

Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student
Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicate are effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Research has shown chronic student absenteeism is highest among high school students (Stronge & Associates, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), and effects may include low academic achievement, possible high school dropout, and poor outcomes in adulthood (Elias, 2019; Ready, 2010; Stronge & Associates, 2019; Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], n.d.). Chronic student absenteeism is one measure of school performance in Virginia and therefore, a responsibility of the school principal to monitor, maintain, or improve (VDOE, n.d).

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

This study included a survey of 8 Virginia high school principals whose school experienced a reduced rate of chronic absenteeism between 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) reported chronic absenteeism as a measure of school accountability beginning in 2016. Additionally, this study included semi-structured interviews with 3 of the high school principals. The survey and interview questions

aimed to determine various strategies and interventions high school principals implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism, along with the effectiveness of each.

Principals in this study reported communication, involving school stakeholders, creating a positive school culture, and utilizing accountability practices as means to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals perceived communication and engaging instruction to be effective strategies or interventions utilized in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism, while data collection and management were considered to be least effective. The study suggests principals could engage in those practices perceived as effective in reducing chronic student absenteeism, but also school divisions could provide job embedded professional development to enhance the knowledge and skills of principals related to the topic.

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General Audience Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicate are effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. This study also explored how effective principals perceived each strategy or intervention was in regard to reducing chronic student absenteeism. The study included Virginia high school principals whose school experienced a reduced rate of chronic student absenteeism between 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019. Principals participated in a survey and individual interview; the survey and interview instruments were designed by the researcher (see Appendix G and Appendix H).

The study results indicated high school principals are utilizing communication as a strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Additionally, principals also reported involving various school stakeholders, creating a positive school culture, and utilizing accountability practices in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals perceived communication and engaging instruction to be effective strategies or interventions, while data collection and management was perceived to be least effective. Future actions could include principals' continued efforts to engage families in practices to reduce chronic absenteeism. Principals could also monitor and support teacher instruction for student engagement. Additional implications and future research to decrease chronic student absenteeism are shared.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Grace and Claire, my precious girls. Girls, know that hard work, commitment, and perseverance pay off. I hope you dream big dreams, establish ambitious goals, and work hard to achieve them all. Your success in life is defined by you, no one else. You really can do anything you set your mind to.

To my parents, Wayne and Debra Lenhart, for your constant encouragement and motivation. Thank you for always believing in me. I am still keeping my tips up!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As the school's primary leader, no principal can ignore chronic student absenteeism (Attendance Works, n.d.). A student is chronically absent if he or she misses more than 10% of the academic school year for any reason (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], n.d.). Jordan and Miller (2017) determined a fifth of the nation's schools report that 20% or more, over 7 million, of their students are chronically absent from school, missing more than three weeks. Chronic student absenteeism is problematic because it leads to low academic performance among students, predicts high school dropout, and is associated with poor outcomes later in life (VDOE, n.d.).

National interest and initiatives targeted to improve student absenteeism, including chronic student absenteeism, are linked to President Obama's "Every Student, Every Day" campaign (VDOE, n.d.). A goal of the campaign was to bring awareness of and solutions to the millions of American school children who are chronically absent each year (Bauer et al., 2018). As a joint effort among the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2015), the *Every Student Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism* articulated that the population will be less educated, less healthy, without employment, and financially unstable as a result of chronic student absenteeism. Furthermore, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 required states to include at least one measure of school quality beyond academic achievement and graduation rate in regard to accountability (VDOE, n.d.). When considering chronic student absenteeism, a review of compulsory education laws and current measures of school performance provides further context.

Background

In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to enact a compulsory education law that required localities to offer primary schools focusing on basic academic skills such as grammar and arithmetic (Find Law, 2016). Under the law, parents who refused to send their child(ren) to school were fined or sometimes stripped of their rights as parents. Numerous states followed Massachusetts and began enacting compulsory education laws, which brought education to the forefront as a public concern. While there are a few exceptions, today, such laws mandate children to attend school for a specific length of time.

The Code of Virginia details Virginia's compulsory education law. According to Virginia's Legislative Information System, the *Code of Virginia* states:

every parent, guardian, or other person in the Commonwealth having control or charge of any child who will have reached the fifth birthday on or before September 30 of any school year and who has not passed the eighteenth birthday shall, during the period of each year the public schools are in session and for the same number of days and hours per day as the public schools, cause such child to attend a public school or a private, denominational, or parochial school or have such child taught by a tutor or teacher of qualifications prescribed by the Board of Education and approved by the division superintendent, or provide for home instruction of such child as described in § 22.1-254.1. (para. 3)

In 2015, student attendance became a measure of school performance. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allowed states to select one nontraditional indicator to measure school quality or student success in addition to four academic indicators (Attendance Works, 2016; VDOE, n.d.). The ESSA required states to reach beyond traditional achievement measures,

achievement on standardized tests or graduation rates, to include at least one standard of school quality or student success (VDOE, n.d.). Many states, including Virginia, adopted chronic student absenteeism, being absent 10% or more of the school year, as their fifth indicator (Jordan & Miller, 2017; VDOE, n.d.).

In Virginia, school accountability requirements measure specific school quality indicators. According to the VDOE (n.d.), high schools are evaluated based on the Standards of Accreditation (SOA) School Indicators, which include:

- Overall proficiency in English reading/writing and progress of English learners toward English-language proficiency;
- Overall proficiency in mathematics;
- Overall proficiency in science;
- Achievement gaps among student groups in English;
- Achievement gaps among student groups in mathematics;
- Graduation and completion index;
- Dropout rate;
- Chronic absenteeism; and
- College, career and civic readiness. (Impact on Schools, para. 2)

Each school quality indicator is rated at one of three levels. Level One indicates the school's performance meets or exceeds the state standard for that indicator or is making adequate improvement (VDOE, n.d.). Level Two indicates the school is near the standard or is making sufficient progress. Level Three indicates the school's performance for that indicator is below the standard.

Specific to chronic absenteeism, a school is labeled Level One if its rate of chronic student absenteeism is no more than 15%, meaning no more than 15% of students miss over 10% of the academic year (VDOE, n.d.). Level One can also include a school with a rate greater than 15% but no more than 25% and demonstrating a reduction of 10% from the previous year (VDOE, n.d.). Schools at Level Two have a chronic student absenteeism rate greater than 15%, but lower than 25%, or a rate greater than 25%, but demonstrating a 10% reduction from the previous year. Schools at Level Three have a chronic absenteeism rate greater than 25% or have a Level Two rate for more than four consecutive years. Figure 1 provides a description of the leveled system the VDOE uses to measure the School Quality Indicator: Student Engagement – Chronic Absenteeism.

Figure 1

School Quality Indicators; Student Engagement – Chronic Absenteeism

Indicator	Level One	Level Two	Level Three
Chronic Absenteeism	Schools with a current year or three-year average overall absenteeism rate of no more than 15% (that is, no more than 15% of the students missing 10% of the school year), or schools that were at Level Two the prior year and decrease the rate by 10% or more from the prior year	Schools not meeting Level-One performance with a current year or three-year average rate of no more than 25%, or schools that were at Level Three the prior year and decrease the rate by 10% or more from the prior year	Schools with a current year or three-year-average chronic-absenteeism rate of 25% or more or schools with a Level Two rating for more than four consecutive years

Statement of the Problem

Chang and Romero (2008) stated there is an assumption at the core of school improvement and education reform that is not addressed where learning requires that students be

present and engaged. Students who are absent from class have fewer opportunities to learn information to help them succeed later (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). When students are chronically absent from school, or miss 10% or more of the school year, they are more likely to be negatively impacted; chronic student absenteeism leads to lower achievement scores, increased discipline, and a reduced rate of on-time graduation (Elias, 2019). Epstein and Sheldon also found absenteeism to be a critical predictor of students dropping out of school.

Moreover, the research of Chang and Romero (2008) stated:

Whether children attend school regularly reflects whether children's environments - including family, schools, community, culture, and society - adequately address their needs. While parents are responsible for getting their children to school every day, schools and communities need to recognize and address the barriers and challenges that may inhibit them from doing so, especially when they are living in poverty. (p. 11)

This study sought to provide research targeted toward which strategies and interventions principals utilize that are effective in reducing chronic student absenteeism among high school students. As Bartenen (2020) offered, much has been researched about how a principal's influence positively impacts student achievement but not student attendance. Bartenen conducted a study to estimate principal value-added to student absences, a method that measured the principal's contribution in one year by comparing it to previous years. The research determined "moving from the 25th to 75th percentile in value-added decreases student absences by 1.4 instructional days and lowers the probability of chronic absenteeism by 4 percentage points" (Bartenen, 2020, p. 101). While Bartenen's research indicated principals could positively impact reducing chronic student absenteeism, the research did not detail the specific strategies and interventions principals used to decrease student absenteeism.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicated are effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Research indicates the factors contributing to chronic student absenteeism are: poor grades, school safety, illness, family relations and parental problems, mental or emotional health issues, economic disadvantage, unreliable transportation, suspensions and expulsions, faulty beliefs, and lack of school engagement (Stronge & Associates, 2019). This study explored the strategies and interventions designed to address many of those school factors by the principal within the school setting. This study also explored how effective principals perceive each strategy or intervention has been in reducing student absences. Furthermore, this study's population included high schools that experienced a decreasing rate of chronic absenteeism over three academic years, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019.

Research Questions

Two research questions related to the strategies and interventions utilized by high school principals to reduce chronic student absenteeism guided this research. These research questions

1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

This study used a qualitative research methodology to identify what high school principals indicate are effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Virginia high school principals who have led a school that decreased its rate of

chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019, were invited to participate in a survey and be individually interviewed.

Conceptual Framework

Research has identified factors contributing to chronic student absenteeism as: poor grades, school safety, illness, family relations and parental problems, mental or emotional health issues, economic disadvantage, unreliable transportation, suspensions and expulsions, faulty beliefs, and lack of school engagement (Stronge & Associates, 2019). Ready (2010) found inadequate educational supports such as lack of transportation, unsafe conditions, lack of health services, and harsh disciplinary measures were also associated with chronic student absenteeism.

A report by Brundage et al. (2017) communicated the results of the *Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism Survey* of secondary students. The reported top reasons for chronic absenteeism among students were health, transportation, personal stress, preferred non-school activities, and the perceived value of school. In the research, 38% of survey respondents cited the value of school as a reason they sometimes or usually miss school. Value of school encompassed students' perceptions about school, including their interest level in courses, the support provided by personnel, and the school's ability to help them reach goals (Brundage et al., 2017).

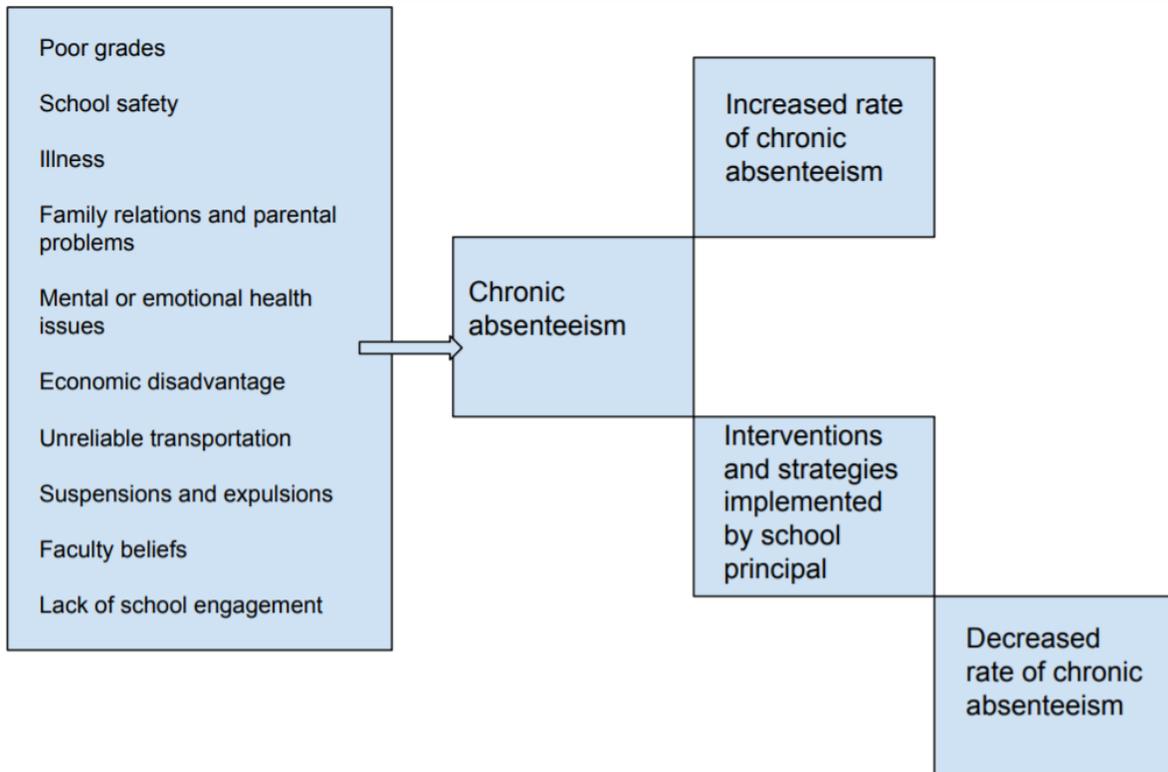
A school principal is responsible for implementing strategies and interventions to address school and student performance deficiencies. With chronic student absenteeism being one measurement of school quality, principals must also monitor chronic student absenteeism and implement strategies and interventions to address it if there is cause. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) suggested developing strong school-family-community alliances to improve school attendance. Specifically, schools should develop activities that focus on attendance using the following six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-

making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). Additional research indicated schools that prioritize a welcoming school culture, contact with parents and families, programs to address and improve attendance, and record-keeping have better school attendance (Marsh, 2019).

