

ENGAGING FAMILIES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

**THE IMPACT OF ENGAGING FAMILIES IN STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING
REGULAR ATTENDANCE FOR CHILDREN OF POVERTY**

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Abstract

Academic achievements and regular attendance are considered to be two important indicators of college and career readiness. Students who are economically disadvantaged and do not have regular attendance in school do not achieve at the same rate as their peers (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Additionally, attendance in middle school is considered a reliable predictor of high school success. This project was designed to determine if regular communication and engagement strategies with parents of economically disadvantaged students is effective in promoting regular attendance and preventing truancy, or habitual truancy, for students in this at-risk population. An additional inquiry was sought to determine if improved attendance then increased student performance on standardized tests. Tier 1 strategies were applied to all middle school students in a high poverty, rural school district. Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies were implemented for some students and proved to be successful in remediating truancy issues and preventing habitual truancy from occurring. School records from before and during the intervention year were compared to determine any differences in attendance rates and achievement. While some of the data was interrupted due to a national pandemic, it was determined that a tiered system of support was effective in promoting regular attendance for all students and even more so for students who are economically disadvantaged. Three recommendations for future action are provided for educational leaders who wish to improve attendance statistics.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Introduction

Academic achievements and regular attendance are considered to be two important indicators of college and career readiness. Students who are economically disadvantaged and do not have regular attendance in school do not achieve at the same rate as their peers (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). This phenomenon creates a greater divide between children of poverty and their peers from higher socioeconomic class for college and career readiness. Regular attendance in Pennsylvania is defined by the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 60 or more school days and present 90 percent or more of these school days. Regular attendance rates in my school district are inconsistent among schools and grade levels, but it is evident that overall the economically disadvantaged students have lower attendance rates than their non-impooverished peers. According to a 2014 report on Middle Grade Readiness in Chicago Public Schools (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, De la Torre, 2014), middle school attendance is much more predictive of passing high school classes than test scores. School administrators and teachers must employ strategies specifically targeted to the families of poverty in middle school grades in an effort to increase regular attendance and close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students.

Background and Focus

For the time period of this study, I served in the role of superintendent for the Keystone Central School District. I am new to the role of superintendent and a new employee in the district. Upon accepting this title, I also accepted a lot of responsibility for improving

low performing schools in a rural, low socio-economic area as required by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the criteria of the PA Future Ready Index. For the 2017-18 school year, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) reported that the statewide average for Regular Attendance was 85.8% (<https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/Attendance.aspx>). This percentage suggests that there are several schools across the state that are addressing truancy and habitual truancy as well as chronic absenteeism. In my district, all of the schools earned Regular Attendance rates well below the Pennsylvania target of 94.1%. It was evident to me that if we were going to improve standardized test scores, that we needed students to be in school regularly to impact their academic growth. Furthermore, we needed to understand why so many students were not attending school across the district.

Through our district comprehensive planning process, we conducted a survey for teachers, students and parents or guardians. From the responses we concluded that there were very few consequences for students who were missing school and that in many cases, parents were unaware that their children were missing school. The district was very lax in monitoring student attendance and truancy and this led to the fact that many students could accumulate multiple absences before parents were even notified of the first one, or before any interventions could be applied to remedy the situation. We determined that there needed to be some changes in our district policies and procedures. We implemented new policies for the 2019-20 school year and communicated them in letters to parents and in the revised student handbooks. These actions were in our control. What is not in our control is parental decisions regarding school attendance for their children. I have had some experience in understanding the role of poverty in school achievement

and was interested to know more about this topic as related to student attendance. My administrative team and I needed to find ways to successfully engage families in their child's education and teach them about the importance of school attendance. I felt that we also needed to find solutions that were fiscally responsible and did not have a pre-established budget to implement. I decided to embark on a project that would determine what other actions are in our control to support families in high poverty schools. I decided to focus on middle school students as they are all of compulsory attendance age and have multiple years of school achievement data. I also decided to focus on the schools with the highest poverty rate in the most remote location of my rural school district. By focusing on the school with the greatest need, this study would serve as a pilot project that if successful could be implemented across all schools in the district. Additionally, I would be able to determine if the monetary costs of the materials (approximately \$1400) and the time commitment of my counselors and principals to implement the strategies was worth the investment of time and money for the gained results.

For this project, I determined that I needed to compare the pre and post data collections to determine if communication and parental engagement of families has an impact on attendance rates for students in a high poverty middle school. A comparison of the gap between economically disadvantaged students in relation to their non-impooverished peer group will also be compared to determine if a decrease was notable. In addition to attendance data, the researcher will be able to determine if Regular Attendance is correlated to a proficiency rate on grade level standardized tests (PSSA) and norm referenced tests (AIMSweb). Student data for those designated as

truant, or habitually truant, will also be disaggregated as subgroups when analyzing the data.

Research Questions

My study developed into a project that analyzed the Impact of Engaging Families in Strategies for Improving Regular Attendance for Children of Poverty. This led me to my three research questions:

- ***Research Question 1: Communication and Regular Attendance.*** Is regular and consistent communication to parents/guardians effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students?
- ***Research Question 2: Engagement and Truancy.*** Is parent engagement effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students who are truant (three illegal absences) or habitually truant (six illegal absences)?
- ***Research Question 3: Academic Achievements.*** Does improved regular attendance of middle school students in school increase student performance on grade level standardized tests?

Expected Outcomes

Based on the review of literature on this topic, I have selected strategies that are targeted for middle school students and their families who are considered economically disadvantaged. There will be direct and indirect costs associated with the project. Direct costs will be under \$2000 for supplies and the indirect costs of employee time may be worth the effort. There is adequate literature to support the strategies that include regular

communication that influences parental attitudes toward the importance of attendance. Students who live in households that are determined to be economically disadvantaged have a greater risk of being absent due to limitations of parental support for education and a greater risk of mental health issues or physical wellness issues. If school administrators focus on what is in their control, such as parental engagement strategies and accountability, our efforts are likely to have a positive impact on student attendance. Administrators should consider employing strategies that are respectful and provide sensitivity to the characteristics of families of poverty. Strategies that combine accountability and multiple sources of written notification, including monthly cumulative attendance data, is expected to improve attendance of students in a high poverty middle school. The goal is to improve attendance, and ultimately academic achievement, for the most at-risk students in my district.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The Keystone Central School District, located in Central Pennsylvania, is geographically the largest school district in the Commonwealth as it covers 970.8 square miles across all of Clinton County and parts of Potter and Centre Counties. There are ten schools located throughout the district housing students in kindergarten through twelfth grade with one Career and Technical Center. District enrollment is currently 3862, with over 300 full-time and part-time Cyber School students. There is little diversity within the district as 94% of the student population is white. There is a small percentage of Hispanic, Black and Mixed-Race students who make up the remaining six per cent of the population. The rate of poverty is higher in some schools across the district with the average poverty rate of 48% and an average rate of 20% for students who have disabilities. In the northern and most remote region of the school district, Renovo Elementary houses students in grades K-6 next door the Bucktail High School which houses students in grades 7-12. My study is focused on students in grades 5-8 in the Bucktail Middle School configuration. These schools have the highest rate of poverty (53%) among all of the schools in the district. While many local stakeholders characterize their school as a close-knit community, there seems to be limited engagement between parents and school personnel when it comes to attendance. Low attendance rates combined with low parental engagement has led me to study, *The Impact of Engaging Middle School Families in Strategies for Improving Regular Attendance for Children of Poverty*.

Academic Success

The United States Department of Education's (USDE) mission statement is "*to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access*" (<https://www.ed.gov>, 2019). This mission statement provides a clear purpose for public education: equal access and student achievement. Public schools are designed for students to attend daily in order to receive an education. According to Balfanze & Byrnes (2012) regular attendance matters for all students, and especially for those who live in poverty, or close to the poverty level, as these are the students who are the most vulnerable to poor school performance or dropping out of school (p. 4). This is an issue across the nation, in urban, suburban and rural areas, as millions of students miss far too much school and the detrimental effects will have an impact on these individuals and our society as a whole (Balfanze & Byrnes, 2012, p. 6). Thus, as school administrators, we must ensure that policies and procedures are in place for our school districts that will promote regular attendance, but we cannot simply stop there. We must also make a concentrated effort to know our students and engage parents as partners in their child's education, especially those who are in poverty, to ensure that our students are able and willing to attend school every day in pursuit of academic success.

Learning is the fundamental purpose of schools. Academic success can simply be defined as readiness for college, career, or life as a citizen. It is evident that children need to be in attendance at school on a consistent basis in order to be academically successful in a traditional public school model. It is clear that certain characteristics of students can predict academic success. Family involvement is one of the factors that

predicts success according to Simon (2001) of John Hopkins University (p. 1). Over 11,000 high school parents and 1,000 high school principals participated in a study to examine high school, family, and community partnerships. The analyses revealed that “regardless of students’ background and prior achievement, various parenting, volunteering, and home learning activities positively influenced student grades, course credits completed, attendance, behavior, and school preparedness. When educators guided parents and solicited their participation, parents responded with increased involvement to support student success” (Simon, 2001, p. 1).

Barriers to academic success have also been identified. Students who have poor attendance, low test scores, and poor grades are more likely to drop out of school (Balfanze & Byrnes, 2012, p. 3-5). Regular school attendance rates are proven to be linked to increased student achievement across all grade levels including elementary, intermediate grades, middle school grades, and high school (Nichols, 2003, p. 1). While there are valid reasons that students miss attending school on some days, there are many students who are chronically absent as defined by missing more than 10% of the school year. Some student groups are more vulnerable than others when it comes to chronic absenteeism. According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012)

Chronic absenteeism is most prevalent among low-income students, and it is low-income students who benefit the most from being in school every day. This indicates that one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get students who live in high-poverty neighborhoods to attend school every day, and that this alone, even without any additional qualitative improvements in the American education system, will drive

up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates and through them economic productivity and social progress. (p. 4)

It is imperative that school administrators identify targeted strategies in order to provide high levels of support to students in kindergarten through grade twelve who are identified as economically disadvantaged so that they have an equal opportunity to meet rigorous high school graduation requirements. Middle school students, especially males, are at an even higher risk (75%) of dropping out of school as early as eighth grade with a high degree of certainty (Burrus & Roberts, 2012, p. 4). Students who are attending school less than 80% of the time in eighth grade, combined with failing either mathematics or English during the same year, should signal parents and school officials that these are red flags for recognizing a student who is at high risk of dropping out of school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012, pp. 4-5).

Attendance Crisis

Each year the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) collects data about key education and civil rights issues from public schools across the nation. The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is mandated by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and under the Department of Education Organization Act (20 U.S.C. § 3413) (<https://surveys.nces.ed.gov>). The CRDC collects multiple data points regarding student enrollment and educational programs for the public and researchers. Much of this data is then disaggregated by race/ethnicity, sex, English proficiency, and students identified with a disability. The CRDC collected student absenteeism rates for the first time in 2013-14 which included 6.4 million students from across the nation. The shocking

results revealed that 14 per cent of all students were chronically absent (missing more than 15 days) in that school year. This began the United States Attendance Crisis that prompted action by lawmakers for more accountability and responsiveness by school districts across the nation.

In the same year, the 2013 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) scores were analyzed by each state and concluded that in every state across the nation:

Students who miss more school than their peers score lower on the NAEP. This is true at every age, in every racial and ethnic group and in every state and city examined. In many cases, the students with more absences have skill levels one to two years below their peers. While students from low-income families are more likely to be chronically absent, the ill effects of missing too much school hold true for all socio-economic groups. (Ginsberg, A., Jordan, P., & Chang, H., 2012, p. 2)

The impact of poor attendance is a national problem and tends to be higher in urban areas (Ginsberg et al, 2012, p 4). Poor attendance was also proven to contribute to the achievement gap between low income students and minorities compared to the total population in the 2013 NAEP analysis (Ginsberg, et al, 2012, p.1). Ginsberg, Jordan & Chang determined that:

Students eligible for free and reduced price meals...are more likely to miss three days or more in the prior month. In fourth grade, these students are 30 percent more likely to miss that much school (p. 3). In eighth grade, they are 40 percent more likely. (Ginsberg, et al, 2012, p. 4)

This is evidence that attendance issues in the early years for this at-risk population compounds in the middle school years. The impact of attendance was also directly linked to student achievement on the NAEP. The same researchers concluded that:

Low-income students generally scored lower on the NAEP than their more affluent peers, although the students from all socio-economic groups experienced lower test scores when they missed too much school. Low-income fourth graders with poor attendance scored 10 points (equivalent to one grade on the NAEP scale) lower than those with perfect attendance. For fourth graders from more affluent families, the difference was 8 points. (Ginsberg, et al, 2012, p. 4)

This report provides a clear correlation between attendance and academic achievement with evidence that poor attendance is even a bigger factor for at-risk students and their achievement. Studies such as this have influenced the need for change in school accountability.

Legislation

President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on December 10, 2015 (ESSA, 2015). This bipartisan legislation reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), our national education law. The law makes a long-term commitment to equal opportunity and quality education for all students in public schools across the United States of America. The new ESSA law continues a focus on key areas of progress that includes high school graduation rates, student growth and achievement, attendance and career readiness. This new law increases accountability for particular student subgroups including special education students, minority groups, limited English language learners and students in poverty. Under

ESSA, states are required to determine how they will meet the requirements of the new law while staying in the guidelines provided to them. Challenging academic standards defined by each state must be provided to all students. Goals for academic achievement as measured by the state's choice for annual testing is also a requirement. States must test students in reading and math once per school year, in grades 3 through 8, as well as once in high school. They must also test students in science once in grade school, middle school, and high school. Accountability indicators are required as each state is responsible for having a plan in place to identify schools that are underperforming and put them on a plan for improvement. Each state must include a minimum of five ways to measure accountability. Academic achievement, academic progress, language proficiency and high school graduation rates are required. The final measure can be selected from Kindergarten readiness, access and completion of advanced coursework, college readiness, discipline rates or chronic absenteeism.

