

THE COST OF DISENGAGEMENT: EXAMINING THE REAL STORY
OF ABSENTEEISM IN TWO MICHIGAN COUNTIES

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation in practice, completed by a research group, intended to create a greater awareness and develop an understanding of the impact of attendance on academic performance. Schools are faced with the tasks of ensuring students attend school and keeping them engaged while they are at school. This project encourages the reader to look past school attendance as a mere student record of being present and it also provides a more comprehensive view of attendance as an academic behavior. The project focused on issues that are applicable to all schools, but specifically considered data from schools in Washtenaw and Muskegon Counties in Michigan.

School practitioners need to understand the imperative nature with which attendance issues are to be understood, as attendance is a lead indicator of successful school outcomes, as well as successful life outcomes. Students who are frequently absent from school are at a much greater risk of poor self-concept, poor school performance, retention, and dropping out (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). In considering the transition from elementary school to middle school, we looked at quantitative and qualitative data from seventh grade students in both Washtenaw and Muskegon Counties. This grade-level of students face considerable challenges during this formative time, including the sense of belonging and self-efficacy needed for student success, a more challenging curriculum, more freedom, and additional responsibility in the school. A

connection to absenteeism being an indicator of engagement and disengagement was also made, as attendance (or lack thereof) is the strongest indicator of disengagement (Pellerin, 2005). We also detailed how the current policies and practices in place in schools do not effectively address, prevent, or curb absenteeism in schools.

In this dissertation in practice, we attempted to answer four research questions:

1. What is the current state of student attendance in a large county in Michigan? What are the magnitudes of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism within this county?
2. Who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two Michigan counties? Can these students be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics?
3. How, if at all, do factors related to the individual, peer group, family life and school policy contribute to chronic absenteeism among middle school students in two Michigan counties?
4. What are the current perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff in two Michigan counties concerning student attendance rates?

We answered these questions using a three-phase analysis, which included a quantitative analysis of student attendance data, a qualitative analysis of student interview data, and a qualitative analysis of staff focus group data.

As products from this research, we will provide a summary of our relevant research to the Washtenaw and Muskegon county schools with recommendations, a protocol to replicate research in other districts, and a three-tiered model of support related to attendance.

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Chapter One: Introduction

If education is important, and if student attendance is the first step toward educational success, then communities, school practitioners, families, and students need to better understand and more appropriately address the challenge of chronic absenteeism, and severely chronic absenteeism within schools in our communities. Current systems in schools identify students with challenges in the area of attendance, but what is really being done for these students to meet their learning needs? When letters are sent to parents and parent meetings are set up with school administrators, what real intervention takes place that prevent students and parents from ending up in truancy court? When anxious students finally build up enough courage to attend school after being absent for a week, what type of reception do these students receive from practitioners? What systems and resources do schools and communities have in place to support and intervene in the lives of students who are chronically absent? The questions asked in this study were conceived with the intent of truly understanding the reasons and barriers that keep students from attending school. Whether the challenge is one of home influence, variables of community and peer relations, practitioner-related, or school-affiliated, all answers were considered for the story they told.

The care and attention that needs to be placed on this issue is often times conveniently overlooked, almost as if attendance is a silent hazard that our children face each day. Let us consider a hazard of another type in order for us to put this urgency in context. If the sidewalks that led to the school in a village were only feet away from a severe cliff, and many children each day stumbled and fell off of this cliff, the community would certainly react immediately to find a solution and implement it. Children's lives are precious, and communities need to leverage everything they can to protect our children and their futures. However, if children are getting too

close to a cliff, and are in danger of falling off, the answer cannot be simply to put up a fence and expect it to do the job of catching every child who wanders too close to the edge. Many villages would hire adults to line the path, to ensure safety. The systems of “catching” students within schools are much like a fence. However, despite these representative barriers, many students fall through the cracks each day. Understanding what lies within children, and what circumstances lead them to this area of risk is imperative. Likewise, severely chronic absenteeism is not something that can be fixed quickly or without care and attention. Mining the story of each individual student is the only way to meet his or her need with solutions that will help him or her succeed.

Each day, as school bells ring throughout the country, the youth of America filter into classrooms and hallways of learning institutions, preparing to earn their stake in the American dream. However, on any given day, nine percent of America’s public school students do not join their peers in attending school (Eaton et al., 2008). With absences being either excused or unexcused, student reasons for not attending are varied. Excused absences typically consist of illnesses, appointments, or school-related activities (Eaton et al., 2008). Absences that are not excused by parents, guardians, or the school are considered unexcused, resulting in the student being truant for the day (Eaton et al., 2008). Absences of any description begin to tell a specific story as they compile for a particular student. Often times, school leaders and practitioners may view absenteeism with a negative frame, without knowing or seeking the complete story. There is no doubt that it is important to have a daily understanding of which students are absent, whether they are excused or truant in classification. With this in place, it is important to understand whether a pattern of absenteeism is occurring for an individual learner, and it is also important to have a system in place to assist and ensure an improvement in attendance for

students who exhibit challenges in this area. However, this is not an easy task, as there appears to be indifference among school personnel with regard to how they should respond to issues of student attendance. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) note it is rare that a school official can even tell you who has been absent for ten percent or more of the current school year. This implies the need for school leaders to plan and understand systems and interventions for students who are not attending school. If we expect our students to be ready to actively participate in our communities, it is imperative that we begin to understand the function of attendance.

An understanding of the issues of absenteeism needs to also begin during the early educational years for a student. Low-achieving students who demonstrate a rise in absenteeism at the beginning of their middle school career, which equates to a ten day or more increase in days absent per year when compared to elementary days absent, are significantly more likely than their similarly-skilled peers to not graduate from high school (Balfanz et al., 2007). Perhaps this drop in attendance can be attributed to issues of transition to middle school, as students in their first year of middle school need to adapt to a number of changes within the school, including larger classes, different level of assessment, grading, instruction, and classes that are departmentalized, as opposed to self-contained (Balfanz et al., 2007). Challenges to find success in these necessary areas result in a middle or high school student's decision to not attend school, to not behave, or to not give full effort in class (Balfanz et al., 2007). These decisions then become indicators of a student's increasing disengagement from school, which is strongly predictive of dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2007). It is with this defined connection to student drop out that disengagement and, therefore, engagement become necessary in understanding how to ensure students stay in school.

It is critical that school leaders and practitioners on a daily basis ensure that engaging learning opportunities await every student. Researchers suggest that engagement is multi-faceted, in its definition and in its composition. Current definitions include the following: “an active state of responding to a class through focused behavior, emotion, and cognition” (Cooper, 2014, p. 365), “a student’s investment and commitment to their learning” (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 168), “the quality of a student’s connection or involvement with the endeavor of schooling” (Skinner, et al., 2009, p. 494), and “a dynamic system of social and psychological constructs as well as a synergistic process” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 432). Most definitions include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components, and Turner, et al. (2014) contribute the idea of an agentic component to the multi-faceted construct –referencing the actions associated with each student’s own agency. When this entire engagement construct is considered, along with the complexity with which it is composed, it is understandable why educational leaders and practitioners are leaning into it as a mechanism of needed change and support. Leveraging engagement within classrooms, with the aim of decreasing and eliminating disengagement is essential in overcoming the issues of absenteeism, truancy, and student dropout.

However, student desire to attend school and engage in their learning is often times influenced by caring practitioners who believe in the best version of the student. The counter to this is when practitioners place barriers on students by believing that they are not capable of meeting increased expectations due to existing elements within the student. Valencia (2010) asserts that this deficit thinking “arbitrarily denies students the opportunity to maximize human powers” (p. 230). This denial comes because practitioners fix in their own minds the limit that these students are able to accomplish due to circumstances of the students’ deficiencies

(Valencia, 2010). This deficit thinking places students at a lesser place to begin with in their learning, as they lose the benefit of a caring adult that believes in them to achieve incredible things. When students sense and experience this, they feel the blame for their failure to attend, and failure to learn. This mindset gives little to no responsibility to practitioners who structure learning opportunities within schools. If practitioners operate out of a deficit thinking mindset, the often times offer up excuses for students and begin to rationalize the reasons as to why students can not and will not attend school. This type of thinking lowers expectations for students, and positions them in a place that is hard for them to rise out of. Practitioners cannot allow this to happen, nor can schools, or communities, or intermediate school districts. Our students deserve an opportunity for someone to believe in them.

This call for community to assist in this attendance crisis is one that goes beyond individual school districts, as districts throughout the country are dealing with similar issues. Intermediate school districts often times have the ability to leverage more resources to research and inform their constituents of best practices and systems that work. This partnership is critical to the success of many school districts, and this challenge is no different. In engaging in this research study, and in better defining the academic behavior of attendance, the expectation and hope is for practitioners to begin to identify students with the intention of understanding their individual situation. With this understanding, and with the student's education as a united goal, practitioners can work with the student, family, and district to address the real challenges that keep students from attending school. In looking at the stories that are told through the data of Washtenaw and Muskegon Counties in Michigan, our hope is that a new awareness will be brought to solutions to this silent crisis around our state and country.

It is this frame of understanding that guided our work with the schools in Muskegon and Washtenaw Counties in Michigan in working to determine the detailed story behind the attendance challenges that their community faces. The guiding questions that we are attempting to answer through qualitative and quantitative forms of inquiry are:

1. What is the current state of student attendance in one large county in Michigan? What are the magnitudes of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism within this county?
2. Who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two comparable Michigan counties? Can they be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics?
3. How, if at all, do factors related to the individual, peer group, family life and school policy contribute to chronic absenteeism among middle school students in two Michigan counties?
4. What are the current perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff in two Michigan counties concerning student attendance rates?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Understanding Absenteeism

In order to understand the challenge of absenteeism, it is important to simplify the main components. Every day, a substantial portion of our students are not attending school, and we have some things in place to identify these students, but do we really know why they are not attending, and are the things that we have in place effective? In this chapter, we looked closely at the literature in order to gain a more complete picture of this challenge. We began by understanding what absenteeism really is. We also considered methods of accounting for absences, as well as the way practitioners view absenteeism. From here, it was important to consider attendance as an academic behavior, which suggested that there was not much consistency across the board with regard to the reasoning as to why students are absent. However, in looking at attendance as a behavior, it was found that there is consistency in individual students, which suggested the understanding individual stories to be critically important (Borghans et al., 2008). The review then spends some time examining absenteeism in the context of adolescence and the middle years of sixth through eighth grades. With this understanding, attendance and the way it connects to academic performance and academic under-performance, was considered. Engagement and the hope that it holds in drawing in learners, was the next topic in the review, and fittingly, literature on motivation in students was included to follow this up. The way practitioners perceive and view students was looked at next using deficit thinking and its effects on absent students, as our frame of understanding. The review then looked at belonging in schools and the transition from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. A consideration of current attendance perceptions, policies and practices then concluded the literature review. With this more complete understanding and

view it then becomes the work of intentional and caring practitioners to determine if what is currently taking place with regard to attendance is addressing the real issues involved.

Chronic absenteeism is a national challenge, thwarting educational initiatives and improvement plans in schools throughout the country (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). As a force, chronic absenteeism, which equates to missing ten percent of school days in a year, acts as a silent variable impacting school-wide achievement and performance (Eaton et al., 2008). School leaders attempt to move forward addressing major issues such as the achievement gap, without an intentional plan in place to halt the pervasive challenge that absenteeism poses. In contrast, attendance policies in schools often focus on the number of days absent and whether the absenteeism is due to unexcused, excused, or disciplinary reasons. While this is important to collect accurate data, current methods of accounting may not provide supportive school staff members with the information they need to do something corrective regarding a student's attendance. This lack of information bleeds into other areas of schools, and into the various constructs used to define attendance. The way educators view attendance, as well as its importance as an academic behavior, will define how they interact with attendance concerns as members of the school support team. School leaders and practitioners also need a consistent and reliable manner in which to measure attendance to ensure that school staff members are able to recognize a decrease in student attendance – allowing them to respond with appropriate attention in a timely manner.

An understanding of student motivation to attend school brings with it a mix of explanations for why students attend on a daily basis. These include the school culture and environment, family circumstances, and characteristics of the individual (Goldstein, 2003). Social values also compete for student's attention each day in making the decision to attend or

not. Goldstein (2003) considered the impact of school attendance in major cities, recognizing that in a city of 1,000,000 students, a 15% daily absence rate would put 150,000 students out of school on any given day. This equates to 75 students absent per day in a school of 500, or 3 students out in a class of 20. Access to this data within schools is not challenging, as it is easy to tell who shows up. The challenge comes in determining the reason an individual chooses to attend or not attend and then doing something to ensure consistent attendance.

In considering attendance, it is important to consider participation in school activities during the day as well as activities outside of the school day as a form of behavioral engagement (Benner & Wang, 2014). Social constructs such as the predictability of the day's events and how these variables interact with one another come into play when individuals decide whether or not to participate while at school (Vellos & Vadeboncouer, 2015). The entire structure of the school day formats the opportunities for participation and may also provide insight into why a student's attendance declines. This would include participating in the transportation program offered by a school, participation in the design and delivery of instruction in the classroom, participation in the lunchroom or cafeteria, and finally participation in extracurricular activities that are made available to students (Vellos & Vadeboncouer, 2015). Using 4th-grade student and teacher surveys regarding classroom participation, Finn (1992) arranged student participants into groups based on their levels of participation in class. He categorized them as nonparticipant, passive participant, and active participant. In this study, he described participation by engagement and involvement in the activities or work of the school. Participation in activities can be passive or active (Zirkel, 2015). This is important to note, as participation in the early years may be somewhat forced or at least less of a choice, whereas these early participatory patterns may lead

to a habit and ultimately withdrawal from school (Finn, 1992). This was an important aspect to the work we did with Muskegon County and Washtenaw County Middle Schools.

In attending school, students must also choose to participate. It is apparent that this decision to be a learner contributing to the learning community in a classroom is indeed a choice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning can be considered a social construct, and the negotiation and renegotiation of involvement in a learning community is a demonstration of the decision to either participate or not. Participation is typically noted by involvement in the activity and the process of doing the work (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Attendance is the ultimate academic behavior, as you must be present to perform. Simply showing up for school, participating in the classroom activities, and doing the work has resulted in increased grades and classroom performance (Zirkel, 2015). On the contrary, refusal or failure to participate, results in student disengagement. However, when practitioners and school leaders see this behavior exhibited, it likely is not the first encounter for the learner, as Kearney and Ross (2014) have found that the earliest indicators of future disengagement include crying or clinging, limited participation in class, frequent trips to bathroom during class, and bargaining future school attendance.

The issue of attendance is not a new concept. Current research shows that attendance is the lead indicator of student grades, and that student grades are the best indicator of successful high school and college completion (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). With these relationships in mind, it makes sense that focus is drawn to developing a shared understanding of attendance as an academic behavior and that we undertake ways to impact attendance as an academic behavior in order to improve students' academic performance and ultimately benefit our community. These long-term community outcomes should serve as a rallying cry for communities to come together to understand the problem of absenteeism.

Attendance as an Academic Behavior

When considering attendance as a behavior, it is recognized that there is limited consistency in attendance patterns across a sample of individuals, while within single individuals; consistent attendance patterns are quite strong (Borghans et al., 2008). This can be attributed to the fact that individuals respond to stimuli in different ways based on the personal perception of the incentives being offered (Borghans, et al, 2008). Many would also argue that attendance is the result of external factors that cannot be controlled within the school borders including parent marital status, family housing situation, socio-economic status, lack of familial educational tradition, substance abuse patterns, or medical issues. While these variables may have direct impact, others would attribute absenteeism to school controlled features such as student disengagement, classroom workload, or teacher quality (Boyle, 1988; Goldstein, 2003; Kearney & Ross, 2014; Velloso & Vadeboncoeur, 2015).

Having one hundred percent of learners engaged in learning one hundred percent of the time has become an exceptional goal for many classrooms around the country. However, each day a great number of students who remain disengaged attend schools. Disengagement in classrooms is a pervasive challenge that needs to be equally understood. Disengagement as a concept refers to the absence of engagement, including the absence of effort or persistence (Skinner et al., 2009). Students who exhibit characteristics of disengagement tend to be passive, lack motivation, and give up easily (Skinner et al., 2009). These students tend to become not only disengaged from learning, but they begin to suffer from feelings of helplessness, exclusion, emotional withdrawal, and boredom (Skinner et al., 2009). Some of these disenfranchised learners react to these characteristics with avoidance, which exhibits itself as chronic, or severely chronic, absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013).

Absenteeism is a primary risk factor for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and educational failure (Spencer, 2008). In addition to this passive neglect, truant students face severe consequences in school. These consequences are outside of the scope of what is assigned by an administrator, such as poor self-concept, poor school performance, and retention (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Due to the nature of the precipitating factors, chronic absenteeism and severely chronic absenteeism should not be treated like other offenses, as they have their own long-term consequences, which make traditional consequences such as detention and suspension ineffective. According to Rumberger and Palardy (2005), the number one predictor of student dropout is retention in grades 1-8. Students who are severely chronically absent are those that are most at risk of being retained, making them prime candidates to disengage from learning and drop out once they reach high school. Another factor to consider is the role that school policy plays in these decisions. According to Spencer (2008), certain schools assign automatic failure for poor attendance. These strict policies have the unintended consequence of school disengagement, which leads to more absences and possibly total withdrawal, which itself is the strongest indicator of school disengagement (Pellerin, 2005). Failure is an important component in the fight against truancy. Students failing courses are those who are most likely to disengage and ultimately drop out of school, and often absenteeism can be the precipitating factor for students failing a class. This is true especially at the middle school level, where failing a course has negative effects on a student's self-efficacy and choice to engage, which could result in a choice to eventually drop out of school (Balfanz et al., 2007). It is not surprising that class attendance is the most important academic behavior with regard to determining completion success (Farrington et al., 2012). Research in this area also states that student grades are a better predictor of success than

student test scores (Farrington et al., 2012). The relationship between attendance and school grades holds true regardless of test scores. Small differences in attendance can have a large impact on student grades.

The Challenges of Middle Years

During the middle years of schooling, typically grades six through eight, the challenges of adolescence amplify the complexity of decisions and decision-making for many students, especially those from situations of poverty (Balfanz et al., 2007). These students who live in challenging neighborhoods do not have an escape at times if their school resembles the same chaos, disorganization, and lack of resources that they experience in their homes and surroundings (Balfanz et al., 2007). Middle school students in high-poverty cities and communities also have the need for immediate and continuous intervention should they waver from the graduation path, and oftentimes they are unable to receive this vital support. This lack of support leads to the ability for researchers and practitioners to correctly predict and identify the majority of high school dropouts before they even enter high school (Balfanz et al., 2007). As mentioned earlier, middle school students in general already have a variety of challenges that face them, with regard to larger classes, academically more rigorous classes, as well more freedom and responsibility as a learner. With this freedom, come distractions, especially in areas of high-poverty, where allegiance and participation in non-productive and at times dangerous undertakings compete with school attendance and engagement.

Attendance and Academic Performance

Regardless of external challenges, it is clear that student attendance in schools is vital to academic success. Garcia and Cohen (2012) propose that academic under-performance is a social problem with policy implications, while others posit that chronic absenteeism may be

disrupting decades of school reform efforts. A report of chronically absent Kindergarteners shows these students demonstrated worse performance in 1st grade, as compared with their peers, and the impact of poor attendance doubled for students of low socio-economic status (SES) (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Unfortunately, chronic absenteeism is more prevalent in low SES schools and is even further concentrated in particular schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). To strengthen the importance of attendance, researchers have consistently found grades, test scores, and other accountability measures to be correlated with attendance (Goldstein, Little, Akin-Little, 2003). In a study of Louisiana elementary and secondary school students, Gottfried (2010) found a positive relationship between attendance and achievement. Gottfried determined that early attendance patterns do in fact impact achievement in a causal manner. Gottfried went on to suggest that low levels of attendance are connected with academic risk, course failure, and ultimately dropping out of school. Additionally, he pointed out that these achievement patterns may ultimately lead to overall school quality concerns and even neighborhood valuation. Finn (1992) found absences are detrimental to school grades and may be more predictive of poor performance than interaction with the law. There is no question as to what is at stake for the immediate and future lives of our young people with regard to their education. However, as noted, simply getting students into the seats of our classroom is only a portion of the challenge, as a number of students attend daily, but remain disengaged. This calls for a more thorough understanding of engagement within schools.

Understanding Engagement within Schools

Everywhere you turn in educational circles, a new initiative aimed at increasing student learning and achievement awaits eager practitioners and willing participants. With increased accountability comes increased responsibility on the part of practitioners to ensure maximum

learning for students each day. Perhaps the most promising method to achieve these necessary increases is the idea of enhancing student engagement in classrooms and in schools. The idea is simply that engaged learners attend and stay in school, and disengaged learners, although they may attend for a while, tend to become chronically absent, opening the door for dropping out. Currently, engagement is considered to “represent a potentially malleable proximal influence in shaping children’s academic retention, achievement, and resilience” (Skinner, et al., 2009). If engagement in classrooms is indeed malleable and proximal, then this allows practitioners potentially unlimited opportunities to craft experiences that will best connect students to learning. The conceptual ideas that lead to the belief that engagement can influence and respond in these ways give educational leaders and practitioners great promise to combat the challenges of disengagement, absenteeism, and dropout - as long as engagement is fully understood.

There is no doubt that disengaged students in schools end up with limited options throughout adulthood (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Some students complete school by simply going through the motions of attending but not engaging, while others decide to drop out (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). For the majority of students who choose an early exit from their educational career, this decision comes at the end of a “long process of disengagement from school” (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Learners who exhibit a number of risk factors for dropping out can be identified as early as elementary school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). With this knowledge, it is important for local education agencies, as well as Intermediate School Districts, to ensure schools are intervening at an early age. Schools also need to be intentional and vigilant in ensuring solid support systems within schools for older students who have not had successful academic careers up to this point. The practitioner’s goal is for every student to become committed to their own learning and for students to develop quickly into their own

learning agents, allowing them the support and autonomy to achieve their goals. To increase the odds that this is able to happen, school leaders need to ensure that systems are in place to engage students each day.

As research suggests, engagement can be described as behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic in composition (Fredricks, 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to the idea of participation and action. This type includes involvement in activities, and is vital for positive academic outcomes for the student. Emotional engagement includes positive and not-positive reactions from school stakeholders including practitioners, students, and members of the school team. In looking at student perception of school, it is this emotional engagement that typically creates a strong commitment to school. Cognitive engagement includes the choice of a student to invest in their learning by committing to engage in difficult tasks. Agentic engagement draws upon the agency of a learner, and is characterized by students expressing their feelings, thoughts, ideas, and opinions during an activity (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Understanding each of these components not only helps in determining how to connect learners to experiences and opportunities, but it identifies possible growth areas for practitioners and learners in the engagement journey.

