absenteeism, including a toolkit for schools and communities that may benefit absenteeism work (U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, & U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). I will describe some Oregon collectives in the section that follows this one.

Intervention theory regarding chronic absenteeism is a rapidly evolving area of academic literature and graduate research. Understanding what works is important, and evidence-based decisions may be the future of intervention work. In 2010, Brandy Maynard published a doctoral dissertation that reported the results of a meta-analysis of the extant literature concerning chronic absenteeism intervention. Her analysis represented foundational work regarding identification of promising practices based on quantitative analyses, and offered potential to advance theory beyond descriptive and observation-based interpretations. Maynard has published prolifically since being awarded her Ph.D., including work that focuses on absenteeism issues.

Oregon issues. Scott Perry was appointed Interim Superintendent of the Multnomah Education Service District in December, 2015. Superintendent Perry is recognized as one of the foremost experts in Oregon regarding chronic absenteeism. He consults with districts and schools regarding intervention efforts and is a frequent presenter at conferences and workshops. Superintendent Perry began working on attendance and student engagement around 2004 when he was a school psychologist working for the Linn–Benton Education Service District. He moved on to become superintendent of the Southern Oregon Education Service District (SOESD) where he worked until his recent retirement from that position (S. Perry, personal communication, February 16, 2016). During his tenure at SOESD Perry managed this state's first and most widespread regional effort regarding intervention with chronically absent students. Although Perry has not published formal research findings, his informal findings are discussed during his presentations.

In 2012, Melanie Buehler, John Topanga, and Hedy Chang evaluated 2009–2010 data and produced the first substantive evaluation of chronic absenteeism in Oregon. In 2014, Betsy Hammond, an investigative reporter for The Oregonian newspaper published a six-part series

that analyzed 2012–2013 data, evaluated the trends, and described challenges and successes in specific districts. Hammond has continued to investigate the issue and keep it in the public eye. Her most recent work is cited later in this chapter. Two Portland, Oregon organizations, Upstream Public Health (UPH) and the Children's Institute (CI), support initiatives and publish research related to chronic absenteeism. In 2014, Katia Riddle produced a report for CI that provided recommendations for action and described successful school practices. Also in 2014, Tia Henderson, Caitlin Hill, and Kerry Norton reported for UPH concerning the nature of chronic absenteeism, links to student health issues, and promising practices.

Recent Findings

Research continues concerning the chronic absenteeism issue. Recent studies have evaluated participants' perspectives, effects on achievement, and programs that may influence attendance. Each of these areas has been an element of this study, either identified as an aspect of the conceptual framework, part of the methodology, or revealed in the findings. The following are recently published articles, reports, or studies that were not identified prior to the implementation of this research project. They represent some of the most recent work, analysis, or priorities concerning chronic absenteeism.

In a recent research project, Bradley (2015) focused on parent perspectives related to the issue. Bradley cited studies such as those by Sheldon (2005; 2007) and Sheldon and Epstein (2004) to establish the framework for his parental involvement work. Bradley conducted interviews with 13 parents of students, past or present, in an urban school district. He described a purposeful selection of participants "to gather a cross section of individuals of gender, race, and socioeconomic status to capture a broad range of perspectives" (p. 39). Bradley explored two research questions: What were the obstacles parents faced that led to absenteeism, and what

supports would they build into a school intervention program? Bradley reported that

transportation was a critical issue, as was the case for some families in this current study. The

majority of the participant quotes that were related to his first question contained references to

transportation. Bradley stated that transportation supports were the most frequent responses

regarding effective school interventions. The other most frequently mentioned supports were

varied strategies to increase parental involvement and improve school–home communication.

Although this current study did not focus on parent-oriented interventions in the school setting, it

did seek to raise participant awareness concerning individual student attendance (and

tangentially to its relationship to achievement). During this current study, parents generally

expressed satisfaction concerning communication regarding attendance, but staff improved the

consistency of that communication.

Rasasingham (2015) published a review of the previous decade's literature titled *The Risk*

and Protective Factors of School Absenteeism. Rasasingham's analysis included references to

several authors who were cited in this dissertation. Rasasingham is a psychiatrist, and some of

his findings were related to the medical and psychological factors that influenced absences.

However, Rasasingham identified risk factors that were present at the study site. Economic

disadvantage, school stressors, family attitudes, anxiety, and school refusal were found to place

students at risk for absenteeism. Regarding interventions, he identified the effectiveness of

programs that understand chronically absent students as individuals. A student who felt

supported and psychologically secure was more likely to improve attendance. He suggested that

a system of consistent supports provided a foundation for intervention, and that beyond that

schools should seek to address individual needs. Rasasingham also stated that "an important part

of successfully implementing an intervention is the collaboration between school officials,

parents, [and] youth" (p. 199). This current study included elements that addressed these priorities.

In Oregon, vibrant conversations regarding chronic absenteeism continue. Betsy Hammond, who writes for Oregon's largest newspaper, continues to keep the issue in front of the public. Hammond (2015) analyzed Department of Education data and reported that the statewide chronic absenteeism rate improved 0.3% compared to 2 years prior, but that seniors, at 32%, and juniors, at 25%, continued to miss school at alarming rates. School districts' successes regarding ameliorating the problem continue to be mixed. During 2014–2015, in the 10 districts with the lowest rates, chronic absenteeism was 11% or less; in the 10 with the highest rates, it was 26% or greater. In December of 2015, the Oregon Department of Education published a research brief that described the demographic characteristics of students who were chronically absent during 2014–2015 (C. Clinton, personal communication, March 7, 2016) and provided information concerning specific schools that had implemented intervention practices (Clinton & Reeder, 2015).

The Chapter 2 literature review indicated that the Oregon state legislature has begun to make chronic absenteeism a priority issue. House Bill 4002, which directs the Department of Education to form a task force to study the issue, came out of committee early in the February, 2016 "short session." Subsequent to that House action, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Education arranged to visit the study site to discuss the chronic absenteeism and the findings of this research study (A. L. Roblan, personal communication, February 9, 2016). On February 15, the chairwoman of the House Education Committee introduced HB 4031, which would provide funding to establish pilot sites to study local issues and intervene with chronically absent students. Some legislators have become aware of this research study, and at their invitation I

travelled to the Capitol to meet with the chairs of the Senate and House Education Committees, among others, to provide input concerning the legislative efforts (A. L. Roblan & M. Doherty, personal communication, February 18, 2016). I presented a summary of critical issues to the House Education Chair for her use while lobbying for the pilot project bill (M. Doherty, personal communication, February 22, 2016). In that letter I communicated select limited statistics related to this project without compromising the confidentiality of the study participants. I shared that I had engaged in an intervention project while completing my doctoral research and revealed how much time I spent each week intervening with chronically absent students. I stated that I worked with K–12 students, and that 80% of the student participants improved attendance and 75% were not chronically absent during the study trimester.

House Bill 4002 passed the House on March 1, 2016, the Senate on March 2, 2016, and was signed into law by the Governor on March 29, 2016. House Bill 4031 stalled in the House Ways and Means Committee and is expected to resurface in some form during the full legislative session in 2017 (M. Doherty, personal communication, February 18, 2016). Legislative action during the short session is reflective of conversations I had with the Education Chairs when I was at the Capitol. It is easy to pass a task force bill that has no imminent financial impact and assigns responsibility to a fully funded Department of Education. Identifying funding to establish pilot projects is more difficult, and even that limited effort would represent a small fraction of what will be required to support this work statewide and long-term.

Further evidence is accumulating that chronic absenteeism has deleterious impacts on achievement. Collins (2015) completed a doctoral research study that confirmed that chronic absence negatively impacted both Communication Arts and Mathematics achievement on year-end Missouri state tests. To eliminate sampling error, Collins chose to investigate the full

population of 250 students in grades 5 through 8 in one school district. He examined

longitudinal data from 2010–2014. Although Collins's methodology implied he was examining

the effects of high absenteeism (more than 10% of days), the results indicated that he conducted

Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlations between the number of days absent and the

state test measures. His calculations revealed statistically significant relationships between

attendance and performance on both state test measures. The effect for Communication Arts was

demonstrated at $p = .02$, and for Mathematics at $p < .01$. I have provided evidence in this

dissertation that the effect of absenteeism is more profound for mathematics than for reading,

and Collins's findings support that argument.

Coelho, Fischer, McKnight, Matteson, and Schwartz (2015) presented a report to the

Wisconsin Department of Public Education that evaluated the link between absenteeism during

first grade and subsequent achievement on a third grade standardized measure, the Wisconsin

Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE). Coelho et al. collected statewide data for more

than 340,000 students and controlled for demographic characteristics. Coelho et al. compared

mean achievement scores for the sample in reading and mathematics to the mean scores for

chronically absent students (missed 18–35 days) and excessively chronically absent students

(missed at least 36 days). Except for the Asian subgroup, statistically significant differences at

$p < .01$ or greater ($p < .001$) were revealed in both subjects for all groups. The effect was greater

in mathematics than in reading, and it was greater for the excessively chronically absent than the

chronically absent. Research continues to reveal that early chronic absenteeism has negative

impacts on subsequent achievement.

Michael Gottfried continues to develop an important body of work that utilizes

sophisticated statistical analyses to examine the effects of chronic absenteeism; Gottfried's work

has been cited in this dissertation previously. A study by Gottfried (2015) became accessible

online in December 2015 and will become available in print in the near future. Gottfried's

findings demonstrated that chronic absenteeism has whole-class effects, and that as the number

of chronically absent students in a class increased, the achievement of all suffered. Gottfried's

investigation utilized a large sample, $N = 23,386$, of third and fourth grade students across 175

schools in a single, large school district. These studies regarding the relationship between

attendance and achievement are relevant to this study because my conceptual framework argues

that absence has negative impacts on achievement.

The findings of this current study revealed that different extra-curricular activities and

activity-based school experiences were motivating for some students. Two recent studies

provided evidence concerning the importance of such programs. MacIver and MacIver (2015)

investigated the impact on the attendance of middle school students who participated in a

summer robotics program. MacIver and MacIver utilized a quasi-experimental design and had

complete data for 166 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students who represented approximately

70 schools and participated in robotics at eight summer sites. A matched comparison group of

the participating students' peers was established and co-variates were incorporated into the

design to account for individual and school factors. The effect on attendance was found to be

significant at $p = .001$, and robotics participants attended an average of 2.5 more days during the

subsequent year than did their non-participating peers. Robotics has been available to middle

and high school students at the current study site since 2013–2014, and an elementary robotics

program was established in 2015–2016, concurrent with this intervention investigation.

Leos-Urbel and Sanchez (2015) reported on the attendance effects of participation by

elementary and K–8 students in Playworks in the San Francisco and Oakland Unified School

Districts. Playworks is program that involves mentored games and activities—during class, at recess, before and after school, and as organized extra-curricular athletics. The goals of the program include building school climate by promoting positive peer-to-peer interactions and increased student connectedness and school engagement. Leos-Urbel discovered that Playworks students attended approximately one-third more days per year than their non-Playworks peers; the effect was doubled for chronically absent students. At the school level, Playworks schools had 4% fewer chronically absent students than non-Playworks schools. The results of this current study demonstrated that different activity-based experiences motivated some students to attend school.

Summary of recent findings. Academic research regarding chronic absenteeism continues to be conducted. Coelho et al. (2015) provided additional evidence that early chronic absenteeism has subsequent negative impacts on achievement; the link between absenteeism and reduced achievement is a critical element of the conceptual framework for this current study. Gottfried (2015) demonstrated that a student's chronic absence negatively impacts classmates; intervening with students at the study site may offer broader organizational benefit. Bradley (2015) utilized a qualitative methodology to understand parent perspectives and inform school leaders regarding ameliorating issues that led to absenteeism; his methods and reporting were similar to aspects of this current study. Rasasingham (2015) described factors that place students at risk for chronic absenteeism and components of effective intervention. His work identified several demographic factors that are present at the study site. Rasasingham explained that each student must be treated as an individual, and that cooperation between the school and families improves the efficacy of interventions. This current methodology incorporated several of Rasasingham's priorities.

166

Studies by MacIver and MacIver (2015) and Leos-Urbel and Sanchez (2015) explained that participation in activities was associated with reduced absenteeism. The results of this current research demonstrated that activity-based experiences were motivating for some students regarding attendance. In Oregon, chronic absenteeism continues to be an educational and public priority. Hammond (2015) reported on the most recent statistics available from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) regarding the issue. Clinton and Reeder (2015) produced a report for ODE that detailed the demographic characteristics of the chronically absent and described some successful intervention practices. Work by the Oregon Legislature codified law requiring action by ODE concerning the issue. The current research study addresses an issue of contemporary significance in the state where this project was conducted.

Review of Methodology

This research project utilized an action research methodology. The population of potential participants was identified from the 2014–2015 school-level absence data provided by the school to the Oregon Department of Education. Families were contacted concerning this research effort if a student had missed more than 10% of days, was enrolled in the district at least 75 days, and intended to enroll at the start of the 2015–2016 school year. I discussed the nature of the study with 25 families and provided informed consent documents to those who expressed interest in participating. Eighty percent of the eligible population signed permission forms, and all of them persisted in their involvement through the study term. During the study, participants permitted me to record almost every interaction. Those recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts became a primary source of data that informed my research.

Prior to the start of the school year I conducted initial interviews with the 20 students and one of their parents. As the study progressed and I gathered data, I evaluated the transcripts by

engaging in cyclic, iterative coding to identify important themes and categories. The first review

of the initial interviews, which I completed during August, focused on interventions and

incentives that participants believed might be beneficial. In the final few days prior to the start

of the school year, I finalized a plan for intervention, prepared student self-tracking calendars,

and purchased inexpensive incentives to use as weekly rewards for those who had perfect

attendance during each week. Prior to the school year, I also met with school staff to finalize

protocols and procedures regarding attendance. I met with the office staff to emphasize the

importance of daily calls to the parents of absent students, record keeping regarding those calls,

and the importance of accurate daily attendance tracking. I met with the teaching faculty

concerning the logistics of study implementation and the need to preserve the dignity and

confidentiality of the participants.