The response to ESSA across the nation has been relatively positive compared to previous education reform initiatives in America. A few of the leading experts in the American education system have characterized it as an improved form of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation because it gives states more flexibility (DuFour, Reeves, DuFour, 2018, p.3). In the spring of 2018, Matt Stem, the Pennsylvania Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, notified school superintendents of the official requirements for the transition to the Future Ready PA Index. The Future Ready PA Index became the evidenced-based tool that Pennsylvania adopted in order to be compliant with ESSA and to report to public stakeholders (PDE 2018 <https://www.media.pa.gov/Pages/Education-Details.aspx?newsid=559>). The tool has

three categories of indicators: Statewide Assessment Measures, On-Track Measures and College and Career Ready Measures. Each of these categories have additional sub-indicators. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act Pennsylvania Consolidated Plan (2019), the federally compliant state criteria includes the following:

State Assessment Measures:

- Percent Proficient or Advanced on PSSA/Keystone Exam (Mathematics/Algebra I, Science/Biology, and English Language Arts/Literature)
- Meeting Annual Growth Expectations (PVAAS) (Mathematics/Algebra I, Science/Biology, and English Language Arts/Literature)
- Percent Advanced on PSSA/Keystone Exam (Mathematics/Algebra I, Science/Biology, and English Language Arts/Literature)

On-Track Measures:

- English Language Proficiency
- Chronic Absenteeism
- Grade 3 Reading/Grade 7 Mathematics Early Indicators of Success

College and Career Measure:

- Graduation Rate
- Career Readiness Benchmark
- Industry Based Learning, including Industry Standards-Based Competency Assessments, High Value Industry Recognized Credentials, or Work Based Learning Experiences)
- Rigorous Courses of Study, including Advanced Placement (AP)/International Baccalaureate (IB)/College Course Offerings, or CTE Career Pathways
- Post-Secondary Transition to School, Military, or Work

([https://www.education.pa.gov/K-](https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/FROverviewoftheDashboard.aspx)

[12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/FROverviewoftheDashboard.aspx](https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/FROverviewoftheDashboard.aspx))

Graduating from high school is critical in determining if students are college, career, or life ready. In order for students to meet high school graduation requirements, there is an expectation that students will attend school, be engaged, and meet academic

benchmarks. If public school students are attending school when they are not ill, engaging in learning, and putting in their best effort, and meeting course requirements they are likely on-track for graduation. High school graduation is considered a metaphoric passage into adulthood for most students and a predictor of later outcomes. Graduates are presumed to be ready for the academic challenges they will face in post-secondary schools. Students who enter the military or workforce, are presumed to be ready with the skills and challenges they need to be a productive employee. For all graduates, it is expected that they will be prepared for adult life as a productive citizen regardless of their pathway. Students with a high school diploma are more likely to be able to reach the middle class level in adulthood where they would have a better chance of living a longer and healthier lifestyle as a productive citizen (Sawhill, et al., 2012, pp. 6-9).

Attendance is not only required by state laws, it is required by ESSA for school accountability. In Pennsylvania, the statewide goal for Regular School Attendance is 94.1% (<https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/Attendance.aspx>). For the 2017-18 school year, PDE reported that the statewide average for Regular Attendance was 85.8% (<https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/Attendance.aspx>). This suggests that there are several schools across the state that are addressing truancy and habitual truancy as well as chronic absenteeism.

Following revisions in 2019, the Chronic Absenteeism criteria was replaced with Regular Attendance by PDE (<https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/Attendance.aspx>). Chronic Absenteeism is defined by PDE

by a student who is enrolled for at least 90 school days and is present and has missed more than 10 percent of those days while in contrast Regular Attendance is defined and calculated by the percentage of students who are enrolled for at least 90 school days and present 90 percent of the school days within one school year. The tool also provides information for individual student groups and whether or not a school and/or student group met the indicator and how it compared to the previous year (PDE 2019, <https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/ESSA/FutureReady/Pages/Attendance.aspx>).

By making regular attendance a priority in the State Assessment Measures, it is evident that Pennsylvania law makers understand the value of attendance as it relates to school performance and ultimately college and career readiness. The mandatory school age is defined in Pennsylvania school code, § 11.13 Compulsory School Age section as:

Except as otherwise provided by law, compulsory school age refers to the period of a child's life from the time the child enters school (which may be no later than at the age of 8 years), until the age of 17 or graduation from a high school, whichever occurs first. (PA School Code, § 11.13)

Truancy laws in Pennsylvania include stiff penalties for parents and students who are of compulsory attendance age and are not compliant with the law. The Education Law Center of Pennsylvania published an analysis of the revised truancy legislation signed into law by Governor Wolf on Thursday, November 3, 2016. The most notable change is in the consequences as the new law permits a judge to levy progressive fines for a person convicted of habitual truancy: up to \$300 per offense, with court costs, for the first offense; up to \$500 for the second offense; and up to \$750 for a third and any and all subsequent offenses. (Education Law Center, 2016, p. 2). At the local level, school

boards are responsible for developing policies that support state laws and administrators are responsible for carrying out the policies with procedures. In the Keystone Central School District these procedures are then approved in the student handbooks and published on the district website for accessibility for students, parents and guardians. In an effort to improve regular attendance rates, the district added consequences for non-compulsory age students who are illegally absent. The consequences are progressive for students entering the Chronically Absent designation.

Local policies must be enacted in order to comply with federal and state mandates as well as provide the authority for school officials to apply and enforce guidelines for compulsory school attendance. The Keystone Central School District (KCSD) Policy 204 Attendance denotes the Purpose of the policy, the Authority by which the local board of directors may enforce the policy and the Delegation of Responsibility for carrying out the policy as intended. The Purpose of the KCSD Attendance Policy 204 is defined with the following statement, “the Board requires that school age students enrolled in district schools attend school regularly, in accordance with state laws. The educational program offered by the district is predicated upon the presence of the student and requires continuity of instruction and classroom participation in order for students to achieve academic standards and consistent educational progress” (KCSD policy 204). The policy also requires mandatory attendance for every day that school is in session. Students may be excused from this requirement if they meet one of the following conditions: illness, quarantine, recovery from accident, required court attendance, death in family, or impassable roads and/or natural disasters. With prior approval, students may be excused for family educational travel or educational trips and tours. The policy includes language

that permits excused absences to be recorded for unusual situations that directly affects the student. This special consideration must be approved by the superintendent or designee. In Pennsylvania, school boards are required by the Pennsylvania School Code of 1949, to permit a student to be excused for participation in projects at agricultural fairs. KCSD specifically denotes excused absence for students who are participating in projects sponsored by a “statewide or countywide 4-H, FFA or combined 4-H and FFA group upon written request prior to the event” (KCSD policy 204).

The policy also considers a students’ constitutional right to religious freedom by permitting an excused absence for observance of a student's religious holiday, or religious instruction, on any Board approved school day. Furthermore, the policy prohibits any penalty for such an absence during a religious holiday, or religious instruction, so long as there is a written request by the parents/guardians. Missed time for religious instruction is limited to thirty-six hours per school year and the district is not permitted to provide transportation to religious instruction. The policy also permits flexible instructional days for students who are participating in career-based programs or homebound instruction. The KCSD Board also recognizes medical and dental appointments and court appearances as justified absences. Family emergencies and other urgent reasons may be excused at the building principal’s discretion.

The policy also declares that, “Absences shall be treated as unlawful until the district receives a written excuse explaining the absence, to be submitted within three (3) days of the absence” (KCSD policy 204, 2019, p. 1). The district permits the written excuse to be delivered in person, via postal mail, or to be emailed to district officials. Failure to do so within three days will permit the district to code the respective

absence, or absences, as illegal days. The policy includes clear language for parents and guardians regarding their responsibilities when a child is absent.

Educational trips provide opportunities for students to learn in non-traditional ways outside of the school day or school building. Such planned absences as educational trips may be approved by school administrators if specific conditions are met by parents/guardians. According to KCSD policy, parents/guardians must make the request at least five days in advance of the trip and the total excused educational trip days cannot exceed more than seven school days within one school year. Educational trip requests may be denied if the date of the planned absences occurs during the Pennsylvania testing exam windows for PSSA or Keystone Exams. Special exceptions to this requirement are explained in the policy and the superintendent is permitted to award additional days at their discretion. The KCSD policy provides specific criteria for required denial of a trip if the student has more than ten days of absences (excluding physician's excuses and suspensions/expulsions), if the student has three or more days of unexcused/illegal absences, or if the student is not in good academic standing. This is quantifiable by meeting athletic eligibility requirement status.

According to the KCSD Policy 204 in regards to attendance, (<https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/keyc/Board.nsf/Public#>), consequences are applied for students who accumulate more than ten days of absence in a school year, regardless of the reason. Furthermore, they will be notified that they must present a valid excuse from a physician for any additional absences. For any illegal absences over three days, students are considered to be truant. District officials must report the truancy to social services and have citation issued to the violators. Students who accrue additional illegal

days up, or more than six days, are considered habitually truant. Legal citations for parents and involvement with social service agencies are required. Students who do not follow the guidelines in the attendance policy for educational trips are also subject to punitive actions that include legal action and academic penalties. The policy specifically states that:

All students are responsible for making up school work and tests missed during an approved trip. At the secondary level, this shall be at the initiation of the student and reasonable convenience of the teacher(s). Work that is not made up shall count as a failure. All work assigned prior to the trip must be returned within three (3) school days, or this will count as a failure. Unapproved trips shall be treated as unexcused absences. As such, no work missed may be made up.

(<https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/keyc/Board.nsf/Public#>)

It is clear that the governing board of the school district values regular attendance and promotes it in its policy while permitting excused absences and opportunities for students to learn outside of the traditional classroom setting. Students and parents who do not comply with these policies are subject to consequences that will have a negative impact on them. Parents who are cited for illegal activity regarding school attendance can result in lost work time for required attendance in court hearings which may also require them to miss work and pay monetary fines. Parents who do not pay the fines or appear in court may be subjected to jail time. These consequences are likely to have a greater negative impact on parents of students who are economically disadvantaged than their non-disadvantaged peers. Parents of poverty are likely to have jobs that do not include paid

time off for such instances, or may not have reliable transportation options to attend the required school conferences.

The KCSD Attendance Policy 204 also requires annual notification of the policy to staff, students, and parents/guardians regarding Board policies and school regulations that “govern student attendance, absences tardiness, partial-day absences, and excusals” (KCSD policy 204, <https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/keyc/Board.nsf/Public#>). This is accomplished by sending a written letter home via the United States Postal Service, posting it on the district website, and sending an electronic copy of the letter via email. The policy and procedures regarding school attendance are also outlined in the KCSD Student Handbook which is approved annually by the school board.

High stakes accountability by ESSA requires PDE to oversee the accountability system for schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (ESSA, 2015). Each school district must act to promote regular attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism among their students in a responsive manner that fits the unique needs of their students. Lauren Bauer, Patrick Liu, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Jay Shambaugh combined their efforts to publish a report entitled, *Reducing Chronic Absenteeism under the Every Student Succeeds Act* (Bauer, et al 2018). The report provides evidence-based strategies for schools as they plan to act in reducing rates of chronic absence and increasing regular attendance among students in response to the ESSA legislation (Bauer, et al 2018). Furthermore, combining this high stake accountability with proven strategies, such as tiered interventions, will clearly have an effect on increasing student attendance and improving student academic outcomes (Bauer, et al 2018, pp. 20-22). My study is designed to employ a variety of multi-tiered strategies in an effort to approve attendance.

Considering all of the truancy law changes and with robust data regarding the attendance crisis, policy makers, and school administrators have responded aggressively with state and district policies that encourage every student to attend school every day by enforcing legal or punitive consequences for truancy and chronic absenteeism. Administrators in school districts across the nation are not only focusing their efforts on improving policies and practices to reduce absenteeism in response to ESSA and state accountability efforts, but they are also seeking systemic approaches to the issue as recommended by experts in the field. Communication to all stakeholders regarding changes to policies and procedures is a key first step in addressing the issue. Monitoring progress and evaluating individual and school results will also be necessary in order to improve regular attendance (Attendance Works, 2018).

Response to Intervention

One approach to solving problems is a Response to Intervention (RTI) model with three tiers of support. According to Fox, et al., RTI is defined as:

A systematic decision-making process designed to allow for early and effective responses to children's learning and behavioral difficulties, provide children with a level of instructional intensity matched to their level of need, and then provide a data-based method for evaluating the effectiveness of instructional approaches. RTI relies on evidence-based instructional practices and frequent progress monitoring to provide the data necessary to make decisions about child progress and need for more intensive intervention. (Fox et. al., 2009, p. 3)

RTI provides practitioners with strategies for all students in Tier 1, strategies targeted for some students in Tier 2, and intensive, targeted strategies for a few students in Tier

3. Tier 1 strategies are intended to be implemented for all students school-wide, with little, to no cost to the district. Strategies must be timely and targeted outside the base tier in order to get the intended results and may be more costly to the school or school district.

In an effort to address poor attendance in a tiered approach, some school districts have implemented targeted professional development for teachers and staff members to make them aware of the importance of daily attendance. One example of this Tier 1 intervention includes interactive online training courses based on the Teaching Attendance curriculum (Attendance Works 2019). Training such as this provides teachers with evidence-based strategies to support students and parents in promoting daily school attendance. Teachers have also been provided research-based resources to support positive engagement such as videos, incentives, posters, and messages for parents (Attendance Works, 2019). Communicating with all parents about the importance of daily attendance is one part of Tier 1 plans to address the attendance crisis. Communications may include texting, emailing, phone calls, and paper communications are commonly used by districts to communicate with parents. Texting, emailing or calling parents on the day of any unexpected absences to remind them to return excuse notes within three days is not likely to reduce absences, but can reduce the number of absences that are coded as truant due to the lack of a legitimate excuse.

Strategies that impact parental behavior have been proven to produce positive results regarding student attendance. Todd Rogers of Harvard University and Avi Feller of the University of California, Berkeley implemented a study across multiple years in the Philadelphia School District, the largest district in the Commonwealth, to determine

what type of mailings regarding attendance were most effective by targeting parents' misbeliefs about student absences (Rogers & Feller, 2016). This study included a large sample size of 28,080 parents of students in kindergarten through grade twelve and proved that their most effective intervention increased attendance by 10% in cases where the parents had underestimated students' total absences (Rogers & Feller, 2016, p. 1). This research indicated that parents who received reminders about the importance of attendance improved by eight per cent while parents who received personalized notifications (six times throughout the school year) of cumulative absences for each child improved student attendance by ten per cent (Rogers and Feller 2016, p 5-7). Based on this study, it is evident that engaging parents with personalized information about their child's total absences intermittently throughout the school year can be effective in increasing attendance rates of children in kindergarten through grade 12 as a Tier 1 strategy.