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study. The factors contributing to chronic student absenteeism are displayed on the left. School leaders, principals, seek evidence-based interventions to improve and address chronic student absenteeism. A school’s rate of chronic student absenteeism should decrease by implementing specific strategies and interventions to address the problem.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework – Impact of Interventions and Strategies on Chronic Student Absenteeism



The implementation of strategies and interventions, as displayed in the conceptual framework, aligns to the research questions from this study. Without implementing strategies and interventions which establish foundational school practices, a school's rate of chronic student absenteeism will not decrease.

Definition of Terms

For clarification purposes, certain vocabulary terms were defined for readers. The following vocabulary terms were used often throughout the study and findings: *chronic student absenteeism*, *interventions*, *School Quality Indicator*, *strategies and truancy*. For this study, these terms were defined in the following paragraphs.

Chronic student absenteeism is defined as “missing [10] percent or more of the academic year for any reason, including excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions. Based on a 180-day school year, that means approximately 18 days per year or 2 to 3 days per month” (VDOE, n.d., Attendance and Truancy, para. 2).

Interventions are specific actions designed to support at-risk students (VDOE, n.d.).

School Quality Indicator is a specific measure of achievement determined by the Virginia Board of Education (e.g., chronic absenteeism) (VDOE, n.d.).

Strategies are general actions designed to support students, including engaging students and their families, recognizing improved attendance, monitoring data, individualizing outreach early, and responding to problems (VDOE, n.d.).

Truancy is defined as “the act of accruing one or more unexcused absences, where the parent is unaware of or does not support the student's absence, or where the parent's provided reason for the absence is not acceptable to the school administration” (VDOE, n.d., Attendance and Truancy, para. 3.).

Limitations

A study's limitations are the design or methodology components that affect the results, but cannot be controlled by the researcher (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study contained the following limitations:

1. Chronic student absenteeism was included as a school quality indicator beginning with the 2016-2017 school year, but not included in accreditation ratings until 2018-2019; therefore, many principals may not have adequate experience implementing strategies and interventions to address chronic student absenteeism.
2. Various school divisions across the Commonwealth of Virginia may take attendance using different methods.
3. The researcher was a former principal of a high school with a Level Three Chronic Student Absenteeism rate. There is a potential for researcher bias.
4. Due to the impact of COVID-19 on schools and school personnel, district administrators may not permit school principals to participate in the study and school principals may also opt not to participate in the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the choices made by the researcher which limit or define the boundaries of the study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study contained the following delimitations:

1. The research was limited to only Virginia high schools that experienced a decrease in chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019.
2. The research was limited to the perspective of high school principals who served high schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia that experienced a decrease in chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019.

3. Chronic student absenteeism data are limited to School Quality information as reported by VDOE.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters and includes references. Chapter 1 includes a brief introduction of the study, a statement of the problem, the study's purpose, research questions, an overview of the study, conceptual framework, the definition of terms, limitations, delimitations, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to chronic student absenteeism. The review includes background information, the search process, and literature relevant to the topic. Chapter 3 provides the qualitative methodology used in this study. The following components are also included in Chapter 3: the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, needed data, site/sample selection, data collection procedures, data gathering procedures, instrument design, instrument validation, data treatment, data management, data analysis techniques, timeline, and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the collected data and provides a description of the data analysis used to identify major themes. Finally, Chapter 5 provides the findings and implications identified in this study, including suggestions for future research, a summary, and personal reflections. References are included at the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

Chronic absenteeism, when students are repeatedly absent from school for any reason, is a nationwide crisis (Chang, 2016). The topic is an issue that many schools and school divisions across the country are attentive to because of the negative impacts on students' academic achievement, health, and well-being. "A fifth of the nation's schools report that 20 percent or more of their students are chronically absent. No state is untouched by the problem" (Jordan & Miller, 2017, p. 1). Schools are also particularly attentive to the issue because of the impact low student attendance has on the school's overall performance, including accreditation, evaluations, and funding (Rogers & Feller, 2018). Historically, most states and schools have failed to examine chronic student absenteeism closely but instead have focused on truancy and average daily attendance (Buehler et al., 2012). Chronic student absenteeism is a different data point than truancy or average daily attendance, two rates many schools also calculate (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Balfanz, 2016; Nauer, 2016; PDK International, 2016).

The topic of chronic student absenteeism has only recently gained attention, as it was not until 2014 that the U.S. Department of Education asked schools to report how many students missed 15 or more days per year (Balfanz, 2016). Stronge and Associates (2019), along with the VDOE (n.d.), defined chronic student absenteeism as missing 10% or more of a school year, including excused or unexcused absences and suspensions. Despite the reason for missing school, any student absence counts towards a school's chronic student absenteeism rate unless the student receives educational services such as homebound or home-based instruction. "Nationwide, more than 6.8 million students – 14% of all students – are chronically absent each year. More than 3 million high school students – or 19% of all high school students are chronically absent" (Stronge & Associates, 2019. p. 2).

Research details various reasons why students miss school, including both in-school and out-of-school conditions and adverse childhood experiences (Balfanz, 2016; PDK International, 2016; Stempel et al., 2017;). As a result of missing instruction and time in school, student achievement declines, dropout rates increase, and the likelihood for declined health increases (Elias, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2006; Ready, 2010; Stronge & Associates, 2019). In order to improve chronic student absenteeism in schools, attendance data must be tracked accurately, schools should closely examine daily and master schedules, and schools should work to create positive cultures (Elias, 2019; Whitney & Liu, 2017; Wilkins, 2008). Chang (2016) stated when students are absent, we should try to determine the cause or break down. Furthermore, there is also a need to improve communication between schools and homes to ensure parents and guardians receive accurate and frequent information about student absences (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Search Process

Multiple means of data collection were utilized during the search process for this literature review. Searches were conducted utilizing Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Library, Mendeley, and online search engines (i.e., Google Scholar). The collected literature provides information on the variances between chronic student absenteeism, truancy, and average daily attendance; federal policy; the causes of absenteeism; and the relationship between chronic student absenteeism, school culture, student achievement, and health. Some supporting literature is outside of the ten-year range; however, it is foundational work.

Keywords and terms used to search include absenteeism, achievement, attendance, chronic student absenteeism, daily attendance, facility, principal, public schools, and truancy.

Education

Federal and State Policy

When states began to give chronic student absenteeism more focus and attention, several began doing their own analyses under the guidelines of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and were able to link student absenteeism and test scores (Jordan, 2017). As some states were granted a waiver to NCLB, a few included chronic student absenteeism into their accountability program. The NCLB was updated, and the Office for Civil Rights added chronic student absenteeism in its official data collection for 2013-2014 (Jordan, 2017). Chang (2016) stated:

The Office for Civil Rights decided to begin collecting data on chronic absences because it understands that kids don't have equal access to educational opportunity if they're not in their seats. It's common sense; you don't benefit from instruction if you don't show up for class. (para. 4)

In 2015, NCLB was renamed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and it allowed states to define accountability measures using five indicators within an established legal framework to measure school performance (Attendance Works, n.d.). Four of the indicators focus on academic achievement with the fifth indicator being non-academic; many states use chronic student absenteeism as this fifth indicator (Jordan & Miller, 2017).

States use chronic student absenteeism as a fifth indicator because it meets or exceeds the ESSA criteria (Attendance Works, 2016). Specifically, chronic student absenteeism meets the ESSA criteria for being an indicator because it is applicable for every student, can be disaggregated appropriately, is comparable across a state's school districts, differences can be noted in performance among schools, is valid, reliable, and has a proven impact on achievement (Attendance Works, 2016). Chronic student absenteeism data are often used by school officials

in school improvement plans and can be used to measure specific school characteristics, including school climate and student engagement (Attendance Works, 2016). Additionally, chronic absenteeism data assist community stakeholders and policymakers in knowing where and how to allocate funding to schools to better support students (Chang et al., 2019).

Chronic Student Absenteeism vs. Truancy

Chronic student absenteeism differs from truancy. Truancy is an absence-related legal term that reflects the number of unexcused absences a student has earned before a school acts (London et al., 2016). Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) defined truancy as "a non-home school student's act of non-attendance evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being authorized by medical practitioner or sanctioned by parent(s) and legitimately excused by school or per state law" (p. 21). Truancy applies to only unexcused absences, whereas chronic student absenteeism includes all absences (London et al., 2016). After a certain number of unexcused days within a specific time frame, schools develop truancy reports, which are often communicated with legal institutions, namely juvenile court systems (Balfanz, 2016). The number of unexcused absences a student may be granted varies by state, as does the type of court involvement. "Although students who are truant may be chronically absent, focusing solely on truancy may miss those students who miss excessive amounts of school for 'excused' reasons" (Allison & Attisha, 2019, para. 2). Truancy reports represent only a portion of a school's attendance data. Furthermore, there are no similar systemic procedures in place in any state to handle cases of chronic student absenteeism, and most districts have not developed data systems to track chronic student absenteeism (London et al., 2016).

The effectiveness of court involvement in truancy and improving student attendance is questionable (Weber, 2020). Courts are able to intervene and promote good attendance due to

their ability to hold others accountable, and connect students and families with various support agencies (Shdaimah et al., 2011). Rather than using punitive measures, courts should seek proactive, compassionate ways to promote student engagement with schools (Shdaimah et al., 2011). “Courts have the potential to become allies of vulnerable children when school attendance come knocking on the court’s door...” (Shdaimah et al., 2011, p. 12). On the contrary, Weber (2020) reported that court or judicial system involvement actually results in higher rates of absenteeism. “Juvenile justice system involvement is not associated with positive impacts on youth’s school attendance and may in fact negatively affect students’ success” (Weber, 2020, p. 16).

Chronic Student Absenteeism vs. Average Daily Attendance

The rate of chronic student absenteeism is also a different calculation than average daily attendance. Attendance includes student behaviors, policies, procedures, and protocols for formally determining a student's presence or absence in a school system by an official school representative or system (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). Nauer (2016) stated:

Average daily attendance is the measure used nationwide to evaluate attendance for school funding and accountability. Daily attendance measures the percent[age] of students who show up on any given day, and average daily attendance offers a picture of how well schools do over time. (p. 33)

Focusing on average daily attendance provides little information about how many students miss school and miss school too frequently (Nauer, 2016). Schools with a high average daily attendance, for example, may assume the school is performing well; however, without considering the chronically absent students, this scope is limited. "A school could have an average daily attendance rate of 92% and still have 20% of its students missing a month or more

of school. This is because different students on different days are making up the 92%" (Balfanz, 2016, p. 9). High percentages of average daily attendance can mislead or mask the actual number of chronically absent students (Chang & Romero, 2008). Including chronic student absenteeism information in a school's overall attendance data is a more informative and accurate description of how well the school performs (Nauer, 2016).

Demographic Characteristics of Chronically Absent Students

Buehler et al. (2012) found that approximately 7.5 million students in the United States miss nearly a month of school each year. According to a national data review by Chang (2016), some minority student populations, including American-Indians, African-Americans, and Pacific Islanders, experience higher rates of chronic absenteeism than white students. Garcia and Weiss (2018) also confirmed this finding in their report stating, "Hispanic ELLs (English language learners) and Native American students were the most likely to miss three or more days of school, followed by black students..." (p. 4).

Children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss three or more days of school per month (U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics, 2006). The research of Garcia and Weiss (2018) found that poor students or students with disabilities, 26%, were more likely to miss school than affluent or non-individualized education program (IEP) students, 18.3%. Garcia and Weiss (2018) reported:

23.2 percent of students eligible for free lunch, and 17.9 percent of students eligible for reduced-price lunch, missed three school days or more, compared with 15.4 percent of students who were not FRPL-eligible (that is, eligible for neither free lunch nor reduced-price lunch). (p. 4)

The research of Buehler et al. (2012) also supported the conclusion that the highest absenteeism rates are among students living in poverty and those with disabilities.

While kindergarten students are most frequently absent in elementary school, the rate grows as students enter middle and high school, where truancy becomes more of an issue (Buehler et al., 2012). In 2015, one in five eighth-graders was chronically absent (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). According to Buehler et al. (2012), chronic student absenteeism is 14 percentage points higher in high school than in early elementary school. A 2016 U.S. Department of Education report, included in the work of Garcia and Weiss (2018), indicated high school students are more likely to be absent from school than other grade levels (elementary or middle school).