On the first day of school I met with each student, provided them with an attendance

calendar, and explained to them how they would self-track daily attendance. During the study

term, I monitored attendance of the participants daily, and at the end of each week I downloaded

an attendance summary. I met with all participants weekly, usually on the last day of the week,

but if I could not get to everyone, then I occasionally met on the following Monday. During

those meetings, I checked attendance calendars and allowed students who had earned a weekly

prize to choose something from the *incentive store*.

Parallel to those meetings, I formed small groups of high school students that convened

on a bi-weekly basis. Later in the study term, early elementary and mid-level participants from

two classrooms spontaneously initiated small group interactions, and I allowed those group

interactions to happen. As the term progressed, I began to record some individual meetings and

the group interactions. My decisions to record individual meetings were driven by the nature of

the conversations that were occurring. If students began talking about something other than rewards, I frequently turned on the recorder. As the term progressed, we talked about topics such as the study, attendance successes and challenges, school progress, personal and family issues, interactions with staff, and concerns students had mentioned during the initial interviews. Small group meetings were recorded after the initial meetings, during which we clarified the purpose of those groups.

At the end of the study term, I compiled empirical attendance data for the participants. I provided informed consent documents to the teaching faculty who were involved with the participating students, and 100% of them consented to complete a post-intervention survey. I identified a subset of students who were chronically absent during the study trimester that represented five different grades, and obtained consent for participation from those families. I conducted initial interviews with those 10 individuals (five students and five parents) to provide a cross-check on the validity of my initial interview data. I conducted final interviews with the 40 full-study participants.

During the term of the study, I was transcribing recordings on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, there were four types of transcripts: initial interviews, check-ins, final interviews, and initial interviews with first trimester chronic absentees. The other data sources were attendance records, phone logs, and teacher surveys. I began coding the initial interviews and the check-ins during the study term. Themes and categories I identified during those rounds of coding informed my approach to coding the final interviews and the second set of initial interviews. The second set of initial interview data did not yield any strong, novel information, and those data are not detailed in this research report.

Discussion of the Results

This research project demonstrated that participant students and parents were very willing to discuss attitudes and perspectives related to attendance and chronic absenteeism. The methodology provided an opportunity for non-threatening dialogue, and my assessment was that participants welcomed the opportunity to address issues that concerned them. The findings reflect attitudes and priorities of the participants at one rural, K–12 school site, and readers should be mindful of the context dependence of the findings. The data provided strong evidence that this work may be effective in K–12 settings in terms of allowing people to freely express their perspectives, and it demonstrated that a multi-pronged approach to interventions may yield positive outcomes. The extant literature contains few examples that capture this dissertation's depth of participants' authentic voices, and none were found that spanned all 13 grades.

The findings of this study are representative of the participants at the study site, and should not be construed to be generalizable. It is possible that the interplay of a unique combination of factors contributed to the high participation rate, the rich qualitative data, and the success of the interventions. No studies were found in the literature that demonstrated both this level of participation (80%) and an equally high success rate (80% improved attendance). In this analysis I will evaluate the most important findings in relation to motivation to attend, school absences, and effective interventions.

An examination of some of these factors may inform educational professionals regarding the potential transferability of this study's methodology into other settings. In the following sub-sections I first discuss the results by evaluating the relationships between the strongest motivating factors regarding attendance and their relationships to successful interventions. I follow that with an analysis of circumstances that lead to absenteeism, and their association to

interventions that influence attendance and lead to other positive outcomes for students. Finally, I describe the importance of incentives as a component of intervention.

General Findings

The intervention effort at the study site was successful. Three fourths of the participants were not chronically absent during the study term, and 80% improved their attendance. Most students reported that they liked school. They were strongly motivated by social relationships—both peer and staff interactions. Students were motivated by academics, non-curricular learning, or activity-based classes. However, a majority of students missed school sometimes when perhaps they did not need to. Many parents believed it was acceptable for students to miss school for unexcused reasons. A majority of participants believed that participating in the project was beneficial and that the school supports helped students improve attendance.

Student absences are individualized phenomena and at the study site were influenced by school, individual, and family factors. The strongest factors that contributed to absences were illness and medical appointments, family decisions and priorities, and student anxiety—individual and school-related. The length of an absence related to medical appointments was sometimes influenced by transportation. Regarding family priorities, some parents believed all absences should be excused if the parents communicated about them and many held very strong opinions in this regard.

The most successful interventions were incentives, principal involvement, and increased motivation toward and success in school. The teacher data demonstrated that the study did not greatly impact teaching and that teachers believed the project was beneficial. Interventions provided both tangible and intangible benefits.

171

The list of factors motivating absence and attendance, and the data concerning successful interventions, was more extensive than reviewed in this brief summary. Even those examples infrequently mentioned had great importance in individual cases, as I discussed in the Chapter 4 results; for some students, an infrequently named factor was the most important.

Motivating Factors

Peer relationships. Students are motivated to attend school because of social relationships, but may also be negatively impacted by their peers, which may lead to absenteeism. Students also reported that they appreciated opportunities to work with others during classes. The study results revealed that directly addressing the quality of interactions yielded positive outcomes. In this section I will describe how those findings may provide the foundation for more widespread efforts to enhance school climate and student-centered teaching.

This research revealed that at the study site peer relationships were a strong motivator regarding attendance. Peer interaction was valued throughout the school day—on the buses, during unstructured time, in the classrooms, and as an aspect of organized activities. There was also evidence that negative interactions were sometimes demotivating, but that participation in the project helped some individuals improve social relationships. Authors such as Kearney and Bates (2005) and Dube and Orpinas (2009) explained that factors related to school climate increased student stress and anxiety and contributed to absenteeism. Although climate was not directly examined during this research study, the results showed that additional focus in this area may be beneficial. Some students reported improved relationships, although the intervention with them was individualized and targeted toward those students' specific issues and needs. Schoolwide climate initiatives may provide organizational benefit.

Action research seeks to examine issues in a specific setting with the goal of increased understanding that informs improved practices. In some cases, the work may reveal narrow findings that apply only to the issue at hand. At other times, the results provide insights that may benefit the organization more broadly. In this study, the specific research data showed clear benefit for some students regarding improved relationships, and it also revealed that some students felt school-related stress. The study site hired a full-time counselor 1 year prior to the beginning of the study. A long-term plan for counseling intervention at the study site is still developing. This research provides evidence that focusing some resources on overall climate initiatives may benefit the school regarding improved attendance, and also more broadly by improving the quality of all types of interpersonal interactions.

Both younger and older students discussed that specific instructional practices increased their motivation to learn. Some of these included opportunities to interact with peers. Authors such as Kearney (2008) and Sheldon (2007) have explained that individualized and high quality teaching may be influential concerning reducing absenteeism. Although this study did not examine instructional practices, it provided evidence supportive of a parallel effort that was undertaken at the study site. Concomitant with the inauguration of the intervention phase of this study, the teaching faculty at the study site began a professional development course that emphasized the importance of the student as an active, self-directed learner. The staff studied the importance of involving students in the development of learning outcomes, making student thinking visible, and peer feedback. The results of this study demonstrated that students appreciated being able to interact with one another, and that they enjoyed interacting with their teachers. Some students also stated that learning from one another was important to them. The findings from this study support the professional development efforts at the study school.

173

Academic engagement. This study revealed that students were motivated by academic achievement, intellectual growth, and activity-based learning. The results also demonstrated that some participants' attitudes toward attending changed for the better. Action research attempts to identify next steps for organizational improvement. In this section I will discuss how the findings may influence decision making concerning curricular and non-curricular offerings. I will also discuss student motivation, a factor students initially reported as meaningful, but which was enhanced as they improved attendance.

The initial interview data revealed that many students identified a favorite subject or subjects. Other students identified specific non-curricular academically-oriented interests—the library, robotics, and theater arts. Parents also described that their children may have academic preferences, and that student attitudes were positively impacted as their skills increased. A few students stated explicitly that they valued knowledge, and a majority of secondary parents described the future benefits of educational attainment. The study participants communicated in a variety of ways that the school experience was beneficial on an intellectual level. This research sought to reveal issues of importance. How school staff move forward and foster this revealed appreciation for intellectual growth is a logical next step, which is consistent with this study's action research methodology.

Over the last several years the study district has maintained some programs, such as drama, K–12 music, and a K–12 library. It has expanded others, such as industrial arts, high school and elementary robotics clubs, game club, and technology education—including one-to-one computers in the secondary schools, tablets and iPods at the elementary level, and elementary technology-based instructional games in mathematics. The importance to individuals of many of these programs was demonstrated in the results. There were even more singular data

points I have not discussed, such as: it would be nice if the school had equestrian or computer programming. As a superintendent, I interpret the results to say that it is important to preserve the programs that already exist, and consider carefully whether the staff might be able to further augment curricular and non-curricular offerings in the study district. This is another case where I have direct evidence that doing so would be motivating for the chronically absent, and it is reasonable to infer that there may be broader organizational benefit.

During this study, three fourths of student participants were not chronically absent. Something changed for them that motivated them to improve attendance. Student participants reported that they received encouragement from their parents and teachers, and from their peers, regarding the improvement. The results revealed that for many, grades improved and they felt good about their higher marks. The study protocol provided participants the opportunity to earn rewards. External reinforcement occurred for those participants. The evidence presented in this study demonstrated that sometimes students control whether they are absent or not. In those cases, internal motivation is an important factor.

Gunter and Thomson (2007) explained that students are self-aware: they understand how school works; they are conscious of the choices they make; they understand both themselves and school practices well. Long-term, positive attendance behavior is highly student-dependent. Prior to the study, participants explained that students were motivated by engaging school activities. The evidence revealed student participants were increasingly aware of and affected internally by the benefits of improved attendance, and were also cognizant of the negative impacts when they did miss school. It is reasonable to conclude that a strong motivating factor, self-motivation to be engaged, was enhanced when participants missed less school.

A high school student stated that success was making him try 10 times harder. Another high school student said that being at school was important, and that it was critical to engage in work when present. Elementary students shared that they were very proud of themselves and that it was important to get to school every day. Parents described that their children had changed, whether they stopped arguing about getting to school or whether they were making statements concerning the desire to attend. Improved attendance enhanced what was already a motivating factor—an internal desire to be successful.

Student–staff relationships. The quality of their relationships with adults is important to students. The results of this study revealed that intentional efforts may positively influence student–teacher interactions. In this section I will discuss strategies the students and I used to develop those relationships, the desire of teachers to be deeply involved in this type of work, and the importance of my roles as superintendent–principal and researcher in relation to the successes of this project. Implications for future school practices will be discussed.

Participants reported that staff relationships were motivating regarding attendance. The evidence revealed that children had strong, positive relationships with staff who held many different types of positions. In some cases, students or parents discussed a specific staff member. Others discussed a broader level of connection with multiple adults. The evidence indicated that during the term of the study, some students improved their communication and relationships with individual staff members. In part, these improvements were an outcome of the study methodology. The individual and group check-ins provided the students an opportunity to discuss interpersonal difficulties. Investing time and energy ameliorating those relationship difficulties was a priority; as revealed by Lochmiller (2013), improved staff relationship have benefit regarding improved attendance.

176

As I discussed in the peer relationships section, I helped the students develop approaches to problem solving that were effective. In a small number of cases, I approached teachers directly to raise their awareness of issues. I did not compromise the confidentiality of the study by having these discussions. It is a regular part of my practice to visit with teachers and problem solve when I become aware of issues. When I approached teachers, I did not reference the attendance study. As I do in most cases, I discussed that I had become aware that a particular student was having difficulties and had been hesitant to approach the teacher about it. I asked that the staff start a conversation. This is a method I have utilized since I began working in the study district, and in every case teachers have been willing to reach out and attempt to communicate more effectively with a particular student. This two-pronged approach, discussing with students being self-advocates, and sharing with teachers that I thought a student needed to talk with them about a class, was shown to be effective in some individual cases.

The teacher data revealed that many staff members wanted to know more about and be more involved regarding interventions with chronically absent students. There were times when I wished I had been able to be more forthcoming. Prior to, during, and after the study term I had discussions with the staff concerning the tight research protocol. We agreed that a short-term investment in the confidential research offered potential future organizational benefits. At the study site, the next steps following the research term involve developing a more whole-school approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. Staff want to be part of the solution to chronic absenteeism at the school.

That desire is supported by research. Lauchlin (2003) explained that teachers benefit when they deeply understand cases of absenteeism, and that they may benefit from coordinated professional development regarding effective and appropriate interventions. Chang and Romero

(2008) advised that staff act consistently and persist in their efforts when addressing

absenteeism. At the study site, interpreting the findings of this study and moving the work

forward to address the needs of all chronically absent students must involve an intentional and

strategic communication strategy that consistently informs all staff and facilitates open

communication among them regarding issues and interventions.

The superintendent–principal's involvement was a critical component of staff

involvement and that assertion was substantiated by a variety of the data. Findings regarding

interventions were consistent with that conclusion. During the final interviews, when I asked

students and parents, explicitly, why they participated, several said it was because the principal

had asked. The results in Chapter 4 contained data obtained from answers to other questions that

described the importance of the student–principal relationship. Some parents described the

principal as a powerful and influential figure in children's lives. Others explained that they

perceived I had made a connection with their son and daughter. Several students, across the age

spectrum, expressed that it was meaningful that I had taken an interest in them and that they

appreciated the opportunities to spend time with me.

I will argue briefly why I believe this project produced evidence supporting the

conclusion that even a relative newcomer to a tight-knit school community may be successful

attempting this type of work. As I was initiating recruitment for this study, I was finishing my

second year in the district. I did have the benefit of spending the previous two decades in a

different rural district, and although that district was twice as large, it was not profoundly

different in terms of demographics, attitudes, or priorities. Although I believed I knew about the

people and the types of families I served, I did not know all of the participating families well.

Some I had spoken with on the phone regarding attendance or other concerns. I knew only a few

of the students and parents very well at all, and even so, those relationships were shallow compared to the depth that they attained by the end of the study.

