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An Examination of Chronic Absenteeism and the Impacts on Student Success

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An Examination of Chronic Absenteeism and the
Impacts on Student Success
by
Rachel Pini
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Master's Project
Submitted to the College of Education
At Grand Valley State University
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The signature of the individual below indicates that the individual has read and approved the project of Rachel Pini in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education.

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Abstract

Research shows that students who are chronically absent are less likely to graduate and have poorer academic achievement among other issues. Chronically absent students may struggle with attendance for a variety of reasons, and thus individualized interventions are the most effective when dealing with this issue. School counselors can provide school staff with resources to learn to deal with chronically absent students, to monitor attendance progress, and to form positive relationships with these students in order to improve the school's climate. This project is a ready-to-use plan for school counselors to share with other educators in order to create a school-wide attendance intervention plan that can be used to monitor individual students' attendance progress, as well as the progress of chronically absent students as a demographic.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

School staff lack the necessary resources to provide effective interventions to chronically absent students, who are at a much higher risk of not graduating than their peers. The Learning Policy Institute found that students missing 10% or more of the school year in early grades are less likely to be academically successful in later grades and more likely to drop out of school (Kostyo et al., 2018). Similarly, one study in Chicago found that middle-grade students who were chronically absent were 18% less likely to earn a 4-year diploma and 17% less likely to graduate by age 21 with a diploma (Smerillo et al., 2018). To compound these findings, there are educational policies acknowledging that less instructional time, due to chronic absences, can be an early indicator of students falling behind academically and eventually dropping out of school altogether (Childs & Lofton, 2020).

Additionally, there is a lack of confidence among educators in providing attendance interventions due to a paucity of research-based strategies that detail what specific steps staff members can take to combat absenteeism (Eklund et al., 2020). This barrier to explicit attendance interventions limits staff's ability to intercede when chronically absent students are struggling academically and can thus lead to higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates (Eklund et al., 2020).

Importance and Rationale of the Project

Chronic absenteeism needs to be addressed as it affects students' likelihood of graduation. On average, people with a high school diploma have better health and economic outcomes than those who drop out of school (McDermott et al., 2018). This shows that the immediate impacts of chronic absenteeism, missed instructional time and poor academic

achievement, can lead to long-standing issues such as poor health and hindered economic prospects. School counselors have an ethical obligation to promote students' comprehensive well-being and create a culture of "postsecondary readiness" (American School Counselor Association, 2016, p. 3). As chronic absenteeism has been shown to be a predictor of post-secondary success and wellness, it is an issue that falls within our ethical responsibility.

All students are susceptible to accumulating enough absences to be considered chronically absent. However, there are populations of students who are more affected by chronic absenteeism than others. Low-income students and racial and ethnic minority students are at a higher risk of becoming chronically absent and experiencing long-term ramifications (Malika et al., 2021). While this research only covered students in the United States, there are substantial data to suggest that students in other countries face similar struggles following chronic absences. The numbers of absences used to define chronic absences vastly varies between countries and varies slightly between states in the U.S., but the implications of these absences remain the same. One study investigated student absenteeism in rural India and found that while the threshold for absences required to be considered chronically absent is lower, the effect of these absences on the likelihood of dropping out is similar to that of the United States (Ben Amor et al., 2020).

Background of the Project

Chronic absenteeism is not a new issue, though relatively little progress has been made since the origin of schooling. Issues with school attendance, and subsequent consequences, have been conversational topics for educators and government officials since the late 19th century. According to one study, a quarter of the juveniles jailed at the Chicago House of Correction in 1898 were truant students (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Educational figures involved in the common schools reform movement, such as Horace Mann, called for laws requiring families to enroll

their children in school. This educational reform aimed to create a “more educated and moral electorate.” By 1918, school attendance was compulsory in every state (Goldstein, 2015).

The reasons behind chronic absenteeism have historically centered around willful defiance and issues stemming from low-income households. The main explanations cited for chronic absenteeism among students have remained prevalent throughout the past 30 years. Researchers at John Hopkins University found that half of all chronically absent students skip school by choice; half of these students reported avoiding a bully or a specific class, while the other half cited that their family could not afford transportation or that they needed to stay home to watch siblings or a sick relative (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). While these contributing issues have already been identified and studied over the past three decades, there is still much to be desired in way of combating the issue at its root.

Many states are reporting absenteeism data annually under the Every Student Succeeds Act. This issue can affect anyone from early elementary school up through high school and causes academic issues at all levels regardless of the reasoning behind the excessive absences. According to government data, children who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are significantly less likely to read at grade level by the time they reach third grade (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016). This causes a ripple effect as the data shows that students who cannot read at grade level by that time are four times more likely to drop out of high school (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016). Chronic absences at any level can cause consequences for students, and those consequences can snowball throughout their education to cause long-term developmental delays (Eklund et al., 2020).