Student Motivation and Chronic Absenteeism

It is this journey of engagement that provides a strong foundation for student motivation. This becomes more critical in our work with attendance issues at the middle and high school levels, because students who are not motivated to attend, if given a choice, will most likely not attend. In looking at the specific reasons that relate to student behavior with regard to their own learning, it is important to draw upon motivational theories to help with the analysis and understanding of this challenge. The three motivational theories that are particularly relevant to

examining chronic absenteeism and engagement in school are: self-theories, self-efficacy, and attribution theory. Understanding the reasons that students are not attending school, within the context of each of these theories will certainly assist in the work that needs to be done.

The work of engaging learners takes more than a willing practitioner. In order to learn, students need to believe that they can continue to learn (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Self-theories are excellent for providing a framework from which to understand abilities, barriers, and growth (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Somewhere between twenty-five to thirty percent of learners have fixed self-theories that could negatively impact their ability to genuinely engage in learning (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Self-theories have most easily become categorized as “fixed and growth” mindsets (Dweck, 2006). Individuals with fixed mindsets believe that their abilities determine their capacity and opportunities, while those with growth mindsets believe their effort and attitude determine their capacity and opportunities (Dweck, 2006). Fixed mindset individuals also do not like to be challenged, tend to give up easily when frustrated, and feel threatened when others succeed. In comparison, individuals with growth mindsets embrace challenges, are inspired when others are successful, and persevere when faced with frustration (Dweck, 2006). The application of this knowledge and understanding is beneficial for all that have a stake in education. Self-theories become important in addressing the issue of chronic absenteeism, simply due to the importance that they hold in how students perceive themselves. If students have a fixed mindset, then they almost pre-determine their success or failure by how and what they think about their own ability (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

In this discussion of mindset, it is important to more clearly define the aforementioned motivational belief of self-efficacy, which is defined as an individual’s belief about their “perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels” (Bandura, 1997).

Research shows that self-efficacy directly influences motivation, learning, self-regulation, and achievement (Wentzel & Miele, 2016) How students perceive their abilities, and what they believe about their capabilities are critical to how they perceive their success or failure, as those with higher self-efficacy work harder, persist longer, and show greater interest in learning (Wentzel & Miele, 2016). These students become more likely to be those that set goals, use effective and proven learning techniques, and engage in their own learning as active participants (Bandura, 1997). At the same time as practitioners nurture these beliefs in learners, it is important to ensure that all learners are included in this. For more challenged learners, self-efficacy can be weakened by practices such as ability groupings, classrooms that allow for social comparisons, as well as lock-step sequences of instruction and learning (Wentzel & Miele, 2016). This learning supports the idea that practitioners and variables in the classroom can influence self-efficacy in positive and not positive ways (Wentzel & Miele, 2016). This is particularly theory is important for students who face attendance challenges. When students miss days of school, the missing assignments, quizzes, and tests, can be overwhelming, causing some to believe that they already failed simply because they were not present.

The effort and hard work needed in order to achieve is also considered in attribution theory. Attribution theory tends to center around “why” questions, such as “Why am I not good at science? or “Why do my teachers not like me?” In situations of achievement, success and failure are attached to ability factors that include acquired and aptitude skills (Graham, 1991). Of these characteristics, effort and ability are the most prevalent perceived causes of failure or success (Graham, 1991). Students arrive at these self-perceptions in a myriad ways. Attribution research has shown that teacher responses to student effort and ability convey strong and lasting messages (Graham, 1991). If a student’s failure is attributed to low ability, a predictable teacher

response is to show sympathy or pity, while perceived failure due to low effort results in teacher frustration and anger (Graham, 1991). This places critical importance on the affective conveyances of practitioners. It also suggests that in nurturing self-efficacy and a growth mindset within students, that practitioners emphasize the importance of genuine effort and hard work to students each day. In the midst of learning challenges, students need to know that they are one of the key individuals responsible for how they perceive themselves. Another element that can make a difference is building the understanding within students that if they are successful, then that is due to their hard work and effort, not the easiness of the problem or situation, and conversely, if they are not successful, then it is due to not enough effort or hard work, and not because the problem or challenge was too difficult. Attribution theory is important in the context of absenteeism, because students who do not attribute their success and failure to hard work and effort will find it more difficult to connect to the importance of attending school. Why would they attend if they are not competent in a content area, and why would they try when they could be doing other things? This is the internal messaging that needs to be retaught in many of our students who are chronically or severely chronically absent.

Deficit Thinking

Reactions to this challenge of chronic or severely chronic absenteeism oftentimes include school leaders and practitioners who ignore these issues in schools. If the student is not in class, then they are not present to disrupt the learning environment. Unfortunately for select educators this is acceptable. These practitioners place all of the responsibility on the student, regardless of the challenges that the student might be facing. From this perspective, it is a quick journey to thinking about students in a fixed way that positions them at a deficit. Gaining a solid understanding of the theory of deficit thinking further illuminates the role that adults have in

student perception of self. Deficit thinking, a theory based on what lies within an individual, “blames the victim” for failure rather than looking at how external forces such as systems, schools, and communities are structured to ensure success for our students (Valencia, 2010). It suggests that students who fail in school do so due to their internal deficits or deficiencies (Valencia, 2010). Examples of these deficits include, but are not limited to, lack of motivation, limited intellectual abilities, poor behavior, and language challenges (Valencia, 2010). Amatea and West-Olatunji share that this perception socializes educators to look at financially challenged individuals as morally and culturally deficient (Amatea & West Olatunji, 2007). These practitioners often attribute blame to the parents for passing on negative traits to their children instead of equipping them with middle-class cultural patterns that these practitioners believe are imperative to success in education and in life (Amatea, 2007). The best protection from this harmful perspective is an understanding of how deficit thinking forms within practitioners, schools, and other systems within education. Practices, policies, and everyday interactions need to become subject to examination, in order to ensure a message of deficit thinking is not making its way from thought to action in the lives and interactions of caring practitioners and vulnerable students. Self-reflection and peer accountability also need to accompany practitioners, allowing them to remain aware of their own advantaged status, and not placing limits and barriers on students because of their less fortune (Amatea, 2007). Practitioners need to be champions for students at all times, especially if students are unmotivated or unable to attend school for a number of reasons. The barrier of practitioner deficit thinking is one that is extremely detrimental, as it has the potential of excuse making for students, as well as lower expectations in terms of achievement and learning.

Belonging and Transitions

In seeking the necessary responsibility at their age, adolescent students also have a tremendous need to belong to families, to peer groups, to schools, and communities (Davis, 2000). Jackson and Davis (2000) report research done by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, an organization that hopes to improve systems during the early adolescent time period through examination of middle school education. Their research emphasizes the need for attachment sought by all individuals starting at birth and how this transforms into the student's need for belonging in the context of school. Belonging is defined as "being known, liked, and respected by peers and adults" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 122). This sense of belonging is thought to encourage adolescents to take learning risks that result in effective learning, as well as the development of perseverance and greater achievement for teachers with whom they have a meaningful connection (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25, p. 37 as cited by Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 122). In contrast, students who drop out report feeling a sense of isolation (Hayes, R. et al., 2002). The complexity of student thinking during this critical time of brain development draws in concepts of self and perceptions of others in a manner that is intensely motivating, either positively or negatively. Academics, social support, and school activity involvement all play a role in how students perceive their connection to school during these formative years (Seidman et al., 1996). All of these aspects of a school experience relate directly to a student's sense of belonging. Feeling a connection to a peer support group, or an extracurricular school activity can all create the sense of belonging and fitting-in that is necessary for student success. Embedded in these areas of connection, relationship is at the core. McGrath (2009) reminds readers that relationships with teachers, peers/friends, and parents all impact the way youth view school, and the extent to which students are engaged academically within their school.

Jackson and Davis (2000) support this idea when they suggest that relationships are the vehicle through which education and learning take place. Practitioners are the frontline of a school system, as they are the individuals that represent the school system and interact with students on a daily basis. As a default, teachers also become the primary individuals with whom students experience negative or positive feelings associated with school. These feelings can then be projected onto the student's school experience or connection to school as a whole. McGrath's (2009) study reported that students who had "aggressive" or "passive" experiences with teachers had particularly negative perceptions of school (p. 87). This becomes a challenge, as student perception of teacher support increases motivation for academic performance (Bru et al., 2010), and without positive experiences, this is not likely. Students need to feel supported by teachers, as these relationships are essential to the student's perception of their own school (Coffey, 2013; Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2006).

Researchers report that there is a reduced quality of relationship between teacher and student that comes with the transition to secondary school (Ferguson & Fraser, 1999; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013; Kosir & Tement, 2013). Bru et al. (2010) expound on this finding and determine that this reduction is not an abrupt decline at the time of transition but rather there is a seemingly steady decline in perceived support as secondary school progresses. When these students get to high school, many of these relationships disappear and they are left to fend for themselves, as practitioners were only somewhat engaged in the process of getting them to class. The work in high school was more difficult, the students found it easier to bend the rules, not attend class, and they ultimately paid the price of a failing grade and a negative relationship with an adult practitioner. The expectation of many high school teachers is that it is the student's responsibility in high school to handle academic and social demands (Roderick, 2003). Roderick,

when speaking of students who participated in her study, stated “the students seemed to enjoy high school but reported having difficulty understanding the work and adjusting to teachers whose attitudes were less than supportive. These students expressed shock at the change in their relationships with teachers. Suddenly, school was not easy and teachers were not nice people who cared about them and their progress.” In Roderick's study, these students, and many just like them, felt they were left with no other option but to not attend class and ultimately drop out (2003).

The question of why some students succeed while others drop out despite having seemingly comparable demographics and barriers has arisen. This may be due, in part, to the environment from which the students come from outside of the school setting. West, Sweeting and Young (2010) find that some students are susceptible to issues related to the transition more than others. Risk factors associated with increased susceptibility in transition are related to student ability and family traits. Individual personality plays a role in whether students view the transition as a stressor or as a challenge (Rudolph et al., 2001). The way in which students perceive their ability to influence success results in different outcomes. Students who do not feel they can influence their own success are less invested in school and have more stress and depression during their transition to middle school (Rudolph et al., 2001). The transition appears to exacerbate conditions that are already present and can be a tipping point towards disengagement and dropout if negative conditions reside. A positive support network can be helpful in maintaining engagement (McGrath, 2009). Individuals that have a strong support network, whether within the school or outside of the system, are better situated to navigate through difficult life changes. Students with a stronger sense of belonging outside of the school

setting may have more resilience and therefore struggle less in a situation of transition within the school.

Current Attendance Perception, Policy, and Practice

The challenges of absenteeism have an impact on all communities in Michigan and in our country. However, urban areas struggle with the problem the most, as minority and low-income students are more likely than their peers to experience an educational disconnect and therefore become chronically absent and have a higher risk of dropping out (Spencer, 2008). A central issue to this challenge is the sheer size of high schools in large cities. They are often overwhelming for incoming freshmen, and students feel they are able to hide among their peers. In addition to the school environment, students in urban environments have a higher likelihood of being fearful when coming to school due to the presence of street gangs (Welsh, 2000). These challenges strongly suggest that there are serious repercussions of failure to attend and engage in school for the individual student and also for society at large. Although not all of the schools in our study lie within urban areas, a majority of the schools do, and this is an important consideration with regard to absenteeism.

Students who fail too many courses in a given year are then at a risk of retention, which is another school-assigned consequence for truant students (Picklo, 2005). Retention is also an ineffective method of combating truancy. Retention remains the norm for schools until students are seen to be too old, when they are then socially promoted to a grade that is more appropriate for their age level, regardless of demonstrated skill level. Neither of these policies, or “interventions,” is successful (Picklo, 2005). Retention leads to poor self-concept and attitude towards school, poor social and personal adjustment, and poor employment outcomes during late adolescence (Picklo, 2005). Grade retention is also associated with a substantial increase in high

school dropout (Picklo, 2005). According to the National Education Longitudinal Study, grade retention in grades 1-8 was the strongest predictor of school dropout for all students involved in the study (Rumberger, 2005). Students who are socially promoted do not fare much better. Many students who are socially promoted lack the skills to succeed in the assigned grade level, resulting in a disconnect with the school. They are not offered the support necessary to succeed and are often ignored, especially if their coping mechanism is avoidance of school. These students do not form bonds with their teacher, who might view their attitude as lazy or defiant, and the student is then left to fail on their own. Those who are socially promoted are often pushed (forced) out of school because of poor performance (Picklo, 2005). In an era of increased test-based accountability, students who are not performing well on standardized assessments are pushed to the margin and they see dropping out as their only option.

There is a strong case that suggests that the majority of the current policies and procedures for addressing chronic absenteeism and truancy do not work. Many policies put students in a position to fail, offering a dead end view to the student. According to Spencer (2005), some schools assign automatic F's for poor attendance. These strict policies have the unintended consequence of school disengagement, which leads to more absences and possibly total withdrawal, which itself is the strongest indicator of school disengagement (Pellerin, 2005). Failure is an important component in the fight against truancy. Students failing courses are those who are most likely to disengage and ultimately drop out of school, and often absenteeism can be the precipitating factor for students failing a class. According to Farrington, et al, the decline in English and math grades for over 70% of students could be explained by high absenteeism (2012). The student can either stay in school with unresponsive adults, continue to fail courses, get suspended, and be assigned summer school or drop out and explore the prospects of job-

hunting without a high school diploma. With staff spending an inordinate amount of time on discipline, relationships and rigor often fall by the wayside. The prospects for other students in these environments are not much better. For those students, the stresses and experiences outside of school make them even more vulnerable to experiences in school (Roderick, 2003).

Chronic absenteeism and severely chronic absenteeism are a national challenge, especially in our larger cities. Research has clearly stated that chronic issues of attendance lower achievement in academics, increase the likelihood of students dropping out of school, and underprepare students for success after high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). Over a period of three years from 2010 to 2013, the New York City Mayor's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement launched an initiative that made an enormous impact on chronic absenteeism within their city. There were three core findings that were outlined in their report. The first finding was that students who stopped being chronically absent saw comprehensive academic improvements. The increases in credit accrual, grades, and achievement scores indicated a level of learning that pointed out simply how dangerous chronic absenteeism is for a student's success and ability to have opportunities (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). The second finding was that successful strategies utilized to combat chronic absenteeism were both high-impact and cost-effective. The key in this work was restructuring existing resources and utilizing them in more targeted ways (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). The task force's third finding was that they were able to expand their efforts. An example of this was in ensuring that a system be put in place to monitor and embed accountability metrics within districts that were publicly reported (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). With this work, the task force was able to implement their program in one hundred schools, mentoring students who were chronically absent prior, and allowing them to attend an additional 51,562 days of schooling in 2012-13 and

92,277 days during the three years of the initiative (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). This story acts as an encouraging testimony to the work that can be completed in a community that desires and demands more for their young people. As Eaton et al. discovered through their research (2008), the most effective plans for addressing absenteeism come from the collaboration of multiple community stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, and community members, and New York City is a great example of this. There is no doubt that similar, and perhaps more effective, work can be done to address the challenges that are taking place in the schools of Muskegon County and Washtenaw County, Michigan. With an understanding of current research, the work now becomes one of acting on the recommendations that arose from our research in these communities that are seeking answers.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methods

A student is considered to be chronically absent after having missed greater than 10% of school days, which is typically eighteen days. (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, 2015). A student is considered severely chronically absent after having missed greater than 20% of the school year, which typically is thirty-six days. Both forms of chronic absenteeism are problematic because they have been connected to classroom disengagement and eventual dropout. In Michigan, 25.5% of all K-12 students are considered to be chronically absent (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, 2015). Individual counties have likewise been affected by this statewide concern. For example, Washtenaw County has experienced 25.1% of its student body being chronically absent. On the other side of the state, Muskegon County has experienced 29.4% of its student body chronically absent (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, 2015). This loss in learning is tremendous, and undoubtedly has an incredible impact on student achievement and preparation for post-secondary opportunities.

In the development of this study, we designated Washtenaw County as a focal case study. Lead administrators at Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD) are involved in a consortium with representatives from law enforcement, community agencies, students, and other county officials called the Washtenaw County School-Justice Partnership. The School-Justice Partnership group has been meeting since 2013. This group had the goal of increasing attendance and classroom engagement in order to reduce the rate of individuals funneling into prison. They met regularly to discuss pertinent issues in an attempt to ameliorate barriers to attendance. Participation in this network prompted the WISD administrators to be particularly

Our research objectives were to understand the problem of absenteeism in more depth and to begin a statewide discussion around educators' assumptions related to absenteeism. We desired to understand both the characteristics of chronically absent students and the reasons behind chronic absenteeism with the intention of influencing associated policy and programs and increase student attendance throughout the state as a result.

Overview of the Study

Our research team's goal was to assist in developing a more thorough understanding of local absenteeism problems and the actions that could be taken to address these problems at the county level. We utilized both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Thus, we analyzed overall attendance trends based on quantitative data gathered at the ISD level in Washtenaw. Then, to provide a deeper understanding of chronic absenteeism within the county, we conducted in-depth qualitative study of individual students' experiences as well as staff focus groups. Focus groups included middle school teachers, counselors, and administrators and were used to identify current practice and policy as well as current perspectives and actions within the county. Following this, we replicated the qualitative components of the study so we could compare student and staff perspectives in Muskegon County with Washtenaw's experiences. This combination of data caused a detailed, nuanced picture of attendance issues, which allowed for enhanced understanding of patterns and experiences in these counties.

Research Questions

1. What is the current state of student attendance in a large county in Michigan? What are the magnitudes of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism within this county?

2. Who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two Michigan counties? Can these students be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics?
3. How, if at all, do factors related to the individual, peer group, family life and school policy contribute to chronic absenteeism among middle school students in two Michigan counties?
4. What are the current perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff in two Michigan counties concerning student attendance rates?

Research Sites

Our primary site was Washtenaw County, located in the southeast region of Michigan. WISD serves the following nine local school districts: Ann Arbor, Chelsea, Dexter, Lincoln, Manchester, Milan, Saline, Whitmore Lake, Ypsilanti and several charter schools. These local districts represent a wide range of demographics and settings and consist of 46,555 students (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, 2015).

Our comparison site was Muskegon County, located in west Michigan. Muskegon Area Intermediate School District (MISD) serves the following 12 local school districts: Fruitport, Holton, Mona Shores, Montague, Muskegon, North Muskegon, Oakridge, Orchard View, Ravenna, Reeths-Puffer, Whitehall, and Muskegon Area. 27,481 students are represented in the district K-12 (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, MI School Data, 2015).

Washtenaw County was selected because ISD administrators demonstrated an interest in identifying attendance patterns within their district. They recognized attendance often connects with disengagement, and administrators were searching for a more nuanced explanation and a

research team to assist them in driving action towards addressing absenteeism. Previous professional contacts between members of our research group and leadership staff within the WISD allowed our team to insert themselves as credible partners for their organization. Additionally, Washtenaw was viewed as a county that would be able to provide us with the opportunity to generalize research findings to a broader portion of the state due to having similar attendance rates.

Analyzing Washtenaw County quantitative data allowed us to select targeted districts for the qualitative research section. We looked for districts that had students who were more likely be chronically or severely chronically absent. Upon a review of the data and in conjunction with WISD staff, we contacted two districts within Washtenaw County.

There were 3,515 7th grade students in Washtenaw County in the 2014-2015 school year. Of these students, 473 were considered to be chronically absent or severely chronically absent. These students were present in all of the local school districts represented in the ISD. Through our contacts within the WISD, we reached out to each of the local school districts inquiring about their willingness to participate. We were specifically interested in working with four of the districts within the ISD. Two of these districts were thought to be representative and large school districts in WISD. They were not interested and declined to participate. The remaining two districts, Pine Cone and Grassy Meadow Middle Schools had attendance data that showed spikes in absenteeism. Pine Cone Middle School had 75% of their 7th grade student population severely chronically absent and Grassy Meadow Middle School had a disproportionate rate of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism among African American and special education students. These two district's represent 55% of Washtenaw ISD's 7th grade students that were

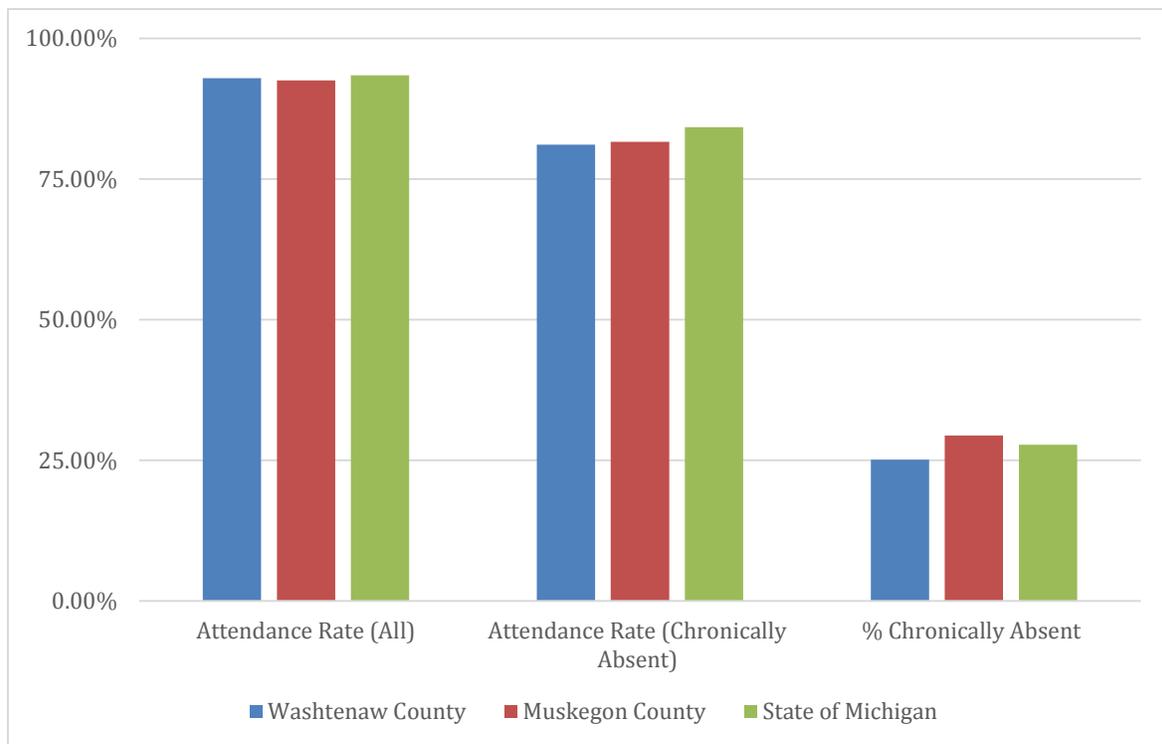
chronically absent. Additionally, the building principals at these two sites were willing to participate in the study.