During the first 2 years I tried to be a visible presence in the district and attended games, concerts, plays, dances, and community events. My initial contacts regarding this research project began in late July, which is a strange time for a parent to receive a call from the principal. However, when I expressed interest in their children, articulated a concrete issue, proposed a plan that might be successful, and asked them to partner with me in the effort, parents listened. Eighty percent of families consented to participate. The findings of this study (attendance improved for 80% of participants) demonstrated that someone who was relatively new to a school district, and who had displayed a genuine interest in and concern for the school community, its students, and its families was well-equipped to lead an effective intervention approach regarding the chronic absenteeism problem.

Absences

Medical needs of students. Medical issues are a reality of life for students and families. When students are absent, there are negative impacts. Among the parent participants, there were differing opinions concerning the severity of illness that would cause their children to miss school. In this section, after I review some of these results, I will explain that the study findings revealed the potential benefit of parent education programs, which I did not study. I will describe a school policy that may conflict with current best practice regarding a common health issue. I will then describe a simple intervention that benefitted a student with a chronic health issue. Finally, I will discuss the difficulties in the rural study district associated with transportation to medical appointments. Schools cannot eliminate every medical issue that leads to absenteeism, but focused action may ameliorate some of them.

There are issues that cause students to be absent that are not easily controlled. Children get sick. Medical, dental, and therapy appointments must be scheduled when they are available and families can make them work. As research concerning chronic absenteeism has developed, the negative outcomes associated with absences have been demonstrated at the individual level. For example, Gottfried (2014) demonstrated that chronic absenteeism in kindergarten resulted in student disengagement and reduced future achievement, and the more days students missed, the greater the effects. Buehler et al. (2012) described similar longitudinal results among Oregon students. Aucejo and Romano (2013) quantified the daily effect of absence on elementary state test achievement. A single absence had measurable effects on mathematics and reading outcomes. The effect was greater for math than for reading. The more school students missed, the greater the impact, presumably because content learning was dependent on having mastered earlier work. The findings were grade-level dependent; the negative effects were more profound for older students. Each day of absence has an impact, even when absences are unavoidable.

This study's results demonstrated that at the study site there were opposing viewpoints regarding sending children to school when they had minor illnesses. Some parents believed students should attend when they did not have a fever or were not vomiting. Others resented that adults would risk exposing their children to potentially contagious pathogens. This is a difficult dilemma that, ultimately, is within parental control. This study did not examine the effects of parent education programs, but in this case, providing the most current information permits improved decision making.

A concrete example of a health-related policy that may negatively impact children may be found at the study site and in the research results. One elementary student crossed the chronic absenteeism threshold during the study term because of a head lice infestation. The study district

180

has a no nit policy. Frankowski and Bocchini (2010) published a report in Pediatrics that acknowledged that head lice caused anxiety among school staff and families, but they argued that exclusion was not a medical necessity and these types of policies should be abolished. The most recent recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) was published in September, 2015 and advised that students not be excluded from school. In the summer of 2015 the exclusion policy was debated by the School Board in the study district, and the no nit exclusion was maintained. Had that policy been changed, it is likely that one less student participant would have been chronically absent during the study term.

One middle school participant has a chronic illness that, in prior years, had led to very sporadic attendance. The participant missed school because of medical and therapy appointments, but also because of chronic joint pain that limited their mobility. During the initial interviews, this student's mother shared that if there were mobility supports available at school, it might reduce the number of days the student missed. I obtained appropriate mobility aids and had them available on the first day of school. This student was also highly motivated by incentives, and the results demonstrated that they had an improved attitude and wanted to attend. The mobility supports were important because they helped the student miss school less often. The final interviews revealed that the student did not miss several days in a row due to an injury, because the student knew that if their joints were hurting they were able to attend and still move around the building. This student improved attendance by approximately 12% compared to the prior year, was not chronically absent, and according to their parent was more engaged in the classroom and with peers. Because I was able to identify a critical need, a simple intervention provided great benefit.

At the study site, absences related to medical needs were also impacted by transportation issues. The school is located some distance from providers' offices and from many participants' homes. Travel time was an issue. For some families, so was the cost of fuel. The research findings helped me to understand the depth of the transportation challenges, but they did not provide ready solutions; it may be that there are few that are easily implemented. If, going forward, individual cases are identified where fuel cost is critical to low-income families, it might be possible to reimburse those who have ongoing medical needs. In the rural study setting, people have to travel when they need to see a doctor. Until about three years ago, when he retired, there was a physician's office on the school property. Unless the rural community finds a way to attract another practitioner, some of these issues are likely to remain unresolved.

Family decisions. On any given day, parents have the power to choose whether or not to send their children to school. Sometimes they make choices with which school staff do not agree. This study revealed that many parents have strong feelings about those decisions and that they believe the school should value their opinions and perspectives; some participants stated unequivocally that they would be the ones to decide, whether the school liked it or not. In some cases, family choices such as vacations and day trips contributed greatly to a participant student's chronic absenteeism. After I briefly review some of these ideas, I will discuss approaches to influencing parental choices and contrast education-based and penalty-based strategies. The results of this study revealed an issue, and the nature of action research is to provide evidence that informs future decision making.

Slightly less than half of student participants described circumstances where family priorities might take precedence over school. Visits with extended family, vacations, day trips, and family stresses were all recognized as sometimes affecting attendance. Students described

182

these events straightforwardly; they happened, and they missed school because of them. Parents, however, took stronger stances, and they talked about family decisions and family recreation more than twice as frequently as did their children.

The results demonstrated that some parents had experienced their children being penalized because of decisions to take vacations, day trips, or spend time with family. Parents expressed opinions that they should be free to decide when their children attended, that family sometimes travelled to see them, that they were unable to take vacations during the school year, that family hunting and fishing trips were traditions they were not going to give up, and that vacations may be profound learning experiences. Recall that 16 of 20 participants were students who resided in other school districts and chose to attend at the study site. The study school does not have a restrictive policy concerning pre-arranged absences. If parents communicate ahead of time and follow the notification procedure, absences are almost always excused. On rare occasions, when abuse of the system is perceived, excused pre-arranged absences may be disallowed. If parents recalled and resented so strongly that their children had been penalized, and that had not happened at the study site, then it is reasonable to conclude that this is a very, very strong parent perspective—schools should be respectful of family priorities in relation to these family choices.

In the preceding section, medical needs of students, I described that even single absences may negatively impact students. I also explained that this study did not have a parent education component, but that such programs might offer benefit. The finding regarding family decisions is another data point that provides evidence that, going forward, implementing intentional and targeted teaching with families concerning the negative outcomes associated with absenteeism may benefit attendance rates at the study site. Families may still make these decisions, but the

school will have engaged in a primary mission, informing its patrons, by developing strategies to disseminate accurate information regarding the impacts of absenteeism.

An alternative is to develop more restrictive and penal policies regarding pre-arranged absences. The existing policies pre-date my work at the study site. The study findings demonstrated that parents have positive feelings concerning how the study school works with families. It is not unreasonable to assume, given their strong feelings on these issues, that some parents might resent attempts to tighten these policies. Given that absences are so affecting, the school should not be fearful of opposition, but mindfulness is warranted. Additionally, studies have called into question the effectiveness of punitive approaches to reducing absenteeism. Maynard (2010) found no clear evidence that punishments were effective. Antworth (2008) explained that students who had been suspended, either in-school or out-of-school, were at greater risk for chronic absenteeism. These types of consequences may exacerbate the problem. And regardless, some parent participants shared that they would continue to make these choices, no matter the school's expectations. My judgement is that, at least in the short term, parent education programs are preferable to penal policies as a strategy for mitigating the attendance impacts associated with parental choice.

Anxiety. In this section I will describe some individual cases and the steps we took to ameliorate students' stressors. These examples may offer insight concerning the effectiveness of individualized approaches to intervention and may inform educational professionals regarding strategies that may be employed in similar circumstances.

Both personal and school-based anxieties may lead to absenteeism. Researchers have urged that school staff seek to deeply understand individual circumstances; this study's methods

helped me to gain a depth of understanding regarding the student participants. My increased

knowledge concerning their anxieties was revelatory and consequently, extremely valuable.

The findings of this study were meaningful concerning the nature of anxieties that led to

individual student's absenteeism. Authors such as Lauchlan (2003), Kearney and Bates (2005),

and Dube and Orpinas (2009) explained that it was important to understand individuals and the

functions of their behaviors to better target interventions. They described cases where anxiety

was directly related to student absenteeism. The findings contained examples of individual

stress-related factors, some previously known and others that were not. There were school-

related factors including course-related stress, negative interactions with staff, and problematic

peer relationships. In every case, at the end of the study term I had greater understanding of each

student's issues and felt better equipped to intervene with them. The time I spent working to

understand individual circumstances was well invested.

A great strength of the methodology of this study was that it allowed the researcher

ample opportunities to spend time with participants and hear their concerns, particularly in the

case of students (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). I was able to assist students regarding working

through issues, and although our efforts did not always improve attendance, I can identify

positive outcomes in every case. One high school student, who had a history of anxiety related

issues that affected attendance, was chronically absent during the study term, but he increased his

attendance rate by more than 7% compared to the prior year. This student explained that there

were not many adults at the school he talked to, and prior to the study I had never had an

extended conversation with him. During the project, I developed an open, productive

relationship with this young man and his mother, who also expressed that she did not have many

positive interactions with school staff. The student continues to struggle with attendance and

personal issues, but even after the study term I have been able to have frank discussions with both parent and child, so the research project opened a communication pathway.

Another high school student was also chronically absent during the study term, and yet there were positive outcomes in spite of an extended illness that caused his attendance to be worse than it was the previous year. He reported that previously, there were days when he could not motivate himself to get up and get ready for school, but he said during the study term the only reason he missed school was because of legitimate illness. This student opened up regarding issues he reported he had never discussed with anyone outside his family. I was able to connect the family with outside support services, which they continued to access after the study term. This student had failed several classes the prior year, yet during the study term he passed every class. I coached this student concerning the importance of attending to school work, even when he was home ill. I helped him open up to his teachers and ask for help keeping up with his work. I helped him arrange to stay after school near the end of the term to finish strong, and his willingness to do so surprised his parents. For me, in spite of decreased attendance, this case was a great success. The parents reported that the student's attitude toward school had greatly improved. The student described that he had more friends this year, and that he was very proud of his academic progress.

During the study term, intervention was also successful with students who reported school-based anxiety. Authors such as Powell (2012) and Chang and Romero (2008) discussed stressors that are functions of the student being present in the school building. An early elementary student had become chronically absent the prior year when she refused to get on the school bus because something was happening in her class that made her extremely anxious. At the end of the year, the counselor and I began working with her and she began attending again.

186

Both she and her parent reported that during the study term several factors motivated her to keep perfect attendance. She liked the prizes, but she also liked visiting with me on a regular basis. In reality, interventions with this student involved asking her how she was feeling, encouraging her to keep her perfect record, and sometimes sitting down to lunch with her and her classmates. Developing even low-level interpersonal connections may be meaningful for students.

A high school student reported that he had struggled to engage positively with some of his teachers and peers. I talked with him about interpersonal communication and taking a positive approach to interactions. We talked about effective ways to approach staff, and then he would try and talk through things with them. Afterwards, we would discuss what went well and what went poorly, and we strategized concerning future interactions. A few times I approached staff directly and apprised them of the issues he wanted to discuss; in every case they were receptive to my input. The study findings demonstrated that, as the term progressed, this student felt much more successful, and instead of feeling abandoned and isolated, he was enjoying his classes and working with those teachers. We took a similar approach to working with his peers. A key success in that regard was getting him involved in extra-curricular sports. Because he was being more successful academically, he was eligible to play. The results section documented that some of his problematic relationships became meaningful friendships.

A high school student described several issues that influenced school-related stress. He was frustrated with some peers' classroom behaviors. He had difficulty with some teaching practices. He was often frustrated with having to do internet research and felt that sometimes it was difficult to get help from his teachers during class time. The prior year, he had stayed home from school to catch up on work and then got further behind. He found himself playing on

electronic devices instead of studying, and then he had to stay up late to finish assignments, which resulted in fatigue the following day. We addressed each of these issues directly.

He made a commitment to work on homework before playing his video games and ultimately moved his workspace into a more common area of his apartment where he was more accountable to his parent in that regard. He reported that he stayed home only once during the term to catch up on work, and when he returned he acknowledged that had been a trade-off. He did get a critical assignment done, but missed a day of work at school because of it. He did not make that choice again during the project. When he had research assignments I coached him regarding effective internet searches. He became more successful at refining keyword searches and less distracted when thousands of results were returned. We worked on identifying high quality, primary sources and branching out from there, and we worked on finding a sufficient number of sources and then stopping so there was time left for writing. He reported that during the study term his classes had a different mix of students than the prior year and he was experiencing less frustration with his peers. And when they did act out, he felt more equipped to focus on his own work and ignore their misbehavior, something we had discussed. I also coached him regarding being more assertive when he needed help in class; teachers enjoy being asked to help. He explained that he had been somewhat reluctant to be perceived as demanding, but that the more he self-advocated, the more positive attention he got, and he was better able to get the help he needed during class.

Understanding individual student circumstances and needs were important successes that resulted from the nature of the methodology. I cannot overstate the extent to which my relationships with the participants deepened. Perhaps more than any other aspect of this research project, while discussing with students their anxious feelings, I came to better understand the

immense value of spending time with, listening to, and trying to help students. As the work with chronically absent students in the study district moves forward, there is an opportunity to expand the number of adults who intervene with students in this manner. Many students reported that they valued spending time with me. It is reasonable to surmise that if more adults develop deep relationships with children and families, then it will only augment students' and parents' feelings of connectedness and being supported. Some participants described that they had positive relationships with staff members. If those important individuals work intentionally to develop deeper staff–student relationships, it may provide benefit. During the study term, the interventions were implemented by one researcher. The teacher data revealed that some individuals desired to be more involved. If the number of individuals who focus on intervention work increases, connectedness with and support for families are likely to be enhanced.