Student attendance has ramifications across all three school counseling domains: academic, social-emotional, and college and career readiness. As previously mentioned, students

who experience excessive absences are more likely to have poor academic performance and are at a much greater risk of dropping out of school (Smerillo et al., 2018). Students who are not present at school also run a higher risk of having short-term and long-term social-emotional issues including relationship problems, marital and psychiatric concerns, teenage pregnancy, violence, and substance abuse issues (Rasasingham, 2015). In addition to these academic and social-emotional issues that come with excessive absences, students who are chronically absent face barriers to post-secondary success in receiving a college education or finding a lucrative career path. These students are subjected to lower-paying jobs, less stable income, higher unemployment rates, and fewer job opportunities (Ahmad & Miller, 2015). Impacting all students K-12, as well as all three domains that school counselors address, chronic absenteeism is pervasive and harmful, and needs to be addressed in schools urgently.

This issue can be mitigated through school staff intervening and building connections with individual chronically absent students (Van Eck et al., 2017). Students who have a positive relationship with a staff member at school are much more likely to describe the school's climate as "positive" (Daily et al., 2020). According to Daily et al. (2020), students who report feeling the school has a positive climate are less likely to be absent (2020). Additionally, one study found that students who reported feeling connected with a school staff member performed better academically while in school (Bacon & Kearney, 2020). Teaching staff how to interact and form connections with chronically absent students based on the student's individual needs and barriers to success can greatly increase the staff member's confidence in implementing an attendance intervention strategy, and thus increase the student's attendance (Eklund et al., 2020).

Statement of Purpose

In this project, I will provide high school staff members with resources about chronically absent students. The resources will provide staff members with explicit information on how to interact with chronically absent students in a way that complements their individual needs and barriers to success. The resources will also include tips on building relationships with the students to increase the students' sense of belonging at school. The project will combine information on individualized interventions for chronically absent students based on barriers, how to build positive relationships with the students, how to monitor attendance and achievement data, and how to use that data to fine-tune interventions as needed.

The project will include the aforementioned resources that can be shared with administrators, educators, and school support staff during professional development meetings or at another pre-approved time. This program will rely largely on staff participation, and thus the materials for this project will contain chronic absenteeism information based on individual needs, research-based tips on creating and maintaining relationships with students, and preliminary information on monitoring data and the formation of an attendance-based student support team. This project is focused on monitoring student data and creating positive staff-student relationships, and thus the resources provided are to be disseminated to staff and not to students.

This project is unique in that it provides an outline for how to perform individual interventions with chronically absent students and empowers staff to support these students regardless of their specific barriers to attendance. These resources directly address some of the known catalysts of chronic absenteeism, provide insight into positive interactions between students and staff, and contain a flow chart of how to address chronic absenteeism based on the

main issues identified (Young et al., 2020). The combination of these resources allows staff members to approach interactions with chronically absent students with confidence, and these positive interactions with staff should serve to improve student attendance and achievement data, as well as increasing graduation rates and decreasing the dropout rate (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

Objectives of the Project

I created resources for high school staff to monitor and uplift students who are chronically absent. Through this intervention, high school students should show a more positive rating of the school's climate and a subsequent decrease in absences and increase in academic performance. These resources can be presented to staff via a professional development day by counselors and administrators and should be used by all staff members. The goal is to have a consistent, intuitive, and research-based approach to tackle chronic absenteeism at the high school level. Counselors or other relevant support staff, such as those on the attendance-based student support team, can supplement these resources with any other relevant information about the students that is okay to share. As a note, confidential information is not to be freely shared with all staff, but rather to be used by the student's counselor, per ethical guidelines, to help provide insight into what specific support the student may need.

Students who are chronically absent will be supported by staff with the goal of students reaching several American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2021) Mindsets and Behaviors Standards in response to staff intervention. This project will support the development of two ASCA mindset standards: "Sense of acceptance, respect, support and inclusion for self and others in the school environment" (M2) and "self-confidence in ability to succeed" (M4). One study found that a positive school climate, including a student's sense of belonging at

school, is associated with fewer attendance issues (Hamlin, 2020). Another study echoed these findings in noting that satisfaction with the school climate and support at school can contribute to better attendance and grades for high school and middle school students (Daily et al., 2020).

In addition to the mindset standards, this project encompasses two ASCA (2021) behavior standards. First, the project addresses “positive relationships with adults to support success” (B-SS 3). Positive student-adult relationships have been shown to increase student success in school, such as students accruing fewer absences (Bird et al., 2013). The second behavior standard, a self-management skills standard, states that students should demonstrate an “ability to identify and overcome barriers” (B-SMS 6). Students who are chronically absent may miss school for several reasons. Regardless of the specific barrier keeping a student from school, this project helps to identify the issue and give students the power to overcome their personal challenges.

Definition of Terms

Chronic absenteeism – Chronic absenteeism, as used in this project, is defined as “missing 15 or more days of school per year” (Rafa, 2017).

Post-secondary opportunities – In this paper, the phrase “post-secondary opportunities” refers to any educational and career pathways that a student may choose to pursue following their high school career.

Reading at grade level – For a student to be “reading at grade level,” they need to perform in the 25th-74th percentile range in a standardized reading assessment as compared to their peers in the same grade. Any students scoring above this range are reading above grade level, and those below that range are reading below grade level (Lesnick et al., 2010).