Both of the Washtenaw county schools were considered to be rural schools. Pine Cone Middle School had approximately 900 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in the 2015-2016 school year. 30% of the district's student population is African American, 60% is Caucasian, and 5% is Hispanic. 45% of the students come from economically disadvantaged homes. Grassy Meadow Middle School consists of 500 6th through 8th grade students of which, 30% are considered to be economically disadvantaged. 85% of Grassy Meadow's population is Caucasian with 4% Hispanic and 6% African American. Both of these schools are the sole middle schools in their respective districts.

Muskegon County was selected because we wanted to see the extent of the attendance issue across the state. Stony Creek Middle School is home to 600 7th and 8th grade students in a suburban district. 50% of the students are economically disadvantaged. 88% of the student population is Caucasian, 5% are African American, and 3% are Hispanic. Building administrators at Stony Creek Middle School expressed interest in our project early on in the process which led to their participation in our study.

The chronic absenteeism issue in both Washtenaw and Muskegon Counties was comparable to the rest of the state of Michigan (see Figure 2). Due to the similarity to the rest of the state, our study could be replicable in other regions, and potentially contribute to the progress in recognizing and addressing attendance issues across the state of Michigan.

Figure 2. State, Washtenaw, and Muskegon County Attendance Comparison



Sample

For the quantitative portion of the study, we focused on students who were enrolled in Washtenaw County as 7th graders in the 2014-2015 school year. The study focused on this age of student for future prevention purposes and understanding, because attendance issues can be a large contributing factor to high school dropout (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast, 2011). Ideally we wanted to determine factors associated with absenteeism at the middle school level, such that policies and programs could be implemented that would improve attendance prior to the student entering high school. For the quantitative portion of our study, the full sample included 3,515 students who met these selection criteria.

The second phase of our study was qualitative in nature and consisted of case studies of current 8th grade students' through analysis of their cumulative student files, interviews with the identified 8th grade students, and focus groups with staff at the student's middle schools. Students in 8th grade during the 2015-2016 school year were selected as the sample population for the qualitative portion to match the quantitative sample population (students in 7th grade during the 2014-2015 school year). As stated previously, we selected three middle schools; two middle schools were in Washtenaw County and one was located in Muskegon County. Our team initiated contact with middle schools utilizing both WISD and personal contacts with middle school principals. The middle schools selected were based on school leadership's response to our request to participate.

Once middle schools were selected, we obtained individual student interviews as well as one staff focus group from each site. Individual student interviews focused on current 8th grade students. The building principals at each district selected students from the chronically absent population that they believed were likely to participate. These students then received information about the study as well as consent forms. Consent forms were sent home to 54 students across the three districts. Of these forms, eighteen were returned (see Table 1).

Interview dates and times were scheduled in collaboration with school staff to limit disruption to the school environment. Our research team and the building principals agreed that students selected for interviewing would be based on their availability (i.e. they were present at school on the interview date) as well as the class they were in at the time of the interview. Students were pulled out of elective courses (i.e. Art, Physical Education, Foreign Language, etc.) rather than from core courses such as Math, English, or Science. This resulted in twelve students being interviewed and their cumulative files reviewed. Of the twelve students that were

interviewed, six were chosen by the interviewers to have more of their individual story told. These six students: Mason, Terah, Roberta, Sam, Luther, and Jordan, represent three schools in the study. These students are representative of students within Muskegon and Washtenaw counties. Selection was based on availability of CA-60 cumulative file for the individual. Case studies were created in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the individual stories of some of the students that are chronically absent.

The students interviewed were not necessarily a representative sample of the entire population of chronically absent students. This was due in part to the bias of principals as the opportunity to participate was only extended to chronically absent students whom they felt would be likely to participate. Additionally, only 22.2% of students who received information about the study and consent to participate completed and returned the consent form. This subgroup of chronically absent students who returned the form can shed light on some individual stories and lead to a determination of whether the stories are the same across the subpopulation.

Focus groups were conducted at each middle school involved. Fifteen total school staff members were involved in the focus group interviews. Participants were selected by building principals. See Table 1 for what job roles the focus group participants held.

Table 1. Qualitative Participants.

County	Local District	Individual Student Interviews	Focus Group Participants
Washtenaw	Pine Cone Middle School 30 consent forms sent 3 consent forms returned	* Sam * Luther * Jordan	Assistant Principal Guidance Counselor Principal ELA Teacher
Washtenaw	Grassy Meadow Middle School 12 consent forms sent 7 consent forms returned	Kara Sarah * Roberta	Math Teacher Teacher Consultant Assistant Principal Social Studies & PE Teacher Social Worker Attendance Secretary
Muskegon	Stony Creek Middle School 12 consent forms sent 8 consent forms returned	Fred * Terah Ray Tonya * Mason Seth	Math Teacher Social Studies Teacher Social Studies Teacher Assistant Principal & Athletic Director

**Case Study Participants*

Note: District and student names are pseudonyms.

Data

Quantitative Data

Approximately 3,500 students attended school in the WISD (Michigan’s Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2015) during the 2014-2015 school year. Sample data was of students during their 7th grade school year. The data was retrieved from the WISD student data portal (Power School) in a format that preserved anonymity. This information was a compilation of data that is reported to the WISD by the constituent schools. The data was retrieved by the WISD in the fall of 2015 and sent electronically in the form of a data file to the research team. Attendance and variable data obtained from the WISD were converted into a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet for analysis. The WISD provided variable data consisting of demographic and other information described in the section below.

Quantitative Variables

Variables were chosen in an effort to provide a complete picture of potential characteristics that may be associated with chronic and severely chronic absenteeism. As described in our list of variables in Table 2, specific variables were at the student level.

Table 2. List of variables with a brief description of each variable.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>UIC Code</i>	Each student in the dataset had a universal identifier that was unique to that student. WISD blinded the data before giving it to us by creating fake UIC codes to replace the real codes that were used by the district.
<i>School District</i>	Each student was identified by the school district they were attending.
<i>School Attending</i>	Each student was identified by the individual school building attended.
<i>Race</i>	Each student was denoted as being White, African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, or mixed race.
<i>Free/Reduced-Price Lunch</i>	To serve as a proxy for socioeconomic status (SES), each student was identified as either receiving free/reduced-price lunch or not.
<i>English as Second Language</i>	Each student was identified as having English as either their primary or secondary language.
<i>Gender</i>	Each student was identified as being either male or female.
<i>Grade Level</i>	Each student was identified based on their current grade level (i.e. 8 th grade if they were promoted or placed into the 8 th grade and 7 th grade if they were retained at the conclusion of the 2014-2015 school year).
<i># Day Enrolled in 2014-15 School Year</i>	The number of days the student was actually enrolled in the 2014-15 school year. This accounted for mid-year enrollees.

Table 2 (cont'd)

<i># Days Absent in 2014-15 School Year</i>	The number of days absent for each student was considered as reported by the LEA to the WISD.
<i>% Days Absent in 2014-15 School Year</i>	<i>The % of days absent was calculated by taking the number of absences divided by the number of school days the student was enrolled, multiplied by 100.</i>
<i>Regular Attendance</i>	This was a dichotomous variable denoting whether or not the student met the criteria for regular attendance (absent <10%) during his/her 7th grade school year).
<i>Chronically Absent</i>	This was a dichotomous variable denoting whether or not the student met the criteria for chronically absent (absent >10% but <20%) during his/her 7th grade school year.
<i>Severely Chronically Absent</i>	This was a dichotomous variable denoting whether or not the student met the criteria for severely chronically absent (absent >20%) during his/her 7th grade school year.

Qualitative Data

To increase efficiency and continuity, our team determined that it was best to assign specific team members to focus on getting connected with middle school staff and students through explanation of research and coordination of research. Each school had one point person responsible for initiating contact with the principal, conducting a file review for selected students, interviewing sample students from that particular school, and meeting with the focus group. The assigned point person gave the middle school principals a run down of the research that we hoped to complete, the purpose, and what we would need assistance with. Each principal sent home a letter (Appendix A) explaining the study as well as consent form (Appendix B) with

students who were considered to be chronically absent. The principals then invited staff to participate in the focus group and scheduled the time with the point person who facilitated the group. Interview dates and times were set up between the point person and the principal.

Part 1

The point person for each school reviewed sample students’ cumulative files to collect additional information that could be related to the previous years’ attendance with the hope of better understanding the history of each individual’s attendance and school outcomes from kindergarten through seventh grade. Main components of the cumulative file search included student report cards, standardized test results, and major behavioral events. These pieces of information were typically available in cumulative files and gave some beneficial historical information about each student’s experiences in school. Within the student report cards, teacher comments were reviewed in particular. The data was used to develop a summary table for each individual student (see Table 3 for a sample from Spencer’s (2008) research examining students’ cumulative files).

Table 3. Sample Summary Table. This indicates an individual student’s history and includes days absent and a summary statement of teacher report card comments. (Source: Spencer, 2008, p. 311)

Maria: Age 15		
Grade	Days Absent	Teachers’ End-of-Year Comments
K	44	Lovely girl, low voice, and great energy toward schooling progress. Working at grade level.
1	34	She is very shy. She made a lot of progress this year.
2	34	A sweet girl and a very shy student who rarely speaks to teacher or peers.
3	14	Continues to be a great student. She is reading a year below level and she had difficulty with some math concepts.
4	63	Shy, has missed school due to asthma. She has difficulty with math and reading.
4 ^a	50	Continues below grade level in reading and math, was referred [to student assistance team].
5	18	She is shy, quiet, still has difficult with math and reading.
6	22	Maria is no longer shy in class. Strong in writing but struggles with reading and math. Can be overly talkative.
7	23	Will be promoted by exception this school year [i.e., socially promoted]. She has done little to no work.
8	28	Maria did better this year academically in all classes except for math. She will be promoted to Grade 9. Grades: English D; Math F; Reading B-; Science D; History D.

a. Repeated.

Part 2

The point person conducted an interview with each of the selected students. Individual researchers used uniform interview questions in a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C). Through the interview process, we hoped to learn about the details of the students' lives as much as ethically permissible, with the goal to uncover the nuances in student's lives that may be leading to severely chronic absenteeism.

The student interviews were held at the school site. Assistance from the administrators was obtained to secure appropriate interview locations within the school. Interviews were audio recorded. Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes.

Student interviews were structured under the following categories:

- **Participant as a Person** - We asked questions that allowed us to understand who the person was that we were talking to in an effort to understand their sense of self.
- **Peer Group** - We asked questions to elicit responses related to the student's peer group.
- **Family** - We asked questions that allowed us to understand how the family influenced the individual student educationally.
- **Overall School Experience** - We asked questions to drive conversation about the individual student's perception of him/herself at school.
- **Beliefs About Attendance** – We asked questions to understand the student's beliefs pertaining to school attendance.
- **Critical Incident Identification** – We asked questions to determine if the student could identify a critical incident when attendance issues originated.

- **Narrative of Critical Incident** – We asked questions to understand the student’s perception of the critical incident.
- **Root Cause** – We asked questions to understand why the critical incident resulted in severely chronic absenteeism.
- **Hopes and Ambitions** – We asked questions to understand the student’s long-term and short-term goals.
- **Student Ideas** – We asked questions to understand possible solutions from the student’s perspective. Discussion involved investigating whether the student had an idea of how to improve their attendance patterns.

Part 3

Members of the staff at each of the three middle schools were assembled to form a focus group to discuss the perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff concerning attendance. All staff gave consent to participate (Appendix D). The conversation was audio recorded and later transcribed by an external service. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour. The focus group occurred in a school meeting room designated by the building principal at a mutually agreed upon time.

Focus group questions fell into three categories (Appendix E). The categories were perception, practice, and policy. The first category discussed staff perception of student attendance in their building. This included the magnitude of the problem and whom they perceived as being absent the most. We then asked them to describe the characteristics of these individuals. The second focus was practice. This included questions about school culture related to attendance. We asked staff to describe the individual students from our case studies and what they believed to be the causes for their absences. Additionally, we inquired as to what other

issues staff believed contributed to absences. We asked the educators what they have tried and what they believe has worked to shift the attendance trajectory. Finally, we inquired about school policy and procedure as it related to attendance.

Data Analysis

Phase 1: Quantitative Data Analysis

Our objective in Phase 1 was to answer our first research question:

1. What is the current state of student attendance in a large county in Michigan? What are the magnitudes of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism within this county?

In this first phase of the study, we examined 7th grade student attendance in Washtenaw County during the 2014-15 school year in order to identify who was absent in the county during that school year. We identified students by the three attendance classifications: regular attendance (absent 0-9% of the scheduled school days), chronically absent (10% and 19% of the scheduled school days), and severely chronically absent (20% or more of the scheduled school days) (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). We looked at the number of students in the entire WISD whose attendance rates fall into these three categories.

We also examined relationships among the variables used to characterize the students by absentee rate, with a focus on the students who fall into the chronically and severely chronically absent groups. We identified attendance trends with the different variables for the selected student sample. We compiled the data for all students in the county. Next we compared race and ethnicity across the county and then did a comparison of the different student variables across the county. Finally, we looked for groups of students that were disproportionately represented in countywide data in any of our absenteeism categories and used that information as

a starting point for seeking trends in individual districts. For example, students who received free or reduced lunch represented 51% of the total number of 7th grade students in Washtenaw County, but they were over represented (by 10%) in the severely chronically absent category.

These findings led us to explore each school district to determine whether or not this was a problem in the entire county or if it was attributed to a select few districts. When reviewing individual district data, we chose two sites that were representative of Washtenaw County to conduct further qualitative research. In one district, 75% of the 7th grade population was severely chronically absent. In the other district, African American and special education students were chronically and severely chronically absent at a disproportionate rate.

These analyses have assisted us in recognizing trends in the attendance rates of students based on the descriptive characteristics. We were able to provide information to the WISD in order to determine who and where the high rates of absenteeism are occurring and what populations of students are exhibiting chronic and severely chronic absent patterns more frequently.

Phase 2: Qualitative Data Analysis of Student Interviews

Our objective in Phase 2 was to answer our 2nd and 3rd research question:

2. Who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two Michigan counties? Can these students be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics?
3. How, if at all, do factors related to the individual, peer group, family life and school policy contribute to chronic absenteeism among middle school students in two Michigan counties?

Two team members who led the student interviews completed a search of six students' cumulative file. Notes were related to absenteeism and other pieces that would assist in gaining additional information on characteristics of students who are chronically absent.

Upon completion of all the student interviews, audio files were transcribed by an external service. When the transcriptions were received, two team members coded the interview material using Hyper Research software. These two team members coded a student interview separately initially and met to discuss the method of coding for calibration purposes. The remaining student interviews were then divided amongst these two individual team members. Codes were organized into four general categories related to the research question we sought to answer. We wanted to know how family, individual factors, peers, and school policy impacted the student's attendance. Under each of these four categories, we had sub categories for common concepts that emerged across the interviews (see Table 4).

Table 4. Student Interview Code List.

Category	Sub Category
Family Life	Attribution theory Deficit thinking from adults Responsibility Transportation
Individual	Attendance Belonging to school Engagement/motivation Focus Future Grades/Workload/Expectations Incentives Learning Relevancy School Programs Stress/Anxiety
Peer Group	Belonging to Peers Bullying Socialization

Table 4 (cont'd)

School Policy	Letters/Calls School Rules
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Once the coding was completed, a team member created a case report (Yin, 2009) for each of the individual students in which we synthesized all of the data sources. These two team members met upon completion of interview coding to discuss the themes that seemed most repetitive across the interviews. We summarized what peer, family, and school factors contributed to the individual student's absenteeism. We used analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to determine patterns of difference or similarity for each of the twelve case study students. One of the team members synthesized key phrases into a matrix. For the analytic matrices we used the following categories (see Table 5).

Table 5. Analytic Matrices for Student Interviews

Student Interview Categories	
Individual Factors	Attendance Belonging to School Engagement/Motivation Focus Future Grades/Expectations Stress/Anxiety
Peer Group Factors	Belonging to Peers Bullying
Family Life Factors	Attribution Theory

These two team members met upon completion of interview coding to discuss the themes that seemed most repetitive across the interviews. One of the team members synthesized key phrases into a matrix. Once all the data was collected from all parts of our study, the team met as a whole to determine commonalities and determine findings. Data looked at included student

interview analytic matrix, focus group analytic matrix, student file search information, and quantitative data analysis. Findings were considered and determined by triangulation of data (i.e. once three sources noted a particular theme or idea, it was documented).

Phase 3: Qualitative Data Analysis of Staff Focus Group

Our objective in Phase 3 was to understand the current state of attendance policy and practice in WISD in order to build from existing initiatives and make strong policy and programmatic recommendations. In Phase 3 we sought to answer our 4th research question:

4. What are the current perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff in two Michigan counties concerning student attendance rates?

Upon completion of the focus groups, audio files were transcribed by an external service. When the transcriptions were received, two team members met to discuss common themes and methods of coding. Hyper Research coding software was used for the focus group coding as well. A different set of codes was created for focus group coding than was used for the student interview coding. Codes were created based on the research question we sought to answer. We wanted to know about perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff so we started with those three categories. Sub categories were created under these codes based on themes emerging from the data across the three focus groups (see Table 6). These two members coded the first focus group individually and then compared their coding, discussing areas of difference and determining a consistent method for coding. The remaining focus group transcripts were then split amongst the two coders.

Table 6. Focus Group Code List.

Category	Sub Category	
Perceptions	Financial Issues	
	Accountability	
	Anxiety	
	Belonging	
	Deficit Thinking From Adults	
	Discipline Issues	
	Economy	
	Enabling	
	Giving Up	
	Improved	
	Parenting Deficit	
	Parents Busy	
	Student Doesn't See Relevancy	
	Socialization	
	Staff Stress/ Burnout	
	Student Motivation/Engagement	
Transportation		
Transitory		
Underachievers		
Policies	School	Grade Promotion Parent Letters/Calls Parent Meetings
	Classroom	Communicating with Students
		Modified Grading
District/ISD	District/ISD Initiative	
	Legal System	
Practices	Involvement	Involvement
		Alternate
	School	Schedule/Partial
		Communication with Family
	Culture Development	
	Incentives/PBIS	
	Programs	
	Staff Commitment	
	Staff-Student	
	Relationships	

These two team members met upon completion of focus group coding to discuss the themes that seemed most repetitive across the interviews. One of the team members synthesized key phrases into a matrix, synthesizing initial subcategories into similar groupings (see Table 7).

Table 7. Analytic Matrices Categories for Focus Group

Focus Group Categories

Anxiety/Give Up
Belonging/Staff-Student
Relationships/Culture
Enabling/Parent Deficits
Financial Issues
Deficit Thinking/Attribution
Theory
Improved (beliefs)/ Programs
Parent Letters/Calls/ Parent
Meetings/Grade Promotion
Communication with
Student/Family,

The five-person team met as a whole upon compilation of all the data (i.e. student interview matrix, focus group matrix, quantitative data analysis, file search information on individual students) in order to determine commonalities across each part. Each team member had a different knowledge base throughout the process. One team member had deep knowledge of the quantitative component, two team members had deep knowledge of nuances from meeting with the individual students and staff, and two team members had deep knowledge of the themes emerging through the coding process. Findings were considered and determined by triangulation of data. These items were then condensed into the final capstone findings.

Chapter Four: Findings and Interpretation of Data

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine current attendance data and identify descriptors and variables and their role in absenteeism, and then explore those trends more deeply through analyses of practitioner and student perceptions regarding attendance. This study took a look at quantitative attendance data from Washtenaw County in Michigan, as well as qualitative case studies and interviews with practitioners and students from Washtenaw County. A comparison study of qualitative data was then completed with data from a comparable school in Muskegon County to see if the findings were consistent elsewhere in the State. This chapter will describe the findings and interpretation of the research study with regard to all of our research questions. We begin with the first two:

1. What is the current state of student attendance in one large county in Michigan? What are the magnitudes of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism within this county?
2. Who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two comparable Michigan counties? Can they be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics?

Part I: Quantitative Analysis of Washtenaw Intermediate School District Attendance Data

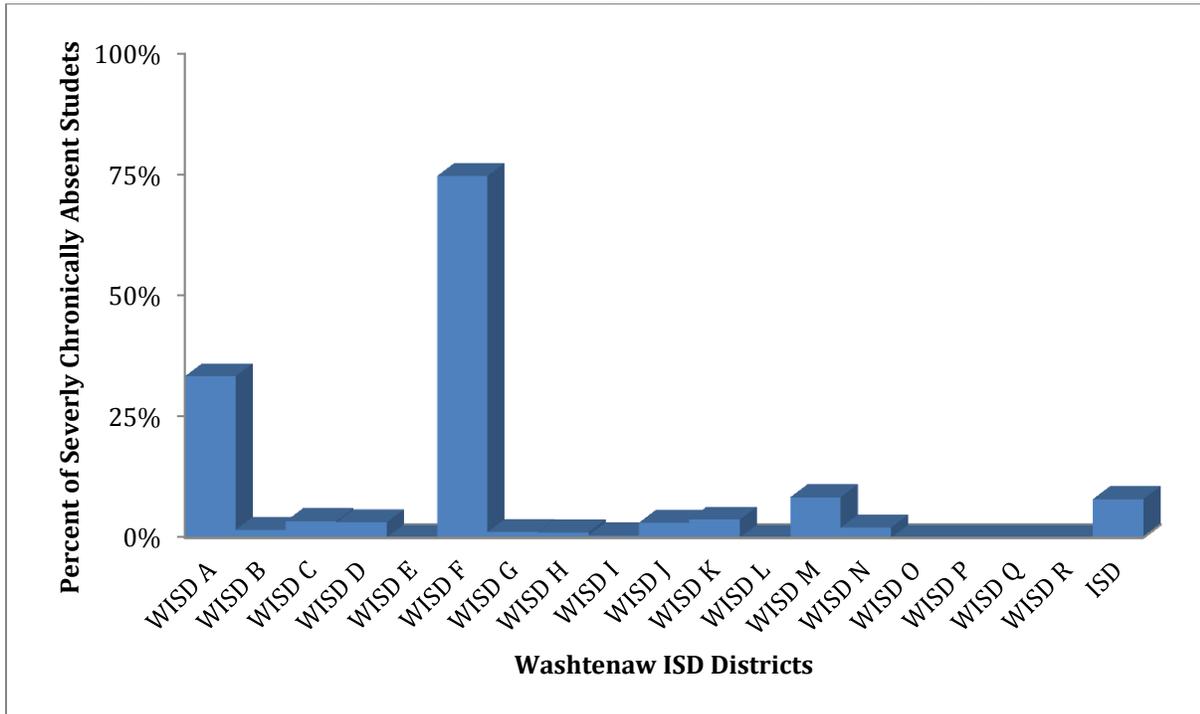
In this section, we disaggregated data from students within Washtenaw Intermediate School District to assess the current state of student attendance and to determine the magnitude of chronic and severely chronic absenteeism within the county. A number of findings emerged from the data.