Absenteeism also varies by state. Garcia & Weiss (2018) found California and Massachusetts had the highest full attendance rates in 2015, followed by Virginia, Illinois, and Indiana in 2018. In contrast, the researchers discovered Utah and Wyoming had the highest absenteeism rates, students missing more than 10 days of school, in the same year (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Also, of importance, they found overall absenteeism rates varied minimally between 2003 and 2015 (Garcia & Weiss, 2018).

Causes of Absenteeism

According to researchers, there are multiple reasons for students to be absent from school, including poor grades, school violence and bullying, illness, family relations and parental problems, mental or health issues, economic disadvantage, transportation, discipline (suspensions and expulsions), faulty beliefs, and lack of school engagement (Balfanz, 2016; Balkis, 2016; Genao, 2013; PDK International, 2016; Ready, 2010). Ready found students miss school because of such factors as poor health, parents' work schedule, poverty or low

socioeconomic status, family responsibilities, educational system failures such as limited transportation, unsafe conditions, and lack of medical service. Students miss school because they cannot attend (illness, family responsibilities, and legal issues), will not attend (bullying and safety concerns), and do not attend (lack of accountability and lack of value) (PDK International, 2016).

Balfanz (2016) asserted there are four broad categories of why students are chronically absent from school: 1) Events outside of school – taking care of family members, medical conditions, transportation issues; 2) Threat avoidance – avoiding situations, bullying, feeling threatened; 3) Disengagement – lack of interest, students feel there is little happening and few who care; and 4) Faulty beliefs – people do not see the value or importance of school and believe missing to be acceptable. Genao (2013) shared students miss and eventually drop out of school altogether for reasons including family problems, poor attendance, course failure, gang involvement, and a lack of interest. A synthesis of this research asserts that both in-school and out-of-school influences impact whether students attend school.

A study conducted by London et al. (2016) examined longitudinal data relating to chronic student absenteeism for both elementary and secondary students in one San Francisco Bay Area Community. The research found kindergarten students had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism, followed by high school students. Extreme tardiness and previous chronic absenteeism were significant factors that predicted chronic student absenteeism during the analysis period. In other words, students who missed school chronically in one year continued to be chronically absent in subsequent years, thereby negatively repeating the cycle (London et al., 2016). Ansari and Pianta (2019) found earlier absenteeism explained significant variance in

future absenteeism. "Earlier absenteeism is a strong behavioral signal of later absenteeism" (Ansari & Pianta, 2019, p. 58).

Balkis et al. (2016) conducted a study to explore school absenteeism as related to personal factors, family factors, and academic achievement. The researchers defined personal factors as academic self-perception, attitudes toward teachers and schools, goals/motivation, and self-regulation. Balkis et al. considered parents' educational level and income as family factors. The researchers hypothesized that personal factors and negative family factors impact attendance. The researchers also stated, "it may be expected that there is a reciprocal relationship between academic achievement and student absenteeism...while student absenteeism may affect academic achievement, academic achievement may affect student absenteeism as well" (Balkis et al., 2016, p. 1822). Using a demographics information sheet and School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised Turkish Version, the researchers assessed 423 high school students (grades 9-12) in two public schools in an urban Turkish city. As hypothesized, they found student absenteeism was negatively correlated to personal factors, e.g. if a student had a poor attitude towards teachers or school, they were less likely to attend school, or if a student had a poor perception of their ability academically, they were less likely to attend school. They also found family factors predicted absenteeism and achievement. "Students whose mothers and fathers received high school/college education reported lower rate of absenteeism" and "students from families with lower socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to skip school" (Balkis et al., 2016, p. 1827). Lastly, the findings reported that student absenteeism negatively impacts academic achievement, while previous academic achievement predicts student attendance; students who do not regularly attend school perform poorly academically, and students who perform poorly academically are not as likely to attend school.

School facilities and building conditions may also contribute to student absenteeism (Berman et al., 2018). In a 1999 study, as Lavy and Nixon (2017) cited, public schools within the United States are approximately 42 years old. "The physical condition of public schools is of great concern due to factors such as aging infrastructure, decades of deferred maintenance, environmental factors, lack of adequate technology, and failure to meet accessibility" (Lavy & Nixon, 2017 p. 125). Although Lavy and Nixon found that there was no effect on attendance rate as related to building composite score or building age, Berman et al. (2018) "observed building conditions...to significantly impact student absenteeism" (p. 805). An examination of specific components within a building, such as air quality and location may be associated with absenteeism. Specifically, the researchers discovered a relationship between industrial pollutant exposure within a building, which contributed to personal illness, and absenteeism from school (Berman et al., 2018). "Industrial toxins were associated with an increase in absences" (Berman et al., 2018, p. 807).

Impact on Achievement

A school's rate of chronic student absenteeism is more helpful in predicting achievement scores than the school's percentage of students with disabilities (SWD), English language learners (ELL), or students classified as economically disadvantaged (ECD) and receiving free-reduced meals (Nauer, 2016). "Children make educational gains as a function of more exposure to school, but turn the exposure off, then children's gains stop" (Ansari & Pianta, 2019, p. 49). When students are chronically absent from school, they miss foundational learning and developmental experiences, which can negatively impact their future (London et al., 2016). "Research backs up the common-sense belief that children suffer academically if they aren't in class to learn (Buehler et al., 2012, p. 2). From an academic viewpoint, chronic student

absenteeism translates to poor reading skills, lower test scores, higher discipline rates, and a reduced likelihood of graduating on time (Elias, 2019). Gottfried's (2011) study supported the conclusion that student absences from school negatively correlate with standardized testing performance in reading and mathematics. Garcia and Weiss (2018) found students who missed ten days of school scored two-thirds of a standard deviation below on a National Assessment of Education Programs mathematics assessment than those who missed no school.

Allensworth and Evans (2016) examined the relationship between attendance, course failure, and high school graduation; they found student course performance in 9th grade was more predictive than other factors, including race, gender, and economic status. Allensworth and Evans stated:

Freshmen who are on track, earning no more than one semester of an F in a core class, are nearly four times more likely than their off-track peers to graduate from high school.

Moreover, by far, the main driver of course failure was absences. (p. 17)

To prevent course failure and ultimately graduate, students must regularly attend school (Allensworth & Evans, 2016). The attendance of freshmen in high school courses is more strongly indicative of course failure than 8th grade test scores. Furthermore, school absenteeism is a valid indicator of social, emotional, and health problems in adulthood (Stronge & Associates, 2019).

Gottfried (2019) argued that students' chronic absenteeism could negatively impact students' classmates. "Chronic absenteeism does not occur in a vacuum - rather, there is the potential for negative spillover effects of chronic absenteeism onto other classmates" (Gottfried 2019, p. 5). When students are absent, teachers must take time to respond to their various academic needs upon return, thereby taking time and attention away from those students who

were not absent. Student absences also impact lesson delivery and curriculum pacing by slowing down the pace at which new material is introduced. Furthermore, upon return to school, if those chronically absent students cause behavior disruptions (perhaps because of academic frustration), the teacher must also take the time to respond to the students' needs and manage behavior. In such situations, teachers must spend their time and effort managing those who were absent instead of those who were present.

Students perform worse academically in classrooms with high chronic absenteeism rates (Gottfried, 2011). Using longitudinal data from a large urban district (third and fourth-grade students in 175 public elementary schools), the researcher set out to determine the role of chronic absenteeism on student achievement. In examining the individual and classroom levels of absenteeism, compared to standard curve equivalent scores (NCES) for the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT9), Gottfried found chronically absent students have low academic outcomes. Also, the researcher found students in classrooms with higher rates of chronic student absenteeism had lower test scores in both reading and mathematics. “Even if students themselves are not chronic absentees, they may still be at risk of educational decline based on the chronic absenteeism of others in the same classroom” (Gottfried, 2019, p. 26).

Student attendance can also impact the entire school community. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) articulated the relationship between student attendance and school funding. School funding is correlated to the number of enrolled students; fewer students means fewer programs and potentially less money (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). When schools lack adequate student attendance, they also lack overall funding.

School Climate

Elias (2019) cited information from the National School Climate Center to argue that schools must create a positive climate to support student's academic success, social-emotional and character development, and the prevention of other problem behaviors including attendance. Improving students' perception of school climate may be an essential strategy for increasing student attendance (Van Eck et al., 2017). Research found students who perceive their school climate to be negative are more likely to attend schools with high chronic absenteeism rates. The National School Climate Center defined school climate as "the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life; it also reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Center, n.d., para.1).

The Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey identified several components of creating a positive climate at school, including allowing students to set goals, practice self-efficacy, promote health and safety, model respect and respectfulness, and offer engaging learning opportunities (Elias, 2019). Genao (2013) stated:

Appreciating and indulging in each student's unique academic story and utilizing that story to develop an exceedingly custom-made learning environment will lead to an entrusted and involved school building. The culture and highly encouraging consultative system where every student is treated as an individual will help develop positive relationships between adults and students, between students and their peers, and students and community partners. (pp. 473-474)

Furthermore, "recognizing good and improved attendance, educating and engaging students and families about the importance of good attendance, monitoring absences, and setting attendance

goals helps establish a supporting and engaging school climate” (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020, p. 3). Suppose students are provided with a positive school environment that supports academics and emotional and behavioral health. In that case, students will likely desire to attend school, and chronic student absenteeism will be reduced. "Schools can improve attendance by making students feel less anonymous and by showing them that being in class is important" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 309). All school stakeholders should work together to provide students with an inviting, engaging environment which encourages their attendance and active participation (Stronge & Associates, 2019).

Schools must examine how to become more supportive of students so students will attend school (Railsback, 2004). “Lack of appropriate or engaging instruction perpetuate student absences” (Stronge & Associates, 2019, p. 10). Providing opportunities for personalized learning and small learning communities positively impact student attendance (Railsback, 2014). For example, career academies are one option known to improve attendance and prepare students for life beyond high school; curricula are relevant and specific to a career pathway and students’ interests (Stronge & Associates, 2019). Kearney (2008) also stated providing individualized instruction was an effective strategy in response to chronic attendance problems. Furthermore, educational leaders should assess schools’ instructional programs to determine if classes are engaging and challenging enough to motivate students to attend (Railsback, 2004).

Allensworth and Evans (2016) noted a decline in student attendance during the ninth-grade transitional year from middle school to high school. The researchers attributed this decline to a decrease in teacher monitoring of students and student behavior (e.g., middle school students are traditionally monitored more conservatively than high school students). High school students are offered a greater degree of freedom and personal responsibility. Allensworth and Evans

recommended providing in-school supports such as mentors and attendance buddies for at-risk students. Allensworth and Evans (2016) found:

An environment in which teachers actively monitor attendance and engage with students to unearth the causes of absenteeism yields vastly different results from one in which teachers let students get by with skipping or missing school, sending the message that they don't care and that attendance doesn't matter. (p. 18)

The research of Wilkins (2008) examined why a group of students who refused to attend their regular public school willingly attended an alternative school for students with special needs and how the regular (or traditional) public school was different from the alternative school. Wilkins conducted three rounds of interviews with the students: open-ended questions about the student's past experiences in their previous school, structured questions asking what the students did not like about the previous school, and open-ended questions about the alternative school. Based on report card information and attendance data, the students were absent less frequently at the alternative school for four primary reasons: school climate, academic environment, discipline, and relationships with teachers. "Students described feeling comfortable and accepted by others, and being involved in trusting, interpersonal relationships" (Wilkins, 2008, p. 16). "Compared to students' previous schools, academic work at [the alternative school] was seen as easier, and the classroom atmosphere as calmer and more conducive to work" (Wilkins, 2008, p. 18).

Many school districts participate in and utilize Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) resources. "School-wide PBIS is a multi-tiered framework to make schools more effective places. It establishes a social culture and the behavior supports needed to improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for all students" (Center on PBIS, n.d.,

para.1). Freeman et al. (2015) analyzed the relationship between implementing PBIS and high school dropout rates. School-wide PBIS results indicate a positive correlation between schools that have implemented PBIS and attendance, and attendance is a predictor of dropout rates. As a result of examining data from high schools within 37 states, the researchers found “no direct relation of time-varying [school-wide] PBIS on dropout rates, [school-wide] PBIS was associated with improvements in attendance, which is closely and directly associated with dropout rates” (Freeman et al., 2015, p. 306).

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) measured the effectiveness of certain school practices in relation to student attendance. The researchers found that rewarding students for improved attendance increased daily student attendance and decreased chronic absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). "Schools that rewarded students for improved attendance (e.g., parties, gift certificates, or recognition at assemblies) reported positive changes in attendance from year to year" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 315). Furthermore, they also determined using truancy officers to work with students and families, referring chronically absent students to counselors, conducting attendance workshops for families, and connecting families with school personnel to be effective. "The degree to which schools overcame the challenge of communicating effectively with diverse groups of families was related to gains in student attendance and declines in chronic absenteeism" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 315). Lastly, the researchers found that schools that offered after-school programs also had an increase in daily attendance and a decrease in chronic student absenteeism compared to schools that did not. After-school programs benefit both parents (who are working and or need daycare) and students (who enjoy participating in after-school activities with peers).