School climate – This project uses the National School Climate Center (2021) definition of school climate:

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (p. 2).

Truancy – Federal law mandates states to track truancy but the definition can vary from state to state. In this project, truancy is a “focus on unexcused absences, truancy naturally leads to a focus on compliance with the rules. Students are missing school without an excuse, skipping school, and violating mandatory attendance requirements” (Attendance Works, 2018, p. 1).

Scope of the Project

This project addresses how educators can confidently build relationships with students who are chronically absent and how these relationships can benefit students' academic and attendance goals. It addresses specific contributing factors for excessive absences and provides information on how to address student issues based on their individual needs. The resources provided cover high school students and are not designed with elementary and middle school students in mind.

There are a few factors that could hinder the implementation of this project. First, it is important that administrators are on board with these resources so that they can be added to a professional development day agenda. To ensure that this project has a place on a professional development agenda, counselors can communicate about the project with administrators via a face-to-face meeting far in advance and can supply administrators with data-driven research that backs up the project. To further assert the importance of adding these resources to a professional

development day, counselors can run a data report that addresses the needs of students in their specific school to impress the importance of targeted interventions for chronically absent students.

Counselors would not be able to create individual interventions and form positive connections with each chronically absent student without the support of other staff members. To that end, it is also imperative that there are sufficient staff interested in this project so that there are people to interact with the students. To combat this potential hinderance, a school counselor could gage staff interest in the project using a Google Form to assess how many students can be included in the primary intervention. Sharing data from the first set of students and proving the effectiveness of the interventions may inspire more staff to join for the next round of interventions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Differentiating solutions based on a student's individualized experience with chronic absenteeism necessitates researching available literature to determine barriers to student attendance. The research used to create this project is organized into discrete sections, each centered on a topic that is relevant to the final project. The first section explores the theoretical orientation that supports this project. The next section focuses on the aforementioned literature that substantiates this project and is separated into three distinct sub-sections. The sub-sections are (1) individualized approaches to chronic absenteeism, (2) monitoring attendance, behavior, and grade data, and (3) the influence of a positive school climate. Following this second section is an overall summary of key findings from the previously discussed literature. Lastly, a conclusion connects the research back to the project and leads to the final chapter which clearly defines the project description.

Theory/Rationale

School counselors support youth in their academic, social-emotional, and career development. Chronically absent high school students may miss school for a plethora of reasons including, but not limited to, illness, transportation issues, mental health, family emergencies, or a negative perception of their environment (Brundage et al., 2017). To support these chronically absent students, educators can focus on specific barriers limiting students' attendance and address those factors individually. To focus on how various factors can influence a student's attendance, it is important to take a comprehensive approach to uncover how one issue can affect other sectors of a student's life. This project intervention is grounded in Maslow's motivational theory, and more specifically his highly popularized hierarchy of needs.

An American psychologist and scholar, Abraham Maslow, developed a motivational theory that included a hierarchy of needs. The foundation of this hierarchy contains the most basic and primal needs, while each subsequent level on the pyramid hinges on fulfillment of the needs below it. At the top of the pyramid is an individual's achievement of self-actualization. This theory originated as Maslow (1958) wanted to uncover what motivates an individual to complete a goal or perform certain tasks, and then to see what motivates them to reach the next goal. To fully understand this theory, it is important to look at each of the five levels on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

According to Maslow (1958), the base of the pyramid reflects an individual's biological and physiological needs and consists of necessities to live such as air, food, water, and shelter. Safety needs are next on the hierarchy and are comprised of components such as health, steady employment, and property. The third step is one's sense of love and belonging, which encompasses friendship and familial relationships, intimacy with others, and a sense of connection. Next are self-esteem needs which include a person's self-confidence, achievement, and respect for others. Lastly, at the apex of the pyramid, is self-actualization. The term self-actualization was first used by Kurt Goldstein (1939) as a biological term, referring to the tendency of an individual's motivation to "actualize as much as possible". In Maslow's theory, it refers broadly to an individual living up to his or her potential. More specifically, within Maslow's hierarchy, this refers to an individual's sense of morality, creativity, spontaneity, purpose, meaning, and inner potential.

Maslow's (1958) hierarchy informs this project by providing theoretical rationale for addressing students' issues on an individual basis rather than addressing chronic absenteeism with a "one size fits all" approach. As each individual student may be at a different level on

Maslow's hierarchy, educators need to address the most basic missing need first in order to help the student progress. For example, a student who does not have consistent access to food or who lives in an unstable housing situation will likely be focusing on that issue and will not be focusing on higher levels of the pyramid, such as achievement at school, which could fall under the self-esteem category. Other students who have those physiological needs met but do not have their love and belonging needs met at home may be more focused on forming relationships than they are on their achievement. While these students are all dealing with different issues individually, all of these unique contributing factors can lead to chronic absenteeism and subsequently a higher chance of dropping out of school.