In Tier 2, the strategies that are implemented are targeted and personalized to individual students and families. Meetings and mentoring are common at this level and these strategies require more resources such as staff time. School district administrators have been engaging parents and students in Student Attendance Improvement Conferences (SAIC) that outline targeted goals and actions in a Student Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP) for increasing daily attendance and eliminating truancy as required by Pennsylvania law (https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/New-Truancy-Law_ELC-Analysis-1-10-17.pdf). One school district, Earl Boyles, located in Oregon, created a Student Success Plan and Attendance Works adapted it to create grade level templates for any district to use at no cost (Attendance Works, 2019). The Student

Success Plans are designed to have students identify total days present, total days absent, and an improvement goal based on a number of days for the rest of the school year (Attendance Works, 2019, <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/student-attendance-success-plans/>). In addition to writing a goal, the student can select strategies the support their goal such as:

1. I will make attending school every day a priority.
2. I will keep track of my attendance and absences.
3. I will set my alarm clock for __ a.m.
4. I will attend school every day unless I'm truly sick with a temperature of 100 degrees or more.
5. I will find a relative, friend or neighbor who can take me to school if I miss my bus.
6. If I am absent, I will contact my teachers to find out what I missed.
7. I will set up medical and dental appointments for weekdays after school. If I must make a medical appointment during the school day, I will try to attend school for the majority of the day.
8. When I am struggling with a challenge that is keeping me from school I will confide in an adult at school and seek help. (Attendance Works, 2019, <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/student-attendance-success-plans/>).

In the plan template, students also make a commitment to their goals and identify "My Help Bank" which may include family members, everyday helpers such as people like friends and neighbors or school staff who can help regularly, and occasional helpers who can assist for short periods of time such as a friend or relative that lives outside the

neighborhood. Potential helpers can also be identified by name for any individual that is part of the school community, church or neighborhood (Attendance Works, 2019, <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/student-attendance-success-plans/>). Tier 2 interventions such as attendance plans, require a higher degree of student and parent engagement than Tier 1 interventions. If implemented in a timely fashion, this intervention, if successful, would have the likelihood of improving attendance and eliminating chronic attendance issues. When Tier 2 interventions are not successful for students it is necessary to intensify the level of support to Tier 3 interventions.

For students who are chronically absent, Tier 3 strategies are likely to include involvement with social workers, government agencies such as child services, and the legal system. Interagency support from private and public entities may include monitoring in the home, mentoring, and legal actions. Behavioral health specialists, health care providers and Child Protective Service agencies can be included in the planning and supports that are implemented. Strategies at this level are costly to the school district and other agencies because of the human and fiscal resources that are needed. The cost benefit analysis of these strategies should be evaluated in order to provide information for school leaders to make decisions on future implementation of all interventions.

The response to the attendance crisis is impacting students across the nation and across all grade levels because actions by policy makers for accountability of schools and parents has led to enforcement with mainly punitive consequences. Positive approaches with proactive and responsive strategies have been promoted by support agencies such as Attendance Works (Attendance Works 2019, <https://www.attendanceworks.org>). This

crisis has also prompted researchers to study the effects of multiple strategies in order to reduce student absences and to make recommendations for success in addressing the attendance crisis. My study is also designed to focus on the impact of engaging families in a proactive manner to improve attendance and ultimately student achievement. I have determined that the focus will be on economically disadvantaged, middle school students who have a higher risk for having poor attendance and low student achievement than their peers. It is important to understand the unique characteristics of middle school students and middle school models for the purpose of this study.

Adolescent Development

My capstone project is focused on middle school children who are in grades 5-8 during the 2019-2020 school year. Students in the middle grades have very unique characteristics related to adolescent development and the human life cycle. Middle schools were developed to provide a supportive transition from elementary to high school and typically include adolescents in between grades five and eight. It is also the intention to have middle schools experience, or explore, as much as possible in this time of their education (PAMLE, 2015, <https://pamle.org/>). Students in middle schools are seeking to develop their personal identities and due to brain development, they also exhibit high reward and low risk thinking in social interactions. Successful middle schools consider these characteristics when designing school functions and learning experiences. They are usually organized into teams at each grade level in order to allow for cross-curricular learning experiences and social learning in controlled environments with adult role models.

Erikson (1980), a twentieth century psychoanalyst used the phrase “identity crisis” to explain the behaviors typically seen in adolescent children (p. 2). He notes that during this time of human development, children are engaging in life experiences such as friendship, romance, negotiations with authority figures and establishing their own beliefs and values. Navigating all of these interactions leaves them with a sense of confusion regarding how they fit into the larger community and how they should function (Erikson, 1980, p3).

In his book, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students*, Thomas Armstrong (2016) explains that in adolescent brains the mostly developed limbic system and the developing prefrontal cortex explain much of the behavior we see in middle level students. He explains that the limbic system is mostly developed by this stage of life and is responsible for human functions such as memory, emotions and arousal. Armstrong explains that white matter increases and black matter decreases throughout adolescent development between the ages of ten and sixteen. Most of these changes in adolescent brains occur in the prefrontal cortex which controls impulse and decision making. He further explains that due to these changes in brain development that “in social contexts involving strong feelings, adolescents may be more emotionally reactive and less capable of relying on rational faculties” (Armstrong, 2016, p. 10). The combination of these two developing systems during adolescence explains that:

Many of the natural traits of adolescence (e.g., sensation seeking, need for peer approval, and risk taking) are evolutionary adaptation that were genetically selected for because the lead teenagers away from the safety of home and toward

the challenge of the world that they will fully enter in just a few short years.

(Armstrong, 2016, p. 17)

Brain-friendly middle schools are prepared to provide programs that set students up for academic success and put them on-track for success in high school.

A student's journey to high school graduation begins long before high school. Success in the early years puts students in a better position to become a high school graduate and ultimately a successful citizen (Sawhill, et al., 2012, pp. 2-5). Middle schools need to be prepared to identify students who are not on-track for graduation and respond with strategies that will support the students they serve. The study *Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools* provides middle school educators with five key findings that can be used to predict which students are on track for success in high school or beyond (Allensworth, et al. 2014, p 2). The first key finding is that two factors, middle grade attendance and Grade Point Average (GPA), actually provide the best indication of how students will perform in high school classes. The study indicates that these are considered better indicators than test scores or background characteristics such as race and neighborhood poverty level, for identifying which students are at risk of failing ninth grade classes or earning low grades in high school (Allensworth, et al. 2014, p. 2). The second key finding mirrors the first as it reveals that students who are chronically absent or receiving failing grades are at a very high risk of being off-track for graduation in ninth grade and inevitably dropping out of school (Allensworth, et al. 2014, p. 6). The third finding on predicting student success in high school is strong grades in middle school. If students are earning all grades above average (all A's and B's) they will have a

modest chance at college readiness by the end of high school. The fourth finding relevant to high school success is related to the improvement of attendance and grades throughout the middle school years. This is independent of improving middle school standardized test scores. Even modest improvements in grades and attendance had a substantial effect in positive high school outcomes (Allensworth, et al. 2014, p. 7). Finally, the fifth conclusion by Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore and de la Torre is in regard to high school selection. Students with the same academic records in middle school can have large differences in high school depending on the level of support provided to ninth graders in each high school. This factor is a better predictor than average standardized test scores for a particular school (Allensworth et al. 2014, p, 8).

According to the report, *Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools: Looking Forward to High School and College*, by Elaine M. Allensworth, Julia A. Gwynne, Paul Moore and Marisa de la Torre (2014), there is conclusive evidence that middle school is an important stage in a child's educational journey from kindergarten through high school graduation because success in the middle years is imperative for later success in high school for college, career and life readiness. Chronic absenteeism is one important factor identified as a barrier to academic success and significant negative implications for one's future. Researchers have discovered that a direct correlation exists between a student's attendance rate and their academic performance, as well as their ability to obtain a high school diploma, and they have a higher risk of drug and alcohol abuse, and criminality (Rogers and Feller, 2018). These factors combine to predict risk of later life outcomes such as poverty and lack of self-efficacy. For some students, there are conditions outside of their control that decrease their chances for academic success as

they are born into families who have been economically disadvantaged for generations. Since my study is focused on the impact of engaging families for improving regular attendance for children of poverty, it is necessary to also understand the impact of low economics and poverty in an effort to select the most effective strategies for this specific population of stakeholders.

Poverty

My capstone project is a study that is focused on middle school children who are identified as economically disadvantaged by Pennsylvania standards. The working definition of poverty as defined by Payne (2019) as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (p. 7). She further explains that resources fluctuate on a continuum and can change throughout one’s lifetime. The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation’s leading public policy center. They are dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. According to the National Center for Children of Poverty, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was \$24,858 in 2017, \$24,339 in 2016, and \$24,036 in 2015 (NCCP 2019, <http://nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>). Families and children are defined as poor if family income is below the federal poverty threshold and are considered low-income if they are less than twice the poverty threshold. According to the National Council for Children of Poverty website (<http://nccp.org>), poverty affects over 20 per cent of the fifteen million children in America (nccp.org). While many parents of these children are employed, their wages are needed to cover basic living expenses with little left over to support healthy lifestyles or educational needs. Working parents with low wages

typically do not have health care coverage, consistent or regular transportation, or reliable child care options for young children (Payne, 2019). They are also more likely to be working shifts that occur during non-traditional work hours. The wages and working conditions of parents who have young children is where the achievement gap begins to occur.

According to the Institute of Medicine (2000), “young children are more likely than any other age group in this society to live in poverty, and poverty in the early years is more powerfully predictive of later achievement than is poverty at any subsequent stage of development” (p. 280). This is true of students across the United States as affirmed by a 2007 publication entitled, *A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades* (Romero & Lee, 2007, p. 1-2). An economic divide exists between families that have higher incomes and families that are considered to have low income, or are considered poor. Basch (2011) published an article in the *Journal of School Health* on “Healthier Students Are Better Learners.” He stated that

Low levels of academic achievement and educational attainment among low-income and minority youth, particularly in urban areas, undermine the quality of individual, family, and community life, threatening the very integrity of American society. Educationally relevant health disparities exert a powerful, but generally overlooked, influence on the achievement gap. (p. 1)

A child’s health is directly related to their ability to attend school and thus may create a valid reason for high absences from school. This has a direct impact on a child’s chances for academic success in their educational journey.

Ruby Payne is considered one of the leading experts on understanding the nuances in different economic classes and the mindset of individuals in these classes. She has authored and co-authored more than a dozen books related to poverty and education. Her award-winning book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach for Educators, Policymakers, Employers, and Service Providers*, has sold more than 1.8 million copies since it was first published in 1995. For over twenty years, educators have relied on her work to inform their practices for working with families and children from different economic classes. In her most recent edition, Payne (2019) explains that genetic determination (who you are and what you become) of the 1800's was replaced by social determination in the 1970's because of the limiting social systems that can hold people back (pp. 5-6). She examines how social determination and Bandura's work on social cognition are related. Payne argues that:

There is a relationship between the demands of the environment, the resources one has, and the knowledge base one has. This relationship among and between who and what you know (relationships and knowledge), what the environment demands for survival, and your resources impacts how you negotiate your environment and create mindsets. (p. 280)

Her position amplifies the fact that poverty is determined from lack of resources as opposed to lack of money.

In a report published by the National Center for Education Statistics, Kauffmann and Bradbury (1992) on the Characteristics of At-Risk Students, students who grow up in poverty have a greater likelihood of being older than peers in the same grade, frequently changing schools, and being from a single-parent family. This is in addition to well-

known statistics such as the student's sex, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. (Kaufman, P., Bradbury, D., & Owings, J., 1992). Active parental engagement is another key factor in predicting school success for children. Parental engagement can be defined by parents who talk to their children about school-related matters and have high expectations for their child's school performance and educational attainment. According to research, it is students from urban schools or from schools with large minority populations that are deprived of parental engagement (Kaufman, P., Bradbury, D., & Owings, J., 1992).

Public schools are tasked with meeting standards for academic growth and achievement for all students as declared by ESSA (2015). In Pennsylvania, targets are established in specific content areas for accountability statewide and in every school district and for specific subgroups of students. Targets are measured from grades 3-8 and once in high school for English Language Arts, mathematics (including Algebra), and Science (including Biology). Educational leaders know from multiple facets of research that there are very specific factors that contribute to increased levels of student achievement, while some factors have minimal effect and others have a negative impact. Economically disadvantaged students and students who are classified as English Language Learners are designated as targeted subgroups of students who are at risk for underperforming on mandated state assessments (Nichols, 2003). Other subgroups include students with disabilities, black students, Hispanic students and students who identify themselves as two or more races.

In response to the accountability measures, teachers across the nation in all grade levels seek to implement the best strategies that will promote positive results for the

children that they teach. *Visible Teaching*, a book authored by Australian researcher John Hattie (2009), has become a popular resource for teachers as they seek fruitful strategies to implement. This text was designed for teachers after he published *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. Hattie has studied school achievement research for two and a half decades that spans over 95,00 studies and over 300 million children. His work has provided educational leaders with reliable instructional methods to implement in schools across the world. Some people have even exclaimed that his efforts reveal the “Holy Grail” of teaching for educators. In his first book, Hattie (2009) created a list of evidence from a meta-analysis of factors that influence student achievement. Based on his work, he then created a system that ranks these factors, or influences, by their effect size. He considers an effect size of 0.4 to be the “hinge point” for factors that help students achieve a year’s worth of growth in a year’s time (Hattie 2009). Collective teacher efficacy (1.57), response to intervention (1.29), teacher-student relationships (0.75) and parental involvement (0.50) are among the most effective strategies identified by Hattie (2009). These characteristics lend themselves to school districts that serve affluent families from affluent neighborhoods and have a small population of students who are economically disadvantaged. On the contrary, the factors in John Hattie’s research that have a lesser impact include Parental Employment (0.03) and a Diverse Student Body (0.10). Factors that have a negative impact on achievement include Family on Welfare/State Aid (-0.12), Transiency (-0.34), Depression (-0.36) and ADHD (-0.90) (Hattie, 2009). The factors that contribute to student achievement can be attributed to the following categories: Student, Home, School, Curricula, Teacher, and finally Teaching and Learning Approaches. Many of the

factors that contribute to negative growth are factors that can be attributed to the Home category and are associated with students who are from low income, or impoverished families. With an emphasis on academic achievement and growth for all students through accountability measures, it is imperative that teachers know the factors that influence achievement.