School Interventions: Analyzing Data

Accurate and consistent data collection and analysis enables educators and community stakeholders to identify which schools and students need support (Chang et al., 2019). It is imperative that schools accurately track attendance data, as missing school in early grades is indicative of future absences (Stronge & Associates, 2019). Genao (2013) stated:

Absenteeism prevention measures must be taken early in a student's career to stop the waste of talent and resources...Schools must make an effort to ensure the reliability of student data. If this type of analysis is going to be made every year, all data must be reliable and readily available. (p. 472)

With this early knowledge, it is feasible to believe schools may be able to intervene early to develop strong relationships with families and students. Knowing how attendance impacts achievement, it is critical for students to be present. For example, a chronically absent student between the years of 9th and 12th grade is more likely to drop out of school (Stronge & Associates, 2019). Chronic student absenteeism is a better predictor of school dropout than other factors (Stempel et al., 2017). "Studies of dropouts show long-term patterns of behaviors indicating these students may begin distancing themselves from school at an early age" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 308). Such students typically exhibit a pattern of frequent absenteeism during their school year. Poor student attendance is a warning sign of potential dropout (Buehler et al., 2012).

A deeper data dive into attendance could help schools determine if there are subgroups of children most affected (Elias, 2019). Gottfried's (2011) work supported the need to examine student-level data. For example, a school may have a particular student population that is consistently absent, and the school could focus on these cases. Alternatively, the school may

have alternating groups of absent students, and a school-wide absence problem should be addressed. "By evaluating student-level data in conjunction with agreement measures, the school can reflect on its own status and guide its absence policies to most efficiently address institutional-specific issues" (Gottfried, 2011, p. 175).

A thorough examination could also reveal if and how school master schedules negatively affect attendance (Whitney & Liu, 2017). Whitney and Liu conducted a study to examine the impact of part-day absenteeism as compared to full-day absenteeism, along with identifying the characteristics of absent students and the classes missed. They considered if class timing (what period of the day) impacted student attendance and the reasons for students missing first period or last period, for example. "A student's decision to attend class could also depend in part on how interesting he or she finds the class content as well as on how important he or she thinks the class content will be for his or her future" (Whitney & Liu, 2017, p. 2). The research found that more students accumulated part-day absences, as opposed to full-day absences and part-day absences, are more frequent among high school students than middle school students. Regarding classes missed, Whitney and Liu estimated that students are more likely to be absent from their PE class than any other class, followed by foreign language, mathematics, science, ELA, and are least likely to be absent from social studies class. Schools should examine improving engagement in lower-attendance subjects and revise policies and practices that could deter absences from the beginning and end of the day.

Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020) suggested using multiple data points to track and report attendance. Examples included teacher records, attendance officer reports, test-taking outcomes, suspensions, expulsions, attendance percentages, discipline behaviors, excused and unexcused

absences, and overall presence. “Current research also considers tracking processes, interventions, classifications, and categorizations” (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2020, p. 3).

Parent Communication

Parents are a valuable component to their student’s educational success and outcomes as they exert a degree of control over such factors as attendance (Robinson et al., 2018). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) stated:

When educators work with families to get students to school every day, and on time, these efforts appear to be successful. Therefore, in schools where students have attendance problems, educators may need to go beyond the school building to involve families in reducing absenteeism. (p. 309)

"Almost all parents want their children to be successful, but schools need to empower and inform parents if they can be expected to intervene upon their child's education" (Robinson et al., 2018, p. 1185). To clarify any mistaken beliefs or perceptions, schools should regularly communicate to parents and guardians the importance and value of regular school attendance and provide timely information regarding students' attendance (Robinson et al., 2018). According to Chang and Romero (2008), "chronic absence decreases when schools and communities actively communicate consistently to all students and their parents, and reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence" (p. 4).

Rogers and Feller (2018) developed a low-cost intervention to educate parents about student absences to reduce absenteeism. "The intervention targets two biased beliefs by parents of high-absence students: beliefs about total absences and beliefs about relative absences" (Rogers & Feller, 2018, p. 335). The researchers claimed that parents underestimate their children's absences from school and do not have an accurate understanding of how their

children's absences compare to other students. Parents of students who recorded high absences mistakenly thought their students missed fewer days than an average student (Robinson et al., 2018). The experiment was conducted in The School District of Philadelphia with a student population of 161,992 (Rogers & Feller, 2018). Participants were divided into three groups. Group one or the control group received no extra or additional communication beyond what is typically given. Group two received mailings throughout the year with information about individual student absences. Group three received mailings throughout the year with individual student absence data and relational data (comparing them to other students). The results indicated frequent communication to parents about school attendance may decrease absenteeism. In addition, Rogers and Fellers (2018) stated:

It suggests that correcting parents' biased beliefs about how many total absences their children have accumulated causes parents to reduce student absences...and using extreme social comparisons to correct parents' biased beliefs about how their children's absences compared with their children's classmates' absences does not cause an appreciable change in student absences. (p. 339)

School Leadership

Research supports various methods schools can use to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Because student attendance is a measure of school achievement, it is of paramount concern for school leaders and "a worthy target for school improvement efforts" (Bartanen, 2020, p. 101). Bartanen argued that a school principal's leadership in hiring and maintaining teachers, improving instruction through coaching and developing teachers, and creating a positive school climate can impact student attendance. Furthermore, principals influence student attendance by

using effective communication strategies with parents and families and exercising effective control over policies and procedures. Bartenen stated:

To summarize, there are both direct and indirect channels through which principals may affect student absenteeism. While some of these indirect channels are likely the same channels through which principals affect test scores, principals' frequent interactions with students and families and their unique position to direct school policy are plausibly more direct ways of reducing student absences. (p. 103)

Using ten years of statewide data, the researcher determined that replacing a school principal "with one that has had success in reducing absences, the result is reduced chronic absence of all students in that school by an average of 0.8 percentage points - or 1.4 days less during a 180-day school year" (Attendance Works, 2020).

Summary

Chronic student absenteeism, or missing 10% or more of one school year, is an issue many schools and districts are battling (Allensworth & Evans, 2016). As a result of federal and state policy and required data submissions, the issue has become a prominent topic in education. Chronic student absenteeism is a different data point from truancy and average daily attendance, two traditional metrics schools calculate. Research indicated minority, economically disadvantaged, and special education students are among the most likely to be absent from school (Buehler et al., 2012; Garcia & Weiss, 2018). Missing school at high rates is associated with poor student academic performance and health concerns and often sets students up for less than successful futures. In addition, high rates of chronic student absenteeism also impact schools' overall achievement or performance levels. While the reasons for missing school are many, including experiencing childhood adversity, transportation, illness, family issues, and

social-emotional factors, schools and school principals must strategically work to combat the negativity. School principals must utilize and implement specific strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism, including effectively communicating with students and parents, involving various school stakeholders, creating a positive school culture, utilizing appropriate accountability practices, and providing an engaging instructional program (Allensworth & Evans, 2016; Bartenen, 2020; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Chang & Romero, 2008; Robinson et al., 2018; Rogers & Fellers, 2018; Shdaimah et al., 2011; Van Eck et al., 2017).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will describe the research designed utilized for this study by the researcher. The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicated are effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. This study also explored how effective principals perceive each strategy or intervention had been in reducing student absences. This study's population included principals of Virginia high schools that decreased the rate of chronic student absenteeism over three academic years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. Chronic absenteeism was defined as a student missing 10% or more of a school year, including excused or unexcused absences and suspensions (Stronge & Associates, 2019; VDOE, n.d.).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

Research Design and Methodology

This research study used a qualitative design with a survey and interview methodology for data collection to answer the research questions. "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Qualitative research focuses on performing a study using primarily verbal descriptions (McMillan &

Wergin, 2010). Qualitative research was used in this study to understand principals' experiences related to reducing chronic student absenteeism.

Study Design

This study utilized a phenomenological approach of qualitative designs. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that is focused on a person's individual experiences within the world, and is aimed at interpreting and understanding the experiences of study participants (McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Neubauer et al., 2019). A phenomenological-designed qualitative study was selected for this research to explore what high school principals indicated as strategies and interventions utilized or implemented to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

Study Methodology

This study used an open-ended qualitative survey methodology developed by the researcher. The survey aimed to gather high school principals' indications of what strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented to reduce chronic student absenteeism and how effectively they perceived those strategies and interventions reduced chronic student absenteeism. This study used an open-ended qualitative survey methodology developed by the researcher. The survey was developed to gather high school principals' indications of what strategies and interventions they implemented and utilized to reduce chronic student absenteeism and how effectively they perceived those strategies to reduce absenteeism. Principals who completed the survey were then asked their willingness to participate in an individual interview. An interview was included following the survey to further capture how principals interpreted their actions to reduce chronic student absenteeism before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) supported using an interview in a study's methodology when researchers are unable to observe behavior or how study participants interpret their actions.

Study Data

Data collected from the survey, along with interview responses from respondents willing to participate in an interview, were collected from high school principals for this study. Criteria used to select the study's population included identifying high schools that had reduced the rate of chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. These data were obtained from the VDOE indicating 117 high schools experienced a reduced rate of chronic absenteeism during the time frame.

Site and Sample Selection

The following criteria was used to choose the site and sample:

- Virginia public high school
- VDOE School Quality Indicator shows a reduction of chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019
- School principal served in the position during the school's reduction of chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019

These criteria were chosen because a review of the literature indicated that chronic absenteeism is highest among high school students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), about one in five high school students is chronically absent; more than 20% of high school students are chronically absent, followed by middle school students at 14%. When a researcher uses criterion-based selection, he/she decides which features are essential to the study, then selects the site and sample according to those criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Additionally, McMillian and Wergin (2010) indicated the participant's perspective is vital to qualitative studies. In this study, high school principals were selected based on their experience with the topic of chronic absenteeism, including their school experiencing a reduced

the rate of chronic absenteeism. As high schools' annual rate of chronic absenteeism is reported to the VDOE and is one measure in determining school accreditation, the topic is familiar to high school principals. The research questions inquired about the strategies and interventions high school principals utilized to reduce chronic student absenteeism and their indications of effectiveness; therefore, it was essential to pose those questions to high school principals whose schools had a decrease in the rate of chronic absenteeism.

Data Collection Procedures

The research study utilized an open-ended qualitative survey and semi-structured individual interviews with Virginia high school principals. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "in education...interviewing is probably the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies" (p. 106). This study utilized semi-structured interviews. In a semi-structured interview, the questions and process are less structured; all questions are used flexibly. There is no predetermined order of questions or wording of questions, but the interviewer does aim to receive specific information from the interviewees allowing the research to respond and guide the interview based on emerging views from responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). According to the researchers, "this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Using this particular type of interview allowed the researcher flexibility in data gathering to ask additional or follow-up questions based upon respondents' answers. Data from the survey and interviews were used to review what high school principals indicated were effective strategies and interventions utilized or implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

Data Gathering Procedures

This study required several forms of approval. The researcher acquired the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification in Social and Behavioral Research in August 2020 (See Appendix A). The researcher was granted approval by the dissertation committee to seek approval from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on May 13, 2021. The researcher gained approval to conduct this research from IRB in July 2021 (See Appendix B).

Upon approval from IRB, email communication was sent to principals of high schools identified as having a reduction in their rate of chronic absenteeism between 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 (See Appendix C). This email communication included a summary of the dissertation topic and study. The email also asked principals to respond with answers to three questions: 1) Did you serve as the building principal of your current school during the time frame of 2016-2017 to 2018-2019? 2) Are you interested in participating in the study? and 3) Does your school division require additional permission to conduct human subjects research with school personnel and if so, who do I need to contact to request such permission?

If principals responded yes to questions one and two, and no to the third question, they were sent a second email communication (see Appendix D) with the survey link included. If principals responded yes to questions one, two, and three, an email communication (see Appendix E) was sent to their school division superintendent (or their designee) for permission to survey and interview high school principals meeting the study's population criteria. The email communication included a summary of the dissertation topic and study. The researcher also shared follow-up emails (see Appendix F) at intervals during the data collection process.

Standard consent was obtained from the principals participating in the survey. Anonymous survey responses were stored in the Qualtrics platform. The survey also included a

question inquiring whether the principal was willing to participate in an interview via Zoom or by telephone at a later time (convenient to the principal’s schedule). As it was an anonymous survey, principals were asked to email the researcher if they were interested in participating in an interview. Interviews were conducted with willing participants via Zoom.

Instrument Design

The researcher designed a qualitative survey instrument (see Appendix G) and a semi-structured interview instrument (see Appendix H). The qualitative survey included open-ended questions for principals to provide an individualized written response. The survey also included open-ended questions to determine how effective principals perceive utilized and implemented strategies and interventions to have been. “A semi-structured interview provides a repertoire of possibilities. It is sufficiently structured to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study, while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study of focus” (Galletta, 2013, p. 24). According to Galletta, “each interview question should be clearly connected to the purpose of the research, and its placement within the protocol should reflect the researcher’s deliberate progress toward a fully in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study” (p. 45). Galletta also stated the questions should be open-ended so interviewees can elaborate on their thoughts and experiences; however, the questions’ intentions are tied explicitly to the research topic (p. 47). Also, it was recommended that the researcher be clear about the purpose each question serves, e.g., to determine the necessity of the question and how it contributes to the topic of study.