Maslow's (1958) motivational theory also provides the framework for this project's inclusion of data monitoring as he found that students would increase their academic success when acknowledged for their achievements. This supports the idea of tracking student growth, including behavior, achievement, and attendance data and using this information to not only inform intervention strategies for individual students but also to incentivize achievement through a targeted recognition system.

Lastly, Maslow's ideas support the importance of a positive school climate via the love and belonging level of the hierarchy combined with the benefits of incentivizing student achievement. As improved student achievement will be met with staff recognition of the student's success, this is contributing to an overall more positive school environment for that student. These positive student-staff interactions also satiate the love and belonging need that students may have and help propel them to the next level of the hierarchy, self-esteem, wherein they can more easily begin working on more ambitious academic achievement goals.

Research/Evaluation

The research included in this review covers the importance of individualized approaches to chronic absenteeism as opposed to a universal solution, as well as the importance of monitoring student data and maintaining a positive school climate. These three areas intersect to form the base of the project outline that will be described in detail in the following chapter and appendices.

Individualized Approach to Chronic Absenteeism

Research shows that an individualized approach to interventions is more effective with chronically absent students than using a “one size fits all” intervention school-wide (Gee, 2018). As each student has their own distinct reason(s) for their absences, educators need to be flexible in their approach when creating an intervention plan. If a response to a student’s chronic absences follows a generalized approach, the student’s specific needs may go unaddressed, and it will be an ineffective use of both the student’s and the staff member’s time. One study found that among chronically absent students, there was a differentiation in the student’s capacity for cognitive reframing based on the reason behind their excessive absences (Kiani et al., 2019). Thus, it is important that educators can differentiate between different subgroups of chronically absent students so that they are setting students up for success and playing to their current mental capacity for change.

There is a time and a place for school-wide interventions in regard to student absences. School-wide precautions and resources may be sufficient to stop the general population of students, the non-chronically absent students, from accruing more absences, but students who are already at the chronically absent level would benefit best from targeted, individualized interventions that take their personal demographics into account (Gottfried, 2015). Successful

programs hinge on individualized approaches that target a student's comprehensive well-being via academic, health, social, and resource needs of students and families. This level of "whole student" support creates student and guardian investment in the educational process and reduces chances of student drop-out, enhances attendance and achievement, and increases graduation rates (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

Schools must consider how to balance these individualized plans with an overarching program to preserve the use of resources (Balfanz & Chang, 2016). Educators should expect to monitor students' progress, and identify students in need of individualized support, through tracking attendance data and identifying students who have reached the chronically absent level. The continued monitoring of this data allows staff to adopt a fluid model that tracks when students will need to enter an individualized program, when they may be at a steady academic level to exit an individualized program, and whether or not the students who have exited the program are remaining on track. More information on the importance of data collection can be found in the following sub-section.

Monitoring Student Data

The presence of an accountability system is a key component of students' success. In addition to providing insight into sub-groups of students when individualizing services, data can be used during interventions and post-interventions as an accountability tool (Perry et al., 2019). One popular chronic absenteeism organization, Attendance Works, found that excessive absences can be significantly reduced when school and families work together to monitor data (Perry et al., 2019). There are a few key uses of student attendance and achievement data for supporting chronically absent students. Perhaps the most obvious reason for monitoring data is to follow a student's progress. One study found that this data used to monitor student's progress is

the most effective tool for adjusting individual interventions in a timely manner (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018).

Another reason to monitor data is to have explicit results to share with student support staff, mentors, and key stakeholders (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). Using data to ensure that all adults in a student's life are on the same page makes it easier to work collaboratively as a team, and to achieve results (Balfanz & Byrnes). This devotion to collaboration also mirrors one of the ASCA (2019) Professional Standards & Competencies, B-SS 6, which says that school counselors should collaborate with families, teachers, administrators, and other school staff and stakeholders in order to support student success. Some students, families, and districts have noted that this lack of collaboration was a serious impediment to student improvement (Balfanz & Byrnes). On a building level, this can begin as a student support group focused on attendance concerns.

Attendance and achievement data for chronically absent students should be regularly reviewed by this team of individuals (Chang et al., 2016). If a student attendance group is in place to regularly monitor and interpret data for chronically absent students' achievement and attendance, it is more likely that the student will receive be able to receive support whether it is via positive reinforcement, altering their individualized plan to include different supports, or identifying a gap in access to resources (Chang et al.). This critical data can then be shared out to the larger school community as a whole, in a way that does not release identifiable information unnecessarily, via staff meetings, district-head meetings, or to key stakeholders (Chang et al.). School attendance teams can work to interpret data in different ways to support improvements in students' attendance and achievement. One study found that attendance data teams have shown to increase attendance and boost scores when the teams have used data to set attendance goals,

provide attendance incentives, communicate the data, and partner with community agencies to address barriers identified in the data (Spradlin et al., 2012).