Percentage of chronically absent students from each district

Of the 3,515 7th grade students in Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD), 472 (13%), were chronically absent, missing 10% or more of the 2014-2015 school year and of those

472 students, 280 (8%), were severely chronically absent, missing more than 20% of the school year. Figure 3 shows the percentage of students in each district who were absent more than 20% of the time:

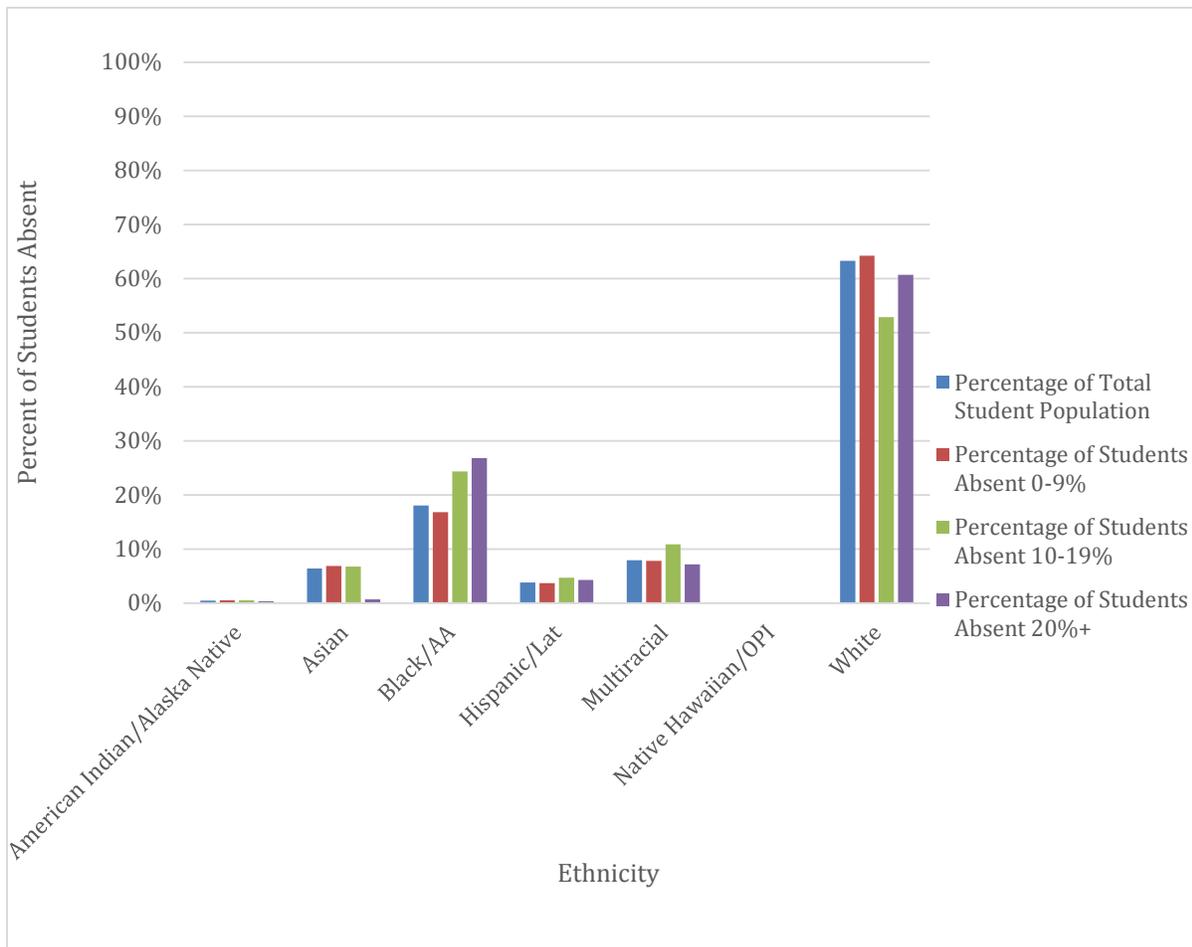
Figure 3. Chronically Absent Students from WISD – Percentages by District, n=3515



In the 2014-2015 school year, 5% of the total population were chronically absent, while 8% of the total population was severely chronically absent. 73% of the absences came from 13% of the population (13% is the chronically absent and severely chronically absent population). 65% of the absences came from 8% of the students (8% is the severely chronically absent population). The ISD as a whole has very low absenteeism. The median student misses 2% of possible school days. Students who are chronically absent or severely chronically absent however, have a much higher median absence rate. For the 280 students who missed 20% or more days, their median percentage of days missed was 94%. Of the 473 students who missed 10% or more days, their median percent of days missed was 52%.

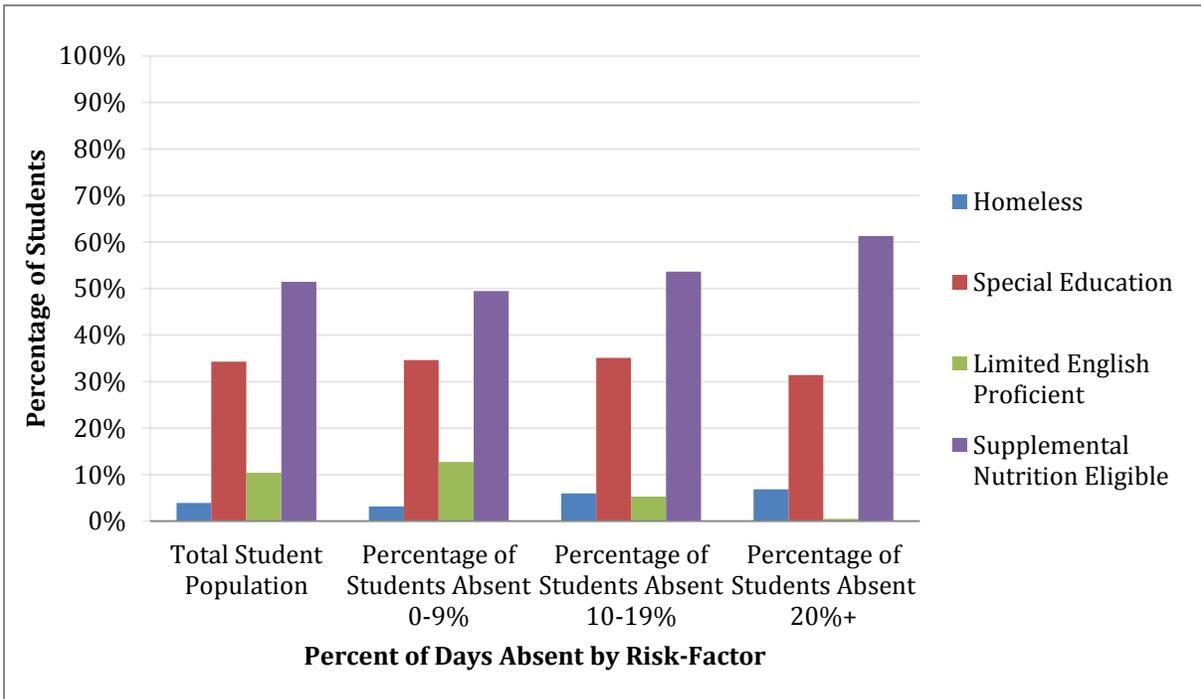
As shown in Figure 4, when breaking the data down by ethnicity, African American students are over-represented by 30% and 50% in chronically and severely chronically absent categories, respectively. No other ethnic groups are significantly over-represented in any of the categories, as the figure below displays:

Figure 4. Percentage of 7th Grade Students Absent from WISD – by ethnicity, n=3515



We also looked at attendance and several risk-factors to determine if students with various identifiable labels were more likely to be chronically absent or severely chronically absent. Figure 5 displays these results:

Figure 5. Percentage of School Missed by Risk Factor Compared with the Total Population (n=3515)



SNE (supplemental nutrition eligible) students were 51% of the total population and 61% of the severely chronically absent population, making over-represented in the findings by nearly 20% and homeless students in WISD were 4% of the total population and 7% of the severely chronically absent population, making them over-represented by nearly 45%. Special education students and students with limited English proficiency were absent at a rate consistent with their respective population within the ISD. Thus, we found differences in absenteeism by socio-economic factors but not by factors related to particular educational needs.

The distribution of absences is not equal across the WISD. District F has six times as many students who were chronically and severely chronically absent as the district with the next highest percentage in the 2014-2015 school year. Figure 6 shows the percentages in each category if the 309 students (out of 3515) are removed from the data set:

Figure 6. Chronically absent students from WISD, with and without District F (n=3515)

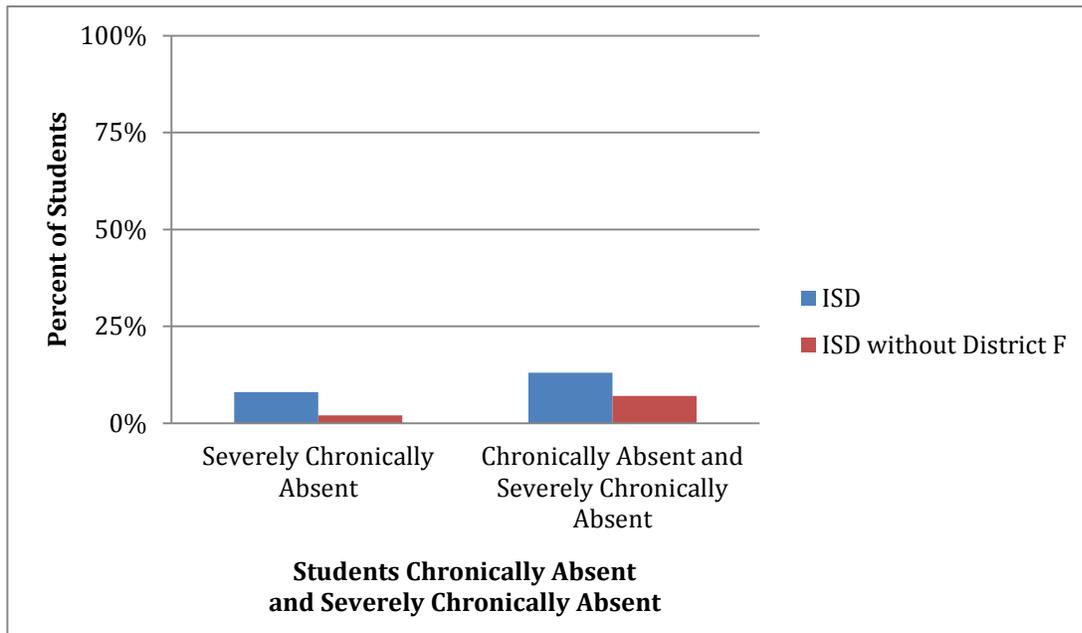


Figure 6 (above) reveals that the overall attendance figures for WISD are strongly skewed by one district within Washtenaw County. In answering research question one, this graph suggests that the current state of student attendance in one large county in Michigan may be misleading, in that one school can so greatly impact the averages of chronically and severely chronically absent students.

According to www.mischooldata.org, the dropout rate in WISD for the 2013-2014 school year was 12%, nearly the same as the chronically absent and severely chronically absent student population in this study. The 2013-2014 graduation and dropout rate data is the most recent data available. What is noteworthy is the 0.28 correlation between the 2013-2014 dropout rate and the percentage of students who were chronically absent in 2014-2015:

Table 8. Comparison of Dropout Rate and Percent of 7th Grade Students Absent 10% or more

District	Dropout Rate	7th Grade Students Absent 10% or More
WISD B	2%	8%
WISD D	4%	6%
WISD E	6%	3%
WISD F	10%	79%
WISD G	0%	9%
WISD H	9%	8%
WISD I	1%	4%
WISD J	1%	8%
WISD C*	21%	13%

**At the end of the 2013-2014 school year, 2 school districts merged. The dropout rate on the above chart reflects the percentage of students that dropped out of the combined cohorts. When combining cohorts, the dropout rate at WISD is actually 6%, when the cohorts are separated the dropout rate is 12%*

Part II: Case Studies of Students

Table 9 shows that the case study students come from three different schools; they also represent gender and ethnic diversity. All interview questions and content were to provide an answer to research question two. Which is:

2. Who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two Michigan counties? Can these students be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics?

Table 9. Case Study Participants

Participant	Site	Gender	Ethnicity
Mason - SC5	Stony Creek Middle	Male	Hispanic
Terah - SC2	Stony Creek Middle	Female	African-American
Roberta - GMMS3	Grassy Meadow Middle School	Female	Caucasian
Sam - PCMS1	Pine Cone Middle School	Male	Caucasian
Luther - PCMS2	Pine Cone Middle School	Male	Caucasian
Jordan - PCMS3	Pine Cone Middle School	Male	Ethnicity

Individual Student Case Studies

Case 1: Mason

Mason, a Hispanic male, averaged 16.68 absences per year from kindergarten to seventh grade, with thirty-three and a half absences his first grade year, and twenty-six absences his fifth grade year. Mason was described as being “smart,” enjoyable to have in class, and as having “made a lot of progress” by his teachers. Mason identified himself as not fitting in socially and not having many friends. He described himself as a victim of others’ actions and appeared to view himself as an outsider. He stated, “I usually don’t have many friends because many people pick on me for reasons that I don’t know.” While in school he identified lunch as a primary cause of stress in the school setting, resulting from peer interactions. Specifically, Mason identified some students as having a sole purpose of making every single moment of life at school miserable. He shared, “There’s a lot of students at schools that will make every day of your life that you go to that school miserable because they just try to make you feel bad about yourself without you knowing anything about what they’re talking about.” Meanwhile, Mason described interactions with friends and talking with friends as something that makes school something worth looking forward to attending. He noted, “You have social periods, you have

times to talk to people, it's a good place to learn. There's not really many downsides to it. People here are caring and they really do love that you are coming to their school." Mason identified the social complexity of school as a driver of his school day. When he discussed his own behavior in school he consistently referred to how others made him feel. Mason saw value in school and identified school as fun. He concluded, "So anyways, I come to this school because it's fun, obviously."

Mason also has varied interests, and he described certain times in school when he became particularly excited and that connected to his self-interests being met as a result of the class, indicating an understanding of when he was engaged and when he was not engaged. "It's a very pleasing educational benefit because you don't just get to work by yourself all day long, you have classes that involve working with partners, getting you active with more people helps you gain more friends, it's very pleasing." At the same time, he identified the best school days as when he was able to choose what precisely he wanted to do during the school day. As it related to learning, Mason liked to work with different people in the classroom,

We usually get to pick our partners or table group because it's pretty fascinating because you get to work with different people if you have a table group and if you have a partner, then you could work with the best person that you know in the entire class.

Mason defined a good student as, "A person who is trying their hardest and putting effort into the activity that they're working on." He described a good student as, "someone who doesn't judge people for who they are and doesn't really try to change anything of someone." He looked forward to activities and projects that people did not know about and were able to "make things happen in the school setting." When describing teachers who had an impact, he discussed how

certain instructors paid particular attention to him and his colleagues as individuals. For example, these teachers listened to students when they needed to talk.

This student identified a critical incident within the past two years that impacted his attendance, as well as a traumatic incident involving a family member. Additionally, he referred to friends and issues related to peer interaction as a reason he was chronically absent. When asked if “schools could do anything to make it so kids come to school every single day of the year, what would schools need to do?” He responded with,

Just try to make a difference like stop talking about how they’re trying to make a difference at school and actually do something because the majority of people who are faculty members or staff here don’t really say that they’re doing anything, but they’re saying what they’re trying to do but it’s kind of challenging to say that you’re going to do something and then not do it.

Mason did not exhibit characteristics of someone who has a high level of self-efficacy. Mason appeared to understand that success is to be attributed to hard work and solid effort, however, there was not evidence that his actions demonstrated this in the school setting. Mason verbalized that he attended school because it was fun. He also mentioned multiple times that interaction with others was a great motivator for him to come to school. Mason mentioned the challenges that he faces from others being mean, and in his description of a good student he stated that it is “someone who doesn’t judge people.”

Table 10 shows the number of absences and end of the year comments for grades kindergarten through seventh for Mason, a thirteen-year-old male, Hispanic student.

Table 10. Mason

Grade	Absences	Teacher's End of Year Comments
K	13	Sensitive and I enjoyed having him in class. A truancy letter was sent in March 2008 without evidence of follow-up.
1 ^a	33.5	I am happy you moved. You are a smart young person.
2 ^a	8	He made a lot of progress this year.
3 ^a	12	While there are no report comments, state accountability reports indicate advanced proficient status.
4	13	
5 ^{a,b}	26	Have a great summer! One teacher. Poor attendance affects work.
6	10	One teacher (out of six) noted that attendance affects work. A truancy letter was sent in December 2013 without follow-up.
7	18	

a. Different school.

b. Community health report submitted.

Case 2: Terah

Terah, an African-American female student, averaged 24.68 absences from kindergarten to seventh grade. Terah was described by her teachers in Table 4 as having “so much potential,” but also possessing an attitude that “interfered with her learning.” One teacher noted that Terah “contributed well in class.” Terah identified herself as someone who was pretty easy going, “I like mostly just chillin’, playing on my phone and I like sports a lot. I like basketball and that’s pretty much it about me.” Terah appreciated her family, although it is a large one. She liked activity and being outside, “I like to go outside a lot, well some days, but if it’s snowing, I won’t go nowhere. This summer I like to go to the beach and stuff and I do like summer sports and like

intra-school sports and stuff like that, yeah.” Terah was able to identify things that were interesting to her like playing sports and talking. Yet, if she could spend the day doing anything she wanted, she would be on her phone chatting with her friends. When asked what students liked, she pointed out that they really liked their phones,

Well, as I can say, I hang around with little people, I don’t want no big crowd or nothing, it’s school, it’s not like you’re supposed to come here for people. So my friends are like, oh they’re very funny people, like sometimes they get in trouble but like it’s like they always have my back and stuff, so yeah, they’re just like good people and stuff.

Terah also appreciated when teachers offered her freedom to listen to music while she was working and also when teachers provided students with assistance when they were struggling. She referenced teachers who checked in on her and her colleagues more often as being ok and in fact specified she liked them and would do more for them.

Even though, she was moody in the morning she was specifically thankful for a teacher who got her going in the morning. Terah continued to identify and appreciate teachers who were able to relate with a student from the student’s perspective. Specifically she discussed teachers who understood when a student had a good reason for not doing something on time or in an acceptable way,

Like certain teachers I can say certain things, like I wouldn’t be scared to say I need help or something or certain teachers I could be like oh I missed this, a family problem or something and they will understand. Some teachers would be like, well you have this day to do it, you need it in by today or you get this. So some teachers kind of understand what you’re talking about, some people don’t and the people that understand it’s like you

get like a close bond at the beginning of the year and stuff and like it goes on until you get out of school.

Terah saw the teachers who were more approachable as those who understood when the student needed help and this part of the teaching team looked out for her and her fellow students. Specifically, Terah referenced a teacher, who knew her vision was not very good and offered to make it easier to copy things from the board,

Well, for my social studies teacher, her and him, they like sometimes I'd be like, so I can't see that good, my vision is really bad, so I'm in the back, and every time like I'm not looking at the screen, I'm looking around, she comes up there and she like lets you move to the front or you can just, she gives me a paper or a copy or something and she helps me with it. Or she just looks at my grade and she's like, I see you've been struggling with this and that, do you need help? So I'm like, yeah.

While discussing what she liked about school she specified not being told what to do and specific projects or activities that she had fun completing. One of her best experiences was when the teachers forgot about the "school hours" and actually spent time playing with the students,

I remember, we had this little, in the commons we like play around and stuff when the bell ring, and actually one day all the teachers were actually playing with us and we didn't have a five-minute warning or nothing, we actually got to stay out there for a little bit of time during fifth hour and it was fun cause like the teachers usually are like, get to class, but mostly the teachers were out and playing with us and stuff and they actually wasn't worrying about the school hours sometimes. I guess it was kind of an off day I guess.

Terah appeared to wish for a little empathy or understanding from teachers. She really appreciated choice in the way she did her work. She identified music, plays, and other small activities as important when she chose to do the schoolwork or not to do the schoolwork.

Terah was very clear about her poor attendance. She very quickly talked about how teacher's transition from being all nice at the beginning of the year to being "all aggressive" a few weeks into the school year,

I think what kind of makes me not want to go to school is like, some teachers like, I don't know, like first day teachers was cool, the week was good, first day of school, a couple of weeks of school and teachers was getting like, you know kind of being aggressive. I'm into school now, they just don't care, they just lessons this and that, blah, blah, blah, and it's like I kind of get sick and tired, so I'll be like, Mom's sick, I kind of don't want to go no more and I guess it's just like sick days, but that's what you can say.

She also acknowledged that she did not like being told what to do and she did not like having what they perceived to be unfair expectations placed in her direction. Terah identified the early start time of school as a big inhibitor of her attendance at school. She specifically stated that if school were in the afternoon she would attend more often,

Well, I'm not a morning person so I'll stay asleep all day if I could, but if I gotta go to school then I gotta go. But see, if I had a choice to pick would I go to school in the afternoon, I'd do the afternoon because 7:38 is not what I do, I couldn't even stay up that long if I wanted to, I just don't like the morning." She talks about how school was fun in elementary school and is not as much fun as she gets older. If there were one thing that schools could do it would be to give students a little freedom to make it more enjoyable.

Terah recognized the importance of school. However, she was unable to pinpoint specific reasons she did not want to come to school other than assessments and the potential fear of failure in class,

I hate to come to school to test, knowing like, she didn't tell you to study or nothing, she's like, test Thursday and then she changed it on Thursday and she went to Friday. So you studied it, you're losing stuff by the minute and when she reschedules the test, I do not want to go to school at all, so I stay home. It's not my day to stay home but it's better than trying to fail so when you come back, you got everything down pat cause you're still passing on it.

Terah did not exhibit characteristics of someone who has a high level of self-efficacy. Her willingness to stay home because her teachers were "aggressive" easily moved to excuse-making for her to stay home. Terah appears to be at risk with regard to attribution theory, as success to her on tests and other work was a challenge as she lost "stuff by the minute," and she stayed home when tests are rescheduled. Terah verbalized that she appreciated teachers allowing her to do what she liked, and she also liked them checking in on her.

Table 11 shows the number of absences and end of the year comments for grades kindergarten through seventh for Terah, a thirteen year old female, African-American student.

