A Qualitative Study of Strategies and Practices Used to Improve Student Attendance and Chronic Absence at Urban Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

The first national chronic school absenteeism data in 2016 revealed that over 6 million students in the United States missed 15 or more school days per year. Students with chronic absences miss both excused and unexcused days of school. The problem of chronic absenteeism is often overlooked during the elementary years, which is a time when foundational academics and socialskills are learned. Typically, attendance issues are addressed beginning in the middle and high school levels. Students with chronic absences during the early years are often linked with poor achievement. The purpose of this study was to determine how school personnel at urban elementary schools in Georgia, implemented strategies and practices to address chronic student absenteeism. Moreover, it explored how these educators increased the average student daily attendance rate for three years, meeting or exceeding a rate of 97%, which has been linked to improved student achievement. A phenomenological research design was used to carry out the purpose of this study. This study was significant because it provided insight into the central phenomenon of chronic student absenteeism from the perspectives of administrators who have been successful with overcoming barriers to chronic absenteeism among elementary school students. Further, this study moved beyond current research by focusing on student absenteeism at the elementary, rather than middle and high school levels, with the intent to address attendance concerns at an earlier age. Exploring student attendance from the perspectives of elementary administrators may contribute to the establishment of future attendance practices and policies.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

New school accountability measures in 2015 mandated a call to action for school leaders to improve student attendance (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2016), each year, almost seven million (nearly 14%) K-12 students have 15 or more days of school absences in the 180-day school year. Fifteen or more absences, or 10% of the school year, is the definition of chronic absenteeism, which more than 6.5 million K-12 U.S. students met during the 2013–2014 academic year (USDOE, 2016). Data from the USDOE (2016) specifically indicated that during the 2013-2014 academic year, 6,520,948 kindergarten through 12th grade American students exhibited patterns of chronic absenteeism. Also, according to the USDOE (2016), students who are from racially diverse backgrounds, female, English Language Learners (ELLs), students with disabilities (SWDs), and high school students are more likely to exhibit chronic absenteeism more than their peers.

The USDOE (2016) reported that female K-12 students were slightly more likely than their K-12 male counterparts to exhibit patterns of chronic absenteeism. Regarding chronic absenteeism among English Language Learners (ELLs) and non-ELLs, the USDOE (2016) reported non-ELLs exhibited patterns of chronic absenteeism more often than their ELL peers. Additionally, students living in poverty were two to three times more likely to be chronically absent than those from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds (USDOE, 2016). While chronic absenteeism occurred at every grade level, it was more prevalent among high school students. Overall, almost 20% or one in five students in high school were chronically absent, as compared to more than 12% of students in middle school (USDOE, 2016). The chronic absenteeism rate was the lowest for elementary school students, at 11 percent (USDOE, 2016).

Balfanz (2016) asserted deficits in learning opportunities can be associated with chronic absence. Balfanz further reported learning may become impacted after missing over five days of school. Also, students who were chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade were much less likely to read on grade level and were four times less likely to be proficient readers (Balfanz, 2016).

Study results reported by Aucejo & Roman (2016) indicated that only 17% of students chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade could read fluently by third grade. To the contrary, 64% of the students with satisfactory attendance read fluently by third grade (London et al., 2016). Thus, satisfactory attendance often correlates to higher reading abilities (Aucejo & Roman, 2016; London et al., 2016).

Balfanz (2016) connected the chronic absenteeism of pre-k, kindergarten and elementary students with lower achievement in their middle and high school years. Chronic absenteeism has also been linked to poor outcomes during adulthood, such as poverty, crime, and poor health. Students with high chronic absenteeism rates are at-risk for dropping out, unemployment, incarceration, or underemployment (Gershenson et al., 2017; London et al., 2016). Federal initiatives to reduce chronic absenteeism began during the Obama Administration (Cutillo, 2013; Hernandez, 2011). The White House, through the My Brother's Keeper Initiative, led efforts to coordinate federal, state, and local responses to address chronic absenteeism. The Secretaries of Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development, and the Attorney General sent a joint letter to states calling for cross-sector strategies to combat chronic absenteeism (USDoE, 2015). Through its convening power, the White House sponsored a national summit on chronic absenteeism. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) changed the national structure of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by empowering states to design and implement their own accountability systems (Cutillo, 2013). Under ESSA, each state must have annual school performance determinations and use this information to identify its lowest-performing schools. In addition to test-based academic metrics and high school graduation rates, ESSA holds states and schools accountable for at least one measure of school quality or student success (Bae, 2018).

New chronic absenteeism school improvement accountability measures have led school leaders and school districts to focus on the number of chronically absent students (Lara et al., 2018). As states developed their plans in 2016 and 2017, chief state school officers led processes to engage stakeholders and decide how to approach this new indicator. Georgia lawmakers passed House Bill 242, which incorporates the legal term “children in need of services” into the state code. With this guideline, state legislation identifies students who may be at-risk and need intervention services for absenteeism. Accountability measures in House Bill 242 mean that school leaders must address the issue of chronically absent students (Lara et al., 2018).

Although educational leaders in middle and high schools have taken action on chronic absenteeism, the problem remains overlooked at the elementary level (Blazer, 2011) Sparks (2011) argued that many elementary schools ignore the need to identify low student attendance. Yet an abundance of research indicates that there is a need to decrease absenteeism rates during the elementary years, especially with students from at-risk backgrounds (Aucejo & Roman, 2016; Balfanz, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2017; London et al., 2016). This study focused on the efforts of elementary school leaders who addressed attendance in their schools.

Problem Statement

According to the first release of chronic absenteeism data in 2016, in the United States, over 6 million students missed 15 days or more of school per year (USDOE, 2016). By the second data collection during the 2015-2016 school year, the numbers of chronically absent students increased to nearly 8 million. Chronic school absence during the foundational years of elementary school has been linked to poor academic achievement and social development (Balfanz, 2016). In 2016, 52% of elementary students nationwide had significant to extreme chronic absence (Chang et al., 2018). Following ESSA, guidelines to provide a fair and equitable education for all students, one of the key indicators for grading schools, is attendance (USDOE, 2016). Thus, school leaders are now more accountable for ensuring students attend school.

Accurate attendance monitoring should be prioritized by school leaders (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) reported that Georgia was one of only six states to report chronic absenteeism. Furthermore, few states collected individual attendance data needed to calculate chronic absence. Chronic absenteeism in Georgia is documented using five categories: (1) low chronic absenteeism; (2) modest chronic absenteeism; (3) significant chronic absenteeism; (4) high chronic absenteeism; and (5) extreme chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Using a benchmark of 15 or more days absent during a 180-day school year, schools that have >1%-5% of students absent for at least 15 or more days are categorized as having low chronic absence. Schools that have from 5%-9% of students absent are considered as having modest chronic absenteeism. Schools with 10%-19% of students absent are categorized as having significant chronic absenteeism. Those with 20%-29% of students absent are considered schools with high chronic absenteeism. Schools that have 30% or more of students absent are described as having extreme chronic absenteeism. While only 3% of schools in the state of Georgia have been categorized as having extreme levels of chronic absenteeism, as compared to the national average of 8%, vast numbers of schools in the state have been categorized as having students who exhibit patterns of chronic absenteeism (Balfanz& Byrnes, 2012).

Students who miss at least 10% of the school year typically struggle with various barriers to attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014). These barriers can include poor health, family and work responsibilities, limited transportation, unsafe routes to school, bullying and other safety issues, homelessness, ineffective school discipline, undiagnosed disabilities, or disengagement from the school system (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014; Tobin, 2016). Despite previous research on student attendance barriers, there is a dearth of studies specifically focused on the organizational strategies effective for increasing student attendance (Nauer et al., 2014). More specifically, literature is scarce on the strategies implemented by urban elementary school administrators that led to consecutive years of satisfactory attendance and decreased chronic absenteeism.

Purpose Statement

While previous research studies have focused on barriers to student attendance, missing from the literature are studies specifically focused on effective practices for increasing student attendance. (Nauer et al., 2014). Moreover, to date, no studies have been conducted which exclusively focused on practices or strategies implemented by personnel at the elementary school level to remedy chronic attendance issues.

The purpose of this study was to determine how school personnel at urban elementary schools in Georgia, implemented strategies and practices to address chronic student absenteeism. In this study, the strategies were identified to reveal the extent to which they attributed to the schools achieving successful attendance and low chronic absenteeism. These strategies evolved into practices, and this research details the manner in which the strategies were implemented.

Chronic absenteeism has led to a heightened awareness of monitoring attendance. Accurate attendance monitoring should be prioritized by school leaders (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). Establishing consistent organizational structures enables routines to be formed (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). The researcher explored whether satisfactory attendance was attributed to school organization factors. The Star Model was used to frame the study to examine how schools organized their work to achieve attendance success.

Research Questions

The researcher chose relevant questions to gain information about the participants' personal backgrounds and careers and to explore the strategies and practices executed in schools with satisfactory attendance achievement.

Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are the life and career experiences of school personnel, at identified Georgia urban elementary schools who dealt with chronic student absenteeism, who increased the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?
2. What strategies and practices did school personnel use at identified Georgia urban elementary schools who dealt with chronic student absenteeism in order to increase the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?

Significance

After ESSA implementation, the national data on chronic school absenteeism indicated that more than six million students in the United States missed at least 15 days of school per year (USDoE, 2016). Students with chronic school absence during the foundational elementary years are at risk of poor academic achievement and dropout. The purpose of this study was to determine how school personnel at Georgia urban elementary schools dealt with chronic student absenteeism in order to increase the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement.

This study is significant because it provided insight into the central phenomenon of chronic absenteeism from the perspective of school leaders who have been successful in overcoming barriers to chronic absenteeism among elementary school students.

Furthermore, the information from this study focused beyond the current research of secondary students and provided narratives of elementary school leaders' attendance experiences. Exploring the experiences and perspectives of elementary leaders may contribute to future attendance practices and policies which may further improve student attendance. Administrators who deal with low student attendance at urban elementary schools may particularly benefit from this study. Additionally, all administrators, teachers, boards of education, policy makers in school systems, and educational leaders may find valuable practical and philosophical information to help in their ever-changing and challenging roles, especially in the area of student attendance. As one administrator noted, “You can’t teach them if they aren’t here.”

Professors and administrators at colleges and universities should consider adding more information in the content of their pedagogy classes regarding absenteeism and how to handle the matter (Sprick & Sprick, 2019). Some of the results in this study may be of interest and help to educational leaders as they prepare the next generation of teachers and administrators. Furthermore, directors and consultants at Regional Educational Service Agencies (RESAs) often help school districts with school improvement, which may include attendance issues. These agencies may find the strategies and practices of the elementary school leaders to be of value. The purpose of this study was to determine how school personnel at urban elementary schools in Georgia, implemented strategies and practices to address chronic student absenteeism.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study was Galbraith’s (1973) Star Model, which is comprised of five strategies. The strategy of an organization is the first component, focused on a specific mission, values, goals, and objectives. The second strategy, structure, separates the organization’s placement of power and authority into four areas:

- Specialization: the type and number of job specialties used in performing the work

- Shape: the number of people in each department at each level
- Distribution of power: classic issues of centralization or decentralization (vertical) and movement of power to the department dealing directly with mission-critical issues (lateral)
- Departmentalization: departments' purpose based on functions, products, workflow processes, markets, customers, and geography

The Star Model's third strategy is processes, which is related to information flow. These are the means of responding to information technologies (Galbraith, 1973). The fourth strategy, rewards and reward systems, influences people's motivation to perform and address organizational goals. The purpose of the reward system is to align the goals of the employees and the organization. It provides motivation and incentive to complete the strategic direction. Finally, the fifth category concerns policies that influence and frequently define employees' mindsets and skills. Galbraith (1973) asserted that policies adopted by an organization work best when consistent with the other connecting design areas. Human resource policies also build organizational capabilities in order to execute strategic directions, simultaneously developing people and organizations' proficiencies.

Galbraith's (1973) Star Model framework was appropriate for this study based on the notion that different strategies can positively impact organizations. The framework's premise indicates that all policies must be aligned and interacting harmoniously for the organization to communicate a clear, consistent message to its employees. According to the Star Model, leaders influence behavior, performance, and culture by progressing through the policies that affect behavior.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was appropriate for the collection and the analysis of rich data from interviews. Oun and Bach (2014) noted that qualitative research methods allow for investigating human perspectives about events, behaviors, and practices. Qualitative designs are suitable for exploring complex topics and better understanding problems or phenomena. Qualitative researchers focus on human subjects' lived experiences with a recurring problem, the reason for the problem's continuance, and how the problem impacts other members of a group or society.

Unlike quantitative research, which includes primarily numerical data, qualitative methods are appropriate to collect and interpret verbal explanations and descriptions. Quantitative scholars are concerned with manipulating variables, numerical data, and hypothesis acceptance or rejection (Taylor et al., 2016). In comparison, qualitative researchers adopt a holistic approach to investigate a phenomenon through artifacts such as pictures, journals, videos, and other documents to better understand participants' perspectives and human interactions. Qualitative data collection can include observations of subjects in their natural settings. Also, qualitative research allows for open-ended questioning; thus, participants can elaborate by providing further details. A phenomenological design was appropriate to fulfill the purpose of this study. The goal of phenomenological research is to describe a lived experience rather than explain or quantify it (Cozby & Bates, 2012). Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the participants' perspectives; thus, there are no hypotheses or preconceived ideas about the data collected (Cozby & Bates, 2012; Giorgi, 2012; Morse, 2015). Phenomenological data collection can entail various methods, including interviews, conversations, participant observations, action research, focus groups, and analyses of diaries and other personal texts (Cozby & Bates, 2012; Giorgi, 2012).

In this study, a phenomenological design was chosen to investigate the strategies and practices used by school personnel in identified Georgia urban elementary schools who dealt with chronic student absenteeism, which led to a 97% three-year attendance rate and chronic absenteeism of less than 10%. The study included an urban school district of 52,000 students located in the southeastern region of the United States. The data were collected from a purposeful sample of five elementary school leaders who had experienced the phenomenon of achieving three years of satisfactory attendance rates.

Data were collected through interviews, observations and documents. The primary source of data collection was interviews. The participants provided rich, descriptive data to detail their experiences decreasing chronic absenteeism. Two interviews were conducted with each participant, utilizing an interview guide (Appendix A), following the guidelines of Brinkmann and Kvale (2014). The initial plan was to conduct three interviews; however, two important aspects of the study began to develop. First, saturation of information began to occur. Then, during the second interview, the researcher realized the difficulty of limiting the interview discussion to focus only on the strategies. The discussion of the practices, meant for the third interview, evolved from the participant's identification of the strategies during the second interview. The researcher combined the questions from interview three into the second interview.

Follow-up phone calls were conducted as needed to clarify information and the interviews were transcribed immediately after the interviews. The researcher sent the transcripts to participants for their review for accuracy and then analyzed the data. A manual coding process was used to identify the emerging themes. After each narrative was written, the researcher sent the document to each participant for approval. This allowed the participants to ensure the data provided accurate interpretations of their experiences.

Limitations

According to Creswell (2014), limitations of a study are factors over which the researcher has no control. One limitation of this study was selecting only urban schools. Another limitation was selecting participants from only one school district. Thus, the data collected were from a small group of schools in a similar geographic area, limiting generalizability to other populations. The school leaders shared their elementary school level experiences.

Another limitation was the researcher was a principal in the school district in which the study occurred; therefore, participants may have provided more favorable responses due to their familiarity with the researcher. The researcher journaled throughout the data collection period to react to personal emotions before and or after the interviews. The researcher also extended the opportunity for the participants to review their interview transcripts and narratives.

Definitions of Terms

Absenteeism. Absenteeism is a period of less than five unexcused missed school days within a 30-day period or less than 10 unexcused days within a 90-day period (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Chronic student absenteeism. Chronic student absenteeism is a period of 18 or more days of nonattendance during the regular 180-day school year. Chronic student absenteeism is missing at least 10% of the school year (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Elementary School. Elementary school is an institute of learning for children ages five through 10 years of age, in grades K-5 (Becker & Selter, 1996).

Extreme chronic absenteeism. Extreme chronic absenteeism occurs in schools in which 30% or more students are absent at least 15 days of the 180-day school year (Chang et. al, 2018).

High chronic absenteeism. High chronic absenteeism occurs in schools with 10-19% of students absent for at least 15 days of the 180-day school year (Chang et al., 2018).

Low chronic absenteeism. Low chronic absenteeism occurs in schools with 5% of students absent for at least 15 days of the 180-day school year (Chang et. al, 2018).

Modest chronic absenteeism. Modest chronic absenteeism occurs in schools with 5-9 % of students absent for at least 15 days of the 180-day school year (Chang et. al, 2018).

Practices. Practices are activities conducted around values, beliefs, or principles (Golby & Parrott, 1999)

Satisfactory school attendance. Satisfactory school attendance is measured by students attending school at a rate of 95% of days out of 100%. Students missing 5% or less days of school per year earn satisfactory attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Significant chronic absenteeism. Significant chronic absenteeism occurs in schools with 10%-19% of students absent for at least 15 days of the 180-day school year (Chang et. al, 2018).

S*trategies.* Strategies are the direction and nature of activities taken to achieve goals (Kates & Galbraith, 2007).

Urban school. An urban school is an institute for educating children located in a city populated by at least 2,500 people but not more than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Summary

In Chapter I, the researcher presented an introduction of the study. Included in Chapter I was the problem statement; under ESSA for student equality, the first national release of chronic school absenteeism data in 2016 revealed that over 6 million students in the United States missed 15 or more school days per year. Students with chronic absence during the foundational elementary years have been linked to poor student achievement. In Chapter I, the researcher also presented the purpose of this study which was to determine how school personnel at urban elementary schools in Georgia dealt with chronic student absenteeism and maintained a satisfactory average student daily attendance rate for three years. These educational leaders met or exceeded a rate of 97% attendance, which has been linked to improved student achievement. The research questions were also included in Chapter I. The significance of the study, Galbraith's (1973) Star Model, which served as the conceptual framework, and the methodology were also presented in this chapter. A phenomenological research design was used to carry out the purpose of this study. The researcher also included the limitations and the definitions of terms in Chapter I.

In Chapter II, the researcher provides a comprehensive review of the literature. The chapter includes the history of attendance. In this chapter, the researcher also includes compulsory attendance laws and school attendance information. Previous studies relating to the subject of attendance are highlighted in the literature review. The researcher explains the Star Model, the conceptual framework for this study used to explore organization choices and designs at the participants' schools.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on school attendance is a historically ongoing concern, as children's futures rely on educational training and development to provide skills for self-sufficiency (Croninger & Lee, 2017). Elementary students' absences contribute to achievement gaps and deficits in social skills learned from school (Baur et al., 2018). In 2016, more than six million students in the United States missed at least 15 days of school per year (USDoE, 2016). Students with chronic absence during the foundational elementary years are at risk of poor academic achievement and later school absence (Simon et al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to determine how school personnel at Georgia urban elementary schools dealt with chronic student absenteeism and increased the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement. The literature reviewed related to school attendance and chronic absenteeism. Organization design served as a framework to explore leaders' and school personnel's efforts to decrease chronic absence and increase student attendance.

Two research questions guided the study:

1. What are the life and career experiences of school personnel, at identified Georgia urban elementary schools, who dealt with chronic student absenteeism and increased the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?
2. What strategies and practices did school personnel, at identified Georgia urban

elementary schools, use to address chronic student absenteeism in order to increase the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?

As a means to better understand student attendance improvement, the researcher sought to learn more about organizational design and its impact on attendance.

History of School Attendance

In 1933, Heck published a literature review of compulsory United States' attendance laws, citing 71.3% average daily attendance (Heck, 1933). Although the literature indicated student illness as the main reason for absenteeism, more common causes included child labor laws—specifically, agricultural work for boys—and parental indifference. In the 21st century, researchers still strive to identify what influences parents' decisions to send their children to school and how to reduce chronic absenteeism. Many factors outside of school affect whether or not children attend, including student illness, family crises, lack of childcare for younger siblings, or transportation problems (Branham, 2014; Claudio et al., 2016; Gottfried, 2017; MacNaughton et al., 2017; Morrissey et al., 2014). Students may also fail to attend due to disengagement, bullying, or safety concerns going to or from school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; DeBaun & Roc, 2013; Steiner & Rasberry, 2015; Washington, 2015) as well as disciplinary problems (DeBaun & Roc, 2013; Linneman et al., 2016).

Student attendance has been an ongoing struggle (Heise, 2017; Moussa, 2017; Rauscher, 2016). Federal acts and legislation, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Reading First, and Race to the Top (RtT), require current and reliable assessment data to determine school funding levels in districts (Heise, 2017; Moussa, 2017). On the state and national level, schools face ongoing demands for students to perform well on standardized tests, showing mastery of curriculum standards. Determining the influences on students' academic achievement and mastery has been a topic of exploration by teachers and principals since the beginning of formal education (Rauscher, 2016). ESSA federal guidelines hold schools, teachers, administrators, and districts accountable for school improvement results and establishing learning objectives in each classroom (Heise, 2017; Moussa, 2017). As curriculum standards become more rigorous, it is increasingly important to identify the factors that impact student achievement.