One study noted that this “connect the dots” approach is needed so that all social service agencies working with a student are likewise aware of the attendance and achievement data so that they can work together with the school to ensure that students are receiving reliable and consistent support (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). This particular study also noted that upon sharing attendance data with the Department of Homeless Services, for example, the staff at 15 different shelters monitored student attendance and helped to ensure that students could remain at their same school building and connected them to resources to make that more feasible. As a result of this school district “connecting the dots” with social services, students showed improved attendance and were better connected to local resources (Balfanz & Byrnes).

Positive School Climate

The final key factor in this approach to eliminating chronic absenteeism is to foster a positive school climate. Among the list of behavior standards that school counselors should encourage for all students is B-SS 3. which states the importance of positive relationships with adults to support success (ASCA, 2021). One study noted that students who have the opportunity to form positive relationships with staff members report a more positive school climate overall (Van Eck et al., 2017). This finding is important as a positive school climate has been shown to decrease a student’s number of absences (Daily et al., 2020). Another study expanded on these findings by showing that chronically absent students who were connected with a staff member as part of an intervention performed better academically while at school (Bacon & Kearney, 2020). At the high school level, is it supremely important that these positive relationships with staff are

intentionally formed as students reported less connection with staff in high school than at any other level, placing them at a high risk for increased absences (Bacon & Kearney).

The effects of a positive relationship with a staff member boost a student's feeling of belonging in a school environment (Allen et al., 2018). This is important because one common barrier faced by students who are chronically absent is anxiety about going to school because they feel as though they do not belong (Allen et al.). School counselors have an ethical obligation to foster certain mindsets and behaviors for student success. Among those is M 5, which notes that students should be able to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging for themselves and others at school (ASCA, 2021). For some students, research has shown that providing students with adult support in the form of a mentor is beneficial in increasing a student's sense of belonging at school, and thus improving attendance rates (Lara et al., 2018). These students benefit from individual support and more in-depth relationships and are often assisted with finding a more intentional path at school (Lara et al.). Students who begin to follow a more directed path in their classes and extracurricular activities tend to feel more involved than students who do not have clear preferences in what they learn and do at school (Marvul, 2011). Thus, having a mentor and gaining individual assistance in planning out a path for high school and beyond can contribute to a student's sense of belonging at school, boost their view of the school's climate, and increase attendance and achievement scores (Weinburger & Forbush, 2018).

Summary

Attendance interventions are highly effective at the individual level with chronically absent students (Gee, 2018). It is important that school staff can differentiate between different subgroups of chronically absent students to provide these individualized interventions based on

the reason(s) behind the absences and the student's capacity for change (Kiani et al., 2019). Kiana et al. also found that among these students, there are discernible differences in the degree to which students can process and tackle the barriers to their attendance. To set chronically absent students up for success, educators need to be aware of these differences and follow a model that allows for individualized support (Gottfried, 2015).

Providing students with individualized support gives educators more freedom to support the "whole student" where there is a personal need rather than only treating absences (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). Kearney and Graczyk found that this approach creates higher student and guardian investment in the educational process and thus reduces chances of student drop-out, enhances attendance and achievement, and increases graduation rates. Finally, schools must consider how to balance these individualized plans for at-risk, chronically absent students with an overarching program to preserve the use of resources (Balfanz & Chang, 2016).

To provide accountability for chronically absent students receiving this support, staff should expect to monitor student achievement and attendance data regularly. Accountability systems are important to student success as they provide insight into how well individual interventions are working for students, and the data can be used before, during, and after interventions to keep students accountable for their goals (Perry et al., 2019). Attendance Works, a popular chronic absenteeism organization, found that excessive absences can be significantly reduced when families and school staff work together to monitor data (Perry et al.). Another study found that regularly monitoring this data is the most effective tool for providing intervention adjustments in a timely manner, and for bolstering support for attendance initiatives via sharing the information with support staff, mentors, and other key stakeholders (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018).

One study showed that families and schools have historically noted a lack of collaboration as a serious impediment to student improvement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). In schools, educators can collaborate by forming attendance student support groups and can regularly review data as a team (Chang et al., 2016). On a macro level, school support staff can further “connect the dots” by providing data to social service agencies who work with chronically absent students so they can provide relevant support where needed and staff can ensure that students are receiving reliable and consistent support outside of school (Balfanz & Byrnes). Sharing data with these community connections can help students receive access to resources that can greatly impact their ability to overcome barriers to attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes).

To support students once they begin to attend school more regularly, it is important that staff intentionally form positive relationships with students (Van Eck et al., 2017). Students who have a positive relationship with a staff member are much more likely to report that their school has a positive climate, and those students who feel the school has a positive climate are less likely to be absent (Daily et al., 2020). Another study found that students who were connected with a staff member performed better academically while in school (Bacon & Kearney, 2020).

Students at the high school level are the least likely to report positive relationships with a staff member than any other level and thus are at a higher risk for absences (Bacon & Kearney, 2020). By solidifying positive relationships via targeted interventions, students report a greater sense of belonging in the school environment, which contributes to their impression of the school climate (Allen et al., 2018). This is important as one barrier faced by chronically absent students is anxiety to go to school due to feeling as though they do not belong (Allen et al.). Students with these relationships benefit from individual support and are more likely to have assistance in

finding a particular passion or career path at school, which also helps them feel a greater sense of belonging (Lara et al., 2018). This leads students to have a more positive view of their school's climate and to achieve their attendance goals and overall academic success (Weinburger & Forbush, 2018).