Researcher John Hattie believes that:

Parents have major effects in terms of the encouragement and expectations that they transmit to their children. Many parents, however, struggle to comprehend the language of learning and thus are disadvantaged in the methods they use to encourage their children to attain their expectations. (Hattie, 2009, p. 68)

He arrived at this conclusion by citing the work of several researchers that spanned from the mid 1980's to the early 2000's. The researchers of parental involvement included Casto and Lewis (1984), White, Taylor and Moss (1992), Hong and Ho (2005) and several others (Hattie, 2009). While the vast array of research breaks down different aspects of parental involvement such as checking homework, attendance, household rules and participating in school events, the most important take-away for my project is that parents who do not have high expectations for their children are at a clear disadvantage compared to their peers whose parents value the purpose of school. Additionally, these same parents are less likely to understand academic language and are more likely to avoid engagement with their child's education. The conclusions from the research suggests that school personnel cannot rely on parents, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, to be engaged in their child's education without some level of support and effort on the part of the school entity. Efforts on the part of educational leaders to reduce

barriers between home and school for high expectations, including school attendance for academic achievement, will likely produce positive results for our most at-risk students.

Increased accountability factors from ESSA and the PA Future Ready Index are creating a sense of urgency for good teaching, but the true importance of good teaching is not just about test scores. Social justice issues and social cognitive issues are equally important to the productivity of our citizens and the future of our country. The true sense of urgency for practical teaching can be summed up by Ruby Payne (1995) as she states:

Having worked for many years in schools and school districts, I know firsthand that teachers need down-to-earth, relevant strategies in addition to theory. Their mission - and it is a critically important one - is to reach the children in their classrooms. They are on the front lines of social change, one student at a time. (p, 3)

Payne further explains that individual success is dependent upon the resources that are available to an individual. These resources can be financial, emotional, mental/cognitive, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, knowledge of hidden rules and language that is necessary to navigate school or work (Payne 2019). Strategies for improving economically disadvantaged students must be selected carefully and take into account the available resources and the point of view of impoverished families rather than the limited lens of an educated, middle-class practitioner in the field of education.

In an effort to increase parental awareness of absenteeism for students in grades 1-12, the School District of Philadelphia partnered with Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Mid-Atlantic to conduct a large scale study that used the “nudge” theory.

According to the authors of the study, a nudge is “an approach in the behavioral sciences

that uses unobtrusive interventions to promote desired behaviors. Nudges are ways of encouraging, not mandating, change” (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 1). The nudge in this study included a single postcard that was sent to parents and guardians to determine if this communication could reduce absenteeism and the study was also designed to determine if the type of message on the postcard had any impact on reducing absenteeism as compared to another (Rogers et al., 2017). These findings are significant as related to my study in rural Pennsylvania because the study found that “there was strong evidence that a single postcard directly encouraging guardians to improve their student’s attendance reduced absences, but the difference in the average number of days absent between the two treatment conditions was not statistically significant” (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 5). Additionally, the study concluded that “there was no evidence that the postcard affected the attendance of students in grades 1–8 differently from how it affected the attendance of students in grades 9–12” (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 6). The postcard method was a low-cost, high-impact strategy that had a positive effect on attendance by improving attendance by approximately 2.4% for twenty-two cents per postcard (Rogers et al., 2017). This information provides school administrators with viable strategies to employ when trying to engage parents in their child’s education by promoting the importance of regular attendance in public schools.

Research studies for improving school attendance have provided educators with several strategies to employ and some indication of what works to get the desired results. In 2018, a large scale study that included 10,504 students was conducted collaboratively by researchers from Harvard University, Stanford University and Boston College, and concluded that attendance in the early grades, including kindergarten

through grade five, decreased chronic truancy by 15% by targeting parental beliefs about attendance (Robinson, et al 2018). The low-cost study was based on the premise that parents' perceptions about the importance and impact of regular attendance could be changed through regular communication which would then influence parental behavior regarding efforts to ensure compulsory attendance in elementary school and ultimately have an impact on future academic success in later years (Robinson, et al 2018). According to the study, "parents tend to underestimate both their child's total absences and relative absences compared with their child's classmates" (p. 2). Through targeted and personalized communication, the schools used the United States Mail service to deliver postcards that informed parents of accurate data on their child's cumulative record of attendance at six different points throughout the school year and some families also received information regarding the importance of attendance (Robinson, et al 2018). Clear differences in the results between the control group and two treatment groups were noted which provided a supported conclusion from this study which may help educational leaders address similar issues in their local districts (Robinson, et al 2018). Based on the results, Robinson and her colleagues state that "future educational intervention work should consider parental beliefs as a lever to marshal parents' involvement in their child's education as early as possible" (Robinson, 2018, p. 24). My study is also focused on engaging parents in their child's education by helping them understand the importance of attending school in an effort to improve academic achievement.

Another study, *Reducing Student Absenteeism in the Early Grades by Targeting Parental Beliefs*, provides evidence that parents are a very important factor that can

influence attendance rates of children in public schools (Rogers et al 2017). Similar to the previous study, this study also involved sending regular communications to parents and guardians in an attempt to influence attendance rates of the children in their household. They determined that:

The mailings also appeared to have a significantly larger effect for students from households that are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The mailings reduced absences by 18 days, on average, for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, as compared to an average reduction of only 0.42 days for students who are not socioeconomically disadvantaged. (Rogers et al., 2017, p. 17-18)

In this study it was also documented that “socioeconomically disadvantaged students have significantly more absences than students who are not socioeconomically disadvantaged (7.41 days absent vs. 6.4 days absent)” (Rogers et al, 2017, p. 18). Phone interviews were conducted near the end of the study to assist researchers in determining how the intervention motivated parents to reduce their children’s absences. By talking with parents, they assessed that the mailings actually worked because they improved the accuracy of the parent’s perception about the number of school days their child had missed. The results of this study concluded that “parents in the control condition were off by an average of 5.1 days in their estimation of their child’s absences during the school year” (Rogers et al 2017, p. 26). In comparison to the other group, “parents who received mailings were more accurate in their appraisals, and were off by only 3.8 days in their estimation” (Rogers et al 2017, p. 26). This study provides evidence that strategies to increase parental involvement through communication is an effective manner to increase student attendance as it proved that it could decrease chronic absenteeism by

fifteen per cent. This study provides statistically significant evidence that parent engagement is essential in student attendance and academic achievement.

Summary

My study is designed to assess the Impact of Engaging Families in Strategies for Improving Regular Attendance for Children of Poverty. According to several studies and validated research, there is a strong connection among absenteeism, academic achievement, and poverty for middle level students. Based on the review of literature on this topic, I have selected strategies that are targeted for middle school students and their families who are considered economically disadvantaged. There is adequate literature to support the strategies that include regular communication that influences parental attitudes toward the importance of attendance. Students who live in households that are determined to be economically disadvantaged have a greater risk of being absent due to limitations of parental support for education and a greater risk of mental health issues or physical wellness issues. If schools focus on what is in their control, such as parental engagement strategies, their efforts are probably going to positively influence student attendance. Furthermore, sensitivity to the characteristics of families of poverty is essential when employing parental engagement strategies such as communication with parents in a language they can understand. When combined with multiple sources of written notification of cumulative attendance for all families in a high poverty middle school is expected to improve attendance and ultimately academic achievement.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this action research study was to identify successful, cost effective strategies for school leaders to apply in their school systems that could improve student attendance and ultimately student achievement of all students, especially focused on students of poverty that live in rural areas of Pennsylvania. Academic achievement and regular attendance are considered to be two important indicators of college and career readiness. Students who are economically disadvantaged and do not have regular attendance in school do not achieve at the same rate as their peers (Garcia & Weiss 2018). According to my literature review, this phenomenon creates a greater divide between children of poverty and their peers from higher socioeconomic class for college and career readiness.

In my district, all of the schools earned Regular Attendance rates well below the Pennsylvania target of 94.1%. Regular attendance in Pennsylvania is defined by the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 60 or more school days and present 90 percent or more of these school days. Regular attendance rates in my school district are inconsistent among schools and grade levels, but it is evident that overall the economically disadvantaged students have lower attendance rates than their non-impooverished peers. According to a 2014 report on Middle Grade Readiness in Chicago Public Schools (Allensworth, et al, 2014), middle school attendance is much more predictive of passing high school classes than test scores.

School administrators, school counselors and teachers must employ strategies that are specifically targeted to the families of poverty in middle school grades in an effort to increase regular attendance and close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students. As evidenced in the literature review, Ruby Payne, an expert on poverty, explains that individual success is dependent upon the resources that are available to an individual. These resources can be financial, emotional, mental/cognitive, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, knowledge of hidden rules and language that is necessary to navigate school or work (Payne 2019). Strategies for improving economically disadvantaged students must be selected carefully and take into account the available resources and the point of view of impoverished families rather than the limited lens of an educated, middle-class practitioner in the field of education. Creating and enacting appropriate strategies that engage parents in their child's education by focusing on attendance is expected to provide a higher level of support for the students who need it the most.

Low attendance rates combined with low parental engagement in my school district has led me to study, *The Impact of Engaging Middle School Families in Strategies for Improving Regular Attendance for Children of Poverty*. The three research questions that I developed for this study include;

- **Research Question 1: Communication and Regular Attendance.** Is regular and consistent communication to parents/guardians effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students?
- **Research Question 2: Engagement and Truancy.** Is parent engagement effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged,

middle school students who are truant (three illegal absences) or habitually truant (six illegal absences)?

- **Research Question 3: Academic Achievements.** Does improved regular attendance of middle school students in school increase student performance on grade level standardized tests?

If the strategies employed in this study are successful, the desired outcome of improved attendance will be evident. This action research study may be valuable to other school administrators, school counselors, teachers and parents who have the desire to improve regular school attendance and reduce truancy, or habitual truancy, in an effort to prepare children of poverty for a successful future.

Setting and Participants

Bucktail Middle School is one of nine schools in the Keystone Central School District which encompasses all of Clinton County along with portions of Potter and Centre Counties. This rural middle school is located in the northern and most remote tier of the rural district. There is little diversity within the school where 93.1% of the student population is white. There is a small percentage of Hispanic and Mixed Race students who make up the remaining six per cent of the population. This school has the highest rate of poverty in the district at 72.3% compared to the average poverty rate of 53%. The school administrators and counselors characterize this school as a close knit community, there seems to be limited engagement between parents and school personnel when it comes to regular attendance at school.

The main participants of this study include Bucktail Middle School students in grades 5-8 along with their parents. Students who live in households that are determined to be economically disadvantaged have a greater risk of being absent due to limitations of parental support for education and a greater risk of mental health issues or physical wellness issues. In the Bucktail Middle School, the Regular Attendance rate of 75.2% is below the state-wide average of 85.4% and well below the Pennsylvania 2030 target of 94.1%.

In addition to myself, the school principal, Director of Students Services, and the Bucktail Middle School teachers and counselors are also included as participants as this group of school personnel is responsible for implementation of the strategies. It is expected that if school leaders focus on what is in their control, such as parental engagement strategies and accountability, our efforts are likely to have a positive impact on student attendance. This action research study will be focused on this individual school as a pilot study within the district.

Intervention and Research Plan

The research plan for this study is multifaceted and includes careful and collaborative planning among the school leaders prior to the beginning of the school year, daily for every student who is absent and monthly throughout the school year. For this intervention to be successful, communication between the school district participants and the parent participants must be applied more frequently and targeted in order to engage family members in monitoring individual student absences. In order to increase communication with all families, the researcher will implement a three tiered plan that includes all Bucktail Middle School families in Tier One, only families of students who

are truant in Tier Two, and only families of students who are habitually truant in Tier Three.

There are three parent engagement strategies for every family in Tier One:

1. All parents/guardians will be notified of school district policy changes for the new school year 2019-2020 (see Appendix A).
2. On the day of any student absence, each parent/guardian will receive a phone call or text notifying them of the absence and reminding them of the need for an absence note (see Appendix B for message content).
3. Each family will receive a monthly attendance report for each child that includes a cumulative calculation for all absence types and educational information for parents about attendance (see Appendix C for message content). This communication will be delivered via postal mail.

Local policies must be enacted in order to comply with federal and state mandates as well as provide the authority for school officials to apply and enforce guidelines for compulsory school attendance. The first step in Tier One of the communication plan requires a notification to all parents/guardians regarding district attendance policy changes and the KCSD Attendance Policy 204 also requires annual notification of the policy to staff, students, and parents/guardians regarding Board policies and school regulations that “govern student attendance, absences tardiness, partial-day absences, and excusals” (KCSD Policy 204, 2019).

The Keystone Central School District (KCSD) Policy 204 Attendance denotes the Purpose of the policy, the Authority by which the local board of directors may enforce the policy and the Delegation of Responsibility for carrying out the policy as

intended. The Purpose of the KCSD Attendance Policy 204 is defined with the following statement:

The Board requires that school age students enrolled in district schools attend school regularly, in accordance with state laws. The educational program offered by the district is predicated upon the presence of the student and requires continuity of instruction and classroom participation in order for students to achieve academic standards and consistent educational progress. (KCSD Policy 204, 2019)

The policy also requires mandatory attendance for every day that school is in session.

Students may be excused from this requirement if they meet one of the following conditions: illness, quarantine, recovery from accident, required court attendance, death in family, or impassable roads and/or natural disasters. With prior approval, students may be excused for family educational travel or educational trips and tours. The policy includes language that permits excused absences to be recorded for unusual situations that directly affects the student. This special consideration must be approved by the superintendent or designee. In Pennsylvania, school boards are required by the Pennsylvania School Code of 1949, to permit a student to be excused for participation in projects at agricultural fairs. KCSD specifically denotes excused absence for students who are participating in projects sponsored by a “statewide or countywide 4-H, FFA or combined 4-H and FFA group upon written request prior to the event” (KCSD policy 204). The policy also considers a students’ constitutional right to religious freedom by permitting an excused absence for observance of a student's religious holiday, or religious instruction, on any Board approved school day and prohibits any penalty for such an

absence during a religious holiday, or religious instruction, so long as there is a written request by the parents/guardians. The policy also permits flexible instructional days for students who are participating in career-based programs or homebound instruction. The KCSD Board also recognizes medical and dental appointments and court appearances as justified absences. Family emergencies and other urgent reasons may be excused at the building principal's discretion.