Compulsory Attendance Laws

National Perspective

Compulsory education laws require children to attend a public or state-accredited private school for a designated period based on varying state mandates (Osborne, 2015). Despite some exceptions—most notably, homeschooling—all states have mandates for when children must begin school and how old they must be before they can drop out. In general, children must start school by the age of 6 years and remain enrolled until they are at least 16. Legislators enacted laws to improve literacy rates and discourage the widespread child labor practices of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Katz, 1976; Mendez et al., 2017).

Historically, schools considered students who were chronically absent from school to be delinquent. Families were rarely involved until the attendance problem became so severe that students were failing their classes. Educators soon realized that families have a tremendous impact on student attendance and are vital resources for decreasing chronic absenteeism and truancy (Corville-Smith et al., 1998).

History of Compulsory Education in America

In ancient Judea, before Plato popularized the idea of mandatory education in *The Republic*, Jewish leaders required parents to provide at least an informal education for their children (Katz, 1976). Rabbis founded many schools and encouraged parents to send their children beginning at the age of 6 years. The Aztec Triple Alliance, which ruled modern-day central Mexico in the 15th and early 16th centuries, was the first nation to make education mandatory for all children. With the Reformation, beginning in 1524, Martin Luther called for mandatory schooling laws to ensure that more Christians could read the Bible. As the Reformation spread throughout Europe, so did the enactment of mandatory education laws. In 1496, Scottish leaders established an education mandate for the children of privileged families; however, the mandate did not include commoners until the enactment of the School Establishment Act of 1616. The concept of compulsory school attendance gradually spread to other parts of the world, primarily based on the systems set up by Prussia in 1773.

With the Massachusetts School Attendance Act of 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to enact compulsory education legislation, having already passed a similar law in 1647 when the Commonwealth was still a British colony (Bandiera et al., 2018). Under the 1852 law, every city and town needed to offer primary school focusing on grammar and basic arithmetic, and parents had to send their children to public school for a minimum of 12 weeks. If parents refused this mandate, state lawmakers imposed fines and stripped them of their parental rights, with their children apprenticed to others. Before the Massachusetts law, and in other states without legislation, education was available through private, church-run schools. Due to tuition costs, poorer children could not attend these schools, instead receiving no education or informal schooling at home.

This state of inaccessibility changed during the immigration boom of the 19th and 20th centuries, with education seen as the best way to assimilate immigrant children.

Over the next 50 years, legislators in other states began to create and implement compulsory attendance laws similar to Massachusetts (Aragon, 2015; Katz, 1976). By 1890, 27 states had adopted compulsory education statutes. By 1900, six more states had followed suit: New Mexico (1891), Pennsylvania (1895), Kentucky (1896), Indiana (1897), West Virginia (1897), and Arizona (1899).

The momentum for compulsory education in the southern states was slower. Tennessee implemented mandatory education in 1908, followed by North Carolina (1907), Virginia (1908), Arkansas (1909), and Georgia (1916); (Katz, 1976). Mississippi was the last state to pass a law requiring school attendance in 1917. These actions were, in part, a growing response to fears of immigrant values and the Catholic Church. The Supreme Court later overturned those laws that required students to attend public schools.

Another motivation for youth education was the growing public concern over child labor and the belief that compulsory school attendance would discourage factory owners from exploiting children. Alabama temporarily repealed its compulsory education law in response to pressure from a large textile company in the state. Still, enforcement of these state laws were largely ineffective until state legislators began to realize the value of an educated workforce. Although all states had some form of compulsory attendance laws in place by 1918, the legislation was not standardized or consistent, with significant variations in exemptions and minimum required student attendance. In 1897, the minimum necessary schooling was from 7 to 16 years. Some truant children went to mandatory reform school; others' absences were the parents' responsibility (Katz, 1976).

Despite variations in state compulsory attendance laws, one constant was their unenforceability. By the late 19th century, compulsory laws had become ineffective nationwide. Parents and students did not respect the laws, nor did those in charge of enforcement. Therefore, it was no surprise that an 1888–1889 report on school attendance showed a striking disregard for state attendance laws, many of them flawed in practicality. Between 1900 and 1940, many state leaders transformed compulsory attendance laws into more practical and effective statutes. For the most part, compulsory education shifted from a relatively simple statute requiring a specific number of required days to a "more complex network of interrelated legal rules" (Katz, 1976, p. 21). These restructured rules included truant officers, defined roles, truant schools, jurisdictive power, and child labor regulations, with child labor laws also updated.

By 1920, despite more compulsory attendance laws were in place than ever before, yet a lack of enforcement remained. More than 78% of eligible students were enrolled in public schools, and 7.7% attended private schools; less than 15% of those required to attend were not enrolled. For children whose ages did not permit them to work, the regular attendance was 90.6%. Katz (1976) posited that these statistics suggested "schooling was becoming established not only as a legal standard but also a social standard" (p. 22). Education policy continued to evolve, particularly during World War I, World War II, and the Cold War (Fowler, 2013). Ability groupings differentiated secondary curricula, with standardized tests developed and junior high schools established. The school movement to track students was another response to increased international competition, providing educators a method to categorize children based on their academic performance. School leaders encouraged the more academically inclined children to pursue higher educational opportunities while directing lagging students toward vocational endeavors (Katz, 1976).

Despite these reforms, there remained a disconnect in providing an equal education opportunity for students, particularly among races, genders, and socioeconomic classes. As a result, several movements toward educational equality emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to a sharp increase in new education legislation around the country. These laws and associated policies created a new educational bureaucracy and coincided with a growing dissatisfaction with public education. Where parents once had complete autonomy to make educational decisions for their children, their authority had diminished in just a few decades (Fowler, 2013).

Compulsory attendance laws affect America's public schools. NCLB required school districts to submit attendance data to their state government to receive federal funding (Early, 2017; Mahoney, 2015; Schanzenbach et al., 2016). RttT initiatives focus on the importance of attendance for student success (Early, 2017; Mahoney, 2015; Schanzenbach et al., 2016). Individual state governments are responsible for enforcing compulsory education in the United States (Brilli & Tonello, 2018). Each state determines the age ranges subject to compulsory education, with the penalties for noncompliance varying by state. Failure to comply is a misdemeanor in almost every state. The fines range from $20 to $100 for the first offense and increase after that, with districts fined $250 to $1,000 for subsequent offenses, depending upon the jurisdiction (Early, 2017; Mallett, 2019). Most states can also sentence parents for up to 30 days in jail; while others provide alternatives, such as community service or counseling (Reyes, 2020).

Georgia Perspective

Georgia's compulsory attendance law requires that all children at least six years old and under the age of 16 must attend school (Gilpin & Pennig, 2015). All kindergarten students who remain in school for 20 school days are subject to the Compulsory School Attendance Law. Any parent, guardian, or other person residing in the state who has control or charge of a child or children and who violates the code is charged with a misdemeanor and, if found guilty, is subjected to fines ranging from $25 to $100, imprisonment up to 30 days, community service, or any combination of such penalties at the discretion of the jurisdictional court (Elsayed, 2019; Gilpin & Penning, 2015).

Every Student Succeeds Act

Signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, ESSA reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students (Bauer et al., 2018). ESSA went into effect for the 2017–2018 school year, with funding authorized through the 2020–2021 school year (Bauer et al., 2018; Sharp, 2016; Shields, 2016). Although ESSA retained the annual standardized testing requirements, the law moved the federal accountability aspect to the states, making them responsible for submitting an accountability plan to the USDoE. However, ESSA allows for local educational agencies to apply for subgrants for local accountability plans (Bauer et al., 2018). In 2010, the Obama Administration followed educators' and families' call for a better law that focused on the explicit goal of fully preparing all students for college and career success (Bauer et al., 2018; Sharp, 2016; Shields, 2016).

ESSA includes provisions to help ensure success for students and schools

(Shields, 2016). The law:

- Advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students.
- Requires the teaching of all U.S. students at high academic standards to prepare them to succeed in college and careers.
- Ensures the provision of vital information to educators, families, students, and communities through annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress toward those high standards.
- Helps to support and grow local innovations, including evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators.
- Sustains and expands the Obama Administration's historic investments in increasing access to high-quality preschool.
- Maintains expectations for accountability and action to effect positive change in the lowest-performing schools, in which groups of students are not making progress and graduation rates are low for extended periods.

School Attendance

At a time when the United States was transitioning from an agriculturally based to an industrialized economy, mandatory schooling was a means to ensure skilled workers could fill the job needs of the new century. Goldin and Katz (2007) noted, "From 1910 to 1940, America underwent a spectacular educational transformation. Just 9% of 18-year-olds had high school diplomas in 1910, but more than 50% did by 1940" (p. 1). With a more educated and skilled population, the nation went through a period of educational prosperity. According to Goldin and Katz, in 1955, high school enrollment was just below 80%; in comparison, European countries did not exceed 25% high school enrollment. Goldin and Katz observed, “The relative stock of educated workers, therefore, was considerably greater in the United States than in most European countries until the 1970s and even to the 1980s” (p. 2). From a historical viewpoint, the implementation of compulsory school attendance laws in the United States impacted the country more than just basic educational opportunities for the country’s youth. As Hogan (2017) suggested, the last 30 years showed that schooling has a significant private return in increased earnings. Yet, education may lead to other societal benefits not reflected in individual earnings (Hogan, 2017).

Importance of Attendance

Compulsory education laws affected primarily middle and high school students due to already high primary school attendance. Additional years of schooling, even without guaranteed graduation, results in increased wages of 6%-10% (Cook et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017; Smerillo et al., 2018). Each year of education raises earnings by about 10%, or $80,000 in present value over a lifetime (Cook et al., 2017; Hughes et al., 2017). One in five young Americans does not graduate from high school, making the record of American nongraduates one of the worst in the developed world (Fisher, 2017). Sass et al. (2016) found a 10% rise in earnings for people who stayed in school one year longer. Over their lifetime, female high school dropouts earned between $120,000 and $244,000 less than female graduates, and males earned $117,000 to $322,000 less than their graduating peers (Croninger & Lee, 2017; Sass et al., 2016). A 10% increase in high school completion rates may reduce U.S. crime expenditures by $14 billion (Hernae et al., 2017). If all students graduated high school, the annual cost of public health care may decline by $10 billion (Sass et al., 2016).

Because of compulsory education laws, U.S. citizens became better educated and more politically engaged (Hogan, 2017). Compulsory education laws increased the probability of citizens voting, national pride, and social awareness. Traditionally, dropouts have lower lifetime earnings, increased health issues, reduced awareness of societal issues, and shorter life spans than individuals with more years of schooling (Guneş, 2015). Data from the National Longitudinal Mortality Study indicated similar findings, suggesting that with each additional year of schooling completed, an individual's average life expectancy increases by up to six months (Meghir et al., 2018).

In recent years, the United States and other countries have raised compulsory education laws to the age of 18. Mackey and Duncan (2013) stated, "The underlying assumption is that young people benefit from continuing their studies to a certain age" (p. 6). President Obama called on all states to raise minimum compulsory education laws, requiring children to stay in school until the age of 18. There was support for this position from the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Governors Association (Mackey & Duncan, 2013).

The supposition is that raising compulsory education ages will result in lower dropout rates and greater teacher engagement with students (Croninger & Lee, 2017). Many lawmakers perceive fully educating students as a moral obligation unmet by allowing students to drop out before they are 18. Low compulsory education requirements are a remnant of earlier times, signaling to students and families that dropping out is acceptable. Mackey and Duncan (2013) observed that from a budgetary concern, "The costs of the change will be more than compensated for by lower spending on social programs, public safety, correctional services, and other state programs and functions" (p. 6).

Factors Impacting Attendance

The educational system is based on the assumption that students will attend school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Many factors directly and indirectly influence student achievement, a significant one being student attendance. Some researchers argued that attendance level is a determinant and direct indicator of academic success. Poor school attendance has high costs in terms of young people's academic learning; connection to peers, teachers, and schools; health; high school graduation; and future employment (Croninger & Lee, 2017).

Students who are most likely to be chronically absent share common characteristics. These students typically earn low grades in core subjects, experience school failure as evidenced by repeating a grade, and are disengaged from school, often manifesting as frequent behavior problems (Kennelly & Monrad, 2017). Chronically absent students tend to have lower standardized test scores, more involvement in criminal activity before adulthood, and a greater likelihood to drop out of school (DeBaun & Roc, 2013). When students are not positively engaged in the educational process, the likelihood of dropping out increases. Understanding the extent of chronic absenteeism is a critical first step to countering the problem. Regardless of why students do not attend, chronic absenteeism is detrimental to academic achievement (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Reasons for students' chronic absenteeism generally fall into four domains: student factors, family factors, school factors, and community factors (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

Student Factors

Students who eventually drop out of school may have begun distancing themselves from the educational process at a young age, as evidenced by higher absenteeism rates as early as first grade (D'Agostino et al., 2018; Hirshfield, 2018; Stempel et al., 2017). Students' physical health is the most frequently identified factor contributing to chronic absenteeism. Researchers have found physical health a significant factor in missed school for 36% of chronically absent students, including issues such as flu, headaches, asthma, and dental care (D'Agostino et al., 2018; Hirshfield, 2018; Stempel et al., 2017). Communicable diseases have a more significant impact than chronic conditions. There has been a particular disparity in physical health among different races. USDoE (2019) research indicated that physical health is the most reported attendance barrier for Asian, African American, and Latino students. Among chronically absent students, physical health was a reported problem for 20% of White, 26% of Asian, 42% of African American, and 41% of Latino youth.

Student illness creates barriers to school attendance, whether typical childhood maladies or chronic illnesses, with the latter leading to numerous days missed (Jacobsen et al., 2016). Parents and guardians of medically fragile children have unique considerations that impact their decision to send their children to school. School provides benefits of student socialization and respite for family members or caregivers (Leroy et al., 2017; Rehm & Rohr, 2012). School may constitute a challenge if parents are not confident in the school's ability to appropriately assess and address their child's academic and physical needs (D'Agostino et al., 2018; Leroy et al., 2017). Rehm and Rohr (2012) found that because of concerns about exacerbating an illness, "Some parents took the extreme steps of removing their children from school for weeks at a time, as a preventative measure during the winter months, when children were most likely to get sick at school" (p. 350).

According to Leroy et al. (2017), student mental health issues also play a substantial role in chronic absenteeism, constituting about one quarter of all chronically absent cases. Psychological health incorporates a range of issues, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Bolton (2016) and Henderson et al. (2014) found that students' mental health issues become more prominent in the later grades, contributing to chronic absenteeism among 39% of participating seventh and eighth graders and 36% of high school students. In addition, students in Grades 7 and 8 reported more mental health than physical health concerns (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2007). The rates of mental health issues as a contributing factor for student attendance in K–3 and Grades 4–6 was considerably lower, at 19% and 13%, respectively. Among races and ethnicities, chronically absent African American (28%) and Latino (29%) students cited mental health issues at rates slightly above average. In comparison, psychological concerns were attendance barriers for only 5% of Asian students (Erbstein et al., 2015). Mental health was a significant absenteeism factor for about one third of special education students. These findings indicate the continued need for supportive services for students in special education programs.

As students get older, many decide to attend school independent of their parents (Ahmad & Miller, 2015). Among teenagers, substance abuse, pregnancy, and emotional and psychological problems all contribute to absenteeism (Ahmad & Miller, 2015; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2017). Ahmad and Miller (2015) identified three categories of absences: cannot attend, will not attend, or do not attend. The reasons students cannot attend school include illness or unmet health needs, family responsibilities, housing instability, need to work, and criminal justice system involvement. Students often will not attend school because of bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment, or embarrassment (Ahmad & Miller, 2015; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2017). According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) and Yeide and Kobrin (2009), students do not attend school when they do not perceive its value or prefer another activity.

Several studies have demonstrated that student disengagement from school is a reason for absenteeism. Spencer (2018) identified dissatisfaction with school as the most important distinguishing factor between school attenders and nonattenders, something particularly true for youth at higher risk for school failure. Students with behavior problems in school and students with disabilities had higher absenteeism rates than peers without those designations. Students who displayed behavior problems were most likely to be absent from school and to have unexcused absences (Gottfried, 2019). From a study of eighth- and 10th-grade students with identified learning disabilities, Spencer found that students with disabilities were more likely to miss school than their peers. Not only do behavior and disability status influence school absenteeism, but also, there is a relationship between students missing school and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use. Chronically absent students are often disengaged from school and associate with friends who participate in deviant behavior, including substance use (Hallfors et al., 2012).

Despite no apparent relationship between gender and absences, there are ethnicity differences (Gottfried, 2018). White students have more excused absences than unexcused, Asian students tend to have fewer absences overall, and African American students have more unexcused absences than excused. Bilingual students are most likely to be truant and often chronically absent early in their school career, contributing to the later risk of dropping out (Spencer, 2018).

Family Factors

Several family factors contribute to school nonattendance, including poverty, family disorganization, health insurance status, and mobility (Ready, 2015). Family members might not support their child's educational goals, have culturally based attitudes about school that do not align with attending regularly, or inadvertently reinforce school absenteeism. In the early elementary years, parents and guardians typically decide whether children can miss school. By age 8, many students have begun actively negotiating with their parents to miss school (Ehrlich et al., 2018). Absences at the youth's discretion happen because students and parents may not understand how much attendance matters, the school lacks a strong culture of attendance, or the student simply wants to do something else (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Family members often support absenteeism by letting students pursue enjoyable activities when they miss school (Ready, 2015). Allowing students to watch television or play games positively reinforces students' choice to miss school. In providing excuses for their children's absences, family members convey to their children that they condone school absences. The extent to which parents feel connected to their child's school influences their decisions to send their child to school and their willingness to work with the school proactively to address truancy issues (Schwartz, 2015). School leaders can improve student attendance by creating encouraging environments, celebrating good attendance, and providing support for students in need of attendance intervention (Branham, 2014).

Living in poverty has direct implications for attendance, academic achievement, and the likelihood of dropping out of school. Attendance issues were more pronounced in urban settings and among students from low-income families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Murdock et al., 2015; Spencer, 2018). The disparity in attendance based on socioeconomic status was significant. Ready (2015) found that "compared to more affluent students, children living in poverty are 25% more likely to miss three or more days of school per month" (p. 272). Absences for these students are often associated with illness, residential mobility, and childcare challenges.

Family disorganization and parents' unmet emotional needs further contributed to students missing school (Yeide & Kobrin, 2018). In such cases, children lack adult guidance in addressing attendance challenges or being motivated to get up for school (Blackmon & Cain, 2015). Parent neglect is a common cause of chronic absenteeism. Many of these parents do not value education, instead keeping children at home to do work or babysit younger siblings. Other students cannot attend school because of problems at home, at school, or in their neighborhood. Absences due to parental neglect are challenging for schools to address because parents support their children staying out of school.

Health insurance status also has implications for school attendance. As of 2014, 28% of children without health insurance do not receive care for medical or mental health concerns (Yeung et al., 2014). When youth do not receive early treatment for a routine illness, it may become more severe and lead to hospitalization, resulting in more school days missed.

Mobility

Mobility contributes to absenteeism, with school attendance impacted during housing transitions (Rumberger, 2013). Family members can change jobs, relocate, or face crises requiring students to move from one school to another. Families may also consent to students' requests to change schools midyear. This movement is not without consequence, as noted in a University of Utah College of Education (Center, U. E. P., 2012) study of the state's public school students: "Students who moved in and out of schools were four times more likely than nonmobile students to be chronically absent" (p. 4). Districts may also contribute to mobility through school choice or policies to reduce classroom or school overcrowding (Vaslavsky, 2012). When students are in the process of changing schools or classroom reassignment, regular attendance can suffer.

Mobility is a prevalent issue that can have severe consequences for students in large, urban, predominantly minority communities (Rumberger, 2013). Students who experience mobility must adjust academically and socially to new environments. Research indicates that students who experience mobility are more likely to struggle academically, possibly due to curricular incoherence and the mismatch between the material taught at the former and current schools (Rumberger, 2013). However, it remains unclear whether other factors associated with mobility are the predominant causes of such difficulties. A California mobility study found that moving residences was the primary reason that students experienced mobility (Rumberger, 2013). A second reason was that the parents moved students at their children's requests (Rumberger, 2013). Residential and educational mobility correlates with higher dropout rates (Welsh, 2018). Patterns of mobility found early in students' school careers (between 4 and 7 years of age) may have an impact on their likelihood of dropping out later (Welsh, 2018).

As of 2014, schools with high mobility have had considerably lower student attendance rates than schools with stable student populations. Students who withdraw from school often lose a day of school simply going through the re-enrollment process, and have additional days missed from moving residences. Also, educators must mark students who have not properly withdrawn from the school as absent until they return or until school leaders file court petitions indicating that they cannot locate the students. In addition to these hurdles, many students struggle to transition to new assignments and surroundings, making going to school even more burdensome. (Branham, 2014).

School Factors

Branham (2014) asserted, "The best teachers, the best principals, and the best administrators have absolutely no value in improving education if children do not come to school" (p. 1113). Specific school-related factors contribute to student absenteeism, including relationships with teachers and other students, academic failure, behavioral problems, and even the school's differential response to absences, excused or unexcused (Rumberger, 2013).

Researchers have found that frequent absences can indicate disengagement from school. Students who demonstrate a lack of connectedness to their teachers, peers, or school communities are more likely to be chronically absent (Washington, 2015). Students may avoid school if they have negative or strained perceptions of their interactions with teachers and school personnel or of their school experience (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Several school characteristics are predictors of student attendance rates. Increases in absenteeism and truancy occur when students perceive their teachers as uncaring or boring or their classrooms chaotic (Epstein & Sheldon, 2012). Croninger and Lee (2017) found that, when holding other factors constant, high school teachers perceived as highly supportive of students halved the probability of dropping out.