Interventions

The most important factors regarding the success of the intervention project were incentives, principal involvement, and increased motivation toward and success in school. Principal involvement was discussed previously in the staff relationships section. Motivation and school success were discussed in both the academic engagement and anxiety sections. As I finish analyzing the results, I will review the findings concerning incentives as a component of intervention and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the prize-giving strategies.

During the study term, my goal was to offer incentives that cost about one dollar each. During the initial interviews I gathered ideas from the participants about things that might be meaningful rewards. Finding a variety of prizes for elementary children seemed easier than for high school students. At the beginning of the study term I purchased some wire puzzles and three dimensional puzzles from Amazon and after that shopped at a discount store and a

189

supermarket. At the discount store I easily found a wide variety of games, toys, puzzles, school supplies, and coloring books suitable for younger students. The only food I offered K–6 students was granola bars. During the term, I also asked students directly if there was anything they might like the next time I went shopping, and I tried to honor those requests. When the younger participants were choosing rewards, they often picked up and handled several different items before choosing one. I was able to offer an appealing variety of choices to the younger children.

I found it more difficult to shop for the high school students. At the discount store I did find some novels, and those were popular. Some high school students also chose school supplies, puzzles, and, occasionally, toys. During the initial interviews I heard almost universally from students and parents that teenagers were motivated by food. For many high school participants, food was a regular, popular choice. I kept a supply of candy bars and granola bars I purchased at the supermarket. At the discount store I found boxed crackers and bottled teas. Some high school students stated initially, and during the check-ins, that they did not think weekly prizes would continue to be motivating. However, no student declined a weekly incentive when they had earned one.

Incentives as a long-term strategy require a financial commitment. I provided the prizes during the study term, and I distributed the leftover items as rewards to the general student body during the whole-school trimester awards ceremony. Because staff want to continue this work, I will build into the 2016–2017 budget enough money to support an ongoing incentive program for chronically absent students as well as for students who are recognized each trimester for attendance, grades, and citizenship. In the past, the school had some success soliciting donations to offer as positive behavior rewards. Because of time constraints and my ethical perspective concerning personal academic research, I did not attempt to acquire incentives in this way.

190

However, near the end of the study term the school counselor did begin soliciting businesses, with some success, on behalf of our Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) team. Now that the research project has been completed, the team has discussed incorporating attendance interventions into the PBIS work.

Ninety percent of participants described during the final interviews that incentives were an important component of the interventions. Half of the students missed 2 or fewer days and earned the end of term ice cream party, and the results demonstrated that some students were aware of that trimester-long reward as the study progressed and were consciously focused on that goal. As a researcher, I felt that I was able to provide an adequate variety of incentives during the school term. As a school administrator, I feel that it may be more difficult to sustain motivation by giving prizes week after week and year after year. Soliciting local businesses to obtain gift cards for food, movie tickets, coffee cards, and recreation passes such as bowling and miniature golf may be a workable strategy. I have considered the idea of allowing students to accumulate weekly points that they may cash in periodically for more expensive prizes. High school students suggested that I extend lunchtime off campus privileges to non-seniors. I believe that as the district moves the work forward, both staff and students will be helpful regarding identifying meaningful incentives that have staying power.

Summary

The study methods were grounded in theory derived from the extant literature and prior research. I developed a multi-pronged approach to intervention that was successful. There was nothing in the methodology that needs to be omitted in subsequent intervention cycles, but there are supports that may be of benefit if they are incorporated. In this discussion of results I reviewed the strongest factors regarding motivation to attend, student absences, and

191

interventions. I described the relationships between the interventions and the attendance

motivations and absence factors. I evaluated the relationships between the study findings and

school practices because action research seeks to inform subsequent organizational reform.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Chronically absent students miss at least 10% of school days. This rate of absenteeism

predisposes students to negative academic and social outcomes. In Oregon, approximately 18%

of students are chronically absent, and Oregon had the highest rate among the six states

described by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) that tracked this data. The study site has a chronic

absenteeism rate near the state average. Chronic absence, which is absence irrespective of cause

or reason, is an emerging field of study. Contemporary scholars and researchers have

demonstrated increased emphasis regarding examining and understanding the impacts of chronic

absenteeism. The literature review for this research project was focused, but it revealed, within

its scope, that an increasing number of studies have been conducted and reports written regarding

the problem during each of the years 2010–2015.

This study sought to understand chronic absenteeism at one rural, K–12, Oregon school

district. I investigated the attitudes and perceptions of chronically absent students and their

parents. I engaged in interventions with the hope of improving individual attendance rates. I

met with students during the term of the study to create an ongoing record of their feelings

regarding participation and their individual needs, and at the end of the study I interviewed

parents and students, and surveyed teachers, to investigate the study's effectiveness and any

changes in participants' perspectives. I chose an action research methodology, because school

staff recognized that high rates of absenteeism among some students was an ongoing issue, and it

was necessary to address the problem. Action research seeks to gather data that informs

organizational practice, and the cyclical nature of the method utilizes the insight gained during one cycle to adjust subsequent cycles.

This research project had a high participation rate and a high success rate. The findings were meaningful in that they described details of successful practices and led to insights that may benefit the district in the long-term. The methods were based upon extant literature, prior research, and participant input. This dissertation contributes to the literature because it details the results of the research at the K–12 setting. My literature review did not reveal prior studies completed in K–12 settings, and this report described detailed qualitative data that provides educational professionals an in-depth understanding of the work at the study site. Because research regarding chronic absenteeism is an emerging field of study, this report may inform researchers regarding the transferability of the methods and interventions. It may assist future researchers regarding investigative design. In the remainder of this section I will explore these relationships—to practice, to the literature, and to scholars—in more detail.

Relationship to the Community of Practice

Schools have a responsibility, together with parents, to ensure that students attend school. Work such as that by Epstein and Sheldon (2002), Sheldon and Epstein (2004), and Sheldon (2007) has demonstrated that both the school and family have important roles to play regarding combating absenteeism. This study demonstrated that families were willing to partner with the study school to reduce their children's absenteeism. That willingness was demonstrated in two ways. At the study site, 80% of parents who were eligible to participate consented to do so. The data revealed that parents were willing to be open and honest regarding their beliefs, concerns, and attitudes. The implication for educators is that it is possible to engage students and parents in this work, even though acknowledging a student's excessive absenteeism may be a sensitive

193

issue. Schools can find ways to communicate about this difficult problem if they express genuine concern, approach the topic with sensitivity, and listen carefully to their patrons.

This research project demonstrated that interventions may be successful with children of all ages. This study involved 20 student participants recruited from an eligible population of 25. The interventions were time intensive and required between 10% and 20% of my work weeks during the study term. Researchers such as Epstein and Sheldon (2002), Antworth (2008), and Rasasingham (2015) discussed the importance of maintaining adequate levels of staffing to meet the unique, individual needs of chronically absent students and families. In the recent findings section of this chapter I described that the Oregon legislature directed the Oregon Department of Education to create a task force and make a plan to address chronic absenteeism, but a bill that was under consideration to fund pilot intervention projects was not advanced out of committee. Notwithstanding, district budgets must account for personnel if school initiate intervention practices and procedures. Educational leaders must allocate funding to provide the human resources necessary to consistently intervene with these students and their families. If chronic absenteeism is to be reduced, individual schools must designate staff who act as point persons regarding local efforts.

Relationship to the Literature

In the middle of the 20th century, investigators recognized that ongoing work regarding absenteeism should continue and that controlled studies that facilitated a full understanding of the issues should be conducted (Heck & Blaine, 1936). The scholarly literature of the mid- to late-20th century regarding absenteeism was replete with work related to truancy and its relationship to delinquency. Some investigators sought to intervene with truant students. Gnagey (1956) reviewed the extant literature and demonstrated factors that had a strong

relationship to delinquent behaviors, including non-attendance and citing students for truancy. Rhodes and Reiss (1969) described the relationship between a failing English grade and student apathy, truancy, and delinquency. These investigators demonstrated that negative reinforcement regarding truancy resulted in detrimental outcomes in some cases. More recently, Maynard (2010) determined that there was no evidence that punishing chronically absent students was effective regarding changing the behavior.

By the 1970s, educators were intervening with truant students in ways that bore a strong relationship to proactive approaches and positive reinforcements present in this study's methodology. Brooks (1975) described work at one California high school that reduced truancy at a statistically significant rate. Students were counseled regarding changing their behavior, signed an attendance contract, carried attendance cards to their teachers daily, and were offered incentives if they met attendance goals. Unger, Douds, and Pierce (1978) presented a brief summary in The Phi Delta Kappan of an individualized approach to truancy intervention. When a student was identified as chronically student, staff assessed the student's issues and needs and designed an intervention program on a case-by-case basis. The intervention phase was 9 weeks long, and follow-up continued for an additional 9 weeks. Students met at least bi-weekly with a staff member, grades and behaviors were monitored, and specific skills and behaviors were taught. For the 40 participants, attendance improved by almost 60%, and the gains were maintained during the follow-up period. Problem behaviors decreased by almost 60%, and grades improved by slightly more than 30%. Both teachers and parents described better attendance, improved attitudes and grades, and less disruptive conduct. Some of the strategies I used with chronically absent students at the study site were shown to be successful with chronically truant students almost 40 years ago.

In the 1990s, work began to quantify the negative effects of absenteeism on school achievement. In the seminal literature section of this chapter I reminded readers of the foundational work by Caldas (1993) and Lamdin (1996), which I view as having opened the door to investigations of the negative effects of absenteeism during the last two-plus decades. Caldas's and Lamdin's work focused on the attendance–achievement link. Although this study did not investigate the achievement relationship directly, the results demonstrated that some students' grades were better, and those individuals felt positively about their academic successes. This dissertation reviewed literature that has established a link between chronic absenteeism and lower achievement, and in 2015, Gottfried demonstrated that chronically absent students have negative impacts on their peers' learning as well. Projects such as this one, which reduce chronic absenteeism, have benefit for the involved individuals and the school as a whole.

This study was rooted in the extant literature, and the findings provided confirming evidence of previous work. Sheldon (2007) explained that schools partnering with families may lead to effective intervention. Dube and Orpinas (2009) explained that students obtained different types of reinforcement when they missed school, and educational professionals should seek to understand each individual case. Chronic absenteeism studies are an emerging field of research. Brandy Maynard has been doing recent work to accurately identify practices that are effective regarding ameliorating chronic absenteeism and truancy. In a 2012 report, Maynard, McCrea, Piggot, and Kelly explained that results are still unclear concerning defining best practices. They do state, however, that making a consistent effort pays dividends, and schools should seek to develop site-specific approaches that employ the resources available to them. Hammond (2014; 2015; 2016) has chronicled the urgency of the chronic absenteeism issue in Oregon.

This research project addressed at one rural, K–12 study site an issue that is critical and urgent for both educational professionals and lawmakers in Oregon today. The results demonstrated that a synthesis of effective practices described in the literature was effective in ameliorating chronic absenteeism at the study site. In the implications for policy and practice section that follows, I will discuss my decision making regarding development of the methods and propose a general structure for intervention that may guide educational professionals who engage in this work. The methodology for this study was detailed in Chapter 3 and summarized previously in this chapter, and its development was influenced by previous scholarly work.

During this study I partnered with student and parent participants and developed meaningful relationships with the parents. School staff kept lines of communication open and notified parents when participant students were absent. I sought to understand each individual case and invested time and fiscal resources in developing an effective intervention plan. I spent time with the individual student participants during the study term and responded to their needs and issues as I became aware of them. The office staff and I responded consistently to the problem. We tracked individual participant attendance on a daily basis. We attempted to talk with parents every time a participant was absent, and left messages if we could not reach them. Students tracked their own attendance daily. I provided incentives each time a participant had perfect attendance for a week, and I had a trimester-ending celebration for those who missed 2 or fewer days during the study term. At the conclusion of the study, I gathered data from participant students, parents, and teachers to understand what worked and identify adjustments the organization might make going forward. This research project evaluated successful practices recorded in the literature, synthesized them into a plan for intervention, and implemented the plan with fidelity. The methodology led to a successful outcome at the study site.

Relationship to the Community of Scholars

In the last decade, academic studies related to absenteeism issues have been an expanding area of focus for graduate and academic researchers. Over about a decade, an expanding body of research regarding chronic absenteeism has emerged. In this dissertation, I cited 12 contemporary examples of doctoral research and two Master's theses. Some dissertations, such as those by Phillips (2006), Zamarripa (2009), McCrary (2010), and Collins (2015) investigated the attendance–achievement relationship. Research such as that by Blevins (2009) and Powell (2012) described the perceptions of participants regarding attendance. This current doctoral research project is more closely aligned with Blevins's work, because it described student perceptions concerning attendance, and Powell's Master's research, because it investigated parent perceptions regarding the same. However, this study's results also demonstrated positive effects on participant students' achievement as attendance improved.

Several recent graduate research projects were identified that focused on interventions to improve attendance. Brandy Maynard and her team were cited in the relationship to the literature section immediately preceding. Maynard's (2010) doctoral dissertation presented a meta-analysis of intervention literature. This current research study's methodology was informed by Maynard's work, and I utilized some interventions that she showed had provided benefit. Doctoral research by Fitzpatrick-Doria (2013) and a Master's project by Rivard (2013), described the effectiveness of intervention strategies and presented results using quantitative methodology. Fitzpatrick-Doria, as did this current research, utilized an action research design with the intent of informing future organizational practice. Bradley (2015) utilized a qualitative approach and conducted interviews with parents to identify obstacles that hindered student

attendance. The current study's methodology also provided rich data concerning parent

perspectives. My research design was influenced by these graduate researchers.

Sculles (2014) described her research as phenomenology, but there were many parallels

with my action research design and my presentation of results. Sculles utilized a conversational

approach to data gathering, and her presentation of results contained many participant quotes.

Sculles's work contained a research question mine did not, the perceptions of school leaders

regarding policy implementation and responding to parent concerns. The system she worked in

was much larger than my small, rural study site. Beyond that, however, my research adds to

Sculles's findings because my research questions added additional depth and breadth of inquiry.