Educational trips provide opportunities for students to learn in non-traditional ways outside of the school day or school building. Such planned absences as educational trips may be approved by school administrators if specific conditions are met by parents/guardians. According to KCSD policy, parents/guardians must make the request at least five days in advance of the trip and the total excused educational trip days cannot exceed more than seven school days within one school year. Educational trip requests may be denied if the date of the planned absences occurs during the Pennsylvania testing exam windows for PSSA or Keystone Exams. Special exceptions to this requirement are explained in the policy and the superintendent is permitted to award additional days at their discretion. The KCSD policy provides specific criteria for required denial of a trip if the student has more than ten days of absences (excluding physician's excuses and suspensions/expulsions), if the student has three or more days of unexcused/illegal absences, or if the student is not in good academic standing. This is quantifiable by meeting athletic eligibility requirement status.

This is accomplished by sending a written letter home via the United States Postal Service, sending an electronic copy of the letter via email and posting a copy of the letter on the district website. The policy and procedures regarding school attendance are also

outlined in the KCSD Student Handbook which is approved annually by the school board. This written notification was provided to parents in the student handbook, on the district website. Families who were signed up for text and phone notifications received an alert message to read the superintendent's attendance message on the district website. Knowing that some families were not signed up for alerts, or may not have access to the internet, a letter was sent to all parents/guardians via postal mail four weeks prior to the beginning of the school year. Only one letter per family was sent to each home.

The second step in the communication plan involves implementing an automated phone call, text and email to all parents/guardians on the day a student is marked absent. Parents may elect to sign up for the alert messages through one, two or three of the available modes of communication. The intent of this message is two-fold. First, it is intended to alert the parent/guardian of the absence in the event that they were unaware of the absence. Some students live in two households and this call ensures that communication about the absence is provided to all parents/guardians even if they live in different households. Secondly, the message provides a gentle reminder to the parents/guardians of the policy requirement of sending an excuse note to the school for each absence. The KCSD Attendance policy also declares that, "Absences shall be treated as unlawful until the district receives a written excuse explaining the absence, to be submitted within three (3) days of the absence" (KCSD Policy 204, 2019, p. 1). The district permits the written excuse to be delivered in person, via postal mail, or to be emailed to district officials. Failure to do so within three days will permit the district to

code the respective absence, or absences, as illegal days. The policy includes clear language for parents and guardians regarding their responsibilities when a child is absent.

The third step requires the school administrators and counselors to prepare a form letter that can be sent to all parents/guardians at the end of each month. The school counselors then extrapolate individual student attendance data and personalize each letter to include the name of the parent/guardian and the student. On the opposite side of the letter new educational information will be printed. Special consideration must be taken in selecting and preparing the educational information in the monthly letter so that it is respectful and provides sensitivity to the characteristics of families of poverty. The length of the letter cannot be long or it may not be read at all. Graphic representations are encouraged to promote information that can easily be understood by any parent. Content should include resources for parents to find additional information on the topic if they choose. Once prepared, each letter will be sent through postal mail. Since each letter is only a single page in an envelope, standard postage rates will apply.

In Tier Two, additional family engagement strategies will be implemented for students who are truant (three illegal absences) include holding a Student Attendance Improvement Conference (SAIC) to include the student, parents/guardians, school counselor and school administrator. At this meeting, the team will determine the cause of the absences and targeted action needed to eliminate additional days of truancy. Parents of poverty are likely to have jobs that do not include paid time off for such instances, or may not have reliable transportation options to attend the required school conferences. Additional considerations, such as permitting parents to participate by phone or providing transportation, could be necessary for parents to actively engage in

this important conference. Parents/guardians who are part of developing the plan will likely have a better understanding of the plan and will more likely carry out the strategies. All participants must also sign that they agree to the strategies in the plan. Some examples of strategies that could be applied in the plan include establishing home routines that include an established bedtime, setting a second alarm, or daily check-ins with a school mentor. The school mentor is a member of the school faculty, or staff, who has a positive relationship with the student. This could be a school counselor, a physical education teacher, or a paraprofessional. A record of this meeting will be kept by the school counselor using the district template for a SAIC meeting (see Appendix D for a sample plan).

Truancy will also be reported to the local authorities as required by the school attendance policy. The KCSD Policy 204 states the following:

Consequences are applied for students who accumulate more than ten days of absence in a school year, regardless of the reason. Furthermore, they will be notified that they must present a valid excuse from a physician for any additional absences. For any illegal absences over three days, students are considered to be truant. District officials must report the truancy to social services and have citation issued to the violators. Students who accrue additional illegal days up, or more than six days, are considered habitually truant. Legal citations for parents and involvement with social service agencies are required. Students who do not follow the guidelines in the attendance policy for educational trips are also subject to punitive actions that include legal action and academic penalties

(<https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/keyc/Board.nsf/Public#>).

The policy specifically states that:

All students are responsible for making up school work and tests missed during an approved trip. At the secondary level, this shall be at the initiation of the student and reasonable convenience of the teacher(s). Work that is not made up shall count as a failure. All work assigned prior to the trip must be returned within three (3) school days, or this will count as a failure. Unapproved trips shall be treated as unexcused absences. As such, no work missed may be made up.

(<https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/keyc/Board.nsf/Public#>)

This section of the policy clarifies academic expectations for students when absent.

School administrators, teachers or counselors may be required to appear in court at the truancy hearing. Students and parents who do not comply with the school policy are subject to consequences that will have a negative impact on them. Parents who are cited for illegal activity regarding school attendance can face consequences that result in lost work time for required attendance in court hearings which may also require them to miss work and pay monetary fines. Parents who do not pay the fines or appear in court may be subjected to jail time. These consequences are likely to have a greater negative impact on parents of students who are economically disadvantaged than their non-disadvantaged peers.

In Tier Three, even more strategies will be applied for students who are habitually truant (six illegal absences). All previous strategies will continue, and at this point, it may be necessary to involve outside agencies with the case. Tier Three strategies are likely to include involvement with social workers, government agencies such as child services, and the legal system. Interagency support from private and public entities may

include monitoring in the home, mentoring, and legal actions. Behavioral health specialists, health care providers and Child Protective Service agencies can be included in the planning and supports that are implemented. Strategies at this level are costly to the school district and other agencies because of the human and fiscal resources that are needed. Additional notification to Children and Youth Services of the county, or with mental health services may be necessary depending on each individual situation. A record of this meeting will also be kept by the school counselor using the district template for a SAIC meeting (see Appendix D).

This research project consists of direct and indirect costs in a fiscally responsible manner. The direct costs required for this study to take place are minimal, a minute fraction of the overall district budget, because only postage and supplies are needed. The overall budget reflects postage costs of \$726 for all mailings and approximately \$100 in supplies for paper and envelopes. The total budget allocation for the study is \$826. This project has the potential to benefit 132 students for many years at the cost only \$6.26 per student.

The most important resource to consider for this study is the indirect cost of employee time for the school participants throughout the school year. This overall cost is minimal and should not have any negative effect on the regular responsibilities of the school employees who are involved, especially if the results positively impact students. In Tier One, it is expected that approximately one hour of collaboration between the administrators to prepare the superintendent letter for August distribution. Administrators and counselors will need an additional hour each month to prepare the educational materials for the monthly letter to families. An additional three-

hours per counselor may be needed to prepare the individual data and print the letters for each family. Clerical staff manages the mailings as part of their regular duties. In Tiers Two and Three, the amount of time needed for administrators, counselors and teachers cannot be pre-determined because the time necessary is dependent upon the number students who move into the latter tiers and the number of meetings required for each case.

These low-cost strategies that combine accountability and multiple sources of written notification, including monthly cumulative attendance data, are expected to improve attendance of students in a high poverty middle school. The strategies applied during this intervention period must be directly related to the overall goal to improve attendance, and ultimately academic achievement, for the most at-risk students in this school. This targeted intervention has the potential to have long-term, positive effects on the success of these students in high school as they prepare to be college and career ready (Allensworth, et al, 2014).

Methods and Data Collection

This quantitative study used multiple forms of archived student data from school records for all Bucktail Middle School students in grades 5-8. The collection of all data took place during the 2019-2020 school year, or shortly after the school year ends. Student information from stored school records will also permit the researcher to identify students within the targeted population with an economically disadvantaged student designation. All data was deposited in a spreadsheet that denotes an unidentifiable student number, grade level, economically disadvantaged status, pre-intervention attendance data (including designation of students considered truant or habitually truant), pre-intervention achievement data and eventually post-intervention

attendance data (including designation of students considered truant or habitually truant) and all available post-intervention achievement data.

Pre-intervention data for attendance and achievement was collected for each student and served as baseline data for this study. These two data sets were compared to determine if there are any correlation between attendance and achievement for this group of students prior to the intervention period. Pre-intervention attendance data for three previous school years, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019, was collected for the same students in grades 5-8 as available. The total number of days present was divided by the total school days for the first three marking periods of each school year in an effort to determine which students were enrolled for ninety or more school days and present for ninety per cent or more of the days in which they were enrolled. The original study intended to utilize attendance data from all four marking periods, but due to the unforeseen closure of all Pennsylvania schools due to the national coronavirus pandemic of 2019, the researcher was only able to calculate the attendance rates for the first three marking periods per year for each student included in the study.

Pre-intervention data for achievement was collected in September 2019 through student records in the district's data warehouse. Individual student achievement data from the state required Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) was also collected from the data provided to the school district in September 2019. Sources of data were collected for math and reading proficiency from the PSSA data sets for all three pre-intervention years if available. Fifth grade students will only have two years of data as the PSSA is administered to students in Pennsylvania beginning in third grade. The researcher averaged the PSSA scaled scores for each student in each content

area. Additional achievement data was expected to be accessed for fifth grade students from the normed Aimsweb assessments that were taken by students in the 2018-2019 school year. The Aimsweb assessments are web-based and provide norm-referenced benchmark data for individual students, or groups of students, in reading and mathematics.

At the conclusion of the school year, the researcher collected all available post-intervention data for attendance and attempted to access achievement data. All data was collected in June 2020 through student records in the district's data warehouse. The original plan for this study included using four marking periods of data, however the final marking period data was not available because of the closing of all Pennsylvania schools due to the national coronavirus pandemic of 2019. In an effort to maintain validity, baseline attendance data was calculated in the same manner by only using only the first three marking periods of each school year to determine the average rate of attendance.

Individual student achievement data from the state required Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) was expected to be collected from the data provided to the school district in July 2020. Unfortunately, this data was not available because of the closing of all Pennsylvania schools due to the national coronavirus pandemic of 2019. The researcher examined the Spring 2020 Aimsweb achievement data for fifth grade students as compared to the previous school year to determine if there was a connection between attendance and achievement. This was the only student achievement data point that is available to the researcher during the intervention year. The data was disaggregated for students within the subgroup who were designated as Economically Disadvantaged (ED). The pre-intervention, baseline data for attendance and achievement

data was compared to the post-intervention data in order to determine if there were any correlations between the two data points for this group of rural, high poverty, middle school students.

The researcher also worked collaboratively with the building principal to obtain additional school record information in an effort to determine which students were designated as “truant” or “habitually truant”. The researcher determined if these students required another level of intervention such as an attendance intervention conference (SAIC) for truancy designation; or if they required a report to Children and Youth Services for a habitual truancy violation. The researcher collected post-intervention data including the letters of communication for the 2019-2020 school year and successful, and unsuccessful, strategies that were implemented in the SAIC plans.

All information points were compiled into a spreadsheet for analysis. Graphical displays were generated to display pre- and post- attendance data. This data was analyzed and displayed for all students in the school and for students who were identified as economically disadvantaged. All data points were coded for grade level, truancy, economic status and proficiency levels so that they were de-identifiable.

The researcher compared the pre and post data collections to determine if communication and parental engagement of families had an impact on attendance rates for students in a high poverty middle school. The researcher analyzed the difference between the previous three year attendance rate and the 2019-20 attendance rate to determine if there was a positive difference for a student’s individual attendance and for the schools overall Regular Attendance Rate. A comparison of the gap between economically disadvantaged students compared to the non-impoverished peer group was

also be compared to determine if a decrease was notable. Student data for those designated as truant, or habitually truant, was also be disaggregated as subgroups when analyzing the data. The researcher also analyzed the successful and unsuccessful strategies utilized in Tier Two and Tier Three intervention plans to determine the effectiveness of each strategy.

Validity

The validity of this action research study can be substantiated by credibility, transferability and confirmability. Peer debriefing each month with the participants in the study who are school employees adds validity to this study through confirmability credibility. The continuous planning was ongoing monthly throughout the school year to monitor the attendance results and validate accuracy. The quantitative data sets are credible because the researcher used multiple years of data to calculate baseline attendance and achievement patterns. Data accuracy can be defended because the researcher used quantitative data from school records in a data warehouse. The participants in the study have been protected by having all data used in the study was coded and de-identifiable. There was minimal risk to the individuals because the data examined did not disclose individual student information such as name or demographic information. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval can be reviewed in Appendix E.

The results of this study may be transferable to any school leader who wishes to improve attendance for low income, middle school students. The thick description of the setting, the study and the participants make this study valid through dependability and

transferability. The study could be easily replicated by others by replacing their own data sets into the action plan.

CHAPTER 4

Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explain the data collection methods used to gather quantitative data needed to answer the questions in my action research study. The data collection was interrupted on March 13, 2020 when Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf closed all schools in Pennsylvania due to a national pandemic, COVID-19, a novel coronavirus. While some of the data was not impacted, such as the historic student record data, I made modifications to the data collection process in order to make a valid comparison of the pre and post intervention data. Student attendance data was interrupted for the fourth marking period of the current school year. I was able to collect attendance data from the first, second and third marking periods and therefore modified the historic attendance data for the same time period.

Additional data points, such as the 2020 achievement data for PSSA and Aimsweb was not available for use as the PSSA was not administered in the spring of 2020 due to the statewide school closures. I was able to access similar student assessment data for only one grade level, fifth grade, in an effort to draw a conclusion for the final research question. To my dismay, the data was unusable to draw conclusions with regards to the research study due to the lack of data to calculate the expected annual growth from mid-year to mid-year.

Data Analysis

In order to answer all of my research questions, I collected historical and current year student data from computer-generated reports of school records that were relevant to

my study. These data points included demographic information such as student identification number, grade level, and economically disadvantaged designation. The best format for organizing these multiple data points was an electronic spreadsheet where I could also code the student identity to protect the participants confidential data. By accessing school records through an electronic data warehouse, I was able to collect historical attendance data and student achievement data for the students included in the study. I was able to utilize the same system to collect post-intervention data on attendance and student demographic data.