It remains unclear whether students disengage from school and then do poorly or whether they perform poorly and, as a result, disengage and miss school. Despite little research on the directionality of the relationship between achievement and school attendance, there is a proven relationship. Early disengagement has implications for later school success (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Causal factors in students' grades (e.g., whether students repeat a grade; classroom climate, including the behaviors of other students; and students' engagement in the overall educational process) impact attendance (Kennelly & Monrad, 2017). Students who struggle academically or behaviorally often need additional support to succeed and remain engaged. Inadequate or inappropriate identification of the need for special education is another contributing factor to school absenteeism (Yeide & Kobrin, 2018). As of 2015, there has been an increased focus on the impact of both in-person and online bullying on student attendance (Steiner & Rasberry, 2015). According to the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 16% of high school students indicated missing school within the last 30 days due to bullying, as compared to 4% of the students who reported not being bullied (Steiner & Rasberry, 2015). The type of absence, excused or unexcused, affects academic achievement. Students with more excused absences perform better academically than those with more unexcused absences (Gottfried, 2018). Excused absences may not correlate with negative experiences, such as a family crisis, illness, or lack of transportation; yet they can affect academic engagement in other ways.

There is a significant distinction between excused and unexcused absences. The proportion of excused absences to total absences positively correlates with academic achievement. Similarly, the ratio of unexcused to total absences negatively correlates with academic achievement (Cvencek et al., 2017). There are distinct differences in the type of absence by race. White students are more likely to have excused than unexcused absences; the reverse holds true for Black students (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Such absences have significant implications for educational outcomes (Gottfried, 2018). Students who live in high-poverty areas are more likely to live nearby and walk to school. However, the neighborhoods have higher rates of traffic accidents and crime and lower levels of perceived safety (Morrissey et al., 2014). The appearance of the school building can also impact attendance (Berman et al., 2018). A damaged and unrestored school presents an atmosphere of instability that threatens social order and the educational process. Students in disordered environments perceive that they are not special, school is unimportant, and that no one cares; as a result, they are more likely to stay home and give education low priority in their lives (Morrissey et al., 2014).

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is one of the earliest indicators that a student may be at-risk in school. There are both academic and behavioral effects of absenteeism and strong correlations between dropping out of school, early illiteracy, and chronic absenteeism. Students who regularly miss school fall behind and may struggle to catch up. Chronic absenteeism has implications on the learning of all students in the class, as well as the classroom and school climate (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ready, 2015).

Students with higher attendance rates perform better on achievement tests, and schools with better student attendance rates tend to have higher achievement levels on standardized achievement tests (Ehrenberg et al., 1991; Lamdin, 1996). Student absenteeism has a disproportionately negative impact on mathematics achievement and general education (Gottfried, 2018).

Students who miss class are not only more likely to fall behind but are also more inclined to have discipline problems. Educators often impose disciplinary measures, including detention and suspension, to address absenteeism. However, corrective interventions may contribute to the disengagement of students who do not regularly attend school (DeBaun & Roc, 2013).

School Leaders' Awareness

Researchers suggest that school leaders take supportive approaches to address student absenteeism (Chang et al., 2016; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Maynard et al., 2012). Supportive approaches require school leaders to embrace the complex task of exploring how they may promote student absence by evaluating their attendance practices and policies (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Maynard et al., 2012). Essentially, in studying their roles as school leaders, they must identify and take ownership of the actions with an influence on student attendance, whether positive or negative (Chang et al., 2016), if they are to improve the system (Maynard et al., 2012; Sanchez, 2012).

School leaders should take comprehensive approaches to address student absenteeism alongside students, parents, educators, and community members (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). School leaders must work with those for whom absenteeism has the most significant impact: the students and their families. Hartnett (2007) suggested that school leaders should get personal with other stakeholders to change the culture of nonattendance. Cullingford and Morrison (1999) identified the "benefits of going outside the school, of involving others, of understanding more fully the whole experience of the child" (p. 257). The authors indicated a need to better understand students and their parents by establishing, building, and maintaining relationships. Taking a comprehensive approach to attendance requires school leaders to look beyond the building, establishing, and committing to a strong, two-way communication system with students and their families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Strategies and Practices Used to Combat Chronic Absenteeism

Absence intervention typically has two approaches: behavior modification or needs-based (Yeung et al., 2014). Yeung et al. (2014) wrote that the individuals who use the behavior modification approach use punishment or positive reinforcement to address absenteeism. At the school level, behavior modification may include sanctions for absences imposed on either the students or parents, meetings with counselors or attendance officers, or rewards for daily attendance. The needs-based approach entails addressing absenteeism holistically to determine the reasons for student absences at the child, family, school, or community level and establishing interventions.

Many intervention strategies for student absenteeism are school-based practices focused on students, parents, and schools. Most of the research on school absenteeism focuses on preventing students from dropping out (Epstein & Sheldon, 2012). Although high schools have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than elementary schools, there is a need to examine school attendance behaviors in elementary school, as it is often a precursor to secondary school attendance patterns (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Limited evidence exists on effective school programs or practices for improving student attendance in elementary school. School leaders have reported the various challenges of monitoring and promoting attendance, including housing instability, parents pulling children from school for vacations, and limited staff to focus on attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2012).

Response to Intervention

Kearney and Graczyk (2014) suggested combating chronic absenteeism by incorporating absenteeism interventions into the response to intervention (RtI) model. RtI has a three-tiered delivery approach with universal, targeted, and intensive interventions. Tier 1 consists of quality classroom instruction, including universal interventions for all students, a common set of instructional goals or curriculum, and regular benchmark screening for identifying students not succeeding in the classroom. A well-functioning three-tiered system of supportive Tier-1 activities should address the needs of 80% to 90% of students (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Many schools have a multitiered approach for academic and behavioral interventions, which is also effective for combating chronic absenteeism. Tier 2 responses include targeted interventions for students identified as at-risk or in need of additional support, such as interventions and additional progress monitoring. Approximately 5-10% of students may need additional support at this level. Tier 3 interventions are the most intensive interventions implemented for students with severe or complex problems requiring individualized approaches, such as one-on-one instruction. Only 1%-5% of students need the support offered at this level (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

RtI is an integral way of addressing the academic and behavioral needs of students in many schools. Chronic absenteeism directly correlates with students' academic and behavioral outcomes; therefore, absenteeism interventions must also align with the RtI model. RtI approaches are effective in combating chronic absenteeism through:

> The need for early identification and intervention with progress monitoring, functional behavioral assessment, empirically supported procedures and protocols to reduce obstacles to academic achievement (including absenteeism), compatibility with other multi-tiered approaches, and a team-based approach for implementation. (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, p. 4).

In the case of truancy, students and family members are not identified as needing support until there is a specific number of unexcused absences accumulated. However, school leaders implementing absenteeism interventions using the RtI model can proactively combat chronic absenteeism. The RtI approach of early identification is important, as research shows the detrimental impacts of even with a few absences.

Parental Involvement

Historically, most family attendance interventions have been punitive actions after students were chronically absent (Epstein & Sheldon, 2012; Wallace, 2017). However, there has been a shift to perceiving families as integral to combatting chronic absenteeism proactively. There is evidence that family structure influences absenteeism (Schwartz, 2015). Negative impacts on school attendance include lower socioeconomic status, male gender, a large number of siblings, a young mother, single-parent household, and changing residence early in the school career (Tamiru et al., 2016). A focus on parenting practices and involvement in specific school-related activities can have a positive impact on school attendance (Rumberger, 2013).

The involvement of school, family, and community members is a way to reduce chronic absenteeism (Connolly & Olson, 2012; Gottfried, 2014). Implementing activities designed to increase school/home communication correlates with improved attendance (Duardo, 2013). Sheldon and Epstein (2004) asserted that elementary school educators need to take the initiative to connect with and involve family members in schooling to improve overall attendance. Leaders who develop and implement programs to promote school, family, and community partnerships have higher parental involvement levels, higher percentages of students passing standardized achievement tests, fewer disciplinary concerns with students, and decreased absenteeism. Sheldon and Epstein found that school, family, and community partnership practices serve as a means of significantly decreasing chronic absenteeism. The six types of parental involvement through which educators can connect with family members and communities to improve student outcomes, specifically student attendance, are: "(1) parenting; (2) communicating; (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home; (5) decision-making; and (6) collaborating with the community" (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004, p. 41).

Afterschool Programs

According to Epstein and Sheldon (2012), after school programs impact attendance. Schools with after school programs had higher daily average attendance and less chronic absenteeism. After school programs may serve as a means of eliminating childcare issues that lead to missed school.

Educators at many schools have begun to use technology to track and address school absenteeism. Automated calls and letters may go out when students miss as little as one day or when they reach a predetermined threshold for a pattern of absenteeism

(Williams, 2017). In New York City, Mayor Bloomberg's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement led to strategies piloted in 50 schools across the five boroughs to identify best practices for reducing chronic absenteeism, especially high schools with high chronic absenteeism rates. The students in pilot schools paired with success mentors and gained an additional 11,820 more days of school in the pilot year than their counterparts at comparable schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

School leaders may not know of the magnitude of the absenteeism problem because they may monitor excused and unexcused absences differently. Most educators track truancy in older grades but not as closely for children in younger grades, as their parents usually provide excuses (Bruner et al., 2011). School, family, and community partnership practices are ways to significantly decrease absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Communicating with family members about attendance (e.g., phone calls and providing information on school attendance policies), celebrating good attendance, and connecting chronically absent students with mentors are strategies for reducing absenteeism from one year to the next.

Educating parents is another way to improve school attendance. Parents may perceive that kindergarten attendance does not correlate with overall school success or that missing school is not a big issue until middle school or high school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Parents or guardians whose children refuse to go to school due to anxiety, bullying, or psychological problems may not know how to encourage them to attend school and address their reasons for not wanting to attend (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Overall, schools that focus on attendance-related interventions produce positive results (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). School leaders who conduct attendance-focused activities are more likely to decrease the total number of chronically absent students (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). There is a critical need to address chronic absenteeism with Sheldon & Epstein, 2004) families Sheldon & Epstein, 2004) and to provide effective interventions, as the most significant predictor of chronic absenteeism in a current school year is the student's chronic absenteeism in the previous year. Every year a child is a chronically absent student, there is a significant increase in the child's likelihood of dropping out of school (Center, U. E. P., 2012).

School, family, and community partnerships are promising practices for reducing chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). There is substantial research on interventions for improving student attendance. Schools, community agencies, and court systems all have programs for improving attendance through education, rewards, and sanctions. Also, research has occurred to examine what schools provide to parents (e.g., newsletters, home calls, home visits, invitations to workshops, and attendance assemblies) to measure their effectiveness based on changes in attendance (Railsback, 2004).

Student Incentive Strategies

Chang (2014) found that many student incentive programs are comprised of common strategies for improving attendance. The Brookings Institution, a nonprofit, independent think tank, focused on implementing student incentive programs in five major U.S. cities. The students received monetary compensation for educational tasks (e.g., reading books, completing homework, or attending school) or student achievement outputs (e.g., standardized test scores or classroom grades). Some scholars have found no need for costly student attendance incentives; for example, motivators could include extra recess time or homework passes. Class-wide incentives in which educators encourage friendly competition between classes also tend to be powerful strategies, as students encourage their peers to attend school so they can benefit from the competition as a group (Gershenson, 2016).

Teacher Strategies

Attendance incentives are the most effective when led by teachers and school leaders (Epstein, 2018). Low-cost incentives generally have as much effectiveness as high-cost, financial motivators. Low-cost incentives, such as certificates, extra recess time, homework passes, and pizza parties, are the most commonly used strategies for targeting attendance among elementary school students. School leaders should avoid recognizing only perfect attendance, instead rewarding punctuality (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). As any missed class time can impact student achievement, school leaders should recognize attendance in many ways (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). Additional incentives include positive comments; positive notes home to parents; extra time on classroom computers; chances to act as teacher assistants; opportunities to eat with principals, superintendents, or school board presidents; and traveling trophies for homerooms with the best monthly attendance (Edwards, 2016).

Administrative Strategies

Reid (2013) noted that ensuring attendance policy adherence requires district leaders to communicate attendance policies and the importance of school attendance. School attendance policies should have clear expectations and alignment with overall district policies. Additionally, attendance policies should promote understanding among all school community members, including parents. School administrators and district leaders must examine the data to understand the general and specific problems with chronic absenteeism (Cook et al., 2017). Childs (2017) emphasized that student data must be sufficient for school leaders to formulate practices, programs, and policies to improve attendance.

According to the National Forum on Education Statistics (2009), the first step in improving attendance is to develop a system to collect and analyze student data. Data analysis can help indicate the characteristics of chronically absent students in order for the district or school leaders to determine appropriate intervention strategies. District leaders must also ensure that they utilize precise data collection methods and correctly interpret the data (Childs, 2017). For example, instead of collecting school- wide attendance averages, the National Forum on Education Statistics (2009) suggested a taxonomy of attendance codes that provides information about student absences for comparison across schools. Additionally, National Forum on Education Statistics (2009) recommended that district leaders issue clear, consistent data collection policies and communicate them to school staff. The teachers tasked with updating attendance records often report the success of attendance data collection (Sprick & Sprick, 2019). A lack of clear collection policies harms data quality; therefore, school administrators should ensure that teachers have adequate professional development and a comprehensive handbook (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). District leaders can reduce teacher responsibilities and streamline data collection and analysis by upgrading their information systems to automate data collection and immediately notify parents of student absences.

Baltimore's Student Attendance Campaign is an example of how to prioritize student attendance throughout a district (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The campaign's key strategies included community workshops conducted by members of the Open Society Institute-Baltimore to promote school attendance and gain support from the city's mayor and Baltimore City Public Schools superintendent. Other major characteristics of the Student Attendance Campaign included (a) the use of electronic dashboards on which principals received automatic alerts when students showed signs of chronic absenteeism, (b)revision of school district discipline codes to increase interventions for misbehaviors and reduce the number of offenses for which suspensions or expulsions were possible outcomes, (c) an attendance campaign for high school students that included postcard mailings, welcome-back-to-school calls from local celebrities, and targeted home visits, and (d) revised attendance measures and strategies based on a continuum of attendance that included five or fewer absences, regular attendance, chronic absences, severe chronic absences, and truancy.

Mentors

Another strategy for reducing truancy, the "check and connect" model includes relationship-based interventions for students with chronic absenteeism and behavioral problems (Lehr et al., 2004). Using this model, educators can refer at-risk students to a "monitor" who acts as a mentor and liaison between the student's parents, school, and community agencies (Cook et al., 2017; Lehr et al., 2004). Monitors work to build trust between students and their families and identify the barriers to regular attendance. They also check in with students monthly, evaluate their behavioral and attendance marks, and modify intervention strategies as necessary (Sugrue et al., 2016). Generally, monitors work with students and their families for up to 2 years.

Student mentorship programs are a means of successfully reducing absenteeism. A 2013 analysis of “success mentors” who worked with chronically absent students in New York City showed that each participant gained approximately nine additional days of school per year (Allen et al., 2018; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). In addition, high school participants were 52% more likely to remain in school the following academic year than their peers who did not receive mentoring support. Mentors must have access to students’ attendance data and maintain consistent, year-long relationships with students and connections to school leadership. Through mentoring arrangements, some school leaders also pair students with community members.

Conceptual Framework

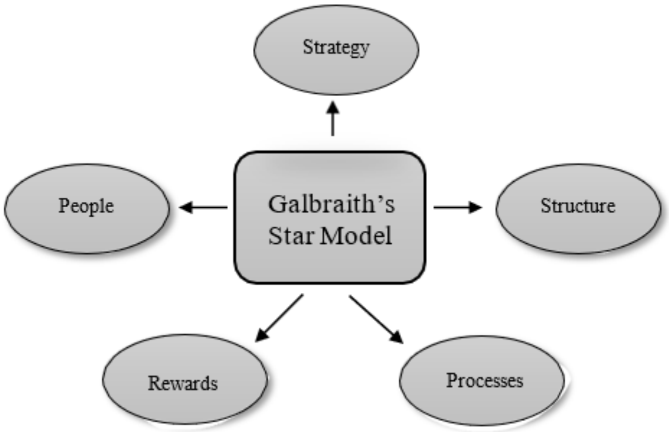
The goal of this study was to understand the stories behind elementary schools with successful attendance. The researcher sought to learn what occurs at schools with either improved or sustained attendance for at least three years. School leaders’ actions were of specific interest, to note how they organized their schools. The term *organization* indicates a firm comprising thousands of people or part of a firm limited to a few people (Kates & Galbraith, 2007). Galbraith et al. (2002) defined organization design as “the deliberate process of configuring structures, processes, reward systems, and people practices and policies to create an effective organization capable of achieving the business strategy” (p. 2). According to Kates and Galbraith (2007), organizational design is a “series of choices and decisions” (p. 2) made to accomplish complex tasks more easily. Through the design model, structures, processes, and practices contribute to people's behavior and energy.

Leaders shape organizations and set direction by identifying strategies, including the vision, purpose, and goals necessary to achieve the vision (Galbraith et al., 2002). Like corporate leaders, school leaders must strive to achieve the organization's strategy. The vision of maintaining or increasing attendance rates aligns with the tenets of Star Model (1973), which requires organization leaders to use different approaches. The Star Model, used by business corporations, could have strategies similar to those utilized at urban schools with successful student attendance. The Star Model was the conceptual lens used to explore the attendance phenomenon in five urban elementary schools.

Galbraith's (1973) Star Model consists of design choices that influence employee behavior controlled by managers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Star Model



The Star Model (Galbraith, 1973) design policies have five categories: (a) strategy, (b) structure, (c) processes, (d) rewards, and (e) people. According to Galbraith et al. (2002), a highly effective organization has each of the five components. Chronic absenteeism or student attendance issues result when an organization lacks one or more elements. The ownership of chronic absenteeism is not only the onus of the students but is also the responsibility of school leaders. Principals can impact attendance and student achievement, even in high-poverty and urban areas (Bartanen, 2020). Principals affect attendance by communicating with families, influencing school policies and programs, supporting families, and building relationships with stakeholders who can share expertise and increase attendance awareness. Attendance Works (2018) suggested that principals impact school attendance when they cultivate school-wide cultures of attendance, know and understand community challenges, analyze chronic absence data to inform the supports needed, develop staff capacity to adopt effective attendance practices, and provide resources to improve student attendance**.**

Strategy is the first component of the Star Model (Galbraith, 1973). According to Galbraith (1973), an organization's strategy affects its direction by defining its values, mission, goals, and objectives. Strategy includes the organization's direction, products or services, target population, and value to the customers. The strategy of an organization also provides the criteria for choosing among alternative organizational forms. Additionally, a strategy enables the organization's members to prioritize the most necessary and important practices. Organizational leaders can use the company's direction in broad terms to incorporate their visions and short-term and long-term goals. Kates and Galbraith (2007) defined strategy as "a set of capabilities at which an organization must excel in order to achieve the strategic goals" (p. 3). Bryson (2004) stated that an effective strategy connects discourse, choices, and actions.

Specific to the role of a school leader and in alignment with Galbraith’s (1973) model, the strategy component includes the vision, purpose, and goals for moving a school forward. In this study, the forward direction or purpose was improved attendance. Just as corporate leaders utilize strategies to obtain success, school leaders determine strategies to target and monitor school improvement areas (Cosner & Jones, 2016).

According to Bartanen (2020), school improvement goals should include strategies for reducing absenteeism. School leaders often create strategic goals and decisions based on their life and career experiences. Colbert et al. (2008) suggested that leaders can determine strategies by values and experiences. Leithwood and Stager (1989) concluded that effective principals understand their personal values, as career and life experiences can affect school leaders’ attendance strategy and vision.

The second design policy in the Star Model (Galbraith, 1973), structure, indicates the location of power and authority within an organization. Structure policies fall into four areas: (a) specialization, (b) shape, (c) distribution of power, and (d) departmentalization. Specialization indicates the type and number of specialists needed to perform specific tasks. Shape indicates the number of people comprising each department at each level within an organization. Distribution of power is the centralization or decentralization of vertical control. In its lateral dimension, the distribution of power indicates the movement of power to the department with workers who deal directly with the issues critical to the organizational mission. Departmentalization is the basis for forming departments at each level of the structure. The standard dimensions of forming departments are functions, products, workflow processes, markets, customers, and geography (Galbraith, 1973).

Relating to the school leader's function and the relationship to Galbraith's (1973) model, Sprick and Sprick (2018) advised blending all four areas of the star model for attendance improvement in the structure component. Within the school structure, school leaders should design attendance teams with varied staff members to execute attendance strategies and meet attendance goals. Sprick and Sprick suggested that team members should include administrators, counselors or social workers, teachers, and attendance clerks. From their work across the country, Sprick and Sprick observed that effective teams improved school attendance, morale, and discipline. Members of effective teams distribute their power and processes to create clear objectives, structures, roles, and responsibilities for successful results (Sprick & Sprick, 2018). Including administrators and certified and classified staff members is a way to build school pride and a culture of attendance (Sprick & Sprick, 2018).