Conclusion

This review of relevant literature outlines the importance of staff providing chronically absent students with support that takes their individual demographics into account.

Individualized interventions allow for staff to provide support to students that is based on their specific needs and barriers to attendance (Gee, 2018). These specific needs can hold students back from achievement goals at school, from a sense of belonging, and from self-actualization per Maslow's (1958) model. It is important that student needs and barriers to attendance are addressed individually as, per Maslow's hierarchy, these barriers limit a student's ability to move to the next level on the pyramid.

Interventions can be monitored using a student's attendance and achievement data, and staff can use that data to alter supports to fit a student's needs. Aside from using data as a response to intervention, school staff can form a student support team that focuses on attendance (Chang et al., 2016). This team can regularly monitor chronically absent students' data and can use this information before, during, and after interventions to help students and staff set goals. This data can also be shared with other school staff, guardians, social services, mentors, and key stakeholders. Research shows that students who take part in these data-driven, individualized interventions will have lower drop-out rates, higher academic achievement, and a higher graduation rate (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

Besides benefiting academically from these supports, students also can build close, positive relationships with school staff. These positive relationships are shown to help students feel a greater sense of belonging in school and contribute to students' perception of a positive school climate (Van Eck et al., 2017). In turn, students who feel like they belong in school and who believe their school has a positive climate are likely to have fewer absences and higher academic performance (Daily et al., 2020). Due to the need for individualized interventions, a student support team, and positive staff relationships for this project model to work, the effectiveness of this intervention hinges on staff buy-in.

The theory and research used to explore the topic of chronic absenteeism in Chapter Two provide the foundation for the resources created in this project that will be used by staff to implement a chronic absenteeism intervention system at school. Students involved in this project will have the opportunity to monitor their progress and have a support team at home and at school who have access to important data, as well as a chance to form positive connections with adults at school. The interventions used in this project can be altered as needed using the data collected throughout the intervention, and these results can be shared out to impress the importance of chronic absenteeism interventions to key stakeholders. The next chapter includes a description of project components and related Appendices, a plan for project evaluation, project conclusions, and an implementation plan.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

School staff lack the necessary resources to provide effective interventions to chronically absent students, who are at a much higher risk of not graduating than their peers. The goal of this project is to provide high school staff with an intuitive guide for individualized attendance interventions for chronically absent students. This guide provides information on barriers for student attendance and how to differentiate one's approach based on these barriers. It also includes information on progress monitoring via data, for staff, students, and caregivers alike, and information on how staff can use these attendance interventions to form connections with students and contribute to a positive school climate. This intervention technique is expected to increase student attendance for chronically absent students and increase the students' sense of belonging at school.

The project description is organized into four distinct subsections and is followed by appendices that contain recommended project materials. The first subsection outlines the project components and includes both the rationale and context of the created project, as well as concrete descriptions of project materials that are included in the appendices. The second subsection, project evaluation, notes how educators can track project effectiveness via data collection. The following subsection notes expected project conclusions given the previously explored research from the chapter prior. Lastly, the plan for implementation provides specific information on who should share this information, when it should be shared, and how it can be shared most effectively.

Project Components

Attendance interventions have historically improved student achievement and decreased the drop-out rate (Smerillo et al., 2018). Additionally, school staff addressing students' attendance issues can decrease the level of student violence, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse issues (Rasasingham, 2015). Staff members forming relationships with chronically absent students as part of an attendance intervention can lead to improved grades and a better sense of belonging in the school environment, in addition to fewer attendance issues (Eklund et al., 2020). According to Eklund et al., staff members are more likely to have these intentional positive interactions with chronically absent students if they are provided with resources on how to approach students most effectively, as it boosts their confidence on how to lead these interventions (2020).

This project is designed to provide school staff with information on how to approach chronically absent students via individualized interventions and intentional, positive interactions. All materials needed to provide this information to staff are included in the appendices of this project so that educators can easily begin these interventions in their own schools. The materials included are as follows; a list of known catalysts of chronic absenteeism, a chart addressing how to approach individual students based on their indicated reason(s) for chronic absenteeism, a guide on how to forge positive relationships with chronically absent students to improve their school experience, and documents that can be used to track progress for individual students and all students in this demographic at one's school.

Project Evaluation

This project will be evaluated via monitoring individual student data as well as compiling data from all chronically absent students within the school. Educators can use the evaluation

documents provided in the appendices of this project to guide their data collection and note trends within their school and longitudinal trends for individual students. The success of this project will vary from school to school, and student to student, but can be generally classified as effective by noting average downward trends in out rate and absences among the students monitored, as well as analyzing any upward trends in graduation rates and self-reported feelings of belonging at school.