While Sculles worked in a middle school, I worked in a K–12 setting. I worked with a larger

number of student and parent participants. My research sample included 80% of eligible

participants, while Sculles's rate was intentionally capped at about 7%.

Presentation of doctoral research results benefits from the lack of constraint imposed by

page limits associated with publication in traditional academic journals. Like Sculles's (2014)

dissertation, this current study's results presented extended examples of authentic participant

voices. These two papers represent the most extensive use of participant quotes I identified in

qualitative graduate research related to chronic absenteeism. I believe that the reliability of the

work is enhanced when results are presented in this manner. Cook and Ezenne (2010) conducted

a study in Jamaica, which likely had a bank of data as rich as Sculles's or mine, and their

presentation contained participant quotes. However, because their academic journal article was

only 24 pages in length, I found myself wanting more examples of participant voice. I wondered

what additional depth might have been revealed if I had access to the full record of their

transcripts. This current dissertation advances the body of work related to understanding student

and parent perspectives regarding chronic absenteeism because I have been able to provide considerable detail regarding my findings.

In the last few years, chronic absenteeism has been a strong focus among some academic researchers. I have cited Michael Gottfried's work several times in this dissertation. Coelho et al. (2015) were referenced in the recent findings section of this chapter regarding their work on the chronic absenteeism–achievement link. Bickelhaupt (2011) described the impact of chronic absenteeism in the early grades. In Oregon, chronic absenteeism is a priority issue. Authors such as Buehler et al. (2012), Oregon Education Investment Board. (2013), Henderson et al. (2014), Clinton and Reeder (2015), and Hammond (2014; 2015; 2016) have placed this issue in full view of educational professionals and communities. This current research study advances the understanding of chronic absenteeism in Oregon by describing in detail the issues at one rural, K–12, Oregon school and demonstrating that interventions may be effective in that setting. It contributes to the current body of academic literature by articulating a rich and thick description of contemporary graduate research work.

Limitations

This study was conducted at a single rural, small-school site that had unique characteristics. The enrollment during the study term was approximately 240 students in grades K–12. The economically disadvantaged rate was slightly below 60%. Class sizes were relatively small, being capped at 21 students with very limited, specific exceptions to that standard. The setting was rural, and the site's status as a charter school meant that approximately half of the students traveled from outside the district boundaries to attend. Many students had to travel considerable distance (> 25 miles) to attend. The participation rate for this study was high at 80%, but the sample size of 20 was not large, and the participants were spread across nine

grades in the K–12 setting. Because of the unique characteristics at the site, the findings of this study are not generalizable. However, practitioners may find that some transferability exists and that elements of the methodology have practical applications. Additionally, the findings were consistent with extant literature and revealed that the intervention strategies were effective in the K–12 setting.

The scope of this investigation was narrow. The majority of the data was gathered from interviews and surveys that were developed to explore the specific research questions. Significant amounts of data were also gathered from check-in conversations. The semi-structured nature of the interviews, the unstructured check-ins, and open-ended questions on the surveys allowed participants to freely express attitudes and beliefs that were important to them. However, other than during check-ins, the input was consistently guided by specific prompts. The findings must be analyzed from within this narrow methodological framework. I did not seek to gather wide-ranging data; my intent was to construct an investigation that targeted the specific research questions.

This study did not provide for extensive triangulation of the data or independent cross-checking of my coding analysis. Some triangulation derived from the structure of the study. Data was gathered from students and parents before, during, and after intervention; these interviews represented multiple sources, which allowed some evaluation of whether or not responses were honest and consistent. I believe they were. Because I conducted initial interviews with a subset of those who were chronically absent during the first trimester, and did not find any perspectives that differed widely from the full-study participants, the reliability of results was enhanced slightly. The sample size was large enough, and the participation rate high enough, that I am reasonably confident the results describe the attitudes of chronically absent

students and their parents, and of the teachers, at the study site. However, only 80% of the population of eligible students and parents and 85% of the teaching staff (not all teachers taught chronically absent students) participated; it is possible that a completely unique set of attitudes and beliefs existed among the non-participants.

I sampled the full population of teachers who worked with the student participants. The teacher participants provided answers to the open-ended questions that varied in length. Because some open-ended responses were much longer than others, it was clear that some invested more time in responding to the survey than did others. Little direction was given during the teacher survey; I simply distributed the surveys in the morning of an in-service day and said return them when you are ready. It is possible that teachers had more opinions about the research project than were revealed on the survey document.

The interview scripts and teacher surveys were not piloted prior to being used. However, they were based on academic principles I studied during my qualitative analysis coursework, examples of related studies I encountered during the literature review, and they were approved by my dissertation committee and the Concordia University Institutional Review Board. This current study allowed the researcher ample opportunity for reflection concerning the process of eliciting student and parent perspectives going forward into subsequent cycles of action research. The most frequent problem with the surveys was related to grade level and language. Some of the youngest students did not know what agree and disagree meant. I had to teach that concept to some early elementary children by explaining that agree meant true, and strongly agree meant really, really true. Disagree was false. I am confident that after this coaching, all students were able to provide reliable answers that reflected their true beliefs.

Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

Human Capital and Time

It is important to consider that this intervention project was quite time intensive. The initial interviews were conducted during the summer months, when I had time to meet families in the settings they chose, and I had time to spend with them unhindered by pressing in-school responsibilities. I believe that these initial investments were important regarding buy-in and relationship building, and they contributed to the longer term successes.

During the study term, I spent at least 10% of my work week engaged in the project—monitoring attendance, visiting with participants, distributing incentives, or attending to issues that arose for students, such as assisting them with coursework or conferring with teachers. There were several weeks where my involvement was at least 15% of my time. I could have spent even more time working in this area without squandering it. I could have invested in longer or more frequent check-ins; some schools have utilized a daily check-in model (Bickelhaupt, 2011; Cole, 2011). I could have been more deeply involved with parents in direct conversation and educational initiatives related to absence. This project was largely a solitary effort conducted by one researcher; a more whole-school approach would have required additional time for collaboration.

It is important for school leaders who wish to ameliorate chronic absenteeism to consider assigning a point person to the effort. A focused approach is important for tracking, counseling, and acquiring and distributing incentives. The ability of the organization to persevere is enhanced if one individual is the lead person. Further evidence of this need is demonstrated by examining absenteeism at the study site during the intervention term. Although the participants' attendance improved, the school rate for the trimester persisted at a rate largely unchanged from

the prior year. Students were still chronically absent, and those children did not have anyone aggressively intervening with them. Intervening with those who are known to be chronically absent is not enough; prevention strategies and rapid identification of at-risk students must be parallel, simultaneous practices. An investment in human capital directed at chronic absenteeism is required to develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy regarding intervention.

The Nature of the Conversation

As I reviewed the literature and developed a conceptual framework for this dissertation, I often reflected on the strength of, and potential stress caused by, the term chronic absenteeism. In this section and the participation and ownership section which follows, I discuss the literature that influenced my approach to recruiting participants, building buy-in, and retaining members of the sample through the duration of the study term. From a political and policy perspective, there is value to stating unequivocally that when a student misses more than 10% of days, they are chronically absent. It is a powerful statement, which conveys a sense of urgency. It draws attention in statehouses and in the media. However, when I thought about asking people to talk about the issue, I considered that telling a parent their child was chronically absent might feel accusatory, demeaning, and judgmental. The words educational professionals use do not change the realities of individual cases, but they may influence the emotions of the most important stakeholders with power to influence solutions regarding chronic absenteeism—parents and students. The nature of these types of difficult discussions is larger than this single term, but in this short argument I will use it as an exemplar.

While I was recruiting participants, I did not use the term chronic absenteeism until I had made an introduction and initiated collaborative power-sharing conversations (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011; Wicks & Whiteford, 2006). When I first spoke with parents, I explained to them

that they were eligible to participate in the research project because their student had missed more that 10% of school days the prior year. I then explained the purpose of the project and described the basics of a methodology that began with interviews and involved interventions, including incentives, once the school year started. At some point after we had talked for a time, often after verbal consent to participate was obtained, I explained that educational professionals used the words chronic absenteeism to describe this level of absence. I did not avoid the term, because it was contained in the informed consent documents, but I introduced it slowly and strategically after we had discussed ways we might work together to help the individual child attend more successfully.

I cannot state that this strategy influenced my participation rate. I can state that my participation rate was several times higher than any similar study I found in the extant literature. I would argue that as educational professionals advance chronic absenteeism work, this idea is something to consider. Educational professionals must consider that chronically absent students are a vulnerable population. How conversations are initiated with these students and families is critical to the success of our efforts. As schools initiate conversations with the critical stakeholders, educators must carefully and intentionally frame the discussions. This imperative is larger than a single term or buzzword. Educational professionals must not create impassible schisms before the work has even begun.

Participation and Ownership

It was particularly important that this study had a high participation rate. Eighty percent of the eligible population agreed to participate. Going into the study, I had concerns regarding attracting a sample that was large enough to represent the population of chronically absent students at the study site. As emphasized in the literature review, those who agree to speak about

absenteeism issues are frequently willing to be open and honest. However, the extant literature revealed that many studies had very low participation rates. In the rural study district, the eligible population was relatively small, numbering only 25. It is important in this kind of work to build buy-in early and to create a climate whereby participants persist in their involvement. Ballamingie and Johnson (2011) did not study absenteeism, but as I examined the potential participation problem, their work influenced me greatly. They argued that taking the time to explain the consent process prior to setting a form down in front of someone may be a significant influence upon their willingness to participate, and that building buy-in early fosters long-term commitment.

The study site was a small charter school, and half of the students enrolled from outside the district boundaries. The school had a reputation for building strong relationships with its patrons. Ballamingie and Johnson (2011) emphasized that an imbalance of power may exist in the researcher–participant relationship. There is potential for a mutually beneficial relationship, but that is not a given; the participant has power to obstruct the researcher or to withdraw completely. If the participants are able to influence the process, then the potential benefits may be more concrete than abstract. The participants have to own it for optimum success. Wicks and Whiteford (2006) and Saint-Germain (2001a) were other authors who offered similar advice.

Recruitment for this study began during the summer months. This was significant because it afforded me time to make personal contact with all of the families who were eligible to participate. It also allowed me to follow up over and over, and persist until I had made contact with all members of the eligible population. Additionally, it gave me time to have extended conversations about the purpose of the study and to answer any questions that people might have had. Wicks and Whiteford (2006) advised that qualitative researchers must invest time so that

206

conversations have a chance to play out. This strategy was implemented first during the initial conversations, and I continued to implement it at each stage of the research. The families were on summer vacation, so they had time to think about the benefits of this work going into the new school year.

I believe that several things contributed to the high participation rate. I endeavored to make personal contact by telephone with every eligible member of the population. If I did not get a person on the phone, I left a voicemail and followed up with an email. When I did talk to people, if, after our conversation, they still had questions, I sent them the informed consent document explaining the full project. I chose in-person interview as a methodology, because it eliminated the possibility of someone receiving a survey and not returning it.

The extant literature revealed that fostering participation and buy-in was enhanced when the participants were comfortable in the setting where interviews were conducted. Saint-Germain (2001b) emphasized the importance of setting when conducting interviews and advised that researchers endeavor to minimize interruptions. I asked each participant when and where they would like to meet, and conducted interviews at the place and time of their choosing. I visited some people in their homes, some at restaurants over coffee or a sandwich, and some came to the school and we did our work in my office. Sculles (2014) was a doctoral student who conducted interviews and intentionally offered alternative settings to provide for the psychological safety and confidentiality of, and relationship-building with her participants. I believe this approach made people realize the work was important to me, and that I would do whatever it took to benefit the students. Because I was interviewing during the period of summer break, I had the time to meet during the day, in the evening, or on the weekend. The

207

majority of the interviews took place during August, so when school started in early September, the idea of an intervention regarding absenteeism was still fresh in peoples' minds.

Participant Voice

Gunter and Thomson (2007) described a case study that involved students investigating issues and contributing regarding policy-making in their school. They argued that students described issues in ways that adults could not. Cook and Ezenne (2010), Powell (2012), and Bradley (2015) conducted studies that revealed parental perspectives concerning absenteeism. In this dissertation, I have previously cited work including that of Steven Sheldon and Joyce Epstein that emphasized the importance of parental involvement as a component of school intervention to ameliorate chronic absenteeism. Kearney and Bates (2005) advised that listening to students and parents was important if staff wanted to understand school refusal. This research proposed to reveal student and parent attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives regarding attendance and absence. The results demonstrate that I was successful in this regard; much of the data reflects the authentic voices of the participants.

Sculles (2014) completed doctoral research with student and parent participants using an interview-based methodology. Sculles's presentation of results supported her conclusion that participants were willing to openly discuss their perspectives. Involving students in conversations regarding attendance practices may yield important insights. Certainly, student behavior is one factor that influences absenteeism. Beginning with the initial interviews, students had input into this study regarding the incentives I would offer, and their input influenced my final decisions concerning the broad-based intervention strategies. Yonezawa and Jones (2009) stated that students provide meaningful data. Thiessen (2006) explained that educators are listening to students with increasing frequency, because they understand what

208

happens in schools and are willing to contribute to improving practices. As my school district

moves chronic absenteeism work forward, the student voices provided important topics for

consideration as staff seek to improve and persist in our efforts. As Yonezawa and Jones said,

the things students say have the potential to increase the quality and depth of adult conversations.

As educational professionals initiate interventions with chronically absent students, it may

benefit staff to converse with parents and students prior to developing initiatives.