Processes, the third design policy of the Star Model (Galbraith, 1973), focuses on the vertical and horizontal flow of information. Vertical processes are business planning and budgeting processes. Leaders review departmental needs, budgeting and allocating resources to capital, research, development, and training. Such management processes contribute to the effective functioning of matrix organizations. The processes require support from dual or multidimensional information systems. The lateral processes are designed around the workflow. Lateral processes occur in various ways, from voluntary contacts between members to complex and formally supervised teams.

In schools, employees at the central office level typically manage the vertical processes. The budget process for school districts includes using funding formulas by counting the number of enrolled students on designated single or multiple days during the year and implementing funding formulas based on per-pupil calculations (Ely & Fermanich, 2013). Central office-level vertical planning and budgeting processes include collaboration between school administrators, board members, employees, and community members (OECD, 2017). Employees at the school level manage the lateral processes in education. Sprick and Sprick (2018) recommended a team approach for attendance workflow. Instead of delegating work to one individual, Whitney (2008) suggested utilizing multidisciplinary team combinations with clear understandings of each other's roles. The team members should develop an attendance policy to detail school attendance expectations and practices (Sprick & Sprick, 2018; Sprick & Sprick, 2019). Within the plan, the identified practices should present three levels of tiered attendance supports for approving attendance: (a) preventative strategies to motivate all students, (b) early intervention support to students showing signs of chronic attendance, and (c) intensive support to students with patterns of chronic absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Rewards, the Star Model's (Galbraith, 1973) fourth design policy, focuses on factors that influence people's motivation to perform and address organizational goals. The purpose of the reward system is to align each employee's goals with those of the organization. Rewards also affect policies for salaries, promotions, bonuses, profit-sharing, and stock options. Reward systems must align with an organization's structure and processes to influence strategic direction. Rewarding success occurs with goal achievement, motivating people within the organization and contributing to esteem (Behn, 2003).

There are a variety of rewards used in schools to improve student attendance. Reid (2013) suggested that using rewards is a more motivational way to encourage student attendance than punishment systems. Attendance works (2017) suggested rewarding only perfect attendance should be avoided due to the risk of sick students coming to school. Instead, utilizing incentives is suggested to create a schoolwide culture of regular attendance (Attendance Works, 2017).

Providing non-monetary, psychological rewards to promote peer and school recognition is a more appropriate way to encourage attendance than providing monetary rewards (Reid, 2013). Balu and Ehrlich (2018) created a guidance framework for identifying and creating incentives aligned with attendance goals and structures, instructing school staff members on how and when to use incentives to improve attendance.

The Star Model's (Galbraith, 1973) fifth design policy, people, focuses on human resources policies that influence employees' mindsets and skills and the recruiting, selection, rotation, training, and development of individuals. Human resources policies are also a means of building the organizational capabilities to execute strategic directions. Flexible organizations require flexible people (Galbraith, 2011). Cross-functional teams need people who are generalists and who cooperate with each other (Galbraith, 2011). Thus, managers must align procedures in harmonious ways for their associations to remain influential and successful (Galbraith, 2011). Managers who create such alignment, often engage in robust and reliable communication with all personnel. The Star Model further indicates that managers can regulate procedure and influence performance and organizational effectiveness.

A school leader navigates the people practices within the school building. Effective staffing has a lifelong impact on students and can provide hope and resilience

(Brooks & Goldstein, 2008). Bartanen (2020) argued that retaining teachers is effective in decreasing absenteeism and a way for principals to improve student attendance. Chang et al., (2018) regarded principals as the anchorpersons for prioritizing attendance. Galbraith et al. (2002) identified the need for creating systems to attract, develop, and retain people who can embrace strategic goals and adapt to changes. Therefore, school leaders must develop hiring practices to recruit open-minded staff members and cultivate school-wide attendance cultures (Chang, 2018). Further, schools must develop staff members who can support student attendance and adjust to the needs indicated by data and the leaders', students', and staff members' daily experiences. According to Chang (2018), principals need to build strong teams who welcome students, emphasize the importance of showing up every day and build trusting relationships with families. Defining and influencing mindsets entails ensuring that attendance actions result in student growth and support, recruiting and selecting staff who believe in the importance of students showing up every day, and training staff members to provide appropriate support to decrease attendance obstacles.

The configuration of Galbraith's (1973) Star Model includes five essential components of organizational structure (Galbraith et al., 2007). An effective organization requires each component of the model to work in unison. Comparatively, principals must implement all elements to address student attendance and avert chronic absenteeism.

Summary

Chapter II contained the literature relevant to developing a strategic model based on Galbraith's (1973) Star Model to improve school attendance and combat chronic absenteeism. Chronic student absenteeism is a concern for many schools nationwide because students cannot learn when they do not attend class. Researchers have defined chronic absenteeism in multiple ways, including a student missing 10% of the academic year, a student missing 10 or more days of the academic year, or a student missing a concentrated amount of school within a short period (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Chronic absenteeism harms students in various ways (Gottfried, 2014). The most apparent negative consequence is the impact on academic achievement. Chronically absent students consistently perform worse in all academic areas than their peers who are present in school. Additionally, chronic absenteeism has negative impacts on students' development of social skills, resulting in disengagement and a lack of the ability to apply critical-thinking skills. Chronically absent students are more likely to be involved in the justice system due to delinquent behavior and some becoming high school dropouts.

The causes of chronic absenteeism include families living in poverty, legitimate student illness, intentional school avoidance, and parents' negative perceptions of the academic process. Socioeconomic status is a significant factor in a student's ability to attend school and compensate for missed instruction when they miss school. Necessary absences may occur due to student illness; however, chronically ill students who are also chronically absent still experience the negative impacts of chronic absenteeism. Additionally, some student absences are avoidable.

There are many strategies for combating chronic absenteeism (Sprick & Sprick, 2018; Sprick & Sprick, 2019). Improving school attendance may involve taking a holistic approach, rather than using one intervention to fix the problem. Another recommendation of researchers is to incorporate attendance interventions into already-effective practices and approaches, such as the RtI model. Furthermore, much of the research focuses on encouraging parents, teachers, and administrators to play supportive roles in addressing the ongoing problem of chronic absenteeism among elementary students.

In Chapter III, the researcher introduces the methodology used for the study. A justification is provided for the qualitative design model. The chapter includes a description of the participant selection process and a rationale for choosing the research sites. Furthermore, the researcher provides the data collection sources and data analysis process. Ethical issues are also addressed in the chapter.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

School attendance and chronic absenteeism are causes for concern in many public schools (Gottfried, 2014). Chronic absences during the foundational elementary years correlate with poor student achievement. Chronically absent students are more likely to perform poorly and drop out of school (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Under the ESSA for student equality, the first national release of chronic school absenteeism data in 2016 indicated that over six million students in the United States miss 15 or more days of school each academic year.

School districts located in urban cities, especially in areas of high poverty, are more likely to report absenteeism as a major problem (Schoeneberger, 2012). High absenteeism rates often result in school dropouts (Scheoneberger, 2012). School disengagement begins as early as the elementary years. Approximately 10% of kindergarten and first grade students were identified as chronically absent nationwide (Balfanz, 2016). Inconsistent school access for elementary students creates learning gaps during the foundational years (Simon et al., 2020). Data showing consistent patterns of absence during the elementary years makes it evident that a stronger focus on attendance is essential earlier (Chang et al., 2016). Drawing attention to successful school attendance practices during the early years may be beneficial to decrease school disengagement, as well as to improve educational achievement (Chang, 2014).

The current study was a means to investigate the perspectives of urban school leaders who experienced satisfactory daily attendance and chronic absenteeism at their schools. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the life and career experiences of school personnel at identified Georgia urban elementary schools who dealt with chronic student absenteeism, and increased the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three consecutive years, thus improving student achievement?
2. What strategies and practices did school personnel use at identified Georgia urban elementary schools to deal with chronic student absenteeism in order to increase the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three consecutive years, thus improving student achievement?

Research Design

Before beginning the study, the researcher obtained permission from the Valdosta State University (VSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study (Appendix B). A qualitative approach was used to investigate how staff members from a group of urban elementary schools in Georgia improved student attendance. A phenomenological design was appropriate to better understand the leaders' perspectives of the three-year student attendance phenomenon. This research model focused on the participants' emic perspectives of their student attendance programs; therefore, it did not include a hypothesis or preconceived ideas about the data (Cozby & Bates, 2012; Giorgi, 2012; Morse, 2015). The participants' provided rich descriptive words and quotes that detailed their experiences with student attendance. Phenomenology differs from other qualitative designs because the goal is to describe rather than to explain or quantify a lived experience (Cozby & Bates, 2012). Van Manen (2014) explained phenomenology as the nature behind a phenomenon that "makes a something what it is" (p. 10). The goal of the phenomenological design is to maximize the depth of the information collected (Morse, 2015*)*. The phenomenological approach enabled addressing the "what" and "how" of the research questions based on the transcendental philosophy and beliefs of Husserl.

According to Vagle (2018), Husserl stated that a phenomenon was "the thing itself and not a generalization" (p. 7) that defines a phenomenon. Husserl thought that "living the experience" through only the individual's descriptions shows the true meaning of the experience. Van Manen (1977) believed that reaching a better understanding of the deeper meaning of a human experience results from borrowing other people's experiences and reflections of their experiences. This method is a way to build knowledge and expertise in those lacking involvement in the encounter.

Site and Participant Selection

Researchers decide where to conduct their research and whom to include (Creswell, 2013). There are two types of sampling: probability and nonprobability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Probability sampling is random selection that produces results generalized to the population from which the researcher has taken it. Probability sampling produces statistical results and is thus used in quantitative research. Nonprobability sampling, also known as purposeful sampling, entails selecting specific sites and individuals to inform an understanding of the research questions (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling enables a researcher to "discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Qualitative researchers utilize purposeful selection when choosing study locations and participants (Maxwell, 2013). According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling produces rich, insightful data about the phenomenon under study.

This study comprised a unique, purposeful sample of school leaders in select urban elementary schools in Georgia, who had achieved satisfactory student attendance and low chronic attendance for at least three years. Sundius and Chang (2017) defined satisfactory attendance as being present 95% or more of school days and chronic absence as missing 10% or more school days. In the current study, there were urban elementary school leaders selected based on three years of satisfactory average daily attendance rates of 97% and chronic absenteeism rates below 10%. There were five elementary schools in the urban district chosen for the study based on satisfactory attendance data results.

Site Selection

The study commenced in an urban school district in the southeastern United States. The student enrollment in the chosen district was 52,000, with 77% of students from low socioeconomic households (GOSA, 2014). The 2013–2014 state data showed the urban school district had chronic absenteeism rates of 35.5% in the initial year of the ESSA focus (Dalton, 2016). Later, the corrected data showed a chronic absence rate of 17.7%. Over one third of the 46 elementary schools in the district had students who missed at least 15 days or more of school in the 2013–2014 academic year. The researcher chose to research schools in a school district with demographics including minority populations of at least 20%. The researcher desired to learn practices or strategies from schools similar to her own. Thus, site permission was obtained from the school district, allowing the research to be conducted on school grounds (Appendix C).

Participant Selection

A researcher bases a phenomenological study on the participants' experiences with a phenomenon. School leaders with firsthand experiences of satisfactory school attendance (i.e., at least 97% for three years) were purposefully recruited to participate in this study. The purposeful sample was sufficient to address the research questions.

There were five elementary school sites within the urban, Georgia school district chosen based on chronic absence rates greater than 10% and average daily attendance rates less than 97% during the 2013–2014 school year. These five schools were in varying demographic locations throughout the area. The school leaders at all five schools served in their positions for at least three years. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as their rights as a participant. They were told they had the right to end their participation in the study at any time, with no consequences. All five participants verbally agreed to the terms of the informed consent form, indicating their understanding of their role in the study (Appendix D).

Enrollment at each school ranged from almost 300 students to more than 500 students (GOSA, 2017). The five schools differed in CCRPI scores, ranging from mediocre to high rates (Table 1). The CCRPI is a measure of annual performance on state curriculum standards in reading and math for Grades 3–5 and science and social studies for Grade 5. The CCRPI score (out of 100) indicates content mastery for grade-level proficiency, progress compared to similar peers, closing gaps, improvement for students in racial subgroups and special education, readiness of foundational literacy, and attendance and exposure to enrichment courses beyond the core content (GADoE, 2017).

Table 1

Summary of Schools

School	Enrollment	Ethnicity	Poverty Rate	3-Year CCRPI	Mobility
A	290	98% Black 1% Hispanic 1% White	61%	75%	20%
B	548	22% Black 51% Hispanic 21% White 6% Other	69%	78%	18%
C	300	89% Black 10% Hispanic 4% Other	79%	66%	37%
D	739	12% Black 10% Hispanic 61% White 16% Other	7%	95%	11%
E	278	83% Black 13% Hispanic	58%	84%	17%

Note: School Leaders A=Blossom; B=Global; C=Heart; D=Sincere; E=Wolf
Source: GOSA (2014) and *GOSA (2017)*

School A was a newly renovated, flat, light colored stone and brick structure. The enrollment was 300 students. The student demographics were 98% Black, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Caucasian. Nearly 60% of the students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The three-year CCRPI was 74.52 during the 2015–2017 school years. The mobility rate was 20% (GOSA, 2017).

School B was a two-story, red brick building. The enrollment was 550 students. The student demographics were 22% Black, 51% Hispanic, and 21% White. Nearly 70% of the students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The three-year CCRPI score was 78% during the 2015–2017 school years. The mobility rate was 18% (GOSA, 2017).

School C was a two-story older, red brick building. The school was relocated due to renovation. The enrollment was 300 students. The student demographics were 89% Black, 10% Hispanic, and 4% other. Nearly 80% of the students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The three-year CCRPI score was 66% during the 2015–2017 school years. The mobility rate was 37% (GOSA, 2017).

School D was an ultra-modern, “green school” built of light-colored brick and glass. The enrollment was 740 students. Twelve percent of the students were Black, 10% were Hispanic, 61% were Caucasian, and 16% were listed as Other. Nearly 10% of the student population came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The three-year CCRPI average was 95% for the 2015–2017 school years. The mobility rate was 11% (GOSA, 2017).

School E was a flat, older, light brick building located close to the street. The enrollment was 300 students. Eighty-three percent of the students were Black, 13% Hispanic, and 11% other. Nearly 60% of the student population came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The three-year CCRPI average was 84% for the 2015–2017 school years. The mobility rate was 17% (GOSA, 2017).

Data Collection

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), data are tangible or intangible sources of information collected based on the type of research. The researcher determines whether the information qualifies as data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data sources used to develop qualitative research findings are interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam, 2002). In interviews, participants share feelings, opinions, and experiences from their perspectives to develop and explain an experience (Maxwell, 2013). Observations provide insight based on the settings, behaviors, and events in a location

(Maxwell, 2013). Documents offer additional information relevant to a study from printed or visual materials (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this qualitative study, the findings came from interviews, observations, and document analyses.

Interviews

Interviews are the primary means of collecting data for phenomenological research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing provides opportunities to hear the voices of the individuals with lived experiences of the phenomenon (Seidman, 2013). In this study, interviews were the primary form of data collection to garner descriptive responses of the school leaders' experiences in regard to the research questions. van Manen (2014) noted that the main goal of interviews is to pose questions to uncover the nature of the human experience. van Manen also asserted that phenomenological research enables a researcher to borrow others' experiences and reflections to gain a better understanding.

An interview guide served as an organizational tool in this study (Brinkmann & Kval, 2014). The researcher utilized Galbraith's (1973) Star Model to frame the questions on improved attendance at each of the five schools. The researcher conducted 10 interviews with school leaders to understand the research questions related to their attendance success. Each school leader engaged in two interviews to speak about their lived experiences as leaders and the strategies and practices they used to impact school attendance. The initial interview focused on the participants' life experiences, with the participants answering questions about their backgrounds and attendance experiences while matriculating through school from childhood to adulthood. The second interview centered around the daily organizational structures they used in their schools to improve and sustain attendance. Audio recording and note-taking were implemented for documentation of the interviews. Participants were allowed to review their interview transcript for accuracy. Follow-up telephone calls served as further means of clarifying the information provided during the interviews.

Documents

According to Creswell (2007), document research consists of locating materials and obtaining permission to use those materials. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined documents as physical, written, visual, and digital materials. For this study, relevant attendance policy documents, event program artifacts, and visuals underwent examination. The documents relevant to the study underwent analysis for triangulation. Bowen (2009) explained that qualitative researchers should use at least two resources to validate the information gained from different data sets.

Observation

Observation occurs in the setting where the phenomenon occurred (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Observation, coupled with interviews and document analysis, "allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 138). In this study, there were observations of the elements of the physical setting: (a) internal and external attributes of the environment, (b) objects in the environment, and (c) the outdoor landscape of the environment. The researcher observed the curb appeal of each school, the main office process of welcoming visitors, the décor and artifacts in the principals' offices, the cafeteria spaces (some occupied by children), vocal tones and behaviors of adults interacting with children, and the artifact displays throughout the school.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making meaning out of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative data analysis requires making sense of the words and artifacts to answer the research questions. Moustakas (1994) presented two types of phenomenological data analysis, the first being a modified version of the van Kaam (1966) method of data analysis. With this method, analysis of the complete transcript uses a multi-step format to develop individual, textural-structural descriptions of the meanings and essences of the experience representative of the entire participant group. Creswell (2013) defined textural descriptions as the significant statements and themes used to convey the participants' experiences. Creswell further presented structural descriptions as the context or setting with an influence on how participants experience a phenomenon. The essence is the "what" of the experience and "how" the participant experienced it.

The second type of phenomenological data analysis is a modification of the Stevick Colaizzi Keen method (Moustakas, 1994). With this approach, a researcher creates a personal description of the phenomenon and uses a multi-step format to code the responses, repeating this step for all participants. The result of this method is the development of "a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

This study involved applying the transcendental philosophy that includes epoche, which requires individuals to look only at what appears before them (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher transcribed the audio recordings after conducting each interview. Multiple transcript readings occurred and were compared to the audio recordings.

The data underwent analysis by highlighting and coding the statements significant to the research question. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined coding as making notations next to data relevant to answering the research questions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) compared the process of category construction to having a conversation with the data, by which a researcher asks questions and makes comments about the information. In this study, coding commenced with the modified format of van Kaam (see Moustakas, 1994). This method does not include the researcher's experience; rather, it focuses on the essence of the participants' experiences. The coding process included the steps of van Kaam's method of analysis:

1. Listing and preliminary grouping of all relevant expressions
2. Reduction and elimination of insignificant statements
3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents (essence)
4. Identifying final invariant constituents and themes
5. Constructing individual textural descriptions
6. Constructing individual structural descriptions
7. Constructing individual textural-structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121)

The manual coding process by Foss and Waters (2016) was applied for the listing and preliminary grouping of variants. Reduction and elimination of the data occurred by color-coding the transcriptions, cutting bits of excerpts, and clustering them into groups. The categories underwent placement into clustered groups by themes. The creation of a matrix captured the themes related to the research questions.

Maxwell (2013) defined validity as "credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation or other sort of accounts" (p. 122). Researchers can increase credibility or validity with triangulation, the best-known strategy for gaining insight from multiple data sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Validity threats are ways a researcher may be wrong, based on personal interpretations of data (Maxwell, 2013). Researcher bias and reactivity are the two most common types of validity threats. Researcher bias consists of drawing conclusions from selected data through subjective means. Reactivity is the influence of the researcher and participants or the setting. According to Maxwell, the strategies for testing the validity of research conclusions are (a) intense and lengthened involvement, (b) rich data collection, (c) member checks, (d) peer review, (e) discrepant data, (f) triangulation, (g) numbers, and (h) comparison.

In this study, triangulation, member checks, and rich data collection were utilized to ensure results consistent with the data.

Ethical Issues

Researchers should address ethical issues to establish the credibility of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethical issues in qualitative research should undergo examination at each phase of the research process (Maxwell, 2013). Prior to engaging in the research process, the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program (CITI) and received certification (Appendix E). In this study, addressing ethical issues began by obtaining permission from the IRB at VSU to conduct the study. Bogdan and Bikien (2007) stated that the two dominant ethical issues in research with human subjects are "informed consent and the protection of information from harm" (p. 48). Participation entailed only minimal risks, with guidelines followed for participant approval and data collection. Each participant received the institution's research participation agreement and provided voluntary consent without coercion. All of the participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw their participation at any time during the interview process. During data collection, the participants received pseudonyms to conceal their identities. All data were kept in a secure location to ensure the participants' privacy. The data will be shred after the researcher's study has been approved for publication.

Summary

Chapter III included a rationale for the qualitative research design model. The researcher chose a phenomenological study to capture the leaders' experiences and narrate from their perspectives. A purposeful sample of urban elementary school leaders with multiple years of satisfactory attendance determined the participant selection and the site selection. Five elementary schools with three years of a 97% attendance rate were selected as sites for the study. Four of the five schools had poverty rates of at least 50%. The student enrollment numbers varied from 300 to 700 students. Data collection sources consisted of interviews, documents, and setting observations. This chapter also contained the data analysis process utilized to determine the themes. The researcher utilized a manual data analysis process of coding information, in conjunction with modified steps of van Kaam's methods of analysis to determine the relevant themes. In Chapter IV, the researcher presents the participant descriptions and narratives.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

Chronic absence became of national interest after the 2015 ESSA federal law required state reporting as a nonacademic indicator of school accountability (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). School leaders play crucial roles in addressing chronic absence within their schools (Chang, 2010). Principals understand the challenges within their communities and may address problems by providing student support (Attendance Works, 2017). This study focused on urban elementary school leaders' efforts to address chronic student absenteeism and increase the average student daily attendance rate for three consecutive years.