Table 11. Terah

Grade	Absences	Teacher's End of Year Comments
K ^a	28	
1 ^a	23	
2 ^a	25	
3 ^a	9	
4	17.5	It is noted that the student has so much potential, however their attitude interferes with their learning.
5	59	There are some struggles this year due to attendance and behavior. The student has missed so much that they are behind academically. Retention as a result of absences is recommended.
6	17	The teacher notes that missing work is impacting grades. They specify that the student is contributing well in class.
7	19	It is noted that the absences are impacting student's academics.

a. No report card comments. Moved after 3rd grade.

Case 3: Roberta

Roberta, a Caucasian student, averaged 18.25 absences from kindergarten to seventh grade. Roberta was described by teachers as being “kind,” having a “big heart,” a “good attitude,” and also exhibited some “struggles academically.” Roberta had a big family that included a number of animals. She described herself as a funny person who was willing to speak her mind. Roberta had no problem going up to another person and confronting them when they were not being kind to others. She also viewed herself as popular, but she was not sure why,

Well, like my friends say I'm the funny one out of the group and I'm not afraid to speak my mind so if I think that somebody is getting bullied I'm not afraid to go up to the person and ask and tell the bully to stop or speak my mind. So if my friends are saying something about somebody, I'll be like, that's not nice to say, like go on up to them and say, sorry and tell them that you're talking behind their back. Cause I don't think that's right, that's how my parents raised me, if my mom found out that I was bullying

somebody oh I would be in big trouble. But yeah, they say I'm the funny one and smart and guess the popular one, I don't see why, cause a lot of them are pretty and that's pretty much it.

Roberta was pretty active outside of school as she was in several activities. While participating in activities like cheer or dance she still tried to make time for schoolwork. If she could do anything she would hang out with her brother or friends. Spending time playing games with family was also something that was really exciting to Roberta,

I would be playing with my brother or my friends or like hanging out with my family.

We usually, there are family nights, we play Hangman or Trivia or what's the game you get a card and you can't say but you have to try to act it out and they have to try and guess it?

Roberta described her friends as different from each other. She defined roles for her friends to include a bad one, a sassy one, and a sweet one. She described many of the students in very pre-defined gender roles for example boys as more mature and girls as "boy crazy,"

The people are like, some people are like oh this is the nerd's table and this is the popular table and I'm like, I think that we're all the same, why do you guys call them nerds and popular and football jocks, well if you think about it the nerds today might be your bosses in the future and then I'm like, so just cause they want to focus on schooling and all that doesn't mean that they're nerds. They might have a better job than you some day.

As Roberta progressed through school she learned to just be herself and not care as much about what people thought about her as a person. When talking about academics Roberta referenced social behaviors like categorizing students as nerds, jocks, popular, and being a part of a particular posse.

While describing herself as a student she talked about how she tried to pay attention in class and ask for assistance. When Roberta missed school, she was good with asking for assistance, and she missed the teachers greatly. Roberta mentioned on many occasions that she really liked her teachers. While describing her favorite teacher she described an individual who gave multiple chances, let Roberta and her colleagues play games, and also gave them projects to complete. Roberta was excited about school when she was able to work on projects and participate with others in the class. She really liked to learn in small groups or with a partner because there was someone she could ask for assistance. Roberta really appreciated teachers who helped her one-on-one to make sure a student understood. Teachers did this by breaking down problems into small steps. Her academic learning changed because of the formal and social rules that were in place, such as how people interacted with each other,

When I was newer I wanted to try to fit in and I would try to show off and all that just to try to fit in. But now I'm like, you know what, I have the friends that I have and they're my best friends, they mean the world to me, and so I don't try to fit in as much, I am who I am so I don't really care what people think about me as much.

Roberta liked school this year, "I like the people around school because there's not a lot of bullying going on this year like there was a little bit last year but the principal stopped it and this principal has been taking really, like if you're getting bullied and you come to her, she'll drop everything just to talk to you, so I really like this principal this year." The principal and their team are referenced as true advocates for students with issues and would do just about anything to make the students' problems a priority. Roberta looked forward to school daily, but there are things she did not like and this includes homework, especially over the weekend. Roberta viewed teachers as liking her because she always tried her best. She performed better in

classes where they felt more comfortable and confident. Roberta saw herself as being in pretty good standing with teachers.

A critical incident Roberta described as impacting her attendance was the death of a family member a couple of years ago, and an illness last year that caused her to miss a few days. A difference maker in whether or not she went to school was if she woke up ready to go to school or if she was sick. If she was sick her parent did not let her go to school because she didn't want anyone else to get sick,

I look forward to waking up at 6:30 because that's the time we have to go to school, cause like I know I'm going to see my friends and the teachers and we're going to have fun and then when I'm sick, I'm like puking either or coughing really bad that it hurts my throat, I'm like, oh I don't want to be here, I'm sick right now, I want to be at school having fun. But my mom puts me on bed rest, I'm not allowed to leave my room unless I have to go to the bathroom then I can walk up and go to the bathroom in my room.

School was important to Roberta because she was going to school to learn in order to get a good job, house, car, and to take care of our kids so they can do the same things we were doing. Roberta understood that it took a lot of learning to be successful and to become a doctor, lawyer, or teacher. School was a place that Roberta really wanted to be and she did not like to miss,

I love school, I want to go to school unless I'm sick then I can't cause I don't want to get other people sick, so if they love to come in school and if they get sick, so I have to stay home but my teachers send me all my stuff on email so I can check it and go through it and do it and send it to them.

Even though Roberta did exhibit a strong confidence in herself in her ability to relate and interact with others, she did not exhibit characteristics of someone who has a high level of self-efficacy. Roberta did not speak much about her effort or amount of work that she applied toward her education. As described earlier, Roberta understood that it took a great deal of education and effort to be successful. However, Roberta did not appear to be putting in this effort, especially in the area of homework. Roberta appears to feel a sense of belonging to her teachers and the school, and she is devoted to her family.

Table 12 shows the number of absences and end of the year comments for grades kindergarten through seventh for Roberta, a thirteen year old female, Caucasian student.

Table 12. Roberta

Grade	Absences	Teacher's End of Year Comments
K	34	The student is very kind. She tries her best, but struggles with basic skills. It is recommended that this student is monitored closely. Attendance is a factor in learning difficulties as they continue to miss important instruction. Attendance did improve as the year progressed. Overall, I enjoyed having her in class.
1 ^{a,b}	17.5	Retention is considered but it is determined that movement to 2 nd grade would be best. As the student attends more often they increase their academic growth. The teacher warns that regular attendance is required for students to perform to expectations. While the student is very sweet they are struggling as a reader.
2 ^b	22.5	Enjoyed having her in class. As attendance improved so has her confidence. Has made big improvements but struggles academically.
3 ^{b,c}	17	
4 ^c	11	I have enjoyed her and her big heart. She is a hard worker and has made good academic growth. Amazing heart.
5 ^c	4	This teacher made a litany of generalized comments to include be sure to visit the library and have a fun summer, et. al.
6	20	There were quite a bit more absences in the afternoon. The teacher noted it was difficult to stay focused and encouraged the use of tools to slow down in order to be successful.
7 ^d	20	Among a couple of teacher comments were this student has a good attitude, asks questions, and puts forth good effort.

a. *Changed school.*

b. *Received specific help in reading.*

Table 12 (cont'd)

- c. *Identified with specific learning disability and provided with individual plan.*
- d. *Received letters in January and March targeting excessive absences.*

Case 4: Sam

Sam was a mild mannered, reclusive Caucasian young man. He averaged 22.1 absences from kindergarten to seventh grade. Sam's teachers described him as "showing growth," being a "joy to have in class," "very artistic," and "struggles in reading and writing." Sam described himself as being smart and athletic, with an inclination to enjoying nature. His grades in school reflected his assertion of his own intelligence, yet Sam was considered partially proficient in Reading based on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program measurement from grades 3 through 6. He had not met the overall expectations of designated Reading standards by the end of First Grade, and his instructor recommended he continue reading practice at home. Sam was assessed as a "hard worker" while being well below reading standards in all five major categories: Phonemic Awareness, Frequency, Comprehension, Fluency, Independent Reading, yet there were no recommendations for him by his second grade instructor for further remediation besides a standard reminder to read daily from the end of year report. His 3rd grade year is clearly unique, considering he was absent 40 days. Yet Sam did not mention any experience or trigger event that caused this distinct change in his attendance pattern. The teacher noted that Sam was well below reading proficiency at the beginning of the year and he met all reading expectations by the end of the year but made no mention of either Reading progress or change in attendance within any of the quarterly comments. When asked about his sporadic attendance, he stated that, "getting up early in the morning is the reason because I'm the farthest away from the school and I have to get up the earliest and I miss the bus." His 5th grade instructors mentioned that he had accumulated a troubling amount of absences, but he worked hard enough to "stay on track".

Sam's strong work ethic had been a recurring theme throughout his elementary experience. He understood that school was relevant to his future from his statement that, "good grades get me more opportunities," but the knowledge of that relevancy alone is not enough to motivate better attendance patterns – suggesting a lower level of self-efficacy. He said that, "if there were more rewards at school, I would want to come more often." There were no records of Sam's middle school teacher comments; however, his transcript showed that he held a 2.9 G.P.A. during his 6th, 7th, and beginning of his 8th grade year. It was apparent that his attendance had not affected his G.P.A., but also equally as evident and more troubling is the fact that he continued to perform well below expectations in reading and mathematics assessments implying a disconnect between school performance and objective assessment – suggesting Sam to be at risk with regard to attribution theory.

Table 13 shows the number of absences and end of the year comments for grades kindergarten through seventh for Sam, an eighth grade male, Caucasian student.

Table 13. Sam

Grade	Days Absent	Teacher Comments
Pre K	13	Has shown a great deal of growth in many areas this year. I wish him success in Kindergarten.
K	3	Has been a joy to have in my classroom. He has shown growth in all areas. Continue to encourage him to write over the summer, which will benefit him in first grade.
1	11.5	Continue to work on reading sight words ...should read 20 minutes each day at home. It has been a great pleasure to have him in first grade this year. He is a delightful, intelligent child.
2	22	Quiet hard working child....Conscientious student who never needs reminders to stay on task. Read every day this summer to keep new skills sharp.
3	40	I am seeing you participate more in music class. Good for you. Keep up the great work. Music. Very artistic! It was a pleasure getting to know him this year.
4	24	He will benefit from focusing more on the task at hand and competing assignments rather than socializing with his peers and rushing to complete assignments. Needs to continue the positive trend of taking more responsibility for his learning and homework. Appears unmotivated in math class. Requires re-teaching, but is great when on task. Continue to work on listening and focus.
5	24	More effort is needed. He struggles in reading and writing, but when he tries he can do well. You are so good at keeping yourself on track and making sure you do your work. Keep coming to school. No more absences!!!
6	16	
7	23	
8	13 as of February '16	No Teacher Comments

Table 13: Compiled from Individual Student CA60 file

Case 5: Luther

Luther was a Caucasian young man who described himself as being “awkward.” Luther averaged 38 absences per year from kindergarten to seventh grade. Luther’s teachers described him as being a “joy to work with,” a “capable student,” “very friendly,” and a “conscientious student and an eager learner.” Luther said that he “fits in with the misfits” and he was comfortable with this designation. He said, “I describe myself as part of the awkward crowd that

no one really cares about. Well maybe not the group that they don't care about, but the group that no one pays attention to.” He seemed to think that he was not smart although his standardized assessments say otherwise. Luther was an advanced reader according to the Michigan Education Assessment Program assessment. However, he was Partially to Not Proficient in Mathematics and Writing. His performance in the classroom depicted a very different persona than his literacy assessments indicated.

Through elementary, Luther was described as a capable student, but he received a 0.25 G.P.A. in his 6th grade year and a 1.0 G.P.A. in 7th grade. He was almost held back a year to repeat his 7th grade year because of his grades and attendance. He and his parent wanted him to matriculate with his classmates, so they requested that he be promoted to 8th grade with his peers. He liked the classes in which he performed best and shrinks from more challenging classes because he attributed his success and failure to “general opinion” of his abilities. In response to which classes did you enjoy, he stated, “pretty much computers and language arts because those are the only things that I'm good at. This is the general opinion. For other classes, I tend to go to the corner and hope no one else notices me.”

Luther was well spoken, and well read. He had issues with bullying and social anxiety that he professed are deterrents from attending school. He said, “I don't look forward to seeing some of the other people at school. I have a history of being bullied. I was in gym one day and I was continuously being punched. The only way he got off of me was when another kid actually pulled him off. In sixth grade, I was bullied when a high school student threw something at me and I tried to throw it back and he threw it at me again and while I was distracted he smacked me across the face.” However, he stated that he felt comfortable attending school most times. Teacher comments had a recurring trend of expressing Luther's negative behavior. He was rated

poorly for showing a lack of self-control, not accepting responsibility, not following directions, not paying attention, difficulty following rules, and distracting others. Other instructors echoed these sentiments as he progressed through elementary. He said that things changed in middle school. “Other kids are disruptive in class now, so I like to stay in the corner and do my own thing so that no one pays attention to me.”

Luther did not have comments from his middle school experience, but he received at least 6 letters regarding attendance issues from the school beginning in 6th grade. He stated that he did not believe he was smart anymore because of a general consensus promoting this revelation and that he did not recognize the purpose of most classes in school: “I don't feel I'm smart although my mom tells me, the evidence is different. I don't see the reason I have to learn science or stuff in math like a square root.” However, Luther did see himself as a good student. He said, “I'm a good student because I hardly ever interrupt like I said before I try to care about more other people than myself sometimes.” Luther stated that he sees himself as being awkward and not really being a part of the school culture, but in one class, he feels a sense of belonging. He said, “I like to go to social studies most because I feel accepted. I don't feel as out of place, mainly because the teacher has an astronaut Barbie on his desk.” In Luther's descriptions of school he exhibited a lower level of self-efficacy.

Table 14 shows the number of absences and end of the year comments for grades kindergarten through seventh for Luther, an eighth grade male, Caucasian student.

Table 14. Luther

Grade	Days Absent	Teacher Comments
K	12	He gets distracted from his work. He is showing growth in academic areas. He has been a joy to work with this year.
1	25	Distracts others, needs better organization, and doesn't always follow directions, easily distracted. A capable student, but is missing many assignments due to absences or losing the work in class.
2	42	Keep up the good work; you are doing a great job! I truly enjoyed having him in my class this year. Very friendly. I could not be more proud of him.
3	44	Has a wonderful sense of humor. Works well with others. Needs to work on slowing down during writing assignments. Creative student with wonderful ideas. Make sure you are keeping focused during class time. There are times I see you drift off.
4	37	Conscientious student and eager learner. I would like to see more focus and listening. Capable student.
5	73	Your grade dropped quite a bit this marking period, let's pick it back up! Work on listening and focus. Excessive absences need to be gotten under control in middle school where the expectations will be even higher.
6	26	
7	45	
8	18	No Teacher Comments
	as of February '16	

Table 14: Compiled from Individual Student CA60 file

Case 6: Jordan

Jordan identified herself as a bi-racial young woman who was an affable person because she could get along with anyone. She said, "I'm not an introvert but I'm not necessarily outgoing. I like to communicate with anyone. I don't necessarily fit into a certain category at school." She is very emotionally intelligent and socially mature beyond her years. However, throughout her elementary career, she maintained approximately 20 yearly absences, yet she managed to do exceptionally well in school as well as on standardized exams, placing within the 99th percentile in reading. She has been consistently described as a wonderful student through

elementary. She considered herself as a good student because she “does not disrupt the class...and tries to stay quiet and helpful.” She had maintained that moniker as a middle school student; however, her attendance had always been a concern. When she was asked about her truancy, she mentioned experiences that decreased her motivation to come to school:

There's a lot of irritating people so I try to avoid them. Also I have really bad anxiety and the teachers don't know how to respond to my Anxiety and I'm not really in a program that helps me understand my Anxiety. Also I get real sick sometimes. Mostly everyone is fine but there are a lot of people who are rude and sometimes I run into racist situations and homophobic situations.

Jordan maintained a high G.P.A. at approximately 3.5, and she was measured as being Proficient to Advanced in all subject areas assessed by Michigan Education Assessment Program, but she admitted to multiple factors that have negatively affected her matriculation at Lincoln. She referenced witnessing the bullying of other children, racism that she personally experienced, as well as her growing battle with depression. She said, “I used to have really bad depression and sometimes that would affect my anxiety so it would make coming to school harder to deal with. Sometimes it comes back and it really affects me and it's hard to function correctly in school. I have really bad anxiety attacks in the morning and it makes it harder for me to go to school. I think if I had more assistance with dealing with my anxiety I would come to school more.” Yet, through all of these obstacles she continued to garner the strength to strive for academic success. She understood the relevance of school she says, “When I go to school I learn a lot of things but it's not just what I learned in class; it is what I learned in dealing with people. You know it helps with small talk being and dealing with people. You have to be smart in order to go places in life and I like learning new things every day.”

Jordan did not have comments from her middle school experience, but she received multiple letters regarding attendance issues since her transition from elementary. She built strong relationships with a couple of teachers that helped to ease her school anxiety:

I look forward to my math and my social studies class. I think the most successful and my social studies class because when he teaches, you compare what we're learning to real life situations and I think I learn best that way. My math and social studies teachers understand the way that I need to be taught it's like they're real social with the kids and they're more interested in things other than academics to get us to learn. Instead of just handing us papers and expecting us to just do it. So basically every time I'm in school every time I go to these classes, I have a good time. When we do school activities that involve a lot of people, that makes me happy too.

Although Jordan performed well academically and socially, she did recognize what would motivate her to attend school more often when she states, "I think they should separate students based on the best way they learn like if they learn best a certain way, they [students] should all be grouped on that way of learning." She continued, "I have looked for help outside of school but when they just asked me questions and don't give me any advice on how to handle my depression, it doesn't really help. I need something more than the assistance that I'm getting right now."

Table 15 shows the number of absences and end of the year comments for grades kindergarten through seventh for Jordan, an eighth grade female, bi-racial student.

Table 15. Jordan

Grade	Days Absent	Teacher Comments
K	Unknown	No Teacher Comments
1	20	Terrific student. A pleasure to have in class.
2	0	Wonderful student! She is reading well above grade level and demonstrates a good understanding of math concepts.
3	20	Delightful student.
4	17	Excellent job. She has grown in confidence and is well behaved and a positive leader in the classroom. She has progressed well and is a strong independent worker and very well behaved.
5	22	Exceptional student. She excels in both math and reading curriculum and continues to work on improving her knowledge and skills in other content areas. I would like to see her participate more in class, since her input and insight may be of value to other students.
6	11	
7	21	
8	20 as of February '16	No Teacher Comments

Table 15: Compiled from Individual Student CA60 file

Cross-Case Summary

Of the twelve students that were interviewed, six were chosen by the interviewers to have more of their individual story told. These six students: Mason, Terah, Roberta, Sam, Luther, and Jordan, represent three schools in the study. These students also are representative of students within Muskegon and Washtenaw Counties. When answering research question number two, which asks who are the students that are chronically and severely chronically absent in two Michigan counties, and can these students be identified by a set of descriptive characteristics, a close look at these students shows that students are very different in their perceptions, expectations, and in many other areas. In looking at the responses of these students, the chronically absent in Muskegon and Washtenaw Counties are students who love interacting with

friends, yet some that feel reclusive, awkward, and like they do not fit in. These students also see the value in school, and see it as fun, however, their actions result in many absences each year. Some of these chronically absent students in these two counties lack a strong sense of self-efficacy, while some understand the importance of their own learning. These students work hard, yet some of them shrink from challenges. They are affected in their attendance by family situations, issues with peers, lack of teacher relationships, bullying, anxiety, and social issues. However, the clear observation in looking at these six students is that no two of them are alike in their situations, responses, and reasoning as to why they fail to attend school.

Part III: Qualitative Analysis of Student Interviews

To answer research question three, which stated how, if at all, do factors related to the individual, peer group, family life and school policy contribute to chronic absenteeism among middle school students in two Michigan counties, we organized student interview information into multiple categories. These categories included: attendance, belonging to school, engagement and motivation, focus on goals, future, grades and expectations, stress and anxiety, belonging to peers, bullying, and attribution theory. The following were our findings that answered this question.

Finding 1

The majority of individual attendance challenges are unique to individual students. The students in Table 16 (below) are those that were illustrated earlier in the case studies. When looking for commonalities and differences among their perceptions, motivations, and definitions, there clearly were a great deal of differences among them. Three of the students got along with their peers, and three did not. Most recognized the importance of school, yet they all shared the same challenge of being chronically absent. The six students had varying perspectives on their own effort in school, and the reasons for their chronic absenteeism were varied, creating a combined list of family trauma, issues with peers, issues with teachers, school start time, personal illness, anxiety, and social issues. The important thing to notice was that there were not predictable types of students that were chronically absent. Each student had a unique story, and to meet that student's learning and success needs, they each needed to be met where they were.

Table 16. Overview of Case Study Students

Case Study Student	Perception of social ability and presence of friendships.	Perception of education and the value of education.	Perception of student's effort (based on teacher comments, own admittance, or both).	Perception on variables that affected their own attendance in school.
Mason	-Not fitting in -Not many friends	-Sees value in school - Sees school as fun.	Defines a good student as one who tries hard and puts forth effort.	-Traumatic family situation - Issues with peers.
Terah	Likes interacting with friends	Does more for teachers who check in with her and meet her needs.	Based on relationship with teachers.	-Lack of teacher relationships. -Start time of school.
Roberta	Sees self as popular.	-Tries to pay attention. -Asks for help. -Likes school and teachers.	-Likes working on projects. -Likes one on one help.	- Death of family member -Illness

Table 16 (cont'd)

Sam	Reclusive	-If more rewards, would come more often. -Good grades = more opportunities.	Works hard to stay on track.	Lives far away and misses the bus.
Luther	Awkward, misfit	Enjoys classes he is good at.	Shrinks from challenges.	-Bullying -Anxiety
Jordan	Gets along with anyone	-Understands and articulates the importance of school	Works hard when present	- Irritating Peers -Anxiety -Social Issues

Data collected by authors

Finding 2

Students who experience anxiety seem particularly unmotivated to attend school more frequently. Anxiety, a sense of worry, nervousness, and unease within schools is a common feeling among students (Merriam-Webster, 2015). However, when it is so prevalent and strong that it contributes to whether or not a student attends school, it is an issue that requires attention.

Jordan, a student who was identified as having an issue of chronic absenteeism stated that she had “really bad anxiety and sometimes the teachers here don’t know how to handle that and I’m not really in a program that helps me out with my anxiety so that kind of makes it hard for me to come to school.” She went on to explain,

I used to have really bad depression and sometimes that would affect my anxiety so it would make coming to school harder to deal with. Sometimes it comes back and it really affects me and it's hard to function correctly in school. I have really bad anxiety attacks in the morning and it makes it harder for me to go to school. I think if I had more assistance with dealing with my anxiety I would come to school more.

These comments suggested that individual factors of anxiety and peer support affected Jordan and certainly contributed to her absenteeism.