Framework for Intervention

In this section I will describe how and why I developed my specific methodology, and I

will present a general framework for intervention regarding absenteeism that may be considered

by educational professionals as they engage in this work. In the relationship to the literature

section of this chapter, I described that the methodology for this study was derived from a

synthesis of some effective practices that I identified during my research. Maynard's (2010)

meta-analysis provided a statistical basis for decisions regarding the effectiveness of various

intervention approaches. Sculles (2014), Cole (2011), and Cook and Ezenne (2010) utilized

qualitative methods that produced meaningful data and demonstrated positive outcomes. I have

cited several studies by Joyce Epstein and Steven Sheldon that influenced my emphasis on

directly involving parents and students, including Sheldon (2007) and Epstein and Sheldon

(2002). Thiessen (2006) and Yonezawa and Jones (2009) emphasized the importance of

listening to students regarding organizational change efforts. Chang and Romero (2008) and

Dube and Orpinas (2009) emphasized that it was necessary to understand each individual case of

non-attendance.

I synthesized my interpretations of these and other studies into a generalized, multi-

leveled approach to intervention that I will present below. This structure includes elements that

were not incorporated into the current research, and it may offer educational leaders who are initiating work with the chronically absent a slightly broader framework than does this study's methods. I will explain the framework in detail after I present it in bulleted form. I have argued in this dissertation that leaders must develop site-specific approaches that make use of available resources. This study was conducted by a single researcher at a rural site, and no school funding was used to support the work. I did have the permission of the school board to use time during the school day to address the district's absenteeism problem. I had to make decisions concerning how and where to allocate my time, and those choices are detailed in earlier sections of this document. The following list should with be viewed as hierarchical with Level 4 exceptions as described below. The Level 4 supports were utilized in only limited fashion in the rural setting, and some of these may be more available to urban and suburban educational professionals. Every student should receive Level 1 supports. As absence occurs, Level 2 supports are initiated. As absenteeism becomes problematic, choices regarding Level 3 and Level 4 supports are made.

- Level 1: School Supports—attendance tracking, classroom procedures, administrative follow-through, positive behavior supports

- Level 2: Parent Communication—same day notification, personal contact

- Level 3: Individual Supports—individualized understanding of cases, check-ins, counselors, administrators, school psychologists, school social workers, individual incentives, attendance agreements

- Level 4: Community Supports—social services, therapists, interagency case management

School supports represent practices that support positive attendance by all students. Attendance should be closely tracked on a daily basis. Teachers should monitor attendance closely. In settings where students move from room to room, which includes most secondary schools, the attendance routine should be completed near the start of the period such that the office or attendance clerk has immediate access to information about absences. When absences do occur, staff must follow through on school procedures. For example, if there are consequences for unexcused absences or tardiness, those must be consistently enforced. Positive schoolwide supports for positive attendance behaviors may provide benefit. The criteria for individual or whole-class recognition or reward may be established and publicized. If these programs are established, then the incentives or recognition must be conferred consistently.

When a student is absent, parent communication is important. Personal communication is preferred. The parent communication level is self-explanatory and straightforward, but school leaders must designate an individual or individuals to complete the work. When absences begin to accumulate, individual supports become necessary. At this level, staff begin to choose how to intervene; prior to this, all school supports and personalized parent contact should be viewed as mandatory. Individual supports begin in every case by understanding the student and family dynamics. This dissertation research emphasized an interview-based, conversational approach. In order to move interventions forward, school staff must develop a means to gather student-specific information. Periodic check-ins as frequently as every day have been shown to be beneficial. Depending on the setting, administrators, counselors, or auxiliary specialists may engage in this work. Schools may have professional staff who are able to intervene effectively in individual cases. Psychologists, social workers, counselors, and administrators have different training, and even within licensure categories, individuals may possess different skill sets.

211

Matching the appropriate, caring individual to each student requires thoughtful decision making. Individual incentives and behavior contracts may provide positive reinforcement and clear goal setting for children.

Community supports move intervention outside the school setting. During this research study most students successfully improved attendance, and there were very few cases where I went outside the school to obtain support. However, when absence persists or there are clear social service needs, staff should not hesitate to identify appropriate resources. These supports are also highly individualized. In fact, if there is an urgent family or individual need, the typical hierarchical structure of this framework may be disrupted. It is possible that crises related to things such as housing, clothing, food, or mental health must be addressed before a family can even begin to address a child's regular attendance at school.

Some families may be influenced by the intervention of a truancy officer, although I have argued in this dissertation that punishment has not been shown to be effective in reducing absenteeism. Here, truancy citation is a Level 4 intervention that is an intentional and thoughtful choice concerning the individual case. Some other examples of community supports, although this is not a comprehensive list, might be mental health therapists, food banks, energy assistance programs, housing alliances, juvenile justice workers, clothes closets, children's services, faith-based programs, legal aid, and community-based health centers. The point of this list is that school staff should create a comprehensive list of all of the agencies that are available in the area, so that when an individual need arises families may be referred. In extremely complex cases, there may be value in facilitating interagency communication and developing a cohesive case management strategy for an individual.

This framework is a generalized structure of attendance support with increasing levels of intervention as absences accumulate. Supports at the top are universal and consistent with all students. As we move to higher levels, staff work to understand the individual student and family dynamics, and they develop a strategic, targeted approach to each case.

Recommendations for Further Research

Chronic absenteeism is an emerging field of study. Formal research regarding the problem is critical because awareness of and debate concerning the issue is increasing. Decisions by schools, governmental agencies, legislators, and families should be informed by valid and reliable data rather than by feelings, impressions, and assumptions.

The term of this study was one school trimester. Longer-term studies may provide greater understanding regarding effective interventions. This methodological design might be extended through several cycles of action research, or a longer intervention term might be established at the outset—for example, a full school year. The extant literature identifies that commitment and persistence are important concerning interventions; additional research findings would help develop the body of literature.

Longitudinal studies regarding students who have reversed chronic absenteeism may be beneficial. It would benefit schools to know whether a term, or what term, of intervention has long-term positive effects. Effective interventions are time-intensive. While some students are reversing their problematic behaviors, others in schools are manifesting them. Knowing more about how much support is required at each level of long-term follow-up would allow schools to efficiently allocate resources.

This study was conducted in a single K–12 school, a setting type that I did not identify elsewhere in the extant literature. Nevertheless, this was a relatively small study. The eligible

population was 25 students, 20 of whom participated. There are larger K–12 schools. Research in a school with greater enrollment may provide additional understanding regarding effective single-school approaches.

Similarly, I did not identify uniform district-wide approaches in the research literature. Within-district studies using consistent methodology across multiple schools may provide additional insight regarding grade- or setting-specific differences concerning intervention strategies.

This study did not attempt to analyze results based on demographic subgroups. The study site does not have broad demographic heterogeneity. The most prevalent at-risk group at the study site were the economically disadvantaged, at slightly less than 60%. Among study participants, 75% were economically disadvantaged. Research similar to this study in a less homogeneous setting may allow for differential analysis of demographic subgroups such as might be segregated according to ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

The findings of this study demonstrated that parents' attitudes and behaviors influenced children's attendance. The results also demonstrated that parents were willing to openly discuss their beliefs and perceptions. This study did not contain a strong parent education component. Further research should be conducted that examines parent attitudes before and after a period of parent education initiatives regarding the effects of chronic absenteeism.

This study was conducted by a single researcher. Involvement of other staff was minimal and limited to what might be termed typical attendance functions. A project that involves a team of investigators may provide additional insight. With such a design, participants would notice that several adults were directly involved with interventions. More organizational man-hours might be invested each week. Different professionals have different skill sets, and more layered

services such as those proved by counselors, social workers, psychologists, and administrators may bring additional, varied professional expertise to bear on the problem.

Research concerning wrap-around intervention practices would also benefit from designs that identified at-risk students on an ongoing basis. This study involved the same 20 participants from start to finish. As I discussed previously, other students became chronically absent during the study term. Research that identified students at-risk for chronic absenteeism at regular intervals, and immediately engaged with them and provided intervention supports, would develop understanding regarding ongoing, year-long procedures that may become best practice in school settings.

This study provided meaningful data regarding participant perspectives and demonstrated that students and parents were willing to give voice to their concerns, beliefs, and attitudes. A case-study or phenomenological methodology may provide deeper insight into the thoughts and feelings of individual chronically absent students.

Conclusion

This doctoral research study at a rural, K–12 study site proved to be successful: it recruited student and parent participants at a high rate; it revealed a rich and extensive body of data; the interventions were effective and 80% of participants improved their attendance rate. Students reported that the strongest motivators regarding attendance were peer relationships, intellectual benefit, and relationships with staff. Parents reported that their children were motivated to attend for the same three reasons, and additionally, they mentioned activities and athletics more frequently than did their students. Students identified that they were most frequently absent due to illness and medical appointments, family decisions, and anxiety or stress. Parent perceptions again aligned with those of the students, but parents made a more

215

pointed case regarding their beliefs that their choices about family decisions should be accepted and respected by the school.

These findings influenced the intervention strategies in two ways. Because the methodology included regular, personalized interactions with students, I was able to focus some discussions toward ameliorating factors that led to absence. I focused on making attendance rewarding: I offered concrete rewards, some specifically identified by the participants, for each week of perfect attendance; I reinforced the academic benefits of consistently being in class, and I assisted students in working through issues that affected class achievement; I directly addressed their concerns and counseled students regarding issues that led to anxiety or stress. The results demonstrated that these approaches were beneficial for many students. In the end, teachers, parents, and students believed that participation in the project was beneficial. They did not identify elements that needed to be modified or eliminated, and they offered constructive feedback concerning adjustments and additional elements that may offer future organizational benefit. The goal of the action research was realized. This cycle of study effectively informed future work at the school with chronically absent students.

This study was unique because it was conducted in a single-school, K–12 district and demonstrated that the selected approaches to intervention were effective with students of all ages. That is not to claim that the study proceeded perfectly. In fact, the nature of action research is such that if I failed to learn from this experience and adjust going forward, I would be neglecting the power of this methodology. I was humbled and honored to work with these participant students and families. They opened themselves to me; provided me with deep insight regarding their lives, beliefs, and attitudes; and they demonstrated appreciation for my interest and investment in them. I understand these children and families better because they chose to

participate with me in this research, and it has become my responsibility to care about and for

them for as long as we work together.

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APPENDIX A: Pre-Intervention Interview Scripts

Parent Interview

I am going to ask you some questions today to gather information which will help us understand why students are absent from school and how we can help them attend more regularly. Your responses will be confidential, and the response sheet I will complete will not contain any personally identifiable information.

I will be asking three types of questions. My first few questions will ask about factual information and you should be able to provide specific answers. The rest of the survey be composed of some questions that ask you to rank how strongly you agree or disagree with a given statement and some questions that are open-ended and ask you to think of answers to a question.

I want to thank you for participating today. Take as much time as you feel is necessary to provide answers that are accurate and forthright. Your opinions are important to us.

Let's begin.

Is your student a boy or a girl?

In what grade is your student enrolled?

Including this year, how many years has your student been enrolled at Triangle Lake Charter School?

Has your student's enrollment at this school been continuous?

If no, during what grades did your student attend another school?

Next, I am going read some statements. I am going to ask you to tell me how much you agree or disagree by providing me one of five answers. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree? Let me know when you are ready for the first statement.

My student likes attending school.

I will read another statement. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

It is okay for students to miss school sometimes for what may be considered unexcused reasons.

Thank you. At this time, I am going to ask questions that require you to think about and provide answers. For the first question, I would like you to give me as many answers as you can think of. After that, the questions ask for one answer.
Will you please tell me all of the reasons you can think of that would be acceptable reasons for YOUR student to miss school?

Thank you. These next questions will be about why your student misses school.

Please think back over the last two years. What is the number one reason your student has missed school?

What is the number two reason your student has missed school?

What is the number three reason your student has missed school?

We are almost done. I have one more statement and I want to know how much you agree or disagree with it. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

The school can do more to support my student toward improved attendance.

And for my final question I would like you to take your time, and provide me as many answers as you can.

How might the school staff might help motivate your student to improve attendance?

Thank you for your help today. If you would like to know about the results of our research project, feel free to contact me or the school office, and we will make a copy of the results available when our work is complete.

Student Interview (Student is a _____ Male or _____ Female)

      I am going to ask you some questions today to try and understand why students are absent from school and how we can help them improve attendance. Your responses will be kept private, and the response sheet I will complete will not contain any information that identifies you.

      I will be asking three types of questions. My first questions will ask about factual information regarding your grade and how long you have been at Triangle Lake Charter School. After that I will ask some questions about whether you agree or disagree with some statements. I will also ask a few questions that will let you come up with any answers you can think of.

      I want to thank you for helping me today. Take as much time as you need. I want you to answer as honestly as you can. Your opinions are important to me.

      Let's begin.

What grade are you in right now?

What grade were you in when you started at Triangle Lake Charter School?

From the time you started at Triangle Lake Charter School, is this the only school you have attended?

If no, during what grades were you at another school?

      Next, I am going read some statements. I am going to ask you to tell me how much you agree or disagree by providing me one of five answers. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree? Let me know when you are ready for the first statement.

I like attending school.

      I will read another statement. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

I miss school sometimes, even when I am not sick or have to go somewhere with my family.

      Thank you. Now I am going to ask questions that require you to think about your answers. For the first question, I would like you to give me as many answers as you can think of. After that, the questions ask for one answer.

Will you please tell me all of the reasons you can think of why students miss school?

      Thank you. These next questions will be about why you have missed school.

Please think back over the last two years. What is the number one reason you have missed school?

What is the number two reason you have missed school?

What is the number three reason you have missed school?

We are almost done. I have one more statement and I want to know how much you agree or disagree with it. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

The school can do more to support me toward improved attendance.

And for my final question I would like you to take your time, and provide me as many answers as you can.

How might the school staff might help motivate YOU to improve attendance?

Thank you for your help today. If you are interested in what we discover during our research, let me or the school office know, and we will share the results after our work is complete.

APPENDIX B: Post-Intervention Interview Scripts

Parent Interview

I am going to ask you some questions today to gather information which will help us understand whether this study has been successful. Your responses will be confidential, and the response sheet I will complete will not contain any personally identifiable information.

I will be asking different types of questions. Some will ask about factual information and you should be able to provide specific answers. The rest of the survey be composed of some questions that ask you to rank how strongly you agree or disagree with a given statement and some questions that are open-ended and ask you to think of answers to a question.