Two research questions guided the study:

1. What are the life and career experiences of school personnel, at identified Georgia urban elementary schools, who dealt with chronic student absenteeism and increased the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?
2. What strategies and practices did school personnel, at identified Georgia urban elementary schools, use to address chronic student absenteeism in order to increase the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?

The researcher collected data through interviews, photographs, and documents. A purposeful sampling was utilized to identify five urban elementary school leaders who increased attendance rates or maintained attendance rates of 97% for at least three years after the baseline year of 2013–2014. The schools had chronic absenteeism rates of less than 10% for at least three years. The participants received an explanation of the study and an informed consent form (Appendix D) via email in compliance with Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board regulations.

This chapter contains participant descriptive narratives to present rich data. At the time of the interviews, all participants had served in school leadership for at least five years and led at their schools for at least three years. The participant profiles include personal background information, paths to education, daily routines, family attitudes toward attendance, attendance beliefs, and perceptions of attendance success (Table 2).

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Ethnic group	Gender	Years of school leadership	Years of leadership at current school	School socioeconomic status	School enrollment
Blossom	AA	Female	13	13	59%	300
Global	CA	Female	12	4	34%	500
Heart	AA	Female	9	3	79%	300
Sincere	H	Male	17	4	8%	800
Wolf	AA	Male	14	10	62%	300

Note. AA = African American; CA = Caucasian; H = Hispanic

Narrative Profiles

Blossom

The pseudonym “Blossom” was appropriate for this principal, symbolizing her growth from a distracted high school teenager to an accomplished school leader. After losing her father, she was raised by a “village” of people who helped her mother, sharing equal responsibility for her upbringing. The village concept of unity suggested the idea of nurturing plants through the phases of growth. The metaphor of a plant indicates her growth process. During the latter years of high school, Blossom was like a young sprout. She struggled to form her preadult roots while surrounded by disconnected relationships with her teachers. She “actively disengaged in high school” and chose a path of truancy and performance below her potential. Her extended family village and her mother were fertilizers that enabled her to root into the profession of education. Blossom transformed over time into a nurturing principal. Her primary work is addressing the needs of struggling students and families. Her nurturing village approach is evident through her school website’s assuring words: “When you walk through the doors of [school name], you will become a part of the [school name] family, where everyone learns and grows!”

The interviews occurred during a school day in the conference room of the newly renovated school. During the interview, Blossom discussed her high school years, during which she felt unsure about her desired life path. She described feeling distracted during her high school years. She attended an urban, affluent, predominantly White school, about which she said, “I was one of those Black students who did not perform up to my potential.” She reflected on her actions of “goofing off and skipping school.” She recalled, “For a while, it was questionable that I was even eligible to go to college. I was actively disengaged in high school. It was a pretty bumpy time for me.” Her junior year of high school provided her the opportunity to participate in an elective child development class. A partnership between the high school and a nearby elementary school offered high school students hands-on teaching experience.

Fatefully, her introduction to the teaching profession changed the trajectory of her life. Her teaching assignment at the elementary school caused her to realize her career aspirations. The experience provided her with insight: “Not only did I want to be a teacher, but I want[ed] to be an early childhood educator.” She said, from that point forward, “I just kinda started taking things seriously.” She enrolled in a historically Black university on a provisional basis. She graduated from college and evolved from an unfocused teenager to a dedicated principal in the same school district. Her school district recently provided her with a Principal of the Year award for her dedicated leadership.

Blossom grew up in a family of educators. Her mother, a former principal, retired with 40 years of service in education. Her great aunt and great uncle worked as educators. All of her cousins worked in education, as well. Although Blossom experienced some unfocused high school years, she proudly recalled early memories of wanting to become a teacher. She reminisced about her mother compiling a memory album of her early school years:

> I tell people, you have those little memory books, where every year you put your school picture and write who your teacher is and what you want to be when you grow up. When I go back and look, every year, I would say a teacher.

Initially, she thought she would teach at a daycare center and even dreamed of owning one. Her mother’s guidance led her to apply for employment with the public school system. She bloomed in the education profession, going from a teacher to an instructional coach, instructional specialist, and a principal of 11 years. Her service in education totaled 22 years in the same building.

Blossom prioritized building relationships with students, families, and teachers. She believed that personal relationships were a way to foster understanding and support. She knew her community well and proudly said, “I grew up right here.” She is a perceived as a knowledgeable and dedicated leader to her students and the community around the school. She stood outside and greeted students when they arrived, partaking in morning and afternoon carpool duty to “welcome [students] in and chat with parents.” Once everyone settled in, she visited classrooms. All teachers received a weekly visit from her or a member of the administrative team. Blossom said, “Every day, I’m in classrooms, [and students] see me, and I’m a part of the lesson.” She reflected on learning a new vocabulary word on her morning visit just before the interview. Blossom smiled and chuckled when she spoke about the second-grade class visit: “Honestly, I had never heard of the word before. I told [the students], ‘Y’all are smarter than me.’”

Blossom varied her approaches to reaching out to families. She communicated with parents to minimize the barriers that block her students from attending school:

> We have a family; this lady has four children here. She had an attendance issue last year, and she did not bring them to school. So probably a week after Labor Day this year, we thought they were gone; [then] she showed up. Last year, she had only three [students in school]. She showed up with one more in the first grade who had never been to school. So, I brought her into my office, and we sat knee to knee and had a real conversation. I told her, “I care about your kids, and what happened last year can’t happen this year. How can I help you?”

Blossom communicated with families to troubleshoot issues and connect them with support services. Blossom learned that one child had a medical condition and that others had severe learning deficits. Because the children had enrolled midyear and had frequent absences, she had not had the opportunity to foster a family relationship. Blossom established a support team to address each child's needs. The support team members tested the children and provided remediation services. The principal even empowered the oldest sibling, telling the student that when their mother did not wake the children up for school to "call the school when you get up and see the sun shining. We will come and get you."

Blossom believed that relationship-building should be a shared responsibility of all staff members. The staff at her school tell the parents, "We're concerned, and we want them [the family] here." The school leader confided that she knew that she made efforts far beyond some principals at other schools. She said, "Colleagues have blatantly told me that's not my job." On the contrary, Blossom thought of school attendance as a collective effort and that, "Everything is everybody's job. We're all the social worker, we're all the psychologist, we're all the intervention specialists, we're all the teachers, we are all the nurse, and we are all of that." She felt that the caring culture of her school differentiated them from other schools. Blossom shared some of her everyday realities and said, "I have to be empathetic and sympathetic to what [parents] are saying, and my job is to remove barriers to help [students] get to school. I believe that, and we work hard to do that." She thought that all schools should utilize staff to build relationships with parents and provide "the extras" needed for their families. However, her networking with colleagues suggested that not all schools function in such a manner. Blossom embraced the importance of building relationships with parents and students.

Blossom perceived school attendance as the foundation for students' future work ethics. Her mother's experiences of fighting through poverty and her "make a way" attitude influenced Blossom's views of students regularly attending school. According to her mother, "You do your schoolwork, and you go to school in spite of." Despite her poverty, Blossom's mother taught her life lessons:

> Everybody in my family and my village went to work every day unless you were in the hospital. Like, you had to be dying. And so, you go to school every day unless you are dying. I mean, it wasn't discussed. It was just the way you built a work ethic. That's the work ethic I saw in all of the adults in my family.

With her mother's "by any means necessary" teachings, Blossom sometimes struggled to comprehend parents' inabilities to fight through obstacles; however, she continued to educate parents about making sure students come to school. She recognized their challenges of "not having washing machines, having lights off, and water off" as factors of poverty with an impact on student attendance. Blossom created structures to assist family members at her school overcome attendance obstacles. She said, "I know that attendance is important. I build relationships with parents. I do whatever it is [that] I have to do to get them here." She admitted that "it is not [my] job nor [my] teachers' job to understand it all. It's our job to remove barriers and make it happen for children."

Blossom regarded each student as a vital member of the small school's environment. She credited the school's favorable attendance rates to the school climate of celebrating students and recognized students for their presence at school:

> We acknowledge [the] kids who are here. We reward them for having great attendance. We talk about [attendance] every day on the afternoon announcements. We acknowledge our homerooms [that] have perfect attendance.

> We reward students for coming to school. I think every child hears me say every day, “You can’t learn if you’re not here.

The principal built personal relationships with every child in the building to let them know that she cared about them. When her students had been absent, she greeted them upon return to let them know they were missed.

Global

This school leader received the pseudonym “Global” due to her open-hearted spirit to serve students from outside of America. She realized that all youth, American-born or not, desire and deserve fairness. She strongly advocated for minority, underserved, Spanish-speaking students. She described herself as a “Spanish-speaking White woman” who believed that every child should have access to instructional resources, no matter the country in which they were born. She used her educational position to empower her international students with language and knowledge. Global welcomed the diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds of her students. The main office wall arrangement of annual staff photographs showed diversity among the staff. Because more than half of the students were Hispanic, Global desired to increase her Hispanic teacher numbers from 35% to at least 50% for a more inclusive cultural environment. Global said, “If we were a business, you would want your staff and the business to reflect your community. Finding certified teachers fluent in both the Spanish and English language presents challenges due to the scarcity of qualified applicants.”

Global served at an elementary school with a dual-immersion language program. Her students received Spanish and English language training to speak and relate to people of various cultures. She served as a leader for 12 years, mostly in bilingual schools. She had held her elementary leadership role for 4 years. The interview with Global commenced after school dismissal. Upon my arrival at the school, I saw a colorful bunch of Black, Brown, and White children playing and running outside in the afterschool program. The school was in a well-landscaped, affluent neighborhood.

Global's mother influenced her decision to pursue a career in education, planting the seed of teaching at a young age. Her mother might have been trying to spark a career of teaching into existence for Global to make up for dropping out of school in the eighth grade. Global thought that her mother wanted to become a teacher:

> I think my mom would have become a teacher. She dropped out [at a] very young [age] to have babies, actually in the eighth grade. I think [that] she really wanted to be a teacher, and so, for my whole life, I just thought that I was going to become a teacher. And so, when it came time to really decide, I was really weighing options, and really, [teaching] has always just been a passion.

Global's high school Spanish teacher noticed her passion for learning Spanish and introduced her to bilingual education. She motivated Global to become a bilingual educator. Global combined her love of Spanish with her interest in early childhood education and became a certified early childhood educator in English as a second language.

Global advocated for minority, underserved students. She believed that all students should have equal access to educational materials. As a young educator, she experienced inequitable treatment of the minority students in her classroom. She was expected to teach lessons to her self-contained Hispanic homeroom with "literally three Spanish books on a shelf and nothing else." In contrast, the teachers with English-speaking, Caucasian students had a plethora of materials. During Global's career, she duplicated resources, stretched resources, or created appropriate resources to educate her non-English-speaking students. For most of her career, she worked in schools where the affluent, White students lived in the communities of the "haves," and the Spanish-speaking students were bused in from the impoverished, surrounding neighborhoods of the "have-nots." Global championed equitable rights and experiences for her students, no matter their origin. She considered every student a valuable member of an emerging world to form one community.

Global compared the idea of school attendance for children to employment for adults, likening students learning at school as work for their grade to adults working jobs to earn their pay. Her parents enforced going to school when she was young, and she carried forward the family view of "it is definitely your job to go to school. That's what you do; you got to go to school." Her parents were older and had grown up during the Great Depression. They believed that "no matter what, your job was to go to work [as an adult], and as a kid, my job was to go to school." Global was the youngest of six children. Both of her parents worked and gave no options for staying home from school; they expected regular school attendance. Global said that her parents instilled in her, "If you weren't bleeding or on fire, you pretty much went to school. I don't think it was ever an option. Pretty much, you just had to go to school." Attendance was essential during her upbringing.

Global believed that her school's consistency with attendance occurred because of the relationships that she and her staff members had with the students. She further thought that the strong adult-student relationships enabled her to avoid relying on trinkets and tangible items to motivate students to attend school. She confidently voiced her opinion on the teachers' positive relationships with the student:

> [Students are] motivated by the relationship[s] they have with the adult[s] here. And with the other students, is what I truly see is the formula. We don't have the "Rah, rah, sis boom, hah." We have, "Hi, baby. We got to come to school. I'm here for you; you've [got] to come.

Global considered the positive relationships that the adults had with students the school's bright spot. She communicated to parents the importance of students attending school. She and her staff told students that they missed them when they were not in school. She believed that students who repeatedly want to be at home warrant in- depth investigation to determine the root cause of school avoidance. The results include an evaluation of "why are [students] not feeling well? There could be some emotional issues going on." She noted that some students need guidance and support.

Global confirmed that most of the time, absences are not the fault of the student. She said, "Sometimes [students] really do have to be the one to make sure they get up and do [come to school]." She thought that the parents typically do the best that they can, and they might need support, as well: "We can try to work with [parents]. Sometimes, it's a matter of educating them. They don't realize [student absence is] that big of a deal." Supporting students was a collective effort at Global's school. The principal and teachers communicated with students' families to stay connected. Global ensured that students and their families felt the importance of daily presence for the school community.

Heart

This school leader received the pseudonym of "Heart" to represent her energetic and compassionate spirit for serving children in disadvantaged communities. She loudly voiced her preference of advocating for students who lack “people who believe in them.” Her enthusiasm for supporting urban students showed that she was a cheerleader and ambassador for her school team. Like a cheerleader showing love and spirit for a team, she dedicated herself to supporting and motivating her students.

In her earlier years of life, Heart explained often “feeling limited in my abilities because I had awful teachers.” She used her childhood memories of wishing she could have been “pushed more” by “people [who] believed in me” as inspiration to push and motivate her students. Heart’s passion was evident throughout the school. She promoted team spirit for all by posting visuals of reading-level statistics, math fact mastery on the wall of fame, achievement banners on classroom doors, and attendance spirit sticks around the school. Her competitive nature of pushing her students, her zestful voice of encouragement, and her commitment to recognizing students’ incremental victories demonstrated that she was a cheerleader with a compassionate heart for students.

The interview with Heart took place at her school on Saturday afternoon. At the time of the interview, she had been a school leader for nine years and a principal at the school for three years. Heart’s mother raised her in the inner city of Cleveland, Ohio. Her mother did not complete high school but instilled in Heart, the importance of showing up to obtain an education. She said, “My mom often told me, ‘I want you to go to school so you don’t have to ask anybody for nothing and can fend for yourself and be independent.’” As a first-generation student, Heart may have felt obligated to do well in school. Because her single-parent mother never completed high school, she struggled to raise her children. Heart recalled her mother working long hours to provide for the family:

> When I think about my mom, she never missed a day at work. She was always early, always on time. Very dependable when it came to working. Probably because she never felt that she could afford not to be there because she had a family to raise.

Although Heart's mother dreamed of completing school, she could not achieve that dream due to her family obligations. She said, "My mom hated that she couldn't finish high school or couldn't go to college. She always wanted us to go to school and finish high school." Education and school attendance were expectations in Heart's home. Heart learned about the benefits of showing up for school and working hard to achieve. She also learned the relationship between working and going to school. She said, "School was like my job growing up. I had to show up every day and earn my pay. My paycheck was my report card." She broke the cycle of family poverty by graduating from high school. She attained three postsecondary degrees in early childhood education: a bachelor's, a master's, and a certification as an educational specialist.

Heart attributed her educational achievements to the work ethic modeled by her mother. This ethic motivated her to become a change agent to improve life for young, destitute children. Her own negative educational experience contributed to her desire to teach in urban communities. She enjoyed working as an advocate for poor children. Heart's ultimate desire was for children from impoverished areas "to have maximum life chances in the world." Her students often faced conditions away from school that required dedicated educators to intervene. She said, "Many of the students' parents are young, single, unemployed, and struggling to raise their children. A lot of our parents are incarcerated. We have a huge percentage of grandparents raising children. They are young, too." The school's neighborhood contained families living amid generational poverty and social challenges that often blocked students from regularly attending school. Large percentages of parents lacked even a high school education.

Due to Heart's urban upbringing, she knew about the life challenges outside of school. She minimized significant barriers for the families in her community. She said, "At least 50% of our families are led by young, single parents, who are out there in the streets." Heart emotionally shared an anecdote of how she advocated for chronically absent siblings:

> I had a family with a history of attendance issues. The students were out that day and the day before. So, I took a team to visit the home. When I got there, I saw two of the students outside riding their bikes. The mother was not home. As we went in, the home was really deplorable. It was messy and reeked of urine. We heard a baby crying in a back room. The person with me and I went back there and saw [that] there were a bunch of covers on the floor. We lifted the covers up, and out came a baby. We actually gathered all the children and took them back to the school and called DFACS.

Heart advocated for her students by supplying some of their basic needs to improve their daily attendance. She said, "Many of our kids have to wake themselves up in the morning. We've had to buy alarm clocks plenty of times for kids just so they could wake themselves up and get themselves ready." She provided students with access to safety, nutrition, health services, mentoring, and clothing. Heart firmly believed that school should be a refuge. She said, "My job is to make kids feel safe and get them to show up the best way they can. Once they come, we can clean them up, clothe them, feed them, and love on them." She said, "When students' needs are met, they want to come to school. They begin to open up and let you know when there is a problem at home. They trust you to fix it."

Building trusting relationships with students enabled Heart to connect with students individually. She believed that all children want to feel loved, regardless of their socioeconomic status. She considered her personal relationships a key factor in improving attendance at her school. She said, "School should be an inviting place for babies to learn. I greet every little person during morning arrival. Even if they had a rough start before arriving, I give them a little hug and let them know [that] I love them." Heart showed extreme compassion and love for her students. She said, "I look into the eyes of each student. That lets me know if I need to pull them aside for some extra love to get them on the right track." She knew the importance of setting a positive tone for her students to have a good day. Heart built loving relationships and worked tirelessly to increase her students' desire to come to school.

In contrast to the negative perspectives Heart maintained of her early education teachers, she believed that students from inner-city neighborhoods needed positive reinforcement and extra motivation. She used positive reinforcement to create a warm and safe culture for students. Instead of focusing on negative school behaviors, she prioritized the recognition of positive school-wide behavior and attendance. She fostered unity by allowing students to have team-building opportunities. Heart shared, "We have a house system that involves kids working as families to earn points as a reward for positive student behavior," which she indicated motivated students and promoted school pride. A school tour revealed displays of tall, colorful banners of the school's point system. Computer monitors throughout the school displayed pictures and daily point totals for each house.

Heart inspired students and created a sense of belonging by letting students see their achievements. She displayed and announced team points each day for the previous day's earnings. She said, "I use the house reward system to foster a homelike environment for my kids. I want them to feel like they belong here by having opportunities to take part in different aspects of school and home life." Because many of Heart's students were transient, they often lacked stable home environments. She said, "When my students show up, I make them feel like this is our house. We model for them how to keep areas clean or how to clean up behind themselves." Heart inspired students to take pride in their school environment. Members of each house cleaned a common area in the school, such as the bathrooms, flower beds, hallways, playground, and main entrance.

Heart celebrated and recognized students on multiple occasions, believing that celebrations contributed to student efficacy. She said, "My biggest goal is to create systems and programs that make kids want to come here." Heart is a cheerleader for her students; she loves to celebrate with them. To engage the students, the school entrance has a large game room with arcade games, video games, board games, dollhouses, and karaoke. She shared her personal philosophy about celebrations at her school:

> A big highlight for me is to have playtime with the kids. We dance, and we sing, and we play hard. I think this helps the kids focus better when it's time for learning. The kids know I like to have fun with them, but they also know I don't

> play with them about being here and getting their work done.

Heart worked as a visionary for students, guiding and helping them set personal goals. Heart motivated students to believe they can achieve their school, attendance, and behavior goals. She set the bar and motivated students to push themselves to meet and exceed it. She used innovative ways to address barriers to students' education. Heart rewarded, inspired, advocated for, and built relationships with students to make them feel safe and loved at school. She believed that she promoted positive student attendance at her school through her actions.

Sincere

A sincere person is an individual who is genuine and focused on matters of the heart and the well-being of others. Sincere received this pseudonym due to his beliefs that school life must include a balance of emotional wellness. He explained that school "can't just always be about the work and the academics and the instruction." He believed that the school day must include time to nurture "the heart of the individual" to show "balance, true care, consideration, and affection for our [students]." As a school leader, he recognized the importance of allocating time during the school day to focus on children's feelings. Sincere motivated his students daily with positive affirmation. During the morning announcements, he recited the inspirational words of "Good, better, best, never let it rest until your good is better and better becomes best." He liked to speak from his heart to build a school-wide community of honesty and trust. Sincere believed in the importance of speaking words of kindness and showing the meaning of spoken words through his actions.

Sincere exemplified kindness by extending hallway morning greetings of "Good morning, how are you doing?" He also gave "fist bumps, high fives, or hugs" to show students that he noticed and welcomed them. Although the school's population primarily consisted of students from highly affluent households, a small percentage of students lived in a women's shelter for domestic violence. He spoke passionately about embracing diversity. Sincere recognized the need to serve children beyond their academic needs. Thus, he structured his school to be a place of physical and emotional safety, striving to provide a "nice, positive vibe" where students know "that people are loving and caring [for] them."