Another student, Cam, suggested that his preferred way to deal with anxiety was to “go hide in the corner and hopefully nobody notices me.”

Practitioners from all three schools had a great deal to say when asked about the challenges and anxiety that students experienced. Pine Creek practitioners shared that “sometimes when a student is so chronically absent and they get so far behind they just give up and they feel like why should I come?” Practitioners from Grassy Meadow Middle School echoed this by sharing that students who were chronically absent were, “overwhelmed and stressed, feeling like they can’t make up what they’ve missed and they just don’t really know what to do.”

In addition to being overwhelmed and unsure of what to do, one practitioner from Grass Meadow suggested that these students lost friends due to their lack of attendance as well.

My experience is as some other people have said here, lethargic and overwhelmed and stressed, in part perhaps because they’re struggling already academically and not doing well, kind of a sense of giving up already at this age and loss of hope. I mean that’s sad but that’s true, I’ve seen that. And then on top of that, they’re not doing well, then they miss as you said, they miss, they get farther behind and so it’s even more difficult, more stressful, and then they lose friends because let’s face it the people they’re friends with, if they’re not there, they’re not going to hang out with them because they’re going to want somebody that’s going to be there to be able to hang out with them so they lose their friendships if they’re chronically absent.

Grassy Meadow practitioners also added that they,

Think it kind of matters why they're not at school cause they can't be at school but they want to be, I think a lot of those students maybe when they are here are the ones that are trying hard and trying their best to keep up even though it's tough cause they miss so much versus the students who are not here because they choose not to be and they fight against coming here and they fight their parents and don't want to be here and then when they are here they may be mad about it, they might be frustrated, feeling behind again and not wanting to put the effort in to catch up.

An important consideration for discussion is how well students are equipped to deal with these challenges. A Grassy Meadow practitioner suggested that "Maybe it's lack of skills to deal with those social anxiety things or the home things that are happening, they (students) haven't been taught how to deal with those stressors in their life, so when those become overwhelming they want to sleep and stay home and remove themselves from situations."

An inventory of student skills may not be enough in many situations, as parent growth areas may need attention as well, as one Grassy Meadow practitioner added,

Sometimes the parents don't know what to do either when it's an anxiety issue. The parents are letting them stay home because of the anxiety and they don't know what resources are available here at school or in the community until either we reach out to them or they reach out to us and then we help them. We've had several students who would miss a lot of days because of social anxiety and then when we reached out to the parent, the parents were very frustrated that their child wasn't coming because of the anxiety.

Stony Creek Middle School practitioners shared a similar voice in stating, "The amount of work they've turned in that starts to show up on tests and quiz scores and sometimes it

becomes almost like an unsurpassable mountain, they almost feel overwhelmed and trying to come back from that can be a challenge.”

In considering motivation and goals, Stony Creek practitioners stated that

Some of them (students) don't know why they need this. Telling a 13-14 year old that this stuff is important so that they can get a diploma when they see their relatives just staying at home is hard for them to do, sometimes it's the path of least resistance and it's just easier to stay home.

If they're not here, it's just much more easy not to be here and so it just gets in that downward spiral habit of, well I'm not here, and then when they do come back, they're so lost it's just easy to give up and we want to make sure that they have some hope and being in school is important.

A deficit thinking mindset emerged when reviewing the focus group comments of practitioners who seemed to overstate the difficulty in students gaining a diploma when a relative is staying at home.

Another concern voiced was the distraction of their presence in class after missed days,

I do notice in classes related to attendance, the kids who are missing more days, those kids are acting out much more often than the kids who are here on a regular basis. It's like instead of focusing on what I need to do, I feel so overwhelmed that I'm just going to completely set that aside and then I'm just going to focus on getting others off-task so that I feel more comfortable with where I'm at.

Collectively, these comments revealed that many factors may have motivated students not to attend school. However, these factors should not become excuses that students use to be absent. Anxiety, stress, parenting issues with regard to expectations of their children, and other factors,

including deficit thinking emerged from the focus group and interview discussions, suggesting that these factors may contribute to chronic absenteeism by making the student unmotivated to attend.

Finding 3

Some students attribute academic success within schools to innate ability, and not effort and hard work. Through the interviews, there was a noticeable current regarding attribution of success. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, students arrive at self-perceptions of their abilities in many ways (Graham, 1991). Of the twelve students interviewed, the following four students added to the discussion of attribution.

Cam shared that “compared to a lot of other people, I am by far not as smart or probably will ever be as smart as them. But that happens, that’s just me. My mom always like, you’re so smart and I’m like, no I’m not really.”

Jordan shared, “Well, I don’t want to sound like conceited but I am smart in general, I am smart, it’s just that sometimes I don’t understand things as well as other people do so I’m not great grades or anything like that.”

Sarah elaborated on her ability to learn by sharing,

I just don’t understand it, I’m in algebra right now, I’m in a high school class and I just don’t understand it. Like my mom had this thing with math, like she had a click and my dad had this click with science and athletics and I just don’t have really either of those except the science part and so I kind of get confused and I try to get my mom to help me but she does help but she’s usually busy... So I can’t really do anything about it, like I tried and I’ve tried to get friends or the teacher to help me but it’s kind of hard...

Well, each of us have their own thing which two of them are into swim, one of them is in, well three of us were in basketball but two of us didn't make it this year and one of us did and then another one likes baseball but doesn't play and then another one is just really artsy like I am, I just think she's like higher up than I am, better at drawing, faster at reading, stuff like that.

I just feel like I can do better in those classes and they're just easier for me. I can do the stuff without as much help as I do in the other classes and I don't have to worry as much in those classes as I do in the other classes.

Here, Sarah revealed easier classes allowed for her to not have to work as hard, and to not have to worry as much. Her comments attributed success to innate skills and abilities that she and others possessed. Sarah preferred easier classes to harder classes, attributing lack of success in math to it having a "click" and not being able to comprehend and success in it.

Fred when asked "What is the hardest thing about school?," stated, "Math. Just looking at it like most problems, they look hard and if the problem is too hard, then I don't do it, I just leave it alone or I'll scribble on it because I don't want nobody else to see it or I usually crumble up my paper." This comment also suggested that the motivational theory of attribution was present in Fred's thinking and actions, as he stated that if problems look hard he simply does not do them. Fred did not attribute success to hard work and effort, and he did not appear to be willing to put in this hard work and effort to achieve.

Finding 4

Students perceive that their attendance in school does not impact their future goals. Kara did not want to go to school, had anxiety issues, and her family got sick a lot. However, she really "likes keeping her grades up," and she was hoping to dual enroll the following year and go

to Michigan State to be a veterinarian or photographer. Kara, during her seventh grade year had twenty-four absences. During her sixth grade year, she had twenty absences with fifty-two tardies. From kindergarten to seventh grade, she averaged 23.1 absences. Kara does not appear to understand that she is getting behind due to her absences and that her absenteeism will impact her ability to reach her ambitious goals.

Sarah averaged 14.1 absences from kindergarten through seventh grade. However, when asked about her future plans she stated:

I just feel like if I generally if I stay in school I can make a difference, I can go to college, I can get a better grade, but if I don't go to school, in fact quit going to school and I just don't, I can't go to college, I can't get a good job, I can't have a nice family. I look into the future a lot and I can see where I want to be and that's my goal is to get everything that I want to do and do what I want and I can make it there.

Sarah seemed to not quite recognize that in order to achieve her goals and get everything that she wanted, she needed to attend school on a more regular basis.

Fred, whose current school in Muskegon County did not receive a CA-60 Cumulative Student Record Folder from the school in Washtenaw County that he transferred from, according to him, is a student who has a history of being chronically absent. However, he wants "to go to college to be an electrical engineer or architect," and he thinks he will "probably play football and things like that." All three of these potential careers would be demanding for this learner. Fred commented he struggles at math, which would make engineering or architecture extremely difficult and require significant effort on his part. To this point, Fred, again according to his comments, has not shown the type of commitment required to overcome difficulties in math to achieve his career goals of an engineer or architect. His lack of follow through would also make

a career in football quite difficult. Athletes spend a significant amount of time honing their craft. Fred has stated if something is too difficult, he tends to give up.

Terah, when asked about her attendance, admittedly said, “I can say it’s bad.” From kindergarten to seventh grade, Terah averaged 24.7 absences. When asked about her future she verbalized that if she “goes to school then (she) has a better chance of getting into college.”

Ray, who averaged 17.4 absences from kindergarten through seventh grade, when asked about his attendance, stated that it is “pretty good I think.” Ray’s goal was to join the Marines upon graduation and follow in the footsteps of his brother. This example was a good illustration of the need to inform and communicate the difference in chronic or severely chronic absenteeism and the misconception of what acceptable, or “pretty good” attendance is. Perhaps some students do not see anything wrong with being absent ten percent of the school year or more. This suggested the need to begin explaining what an acceptable number of absences was, and why it was important to attend school regularly.

Seth, who averaged 16 absences a year from kindergarten through seventh grade, admitted “I miss a lot of school because sometimes I’m sick because of my diabetes.” Upon graduation, Seth had lofty goals, stating “I want to be a veterinarian.”

Of the twelve students interviewed, these six students had the most clearly articulated thoughts regarding their future. The juxtaposition however, of their past and current actions did not coalesce with their future plans and professions. Students had aspirations of future careers. However, their presence at school was critical for their learning, as well as for their future.

Part IV: Qualitative Analysis of Practitioner Focus Groups

We organized the adult focus group comments into the following categories: anxiety and giving up, belonging/staff-student relationships/culture-building, enabling and parenting deficits,

financial issues, deficit thinking and attribution theory, improved beliefs and support programs, school systems (parent letters, calls, meetings), and communication with students and families.

Practitioner focus group questions and discussion were centered on answering research question four, which states, “What are the current perceptions, policies, and practices of school staff concerning student attendance rates?” In this analysis, we were attempting to flesh out the details behind exactly what some schools were doing with regard to chronically absent and severely chronically absent students. We also attempted to hear and interpret the mindset from which they view their work with students and families who face daily challenges.

Finding 5

Practitioners within these schools may have a deficit-based understanding of student risk factors and the multiple challenges of home environment that can contribute to chronic absenteeism. Deficit thinking is a theory based on what lies within an individual. This thinking “blames the victim” for failure rather than looking at how external forces such as systems, schools, and communities are structured to ensure success or failure for our students (Valencia, 2010). In addition to the internal deficits and deficiencies, perceived or actual deficiencies in external home and environmental variables can lead practitioners toward a fixed mindset with regard to chronically absent students and their families (Valencia, 2010). The careful distinction is to recognize the variance in statements of fact and subjective statements that are based on feeling and opinion.

Pine Creek Middle School practitioners, when asked about student obstacles to attending school, looked to the parent’s role and responsibility in the process by stating,

An obstacle is some parents are the obstacles. They’re so coddling to their kids. They cover for them when they skip. I was talking to Regina and she said she was on the

phone talking to the parent, I'm watching Joey leave and he's out and he's heading to the car, he's skipping. And then an hour later they'll call and excuse them.

Grassy Meadow practitioners agreed that parents are a contributor to the challenge, by stating, They'd rather be a friend to them more than to be the parent. I've pulled kids out of cars cause their parents couldn't get them out of the car and I go in there and pull them out and once they get into the school, they're fine. It's just the parent doesn't know what to do and stuff. It's just parents they coddle a lot of the kids and they scream and they throw fits at home and it's like, I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do. I say, well just get them to the front door, we'll get them in from there and they're fine. Or they will come and get them and claim that they were sick and you can clearly see that this person who is skipping on his way to the car, laughing and bragging, is not sick. It's like, oh really, and you took this child home to look at TV, and play games? You've got to be kidding me.

Besides the social anxiety, I also know that some of it is the parent thing, that the parents are not making their kids come to school but then we also have parents who get up and go to work before their students leave the house and the kids will get up and then go back to bed.

In comments like this one, educators knowingly or unknowingly become fixated on anecdotes rather than determining what factors are contributing to what student attendance, or student behaviors on display. With a deficit mindset, the current perceptions will not allow for improvement.

Grassy Meadow practitioners added that it is not just parents that are enabling students, as they voiced frustration with medical professionals by stating,

I know we have some parents who have the resources to get their physicians to collaborate their claims of illness and that's a problem,

One consideration voiced by Grassy Meadow practitioners is that parents may not know what to do, as they shared by saying,

And sometimes the parents don't know what to do either when it's an anxiety issue. The parents are letting them stay home because of the anxiety and they don't know what resources are available here at school or in the community until either we reach out to them or they reach out to us and then we help them. We've had several students who would miss a lot of days because of social anxiety and then when we reached out to the parent, the parents were very frustrated that their child wasn't coming because of the anxiety.

Active communication with the parent and student is essential. As students get older, teachers expect the students to assume responsibility to handle the academic and social demands. Many times, due to factors outside of student control, students need assistance in navigating the challenges of the middle years. Students expressed shock in the lack of relationships with teachers and many have a hard time handling the increased workload (Roderick, 2003)

The practitioner conversation continued at all three schools by taking a closer look at the parent perceptions and values with regard to the importance of school. Practitioners from Stony Creek stated,

Some of them to be real honest have said, their parents, it didn't really bother them whether they were going to be there or not. My parents said I could stay home so I stayed home. Well you know that bumped you up to eight absences? Yeah. And the

priority wasn't placed there by the family so that it didn't really have any impact on them.

Another Stony Creek practitioner shared that,

When the education is not valued at home, then the perspective is a little bit different so the kids that are missing, for some of them, it's like my parents wake up every day and they don't have a job and they don't really care what I do. Or there's struggles that are happening at home that are greater than education where maybe you're trying to figure out how you're going to get fed that day, how are you going to get food and it becomes more important so to speak than the education and so I think some of those things are going on where because the education isn't as high as we might want it to be in terms of the adults, then the kids aren't valuing education as much or because both parents are working two jobs, then I do have to babysit. And that responsibility becomes greater than me getting an education.

A Grassy Meadow practitioner, when speaking to the parental challenges states,

There are the coping skills, behavioral skills, social skills that sometimes the parents don't necessarily have themselves and first of all they're not necessarily a good role model or not the best role model for the kids and therefore they have a hard time then teaching their children or modeling for the children those really good positive behaviors and ways of dealing with life cause everybody gets lemons and you gotta know how to deal with them.

In looking for answers to why chronic absenteeism is an issue in their community, a Stony Creek practitioner shared that "This might be a community where culturally a certain percentage is repetitively absent." The staff at each of these schools would benefit from looking

deeper into the issue and identifying if in fact there is a certain portion of the population is repetitively absent and what the possible explanations for those absences are.

Another Stony Creek practitioner continued in this vein of generalizations by stating,

We have certain students who are going to be successful no matter what, if they had to walk three miles to school, they'd either like school or just know it's something they've got to do so they're going to do it but we also have, and I would say this is almost the majority, that are not internally motivated and if there's not something pushing behind it, then what's your why or any of those things, if there's not something driven behind or somebody pushing them along or asking them or care about in front, they may not see any value in it.

In discussing financial challenges that might be contributing to attendance issues, practitioners mentioned the following statements that paint a picture of financial stress and extreme challenge for students, parents, practitioners, and entire communities:

PCMS: "What I've noticed in the last 5-10 years is that this area is in deeper economic, what's the word I want to use? We have a bigger issue than Ann Arbor because of the closing of General Motors and Ford Motors. We have a transitory population. We have a lot of people leaving and then other people coming in from the Detroit area because the houses were in foreclosure, they got taken over."

PCMS: "It's still in a downturn. The economy may be turning around even in Washtenaw County but in [our towns], we're still in the downturn."

GMMS: "[Our city] has a very high rental property, I don't remember what the percentage is so a lot of our students live in rental homes, their families don't own homes,

so along with what (my colleague) was saying that we have a lot of kids that come from low-income families.”

GMMS: “We have 38 kids currently that are what we consider homeless which means that they’re living in, most of them are in double-up situations. We have a lot of families who live with other family members or with friends because they can’t afford housing.”

SCMS: “I think that also due to some of the economic things that we’re experiencing I think that students see their parents having a high school education or having a two or four-year degree and they can’t find a job so they think what is that, I’m going to do all this to what end.”

These comments by educators at all schools are examples of a potential deficit mindset on display by practitioners across the state. Comments like “coming from Detroit,” having “Section 8 vouchers” and having a “high rental population” say nothing about the academic aptitude of students, the work ethic, or the student commitment to learning. Before that student even walks in the door, the teacher may be unintentionally assuming the student is unable to achieve the standard set forth. The current perceptions may possibly lead to the current results. Teachers seeing students heading to the car “laughing and bragging” and not making contact with the parent or the student, or employing an intervention could only lead to the student continuing to miss class and the parent continuing to “enable” the child. Even when teachers did recognize there may be a greater responsibility pulling at the child they had no actionable interventions to assist the child or the family.

Finding 6

Some schools have systems in place for notifying the parents/guardians of absent students via phone calls, letters, and parent conferences. Systems of notifying students and parents or

guardians of progressive absenteeism were apparent in two of the three schools studied. Pine Cone Middle School sent home frequent attendance notices, and they “have the parents come in for parent meetings with an administrator and we talk to them about what is going on.” Pine Cone Middle School staff members also stated, “We constantly are contacting the parent. The biggest thing I think that’s making a difference for the chronic truant is the prodding that we are sending these notices out and reminding these parents that they are mandated to send their children to school.”

Grassy Meadow staff explained their process in more depth by sharing,

We require them to come in for conferences if their child is a chronic absentee. And during those conferences we talk with them and brainstorm about how do we help because the whole goal of the constant letters and conferences and things and plus we meet with the children too, I also meet with the children and ask the person directly, why are you absent? What is going on? What do you need? The last thing that happens if we get the total non-compliant child and parent is then we file a truancy.

This flow of events was a great example of what schools should have in place to deal with chronically absent students. Holding student conferences, asking relational questions, and working with the child unless the child and parent are not compliant, and then truancy charges are placed. The Grassy Meadow’s attendance secretary described a more expanded look into this school’s system as she spoke to the process at her school,

And I’m the attendance secretary so I monitor the attendance throughout the day and contact teachers or the guidance office if it looks like a student was present for the first hour or two and then suddenly is absent, I call and say, did they leave the building? So we sort of just monitor, I monitor throughout the day and if I have a question, I’ll get hold

of the teacher, call them or email them and say, was so and so in your class today?, and make sure that it's correct.

Stony Creek also had a similar system, however they had an additional resource that they were able to offer for the first time this year,

We have a family resource center located here in our building and what we do is every other week we sit down, we pull the kids' attendance and we are either pulling the kids down that are here or making phone calls home to find out why they are not here and if and when they hit 10 absences or more, we send them over to our district attorney so that they can file truancy and start down those processes.

Required meetings with parents, coaching for students to determine reasons for absences, hourly and daily absence reports, truancy charges, counseling toward home-schooling, and communication are the current policies and practices that were present in the schools studied.

The tone of the practices began with student and parent conferences and became one of business, with talk of truancy charges and district attorneys. A close look at the systems in place in each school district and each intermediate school district becomes necessary to ensure that the meeting of student needs has taken place, and that student situations are understood before students and families enter a journey involving the law.

Bridging the practitioner and student perception and reality gap

Some of the claims made in this study were arrived at due to the differences in practitioner and student perceptions. As an example, Mason, one of the students from the case study, stated that practitioners needed to "stop talking about how they're going to make a difference at school and actually do something." A second student, Terah, strongly desired both empathy and understanding from her teachers when she shared, "I'm into school now, they

(practitioners) just don't care...I kind of get sick and tired, so I'll be like, Mom's sick, I kind of don't want to go no more." Jordan, another case study participant suffered from anxiety, and she mentioned that she has even sought out help outside of school, but has yet to get any advice on dealing with her depression. Jordan also mentioned that she needed more than the assistance that she was getting. These three students point toward examples of real-life challenges within the practitioner-student partnership. Two of the students did not see practitioners as the change agents that they arguably need to be, and the third student, Jordan, has yet to receive support for her depression, which is a primary reason as to why she is absent often. From the student perspective, students are chronically absent because of lack of practitioner and student relationships, as well as internal challenges that students experience.

A strong summary from the focus groups that was shared earlier, was from a Stony Creek practitioner who stated some of the inherent issues with regard to student absences are that education is not valued at home, parents do not have a job and do not care what students do, struggles that are greater – such as ensuring enough food for the day, and parents who are not at home. This practitioner poignantly sums up his assertions by stating that this responsibility "becomes greater than (the student) getting an education." This deficit perspective offers students an immediate excuse to not meet learning expectations. While students share that they were not attending school due to external factors, as well as relationship deficits among practitioners and students – practitioners believed that students were not attending school due to other reasons such as uncaring parents, enabling medical practitioners, and a myriad other reasons. The disconnect between what each stakeholder group thinks is going on with regard to this challenge, and what is actually going on, is a point of contention that could easily be solved.

Limitations

Considering the context of the sites that were chosen to conduct our quantitative and qualitative methods it should be noted that the processes used to collect attendance data and the culture of a school district can vary substantially. A district's ability to staff adequately and thereby monitor attendance consistently may indeed impact attendance data, or the quality of the attendance data. A limitation is that definition of absent or present differs in many districts throughout the state. An additional limitation is a school district's culture as it relates to openness. It should be noted that each of the focus groups featured a mix of support, professional, and administrative staff. This may have an impact on the responses provided by individuals, thereby possibly limiting our access to a greater degree of candor. Additionally, factors like teacher turnover, student mobility, staffing levels, the extent of schools of choice students, and geographic locations would indicate differing contexts for different students. However, according to predominant research, our findings and recommendations may demonstrate commonality across varying demographics. Future research may be directed toward better understanding the nuances among schools and their attendance rates.

The limited student response to our call for participants in this study decreased our ability to gain a wider perspective of all students that were chronically absent or severely chronically absent. We recognized through the number of students who chose to participate, that an incomplete sample of chronically and severely chronically absent students were available for interview. Additionally, several students who returned their consent to participate form were absent on the interview day. This further limited our interviewee pool to those who returned their consent form and were present. From the sheer fact that these students were responsible enough or their parents were responsive enough to return the consent form, one might infer that we only interviewed a particular type of chronically absent or severely chronically absent student. Further described as the type that were engaged enough to respond to the request to participate.

Considering the limited number of students that were interviewed we are not able to make large scale generalizations or make a clear and convincing argument as to why students in one school demonstrated a higher rate of chronic absenteeism than another. This limitation is a result of not having a larger set of interviewees. This limited our ability to pick up on the tendencies of a particular school or building. While it may have appeared that a particular school was unraveling as demonstrated by student attendance, our limited selection of students did not allow a particular cause to emerge, nor did it expose a causal relationship among factors within a particular school.