To answer the first research question *Is regular and consistent communication to parents/guardians effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students?*, I analyzed data for all students in grades 5-8 which included three years (2017-2019) of attendance data by the number of days of school that were missed due to any absences. In response to the COVID-19 school closure, I modified the collection to only include the first three marking periods in an effort to be consistent with the available attendance data for the intervention school year. I calculated the average number of days missed in the previous three years (pre intervention) to be used as the baseline along with the number of days missed in the 2020 (post intervention) school year to determine if the interventions were successful. In the event that a student only had two years of historic attendance data in the district, the average of the two years was used in the baseline calculation. For students who only had one year of previous data, that one year of historic data was used as the baseline for that individual. Students who did not have baseline data were excluded from the study. I calculated the difference between the total number of average absences in the pre

intervention year and the total number of absences in the post intervention year. There was a total of 109 students in grades 5-8 who had current and historical data to include in the study.

As the data was imported into an organized spreadsheet, I also coded the students as economically disadvantaged or non-economically disadvantaged. Of the 109 participants in my study, 54.13% (N=59) students were coded as Economically Disadvantaged (ED). The remaining students in the study, 45.87% (N=50) were coded as Non Economically Disadvantaged (Non ED). The data was then sorted to determine if there were any differences in the rate of change for the ED students as compared to their non-disadvantaged peers for their own individual attendance.

As shown in Table 1, the whole student group pre intervention had missed a cumulative total of 990.47 days before the study occurred. The same participants missed 208.97 less days following the intervention year for a total of 781.5 days. The difference of the pre intervention data and post intervention data for the same group of students indicates that there was an overall improvement in their individual attendance by the whole student group. The data also indicates that both subgroups incurred improvement in their individual attendance. The Non ED group decreased their missed days from 477.40 to 378.50 for a difference of 98.90 less days missed. The ED group decreased their missed days from 513.07 to 403.00 for a difference of 110.07 less days missed. The results of this data indicate that most of the students in both the Ed Group and the Non ED group improved their attendance in the intervention year by decreasing the total number of days missed within a school year. Again, this data only includes attendance data from the first three marking periods of the school year.

Table 1			
<i>Total Days Absent out of 135 Possible Days</i>			
	Whole Student Group N=109	Non ED N=50	ED N=59
Pre intervention	990.47	477.40	513.07
Post intervention	781.50	378.50	403.00
Difference	-208.97	-98.90	-110.07

I also wanted to determine how many students in this study improved their attendance during the intervention year. Table 2 shows that there was a total of 61 students (55.96%) out of the 109 participants in the study who improved their attendance in the intervention year. Additionally, 24 students (48.00%) from the Non ED subgroup improved their attendance, 1 student (2%) had no change and 25 students (50%) increased their absences. This indicates that just less than half of the students improved attendance while just less than half of the students did not improve their attendance with the interventions while a small number, only one student, indicated no change. The results were much different from the ED subgroup whereas there were 37 students (62.71%) who improved their attendance with less days missed, three students (5.08%) had no change and 19 students (32.20%) increased their absences following the intervention. The results of this study indicate that compared to their non-disadvantaged peers, students in the Economically Disadvantaged (ED) subgroup made better gains in improving their attendance as compared to their non-disadvantaged peers by 14.71%.

Communicating with all parents about the importance of daily attendance is one part of Tier 1 plans to support families and address the attendance crisis. All students in

the study were included in all of the same Tier 1 communication strategies. These strategies included letters to families regarding attendance policies and procedures along with monthly letters from counselors and principals combined with automated texting, emailing, and calling parents on the day of any unexpected absences to remind them to return excuse notes within three days as per the approved attendance policy.

	Whole Student Group N=109	Non ED N=50	ED N=59
Total Students with Decreased Absences	N=61 (55.96%)	N=24 (48.00%)	N=37 (62.71%)
Total Students with No Change	N=4 (3.67%)	N=1 (2.00%)	N=3 (5.08%)
Total Students with Increased Absences	N=44 (40.37%)	N=25 (48.00%)	N=19 (32.20%)

In order to answer my second research question, *Is parent engagement effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students who are truant (three illegal absences) or habitually truant (six illegal absences)?*, I reviewed the student attendance data for each participant who was coded as truant or habitually truant along with the interventions applied to each individual students' parent or guardian. Of the 109 students in the study, 26 students had one or more illegal absences in the 135 days included in the study for the 2020-21 school year. For the entire group, a very low number of only five students met the criteria for "truant" with a threshold of three illegal absences. Zero students met the criteria for

being “habitually truant” with a threshold of six illegal absences. Of the five students who were coded as truant, only one student was Non ED. This means that the ED students in my study had a higher truancy rate of 4:1 when compared with their Non ED peers.

Of the Non ED subgroup only nine students (18%) of the entire group had any illegal absences. Out of those nine students, only one student was identified as truant and zero students were habitually truant. As shown in Table 3, there was only one case, Student A, in which Tier 2 interventions were applied in the form of a Student Attendance Improvement Conference (SAIC) was held and a Student Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP) was developed. Of particular note, neither the parent or the student participated in the meeting or the development of the plan. This Tier 2 intervention did not engage the parent in the solution but instead communicated the solutions. Student A also required legal action as the district attendance policy includes filing a citation with the local magistrate on the fourth illegal absence. Student A was also the only student in the Non ED group who did not meet the criteria for Regular Attendance (90% or better) with an attendance rate of 86.67%.

Of particular note in the data, while Student A required legal action and did not meet the criteria for Regular Attendance, Student A improved their attendance rate significantly more than any other student in the study. With an average of 75 missed student days in the pre intervention school years and 18 missed days in the intervention year, this student has missed 57 less days with the increased communication. Student A continued to miss school after the SAIC, however there was only a half day that was illegal and additional 9.5 days that were missed with valid excuses from a physician.

Another student, Student E, had 1.5 illegal days in the intervention year. This student did not meet the Regular School attendance criteria before the intervention year with an average of 15 missed school days. In the 2019-2020 school year, the student did meet the criteria for Regular Attendance with 11.5 missed, an improvement of 3.5 days.

Table 3
Illegal Absences and Interventions 2019-2020 Non ED Group

Student	Total Missed Days	Illegal Days	Truant	Habitually Truant	Attendance Meeting and Plan	Legal Action	Regular Attendance
A	18	4	Y	N	Y	Y	N
B	13	2	N	N	N	N	Y
C	11	2	N	N	N	N	Y
D	8	2	N	N	N	N	Y
E	11.5	1.5	N	N	N	N	Y*
F	11.5	1	N	N	N	N	Y
G	11	1	N	N	N	N	Y
H	7.5	1	N	N	N	N	Y
I	6	1	N	N	N	N	Y

Note: *denotes that this criterion was not met prior to the intervention year.

As shown in Table 4, there were 17 students (28.81%) of the entire ED subgroup that had any illegal absences. Four students in this group (6.78%) were identified as truant with three or more illegal days, and zero students were habitually truant as no one accrued six or more absences. Only one student in this group was referred to the magistrate for legal action.

Student	Total Missed Days	Illegal Days	Truant	Habitually Truant	Attendance Meeting and Plan	Legal Action	Regular Attendance
A	14.5	4.5	Y	N	N	N	N
B	12.0	4	Y	N	Y	Y	Y*
C	13.5	3	Y	N	Y	N	Y*
D	10	3	Y	N	Y	N	Y
E	13.5	2	N	N	N	N	Y*
F	12	2	N	N	N	N	Y*
G	12	2	N	N	N	N	Y
H	11.5	2	N	N	N	N	Y
I	9	2	N	N	N	N	Y
J	4.5	2	N	N	N	N	Y
K	13.5	1	N	N	N	N	Y
L	9.5	1	N	N	N	N	Y
M	9	1	N	N	N	N	Y
N	8	1	N	N	N	N	Y
O	6.5	1	N	N	N	N	Y
P	6.5	1	N	N	N	N	Y
Q	9.5	.5	N	N	N	N	Y

Note: *denotes that this criterion was not met prior to the intervention year.

The percentage of ED students with any documented illegal absences is higher than the Non ED subgroup in this study by 10.81%. There was one case, Student A, in

the ED subgroup that should have received Tier 2 strategies but they were not applied. A closer look at school records indicated that Student A, acquired their third illegal day in late February and was scheduled for a SAIC, however due to scheduling conflicts and the school closure the Tier 2 intervention strategies did not occur. No truancy citation was issued for this student because school was closed due to the pandemic beginning on March 16, 2020. This delay indicates that our process for filing citations with the magistrate was not followed in a timely manner. Student A is one of only two students in this subgroup who did not meet the Regular criteria of attending school 90% of the time or more, either with an attendance rate of 89.26%.

In the ED subgroup there were only three cases in which Tier 2 interventions were implemented with a Student Attendance Improvement Meeting (SAIC) and a Student Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP) was developed with the principal, counselor, teacher, student and parent, or guardian. Student B accrued 4 illegal absences in the 2020-2019 school year. Tier 2 interventions were applied on December 19, 2019. A deeper look at the student records for Student B revealed that the student did not miss any additional school days following the SAIC and the development of the SAIP. There was no citation issued for this student, but the case was referred to social services, which is a Tier 3 intervention. Student C accrued three unlawful days in late February. A SAIC was held on March 2, 2020. While this student missed 1.5 days following the SAIC, the days were coded as excused and the student did not miss any illegal days following the SAIC. Student D accrued three unlawful days in early February. A SAIC was held on February 28, 2020 and the student did not miss any days at all following the SAIC. It is evident that for students B, C and D, the Tier 2 interventions were effective and all three

students were able to meet the Regular Attendance criteria as well. Tier 3 interventions only applied to Non ED Student A and ED Student B but were only implemented for a brief period of time due to the forced school closure on March 13, 2020.

For the whole student group of 109 students, there were 96 students (88.07%) who met the criteria for Regular Attendance before the intervention. During the intervention year there were 104 students (95.41%) who met the criteria at the conclusion of the intervention year. The whole group percentage of the participants in this study exceeds the state target of 93% and is much improved for members of this school than in previous school years.

In the Non ED subgroup, there were 45 students (90%) who met the criteria and five (10%) who did not meet the Regular Attendance benchmark of 90% prior to the intervention. Three of those students met the benchmark in the intervention year and each significantly decreased their missed days by 40, 9 and 3.5 days respectively. The remaining two students did not meet the benchmark in the intervention year but did reduce their missed days by 57 and 4.8 days respectively. In this Non ED group, there was one student who did not meet the Regular Attendance criteria that had in previous years. This student actually increased their absences by 13.8 but had no illegal days for a total of 27 missed days. Of those 27 days, 18 were excused by a physician and five educational trip days were also logged.

For the ED subgroup, there were 51 students (86.44%) who met the Regular Attendance benchmark of 90% prior to the intervention and 57 students (96.66%) who met the benchmark in the intervention year. The statistics revealed that all eight of the students who did not meet the Regular Attendance benchmark before the intervention,

did meet the same benchmark following the intervention. Of this ED subgroup, the only two students who did not meet the benchmark did in fact meet the benchmark prior to the intervention. This suggests that there may have been extenuating circumstances in the 2019-2020 school year that could be attributed to the difference. Furthermore, both of these students missed the Regular Attendance target of equal or less than a total of 13 missed days by one day and one-half day respectively. Student A in the Table 4 is the only ED students who did not meet the Regular Attendance criteria with 14.5 missed days. For Student B, Tier 2 strategies did not occur due to difficulties for the parent to get the meeting scheduled. The meeting was scheduled to occur on March 20, 2020, but due to the forced closure of schools on March 13, 2020, this level of intervention was not able to occur.

Because of the forced closure of schools in my intervention year, the PSSA data needed to answer my third research question was unavailable. I was still curious to find any correlation of data that could answer the final research question, *Does improved regular attendance of middle school students in school increase student performance on grade level standardized tests?* Therefore, I attempted to collect alternate data from the Aimsweb assessment for reading and mathematics, which was available for only the fifth grade class in the 2018-2019 school year and the 2019-2020 school year. This assessment is intended to be administered three times per year (fall, winter, spring) on an annual basis. With the abbreviated school year in 2019-2020, I decided to compare the Winter 2019 results to the Winter 2020 results in an effort to determine if any correlations existed between improved attendance and achievement. I calculated the difference between the RIT scores for each of the two school years in both subject areas

for each student. I was able to determine that all of the fifth grade students increased their RIT scores from one year to the next in both reading and math. I was unable to determine if their rate of growth was commensurate with one year of expected growth for each subject area for each of the students. I am unable to accurately predict if the rate of growth by a student is comparable to norm referenced peers, or if other significant factors, such as a learning disability, could skew the data. Since my study was unable to collect valid achievement data, the answer to my final research question is inconclusive.

I also calculated the total number of communications and types of communications that were provided to all parents as Tier 1 communications. The first communication was a letter sent by me, the superintendent, to all families in the school district prior to the start of the school year on August 15, 2019. The purpose of this communication was to welcome families back to the school year and emphasize the importance of good attendance, positive behavior and course progress. Specifically, it was important for all of our families to be aware of a new protocol regarding attendance which includes immediate parent/guardian notification on the morning of any student absences. A copy of the entire letter can be found in Appendix A.

There were also monthly communications sent by the principals and counselors regarding attendance to all parents/guardians of students in grades 5-8. These personalized letters were mailed through the U.S. Postal Service at the end of each month and included current absence tallies. The tone of the letter was intended to be welcoming and easy to read. Each of the letters also included educational material for parents/guardians as a “Tip of the Month”. A sample of the form letter can be found in

Appendix C. The following “Tip of the Month” topics were selected as resources for parents and mailed with the attendance letter:

- September: “What you Can Do - Make School Priority a Priority, Help Your Teen Stay Engaged, and Communicate with the School
- October: “When is Too Sick for School?”
- November: “Attendance Color Codes”
- January: “Backup Plans for Getting your Kids to School in Bad Weather and Keeping Kids Healthy”
- February: Personal Hygiene

During the intervention period there were a total of four SAIC meetings held for students in the study. This Tier 2 Intervention was implemented for all students who were identified as truant except for one family due to the timing of the absences and the forced school closure. Table 5 shows the engagement and communication strategies that were employed for these four students. Student 1 is coded as Non ED, while Student 2, Student 3 and Student 4 are coded as ED. After analyzing the data, I discovered that only eight of the 18 strategies were employed for all four students. There were five additional strategies utilized for one or more students. Five strategies were not utilized at all during the intervention year: adjusting the parent or student schedule, rewards at home, rewards at school, adjusting the academic schedule, and assigning a mentor. All of these cases applied strategies for obtaining proper documentation to avoid illegal days rather than strategies to prohibit absences. In all cases, the families reported that their children go to bed at a regular time, get up at a regular time and use district transportation so there was no need to implement rewards or adjust schedules in any of these cases. One case included the need for counseling due to peer conflicts. It is unclear why mentoring was not used as a strategy for any of these cases. A sample form for documenting the SAIC and SAIP can be found in Appendix D.