Project Conclusions

Students who are chronically absent can benefit from individualized interventions and increased, intentional positive interactions with school staff. These interventions can support student growth among the three domains to foster both short-term and long-term student success (Malika et al., 2021). The abundant research on chronic absenteeism points to a variety of factors that may catalyze absences for these students but also promises success if school staff take the time to grow these relationships with chronically absent students (Daily et al., 2020). School counselors occupy a role that allows relationships with a wide variety of students, but counselors alone cannot tackle this issue. To improve staff's confidence that they can deliver these interventions, counselors can utilize the tools provided in this project to help staff help students who are struggling with chronic absenteeism. As projects like this intervention has previously led to higher graduation rates and lower drop-out rates, there is substantial reason to expect these measures of success from students who engage in this intervention (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

Though this project covers a wealth of research regarding chronic absenteeism, some questions remain unanswered. While this project aims to create a more individualized approach, it is highly likely that not every unique circumstance will be covered by the list of barriers provided to staff. This will leave some room for growth and may require staff to think creatively

when approaching students whose barriers are not represented. Additionally, some factors influence students so deeply that staff may be unable to reach them, even with the highest level of support. This can be disheartening for staff, but the possibility needs to be addressed so that staff is not discouraged if faced with this situation. Finally, there is not much research on students' perceptions of these interventions and educators cannot assume that all students will happily engage in interventions if they do not feel necessary or authentic. Some students may not desire to continue in an intervention if they are not matched with a teacher to whom they feel connected early on, while others may note that the intervention is not mandatory and will choose to spend their time doing other activities. Again, it is a sad truth that educators may not be able to make this intervention work for every chronically absent student, but it is also important to remember that it is worth using the intervention if it makes a difference for even one student.

Plans for Implementation

This project will be presented to school administrators and key stakeholders by high school counselors as an attendance intervention. After gaining approval, school counselors can present this information to high school staff via a staff meeting or other gathering that is intended to specifically address this intervention. High school counselors can introduce this project to school staff by using their own school data regarding chronic absenteeism, if desired, to show a clear and specific need for intervention. Next, school counselors should present a call to action, as agreed upon with administration, that allows for school staff to lead this intervention with (a) student(s), as needed. To fine tune the process of providing staff with the first group of students, school counselors may work with their Student Support Team and/or Academic Coach to better assess school data.

Staff will then have access to the previously mentioned resources, all of which can be found in the appendices at the end of this project. Staff will then use these resources in their interactions with students who are chronically absent and can monitor data to report back to counselors and the SST team. While the implementation of this intervention is briefly discussed in this project. It is important to reinforce that this project specifically focuses on the creation of materials that counselors provide to staff members, and not on the specifics of how staff members apply this information to students. Ultimately, by school counselors relaying the gravity of chronic absenteeism to other staff and empowering them with resources to work with individual students, the school is expected to see an increase in attendance and improved graduation rates.

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Appendix A
Attendance Barriers

Common Attendance Barriers*

- Inability to make it to school (no reliable transportation, obligations to get a sibling to school, etc.)
 - Tip: Talk with the school counselors, social workers, and other student support staff to work on finding a new bus route or provide the family with gas cards, if possible.
- Low motivation (feeling that coming to school is pointless due to previous low grades, feeling school is not applicable to their future plans, no future plans and thus no “why” to keep trying to succeed)
 - Tip: Work with the student to uncover their interests (outside of school) and help them explore career possibilities to uncover a “why.” Then, help them see how their future can be connected to different classes and opportunities at school.
- Mental health struggles (depression, anxiety, ADHD, etc.)
 - Tip: Refer the student to their school counselor or social worker, and their counselor can supplement the conversation with additional community resources.
- Low functioning due to inability to meet physiological/safety needs at home (no consistent place to stay at night, lack of food at home, neglect, etc.)
 - Tip: Collaborate with the Student Support Team to assess which resources may be best for the student. Encourage the student to call 2-1-1, and/or make the call with them. Call CPS, as is mandated, in cases of abuse/neglect.
- Bullying concerns (prior history of being bullied, social media threats that imply future bullying, facing racist/homophobic comments from students, etc.)