Sincere dedicated 17 years of service to school leadership. He served as an assistant principal, an English to Speakers of Other Languages coordinator, and an elementary principal in two schools. He had worked in his current leadership role for four years. Sincere was excited to participate in the interviews, which occurred in the middle of the school day. Due to scheduling conflicts, the meeting occurred away from his school at a centrally located building in the school district.

Sincere entered the world of teaching long before he realized it. During high school and college, he taught Sunday school, which later connected him to a career in education. After graduating from college, he entered the field of computer science but soon realized he was not fulfilling his life's purpose. He said, "I did a really good job with [computer science work], but I was never what I felt [was] the best at it. It wreaked havoc on my soul because I was usually very good at everything." He decided to pursue a career in educational law; however, one of his college professors advised him to teach first. Sincere decided to follow the advice, and he earned a master's degree in education. He found his passion in teaching and never became an educational lawyer. He said, "After getting into the student practicum in pursuing my master's degree, it was there where I felt I could make the most difference."

He reported his years of serving as an elementary principal as his most rewarding years in leadership. The younger children showed him how to appreciate the world from their perspective. He learned that kids "see the color of your heart and whether someone is kind or mean to them." Sincere's students motivated him to focus on the hearts and characters of individuals rather than their physical appearances. He knew that school leaders must hire teachers and staff members who care about kids and each other. He remained mindful that school "can't just always be about the work, and the academics, and the instruction. We have to somehow balance that with true care, consideration, and affection for our kids." Sincere prioritized relationships and time to nurture relationships at the school. Sincere's regimented upbringing gave him structure and order. His parents taught him about stern expectations and consequences. The rules in his house were, "You don't talk back to people; you act right. If you don't act right, we'll make sure you act right." His father's military background and mother's Catholic beliefs meant his parents "placed a lot of emphasis on education." Both of his parents regarded school as highly necessary. He explained his parent's expectations: "They had strong feelings about grades and performance, and you never embarrassed my parents, especially when it [came] to school." He recalled a "memorable thing" from childhood that indicated the importance of school:

> [My mother] would let me ride the bus every single day. She would follow the bus from home to school every day. She wanted to make sure that I was on that bus, I got to school, and every single day, that was her routine.

His parents prioritized the notion of showing up for school to build endurance for adulthood. Sincere learned early from his mother about showing up for work. He said, "To me, [my mother's actions of following the bus] said, 'School is important. It's not only important; I'm [your mother and I'm] going to make sure that you get there.'" He shared his mother's perspective about missing school due to illness:

> She didn't believe us if we were sick, and if we had to get off early [from school], she would ask 1,000 questions before she even decided that she was going to take us [home from school]. Only a fever would allow her to bring us [home]. We didn't miss a day.

Sincere noted that he had similar beliefs of showing up for school as his parents. He voiced his attendance expectations to the parents at his school. He communicated attendance goals to the parents who commonly took vacations during the school year. The school population included affluent parents who traveled to other countries with their children for consecutive weeks at a time. He told the parents, "This is our calendar. When you see that there are days that are available, I need you to think about how you're planning your vacation." He said, "I talk to the parents and my community the way that I know that my mom or my dad would have spoken to me." He knew that his parents would say, "School is important. Where are your priorities? You need to make sure that your children are in school and use the calendar to plan trips." Sincere likened school attendance to job performance when he explained:

> I do think, in some instances, for kids with school, it is their little job. It's their career at the time being. You have to show up, preferably on time. You have to be there when you're actually there—being present and engaged.

He believed that regularly attending school was a way to build work stamina in preparation for adulthood.

Sincere enjoyed being a highly visible leader throughout the school day. His daily routine differed each day, but he liked “to be out and about and to be seen.” He wanted to be a leader who was easily accessible to children and parents. He began his day in the carpool lane, sharing that duty with a carpool team of about five members who greeted approximately 300 car riders per day. He said, “I want to set my own tone and start my day on a positive note, opening doors, saying good morning, saying hello to the parents, speaking to every kid that I can.” He continued by reading the morning announcements, ending with the affirmation, “Good, better, best, we never let it rest until good becomes better and better becomes best.” He thought that children should know that each day they could improve themselves from the day before. Classroom visits took place for a large portion of the day. He said, “I’m in classes a lot. I want to know what’s going on. What is the scope and sequence? What are we learning today?” The principal ended the day by making the afternoon announcements and conducting dismissal. Afterward, he went to the bus area to supervise students and directed traffic when the buses departed.

Sincere felt proud to lead at his school. He noted that he felt satisfied by parent participation. Although the large percentage of affluent families in the district resulted in limited federal funding for the school budget, the parents worked together to provide for school and student needs. The majority of parents had ample financial means and fundraised to supplement the school budget. The principal voiced his excitement:

> I am incredibly thrilled with the thought that we have so many parents who are very cooperative and want to spend their time and volunteer their time at our

> school. I’m very proud that we have a community that fundraises and contributes and donates a lot of money.

According to Sincere, the school received the highest amounts of donations and funds in the school district due to the efforts of the community.

Sincere also reported student academic growth as a positive accomplishment of the school. Most of the students obtained high scores in academic performance on state testing. The students in minority subgroups historically had significantly lower scores in achievement and academic growth. The leader relayed his feelings about the school’s progress:

> I want to know that when they come into our building, we meet them where they are, and we take them further, regardless of what they came to the table with. We have really focused highly on how we grow our children and not just simply remediate.

The principal acknowledged the shifts in school growth trends in a favorable direction but indicated the need for further growth.

Sincere noted school culture as an area that he and the staff members worked to improve. He continued to have concerns about balancing academics and compassion. He relayed that balance is needed “to give kids what it is that they need while also still loving on them and making sure that they’re enjoying the experience.” He further said, “It can’t just always be about the work, academics, and instruction. We have to balance that somehow with true care, consideration, and affection for our kids.” He insisted on making decisions based on children’s individual needs. He stressed that teacher accountability had a positive impact on children. He also discussed working with the school community to identify “our implicit biases and inclusivity practices” to improve teachers’ and parents’ understandings of students’ unique qualities and backgrounds.

Sincere believed that the school’s consistency with satisfactory attendance rates occurred due to the “real conversations” that he and the assistant principals conducted with the parents. He reported that both the school leaders scan the daily attendance data. If students show patterns of missing 2 days in the early months of school, the school leaders call parents. He spoke openly about the conversations:

> We don’t always get the best reception for [the call], but we make the call of, “Your child [has] already missed this many days. I’m really concerned.” When they miss this many days, [we mention] how much time they have lost in reading and math.

Sincere further explained that he used data to remain transparent with parents. He found that the data showed parents the information that they needed to understand attendance better. When asked about how his school may differ from other schools with attendance concerns, the principal stated, “I don’t think we are any different than any other school” and continued, “I have no problem having real talk with parents.” He spoke in-depth about addressing adult problems that often cause students to miss school. He sounded confident about taking the risk of speaking candidly with parents about placing their children’s futures at risk when they allow them to lose too much school time. The principal emphasized sending the message of attendance concern for all of his students.

Wolf

A wolf travels in a pack and symbolizes guardianship over others. Like a wolf, this male leader guided and guarded his pack of students with care. Hence, the leader received the pseudonym of “Wolf.” This leader’s philosophy was “people before paper.” He prioritized daily engagement with his students. Wolf greeted students every morning “to get a pulse for how the students are” when they arrived at school. He attended to students who needed encouragement. He said, “[Students] have to know school is a warm and welcoming place and [that] you are happy to see them.” The leader fostered strong relationships and acted as a father figure for his pack of students. When Wolf missed too many students’ faces during morning arrival, he demonstrated the actions similar to a lone wolf: howling to attract the attention of his pack. Similarly, the principal drove to the surrounding apartment complexes and blew his horn for students who needed a ride to school. He said, “I don’t even know which apartment I need to go to. I just pull up and just blow my horn. They already know it’s [Dr. Wolf’s] truck and they jump in the back of the truck.” His bonds with his students over time have shown him what they need to help them learn. He said, “Kids are used to routine, and they don’t like change. Kids value morning hugs; kids are happy to know someone cares.” Wolf provided school families with the basic needs of “uniforms, city bus passes, employment guidance, and housing resources.” The principal showed his evident love for his students through a huge smile that remained while he spoke of the children.

The interviews occurred during the school day in the early afternoon. The small school building was in a residential neighborhood close to the main road. Upon arrival, I could see and hear students eating lunch in the small school cafeteria. The principal’s office housed a display of awards and items representative of Wolf’s 10 years of leadership at the school. He had 17 total years of leadership experience in his previous roles as assistant principal, academy leader, and model teacher leader. He previously worked in a variety of capacities in the school system. Wolf shared the array of positions that he worked in education before leadership:

> I actually started out when I was younger in a program to make money for school clothes. We could come and help paint and clean up the building over the summer. So, I've been a janitor, bus driver, paraprofessional, teacher, and principal.

The principal reflected upon his student teaching experience when he supplemented his income by driving the school bus, outlining his day: "I drove the bus to the school, got off with the kids, went in, taught them, came back out, drove them home, and came back to the faculty meeting." He presented himself as a hard-working, kind-hearted, and professional educator.

Wolf's original career aspiration was to become a juvenile counselor. His upbringing as the child of a single-parent mother inspired him to pursue a college education. He wanted to position himself to help students who came from similar backgrounds. During his journey to becoming a counselor, he "fell in love with teaching" during his enrollment in an education course, which led him to shift his career goals from counseling to teaching. He initially worked as a special education paraprofessional while pursuing his teaching degree. He said, "I helped out with the kids who had issues like I had, [who] wanted to fight." He expressed his desire to give back and "help kids [who] grew up like him" as early as his first paraprofessional position.

Wolf came from a matriarchal lineage with stern views on school attendance. His mother raised him in a home where missing school "was not optional." His mother's house rules required going to school every day, and in his mother's words, "If you could not go to school, you could not do anything else." The principal laughed when he shared the difficulty of growing up in his tough neighborhood and maintaining a "tough-guy reputation" when his mother had such stern rules about going to school. He recollected that everyone knew that his mother punished him if he did not go to school. His mother prioritized education and believed it was a way to change lives. Wolf's grandmother also believed in education and discipline. She instilled in him her philosophy: "You may not be the smartest in the class, but you can go there, and sit down, and shut up, and get your lesson quietly."

Wolf's family values contributed to his expectations while raising his son and leading his school. He taught his son, "I don't care if you are the star basketball player. If you don't go to school, you're not going to practice." When his son came home sick from school, he taught him, "If you come in, you can't do anything else because you're too sick." Wolf's family had strong views about attending school. He said, "Rarely did I ever miss school. You had to be super noticeably sick, like go-to-the-hospital sick, to miss school." Wolf attributed his old-school values to his grandfather, who motivated him to show up, and moreover, to show up on time. His grandfather, who could not read or write, instilled in him "to be present is just what you do." Wolf realized the notion of showing up must be the vision of a principal. He felt that the vision of school attendance should trickle down to everyone in the school:

> I think it comes from the principal, and it drives down. If the leadership places value on attendance, then attendance will be valued throughout the school. It's something as simple as recognizing it and saying it to a kid: "You were here all week. I'm proud of you."

The leader made the message of showing up evident throughout the school. He made the sacrifice of picking up children when their parents called the school. He said that he "literally goes to their apartments because everyone understands that it's that important to be here." He assured me that teachers at his school want the students in class. He said, "Their belief is pretty much that attendance is paramount; it's essentially the first thing. You can't have school if you don't have kids." Wolf strove to send the message to his students and teachers of the importance of attendance at their school. He and the teachers inspired students through competition: "The staff is competition-driven. Everything we do, we make a competition out of it." Wolf explained that sometimes the teachers fussed at the students when they missed school. He cautioned the teachers about getting on students about absences because the problems often originate with adult behaviors. He guided the teachers to get the students caught up on missed lessons.

Wolf referenced school data as a highlight of his school's significant accomplishments. He spotlighted the school for "beating the odds." He shared that the state department of education provided the recognition "because we're still outperforming other schools that are similar in size and with similar students." He noted the need to continue improving language arts scores due to "our kids coming to us with reading deficits." He recognized that student achievement remained their focus for enhancement. The leader identified that prioritizing attendance enabled the maintenance of favorable school attendance rates. He assigned the school counselor to check daily attendance and met with a team to inquire about absent students. Wolf voiced the critical idea behind monitoring student progress: "You don't want an autopsy report. We want to know when the kid starts to get 1 or 2 days absent in a month." The principal mentioned that his competitive nature enabled him to work aggressively with the attendance team. He expounded upon how he wanted to beat other schools in his district through friendly competition every month:

> I don't want to go to the principal's meeting and other principals talk about how they beat me with attendance. The counselor knows I'm going to check the attendance at the end of every month. I'm going to ask, "What's going [on]? Where are they? What can we do?" It's about communication; it's about accountability, and then it's about competition. At the nature of all kids is competition. I'm a big kid myself. I know everybody wants to win.

Communication with teachers, students, and parents enabled Wolf to keep all school community members informed and focused on meeting daily attendance goals. Wolf repetitively communicated the importance of attendance to parents by telling them to "just get your student here." Many of his students struggled with basic needs. His father-like demeanor motivated him to take care of all of his students' needs. Wolf said, "We become the parent, we make sure students eat, we make sure they know [that] someone cares about them, we go and pick them up, we ensure [that] they have clothes." Wolf and his staff members supported students so they could overcome many of their challenges beyond academics.

Summary

Chapter IV contained detailed narratives and demographic information of the five participants. The narratives included the background details, personal perceptions, and career experiences of school principals who began their education careers as teachers. The researcher conveyed the participants' expressions and descriptive language to share their evident compassion for their students. Chapter V presents an interpretation of the findings and themes from the research data.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION OF THEMES

The primary means of data collection was participant interviews, with documents and observations used as supplemental sources. The web-based transcription service Rev.com was utilized to transcribe all audio recordings immediately after each interview. The researcher conducted multiple readings of the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings to hear the participants' vocal tones. For the coding process, the researcher utilized NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software; however, after coding two transcripts, she decided the computer software prevented a view of the big picture while dissecting the small sections. The researcher coded while deeply considering the study's purpose and the phenomenological lens of how the participants experienced the phenomenon and created open coding symbols to begin to identify common themes (Table 3). The researcher utilized a manual system of "marking units of analysis and giving them a code in the margin that captures what you are seeing" (Foss & Waters, 2016, p. 245). A margin color-coding system of drawing a down the margin of each transcript to identify the speaker was used for interview one (Foss & Waters, 2016). A two- line margin color-coding system was marked on the transcripts to identify the speakers for the second interview. After coding all transcripts, the researcher used the steps in the modified van Kaam (Moustakas, 1994) method of analyzing phenomenal data:

1. Cut the marked chunks of coded text from the transcript and list the codes on a spreadsheet matrix.

2. Eliminate the irrelevant data.
3. Cluster the relevant data into thematized groupings.
4. Further analyze and check the data in the thematized groups for relevance, followed by grouping the open codes into larger categories from which themes and subthemes emerged.

Table 3

Open Coding Symbols

Code	Description
ECE	Establish and communicate expectations
ME	Monitor expectations
PS	People-support
SVI	School village/inclusive of all
BNPR	Basic needs/parent role
AA	Attendance awareness
V	Visible
LM	Leader motivation
SM	Student motivation
DR	Develop relationships
SBVIA	School village/inclusive of all
DB	Decrease barriers
CEL	Compassion/empathy/love
DP	Develop partnerships
SL	Servant leadership
SJ	School is a job
DR	Develop responsibility
CMSU	Cultivate mindset of showing up
ES	Empower students
OO	Overcome obstacles
CU	Compassion for underserved
FEFV	Family expectations/family values
EIM	Educator influence/mentor

The researcher reviewed Chapter II and focused on the conceptual framework to determine if the codes supported the ideas in the literature. By creating a matrix sample of themes, categories, subcategories, and supporting participant direct quotes from participants (Table 4), the researcher identified four overarching themes. The new themes of attendance engagement, positive school culture, motivation, and principal insight and inspiration aligned with the research questions, information listed in the literature search, and the five areas of the Star Model conceptual frame.

Table 4

Matrix Sample of Chunked Themes, Subcategories, and Commentary

Themes	Categories	Commentary
Positive School Culture	Compassion	"It's about being accessible, talking to them. Understanding their needs and things of that nature. Don't act like you're above people because you have a certain position because we're all people. It's just understanding that you're in a service industry." (Wolf)
	Visibility	"I do a quick run-through of greeting teachers, making sure things are okay, maybe even some instances of pulling kids out, talking to them, getting them on the right track for the day, that kind of thing. And just being visible. For me, I think the biggest part is just being visible every day and being a part of the process rather than someone who dictates the process." (Heart)
	Empathy/Love	"We have to five kids what it is they need while also still loving on them and making sure that they're enjoying the experience. It can't just always be about the work, and the academics, and the instruction." (Sincere)
	Address Needs	"Our culture is strong. We do a really great job of intervening on our struggling students and getting them a leg up. We wrap our arms around and support them. We do a really great job at that. We've provided equitable experiences for students by intervening and supporting them and loving on them." (Blossom)

Attendance Engagement

This theme focuses on how the school leaders organized school personnel to address student attendance. Although parents have direct control over whether their children attend school, school leaders must work proactively to ensure that students have access to school. ESSA includes attendance requirements that hold school leaders accountable for academic success (Kaput, 2018). The student attendance indicator for the Georgia College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) requires schools to measure the percentage of students absent less than 10% of the enrolled days. The participants acknowledged attendance policies and the compulsory attendance laws established to protect students but felt the policies and rules lacked true parent accountability. For example, Wolf explained, “Everything is always the school’s fault. We have to make sure they come to school. The policies don’t indicate any type of accountability for parents at all. It’s just a policy.” The leaders understood the importance of students attending school consistently. When students miss too many days of instruction, learning deficits occur.

Establish and Communicate Expectations

The leaders recognized the need for principals to establish attendance goals. They all asserted their belief that school personnel should work collaboratively with the principal to communicate attendance goals to all stakeholders and follow the attendance-monitoring plans. According to Bartanen (2020), school leaders must create strategic goals and communicate them to staff. All participants reported sharing their attendance vision at the beginning of the school year. Each principal conducted student meetings during the first week of school to share attendance expectations with students and parents.

At Global’s school, counselors also met with each class to direct students through the attendance expectations in the student handbook. Blossom, Wolf, and Heart led parent groups through the attendance expectations at the back-to-school orientation meeting and with the new kindergarten families. Wolf, Global, and Sincere stressed the importance of parent attendance at the initial PTA meeting. The principals and their social workers spoke to the teachers about taking attendance and entering it into the system. At the beginning of the year, Blossom developed essential agreements with the teachers to establish attendance norms and strategies. Global conducted attendance talks with teachers to review data and make sure new hires understood the system for taking attendance. Wolf and Sincere guided teachers through the handbook at the beginning-of-the-year staff meeting. Also, Wolf stressed daily attendance and the importance of functioning as a support for students and families at his Title I school. He talked candidly about working together to encourage students to come to school.

Heart believed in a different approach to tackling attendance issues at her school. Instead of waiting for the start of the school year, she prepared her students’ individualized attendance goals before the first day. During the summer months, she generated reports identifying the students with chronic absences from the prior year. She believed in the need to develop systems early and monitor them throughout the year. According to Heart, “You put plans in place prior to kids coming back, and those plans include monitoring. Those plans include incentives. Those plans include strategies, like morning check-in and afternoon check-out systems.” She sent the parents letters documenting their children’s attendance status from the previous year and presented individualized attendance goals for improvement during the upcoming school year. The students with chronic absences received a mentor-buddy to help monitor their progress.

Blossom, Sincere, and Heart published newsletters at the beginning of the school year that featured student attendance goals. Blossom identified three important exceptions in the newsletter: “Keep students home if they have fever, vomiting, and diarrhea. Any other time, students should come to school.” In the school newsletters and handbook, Sincere explained to parents that “attendance matters. Make sure you do your best to make sure that your kid is here every single day.” He talked to parents about the importance of attendance and what it affords their children. Global noted that she puts a lot of information about success and academics in the first Friday Flyer about school attendance. Wolf and Heart both shared their challenges of “parents not reading newsletters,” which led them both to cease their efforts. Wolf no longer distributes newsletters, but he does send the school handbook home at the beginning of the school year.

The participants communicated their expectations to promote attendance awareness at their schools, using communication as an improvement strategy to address student absenteeism. For example, Blossom made daily afternoon announcements to tell her students, “I will see you tomorrow. Remember, we come to school on time every day because you can’t learn if you are not here.” She made calls to absent students, saying, “Hey, we noticed you’re missing, and we need you here.” She reached out to students to check on them and ask questions.

Sincere speaks to most of his new parents about attendance when they take the new-parent tour. At his school, the office clerk articulates the attendance vision to parents during the enrollment process if they have not participated in the tour. He explained, “She has a different level of impact because it’s one on one. She is very much to the point and tells the moms, ‘You[’ve] got to make sure that they’re going to be here every single day.’” He further explained, “She does this really cool thing with her rapport. That’s just the way she is; it works well. That’s how we start. It’s through her if they don’t come on the school tour.”