The small sample interviewed limited our ability to determine if the patterns discovered are indeed the most important. Yet, it does not limit the importance in recognizing the individuality of the responses, and the uniqueness needed to resolve a self-identified cause for absence and specific course of action to remedy this behavior.

A challenge in determining the reason students are absent is that the student is the primary source as to why they themselves do not come to school. Students are also least likely to recognize things in their own life as contributing to attendance or lack of attendance at school as their exposure to different home and community environments is limited. Things attributed to deficit thinking could be things that are invisible to students, yet the teachers perceive. This limits our ability to link teachers' observations and student reasons for their absences. This limitation makes it difficult to provide a clear connection between teacher beliefs and actual student reasoning and leads us to theorize that deficit thinking may be a cause for the lack of action from schools.

Chapter Five: Discussion & Conclusion

This research project intended to investigate chronic absenteeism from the student's perspective, create awareness with respect to implicit implications of attendance patterns on student development and explore the significance of school intervention practices. School attendance is often relegated as an issue of compliance; however the data suggests that the reader should view school attendance as not only a mere matter of student record but also that of a socio-academic behavior. This project focused on issues that are applicable to all schools, but we focused on data representing two counties in Michigan—Washtenaw and Muskegon—with similar demographics, yet interesting distinctions. In doing so, this study examined the candid and diverse perspectives of students, teachers, counselors and administrators regarding causes of the problem of chronic absenteeism and potential solutions.

Prevailing research shows that attendance is imperative for student success. Student attendance is a lead indicator of how students navigate their academic career. Successful school outcomes as well as successful life outcomes have been linked to positive and negative attendance patterns respectively. Students who are frequently absent from school are at a much greater risk of poor self-concept, poor school performance, retention, and dropping out (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Stages of transition are critical times for student maturation and participation in school. The transition from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school are noted by relevant research to be the most significant stages of change within a student's academic career (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). We considered the transition experienced in middle school of great significance because attendance patterns formed by the end of a student's 8th grade year are shown to be probable indicators of student dropout rates upon entering high school.

Middle school students struggle with a sense of self, understanding their place in society as well as their position in their own school community, so we chose to consider many of these challenges in our study of the real stories to why students choose chronic absenteeism at this stage in their education. We hypothesized that students did not feel a sense of belonging to the school environment; they experienced a high level of anxiety; or they were effectively disengaged (Pellerin, 2005) from the process of education altogether before conducting our study. Interestingly enough, much of our suppositions, in accordance with the research of accessible literature on the subject, were confirmed in our study by participants. We also felt as if this study strengthened the research on the importance of seeking, hearing, understanding, and acting on the real stories of absent students. Another area of we explored was how the current policies and practices in place are not effectively addressing, preventing, or curbing absenteeism in schools at a high enough rate.

Working with the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, we elected to conduct this study as a focus on how chronic absenteeism may be related to student dropout and disengagement from school. However, as the project progressed, it also evolved into something even more significant incorporating Muskegon County with implications for further study of attendance as behavioral patterns across Michigan. We disaggregated relevant quantitative data to explore correlations and significant patterns for chronically absent students. We then gathered qualitative data through student and school staff interviews. Interview discussions allowed us to gain a firm understanding of causes of student and staff behaviors. This insight allowed us to infuse relevant research theory with participant and practitioner experience in our study.

This study attempts to address four research points 1) identifying the current state of student attendance and chronic absenteeism in schools within one large county, 2) examining the

characteristics of students who are chronically absent, and 3) linking absenteeism to facets of students' lives, while 4) considering implications of school policy, perceptions and practices regarding chronic absenteeism.

Summary of Major Findings

We gained tremendous insight from staff and students in this study. Our findings revealed that many students perceived their attendance in school did not impact their future goals. Students were also inclined to attribute academic success within school to innate ability instead of hard work and preparation. A significant discovery included students who experience anxiety and utilize chronic absenteeism as a strategy of avoidance. This knowledge contributes to our understanding that the majority of students interviewed also had very unique attendance challenges as well as multivariate motivations for observed attendance patterns. We also found that some practitioners within schools may harbor a deficit-based understanding of student variables and challenges that contribute to a lack of support for a growth mindset. We found that most schools have systems in place for notifying parents/guardians of student absences, yet many times these methods are only compliance oriented. We also found that some students preferred programmatic structural changes as a solution to chronic absenteeism. When completing this study, we found that a focus on county statistics was misleading as to the severity of chronic absenteeism countywide, so we focused on the individual schools that inherently skewed the attendance trend for each county.

Our research study into the real story behind chronic absenteeism has elicited findings consistent with much of the literature on chronic absenteeism and at risk indicators of middle school students as they navigate their school experience. We were fortunate to investigate student perceptions of school absenteeism and some of the causes thereof. Consistent with the

literature, we noticed that, many times, chronic absenteeism is an active behavior in which students choose not to attend as a method of avoidance instead of the result of apathetic fallout from at risk factors (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). Throughout this study, we recognized that at risk indicators for chronic absenteeism could go unrecognized for years until students are given a voice. This study has the potential to empower a subset of the student population that is self-medicating high levels of anxiety with chronic absenteeism. Our findings are based on thorough evaluation of current efforts to mitigate chronic absenteeism at the school level and how these observations connect to the development of research based proactive response systems for chronically absent students.

Evaluation of Current Strategy Based on Student Study

Our investigation into current strategies to curb chronic absenteeism overwhelmingly shows that they have been unidirectional in that the response from educators focuses on the independent act of not attending school instead of why students are absent as prevailing research suggests (Scott, Alter, & McQuillan, 2010). Many times, individual behaviors determined to be most disturbing overshadow the need to conduct a more comprehensive study of the stimuli that produces such behavior. Our findings indicate that, although identifying chronically absent students is foundational to addressing the problem of absenteeism, it is a critical, yet initial step in structuring a solution (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Development of Proactive Response Systems for Chronically Absent Students

In a publication from the American Psychological Association it was stated that "As children progress through the sixth and eighth grades, poor academic performance in math and English, low reading scores, absenteeism, and disengagement from school become very reliable predictors of whether they will later drop out of high school;" however, it suggests that schools

use these indicators as symptoms instead of diagnoses of impending failure (American Psychological Association, 2012). Research shows that effective schools with high attendance rates and low chronic absenteeism have some form of early warning/indication system to alert the need for intervention; however some early indicators can be inhibitive for particular groups of at risk children because of the potential for misdiagnoses through cultural barriers and lack of understanding (Stuebing, Barth, Trahan, Reddy, Miciak, & Fletcher, 2014). With an ever evolving population of students with various and perpetually changing needs, varied, timely, and culturally responsive strategies are essential.

Research shows approaches that have produced positive outcomes for students have done so through family partnerships, safe environments, caring relationships, cooperative learning, and high expectations (American Psychological Association, 2012). There should be school wide responses for general attendance patterns that show cause for concern such as letters sent to parents and structured communication efforts, but also a more targeted approach that addresses the individual student in need of Tier II or higher interventions. Studies have shown that teachers and administrators must also implement positive disciplinary techniques; although absent or tardy students are contacted, monitored, and possibly penalized, reward systems that promote academic achievement and school attendance are necessary as well (Carswell & Hanlon, 2009). This is consistent with many student responses that positive incentives would motivate them to attend more often.

Many staff members in our study found that most school to home contact was essentially unwanted and that there was a tenuous relationship established. They explained that interaction with parents would at times be hostile because the parents perceived their communication as negative and opportunities for the school to berate them or their child. Many believe that

classroom and school interventions that foster parent involvement in positive ways are likely to have overwhelmingly more positive effects on students as well as more productive parent interaction than just informing parents of social deficiencies of students (Brooks & Stitt, 2014). According to Carswell's study, measuring the benefit and response to interventions that promote family participation showed that highlighting the unique talents of the students increases engagement and serves as a motivating factor for increasing parental involvement (Carswell & Hanlon, 2009). Therefore, creating ways at the beginning of the school year to include parents in activities in a positive way may lower their defenses and thereby foster a partnership for anticipated future contact efforts. Although this brief study investigates the plight of a few schools in southeast Michigan, it has implications for a wider audience in addressing issues of chronic absenteeism. We recognize that the task of motivating children and families to partner with schools to increase attendance and performance is daunting and that there is no "silver bullet" that can immediately transform attendance patterns in our school. However, we offer this attendance study as a juxtaposition of endemic problems to research based solutions. The recommendations to follow are by no means a "catch all" for eliminating chronic absences in school, but in our attempt to weave an intricate interdependent network of intervention strategies, we provide a potential net.

Multi-Tiered Intervention Strategy

This study exposes a particular need to address chronic absenteeism in middle school through a multi-tiered process of intervention and support. The framework is structured on a three tiered model, similar to that of the Response to Intervention process in which schools use data to identify, monitor, and provide evidence-based interventions for students at risk academic failure (VanDerHeyden, et al., 2016). Based on our findings, we have structured a proactive

process integrated with generally accepted practices intended to curb truancy and absenteeism for all students.

The first tier of our Truancy & Chronically Absenteeism Intervention (TCAI) model is generally applicable to entire student body. School leadership is responsible for ensuring that the goals and expectations regarding attendance and the supports made available to students are clearly communicated to all stakeholders involved with student performance. All staff, students, parents, and relevant community partners understand the requirements for adequate student attendance as well as a structured positive rewards system that motivates desired outcomes (VanDerHeyden, et al., 2016). The leadership crafts this Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports framework. Also, a critical piece of Tier I is the CA60—cumulative student records folder—evaluation of all students that examines attendance patterns and recognizes indicators of needed support for individual students with troubling attendance patterns. Staff monitors student absences and initiates communication with parents after 3 absences notifying parents/guardians of the necessity of a conference.

Tier II focuses on students who have persistently poor attendance after Tier I interventions are exhausted. These students participate in an interview that assesses their level of engagement, perception of school, and need for appropriate motivators such as mentors or personal rewards for achieving attendance goals. Parents are continuously involved in this process through meetings and home visits. The school also provides the family with an option to restructure the student’s schedule or readjust classes if feasible. Under the Tier II progression, staff provides students with the opportunity to receive counseling in which students complete a “Root Cause Checklist” (Washtenaw County School-Justice Partnership, 2016) that helps to identify potential causes for absenteeism.

This tiered response model utilizes various interventions that include methods of providing student and family support. However, even with well-established, research based interventions found in Tier I & Tier II strategies, our research suggests that some students will continue to need additional intervention that requires community involvement. Students who do not respond positively may require more intense and individualized interventions at the Tier III level. Schools may advocate for special needs testing, refer the student to community agencies that address mental and physical health needs of students, or transfer the student to an alternative school setting that is most appropriate for them. Typically, alternative options are presented after failure and withdrawal (Roderick, 2003), as opposed to being a worthwhile option for a willing and able participant who is ready for the next chapter in their life. The most important goal of the school is for every student to thrive, however, after the staff has exhausted Tier I and II possibilities, referral to a district, county, or prosecutor's office is the last resort. See Appendix F for an example of a multi-tiered intervention strategy.

Implications for Practice

Our research delves into intricate causes of absenteeism for a subset of students who volunteered to participate in our study. We recognize that this study has limitations in scope, population quantity, and manner in which students were selected. However, our sample population was representative of the general makeup of students in these two counties; and participants were candid and eager to share their stories. Further research through a replication of this study with a more extensive student population sample is a recommendation for future study. While conducting this research, theoretical and practical strategies merged with research to form plausible recommendations for consideration. In trying to form typologies for who one would consider the chronically absent student, the clear message is that there is no definite

persona. We learned that each individual has a particular conglomerate of factors that constitute reasons to why they choose the behavior of absenteeism. Although there may be similarities, determining solutions for this challenging population must be considered after communicating with the individual. Based on findings from this study and the prevailing literature regarding chronic absenteeism, the following recommendations for Washtenaw and Muskegon counties may be beneficial to decreasing chronic absenteeism.

Students' Views on School and Future Goals

Our study revealed that many students perceived their attendance in school did not impact their future goals. They did not understand the correlation of attendance as preparation for academic success to attendance as preparation for professional success. This connection is implicit at our subject schools and most students we interviewed did not recognize it. Research shows that demonstrating relevancy in school settings improves student engagement and attendance (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006). Schools may benefit from incorporating an explicit connection of life skills such as goal-setting and career development to academic instruction. Our student population overwhelmingly understood the connection between getting good grades and achieving academic and professional goals, but they did not prioritize the non-cognitive behaviors inherent to reaching their goals. Goal theorists generally separate achievement goal theory—academic and behavioral motivation can be understood as attempts to achieve goals—into two major categories being mastery and performance based tasks. Mastery involves increased understanding of skills or knowledge, while performance goals required reaching a pre-defined performance level or outperforming others (Seifert, 2004). Helping students develop performance goals that align with attendance behavior extremely important. By allowing the student to create their own goals and structuring

performance checkpoints for those goals with adult guidance, students are able to connect their attendance with academic performance. The literature suggests that building non-cognitive skills in students who have at risk indicators is critical to positive development (American Psychological Association, 2012). The first step in changing attendance patterns is to recognize the context surrounding the individual and their attendance pattern. “The essential question is not how to change students to improve their behavior but rather how to create contexts that better support students in developing critical attitudes and learning strategies necessary for their academic success” (Farrington, et al, p.76).

Students’ Self-Concept

We also found that many students saw their type of intelligence as being fixed in that they attributed their success and failure in certain areas to what they saw themselves as being proficient. We have learned through this study that chronically absent students are actually exhibiting a behavior of avoidance. Although their methods are as diverse as their motivations, the chronically absent student is many times purposely avoiding school (Jolivette & Nelson, 2010). A student mentioned that he was comfortable failing math class because he has never been good at math. Another student stated that English Language Arts doesn’t come to her as easily as math. Students in our population described themselves as intellectually one-dimensional in many cases and schools can combat this dysfunction by providing more opportunities for success in all classrooms (Jolivette & Nelson, 2010). Techniques such as differentiation, modification, and personalization of challenging material can provide students with greater academic confidence and motivation to practice further (Springer & Noddings, 2005).

Programmatic Support

We found that students were interested in adjusting their schedules to improve their attendance patterns. Students in our study have stated that a major barrier to making to school is that they miss the bus if they need to wake up earlier than other students because they are farthest away on the bus route. Therefore, based on our research, we've found that it is worth pursuing to find ways to restructure school as a programmatic intervention. Research suggests that extended learning time programs, including extended school day (ESD), extended school year (ESY), and expanded learning opportunities (ELO) programs that provide academic services during out-of-school time hours, can be effective in improving student performance (Lauer, 2006).

An extended school day would allow students who are persistently late to school or miss the bus to come in at a later time and dismiss from school later than the regular population. When students were asked if this would be a better option for them, many stated that it would. An additional option for allowing students to reach 90% attendance for the school year is to extend the year for students who are chronically absent. Many schools consider this option compulsory summer school. Although Lauer (2006) found that Extended School Year (ESY) has been found to be more appropriate for elementary students, it may be an effective method of addressing early at-risk indicators of chronically absent students. Much of the literature also suggests that inverted or nontraditional learning time programs may be more advantageous for low-income, low-performing, or otherwise disadvantaged students because it disrupts negative external influences on student performance such as sporadic attendance (Redd, Boccanfuso, Walker, Knewstubb, Moore, & Princiotta, 2012).

Get to Know Each Student's Story through Data Systems and CA-60 Reviews

One student was particularly hampered by clinically diagnosed depression as to why she found it difficult to attend school. Without getting to know the students, nuances like these would go unnoticed throughout a student's academic career. This student communicated that she was unable to find the assistance she needed notwithstanding her efforts in seeking guidance from administration, teachers, family, etc. There was no information regarding this condition in her file and she was relegated to dealing with it the best way she knew how, which apparently because chronic absenteeism. Even if schools are not fiscally capable of providing wraparound services, including social skills instruction as well as life skills strategies in daily activities that address topics such as managing emotions effectively, establishing positive goals, self-efficacy, effective coping skills, and resiliency would improve student attendance from the students' perspectives may help tremendously. Research promoted by The American Psychological Association posits that building non-cognitive skills and strengths in students who have at risk indicators is critical to positive development (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Allensworth (2013) points out that attendance is an early sign of failure and withdrawal from the learning environment and it can be observed as early as the 1st week of school. Using the school's Student Information System, it is important to ensure that the district and each building are maximizing use of their system to inform them of necessary attendance information. Early warning systems that are built into student information systems will let practitioners know at the end of each year, who their students at risk for chronic absenteeism are for the next school year. Prior to the school year, it is important for practitioners to review the cumulative student record folder of each of these students with the intent of better understanding their situation. With this knowledge and foresight students that are identified from prior years as being at risk

for high attendance will meet with practitioners and parents to determine a success plan for the beginning of the next school year.

Teachers in early elementary grades often perceive students who are likely to struggle in school either academically or socially and rarely use this opportunity to enact early response interventions (Stuebing, Barth, Trahan, Reddy, Miciak, & Fletcher, 2014). The research shows us that young people with successful trends as well as those with at risk tendencies do not suddenly emerge without warning signs and are rarely unpredictable. A brief investigation into the CA60 documentation for many of the students in this study demonstrated recurring themes of student patterns of attendance that have developed from Kindergarten (Dupere, Leventhal, Dion, Crosnoe, Archambault, & Janosz, 2014).

As much of the literature suggests, conducting a quantitative study of student absenteeism and the effectiveness of current policy in response to this behavior is an important phase of changing poor attendance patterns. Without the appropriate data, it is difficult for policy makers, educators, and parents to make informed decisions regarding student outcomes and organizational practices (Wolf & Wolf, 2008). This study of the real stories behind chronic absenteeism allowed the researchers a chance to take a critically objective look at systematic response protocols for addressing absenteeism in various schools. We noticed that schools had a well-developed identification process established and the response to chronic absenteeism included notifying parents of attendance patterns through phone calls, letters mailed home, parent meetings, grade retention, and/or collaboration with local authorities. However, there were few, if any, inclusive strategies for students and family partnerships.

During the evaluation process, schools should take a quantitative look at the effectiveness of current strategies by correlating frequency and type of response to the impact on student

attendance. Although Tier I type responses such as letters from the school are effective for part of the population, the research suggests that students who are considered chronically absent do not respond to initial school letters regarding attendance (Lane, Oakes, Ennis, & Hirsch, 2014). In fact, we noticed that by the time this population responds to a letter intervention, the school year is coming to a close. Unfortunately, without a yearly student attendance study many teachers, parents, and administrators will be ill-equipped to address specific needs of chronically absent students. We observed that school interventions implemented from year to year are filed away and student attendance intervention cycles effectively reset each year. Therefore, we noticed with our population that these students tend to perpetually repeat the same patterns of attendance without utilizing insight from previous interventions. Patterns in attendance can be followed over time and an intentional focus on these elements can make an impact (Allensworth, 2013). Benner and Wang (2014) recognized that the shifting of attendance trajectories often signaled disengagement. Therefore, interventions to address a recognized decline in attendance must be swift and timely. The timing and consistency of the intervention is critical to its success. It cannot be too early or before the individual is experiencing stress and it cannot be too late or after other psychosocial factors have begun to influence the individual such as motivation or perseverance (Garcia, 2012).

Deficit Thinking From Staff Perspectives

We also found that some practitioners within schools may harbor a deficit-based understanding of student variables and challenges that contribute to a lack of support for a growth mindset. This phenomenon focuses on perceptions of student challenges rather than their potential, which deteriorates staff expectations and efforts to implement innovative interventions for students (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Many would argue that attendance is the result of a

culmination of external factors that cannot be controlled within school borders (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Consistent with this ideology, our study exposes the fact that many staff members view such factors as parent involvement, student apathy, transportation, parent marital status, housing, socio-economic status, educational attainment, substance abuse patterns, medical issues, etc. as insurmountable odds in changing negative attendance patterns. Alternatively, others would attribute absenteeism to factors controlled by the school within the realms of student engagement, teacher workload, or instructional quality (Boyle, 1988; Goldstein, 2003; Kearney & Ross, 2014; Velloso & Vadeboncoeur, 2015). After all, a community encompasses a multitude of influences on student behavior in school as well as out of school. However, our research through student interviews indicates that schools can have a particularly strong influence on student engagement and desire to attend through culture building. This influence is especially important when young people do not experience successful outcomes within, or outside of the school setting.

One of the most prevalent methods of addressing chronic student attendance and disengagement is evaluating current program philosophies regularly and using the findings discovered from staff culture research in creating the most inclusive, academically and emotionally nurturing environment for students (Brooks & Stitt, 2014). Some students in our research population discussed their performance from the perspective of having low self-efficacy because of how they see themselves and how others within the school community supposedly see them. Schools can foster a universally positive program philosophy based on a growth mindset uninhibited by deficit thinking from which many students considered at risk have suffered for most of their educational careers. These philosophies emphasize that it is the educational

approach from the educator rather than the student that needs to change in order to empower the individual student (Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

In addition to the philosophies and beliefs promoted at the school level, the staff must subscribe to these beliefs in order for them to be effective. Based on considerable research (Quinn & Poirier, 2006), we understand that staff must truly believe that that all students can improve behavioral patterns, including that of attendance, despite perceived obstacles such as family or transportation. These programs communicate and support high expectations for positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth in all students. Staff must recognize that for students identified as having a higher risk of disengagement, truancy, or dropping out, interventions need to be more targeted, more personalized, more creative, and more aggressive. Involving the parent is extremely important, but only if there is personalized contact by someone with knowledge of the situation. Daily phone calls home before school for a targeted group of students was shown to have a positive effect on student attendance in a study of based on improving student attendance (Marvul, 2011). Students in this study stated that they did not feel as isolated and that they were important to someone at the school.

Compliance Mindset versus an Improvement Mindset

One of the most prevalent methods of addressing chronic student attendance and disengagement is evaluating current program philosophies regularly and using the findings discovered from staff culture research in creating the most inclusive, academically and emotionally nurturing environment for students (Brooks & Stitt, 2014). Some students in our research population discussed their performance from the perspective of having low self-efficacy because of how they see themselves and how others within the school community supposedly see them as well. Schools can foster a universally positive program philosophy based on a growth

mindset uninhibited by deficit thinking from which many students considered at risk have suffered for most of their educational careers. These philosophies emphasize that it is the educational approach from the educator rather than the student that needs to change in order to empower the individual student (Quinn & Poirier, 2006).