I want to thank you for participating today. Take as much time as you feel is necessary to provide answers that are accurate and forthright. Your opinions are important to us.

Let's begin.

Did your student talk with you about participating in the attendance study?

If so, what sort of things did they share?

What would you say was your student's favorite thing about participating?

What was their least favorite part?

Next, I am going read some statements. I am going to ask you to tell me how much you agree or disagree by providing me one of five answers. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree? Let me know when you are ready for the first statement.

Participating in this study was beneficial for my student.

I will read another statement. Again, do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

My student has increased their rate of attending school.

For now, I have one more statement. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

After the study, my student feels strongly that it is important to attend every day.

Thank you. At this time, I am going to ask questions that require you to think about and provide answers. For the first question, I would like you to give me as many answers as you can think of. After that, the questions ask for one answer.

I asked this question during our initial interview. Will you please tell me all of the reasons you can think of that would be acceptable reasons for YOUR student to miss school?

Thank you. These next questions will be about whether your student missed school during the study.

Has your student has missed school this year?

What were the reasons from greatest to least frequency?

We are almost done. I have one more statement and I want to know how much you agree or disagree with it. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

During this study, the school supports helped my student improve attendance.

For these final questions I would like you to take your time, and provide me as many answers as you can.

What were the most significant supports that influenced your student's attendance during this study and why?

Were there supports or incentives we did not offer that would have been beneficial?

Was there an aspect of this study that should be changed or eliminated?

Thank you for your help today. If you would like to know about the results of our research project, feel free to contact me or the school office, and we will make a copy of the results available when our work is complete.

Student Interview (Student is a _____ Male or _____ Female)

I am going to ask you some questions today to gather information which will help us understand whether this study has been successful. Your responses will be confidential, and the response sheet I will complete will not contain any personally identifiable information.

I will be asking different types of questions. Some will ask about factual information and you should be able to provide specific answers. The rest of the survey be composed of some questions that ask you to rank how strongly you agree or disagree with a given statement and some questions that are open-ended and ask you to think of answers to a question.

I want to thank you for participating today. Take as much time as you feel is necessary to provide answers that are accurate and forthright. Your opinions are important to us.

Let's begin.

Did your talk with your parents or guardians about participating in the attendance study?

If so, what sort of things did you share?

What would you say was your favorite thing about participating?

What was your least favorite part?

Next, I am going read some statements. I am going to ask you to tell me how much you agree or disagree by providing me one of five answers. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree? Let me know when you are ready for the first statement.

Participating in this study was beneficial for me.

I will read another statement. Again, do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

I have increased my rate of attending school.

For now, I have one more statement. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

After the study, I feel strongly that it is important to attend every day.

Thank you. At this time, I am going to ask questions that require you to think about and provide answers. For the first question, I would like you to give me as many answers as you can think of. After that, the questions ask for one answer.

I asked this question during our initial interview. Will you please tell me all of the reasons you can think of why students miss school?

Thank you. These next questions will be about whether your student missed school during the study.

Have you missed school this year?

What were the reasons from greatest to least frequency?

We are almost done. I have one more statement and I want to know how much you agree or disagree with it. Do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree?

During this study, the school supports helped me improve attendance.

For these final questions I would like you to take your time, and provide me as many answers as you can.

What were the most significant supports that influenced your attendance during this study and why?

Were there supports or incentives we did not offer that would have been beneficial?

Was there an aspect of this study that should be changed or eliminated?

Thank you for your help today. If you would like to know about the results of our research project, feel free to contact me or the school office, and we will make a copy of the results available when our work is complete.

Appendix C: Teacher Survey

The following survey seeks to evaluate your perceptions of the success of the attendance interventions utilized during this study. Several questions ask about your level of agreement or disagreement with questions. Those are followed by an open-ended opportunity to share your thoughts and feelings about the project.

Thank you for your assistance with this endeavor.

For the following statements, please indicate whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree.

Students who participated in the study improved their attendance.

Students who participated in the study improved their academic performance.

Students who participated in the study improved their attitude toward attending school.

Students who participated in the study demonstrated greater interest in class activities.

Participant students were successful recording their daily attendance.

Participant students were positively motivated by weekly incentives.

Participant students were positively motivated by the trimester-end reward.

Participant students were positively motivated by the mentor check-ins.

Student participation did not require excessive time away from the classroom.

Student participation in the study was beneficial for the individual(s).

Please consider the following questions and begin thinking about the study, its effectiveness, and your feelings related to the effort. These questions are designed to stimulate thinking, but are not meant to be restrictive in their scope. Please tell me anything you would like about what worked, what did not work, and what might work better going forward. Do not hesitate to use the back of this survey or additional sheets to respond.

What was the most successful aspect of this study? What was the least successful? Did students talk about anything they liked or disliked? Did the study cause disruptions to teaching? What were specific significant benefits for participating students or the class as a whole? As we continue this effort going forward, what would you change?
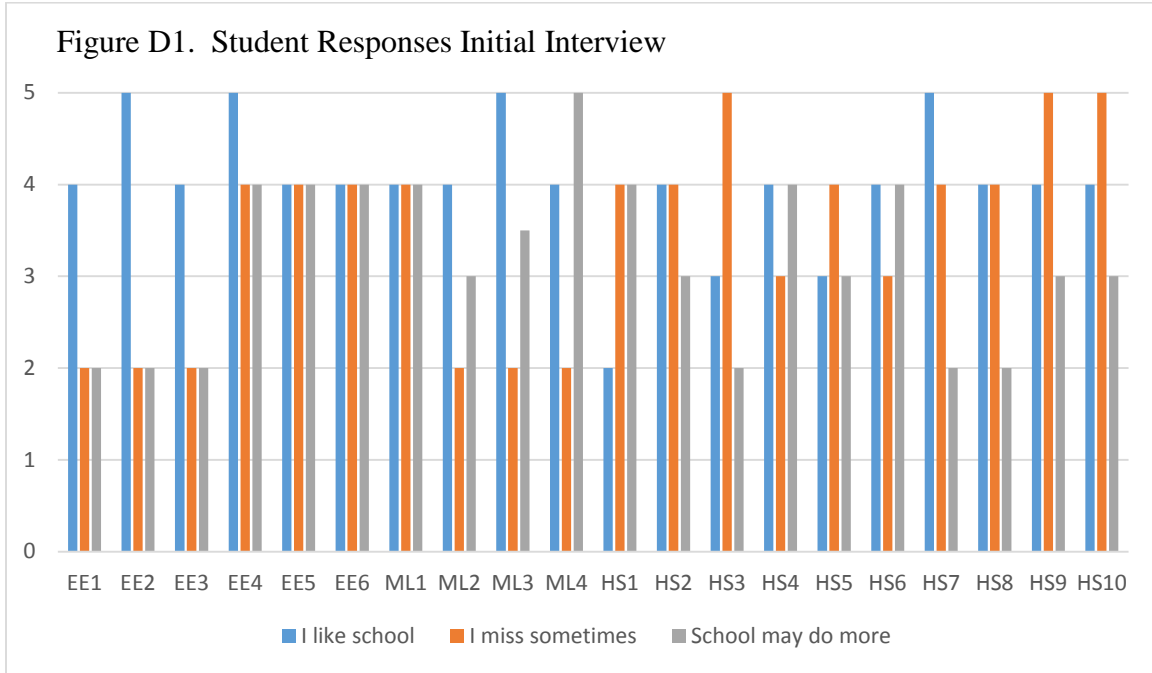
Appendix D: Initial Interview Data

Figure D1. Student Responses Initial Interview

Figure D1. Likert-type responses of 20 student participants to initial interview questions which may be found in Appendix A
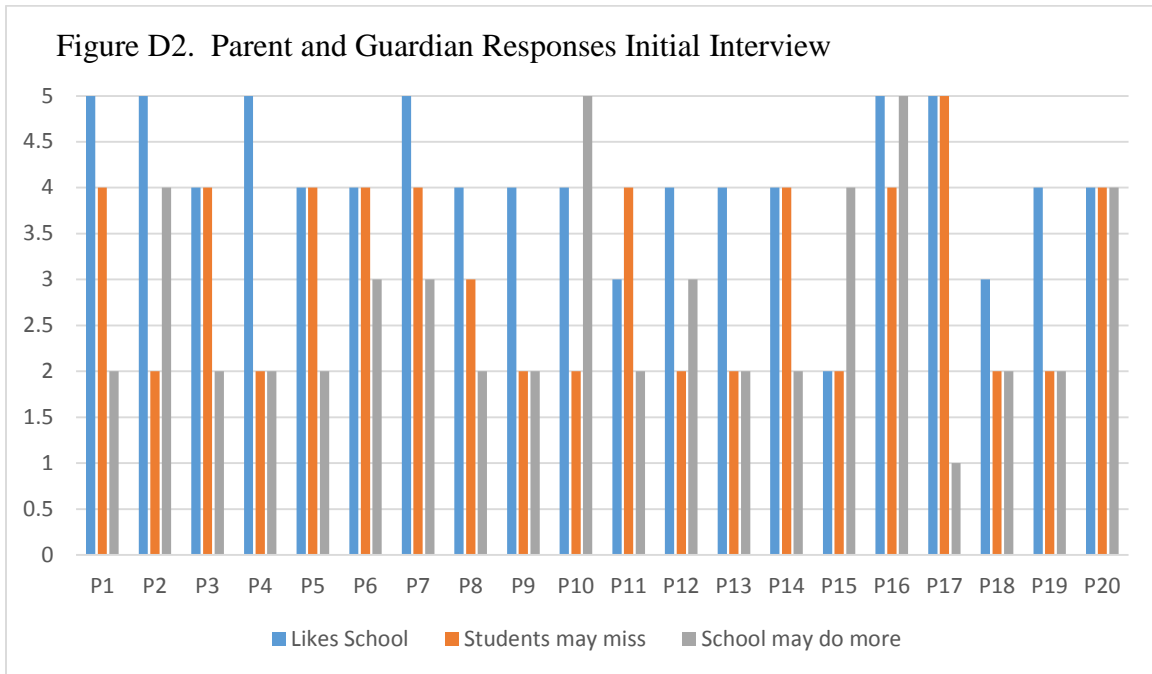

Figure D2. Parent and Guardian Responses Initial Interview

Figure D2. Likert-type responses of 20 parent participants to initial interview questions which may be found in Appendix A
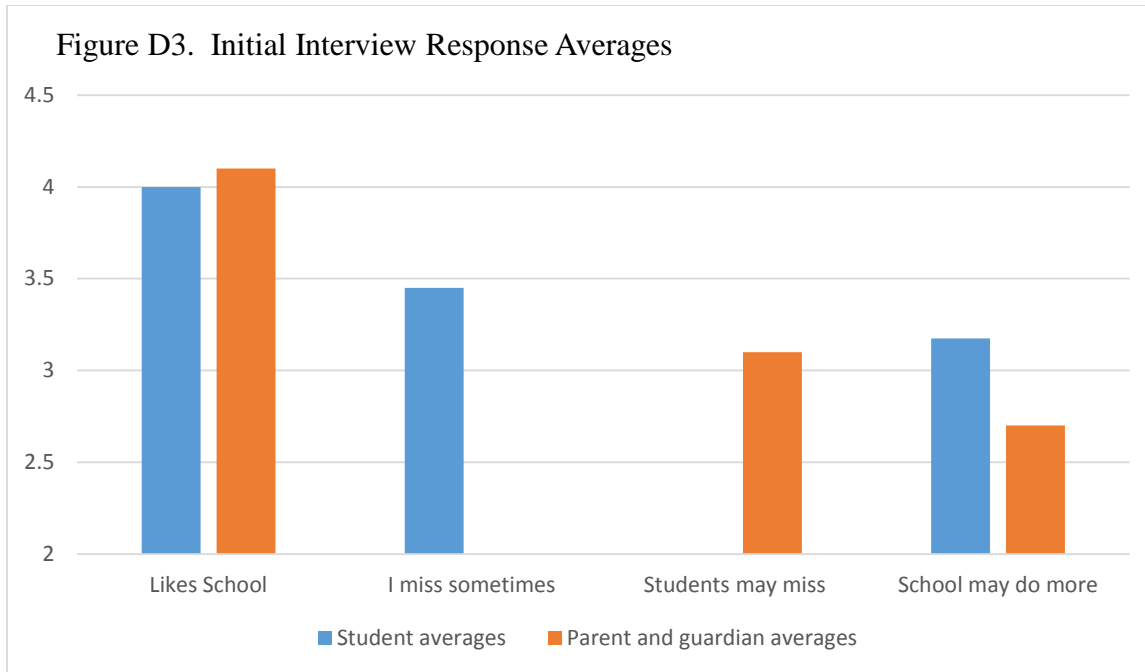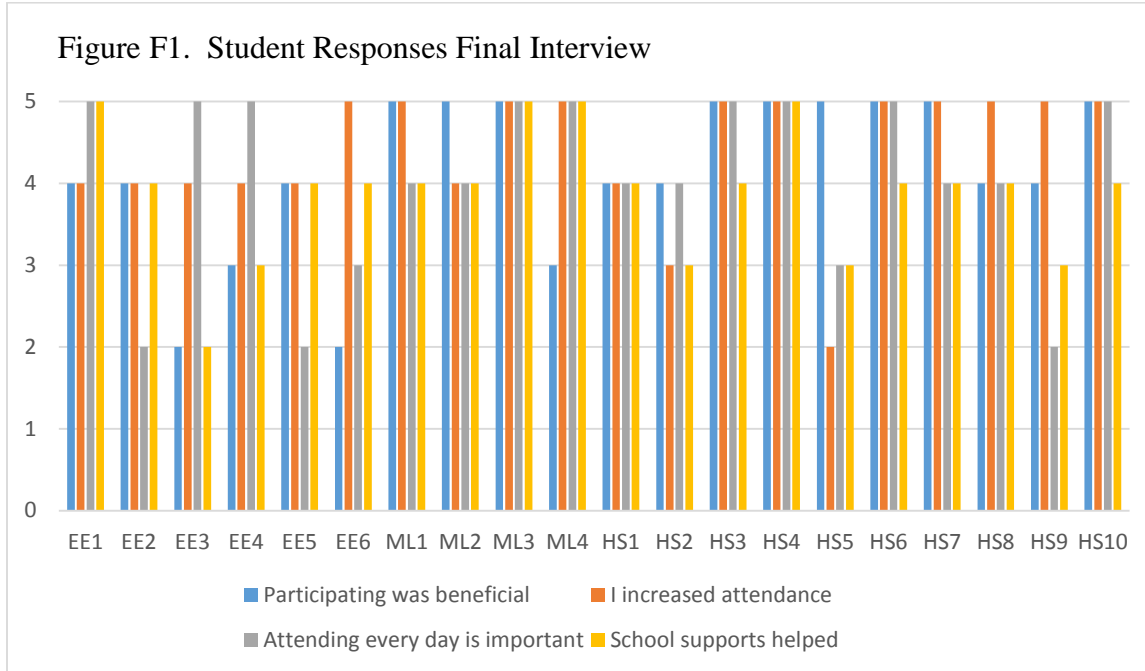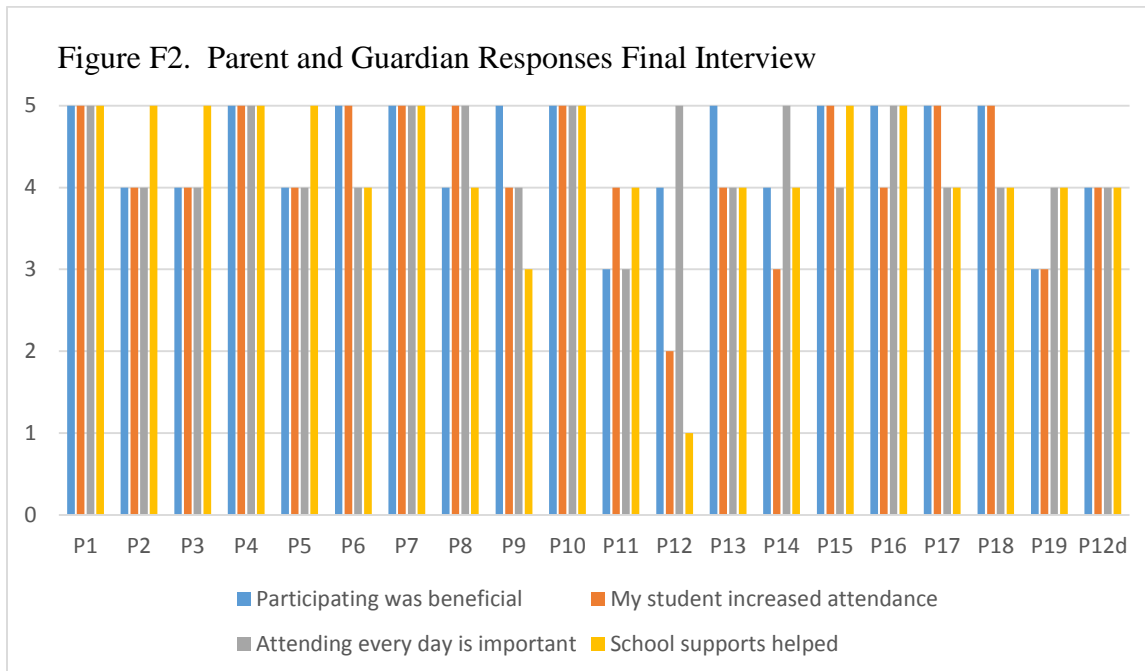
Figure D3. Initial Interview Response Averages