Heart disclosed her favorite strategy for communicating updates to parents was to “send home on Friday an attendance receipt to tell parents how many hours of learning the students had received that week if they attended school the entire week.” She felt the attendance receipts sparked an attendance awareness among the parents. The receipts included a raffle entry coupon for parents to complete with their contact information. This way, she maintained up-to-date contact information, and parents participated in weekly raffles.

Monitor Expectations

Attendance should be regularly monitored to identify patterns of student absence. RtI practices focus on student attendance behaviors at universal, targeted, and intense levels (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Through the RtI model of intervention and support, leaders work proactively to combat chronic absenteeism. All of the participants utilized their staff members to monitor the school attendance policies.

Wolf and Heart expressed the need to prioritize and check daily attendance. Wolf stated, “The key is that you don’t want an autopsy report. You want to know when the kid starts to miss 1 and 2 days in a month. You want to know what’s going on.” He stressed the importance of assigning someone to check daily attendance systems every day. Heart had similar thoughts about consistent checks. She shared, “It can’t be a once-a-week monitoring system put in place because that means you can give some kid an opportunity to miss 5 days.” She required careful attendance monitoring during the first 2 months to identify chronically absent students, saying, “If you don’t address it then, it becomes a habit because no one addressed it.”

All participants reported systems of daily monitoring attendance at their schools. Each school had cross-functional teams to execute daily attendance processes similar to Galbraith’s (1973) Star model. Three out of six schools reported involving the school office clerk or secretary in the daily monitoring of school attendance. Sincere identified the office clerk as his school’s “Attendance Queen,” commending her for calling in to the classrooms to remind teachers to stop and enter their attendance into the system. She was responsible for informing the principal of which teachers inconsistently take attendance and which students are absent from school. Global expected the secretary to monitor daily attendance in accordance with the school’s daily integrity norms checklist. According to one of the norms, teachers must take attendance by 9:00 a.m. If that has not happened, the secretary rings the classroom to notify the teacher. Global observed that follow-through on taking attendance had improved the accuracy of the data. Blossom also utilized the school clerk to monitor teachers’ accurate input into the online attendance system.

The building leaders in the remaining two schools reported practices similar to the assistant principals, closely monitoring the daily practice of checking student attendance. Sincere explained, “The assistant principal knows it’s a part of our strategic plan, so she constantly monitors which kids are falling below 94%. Anything below that will affect our overall attendance." Heart spoke about her initial process of building attendance practices at her school. During the 2014–2015 school year, she conducted the monitoring herself while establishing systems and processes. She explained, "I had to feel the work first myself to see exactly what it would entail before I started bringing in other people." She hung classroom charts in the hallway and listed the last name of every child in the class. The teachers assisted by placing stickers on the chart every day a student attended school. The charts provided visible data for everyone to readily see which students needed help. The first year of monitoring, the assistant principal contacted parents and sought support for children. The following school year (2015–2016), she began delegating tasks to the counselor, social worker, and attendance team.

Teams of Support

The school community should incorporate a team-led approach to assist students and families with achieving attendance goals. This subtheme pertained to the participants' use of teams to support students and their families. Sprick and Sprick (2019) recommended creating a school attendance team which includes an administrator, an interventionist position, general education and special education teachers, and an attendance clerk or other classified staff in charge of attendance.

The participants utilized diverse teams comprising various individuals, from teachers, nurses, and parent liaisons to counselors, social workers, assistant principals, and principals. For example, Global had teacher teams send courtesy text messages to ask chronically absent students, "What's going on today?" The care team—comprised of the RtI specialist, special education lead teacher, assistant principal, principal, social worker, and nurse met monthly to address student needs, including attendance. The school identified students needing wraparound services to address homeless issues, mental health issues, or more basic needs to help them with attendance and academic performance concerns.

Blossom shared the composition of the attendance team members, known as the care team at her school. She explained, "I lead the attendance team, which also consists of the school counselor, the intervention specialist, the assistant principal, and the social worker." Teachers refer students to the team after the Tier 1 supports of regular monitoring and Tier 2 supports of multiple phone contacts made by teachers to check on missing students do not produce changes in attendance behaviors. According to Blossom, the care team:

> Involves everybody coming together to get those supports in place. …It involves everybody doing something to have a relationship with the family so that you can ask those questions, or their families will feel comfortable sharing things with you so we can remove those barriers to get kids here.

Sincere's school initiates the team support process with teachers. Both attendance and academics appear on the agenda for their professional learning community (PLC) meetings. The teams discuss students of concern with the principal and assistant principal, who further investigate cases for extenuating circumstances. The counselor intervenes when situations indicate that students need assistance handling a situation that keeps them from attending school.

Global explained that the progression for support "flows from the secretary to the school administrators, and then to the instructional coach or counselor." The school nurse had conversations with children when there were issues with sickness or school anxiety.

Wolf used a support team comprised of the counselor, assistant principal, social worker, and two teachers. Teachers made referrals to the support team, and the counselor led the team and reported updates to the principal. Team members intervened by contacting parents and exploring possible wraparound services to meet families' needs and get children back into school.

Heart utilized the assistant principal, the counselor, and teacher teams to review the hallway attendance charts to see when students had multiple days without stickers. Heart's team provided support by making parent calls to offer assistance or to thank parents for sending their children to school. Even though the parents' role is to ensure students attend school regularly, Heart wanted to give parents recognition. She believed that because parents received letters when children missed school, the team should also notify parents when students improved or showed positive patterns of school attendance.

Positive School Culture

This theme focuses on the nurturing school environment the school leaders cultivated at their schools. Teasley (2017) defined school culture as the heart and soul of the organization that attracts stakeholders' presence and involvement. The school culture results in a strong, unified, positive or negative bond among teachers and students. The participants in this study reported building quality personal relationships to foster a positive school culture. The participants felt the levels of interaction and compassion toward their students and families created an inviting environment that promoted student attendance.

Relationships

This sub theme addresses the leaders’ understanding of the need to build bonds with students and families. Safety, interpersonal relationships, and connectedness to school all contribute to a school’s climate (Hamlin, 2020). Sprick and Sprick (2019) defined connectedness as the quality of the relationships between students and staff members. Strong interpersonal relationships characterized by trust, respect, and fairness, can create an environment that improves attendance (Adams et al., 2016).

Wolf expressed the importance of providing more than classroom instruction at schools with large percentages of students from poverty. With many of his students raised by grandparents or single mothers, Wolf found it essential to create a family feel at his school. The participant explained:

> We want our students to feel welcomed, and we have a warm environment. We greet every parent when they come to the school, and I hug the parents. We don’t have principal roundtable meetings because I tell them, and they’ll tell you, he’s standing right there to talk to anyone.

Blossom reluctantly disclosed that not all of her district colleagues feel comfortable or believe it is their job to build relationships. However, Blossom identified relationship-building as the leaders’ responsibility and the job of everyone in the school. She shared, “Building relationships with parents and letting them know we care, we’re concerned, and we want them here is all of our jobs. That is the culture here. Everything is everybody’s job.” Blossom expressed the importance of extending kindness to parents and students, especially those with challenging home lives. She recalled having a friendly parent conversation early in the school year because the student had poor attendance the previous year. She said to the parent:

"I care about your kids and what happens to them. How can we help? What is keeping you from bringing them to school? What do you need from us? How can we work together to help your baby get here every day?"

The participants agreed that building relationships helped them feel connected to their stakeholders. They all work in communities where the majority of the students and families face constant life struggles. The participants believed that building relationships with parents confirmed how much they care about their students.

Global identified relationships with students as one of the positive factors at her school. She opens car doors and greets parents and students in the carpool lane. She attributed the caring relationships as the reason students come to school, confidently stating, "They're motivated by the relationships they have with the adults here. We don't have the rah, rah, sis, boo, bah. We encourage them to come to school."

Heart shared that she builds relationships by extending an open-door invitation to her students. Heart begins her mornings by greeting students and making sure they are okay. Many of her students are being raised by very young grandmothers because the mothers are incarcerated. She explained, "I talk to students and get them on the right track for the day." Heart attributed her visibility at her school for starting the day in a positive manner. Sincere echoed similar feelings about visibility. He began his mornings by greeting students and parents in the carpool line and then standing in the main hallway to exchange greetings of "Good morning, how you doing?" and giving fist bumps, high fives, or hugs to students.

Minimize Attendance Barriers

This subtheme refers to leaders taking action to decrease the barriers that keep students from attending school. Chen and Rice (2016) examined the actions of a New Jersey school principal who used data to identify patterns of school absences that required additional interventions. The principal contacted those families to investigate the root causes for missing school. Targeted solutions were the means to combat the trending issues of missed school during inclement weather, absence of clean uniforms, and transportation challenges. The principal in Chen and Rice's study identified building relationships and fostering trust with families as key components for increasing student access to school. The participants in this study built positive school environments by addressing the individual needs of students and their parents.

Wolf recalled the numerous times he had assumed a parental role to ensure students had the basic necessities to come to school. He talked about having to problem solve and find solutions to fix issues outside of the educator's realm. He explained:

We make sure the kids eat. We make sure they know someone cares about them. We pick them up in the morning. We ensure they have clothes and uniforms. Those are just some of the extra challenges you have at a low-socioeconomic school.

Sincere expressed how well his staff support and show concern for kids, especially for those who are part of their homeless population. He worked to provide a "nice, positive vibe" for students to know they are loved at their home away from home. He explained:

> We have to give kids what it is they need while also still loving on them and making sure that they're enjoying the experience. It can't just always be about the work and the academics and the instruction. We have to somehow balance that

> with true care, consideration, and affection for kids.

Sincere disclosed that at times she sent an Uber for students and a parent escort when they needed transportation to school. According to Sincere, his students would likely miss more school if parents did not feel comfortable enough to let the school know when they lacked the money to transport their child to and from school. He confessed:

> I have gone to pick up children; I've dropped children off because, at times, what we noticed is that sometimes parents will not send their child to school because they may not have a way to get back home in the afternoon. If they let us know, we'll figure out a way.

He explained that he does what it takes to support his students' needs, even if it means making decisions that might require him to "ask forgiveness from the district later."

Heart created a team to transport students who might have moved to a different area without notice. She shared that arranging transportation for a displaced student can take at least a week to start. Blossom explained, "I have teachers who will go and pick up students to remove barriers and make it happen for children." Global and Wolf reported forming relationships with their bus drivers. Wolf shared the value of obtaining the bus driver's phone number to request a morning pickup for a child who missed the bus. He considered the bus drivers to be part of the school family. Wolf provided the bus drivers recognition whenever he commended the teachers. Blossom also shared the value of bus drivers having relationships with the students and "tak[ing] real interest in the kids." She stated, "If a driver is running late, they will help pick up the other children to make sure they get to school."

Three of the five leaders taught students personal strategies of responsibility to empower them to come to school. The leaders expressed that many of their students get themselves up in the morning and get ready for school without help from an adult. The students counted on their principals and other people at the school to establish systems that minimized the barriers and increased their access to school. The leaders shared strategies designed for each of their students' unique situations.

Heart discussed an intervention she provided to help students arrive at school on time. She would tell students specific times to leave their homes to walk to school or catch the bus. Heart made sure she advised the walkers to leave in time to reach the crossing guard before her shift ended so that they had help getting across the busy main road. She stated, "If [students] need an alarm clock, we buy it. And we practice identifying the correct time on the clock for them to leave home and be on time for school."

Blossom recounted a similar story about how she advised fifth-grade student, saying, "You know that if you get up and you see the sun is shining, you need to call one of us and we will come and get you." Wolf shared how he influenced his students to look out for each other in the morning. He said, "Get you a buddy who lives close to you [and] who's going to make sure that you're on the bus and you're there." He created a buddy system for them, and when they arrived at school, they would let him know who was not coming for the day.

Motivation

This theme focuses on the motivational systems the participants utilized to inspire and reward student attendance progress. The participants believed in recognizing attendance to celebrate their students. Reward systems motivate and build self-esteem among people within organizations (Behn, 2004). The participants discussed the importance of motivating their students to come to school. They reported having many families balancing several life struggles that conflicted with regular school attendance, including homelessness, multiple generations living in one home, incarcerated parents, fear of undocumented citizenship, young, single parents heading households, parents working third shift, and poverty. The participants utilized intrinsic motivators and extrinsic motivators to get students to school.

Intrinsic Motivation

This subtheme focuses on how participants promoted their students' sense of self-satisfaction in achieving attendance goals. The school leaders employed intrinsic motivators to prompt innate behaviors to occur without stimulation from rewards. Heart discussed that despite all the situations her students encounter, she often felt they needed extra encouragement to know that others cared for them. Because her students often determined for themselves when they attended school, she routinely attempted to build their intrinsic motivation to make good decisions about daily attendance. She explained, "You have to tell them, 'I want you here every day.' You have to tell them why it's important to get up. Let them know coming to school will make their situations better when they grow up."

Heart further discussed that access to school provided children with safety and exposure to life-changing possibilities. She recognized the extra opportunities for life exposure that students receive in school through social activities and field trips. She referred to school as a lifeline connecting kids to the different channels of life. Many of her students' living conditions limited their access to meals or exposed them to adult drug use and criminal activities. Heart stated, “They don’t have the option to miss out on a couple of days of school. When they miss out on a couple of days, no one is pouring into them when they’re not there. They’re probably fending for themselves.”

Unlike the four other participants who recognized attendance with extrinsic motivators, Global discouraged using external drivers to promote attendance. Instead, Global preferred that students be motivated intrinsically. She explained, “We don’t do a lot of the extrinsic rewards right now because we’re able to sustain attendance with those relationships and the intrinsic rewards.” Global felt that life’s expectations do not always supply rewards but that individuals should follow the expectations to meet desired goals. She admitted she used to announce homerooms with perfect attendance during the afternoon announcements; however, she discontinued the process because she felt the announcements demoralized rather than motivated the other students. Global recognized students quarterly during classroom celebrations of learning, with attendance included as a category for recognition by parent request. She felt the quarterly recognitions were a better way to celebrate students, with grade-level pictures taken and displayed.

Extrinsic Motivation

This theme focuses on the approaches the leaders utilized to motivate their students extrinsically. Extrinsic motivators encourage desired behaviors through rewards (Grey & Gordon, 2018). Blossom shared the importance of recognizing student attendance throughout the year. She believed in celebrating children’s success. She discussed how her school staff motivated students and created a community that celebrates students, developing celebrations to recognize students monthly, quarterly, and at the end of the year. Blossom explained:

> We celebrate the one homeroom with the highest attendance at every primary and upper grade. They get an ice cream social or pop-up party. At every reporting period, we acknowledge students with perfect attendance. At the end of the year, there's something big for kids who have 180 days of perfect attendance.

Wolf reported providing extrinsic motivation to train students and instill the habit of attending school, as students did not always learn good habits at home. He believed one of his many roles was to serve as a father figure and teach his students essential life skills. He disclosed that a significant challenge in Title I schools is that many parents do not understand the importance of attendance. Wolf explained, "They [parents] probably didn't have good attendance habits, so you have to have to put incentives in front of [the students]." He acknowledged that incentives do not influence parents, but that they motivate children to tell their parents, "I need to go to school."

Wolf provided attendance reward systems and competition to encourage his students, attracting their interest and influencing their decision to come to school. Wolf recognized that teachers could not conduct quality instruction if students were not present. He instilled in students that they could not participate in the fun extra activities if they missed school. Students had to complete all missed assignments when they were absent. Wolf facilitated challenges because he felt "competition is the nature of all kids." He believed that everyone wants to win and admitted that he was a big kid himself. He explained, "We are competition-driven. Everything we do, we make a competition out of it."

Wolf reported asking his students about some of the privileges or experiences they preferred, finding they wanted little things: time to play a video game and food.

During the interview, Wolf was pleased to share that one of his teachers had recently written a grant proposal to purchase a PlayStation 4 video game system and a flat-screen television. He developed a schedule for students to receive a few minutes of downtime to play video games in exchange for meeting attendance goals. He also learned that monthly pizza parties and hot pickle parties were favorites for his students. His staff created a school store, with students earning "money" to shop. Wolf recognized improved attendance as well as perfect attendance, noting that children, indeed, get sick, and he does not want them coming to school when they are ill.

Heart shared that she pushes her students to meet their attendance goals. She believed that adequate access to school can change her students' life trajectory. She made every effort to motivate them and to fill the void from their parents' lack of encouragement. Many of her students worked hard to wake themselves up and show up for school. Heart spoke about the need to create big celebrations at the end of the semester to really motivate the kids. She described the details of her end-of-semester big event, Winter Wonderland. The hallways were decorated, and holiday music played while students shopped for the one special item they desired. She shared:

> It was really a big deal. Kids really looked forward to it, and it was our way of us telling them, "Thank you for the hard work that you do and coming to school." For some of them, it was all they would get for the holidays, so it was really special to them.

Heart's school also celebrated weekly victories for students who met attendance goals. Instead of planning a big school-wide dance, she featured celebratory Friday dancing to music in the hallways during the last 10 minutes of the day. According to

Heart, “Students enjoyed showing the staff the latest dance moves.” The activity spread throughout the school, and everybody joined in, including the janitors and the office staff. The Friday activity became trendsetting in her district through social media posts of the event. She stated, “I got people from the district office to come out and dance with them. I even got Freddie [NFL team mascot] to come out and dance with them.” The school also celebrated students with certificates during the monthly school assembly and sent letters to recognize parents for their efforts.

Sincere’s school recognized student attendance within the classrooms at least monthly. The classroom in each grade level with the highest attendance received a celebration determined by the teachers and room parents, which included popcorn parties, dances, and extra recess. Sincere found that classroom celebrations were more effective at his school because different grade levels preferred different rewards.

Principal Insight

This theme provides a better understanding of the participants’ knowledge and influence that impacted their students. School leaders perform a variety of daily roles to ensure the academic and social growth of children (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Their duties include accountability for developing behaviors in children that foster character development as well as college and career readiness. Principals are responsible for building students’ character and changing their behaviors to meet their goals (Dekawati, 2020). The goal of satisfactory student attendance was common among leader participants who developed a school-wide culture of attendance awareness. The participants used their professional insight to help navigate students through life situations.

Wolf shared his awareness for building a positive culture that focused on attendance. Wolf believed that leaders impact students' character development by acknowledging their presence and validating them. When students consistently show up, their self-esteem can improve, and they can learn the value of executing good decision-making. Wolf asserted that the leader should demonstrate to students what is important based on their actions and communication. He explained:

> It starts with leadership. If the leadership places a value on the attendance, then attendance will be valued throughout the school. And something as simple as recognizing it and saying it to a kid, "You were here all week. I'm proud of you.

The participants used insight gained through their own experiences of surviving poverty to understand the struggles faced by many of their students. The leaders' familiar experiences with poverty compelled them to cultivate character in their students. Each of the leaders recalled having parents who balanced their life limitations while developing the traits needed for their children to become successful. Heart and Global remembered how their mothers had to drop out of school because they became teen parents and lacked support. Despite their educational limitations, each of their mothers pushed them toward success by instilling firm educational values. Wolf recalled growing up with a single mother in a rough neighborhood. His mom inspired him to obtain an education to move beyond their circumstances. Blossom recounted how she performed below her potential in high school and barely graduated. Thankfully, her mother believed in her and inspired her to pursue teaching. The leaders noticed similarities between their students' lives and their own and thus made efforts to cultivate positive traits in their students.

The participants unanimously agreed that teaching the notion of grit can result in patterns of consistent school attendance and cultivate a “show-up mentality” that develops a future work ethic in students. The characteristic of grit, also known as perseverance, is highly regarded as an essential noncognitive factor for success that creates stamina (Farrington et al., 2012). The participants compared their families’ beliefs about school attendance to their current beliefs. Sincere stressed the need for teaching future work values when speaking about attendance. School, he said, “is [students’] little job. It’s their little career,” and he explained they have to be taught to show up on time.

Students also have to learn the concept of being present and engaged. Growing up, Blossom observed many examples that demonstrated her family members’ strong work ethic. She explained, “Everybody in my family and in my village went to work, and it was like my job as the child to go to school.” She noted how her family’s beliefs evolved into her current ideas about coming to school every day. Global also identified going to school as a child’s job, saying, “School is just what you do every day.” Heart regarded school as a commitment that should be honored through daily presence. The school leaders build student character, teaching them to push through their circumstances by showing up for school every day that they are not sick.

Summary

Chapter V contained a summary of the findings in which the researcher answered the research questions, as aligned with the themes. Four themes emerged from the study: (a) attendance engagement, (b) positive school culture, (c) motivation, and (d) principal insight. The first theme, attendance engagement was divided into three sub-themes: (a) establish and communicate expectations, and (b) monitor expectations, and (c) teams of support. Through this theme, the researcher relayed how schools involved a variety of staff members in the daily execution of attendance strategies and practices. The second theme, positive school culture, was divided into two sub-themes: (a) relationships and (b) minimize attendance barriers. This theme contained information related to how leaders developed nurturing school environments. The third theme, motivation, was divided into two sub-themes: (a) intrinsic motivation, and (b) extrinsic motivation. Through the theme of motivation, the researcher conveyed how the school leaders encouraged and rewarded both attendance achievement and attendance progress. The final theme, principal insight, consisted of the school leaders' knowledge of student circumstances and the leader influences that impacted student attendance. Chapter VI includes a discussion of the analysis and conclusions of the research.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

ESSA released the first publication of chronic absenteeism in 2016. The results indicated that over 6 million students in the United States missed 15 days or more of school per year (USDoE, 2016). Students with chronic school absence during the foundational years of elementary school have been linked to poor academic achievement and social development. The researcher investigated the efforts and organizational design methods utilized by urban elementary school leaders in Georgia, to address student attendance. A purposeful sample of school leaders, who achieved satisfactory attendance for at least three years, was chosen from the Georgia Office of School Achievement Data (GOSA, 2017).