Figure 3 displays the alignment of the research, survey, and interview questions. The two research questions guiding the study are listed on the left. In the middle column are the survey

questions that correspond with each research question. On the right are the interview questions that correspond to both the research and survey questions.

Figure 3

Alignment of Research Questions to Survey Questions and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Survey Questions	Interview Questions
1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?	1. What school and division policies influence the strategies and interventions you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? 3. What data do you collect to reduce chronic student absenteeism, and how is it managed (i.e., attendance data, grades, assessment data including standardized assessments)? 5. What school safety procedures, protocols, and practices do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? 7. What strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to communicate with students and families to reduce chronic student absenteeism? 9. What community outreach strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? 11. What school discipline strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? 13. What school climate strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Such school climate strategies may include social-emotional learning opportunities, relationship building, and student and staff perceptions. 15. What instructional strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?	

2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
 2. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective are the school and division policies in reducing chronic student absenteeism?
 4. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective has data collection been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 6. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all how effective have the school safety procedures, protocols, and practices been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 8. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the strategies and interventions to communicate with students and families been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 10. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the community outreach strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 12. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the school discipline strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 14. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the school climate strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 16. On a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the instructional strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?
 4. Which strategies and interventions had the most significant impact on reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 5. Which strategies and interventions had the least significant impact on reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
-

Instrument Validation

Current school administrators in the 2022 Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral cohort who are knowledgeable of chronic absenteeism validated the survey and interview instruments. Validity refers to how accurately the instruments aligned to the research questions (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The peer review validation strategy was used to improve the quality of the instruments (Creswell, 2013). Cohort members were sent an electronic email communication with the survey questions and interview questions. Using the peer review strategy, members were asked to validate the instruments by reviewing each question for clarity and ability to appropriately answer the research questions guiding this study. Cohort members completed this task, provided feedback to the researcher, and validated both instruments. Based on the feedback received, clarifying adjustments were made to better ensure validity.

Data Treatment and Management

Study participants were designated as P for principal, along with either a S for survey participation or I for interview participation and a numerical value to protect their anonymity (e.g. PS1, PI2). Survey responses from Qualtrics and interview transcripts from Zoom were downloaded into Google Sheets. The downloaded data were securely stored in the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Google Drive on the researcher's computer. The computer was password protected and used the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Duo Mobile program for safety and security. The data were coded based on broad themes. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), coding "designations can be single words, letters, numbers, phrases, colors, or combinations" (p. 199).

Data Analysis Techniques

The researcher utilized the Qualtrics program to analyze and disaggregate the data obtained from the survey. Survey and interview responses were coded based upon themes or categories to analyze the data or answer the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview transcript was reviewed as the researcher made notations beside data deemed relevant to answering the research questions, known as coding, and as codes were assigned to data, themes emerged; themes or categories highlighted patterns developed throughout the data. Merriam and Tisdell suggest categories should meet the following criteria:

- Be responsive to the research questions
- Be exhaustive
- Be mutually exclusive
- Be sensitive to the data
- Be conceptually congruent (pp. 212-213)

Timeline

The Prospectus examination took place in the Spring 2021. Data collection and analysis were completed in the Summer 2021. The data were reported utilizing tables and other appropriate formats. Analyzed data guided the researcher in identifying findings in this study. The dissertation defense occurred in December 2021.

Methodology Summary

This research used a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to determine principals' indications of effective strategies and interventions to decrease chronic student absenteeism. The survey and interview instruments were designed by the researcher and validated by current school administrators knowledgeable of chronic absenteeism. Data were

gathered from high school principals whose schools had a decrease in chronic student absenteeism over three years, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. Surveys were shared by the researcher and returned by the principals electronically. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using a coding system to develop categories that answered the research questions and were safely managed by the researcher. An analysis and discussion of the data are shared in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Data

The findings of this qualitative study identifying strategies and interventions utilized by high school principals to decrease chronic student absenteeism are presented in this chapter. The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicated were effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Additionally, this study explored how effective principals perceived each strategy and intervention was in regard to reducing chronic student absenteeism.

The population for this study was principals of Virginia high schools that experienced a reduced rate of chronic absenteeism from 2016-2017 to 2018-2019, and the individuals served as principal during that time frame. Chronic absenteeism was defined as students missing 10% or more days in a school year; absences include those classified as excused, unexcused, or suspensions. High schools' rates of chronic absenteeism were reported by the VDOE.

Data for this study were collected through a survey and individual interviews. Data were analyzed through the use of a qualitative methodology. "Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). The researcher in this study collected and analyzed data, including participants' perspectives and beliefs, to identify themes.

Study Participation and Data Collection

This study used a qualitative design to answer two research questions. The survey questions were open-ended and analyzed using qualitative analysis in tandem with the interview questions. The study utilized survey and interview questions developed by the researcher to answer the following research questions.

1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

Upon review of chronic absenteeism data reported by VDOE for the years 2016-2017 to 2018-2019, the researcher identified 117 high schools that experienced a reduction in the school's rate of chronic absenteeism. The first step in the data collection for this study utilized a survey instrument developed by the researcher and administered through the web-based platform, Qualtrics. The current principal of each of the 117 high schools was sent an email detailing information about the study and asking for responses to the following three questions: 1) Did you serve as the building principal of your current school during the time frame of 2016-2017 to 2018-2019? 2) Are you interested in participating in the study? and 3) Does your school division require additional permission to conduct human subjects research with school personnel, and if so, who do I need to contact to request such permission?

Overall, 25 responses were received from the high school principals contacted for this study (25 of 117; 21.4%). Eight of the 117 high school principals contacted, representing 6.8%, responded to the initial email answering yes to the first two questions and no to the third. Seven high school principals responded to the initial email indicating yes to all three questions and provided the contact needed to obtain participant permission (7 of 117; 5.9%). Ten high school principals responded to the initial email and answered no to the first question (10 of 117; 8.5%); their responses indicated that they were either first-year principals or not a principal at their current school during the time frame of 2016-2017 to 2018-2019.

Based on responses to the initial email, a second email containing the study's survey link was distributed to the eight high school principals who indicated interest in participating in the study and did not require additional division permission. Over a period of five weeks, three reminder emails were sent to these interested high school principals, with all eight completing the Qualtrics survey. During this time period, three reminder emails were also sent to the high school principals who had not responded to the initial email. Additionally, an email was sent to school division contacts of the seven high school principals who indicated approval was necessary for their participation in the study. Over a 5-week period, two reminder emails were sent to solicit school division approval for these principals to participate, but the researcher received no responses.

The participating principals' survey responses were stored in the Qualtrics platform and downloaded into Google Sheets for coding, thematic development, and data analysis. The downloaded data were securely stored in the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Google Drive on the researcher's computer. The computer was password protected and used the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Duo Mobile program for safety and security.

Four of the eight principals indicated an interest in participating in the individual semi-structured interviews following completion of the survey (4 of 8; 50%). During a 2-week period following the completion of the study survey, semi-structured, individual interviews were scheduled and conducted via Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Zoom application based on the availability of three of the responding high school principals. An interview was unable to be scheduled with the fourth principal due to multiple conflicts. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Zoom. The recordings and transcriptions were stored in the Zoom application and downloaded into Google Sheets for coding, thematic

development, and data analysis. The downloaded data were securely stored in the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Google Drive on the researcher’s computer. The computer was password protected and used the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Duo Mobile program for safety and security. Table 1 outlines the type of participation along with the code utilized for each study participant during data analysis. A total of eight high school principals participated in the survey, and three also participated in an individual interview.

Table 1

Codes Representing Study Participants

Participant Role	Data Provided	Code
Principal	Survey	PS1
Principal	Survey	PS2
Principal	Survey	PS3
Principal	Survey	PS4
Principal	Survey	PS5
Principal	Survey	PS6
Principal	Survey	PS7
Principal	Survey	PS8
Principal	Interview	PI1
Principal	Interview	PI2
Principal	Interview	PI3

Data Analysis

The survey questions were open-ended and analyzed against the research questions using qualitative analysis in tandem with the interview questions. Through data analysis, specific codes and themes emerged. Data collected are reported by research questions in the following sections.

Research Question 1 and Aligned Survey Questions

What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? The alignment of survey questions to Research Question 1 is provided in Figure 3.

Survey Question 1

What school and division policies influence the strategies and interventions you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Participants responded with individual school and division policies that influence the strategies and interventions they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism. These strategies and interventions include performing required actions such as mailing letters, contacting parents, and arranging conferences at certain attendance benchmarks.

Survey Question 3

What data do you collect to reduce chronic student absenteeism, and how is it managed (i.e., attendance data, grades, assessment data including standardized assessments)? Participants indicated they collect attendance, mental health, and behavioral data in an effort to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Additionally, participants also indicated they collect assessment data such as grades, standardized test scores, benchmark scores, and other test scores.

Survey Question 5

What school safety procedures, protocols, and practices do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Participants responded they utilize and implement safety policies and practices to limit bullying, harassment, and discrimination. They also responded they employ additional safety measures such as using metal detectors, bag checks, and performing state-required drills.

Survey Question 7

What strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to communicate with students and families to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Participants indicated they use multiple methods to communicate with students and families. Examples of such methods include making phone calls, holding meetings and conferences, mailing letters, and developing contracts or plans.

Survey Question 9

What community outreach strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Participants responded that their schools have web pages with attendance information, signs are placed throughout the community, and they partner with community businesses to provide incentives for students with good attendance. Additional participant responses included attending community events to connect with families about the importance of school.

Survey Question 11

What school discipline strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Participants responded they try to refrain from imposing out-of-school suspension for students with poor attendance but do utilize such practices as Saturday school, after-school academy, or court referrals.

Survey Question 13

What school climate strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Such school climate strategies may include social-emotional learning opportunities, relationship building, and student and staff perceptions. Participants indicated a school priority of focusing on the importance of building relationships with students

is a school climate strategy used to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Additional strategies and interventions included holding morning meetings, small group counseling sessions, self-care clubs, and hosting various student activities.

Survey Question 15

What instructional strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Participants responded that their schools have a focus on social-emotional objectives. Schools provide hands-on activities, individual and small group instruction, and utilize online platforms to provide assignments to students. Special education teachers provide additional support and classes hold morning meetings. Saturday school, after-school academy, and remediation are further instructional strategies utilized and implemented by participants in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

Data Coding for Research Question 1

Data were coded and analyzed after the surveys were completed. Data were transferred from the Qualtrics survey platform into a Google Sheet. Initially, the researcher aimed to read and code participants' responses as related to individual questions; however, the researcher determined specific topics repeated by multiple participants in relation to multiple survey questions. The researcher created codes to represent such topics.

Codes associated with school communication with parents and families were assigned to the data. The codes included letters home, parent conferences, truancy prevention plans, behavior contracts, phone calls, and home visits. The researcher determined the codes related as specific methods of communication, so the researcher assigned these codes under theme one, communication with families.

The second set of codes was also identified based on the analysis of survey data. This set of codes reflected school personnel involved in and accountable for the school's rate of chronic absenteeism. These codes included attendance officer, administrator, shared accountability, attendance coordinator, school social worker, school counselor, lead teacher for special education, therapeutic day treatment counselor, student support specialist, school resource officer (SRO), teachers, and case managers. The researcher determined the codes represented various school staff members or support, so the theme of school stakeholders was assigned.

The third set of codes produced from the survey data related to ways of enhancing and promoting a positive school culture. These codes included positive rewards and recognitions, attendance incentives, mental health, safe school, core values, principal's advisory, health reminders, school rallies, community partners, building relationships, student of the month programs, social-emotional learning, morning meetings, self-care club, and advisory time. Each code was identified by the researcher as an action, belief, or component of the school environment. The researcher listed these codes under theme three, school culture.

Juvenile court, Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petition, diversion, denying course credit, denying driving privileges, Saturday school, and after-school academy were the fourth set of codes identified by the researcher. These codes reference corrective practices associated with managing student absenteeism for which students and/or parents are held responsible; therefore, the researcher listed these codes under the fourth theme, accountability practices.

Emergent Themes

Four major themes were identified during the analysis of data collected to answer Research Question 1. These major themes included communication with families, school

stakeholders, school culture, and accountability practices. Table 2 displays the major themes along with the specific codes that were aligned to each theme.