Figure D3. Responses averages of student and parent participants to the Likert-type initial interview questions which may be found in Appendix A

Appendix E: Participant Attendance Rates
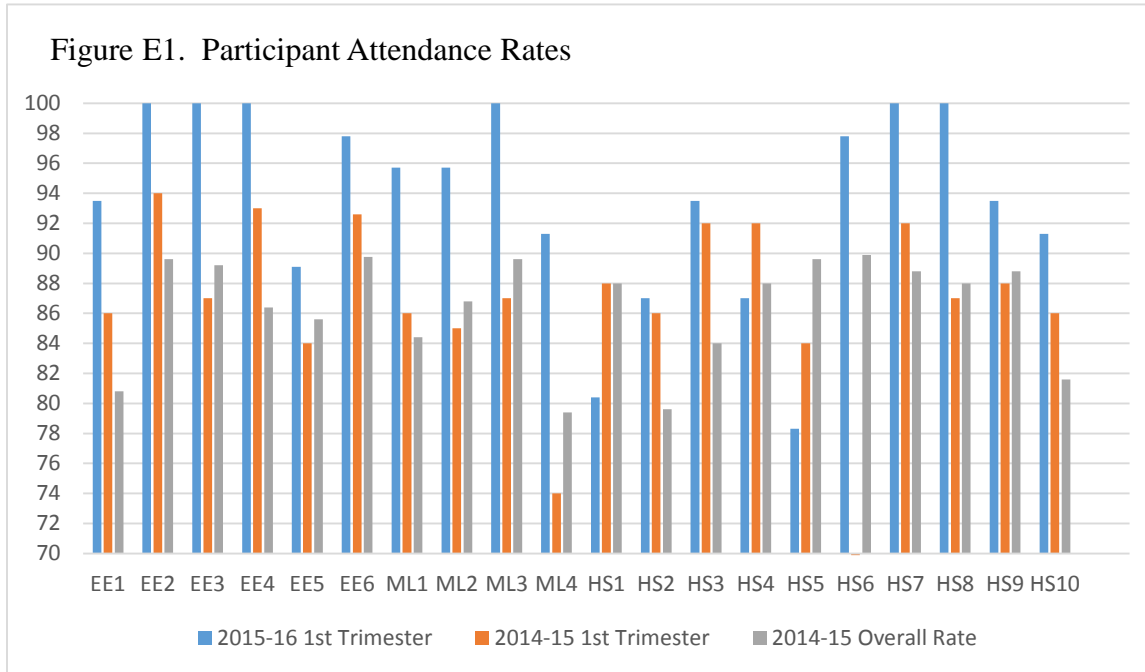
Figure E1. Percent attendance of student participants during the 2014–2015 school year and the first trimesters of 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 (the study term)

Appendix F: Final Interview Data

Figure F1. Likert-type responses of 20 student participants to final interview questions which may be found in Appendix B

Figure F2. Likert-type responses of 20 parent participants to final interview questions which may be found in Appendix B

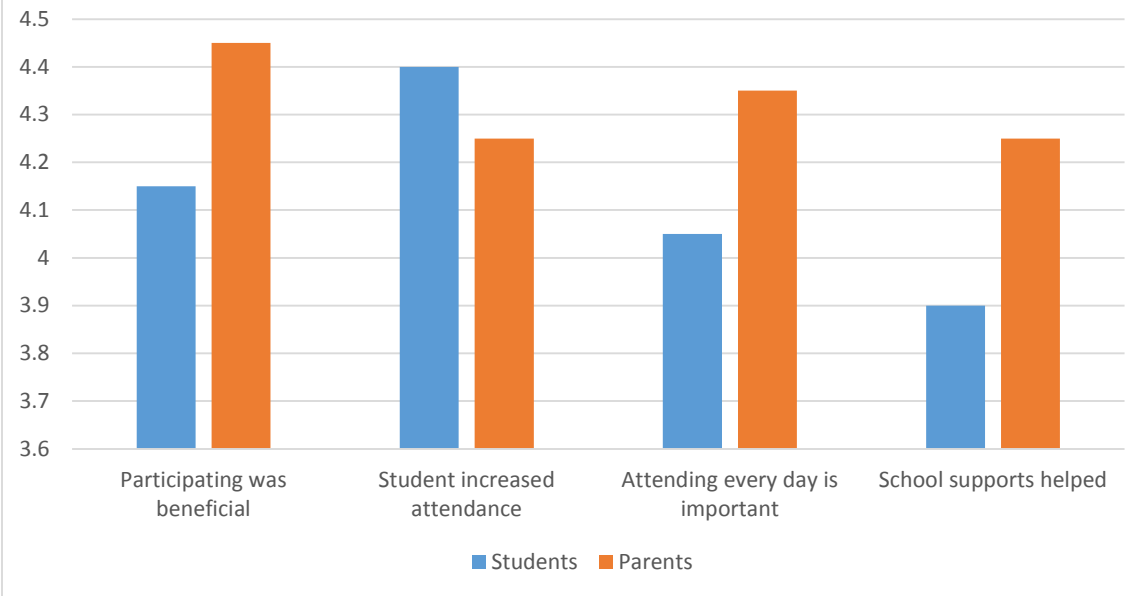Figure F3. Final Interview Response Averages

Figure F3. Responses averages of student and parent participants to the Likert-type final interview questions which may be found in Appendix B
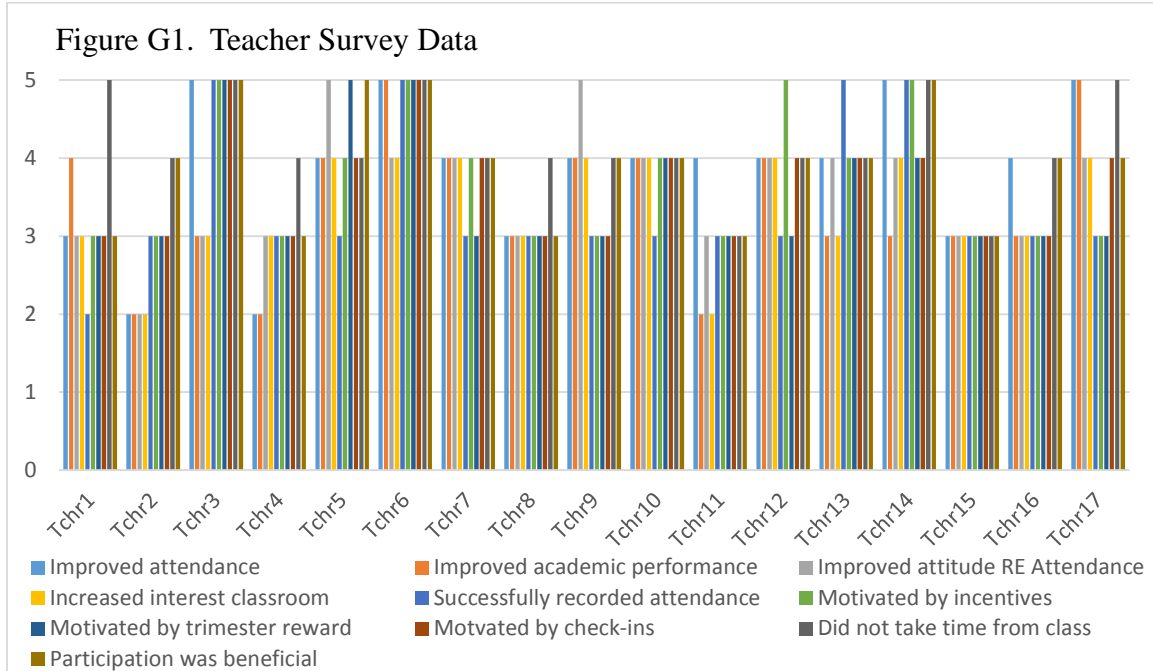
Appendix G: Teacher Survey Data

Figure G1. Teacher responses to Likert-type survey questions which may be found in Appendix C
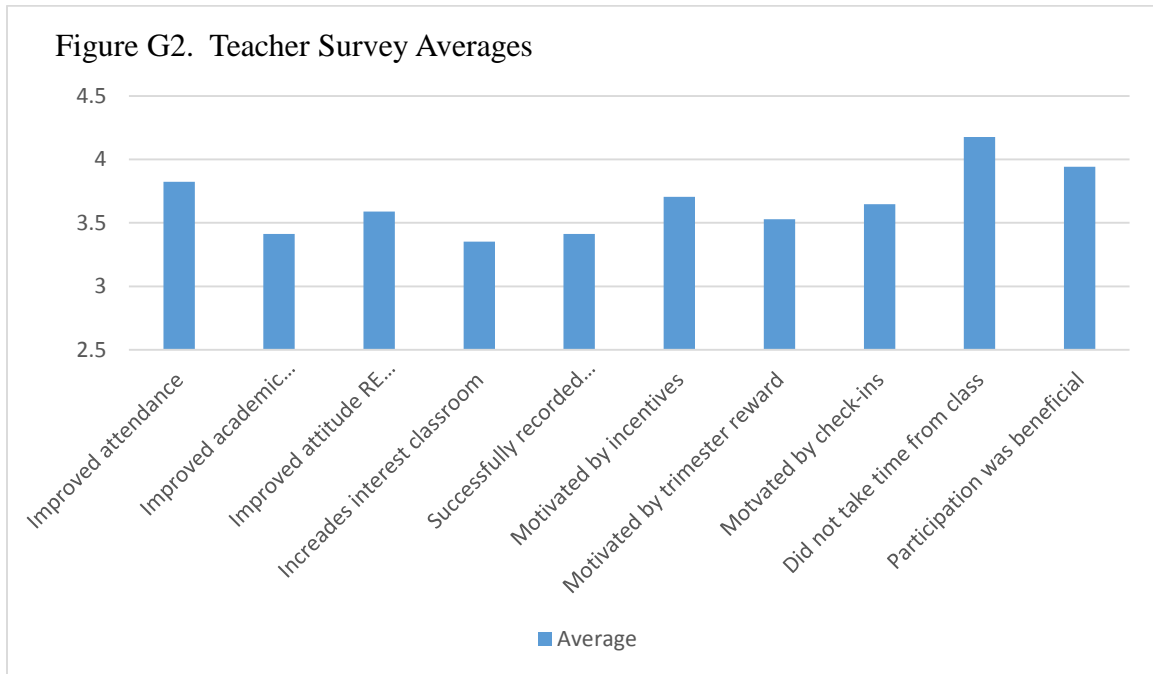

Figure G2. Average responses of teachers to Likert-type survey questions which may be found in Appendix C