Table 5				
<i>Engagement Strategies for Student Attendance Improvement Plans</i>				
Strategies	Student 1 (Non ED)	Student 2 (ED)	Student 3 (ED)	Student 4 (ED)
Review of student attendance data	x	x	x	x
Letter from Counselor/Principal	x	x	x	x
Phone call from Counselor/Principal	x	x	x	x
Review Benefits of Good Attendance	x	x	x	x
Restate Consequences of Truancy	x	x	x	x
Identify student strengths/needs	x	x	x	x
Adjust parent or student schedule				
Evaluate Student Sleep Patterns	x	x	x	x
Set Alarm Clock			x	
Rewards at Home/School				
Adjust Academic Schedule				
Refer to Community Mental Health	x			
Daily Check-in with Counselor	x	x	x	
Assigned Mentor				
Physician Note for Absences	x	x	x	x
Consult with Physician	x			
Child Services Contact	x			

Discussion

It is clear that the forced school closure impacted my research as the fourth marking period data was eliminated from the study. Historically, more SAIC's and SAIP's occur at this time of the year as more students are likely to have accumulated the required three absences that trigger the Tier 2 intervention. The school closure and cancellation of statewide achievement tests also prohibited me collecting necessary data to answer question three.

The data collection also allowed me to take a deep analysis of student attendance at the school level rather than the broader district level. I believe that the data that was used in this study is accurate and provided me with an opportunity to compare the ED subgroup to their Non ED peers with regards to Regular Attendance and truancy rates. The analysis of the SAIC meeting notes and SAIP strategies allowed me to determine which strategies were being utilized to engage parents in Tier 2 interventions.

Throughout this study, I met monthly with the school counselors, principal and Director of Pupil Services, to monitor the monthly attendance rates of all schools in the district. Each month we discussed the content for the Attendance Tip of the Month and looked at overall school attendance data. It became evident to all of us that daily attendance was improving across the district. By November, daily attendance had improved across the district by over ten per cent due to the consistently implemented Tier 1 strategies. It was also evident that Bucktail Middle School was improving at a higher rate than the other middle school in the district, Central Mountain Middle School. Bucktail Middle School is the only school included in this study and the only school in the district that sent the additional monthly letter to parents.

In an effort to triangulate the attendance results I utilized the report feature in our district's data warehouse to compare the attendance data between the two middle schools in the district for the first three marking periods of the 2018-2019 and the 2019-2020 school year. I was unable to triangulate achievement data due to the lack of data available from the PSSA and Aimsweb assessments in the 2019-2020 school year. However, I could successfully run queries regarding Regular Attendance rates and the number of students who accrued illegal absences. I did not exclude any active students in these whole school queries, therefore the number of students will vary from the participants included in my study. This different sample will assist me in the triangulation of data.

Bucktail Middle School had a Regular Attendance rate of 93.30% in the 2018-2019 school year and improved their rating to 95.80% in 2019-2020. Central Mountain Middle School had a Regular Attendance rate of 92.60% in the 2018-2019 school year but slightly reduced their rating to 92.50% in 2019-2020. Since Bucktail showed improvement in Regular Attendance with the additional interventions and Central Mountain Middle School decreased their rate, this data supports the improvements noted in this study for the increased Regular Attendance rate at Bucktail Middle School and suggests that the engagement strategies were overall successful.

In comparing the two schools for illegal absences, Bucktail Middle School had 46 students who missed a total of 102 in the 2018-2019 school year and only 34 students with a cumulative total of 75 illegal days in the 2019-2020 intervention year. In contrast, Central Mountain Middle School had 418 students with a cumulative total of 3321 illegal days in the 2018-2019 school year and increased to 437 students with a cumulative total

of 3072 illegal days in the 2019-2020 year. Since Bucktail showed improvement by decreasing the number of students who accrued illegal absences with the additional interventions and Central Mountain Middle School increased the number of students who accrued illegal absences, this data supports the improvements noted in this study for decreasing the number of students and illegal days at Bucktail Middle School.

Summary of Results

After a compilation of the data and creating graphical ways to display the data and comparing the pre and post data collections, I was able to draw conclusions regarding *The Impact of Engaging Families in Strategies for Improving Regular Attendance for Children of Poverty*. This study also provided me with ideas on how to refine my strategies in an effort to positively impact a larger number of families each school year.

By triangulating data with additional attendance reports from the pre intervention school year and the intervention school year, I was able to cross-check the data and seek any inconsistencies. I found that the additional data points were aligned with the data in my study. I am confident that my data and findings are accurate and meaningful.

Following the data collection process, I worked closely with a colleague, the Director of Pupil Services in my school district to gather and interpret the numeric language of this project. Together we were able to use the data to determine if our communication efforts, including the human and fiscal capital commitments, were effective in improving student attendance and reducing truancy. We were also able to identify areas for improvement within our current district protocols such as delays in filing legal citations for truancy and

limited strategies being implemented for students who are truant. Additional conclusions and recommendations are explored and explained in greater detail in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter, I will share the conclusions I have reached regarding the effectiveness of my overall study and each of the three individual research questions that guided my inquiry. For this action research project, I will explain how the data collection, results, and fiscal needs fostered deep reflection for me and my colleagues. These reflections have led me to the conclusions and ultimately the need for future action in my schools and for other educational leaders.

Conclusions

Based on the data from this study, I have concluded that there is a positive impact on improving regular attendance when school leaders actively engage families who live in poverty. In fact, these strategies are effective for promoting regular attendance for all middle school students and even more so for economically disadvantaged, middle school students. It was effective to determine a tiered system of support strategies that included Tier 1 strategies for all students, Tier 2 strategies for some students, and Tier 3 strategies for only a few students who needed them. Tier 1 strategies were effective in promoting regular attendance for all students and even more so for students who are economically disadvantaged. Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies are essential in remediating truancy issues and preventing habitual truancy from occurring.

The conclusion to the first research question *Is regular and consistent communication to parents/guardians effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students?*, is yes. The data indicates that

approximately half of the students in the Ed Group and most of the Non ED group improved their attendance in the intervention year by decreasing the total number of days missed within a school year. The results of this study indicate that compared to their non-disadvantaged peers, students in the Economically Disadvantaged (ED) subgroup made better gains in improving their attendance as compared to their non-disadvantaged peers by 14.71%.

Communicating with all parents about the importance of daily attendance is one part of Tier 1 plans to address the attendance crisis. The Tier 1 interventions for all students were solely focused on one-way communication strategies. Texting, emailing or calling parents on the day of any unexpected absences to remind them to return excuse notes within three days reduced absences, and reduced the number of absences that were coded as truant due to the lack of a legitimate excuse. While these were low level forms of communication, it is apparent that making parents aware of the laws and expectations of regular school attendance at the beginning of the school year, sending them phone, email and text reminders on the morning of any absence, and mailing monthly updates is worth the effort.

The conclusion to the second research question *Is parent engagement effective for promoting regular attendance for economically disadvantaged, middle school students who are truant (three illegal absences) or habitually truant (six illegal absences)?*, is also yes, but this conclusion is made with caution due to the low sample size and the limited time that the interventions were in place. There were a very low number of students, only five, who met the criteria for “truant” with a threshold of three illegal absences. Four out

of the five students who were truant were coded to be part of the high risk population as ED students.

For ED Student A, who had the most illegal absences in the study, 4.5, the Tier 2 and 3 interventions did not occur immediately and due to the timing of the third illegal day, the SAIC was never implemented due to the forced school closure. ED Student B had accrued 4 illegal days in the second marking period, but did not miss any more days of school following the Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions that were put in place with this student that included legal action, a citation with the magistrate for truancy, and contact with Children and Youth Services of Clinton County. The data supports the conclusion that the engagement strategies were successful for at least three months following the SAIC.

There were two additional ED cases in which the SAIC was held and a SAIP was enacted as Tier 2 interventions. For these students, it appears that the advanced interventions were successful because neither of the students proceeded to the next level of being coded as habitually truant. However, in both cases the SAIP was only in place for approximately three weeks due to the forced closure of public schools in Pennsylvania on March 13, 2020. I am cautious of making this a conclusive statement due to the circumstances of the limited time that the interventions were enacted.

The only truant Non ED student, Student A, presented some interesting data. This student improved their attendance rate significantly more than any student in the study and missed 57 less days. This is the only student in the study that was not identified as high risk for poverty, however the data indicates that there are likely to be extenuating circumstances that are impacting this child's ability to attend school

regularly. Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions were put in place with this student that included legal action, a citation with the magistrate for truancy, and contact with Children and Youth Services of Clinton County. Based on the data I reviewed, these strategies were immediately effective as the student only missed a half day illegally following the interventions and did not proceed to the next level of being coded as habitually truant.

Since both of the students who participated in Tier 2 strategies were successful in meeting the Regular Attendance threshold in the intervention year, the result is 100% effectiveness compared to the Non ED success rate of 50%. While the data indicates that the interventions were successful in the short-term, I believe there is some uncertainty as to if this conclusion would hold firm in the long-term. Due to the closure of schools due to the national coronavirus pandemic, this study did not include the final marking period of the school year.

The data and logs that I reviewed also led me to consider a few additional ideas that I had not previously considered. The success of the SAIP depends on the timeliness of the SAIC, the quality of the SAIP, and the degree of parental involvement in the plan. If the SAIC can occur immediately following the third illegal absence, it is more likely to prevent future illegal absences. While our school counselors received approximately six hours of training from our Director of Pupil Services regarding the procedures for scheduling and leading a SAIC, there were a few instances where the documentation did not appear to be of high quality. It is essential to provide direction and modeling for school counselors and principals who are leading the SAIC meetings so that the root cause of the absences can be identified and the appropriate strategies can be applied. I noticed that there was a SAIC held without the parents or the student. This

practice completely negates the idea of parental engagement. A SAIC without the key players is merely a meeting of school personnel and will likely have a negative impact on changing the behaviors of the student or parent. The partnership between the school and the family is essential in promoting school success.

The third research question, *Does improved regular attendance of middle school students in school increase student performance on grade level standardized tests?*, remains unanswered due to the disruption of achievement data. Other data sets did not provide enough information to draw valid conclusions in this area for my study. There are many variables that can impact student achievement. Attendance is only one factor, but in this study, it was the only variable changed in this school year and attendance improved for most of the students in the study. It would have been beneficial to correlate attendance data with achievement data to determine if the rate of academic growth was higher with improved attendance.

As I reviewed the literature related to my project, there was significant evidence to support my belief that there is a correlation between engaged parents and better attendance and thus ultimately that this engagement would lead to higher levels of growth for the economically disadvantaged subgroup. John Hattie's meta-analysis of what works best to grow students across a twenty year period is one resource that supports my hypothesis. He states that:

Parents have major effects in terms of the encouragement and expectations that they transmit to their children. Many parents, however, struggle to comprehend the language

of learning and thus are disadvantaged in the methods they use to encourage their children to attain their expectations. (Hattie, 2009, p. 68)

While the vast array of research breaks down different aspects of parental involvement such as checking homework, attendance, household rules and participating in school events, the most important take-away for my project is that parents who do not have high expectations for their children are at a clear disadvantage compared to their peers whose parents value the purpose of school. Additionally, these same parents are less likely to understand academic language and are more likely to avoid engagement with their child's education. The conclusions from the research suggests that school personnel cannot rely on parents, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, to be engaged in their child's education without some level of support and effort on the part of the school entity. Efforts on the part of educational leaders to reduce barriers between home and school for high expectations, including school attendance for academic achievement, will likely produce positive results for our most at-risk students. I believe this is still an important area of educational research that could be studied in future school years.

The positive results of this study did not come without a cost. The expense of the improved attendance for my students was in the form of fiscal and human resources. The direct costs for this project are very low in comparison to the district's comprehensive budget of \$76,888,050. While the actual fiscal cost was estimated to be \$578.20 was lower than the estimated cost of \$826.00, I believe that the strategies were cost effective and fiscally responsible. The cost was lower due to the school closure and only having seven mailings as opposed to ten. We spent \$578.20 for 124 students which is an average of \$4.66 per student for the school year.

In addition to the direct costs, I cannot deny the time that was devoted to this project by myself, the Director of Pupil Services, principal, counselors and secretaries. While employee time was necessary to complete this project, all aspects of the tasks required are within the expectations of each employee as noted in their job descriptions, therefore no additional funding was needed. Administrative collaboration between the superintendent, Director of Pupil Services and the principal was necessary to develop the correspondence letters and determine responsibilities of teachers, counselors and secretarial staff. The administrators met monthly with the counselors to manage the details and to monitor the plan as it was being implemented with fidelity. In addition to the one hour monthly meetings, we determined that each counselor spent an average of one and a half hours monthly to retrieve data and create the letters for each of their students. Secretaries spent one hour or less per month on the preparation of the envelopes and mailing details.

Having spent \$578.20 for 124 students which is an average of \$4.66 per student for the school year was not an exorbitant amount for the result. While not all of the 124 students were included in the data, there were a total of 61 students (55.96%) out of the 109 participants in the study who improved their attendance in the intervention year. While that fact constitutes a positive result, it is more compelling that the results of this study indicate that compared to their non-disadvantaged peers, students in the Economically Disadvantaged (ED) subgroup made better gains in improving their attendance as compared to their non-disadvantaged peers by 14.71%. The most at-risk students benefited the most and allowed me to close the opportunity gap. We plan to implement this strategy to a larger group of students. For a district-wide implementation,

the cost would rise significantly and pre-planning will be necessary for direct costs and indirect costs.

Recommendations

The strategies in this research study also served as a pilot study in my school district. While we implemented some tier 1 strategies district wide, we only sent the individual monthly mailings to the students at Bucktail Middle School. Since the results were successful in improving the overall attendance of all students, both ED and Non ED, we have decided to expand our strategies to the five elementary schools, the other middle school and both high schools that are part of the Keystone Central School District.