Table 2

Research Question 1 – Data and Emergent Themes

Major Themes	Codes Aligned with Major Theme	
Communications with Families	Behavior Contracts	Parent Conferences
	Home Visits	Phone Calls
	Letters Home	Truancy Prevention Plans
School Stakeholders	Administrator	School Social Worker
	Attendance Coordinator	School Resource Officer
	Attendance Officer	Shared Accountability
	Case Managers	Student Support Specialist
	Lead Teacher for Special Education	Therapeutic Day Treatment Counselor
	School Counselor	Teachers
School Culture	Advisory Time	Positive Rewards and Recognitions
	Attendance Incentives	Principal’s Advisory
	Building Relationships	Safe School
	Community Partners	Self-Care Clubs
	Core Values	School Rallies
	Health Reminders	Social-Emotional Learning
	Mental Health	Student of the Month Programs
	Morning Meetings	
Accountability Practices	After-School Academy	Diversion
	CHINS Petition	Juvenile Court
	Denying Course Credit	Saturday School
	Denying Driving Privileges	

Major Theme 1 – Communication with Families

Principals are communicating with families to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

PS1, PS2, and PS3 each shared their high school staff made regular phone calls home, held

meetings with parents at school, and even conducted home visits. PS4 stated parents and administrators contact parents and families when student attendance is a concern; this principal also shared that a student support specialist was added to the school staff to work with families. PS5 indicated that parents are involved in the development of behavior contracts at particular absentee benchmarks. PS7 shared communication and collaboration with parents is key to improving student attendance. All participants indicated they communicate with students' families regarding student absenteeism (8 of 8; 100%). Table 3 reflects participants' responses to Survey Question 7 and details the types of communication participants utilize to communicate with students and their families.

Table 3

Survey Question 7 – Strategies and Interventions for Communicating with Families

Participant	Communication with Families
PS1	Phone calls regularly, meetings at school home with administrators and counselors.
PS2	Phone calls, conferences at school, and home visits.
PS3	Robo calls and parent/student/school admin meetings after 5 absences.
PS4	Attendance meetings, phone calls, and teachers and administrators contact parents.
PS5	Attendance meetings, phone calls, and referrals to school social worker.
PS6	Weekly messages via email and telephone and involve parents in developing behavior contracts at particular absentee benchmarks.
PS7	Contact parent or guardian should a student miss school and the parent has not contacted the school.
PS8	Send a 5-day letter and hold a meeting where a contract is created and send a 9-day letter where parents are informed that absences can no longer be excused without a doctor's note.

Participant responses indicated implementing and utilizing such strategies as making phone calls, holding meetings and conferences, mailing letters, and developing attendance contracts or plans.

Six of the eight principals participating in the survey referenced required parent communication as a component of school and school division policies (6 of 8; 75%). Table 4 outlines participants’ responses to Survey Question 1 asking what school and school division policies are utilized to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

Table 4

Survey Question 1 –School or School Division Policies Influencing School and School Division Policies

Participant	Policies
PS1	After five unexcused absences a letter is sent home and a meeting is arranged.
PS2	A conference is held with the parent and student on the 4 th unexcused absence to discuss absences issues.
PS3	Parent contact after one absence.
PS4	Work with families on making up missed work and stress the importance of coming to school each day.
PS6	Pre-selected actions for certain number of absences (i.e. 3-day letter, 5-day letter, etc.)
PS7	Hold and implement prevention plans, communicate with parents, keep documentation and report data.

Participants responded that communication with students and families is a required component of school and division attendance policies.

Major Theme 2 – School Stakeholders

Principals involve various school stakeholders in an effort to reduce chronic student absenteeism. PS1 indicated attendance data are shared with school counselors who work to find out the reason students are absent. PS2 also referenced the influence of school counselors available to aid students. Additionally, PS2 stated the utilization of a therapeutic day treatment counselor in their school for student needs. PS3’s school uses a team approach to monitor student

attendance as the principal responded that a school attendance team meets after any student incurs five absences. PS3 also commented that referrals are made to social workers if students are deemed chronically absent. PS4's school added an additional staff person to assist with monitoring student attendance; this student support specialist was added to the staff to assist families in improving student attendance. PS5 shared social workers, school counselors, and administrators all collaborate in overseeing attendance. PS6 indicated their school holds weekly Tier II/III intervention meetings with counselors, attendance clerk, school division social worker, administrator, and lead special education teacher to address student needs, including poor absenteeism. Table 5 identifies participants' communication regarding school stakeholder involvement to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

Table 5

Involvement of Stakeholders to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism

Stakeholder	PS1	PS2	PS3	PS4	PS5	PS6	PS7	PS8	%
Attendance Officer/ Coordinator	X	X		X		X			50.0
Administrator			X		X	X	X		50.0
School Social Worker			X		X	X			37.5
School Counselor	X	X			X	X			50.0
Lead Teacher for Special Education						X			12.5
Therapeutic Day Treatment Counselor		X							12.5
Student Support Specialist				X					12.5
School Resource Officer							X		12.5
Teacher	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	87.5
Case Manager							X		12.5

Participants responded and named the utilization of various school stakeholders to assist in reducing chronic student absenteeism. A majority of participants responded that teachers are involved in the process (7 of 8; 87.5%). Half of the participants responded that attendance officers/coordinators, administrators, and school counselors are stakeholders involved in working to reduce chronic student absenteeism (4 of 8; 50%).

Major Theme 3 – School Culture

Principals work to create a school culture to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

PS1 indicated zero tolerance for bullying, harassment, and discrimination and an intense focus on relationships and mental health as safety procedures, protocols, and practices in his or her school. PS6 shared an attempt to create a school culture that is safe with communicated shared values. Additionally, PS6 runs a principal’s advisory made up of student members from every school club.

Building relationships with students was common among six of the eight principals participating in the survey (75%). Table 6 details responses shared by participants to Survey Question 13

Table 6

Survey Question 13 – Strategies and Interventions Relating to School Climate

Participant	Responses
PS1	SEL and building relationships with students.
PS2	Administration, teachers, and staff know and have a relationship with every student.
PS3	Morning meeting to increase student-teacher relationships.
PS6	Advisory time lessons based on our core expectations.
PS7	Relationship building with school counselors, teachers, staff, case managers, and admin so that students want to come to school.

PS8 Fun activities scattered throughout the year such as spirit days, events for students with good attendance, pep rallies, student versus staff games, etc. to make school a great place to be. Building strong relationships with students.

Participants indicated a priority of building strong relationships with students as a strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Additionally, participants named holding morning meetings, advisory lessons, and student activities as strategies and interventions.

Major Theme 4 – Accountability Practices

Principals utilize accountability practices to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

PS1, PS2, and PS3 stated school staff try to refrain from suspending students out of school for reasons such as attendance. PS1 indicated after a student has seven unexcused absences, a CHINS petition is filed with the court system. PS2 stated after six unexcused absences, the student and their parent(s) are required to meet with a juvenile intake worker; the student is then placed in the diversion program. If the student continues to incur unexcused absences, a petition is filed with juvenile court. PS6 stated that at certain attendance benchmarks, such as when a student misses 15 or more days, the school requires the student to attend Saturday school or after-school academy. PS7 shared one consequence of a student's truancy plan may require the student to go to court where a judge orders the student to attend school regularly. PS7 also shared school administrators have the authority to deny course credit to an excessively absent student. A majority of participants, 62.5%, indicated utilization of an accountability practice as a strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Table 7 displays responses shared by participants regarding accountability practices.

Table 7

Strategies and Interventions Relating to Accountability Practices

Participant	Responses
PS1	After 7th unexcused absences, a CHINS (Child in Need of Services) petition is filed
PS2	After 6 th unexcused absence, student and parent(s) meet with juvenile intake worker. If absences continue, juvenile court petition is filed.
PS5	Court referrals
PS6	Saturday school, after-school academy
PS7	Deny class credit, deny driving privileges, court order

Participants communicated various accountability practices utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Such practices included filing CHINS and juvenile court petitions and arranging meetings with intake workers. School-based practices included denying course credit and driving privileges, and holding Saturday school and after-school academy.

Research Question 2 and Aligned Survey/Interview Questions

What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Figure 3 in Chapter 3 displays the alignment of survey questions and interview questions to Research Question 2. Survey Questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 asked participants to rate the effectiveness of strategies and interventions related to school and division policies, data collection, safety, communication, community outreach, discipline, school climate, and instruction. Interview Questions 4 and 5 asked participants to identify which strategies and interventions had the most impact and least impact on reducing the school’s rate of chronic student absenteeism during COVID-19.

Participants responded to survey questions by providing a numerical value; a rating of one indicated the strategy or intervention was extremely effective while a rating of 5 indicated it

was not effective at all. PS1 reported that implementing and utilizing community outreach strategies was not effective at all (rating of 5) in reducing chronic student absenteeism while communication with students and families, discipline strategies, school climate strategies, and instructional strategies were all extremely effective (rating of 1). PS2 stated that collecting and managing data, and implementing school discipline, school climate, and instructional strategies were extremely effective with a rating of 1. PS3 rated collecting and managing data, implementing school safety procedures, protocols, and practices, implementing school climate and instructional strategies, communicating with students and families (rating of 2) as more effective than community outreach and school discipline policies (rating of 3), followed by division and school attendance policies (rating of 4). PS4 reported that communication with students and parents (rating of 2) was more effective than implementing school and division policies, safety practices, and collecting and managing data (rating of 3). PS4 did not respond to Survey Questions 9 through 16. PS5 indicated school climate strategies were not at all effective in reducing chronic student absenteeism (rating of 5). PS5 indicated discipline (rating of 3) to be more effective than school and division policies, data collection and management, safety, communication, community outreach, and instruction (rating of 4). PS6 rated all strategies (school and division policies, collecting and managing data, school safety procedures, communication with students and families, discipline practices, school climate, and instruction) as equally more effective (rating of 2) than community outreach (rating of 3) in reducing chronic student absenteeism. PS7 indicated implementing school and division policies, safety protocols, and instructional strategies (rating of 3) are more effective in reducing chronic student absenteeism than managing and collecting data, communication with students and families, utilizing discipline techniques, and school climate strategies (rating of 4). PS8 shared utilizing

and implementing instructional strategies was extremely effective (rating of 1), followed by school climate and communication with students and families (rating of 2), then school and division policy, data collection, safety, community outreach, and discipline (rating of 3).

Table 8 details principals’ perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. The numeral one indicates the principal perceived the strategy or intervention as extremely effective. The numeral five indicates the principal perceived the strategy or intervention as not effective at all. With a mean score of two (2), instruction is perceived as being a more effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism, followed by communication with families with a mean of 2.38.

Table 8

Principal Ratings of Effectiveness of Strategies and Interventions for Reducing Chronic Student Absenteeism

Category	Principal Ratings								Mean
	PS1	PS2	PS3	PS4	PS5	PS6	PS7	PS8	
School and School Division Policies	3	2	4	3	4	2	3	3	3.00
Data Collection	4	1	2	3	4	2	4	3	2.88
School Safety	2	3	2	3	4	2	3	3	2.75
Communication	1	2	2	2	4	2	4	2	2.38
Community Outreach	5	2	3	DNA	4	3	DNA	3	3.33
School Discipline	1	1	3	DNA	3	2	4	3	2.43
School Climate	1	1	2	DNA	5	2	4	2	2.43
Instruction	1	1	2	DNA	4	2	3	1	2.00

Note. DNA = Did not answer.

Instruction was perceived by participants to be more effective in reducing chronic student absenteeism than school and division policies, data collection and management, school safety, communication, community outreach, discipline, and school climate.

Further analysis of participants' responses indicated the majority of participants perceive communication as the most effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participants also indicated they perceived data collection and management as the least effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Table 9 shows the participants' responses to questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 by percentage.

Table 9

Percentage of Principals' Rating of Effectiveness of Strategies and Interventions for Reducing Chronic Student Absenteeism

Category	Rating 1	Rating 2	Rating 3	Rating 4	Rating 5	NR
School and School Division Policies	0.0%	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Data Collection	12.5%	25.0%	25.0%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%
School Safety	0.0%	37.5%	50.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Communication	12.5%	62.5%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Community Outreach	0.0%	12.5%	37.5%	12.5%	12.5%	25.0%
School Discipline	25.0%	12.5%	37.5%	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%
School Climate	25.0%	37.5%	0.0%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%
Instruction	37.5%	25.0%	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%

Note. NR = Not Rated

Communication was perceived as a more effective strategy or intervention by participants than school and division policies, data collection and management, safety, community outreach, discipline, school climate, and instruction.