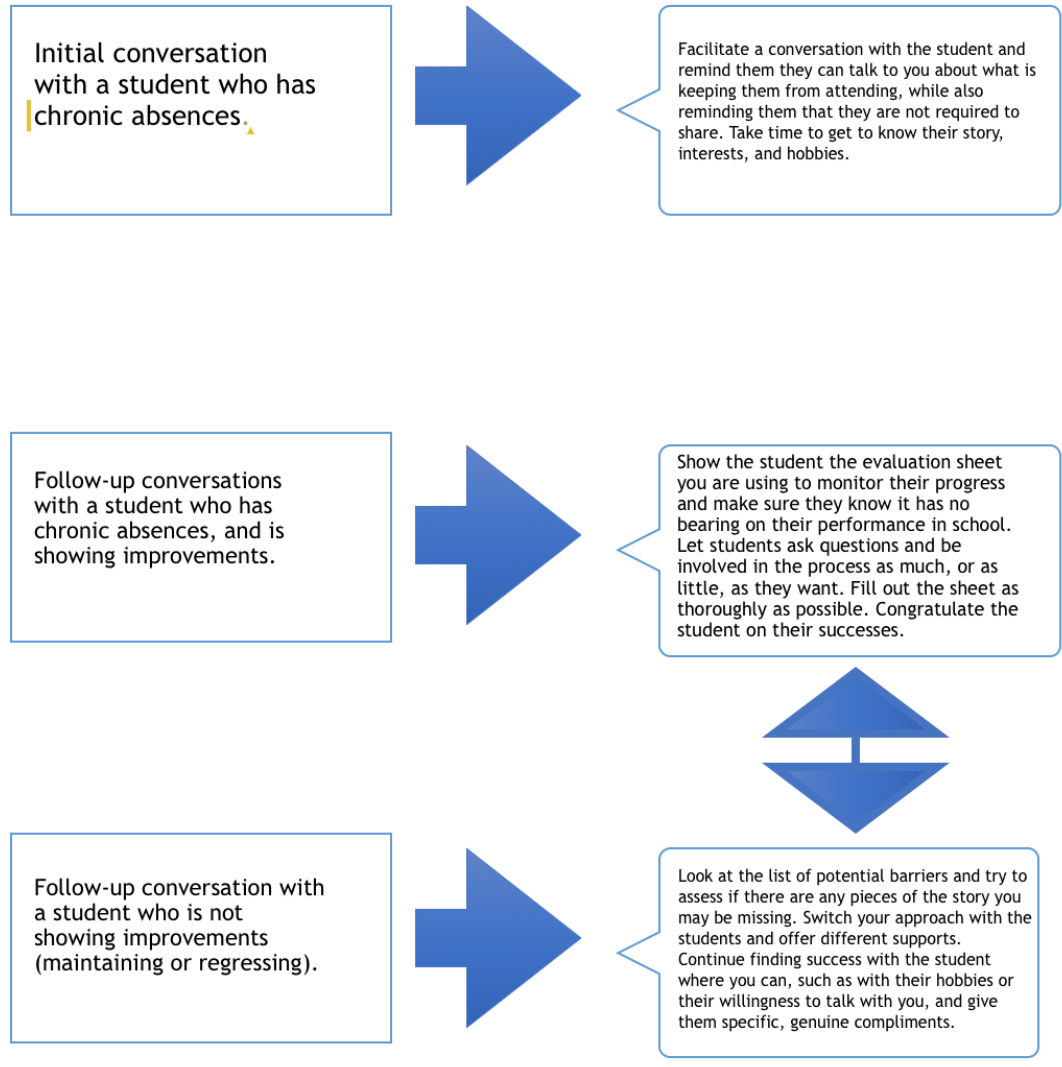
- Tip: Connect the student with administration who may be able to help with bullies where discipline is needed. Connect with the student's caregiver and/or counselor to develop a plan of action for helping the student feel comfortable coming to school. Remind the student that you are a new support for them and are in their corner.

*There are certainly many other reasons that a student may not be coming to school. The barriers listed above are some common examples from high school students to help you begin to approach chronically absent students and brainstorm how to best help them based on their unique situation.

Appendix B

Flow Chart: Individualized Attendance Interventions

Flow Chart for Individualized Attendance Interventions



Appendix C

Intentional Positive Interactions Guide

Staff Guide to Positive Interactions with Chronically Absent Students

1. Give students specific, genuine compliments when they reach a goal or achieve something important to them. The goal may be attending school, joining a club or activity, successfully completing a skateboard trick they have been working on, etc. The goal does not need to align with attendance but does need to be specific so that the student knows it is genuine.
2. Smile at the student whenever you see them and take the time to greet them in the hallways, when appropriate. You do not need to talk with the student at length every time you see them in the halls, especially if they are talking with their peers, but you should try to make eye contact and smile so that they know you are in their corner at all times.
3. Try to engage positively with the student even when they are not present in school. Send emails or call home, when appropriate, to let a student know that they were missed at school or that you heard of a new club/activity that may interest them. Continuing to talk with students in a positive way, even when they are not physically in the building, will remind them that you are there for them unconditionally.
4. Let students talk with you about topics that are not school related, as appropriate. If a student can talk to you about their hobbies or activities outside of school, it can help build your relationship with them and assure them that you care about their comprehensive well-being.

5. Be open. Remind students that you are monitoring their attendance progress and that they can get more involved in the project at any point. Offer opportunities for students to see your evaluations, offer suggestions and corrections to what you wrote, and/or provide updated information on why they are struggling to get to school.

Appendix D**Evaluation**

Progress Monitoring: Attendance Intervention

Student Name & Grade _____

Staff Name _____

Date of Evaluation _____

Log of Interactions with Student (Since Last Evaluation): _____

Missed Class Periods (Over Last 10 School Days): _____

Last Recorded Missed Class Periods (Last Evaluation): _____

Increase/Decrease in Absences Since Last Evaluation: _____

Is the student in 12th grade? Y or N

Is the student currently on track to graduate?* Y or N

*can refer to student's counselor for this question