Regular attendance rates in my school district have been inconsistent among schools and grade levels, but it is evident that overall the economically disadvantaged students have lower attendance rates than their non-impooverished peers. It is proven that the students at the highest risk for school failure have benefited the most from this project. Based on what I have learned from this study, I have three recommendations for future action that I will employ in my school district.

First, I recommend that a tiered system of support for attendance is expanded for all schools and students in the district with a few modifications. The expanded implementation will take more human and fiscal resources. If postal mailing was utilized for all 3700+ students in my district, the cost would rise significantly from the estimated \$826.00 to \$17,242.00. If this strategy is applied to a larger group of students, or district-wide, then other ways to deliver the information could be explored. One other strategy could include hand delivery by students and a returned portion with parent sign-off. This

idea would be one option to eliminate costs and ensure receipt of the information. The modifications to the plan are explained in detail within the other two recommendations.

The second recommendation is focused on effective professional learning for my staff. The plan that was implemented for this study only included six hours of training for school counselors. It is necessary to provide professional learning for all professional staff regarding the importance of regular school attendance for all students. In addition to training on attendance, there should be an additional focus on understanding the impact of poverty on children in public schools. Many teachers have never lived in poverty and therefore may have a difficult time relating to, or understanding the barriers that are present for more than half of their students. I believe that informed professionals will be more likely to modify their behaviors to include proven and supportive strategies. The quality of the professional learning must be considered as one-time “sit and get” sessions will be unlikely to make a difference. I would suggest ongoing professional learning with embedded into professional learning community time to focus on at-risk students. This strategic support for staff can come from principals, counselors, school nurses, school psychologists and social workers.

My third recommendation is that the Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies are employed sooner for any student who has a poor attendance history or accumulates frequent absences throughout the school year. The school law regarding SAICs only applies to truant students and gets employed after three illegal days have occurred. This is simply too late. I cannot recommend a passive approach that relies on hope as a strategy. If we know that these supports are helpful to any student, then why should we wait? Delaying the implementation of successful strategies will be unlikely to change previous behaviors.

A much different proactive approach should be applied to any student who historically is known to miss a lot of school. If a proactive SAIP is developed prior to the beginning of the year, then Tier 2 strategies could be applied from the first day of school. At risk children could have assigned mentors or attendance contracts in place that can help prevent any unnecessary absences early on. If the strategies are successful in changing behavior permanently, the supports could be gradually dismissed. If there is a relapse in missed days, the strategies could be reinstated. In order to ensure that Regular Attendance rates are met per school, these same proactive ideas could be applied to students who accrue ten or more absences at any point in the school year.

It was unfortunate that the data sets for this study were interrupted by the forced school closures. Areas for further study on the topic of attendance and truancy for economically disadvantaged students should be considered with data from across an entire school year when compared to a pre-intervention year. It would also be beneficial to be able to link the parental engagement strategies to academic growth data. I would also recommend that any researcher who is interested in this area of study include qualitative data along with the quantitative data collected from school records. I believe that there could be rich results if the parental attitudes and perceptions were included. This would assist researchers in determining even more valid action steps in the future.

Concluding Summary

As stated in the initial introduction, academic achievements and regular attendance are considered to be two important indicators of college and career readiness. Students who are economically disadvantaged and do not have regular

attendance in school do not achieve at the same rate as their peers (Garcia & Weiss 2018). This phenomenon creates a greater divide between children of poverty and their peers from higher socioeconomic class for college and career readiness. The research regarding the importance of Regular Attendance cannot be ignored. School administrators and teachers must employ strategies specifically targeted to the families of poverty in middle school grades in an effort to increase regular attendance and close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students.

Furthermore, school leaders should not be passive when it comes to setting expectations for staff, students and families regarding student attendance. Setting high expectations and maintaining a focus on the importance of school attendance. Regular and consistent communication is effective in improving regular attendance and preventing truancy for all students, and particularly effective for students who are economically disadvantaged. It is essential that many modes of communication are utilized to reach every family. Emails, automated phone calls, texts and postal mailings are effective one-way communication strategies when utilized concurrently on the day of a student absence. Professional learning for professional staff members regarding attendance and poverty should also be a priority.

For students who accrue three or more illegal absences in a school year are subject to consequences according to school law and district policies. While these actions cannot be ignored, it is essential to promote parent engagement in the plans for remediating attendance issues. Face-to-face meetings that are focused on identification of the root cause of the absence and subsequently involve the parent and student in the solution have proven to be successful in preventing additional absences if a quality plan

is developed and monitored. In some cases, it is necessary to employ additional supports such as local family services or healthcare agencies. The quality of the SAIC and SAIP will determine the effectiveness of the results.

Future implications include expanding the strategies in this action research project to encompass all students in the school district. It will be necessary to provide some training and modeling for principals, counselors and teachers regarding the importance of attendance and the best strategies for engaging parents in effective solutions for promoting positive attendance rates. Additionally, Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports could be employed from the beginning of the school year for those children who have a history of poor attendance, or for any child who accrues ten or more absences during the school year. The supports could be applied in a proactive manner to prevent unnecessary absences rather than a reactive manner to remediate the problem.

As an educational leader, I have benefited greatly from this study. This research project has allowed me to take a deep dive on an inquiry that will ultimately benefit students and other practitioners who wish to improve their practice with research-based action. The research regarding the importance of school attendance cannot be ignored. School administrators and teachers must employ strategies specifically targeted to the families of poverty in middle school grades in an effort to increase regular attendance and close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Superintendent Letter to Families

<Letterhead>

August 15, 2019

Dear KCSD Families,

On behalf of the KCSD Board of Directors and all of us who support your children, I want to welcome you back to a new school year. For several months we have been busy making preparations for the **first day of school, Wednesday, August 28, 2019**. If your child is a member of the Senior Class of 2020, an underclassman, or beginning their first year as part of the Class of 2032, we are committed to making it a great year. It is hard work and we know we cannot do it alone. Monitoring the ABC's of your child's progress for Attendance, Behavior and Coursework will help to ensure success. While you can access information through the parent portal in Powerschool, you are encouraged to also contact teachers, counselors and administrators for assistance. Please see the enclosed **Communication Chain** for clarification on who you should contact.

Attendance:

I am asking for your support to improve overall student attendance. Regular attendance is a key indicator of success in school and career readiness. We want to provide you with immediate notification of absences; therefore, you will be receiving alert messages (email, call, and text) around 9 am on the morning your student is marked absent. The message will simply alert you of the absence and remind you to send a note within 3 days so that the day is not considered unlawful. Any student who has more than three (3) unlawful/unexcused absences will be required to attend an Attendance Improvement Conference with parents/guardians to develop a plan to support attendance. Other changes related to attendance include educational trip days increased to 7 days and loss of privileges for students who miss more than 18 days of school at the secondary level. In accordance with attendance laws, **we will only be able to accept absence excuses for the following reasons:**

- Illness
- Quarantine
- Impassable roads / natural disaster
- Court appearance
- Death in the family
- Educational trip - with prior approval
- Recovery from an accident or injury

Behavior:

Our schools will continue to implement Positive Behavior Intervention Support programs. This means that we use proactive strategies for defining, teaching and supporting student behavior resulting in academic and social gains and a positive school environment. Research shows that when a school environment is positive and predictable, students feel safer, have better academic performance, higher test results

and make better behavior choices. **We are taking extra measures to address bullying and harassment because it is imperative that our students have a safe and supportive learning environment.** The district is implementing a new Customized Learning Program for secondary students who need structured support for academic or behavioral success.

Course Progress:

Learning is our fundamental purpose. We are continuously working to improve our course expectations in order to challenge and support our students. **Teachers will keep you informed about progress and any concerns throughout each marking period.** We have added a new STEM (Science/Technology/Engineering/Math) course for all K-5 classes. Students will be able to use math and science concepts to solve problems and create innovative ideas. At the secondary level, we have increased career opportunities through our Career and Technical Center and added dual enrollment opportunities for college bound students. All curriculum will be under review and revisions will be made annually.

Finally, our district is finalizing a new comprehensive plan that will challenge the status quo and provide a roadmap to create a successful school district. **Our new mission is to develop life-long learners who are adaptable, resilient, productive and of high moral character.** It's an exciting time for Keystone Central, and I am confident that if we work together our best days are yet to be.

Respectfully,

Jacquelyn Martin
Superintendent

Appendix B

Notification Message for Daily Absence

“Your student (first name), is currently marked absent from (their school name). Please send in an excuse for their absence within three days. Absent notes may be emailed to bucktailattendance@kcsd.us or turned into your student's main office. If you have any questions or concerns about this notice, please call or email your student's school.

Appendix C

Template for Individual Monthly Letter

<Letterhead>

September 30, 2019

Dear Bucktail MS and Renovo Elementary Families,

This school year we are focusing on improving student attendance because showing up for school has a huge impact on a student's academic success starting in kindergarten and continuing through high school. As a special project for students in grades 5-8 we are going to be keeping you informed each month regarding your child's attendance.

So far this year we have had 23 days of school. Your child's attendance record shows that, _____NAME____, has been **PRESENT** for ____ days. The following absences are noted:

_____ **Excused Absence(s)**
 _____ **Doctor Excused**
 _____ **Unlawful Absence(s)**
 _____ **Educational Trip Days**
 _____ **Tardies**

Even as children grow older and more independent, families play a key role in making sure students get to school safely every day and understand why attendance is so important for success in school and on the job. We want to partner with you and your family for a successful school year. Please contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

Amy Clary, School Counselor
 Sheri Gordon, School Counselor
 Betsy Dickey, Principal

Please see the other side for an Attendance Tip of the Month

Attendance Tip of the Month



Pay Attention to Attendance: Keep Your Child On Track in Middle and High School

Showing up for school has a huge impact on a student's academic success starting in kindergarten and continuing through high school. Even as children grow older and more independent, families play a key role in making sure students get to school safely every day and understand why attendance is so important for success in school and on the job.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Students should miss no more than 9 days of school each year to stay engaged, successful and on track to graduation.
- Absences can be a sign that a student is losing interest in school, struggling with school work, dealing with a bully or facing some other potentially serious difficulty.
- By 6th grade, absenteeism is one of three signs that a student may drop out of high school.
- By 9th grade, regular and high attendance is a better predictor of graduation rates than 8th grade test scores.
- Missing 10 percent, or about 18 days, of the school year can drastically affect a student's academic success.
- Students can be chronically absent even if they only miss a day or two every few weeks.
- Attendance is an important life skill that will help your child graduate from college and keep a job.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Make school attendance a priority

- Talk about the importance of showing up to school everyday, make that the expectation.
- Help your child maintain daily routines, such as finishing homework and getting a good night's sleep.
- Try not to schedule dental and medical appointments during the school day.
- Don't let your child stay home unless truly sick. Complaints of headaches or stomach aches may be signs of anxiety.

Help your teen stay engaged

- Find out if your child feels engaged by his classes and feels safe from bullies and other threats. Make sure he/she is not missing class because of behavioral issues and school discipline policies. If any of these are problems, work with your school.
- Stay on top of academic progress and seek help from teachers or tutors if necessary. Make sure teachers know how to contact you.
- Stay on top of your child's social contacts. Peer pressure can lead to skipping school, while students without many friends can feel isolated.
- Encourage meaningful afterschool activities, including sports and clubs.

Communicate with the school

- Know the school's attendance policy – incentives and penalties
- Talk to teachers if you notice sudden changes in behavior. These could be tied to something going on at school.
- Check on your child's attendance to be sure absences are not piling up.
- Ask for help from school officials, afterschool programs, other parents or community agencies if you're having trouble getting your child to school.



Assessment/Areas of Need:

- medical concerns
- family concerns
- school anxiety
- social concerns
- academic difficulty
- other _____
- doesn't like school
- parent at work
- overslept
- no transportation

Strengths of the Student/Family/School

1.
2.
3.

Solutions: Student/Family/School/Community (Check all that apply)

- adjust parent/student schedule
- evaluate sleep patterns
- set alarm clock
- rewards at home
- rewards at school
- adjust academic schedule
- participate in community mental health
- contact with assigned staff (who) _____
- other _____
- regular communication between home and school
- communicate with a mentor (who) _____
- physician note for all future absences
- consultation with physician
- interagency contact

Additional Information:

General Information Regarding Family, Habits and Routines: (at meeting)

1. Are there siblings, step or half-siblings, or other children or young adults in the home?
2. With whom does the student live during the week?
3. Bedtime is typically at ____ p.m. Wake up time is typically ____ a.m.
4. Means of transportation?
5. Other:

Benefits for compliance
1. Complying with the compulsory school attendance laws will lead to better academic success.
2. Compliance with the compulsory school attendance will prevent any legal actions with the District Magistrate Court.
3.

Consequences for non-compliance
1. There is a correlation between academic success and attendance. Therefore, by not complying with the compulsory school attendance law there is an increased risk of academic struggles.
2. Non-compliance of compulsory school attendance will lead to legal actions. On the 6th unexcused absence, a citation will be filed in Magistrate Court.
3. If a criminal complaint is filed in the Magistrate Court, criminal changes will show up on a criminal background check.
4. Educational trip requests will be denied when a student has accrued 3 unexcused absences or 10 excused absences.

Date(s) for Follow-up Outcomes Meeting: _____

For questions, concerns or difficulties implementing this plan or if the roles of each party is unclear, contact () prior to the scheduled progress meeting.

Outcomes from meeting on:
Next Steps from meeting on:

This SAIC was created collaboratively to assist the student in improving attendance, to enlist the support of parents/guardians and to document the school's attempt to provide resources to promote student success.

Signatures	Date
Student:	
Parent or Guardian:	
School Administrator/Dean:	
School Counselor:	
Classroom Teacher:	
School Psychologist:	
Home and School Visitor:	
Family Outreach Specialist:	
School Nurse:	
Other:	
Other:	
Other:	

Appendix E

Institutional Review Board
California University of Pennsylvania
Morgan Hall, 310
250 University Avenue
California, PA 15419
instreviewboard@calu.edu
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Jacquelyn,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled "The Impact of Engaging Families in Strategies for Improving Regular Attendance for Children of Poverty" (Proposal #18-098) has been approved by the California University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board as amended.

The effective date of approval is 9/17/19 and the expiration date is 9/16/20. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

- (1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)
- (2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects
- (3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).
- (4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 9/16/20 you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu

Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, PhD.
Chair, Institutional Review Board