PII shared that revising the school's attendance contract, a method of communication, had the most significant impact on reducing the school's rate of chronic student absenteeism

because it clarified expectations for parents. The new contract detailed what the school would accept as excused absences and what they would not. PI1 stated, “it was kind of a simple thing, but I think it made it a little bit clearer to parents as to what we needed and what we required” (PI1, 127). The contract also specified when the school would involve the court system. PI1 stated, “it helped a lot, and it wasn't a big thing, and then we followed up with phone calls” (PI1, 132). PI2 communicated that utilizing an accountability action of taking away course credit from students with poor attendance had the most significant impact on reducing chronic student absenteeism. PI2 stated, “they [students] did not want to have to repeat the course” (PI2, 184). PI2 also stated, “they [students] don't believe that they're going to fail and it takes that one time when they see their friends or they, themselves, fail that course, or they're having to repeat that grade. That's when it starts to click” (PI2, 191). PI3 shared school climate had the most significant impact on reducing the school's rate of chronic student absenteeism. “We had students making posters, students making announcements...what we found really productive was the recorded visual announcements. So, students ultimately took over the building” (PI3, 154). PI3 also stated, “when the climate is there, and you have that type of leadership from your juniors and seniors then people will follow that” (PI3, 158). Table 10 details interview participants’ responses to Interview Question 4, asking which strategies and interventions had the most effectiveness on reducing the school’s rate of chronic student absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 10

Interview Question 4 – Strategies and Interventions Identified as Most Impactful

Participant	Strategies and Interventions
PI1	Communication with families
PI2	Accountability actions
PI3	School culture

When questioned about what strategies and interventions had the least significant impact on reducing chronic student absenteeism, PI1 stated holding meetings and sending meeting notices was not effective because people did not attend. She stated the meetings held and meeting notices sent did not have “much of an impact” (PI1, 137). She countered with “the main thing we’re trying to do is focus more on positive attendance habits and remind kids about good attendance and reward the ones that have the good instead of as in the past, where we focused primarily on punitive” (PI1, 140). PI2 stated completing truancy plans (TPs) as a part of communication with families was not effective because students do not take them seriously. PI2 stated “it’s more of a formality. Students don’t take them seriously because nothing’s going to happen. It’s a piece of paper” (PI2, 199). She elaborated to discuss the important and serious manner in which administrators should communicate truancy plans. Lastly, PI3 stated the least effective means of reducing chronic student absenteeism in his school was to punish students. The participant said, “It doesn’t work. You can’t punish your way to success on attendance” (PI3, 178). When asked by the researcher what was meant by punishment, the participant stated, “all of it” (PI3, 182). He said, “when a student gets further behind because they haven’t been here, and you strip their credit or make them repeat a class...it further reinforces the fact they can stay home” (PI3, 182-83). He also said, “the court is always a negative thing...the minute those letters start hitting, then you have lost the positive interaction with the parent and student” (PI3,

184). Table 11 details interview participants' responses to Interview Question 5, which asks which strategies and interventions had the least significant impact on reducing the school's rate of chronic student absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 11

Interview Question 5 – Strategies and Interventions Identified as Least Impactful

Participant	Strategies and Interventions
PI1	Communication with families
PI2	Communication with families
PI3	Accountability actions

Response to COVID-19

Many school practices were altered, modified, or recreated altogether as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-2021 academic year. According to a VDOE Superintendent's Memo #188-20 from Dr. James Lane (2020), Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction, due to the changes in instructional delivery, measuring attendance by traditional methods was not practical or suitable. The memo provided suggestions to school districts on how to track attendance, but ultimately allowed school divisions to establish certain unique procedures and expectations for collecting attendance data. To gain an understanding of how COVID-19 impacted the strategies and interventions principals utilized to reduce chronic student absenteeism and how principals altered their practice due to COVID, Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3 were asked of participants.

Interview Question 1: How has COVID-19 impacted the strategies and interventions you previously used to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

Interview Question 2: How have you adapted or changed the strategies and interventions you use to address and reduce chronic student absenteeism due to COVID-19?

Interview Question 3: How do you plan to maintain or improve your school’s current rate of chronic absenteeism?

PI1 stated the school was not able to host any incentives for students due to the pandemic, which previously made a positive impact on reducing chronic student absenteeism. In addition, she also shared that the school was not able to accurately track attendance because "they could text in to say there were present and that doesn't actually mean anything. It doesn't mean they were actually doing their work" (PI1, 110). PI2 also stated her school was unable to accurately track students "because it was a push of a button on a computer" (PI2, 111). The participant stated attendance was taken by students clicking a button to indicate presence and the school could not accurately measure who performed that action, the student, a parent, etc. The participant also stated parents did not have to call the school to report student absenteeism and courts were closed, so schools lacked judicial support. PI3 stated traditional strategies to encourage students to attend school “have been set to the side because they’re no longer effective because of the encouragement to stay home [if sick]” (PI3, 111-12). Table 12 reflects participants’ responses to Interview Question 1 asking how COVID-19 has impacted the strategies and interventions previously used to address chronic student absenteeism.

Table 12

Interview Question 1 – Impact of COVID-19 on Previously Used Strategies and Interventions

Participant	Impact of COVID-19
PI1	Not able to offer incentives Not able to accurately track attendance data
PI2	Not able to accurately track attendance data
PI3	Traditional methods to encourage positive attendance not relevant

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, PI1 stated more telephone calls to students and families had been made. The school was able to conduct in person meetings less frequently because of health concerns, so phone calls regarding attendance replaced the meetings. To continue to improve the school’s rate of attendance, PI1 hopes to be able to offer in person incentives such as an outdoor movie night or student baseball game. PI2 shared that the school division hired a new truancy officer to work with families on attendance, but otherwise, no changes have been made, and the school will use the attendance protocols as they have previously. PI2 indicated the school would continue to make phone calls, monitor course attendance, deny course credit if needed, and work to maintain consistency in monitoring attendance. PI3 stated the division added a student support specialist to improve parent communication via telephone and in person. PI3 shared that this staff member will "talk through and work through various specific situations with a child rather than having a policy that fits all children" (PI3, 114). To maintain or improve the school's rate of chronic student absenteeism, PI3 indicated the school would continue to work on social-emotional learning and the school culture. Table 13 reflects participants’ responses to Interview Question 2 asking how has the principal adapted or changed the strategies and interventions used to address and reduce chronic student absenteeism due to COVID-19.

Table 13

Interview Question 2 – Adaptations or Changes to Strategies and Interventions Due to COVID-19

Participant	Adaptations or Changes
PI1	More telephone communication with families
PI2	Hired a new truancy officer (school stakeholder)
PI3	Hired a new student support specialist (school stakeholder)

Table 14 details participants’ responses to Interview Question 3 inquiring how principals plan to maintain or improve their school’s current rate of chronic student absenteeism.

Table 14

Interview Question 3 – Plan to Maintain or Improve Current Rate of Chronic Student Absenteeism

Participant	Plan
PI1	Offer more incentives
PI2	Continue to use established attendance protocol
PI3	Focus on social-emotional learning and school culture

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicated were effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. This study also explored how effective principals perceived each strategy or intervention was in reducing chronic student absenteeism. The researcher collected data from a survey with open ended questions and individual interviews. Participants were high school principals whose school experienced a reduction in the rate of chronic student absenteeism from 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. Eight participants completed the survey with three of the survey respondents also completing an individual interview. Two research questions were used to guide this study.

1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of the strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

Four major themes emerged from Research Question 1. Principals communicate with families regarding chronic student absenteeism by multiple methods, including mailing letters, holding parent conferences and meetings, making phone calls, conducting home visits, and developing truancy prevention plans and behavior contracts. Principals involve various school stakeholders in an effort to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Such stakeholders include attendance officers or coordinators, administrators, school social workers, school counselors, lead special education teachers, special education case managers, student support specialists, school resource officers, and teachers. Principals work to create a school culture to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Components of school culture include incentive programs, positive awards, and recognitions, focusing on mental health, social-emotional learning, and relationship building, and holding advisory and morning meetings. Principals also utilize accountability practices, such as denying course credit, involving the court system, and holding after-school and Saturday school sessions, as a strategy to reduce chronic student absenteeism.

Principals perceive instructional and communication strategies and interventions as effective in reducing a school's rate of chronic student absenteeism. Principals perceive collecting and managing data as least effective in reducing a school's rate of chronic student absenteeism. Chapter 5 presents the study findings, conclusions, implications for practice, and suggestions for future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicate are effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. In this qualitative study, the researcher explored principals' indications of effective strategies and interventions designed to decrease chronic student absenteeism in Virginia's high schools. Data were collected using a survey with open-ended questions and individual semi-structured interviews. The study population included Virginia high school principals whose school experienced a reduced rate of chronic student absenteeism between the years 2016-2017 and 2018-2019. Eight high school principals participated in the open-ended survey and three high school principals participated in the individual semi-structured interview. The study was designed to answer two research questions.

1. What strategies and interventions do high school principals indicate they utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding the effectiveness of strategies and interventions they utilized and implemented in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

Summary of Findings

After analysis of the data, the researcher identified several findings. Those findings are shared with the associated study data and prior research.

Finding 1

Principals reported communication as a strategy or intervention they utilized and perceived to be effective in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Survey Question 7 focused on communication strategies and interventions utilized by principals to reduce chronic

student absenteeism. The study indicated that 100% (8 of 8) of participants utilize various strategies and interventions to communicate with students and families to reduce chronic student absenteeism, including phone calls, meetings and conferences, mailing letters, and home visits. For a summary of responses regarding communication, refer to Table 3.

Survey Question 1 inquired what school and division policies influence the strategies and interventions principals utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism. A majority of participants, 75% (6 of 8), referenced required parent communication as a component of school and division policies. Participants' responses describing communication as a component of school and division policies are displayed in Table 4.

Survey Questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16, and Interview Questions 4 and 5 asked participants their perception of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participants were asked on a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not at all effective, to rate each. A majority of participants, 75% (6 of 8), rated communication as an effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism (with a rating of 1 and 2). Table 9 displays how participants rated each strategy or intervention by percentage. Communication was perceived as a more effective strategy or intervention by participants than school and division policies, data collection and management, safety, community outreach, discipline, school climate, and instruction.

This finding is in line with prior research that suggested school to home communication is an important and successful step in supporting student attendance as parents can exercise control of their student's attendance (Robinson et al., 2018). Rogers and Fellers (2018) suggested providing frequent and accurate information to parents about student attendance may decrease absenteeism. Chang and Romero (2008) also suggested chronic student absenteeism decreases

when schools actively communicate with families. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) stated educators must seek ways to involve parents in schools where attendance is a concern.

Finding 2

Principals reported they involve various school stakeholders to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals referenced the inclusion and utilization of various school stakeholders in the processes and procedures of reducing their school's rate of chronic student absenteeism. A majority (87.5%; 7 of 8) of participants named teachers as stakeholders in the process. Additionally, 50% (4 of 8) of the participants identified attendance officers/coordinators, administrators, and school counselors as stakeholders that they involved in attendance-related issues. For a summary of responses regarding stakeholder involvement, refer to Table 5.

This finding agrees with Allensworth and Evans (2016) who suggested schools have lower rates of absenteeism when teachers actively monitor attendance and work with students to promote good attendance habits. Additionally, prior research suggested using truancy officers to work with students and families, referring chronically absent students to school counselors, and connecting families to school staff to be effective (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Stronge and Associates (2019) claimed all school stakeholders should collaborate to motivate student attendance and engagement.

Finding 3

Principals reported they work to create a positive school culture to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Survey Question 13 focused on the school climate strategies and interventions principals utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism. A majority (75%; 6 of 8) of study participants cited specific school climate strategies and interventions,

including building positive relationships with students and incentivizing good attendance. Table 6 displays participants' responses.

As communicated by Gentle-Genitty et al. (2020), recognizing, educating, and supporting students in good attendance practices is a component of establishing an engaging school climate. Furthermore, according to Epstein & Sheldon (2002), schools that reward students for good attendance have lower rates of daily absenteeism and chronic student absenteeism. According to Van Eck et al. (2017), building-level climate and culture improvement strategies are essential to increasing school attendance.

Finding 4

Principals reported they utilize accountability practices to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Study participants communicated the utilization of accountability practices, including court involvement, judicial processes, and extended school time as strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participants' responses are displayed in Table 7.

Punitive accountability measures to improve student attendance, such as court involvement, are debated in the research. Some research finds involving the judicial system in reducing student absenteeism to be advantageous because of the court's ability to connect students and families with various agencies for support (Shdaimah et al., 2011). In addition, courts are in a position of power and can hold parties accountable (Shdaimah et al., 2011). Other studies show court involvement has a negative influence on student attendance (Weber, 2020).

Finding 5

Principals perceived engaging instruction to be an effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Survey Questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16, and

Interview Questions 4 and 5 asked participants their perception of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participants were asked on a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not at all effective, to rate each. Instruction, with a mean of 2.0, was rated by participants as the most effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism (Table 8). Based on the ratings, participants perceived instruction to be more effective in reducing chronic student absenteeism than school and division policies, data collection and management, safety procedures, communication, community outreach, discipline, and school climate.

Failure to provide appropriate, engaging instruction can lead to chronic student absences (Stronge & Associates, 2019). Bartenen (2020) argued principal leadership can impact attendance by supporting and coaching teachers in improving instruction. Schools that recognize and provide personalized learning opportunities for students, as well as create smaller learning communities, have higher attendance rates (Railsback, 2004). Kearney (2008) claimed providing individualized instruction to students was effective in response to chronic student absenteeism.

Finding 6

Principals perceived data collection and management to be the least effective strategy or intervention to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Survey Questions 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16, and Interview Questions 4 and 5 asked participants their perception of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participants were asked on a scale of 1-5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not at all effective, to rate each. A total of 37.5% (3 of 8) of participants indicated data collection and management was ineffective (with a rating of 4). Table 9 displays how participants rated each strategy or intervention by percentage.

This finding is not supported by research which claims schools should accurately track and report attendance data as a means to prevent future absenteeism (Stronge & Associates, 2019). Furthermore, research supports school analysis of student-level data to identify trends or commonalities in student absenteeism and develop mitigation plans (Gottfried, 2011). Chang et al. (2019) argued data help policymakers and community stakeholders know where and how to allocate funding.