Our investigation into current strategies to curb chronic absenteeism overwhelmingly shows that they have been unidirectional in that the response from educators focuses on the independent act of not attending school instead of why students are absent as prevailing research suggests (Scott, Alter, & McQuillan, 2010). Many times, individual behaviors determined to be most disturbing overshadow the need to conduct a more comprehensive study of the stimuli that produces such behavior. Our findings indicate that, although identifying chronically absent students is foundational to addressing the problem of absenteeism, it is a critical, yet initial step in structuring a solution (American Psychological Association, 2012). We noticed that many schools ignore truant students or socially promote them without initiating appropriate interventions as they matriculate from one grade to the next. Schools that do not pair identification with intervention subsequently developed a “compliance mindset, as opposed to an improvement mindset” (J. Yun, personal communication, February 13, 2016) when structuring prototypical responses to chronic absenteeism. We noticed that many schools simply passively reached out to parents through calls, letters, and threats, rather than actively engaging them in the process of educating their children, which according to Tobin & Sprague, has the opposite of the intended effect on student behaviors (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

During the evaluation process, schools should take a quantitative look at the effectiveness of current strategies by correlating frequency and type of response to the impact on student attendance. Although Tier I type responses such as letters from the school are effective for part

of the population, the research suggests that students who are considered chronically absent do not respond to initial school letters regarding attendance. In fact, by the time this population responds to a letter intervention, the school year is coming to a close. Unfortunately, without a yearly student attendance study many teachers, parents, and administrators will be ill-equipped to address specific needs of chronically absent students. The school interventions implemented are filed away and student attendance patterns effectively reset each year. Therefore, these students tend to perpetually repeat the same patterns of attendance.

Mentors & Check In/Check Out Process

Many students we interviewed in this study mentioned that they feel a strong connection with one or two teachers at their schools that motivate them to attend their particular classes. Students suggested that they feel accepted for their individuality and uniqueness by these particular individuals and seek their guidance. This finding correlates with Zweig's interpretation of the importance of having an adult support system at the school level. A school-based adult mentor can be a major component of student success for students with chronic absenteeism. In 2001, The Coalition for Juvenile Justice identified various barriers to education within school and outside of the school. A prevalent barrier to education is the lack of adult support and mentors (Zweig, 2003). By getting to know each student, practitioners will understand the unique needs of each individual. Students may divulge circumstances that may require the assignment of a mentor/teacher who will check in with them prior to them leaving school each day, as well as first thing in the morning. This allows a practitioner to ensure that students have everything they need for learning prior to leaving for the day, as well as all necessary tools, support and resources for success each morning. Some students may begin on a daily check in schedule, and others may only need this two to three times a week. The important

action in this is for personal time with a caring adult in the building for each chronically absent student each day. Marvul (2011) agrees that making daily phone calls home before school for a targeted group of students was shown to have a positive effect on student attendance.

Self-Medicating With School Avoidance

A significant discovery was that students experience anxiety in school and utilize chronic absenteeism as a strategy of avoidance. This knowledge contributes to our understanding that the majority of students interviewed also had very unique attendance challenges as well as multivariate motivations for observed attendance patterns based on peer group anxiety.

Many students in our sample discussed having a high level of anxiety regarding attending school. Some students mentioned that they felt isolated, unimportant, or excluded from the school culture. Alternatively, some students discussed feeling targeted because of their lack of affiliation with the school community. Our study shows that schools may unearth these peripheral components that contribute to student anxiety by implementing a proactive Tier I response structure to chronic absenteeism for the entire student population. According to the students we interviewed, engaging them through a holistic educational experience that includes social, emotional, and programmatic structural support systems integrated in daily curriculum would increase their desire to attend school.

Research suggests that effective schools address total engagement comprehensively (Carswell & Hanlon, 2009). They, not only focus on academic or behavioral skills, they also pay attention to the social and interpersonal aspects of schooling. Findings show that this population of students would benefit greatly if the schools in our study support positive connections with students to other adults and peers through explicit programming to address student self-concept issues (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). Many students in our study stated that they dislike other

students in their classes because they can be “loud, disruptive, or disrespectful” to one another and they feel “out of place”. Subsequently, according to those students, this adds to their anxiety at school. However, we noticed that students who perform well academically were also those who were most well-adjusted socially even though they maintained low attendance rates. Alternatively, students who felt excluded from school culture were more apathetic about academic performance as well as their individual attendance. In an effort to garner acceptance, sometimes students are unsuccessful when they try to join in and are disenchanted with the level of discomfort experienced in the attempt. This may lead them to seek acceptance from more negative sources or disconnect altogether (Marvul, 2011). Significant attention should be given to a student’s perception of themselves and how others perceive them. An intervention mentioned by Garcia (2012) is addressing and changing the failure process in the social environment. While this study references changing stresses related to identity threat, it could be transferred to the social environment related to attendance in an effort to block downward trajectories.

Social skills instruction establishes standards of behavior and interaction among students and provides guidance to students struggling with how they fit into the schools ecosystem. Adding a social skills component to daily instruction would provide an opportunity for those in our sample population who experience the perplexity of wanting to fit in, yet disliking the culture in which they desire to join. Providing a platform to discuss leadership, character, and the differences between right and wrong has been shown to have a positive effect on students’ affiliation with school (Marvul, 2011).

Chronically absent students would also benefit from a Functional Behavioral Assessment—a study of subject behaviors from the subject’s perspective relative to

environmental factors and how the subject navigates within, and through alterations of, that environment—because it allows for a far more in-depth analysis of problem behaviors such as absenteeism and truancy. FBA provides much more information regarding triggers and antecedents for outcomes and helps educators teach more appropriate replacement strategies through social skills instruction instead of providing reactionary consequences. Through this method, educators may be more responsive to what compels student behaviors instead of reacting to only the behaviors themselves (Scott, Alter, & McQuillan, 2010).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study on chronic absenteeism focused on schools in Washtenaw and Muskegon counties intended to identify and better understand the very intricate reasons for disconcerting patterns of attendance for a significant portion of the student population. Through this quantitative and qualitative data study, we raised questions regarding issues of mindset, existing systems, and implementation of intervention. However, much more research is needed in this area. Further inquiry is needed to explore how an improvement mindset may affect student learning, how practitioners may intervene to redirect negative attribution tendencies, and how to intentionally incorporate measurable and effective intervention strategies for chronically absent students.

Conclusion

This study has brought to light the importance of taking time to truly understand each student and family situation of chronic absenteeism within schools. Systems and procedures within schools are only effective if they lead to student learning and success. Our aim with this project is to inform practitioners of existing challenges within schools as well as to delineate effective practices that can increase student attendance. Through our research, we hope more

practitioners will spend time with students who exhibit consistently undesirable patterns of chronic absenteeism and continue to develop and implement appropriate, timely, and purposeful interventions for this population.

In the introduction, we stated that if education is important, and if school attendance is the first step toward educational success, then all stakeholders needed to better understand and more aggressively address the silent epidemic that chronic absenteeism and severely chronic absenteeism is within all of our schools. The fact is that education is extremely important, and it is imperative that we leverage all resources necessary to ensure that our children have every opportunity possible for their future. Whether students want to become teachers, welders, doctors, engineers, or professional academics, the first step is showing up each day and giving their best effort. This study may help to create a better understanding of what is currently being done to meet the motivation, engagement, and environmental needs of students who are chronically and severely chronically absent. However, this study also made it a point to highlight potential areas of development. With a comprehensive view of what needs to be done, students, parents, and practitioners at the school district and intermediate school district levels can all work in the same direction toward student success.

This study illuminates the fact that school districts can no longer rely upon policies and procedures to be the fence barrier that protects all students from the pitfalls of chronic absenteeism. Risk factors need to be understood and mitigated whenever possible so that all students have a similar starting place and journey in education. Seeking, hearing, and understanding each student and family's story is the only way this work will be completed. It then becomes the responsibility of practitioners at all levels, as well as students and families to ensure the best possible outcome for their individual story.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Student Interview Invitation Letter

Dear _____,

This letter is to invite you to participate in an interview study about student interest in school among middle school students. This study is being conducted in order to understand student experiences and perspectives related to school and how this connects to future goals. We would like to help schools better understand how students think, feel, and learn in order to improve education.

The information that we find throughout this study will be (a) shared with school leaders at your school (but no participants will ever be identified in what I write although you might be able to recognize something you said), and (b) presented to educators around the state. This is an opportunity for you to help us learn how to make school a more engaging place for students. We hope that you will agree to participate.

To find out more about what it would mean for you to participate in this study, please read the attached consent form, which describes all of the details. If you want, you can also e-mail any of to ask questions.

If you decide to participate and are under 18, both you and your parent or guardian will need to sign the attached form and return it to [individual in the school office].

Thank you for considering this invitation. I look forward to working with you if you decide to participate.

Sincerely,

Tim Hejnal - tim.hejnal@gmail.com

Carmen Maring - maringca@msu.edu

Jerry McDowell - blue.mcdowell@gmail.com

John Tafelski - jtafelski@gmail.com

Charles Rencher – Charles.rencher@yahoo.com

Appendix B

Student Perception Interview Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your child is invited to participate in a confidential interview, which is part of a study we are doing in partnership with Michigan State University and Washtenaw County Intermediate School District. This interview is being conducted to understand student experiences and perspectives. We hope that you, and your child, will give permission to participate. Please review the following information carefully before deciding whether or not to participate:

Goal of the research:

To understand middle school students' interest in school and how this connects to their attendance patterns.

Participant role:

Two researchers will interview willing students during the school day for approximately 45 minutes within the next month. During the interview, we will ask questions about themselves, what their beliefs about school are, and how these beliefs connect to future long and short term goals. We will tape record the interview so we do not have to take so many notes while we talk and can make sure we capture all of your child's thoughts and ideas. Afterwards, we will listen to the tapes and write down everything we said, but without any names. The tapes will be erased once the project is completed.

Benefits:

The results from our study will be shared with school leaders and presented to educators in the state. This is an opportunity for your child to help us learn how to make school a more engaging place for students.

Risks:

The only risk would be if teachers and administrators found out something someone said that they did not like and took it personally. The next section explains what will be done to keep this from happening.

Confidentiality:

These things will protect privacy and confidentiality:

1. The only adult at the school who will know who is participating in the interviews and focus group is (individual's name) because s/he is working with us to recruit students. S/he has agreed to keep this private and confidential. Teachers will not be told who is participating.
2. In anything that we write about participants, we will use a fake name.

3. Participants can also protect their privacy and confidentiality by not telling people at school that they are participating unless there is some important reason to tell them. Participants can talk to us about this if they have any questions.

Withdrawal:

Participation is voluntary; and students can skip any questions they do not want to answer or stop the interview at any time.

Protection of the data:

The transcripts will not contain real names. The actual interview recordings will be stored on our computer until the completion of this project. After that time, they will be permanently erased.

Contact:

If you have any questions about this research, please contact any of us or Kristy Cooper, our faculty advisor at Michigan State University:

Kristy Cooper – kcooper@msu.edu
Tim Hejnal - tim.hejnal@gmail.com
Carmen Maring - maringca@msu.edu
Jerry McDowell - blue.mcdowell@gmail.com
Charles Rencher - Charles.rencher@yahoo.com
John Tafelski - jtafelski@gmail.com

Whom to contact about your rights in this research, for questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that are not being addressed by the researcher, or research-related harm:

Michigan State University Human Research Protection Program
Phone: 517-355-2180
Email: irb@msu.edu

Student’s agreement to participate:

The nature and purpose of this research have been satisfactorily described to me, and I agree to become a participant. I understand that I am free to quit at any time if I so choose, and that the researchers will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.

Signature: _____ Date: _____
Name (print): _____

Parent’s permission for child’s participation (if student is under 18):

The nature and purpose of this research have been satisfactorily described to me, and I give permission for my child to participate. I understand that my child is free to quit at any time, and that the researchers will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix C

Student Interview

Prior to beginning questions explain the research to the student by working off of the following scripted information:

Hello! My name is _____ . I'm a student at Michigan State University and I'm working on a project to try to understand more about what students think about school, what they like or dislike, and what motivates them to go to school. I'm interviewing you because you were selected out of hundreds of candidates as a student who may be most helpful in finding ways to improve schools for all students from the student's point of view. Thank you for being willing to help us.

I'll ask you a few questions for your honest opinion, but there are no right or wrong answers; we just want to know as much about your thinking as possible. Your answers will be kept anonymous, meaning that no one except us will know that you were the one who said them. In fact we can establish a code name now if you'd like. Speak into the mic to identify your code name by saying "Hello, my name is Honey Boo Boo!"

We will be looking for, and sharing out, patterns but nothing particular about what you said.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Participant as a Person

(The goal of these questions is to establish rapport and gain context for how the student views him/herself)

Tell us about yourself as a person.

How would you describe yourself as a student?

What do you do when you are not in school?

If you could spend your entire day doing whatever you want ... what would you be doing?

Overall School Experience

(The goal of these questions is to understand the student's perception of school, how it influences their engagement and to what they feel most connected).

What do you like about school?

What do you get really excited about when you are at school?

What do you miss most about school when you are not here?

Affective Engagement

What are some fun memories you have from your school experiences?

What happened?

What do you look forward to at school?

What don't you look forward to at school?

Tell us about your friends at your school?

What do you think about the kids at your school?

Are there any teachers you feel like you have a close relationship with?
What are some things that school staff do to make you dislike school at times?
How is your attendance at school?
How is others attendance at school?
What makes the difference between you going to school and not going to school in the morning?

Cognitive Attribution Theory

How do you learn the best?

Provide a list with definitions

One on One

Small Group

Whole class

On your own

What way do you learn the best?

Musical/Kinesthetic...

Writing

Thinking

Reading

Moving

What classes are your best classes? How do you know that?

Do you like that class? Is it because of the way the teacher teaches?

What is the hardest thing about school?

Please elaborate...Develop story lines...Details

What place at school do you dread going?

Do you think what you are doing in school will make a difference in your life? Give an example.

Do you consider yourself to be a smart person?

Please elaborate...

Do you consider yourself to be a good student?

Please elaborate...

Has your behavior changed much from elementary to middle school?

Socially (In and out of school)

Academically (Grades)

Teacher Interaction

Was there a significant event that caused a negative change in your attendance patterns?

If so, please elaborate...

Appendix D

WISD Attendance Study- Middle School Staff Focus Group Consent Form

Please consider this information carefully before agreeing to participate.

Goal of the research:

This research explores attendance patterns in WISD. Specific focus will be on chronic and severe absenteeism in the WISD. The focus group in which you will participate will consider the current state of practice as it relates to student attendance. This includes perception, practice, and policy in your school.

- To understand the perception, policy, and practice of school staff concerning student attendance
- To assist in development of actionable steps to reduce chronic and severely chronic absenteeism

Participants Role:

If you agree to participate in this research you will take part in a 1-hour focus group at the selected middle school in December or January of this school year to discuss the current state of attendance at your building. During the focus groups, you will meet with members of the capstone team and 3 to 4 of your colleagues to discuss your perspectives on student attendance and chronic absenteeism. This conversation will be audiotaped and transcribed.

Data Collection:

For a better understanding of the research related to this project we have briefly described the research in three phases below. You will participate in Phase III.

Phase I – Attendance data will be analyzed in Washtenaw ISD to understand the attendance patterns in the county. The study will focus on students who were in 7th grade in the 2014-15.

Phase II - Students will be selected for study based on their attendance pattern. These students' cumulative files will be reviewed to collect additional information that may be related to the previous year's attendance to understand the history of each individual's attendance. An interview will be conducted with each of the selected students to better understand their pattern of attendance.

Phase III – We will assemble staff at each of the middle schools and form a focus group to discuss perception, policy, and practice of school staff concerning attendance. The focus group will consist of two to three 8th grade teachers, the building principal, and others as recommended by the principal and who have given consent to participate. The conversation will be audio recorded and the interviewer may take polite notes to guide discussion throughout the interview. The focus group will last approximately one hour. We will meet in a school meeting room as designated by the building principal and at a mutually agreed upon time.

Benefits:

As participants in this study, the participating staff and the participating schools will receive the quantitative report on student attendance in WISD and a specific report on their school. You will be invited to a county-wide presentation to release our findings. You have the information to

coalesce a group in your county that is interested in addressing the issue of attendance. In addition, you will receive a discussion summary of individual cases to use with other staff to prompt dialogue related to similar students. A member(s) of the capstone team will also provide professional development sessions presenting the data to the staff upon request. Most importantly, you will provide a voice in the development of a potential plan that informs the WISD's actions.

Confidentiality:

Focus groups will be completed anonymously, and any results shared with teachers or the school will be aggregated to protect the anonymity of individual participants. Teacher focus group participants will be identified by pseudonyms and identifying characteristics will be altered slightly to disguise the identity of the staff present. In any reporting outside the school, the school will be identified by a pseudonym, and the location will be identified by a descriptor, such as 'a small urban school in Southeast Michigan.'

Withdrawal:

The focus group's participation in this study is completely voluntary. If, at any time, the focus group wishes to withdraw from the study, that will be within their rights. If the school decides to withdraw before the end of the study, the capstone team will not use any material from surveys of focus groups collected up to that point without written permission.

Contact:

If you have any questions about this research, please contact any of us at:

Kristy Cooper – kcooper@msu.edu
Tim Hejnal - tim.hejnal@gmail.com
Carmen Maring - maringca@msu.edu
Jerry McDowell - blue.mcdowell@gmail.com
Charles Rencher - Charles.rencher@yahoo.com
John Tafelski - jtafelski@gmail.com

Whom to contact about your rights in this research:

Whom to contact about your rights in this research, for questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints that are not being addressed by the researcher, or research-related harm:

Michigan State University Human Research Protection Program
Phone: 517-355-2180
Email: irb@msu.edu

Agreement to participate:

As a staff member of the selected school, I agree that the nature and purpose of this research has been satisfactorily described to me, and I agree to become a participant. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time if I so choose, and that a member of the MSU capstone team will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix E

Staff Focus Group Protocol

Begin Audio Record

Prior to beginning questions explain the research to the parent by working off of the following scripted information:

Hello! [Introduce researchers present]. We are students at Michigan State University and we are working on a project to try to understand more about what students think about school, what they like or dislike, and what motivates them to go to school and stay in school. A child you teach was selected out of the 8th graders in the county to help us to learn because s/he has been identified as being chronically absent in the last school year and his/her administrator felt that the student would be willing to participate in the study. We are going to ask you some questions. There are no right or wrong answers; we just want to know as much about your thinking as possible at good honest feedback. Your answers will be kept anonymous, meaning that no one except me will know that you were the one who said them. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Staff Focus Group Questions

Perception

- Tell us what you know about chronically absent students.
- What do you think causes their absenteeism?
- What are some other issues that may contribute to absenteeism?

Practice

- What have you tried to do to impact this trend?
- What do you think has worked?

- If you had all the resources in the world, what would you do to resolve attendance problems with students?

Policy

- Is attendance checked by class period for middle/high students?
- Are there instances of student scheduling errors or gaps in data for attendance?
- What is your actual policy within the school in response to student absences? Chronic absenteeism? Severely chronic absenteeism?
- Is there a positive incentive disciplinary structure in place to increase attendance rates?
- Are there individualized student specific RTI procedures present for attendance issues and student retention efforts?
- Is there a parent communication structure in place dedicated to attendance?

Appendix F

Truancy & Chronic Absenteeism Intervention Model

Figure 7. Tier I and Tier II

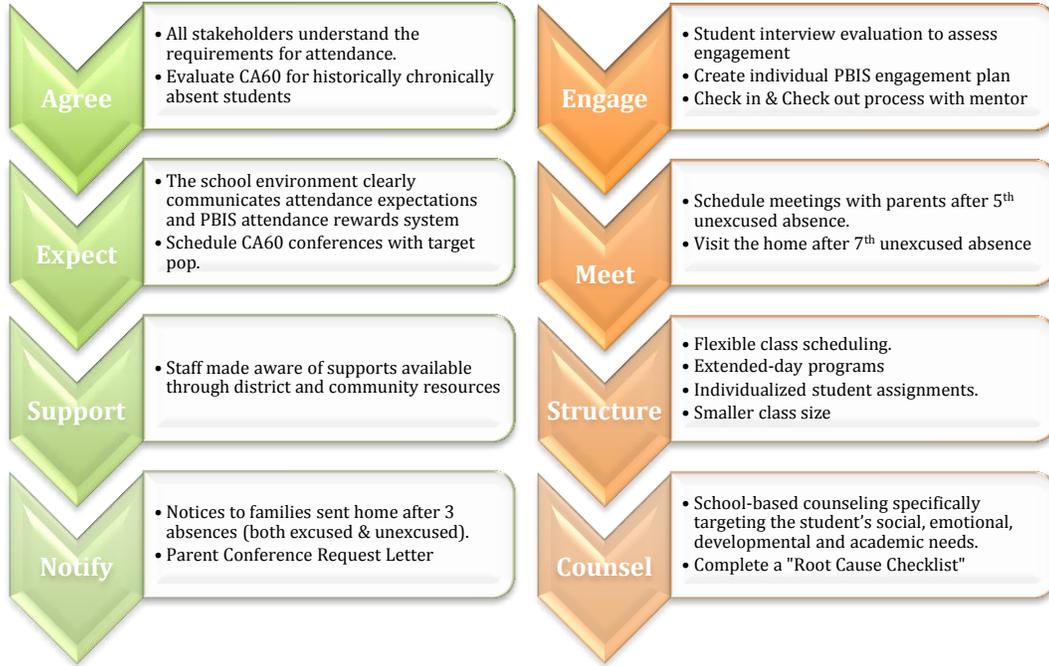
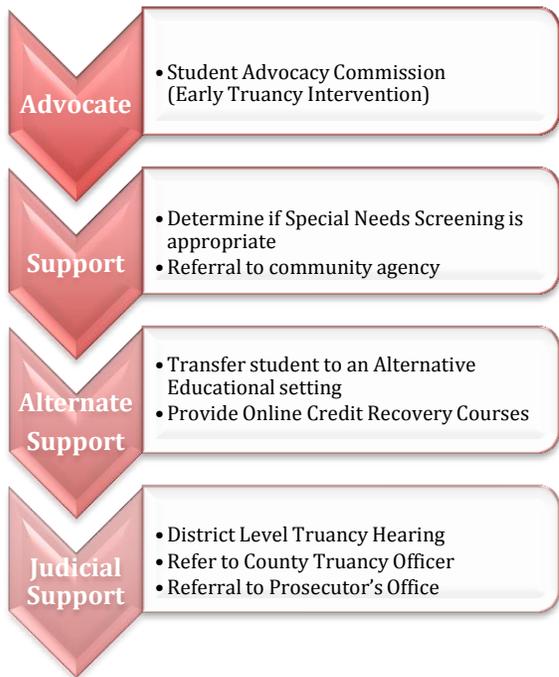


Figure 8. Tier III



This tiered response model utilizes various interventions that include methods of providing student and family support. However, even with well-established, research based interventions found in Tier I & Tier II strategies, our research suggests that some students will continue to be absurdly absent throughout the year. Students who do not respond positively may require more intense and individualized interventions at the Tier III level. Based on our study of various districts, we have found that students are rarely elevated to Tier III status. Even more encouraging is the discovery that Tier I & Tier II strategies are much more effective long term when implemented during elementary years of schooling.

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