Implications of Findings

Following a review of the findings of this research, the researcher identified several implications for high school principals to implement and utilize when working to reduce their school's rate of chronic student absenteeism. Those implications associated with the findings are provided in the following section.

Implication 1

Principals could identify and engage in practices that enhance communication with students and families to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals could use various methods and modes of communication to engage students and families in reducing chronic student absenteeism. Principals could provide clarification on school and division policies, and consequences of continued absenteeism. Additionally, principals could provide information on support resources to assist families in improving student attendance. Principals could consider the technology and transportation available to students and families when communicating with regard to chronic student absenteeism. Principals could seek ways to increase and expand communication with students and families on the topic, including conducting home or community visits, and sending multi-language communication. This implication is associated with Finding 1.

Implication 2

Principals could involve a variety of school stakeholders, to include teachers, in the processes and procedures of reducing chronic student absenteeism. Principals could utilize and involve various school staff members to monitor, analyze, and engage students and families in reducing chronic student absenteeism. Principals could consider creating school-based attendance committees with diverse staff representation to analyze the causes of absenteeism and develop plans to improve chronic student absenteeism. Principals could identify and utilize parent attendance liaisons as a resource to support students and families with attendance concerns. This implication is associated with Finding 2.

Implication 3

Principals could identify and engage in practices to create a positive school culture to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals, with school stakeholders, could create systems to recognize positive and improving student attendance. Principals could establish and communicate norms and expectations regarding positive student attendance. Principals could develop and implement systems to support students' social, emotional, and academic needs. This implication is associated with Finding 3.

Implication 4

Principals could investigate and identify what accountability practices are most effective with their student population in order to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals could consider the needs of, and resources available to, students when utilizing certain accountability practices with their student population. Principals could consider the establishment of a community-centered stakeholder committee to promote positive student attendance. This implication is associated with Finding 4.

Implication 5

Principals could monitor, evaluate, and support teacher instruction for student engagement and relevance to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals could develop instructional expectations to include clarity and purpose of objectives, learning outcomes, and various student engagement activities. Principals could develop a process for examining and improving curricula as related to relevance to real-world application and student interest. Principals could provide teachers with professional development and learning opportunities. This professional development could include mentoring at-risk students, providing meaningful feedback, and incorporating engagement activities to ensure students are provided relevant, engaging instruction. This implication is associated with Finding 5.

Implication 6

Principals could utilize data collection and management as a foundation to provide relevant, engaging instruction and communicate with students and families regarding chronic student absenteeism. Principals could collect, manage, analyze, and communicate student attendance data with students, school stakeholders, families, and the community. Once those data have been analyzed, the principal, along with stakeholders, could develop action steps, including monitoring and implementation, to address and improve student attendance through instruction and communication. This implication is associated with Finding 6.

Implication 7

School divisions could provide job embedded professional development opportunities to enhance the knowledge and skills of principals related to reducing chronic student absenteeism. Those topics could include communication, instruction, and the use of data collection and analysis in response to chronic student absenteeism. School divisions

could consider budgeting to provide principals with job embedded professional development on the topic of chronic student absenteeism, as well as the impact that communication, instruction, and data have on absenteeism. School divisions could consider utilizing the informational tools provided by the VDOE on the topic and explore research based best practices for reducing chronic student absenteeism. This implication is associated with Findings 1 through 6.

Suggestions for Future Studies

The purpose of this study was to identify what high school principals indicated were effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. This study also explored how effective principals perceived each strategy and intervention was in reducing chronic student absenteeism. This study was limited to principals of Virginia high schools that experienced a reduced rate of chronic student absenteeism from 2016-2017 to 2018-2019; the participating individuals served as principal during that time frame. Future studies could investigate elementary and middle school principals' perceptions of effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Additionally, future studies could investigate what parents of high school students perceive to be the most effective strategies and interventions to promote school attendance.

Summary

Chapter 5 provided a summary and discussion of the findings, presented implications of the findings, and presented recommendations and suggestions for future studies. In summary, principals utilized and implemented multiple strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals reported they communicate with students and families to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Principals also reported that they involve and utilize various school stakeholders in the process. To reduce chronic student absenteeism, principals work to create a

positive school culture and utilize accountability practices. Principals perceived engaging instruction and communication to be effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism while they perceived data collection and management to not be an effective strategy or intervention.

Personal Reflections

The administration of the survey, scheduling and conducting interviews, and data collection and analysis went well; however, the number of study participants was low and might possibly be attributed to the timing of the distribution of the interest letter, August 2021. In August, many principals and school leaders were preparing to or beginning to open schools after a challenging last year due to COVID-19. The low participation rate may also be attributed to the requirement that the current building principal also served during the time of 2016-2017 to 2018-2019; the researcher found several principals had transitioned to another role since that time.

The research study was a positive and affirming experience as a current high school principal whose previous school worked to reduce the rate of chronic student absenteeism, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants confirmed the importance of communicating with students and families to improve attendance, as well as involving various school stakeholders in the process. Furthermore, the participants reaffirmed the necessity for school principals to strive to create positive school cultures, including building positive relationships, so students desire to come to school. School leaders must actively seek ways to engage students in school.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Protection Certificate of Completion



Completion Date 31-Aug-2020
Expiration Date 31-Aug-2023
Record ID 38153801

This is to certify that:

Magie Wilkerson

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Social & Behavioral Research (Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).

Under requirements set by:

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w897eacd4-de84-4851-bad8-9d35388aa95f-38153801

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter



Division of Scholarly Integrity and
Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
<http://www.research.vt.edu/siro/hrpp>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 21, 2021
TO: Carol S Cash, Magie Lenhart Wilkerson
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools
IRB NUMBER: 21-497

Effective July 21, 2021, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category (ies) 2(i),2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(i),2(ii)
Protocol Determination Date: July 21, 2021

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

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An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution

Appendix C

Request for Participation

Email Subject Line: Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools

Principals,

I am currently working on a research study as part of the requirements for a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with Virginia Tech. The Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program reviewed my study (IRB #21-497). My research study is titled: Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools.

As part of the study, I am surveying principals who served in the position from 2016-2017 to 2018-2019 and their school experienced a reduction in the rate of chronic student absenteeism during the same time period, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. The findings of this study will provide information to educational leaders regarding principals' perceptions of effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participation will involve the completion of an electronic survey. The survey consists of 16 short answer questions, should take 20-30 minutes, and can be completed at any time before Friday, August 27, 2021. Following the survey, you will be invited to participate in an individual interview via Zoom. Zoom interviews will be recorded with participant permission; the recording is a requirement for participation in the interview. Interviews will last approximately 15-20 minutes.

Your response to the following questions is appreciated:

1. Did you serve as the building principal of your current school during the time frame of 2016-2017 to 2018-2019?
2. Are you interested in participating in the study?
3. Does your school division require additional permission to conduct human subjects research with school personnel and if so, who do I need to contact to request such permission?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at magieltw@vt.edu, or Dr. Carol Cash at Va Tech at ccash48@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Magie Wilkerson



Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. Carol Cash

IRB# and Title of Study: IRB # 21-497: Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools

Principals,

I am currently working on a research study as part of the requirements for a doctorate in Educational Leadership with Virginia Tech. Recently, the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) has granted me permission to conduct research for my study: Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools.

As part of the study, I am surveying principals who served in the position from 2016-2017 to 2018-2019 and their school experienced a reduction in the rate of chronic student absenteeism during the same time period, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. The findings of this study will provide information to educational leaders regarding principals' perceptions of effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participation will involve the completion of an electronic survey. The survey consists of 16 short answer questions, should take 20-30 minutes, and can be completed at any time before Friday, August 27, 2021. Following the survey, you will be invited to participate in an individual interview via Zoom. Zoom interviews will be recorded with participant permission; the recording is a requirement for participation in the interview.

All survey data will be submitted anonymously. Please do not include your name or other identifying information in your responses. Specific school data will not be disaggregated. We do not anticipate any risks from completing this survey.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researcher. The survey will be distributed to principals using the web-based survey tool Qualtrics through Virginia Tech. Survey data will be downloaded into a Google Sheet for disaggregation purposes and will be maintained on the password-protected laptop of the researcher until successful dissertation defense, after which time it will be destroyed. The Virginia Tech Zoom platform will be used to conduct interviews. The recording, transcription, and downloaded transcription into a Google Sheet will also be

maintained on the password-protected laptop of the researchers until successful dissertation defense, and then destroyed.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise that warrant doing so.

Consent for participation in the study will be requested at the beginning of the electronic survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Magie Wilkerson at magielw@vt.edu, or Dr. Carol Cash at Va Tech at ccash48@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Magie L. Wilkerson
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix D

Survey Distribution

Email Subject Line: Survey Participation - Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools

Principal,

Thank you for confirming your interest to participate in my research study, Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools (IRB #21-497).

To complete the survey, please click on the following link https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bkf9PxdD0dPZ5ye. Consent for participation in the study will be requested at the beginning of the electronic survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at magielw@vt.edu, or Dr. Carol Cash at Va Tech at ccash48@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Magie Wilkerson
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix E

Email to Superintendents

Email Subject Line: Request to conduct study - Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools

Superintendents,

I am currently working on a research study as part of the requirements for a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies with Virginia Tech. I am contacting you to request permission to conduct research in your division. The Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program reviewed my study (IRB #21-497). My research study is titled: Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools.

If approval is granted, I will survey high school principals who served in the position from 2016-2017 to 2018-2019 and the school experienced a reduction in the rate of chronic student absenteeism during the same time period, 2016-2017 to 2018-2019. The findings of this study will provide information to educational leaders regarding principals' perceptions of effective strategies and interventions to reduce chronic student absenteeism. Participation will involve the completion of an electronic survey. The survey consists of 16 short answer questions, should take 20-30 minutes, and can be completed at any time before Friday, August 27, 2021. Following the survey, principals will be invited to participate in an individual interview via Zoom. Zoom interviews will be recorded with participant permission; the recording is a requirement for participation in the interview. Interviews will last approximately 15-20 minutes.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If the high school principal(s) in your division meets the criteria of serving in the position during the time frame of 2016-2017 to 2018-2019 as the school experienced a reduction in the rate of chronic absenteeism and you agree, please indicate such with a return email stating your approval. Please also include the name of the high school(s) and principal(s) in your communication.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at magielw@vt.edu, or Dr. Carol Cash at Va Tech at ccash48@vt.edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Magie Wilkerson
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix F

Follow-Up Email to Principals

Email Subject Line: Survey Participation - Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools

Principal,

Thank you for confirming your interest to participate in my research study, Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism in Virginia's High Schools (IRB #21-497). I appreciate the responses I have received so far. If you have already completed the Qualtrics survey, then please disregard this email.

To complete the survey, please click on the following link https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/ife/form/SV_bkf9PxdDOdPZ5ye. Consent for participation in the study will be requested at the beginning of the electronic survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me magielw@vt.edu, or Dr. Carol Cash at Va Tech at ccash48@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Magie Wilkerson

Doctoral Candidate

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Appendix G

Survey Instrument

Principals' Indications of Effective Strategies and Interventions to Decrease Chronic Student Absenteeism

Do you give your consent to provide a response to this survey?

1. What school and division policies influence the strategies and interventions you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

2. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective are the school and division policies and reducing chronic student absenteeism?

3. What data do you collect to reduce chronic student absenteeism, and how is it managed (i.e., attendance data, grades, assessment data including standardized assessments)?

4. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective has data collection been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

5. What school safety procedures, protocols, and practices do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

6. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the school safety procedures, protocols, and practices been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

7. What strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to communicate with students and families to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

8. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the strategies and interventions to communicate with students and families been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

9. What community outreach strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

10. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the community outreach strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

11. What school discipline strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

12. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the school discipline strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

13. What school climate strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism? Such school climate strategies may include social-emotional learning opportunities, relationship building, and student and staff perceptions.

14. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the school climate strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

15. What instructional strategies and interventions do you utilize and implement to reduce chronic student absenteeism?

16. On a scale of 1 to 5, where one is extremely effective and 5 is not effective at all, how effective have the instructional strategies and interventions been in reducing your school's rate of chronic absenteeism?

Thank you for participating in the survey. Would you also be willing to participate in a short, semi-structured interview to share information about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the strategies and interventions you utilized and implemented to reduce chronic student absenteeism? If yes, please email me at magielw@vt.edu.

Appendix H

Interview Instrument

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview. I am interested in exploring principals' indications of effective strategies and interventions to decrease chronic student absenteeism. Your responses will remain anonymous. I will be recording this interview so that I can go back and review your responses for my research study. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with the question, or where the discussion is going, please let me know. We can stop at any time. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. How has COVID-19 impacted the strategies and interventions you previously used to reduce chronic student absenteeism?
2. How have you adapted or changed the strategies and interventions you use to address and reduce chronic student absenteeism due to COVID-19?
3. How do you plan to maintain or improve your school's current rate of chronic student absenteeism?
4. Which strategies and interventions had the most significant impact on reducing your school's rate of chronic student absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Which strategies and interventions had the least significant impact on reducing your school's rate of chronic student absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?