The researcher conducted two interviews with each of the five participants, as well as follow-up phone calls to clarify information as needed. The interviews were transcribed immediately after each meeting. Participants were provided transcripts to read and validate. The researcher manually coded and analyzed the interviews, documents, and field notes to identify emerging themes by using a modified coding process based on the work of van Kaam (Moustakas, 1994). Four themes resulted from the data analysis process: attendance, positive school culture, motivation, and principal insight. The themes supported several topics currently found in the existing literature on school attendance (Table 5). This chapter provides a discussion of the themes that align to the research questions, study limitations and recommendations for future study.

Table 5

Themes of Urban Leaders' Experiences

Themes of Urban Leaders' Experiences						
Themes	Evolved From Research Question	Participants				
		Blossom	Global	Heart	Sincere	Wolf
Attendance Engagement	RQ #2: Strategies and Practices	●	●	●	●	●
Positive School Culture	RQ #1: Life and Career Experiences	●	●	●	●	●
Motivation	RQ #2: Strategies and Practices	●	●	●	●	●
Principal Incite and Inspiration	RQ #1: Life and Career Experiences	●	●	●	●	●

●= inclusive of participant's experience

Research Questions: Final Discussion Summary

In this section, the researcher addresses the research questions that guided the study. Generally, the question responses align with the themes that evolved. Because there is an integration of themes and research questions within the content of each of these areas, The researcher provides key points and perspectives of each element.

Research Question 1: What are the life and career experiences of school personnel, at identified Georgia urban elementary schools who dealt with chronic student absenteeism, who increased the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?

The researcher posed this question in order to explore the backgrounds and the daily career experiences of the participants. The urban leaders had very similar childhood experiences. During childhood, four of the five participants dwelled in low socio-economic homes. Although living in poverty has direct ramifications on student attendance (Spencer, 2018), the participants were reared by strong matriarchs who shaped their views regarding pride in learning and school attendance. Similar to the parents of their students, four of the participants lived in low socio-economic households during their upbringing. The mothers of those four participants only earned a high school diploma or had not completed high school. The other leader's mother grew up in poverty but worked and utilized education to break the poverty cycle for her family.

The participants' life experiences created grit from overcoming their childhood circumstances. The leaders' childhood life experiences fueled them to inspire their students and push them forward the same way their parents pushed them.

Inspiration evolved as a theme from the career and lived experiences of the participants (Table 5). Leading in underserved communities inspired the participants to spread hope to their students and inspire them to succeed. The participants' career experiences included bonding with students and families and acting as mentors who model the behaviors of communicating attendance expectations, teaching the impact of life's possibilities from receiving access to a consistent education, nurturing to meet attendance expectations, assisting when obstacles arise, and celebrating growth toward meeting attendance goals. Participants made conscious efforts to impact their students' ability to attend school.

The participants' mothers inspired them through teaching life lessons about school attendance. The teachings provided the stamina and work ethic needed for adulthood. Attendance was regarded as the participants' childhood jobs, and their satisfactory performance was the expectation. Four of the five participants experienced overcoming poverty. The participants' career experiences included teaching their students the same lessons that they had learned about relating attendance to work ethic. The participants became first-generation college graduates, who now pave the way for others by inspiring disadvantaged children.

The leaders' familiarity with poverty, and their knowledge of the drive needed for one to succeed, inspired them to help develop grit in their students. Collins (2016) suggested that leaders can determine their actions based on their values, beliefs, and experiences. The leaders served as role models and taught the concept of grit to their students. The leaders applied their own families' teachings to their students' lives by rolling up their sleeves and attempting to develop life muscles to fight through their obstacles. The leaders fostered hope and inspired perseverance in their students by educating them about career choices and future options. The leaders combined their teachings with visibility throughout the day. They “loved on” their students and nurtured them, to let them know how much their presence mattered.

The leaders focused on their students' emotional wellness to help reassure them that others cared about their feelings as well. As Sincere stated, “We have to give kids what they need. It can't just always be about the work. It has to balance that [work] with true care and affection for our kids.” The leaders' career experiences included believing in their students and pushing attendance achievement. The leaders also encouraged their students to hold their heads high, push past their difficulties, and show up for school to make a difference in their futures.

Research Question 2: What strategies and practices did school personnel use at identified Georgia urban elementary schools who dealt with chronic student absenteeism in order to increase the average student daily attendance rate to at least 97% for three years, thus improving student achievement?

Strategies help form a plan of what happens in an organization in order to meet goals. The leader determines the strategies based on understanding the organization’s external factors and the abilities within the organization needed to address those factors (Kates and Galbraith, 2007). The participants’ backgrounds provided insight to better understand many of their students’ life struggles (external factors) that caused them to have school absences. Organizational strategies determine the direction taken to provide greater benefits or services to customers. The leaders utilized individual and organizational level strategies of relationships, motivation, stakeholder engagement, and tiered support to impact the goal of obtaining satisfactory attendance.

Practices consist of the flow of information (behaviors and actions) executed to carry out the planned strategies (Galbraith, 1973). Practices are implemented at the organizational and individual level. The participants from the study implemented organizational level practices by utilizing teams to carry out school-wide expectations. Several of the participants performed individual level practices that showed them performing beyond the normal call of duty. The practices used by school leaders were developing personal relationships with students and parents, motivating students to meet attendance goals, engaging stakeholders by communicating and monitoring expectation and supporting students to obtain attendance goals. The practices of an organization connect directly to the strategies. Since the practices and strategies are closely intertwined, the researcher will introduce the strategies, followed by detailed examples of the practices.

The participants applied individual strategies of cultivating personal relationships with their students. Students feel connected when they have quality relationships from interacting with teachers and staff members (Sprick & Sprick, 2019). The leaders appropriated time to have casual conversations with students to get to know their interests, problems and desires. According to Galbraith (2007), the culture of an organization includes common values, mindsets and norms that have become common to the organization. The value of leaders developing personal relationships in schools allows students to view principals as approachable people who care about all of their students.

Wolf implemented the strategy of building relationships by allotting time to hold conversations with students to get to know them. His practices included maintaining high visibility throughout the school day. It was vital for him to get to know his students and to build trust with them. He recognized the need to bond with the students because so many were raised without fathers in their lives. Many custodial grandparents struggled to help their grandchildren with schoolwork and help them to deal with peer pressure. Wolf guided students beyond the instructional topics typically covered at school. He helped his students view school as a haven filled with people who cared about their wellbeing.

Blossom built relationships with students and parents and considered this strategy the responsibility of all leaders and their staff members. Her practices consisted of performing morning duties while chatting with parents during carpool duty. She developed a positive culture in her building through remaining visible. She visited classrooms to involve herself in daily instruction and activities. Blossom planned and participated in school celebrations. She seized moments to engage with students outside of the classroom to build personal connections with them. This participant conducted difficult conversations to intervene when parents needed to improve their child's attendance. She collaborated with parents to develop attainable solutions to problems. Blossom believed in the school and the home working together to create a village that supported each child's success.

Blossom’s relationships with students led her to utilize the strategies of problem-solving when students missed too many days and explored solutions to improve the issue. Her practices included guiding students through the steps of problem-solving. For example, one of Blossom’s new students had missed so many days the previous year she decided to become the student’s mentor. Since the student had limited support at home to help her wake up and prepare for school, she missed several days the prior year. Blossom talked to her about all the things she missed when she was absent from school. Although Blossom knew the absences were not the student's fault and that the child lacked adequate parent guidance, she empowered her with individualized strategies to help her improve. Blossom taught the young girl to use the sunlight outside to determine if she was late for school. Blossom told the student, “If you see the sunlight coming in your window, you are late for school. Call the school and someone will come and pick you up.” Blossom formed relationships to deepen her impact with students and assure them of their importance to the school village.

Sincere utilized the strategy of communicating with stakeholders by greeting as many students and families as possible during morning arrival. His communication practices were implemented in a variety of ways. The leader planted himself in the hallways to greet students as they transitioned to class. He also allowed students to choose their mode of daily greeting, either a fist bump, a high five, or a hug from their principal. In addition, Sincere focused his daily morning practices on molding the fifth-grade students into leaders by teaching them how to model their conduct for the "littles" in the building. He visited classrooms every day to communicate his presence to students while they were learning. Sincere believed his role was to build relationships by communicating and prioritizing kids first when making decisions.

Heart extended the strategy of an open-door policy by leaving her door open for students to pop in and visit her without reason. She credited the pop-in visits for increasing individual rapport with students. The students randomly stopped in to see her and sometimes struggled to think of things to talk about when they visited her office. Heart's practices consisted of casually talking to students about topics ranging from their daily goals to what type of house they wanted to buy when they grow up. Heart was familiar with many students' struggles outside of school and believed the quick visits made the student feel special. Heart assumed the responsibility for just listening and encouraging or intervening if the situation warranted an adult becoming involved.

Heart also executed the strategy of nurturing students by showing them affection and guidance. She implemented morning arrival practices of assisting students with their grooming needs. Sometimes the students came to school wearing dirty clothing or with uncombed hair. Heart kept hair grooming supplies, lotion, toothbrushes, and toothpaste available for students. She taught students about looking "scholarly ready," and helped them get cleaned up when their appearance needed attention. The leader participated in conversations, helped students change into clean uniforms, guided students to change shoes to the correct foot, combed hair, and gave "I love you hugs" to give students extra confidence to have a successful day. According to Spencer (2018), school leaders can improve attendance rates by developing encouraging environments. Heart wanted her students to have good days when they came to school. She felt that her school's positive culture made students feel proud and supported.

Organizational strategies specify the actions taken to direct the path for success. These strategies within the sites visited, included the entire personnel working in collaboration to move students toward the goal of attendance achievement. The school leaders and their staff members established relationships with students to make them feel comfortable and safe while at school.

Global's school personnel implemented relationship-building strategies at the organizational level. The adults led chat groups and a variety of activities in their classrooms to bond with students during down time. Teachers read books with students during lunchtime and hosted conversations about book characters. Global's students felt valued because the adults made time during their personal time to connect with students. These activities were not always school-sponsored activities. Much time spent with students was informal and just one of the extra ways teachers shared themselves with students.

The second strategy widely used by the participants to recognize students for their achievements was motivation. Motivating people and rewarding success promotes esteem (Behn, 2004). The participants motivated students using intrinsic and extrinsic methods. The strategies and practices were conducted at the personal and organizational level.

Motivation was used as an individual strategy and implemented at the organizational level. The personal strategy of extrinsic motivation was used by four of the five participants to help maintain student attendance progress. For example, Wolf used incentives and competition to attract the students' attention, instill the habit of attending school, and create drive in students. Competition was executed at the organizational level to create an environment of attendance pride and build perseverance skills among the student body.

Another example of using extrinsic motivation as an organizational strategy was dancing in the hallway at Heart's school. She and the teachers led the practice of weekly ten-minute hallway jam sessions to reward students who earned at least an 80% attendance rate. Heart danced through the hallways with a megaphone in hand to shout out students' names as everyone bopped to the music. Heart granted students with weekly receipts for learning to inform them of the number of instructional hours they had received for the week. Heart rewarded parents with tickets to weekly raffles in order to obtain current contact information listed on the weekly entries. Heart invited weekly guests to the hallway jams, including local celebrities, to show off the students. The dance parties created a culture of attendance awareness at her school and throughout the surrounding school community. The hallway dance practices were replicated at other schools in her district.

Blossom and Sincere utilized additional extrinsic motivation practices to celebrate homerooms for monthly attendance performance. Both participants celebrated the homeroom in each grade level with the highest attendance rates with pizza parties, pop- up parties, ice cream socials, or extended recess. They recognized students quarterly and at the end of the semester for meeting individual attendance goals.

Leaders engaged stakeholders about attendance through the implementation of organizational level strategies. The theme of attendance engagement highlighted what leaders did to organize personnel, address attendance, and monitor practices. The school leaders communicated their goals to all stakeholders at the beginning of the school year. All participants established and communicated their expectations to students through an initial back-to-school grade level meeting. Wolf and Sincere conducted guided handbook conversations with students. The leaders conducted parent conversations about attendance expectations. Global and Sincere communicated their expectations with families via the initial PTA meeting. Blossom, Wolf, and Heart held parent back-to-school orientation meetings to discuss attendance expectations. All of the participants and their social workers established attendance-taking protocols with teachers during pre-planning meetings. New teachers were taught how to enter attendance into the computer system. Blossom and Sincere utilized back-to-school newsletters to convey their messages. All leaders conducted a variety of activities to educate stakeholders about attendance protocols.

The personnel at the participants' schools executed organization level strategies to monitor attendance. The office personnel and the teachers played vital roles in capturing accurate daily attendance. Three out of six schools depended on the office clerk to check the teachers' compliance who entered attendance into the system. The office clerks prompted teachers to submit attendance by the specified time. The two remaining schools designated the assistant principal to monitor attendance-taking processes. One of the assistant principals heightened the awareness of monitoring attendance by hanging charts for every homeroom in the hallway. Monitoring attendance became a collective effort by "the entire school village." Students received stickers and praise for each day they showed up to school. Building stakeholder-initiated conversations with students about attendance progress. The data displays inspired a school-wide community of attendance awareness.

As an organizational strategy, support teams provided tiered support to students or their families. The participants facilitated collaborative teams of staff members to cultivate attendance awareness. The participants' teams were comprised of teachers, clerical staff, paraprofessionals, counselors, intervention staff, parent liaisons, and nurses. At Blossom’s school, her care team built relationships with families by calling when students showed absence patterns. The team members intervened to find solutions to attendance challenges. The teams developed support methods based on the number of student absences. Teams met regularly to identify students needing assistance, to develop strategies to help them meet attendance goals and provide tiered levels of support.

Some of the participants worked diligently to utilize the organizational strategy of decreasing attendance barriers for their students. Examples of their work to decrease barriers included contacting families when students missed too many days. The teams investigated root causes for absences and developed solutions. Wolf shared that students missed school when they did not have clean uniforms to wear. He initiated a clothes closet in the parent center to assist when a lack of clothing hindered student attendance. The social worker at Heart’s school wrote a grant to provide umbrellas and raincoats for the walkers.

Transportation issues were a significant obstacle in student attendance. Transportation problems are common barriers that prevent students from attending school (Sprick & Sprick, 2019). The leaders created practices to provide students access to school by ensuring they had transportation. When students missed the bus, many families did not own cars to transport their children to school. Sincere sometimes sent an Uber to pick up students and their parents. He disclosed there were days when parents lacked enough money to purchase gas for their car. There were other days when participants personally picked children up for school. Wolf reported that his students knew his truck when he honked his horn and circled the apartment parking lot to round up students on days when attendance was light.

Wolf's fatherly instincts were attuned when morning arrival numbers appeared low. He developed the practice of driving to the nearby apartment complexes at least once a week to pick up students. According to Wolf, the families knew his truck when he pulled up in the parking lot and blew the horn. Wolf explained he would typically pick up two to five students per trip. The gesture of providing students a ride helped decrease the numbers of students missing an entire day because they did not have transportation.

Three of the five participants executed strategies to empower their students through self-sufficiency. They provided students with alarm clocks to wake themselves up for school. The leaders guided the students by showing them what time to leave home in the morning to arrive on time for school. The leaders communicated to the older students about speaking up and telling a neighbor or another adult if they needed help getting to school.

Implications

Student attendance and chronic absence have been a growing issue in the United States. In 2020, Covid-19 abruptly closed schools, further negatively impacting attendance. In this study, the five participants surmounted the challenges of achieving satisfactory student attendance rates under the 2015 ESSA. The leaders balanced accountability with creating strategies and practices to assist students with managing the obstacles that prevented them from regularly attending school. Three implications have been identified from this study for school leaders: leader insight, relationships matter, and school access, all of which are essential factors for increasing student attendance rate and decreasing chronic absence.

Insight

Leader insight is the first implication for improving attendance. In the study, the leaders relied on insight gained from their life and career experiences. When leaders possess insight, they understand improved attendance rates also impact the non-cognitive areas of students' lives. The leader's ability to envision beyond academic needs and into students' personal stories sets the stage for the planning and implementation of practices, policies, and programming for students to learn life skills and develop work ethics in a safe and nurturing environment. Insight promotes awareness for the school leader to plan a vision around meeting students' attendance needs and developing life readiness skills. Creating an attendance vision promotes the habit of showing up for school, being present, and staying focused. Knowing the challenges students will face, school leaders can strategically plan for and teach how to overcome these obstacles. The leader's attendance vision can provide strategies for teaching and modeling life skills (showing up and perseverance). Leader insight provides a more personalized method to vary the approach to improve attendance.

Relationships

The next implication is that relationships matter. Positive relationships with adults are essential for students and families to feel comfortable in the school dynamic. School relationships create a sense of belonging among students and parents. Building relationships requires leaders to remain visible during the school day. Data results indicate higher attendance rates when students learn among trusting, supportive, and caring people (Strand & Peacock, 2002). Standing at the main entry point during arrival and dismissal can allow students and parents to see their school leader in a friendly mode, instead of in the limited role of a disciplinarian. Initiating casual conversations about their well-being or exchanging simple greetings are practices that may be implemented daily. School leaders should be regarded as approachable figures by students and parents. Developing relationships with students and their families allows school leaders to know more about their students and better support their needs.

School Access

The final implication is equal access for all. With insight and positive relationships, school leaders can foresee barriers hindering school attendance. The school leader plays a vital role in making school attendance happen. Students have the opportunity to be at school, yet some have parents do not prioritize the opportunity. Although student attendance for younger students is the parents' responsibility, school leader intervention makes access possible when students need assistance. School leader visibility is the first step toward attendance vigilance. During morning arrival, leaders may execute informal scanning of students to detect levels of attendance. If student absence is detected early enough in the morning, designated people can make phone calls or send text messages to inquire about missing students before school begins. A strategy for morning transportation issues may include partnerships with the school district's transportation department to conduct a late run or appointing parents or staff members to walk late students to school. School leaders should develop proactive strategies that include offering inclement weather gear, such as coats and hats or rainwear for walkers, promote neighborhood buddy systems for families with conflicting work schedules, provide guidance to develop schedules when homes lack morning and evening routines, create a clothes closet when laundry issues present attendance challenges, and develop motivational incentives for disengaged students and parents.

Study Limitations

A limitation of this study was the potential for researcher bias. The researcher acknowledges the participants were distant colleagues employed by the same school district. Participants were identified using state attendance data (GOSA, 2014). The researcher affirms there was not a personal relationship with any of the participants. The participants' familiarity with the researcher from contact at district meetings may have encouraged the participants to disclose more of their personal experiences during the interviews. Data was collected by the researcher as the primary conductor of the study.

Participants were informed of the selection process criteria. During interviews, the researcher read the Valdosta State University Research Participation Statement (Appendix D). The participants exercised their free will and chose to participate in the study. After interviews, participants were contacted to clarify vague or unclear responses as a proactive measure for potential bias. A journal was used by the researcher to scribe emotions or reactions before and or after interviews. Interview transcripts and narratives were reviewed by participants for accuracy.

Another limitation of the study was focusing the study from only the school leaders’ perspectives. During the data analysis process, the researcher began to wonder how other school personnel may have responded to the interview questions. The initial focus of the study was to collect data from other personnel whom the school leader indicated had influence with the attendance practices. Once permission was received from the school district to conduct the research, a timeline of three months was stated as the window of opportunity due to the start of state testing. Once COVID-19 abruptly closed schools in mid-March, the researcher no longer factored in other personnel as a consideration for data collection. Even though the school leaders mentioned the roles of teachers and attendance team members, the researcher did not include their perspectives in the study.

The purposeful sample focused on urban elementary schools in only one school district. There was a potential for researcher bias in that a few participants mentioned their school district conducted district-wide competitions to keep the leaders focused on attendance efforts. If school leaders from other demographics or other school systems read the study, they might not find the results generalizable. The nature of the study included participants from one school district with similar demographic challenges.

Recommendations for Future Students

The purpose of this study was to determine the strategies and practices used by school personnel to increase student attendance rates. A phenomenological study method was used to collect narrative data from school leaders' perspectives about their attendance experiences. Future study recommendations include increasing the participants of the study to include different perspectives from teachers, parents, students, and business partners.

Another recommendation for future research is to change the geographic focus of the study. Chang (2014) reported chronic absence as a nationwide problem. Replicating the study in other geographic locations of the United States might allow the researcher to understand the attendance narratives communicated by leaders, teachers, parents, or students in the north, east, south, or west areas of the country. In addition, changing the demographic focus of the study to metropolitan, suburban, or rural, or perhaps comparing or contrasting schools in the different groups may provide additional insight for leaders or policy makers.

Further recommendations include conducting a longitudinal study on schools with student cohorts matriculating from elementary schools with successful attendance patterns to middle school and later to high school. The researcher could follow the attendance data to better understand whether students with satisfactory attendance habits in elementary school maintained the habit in secondary school.

The Star Model (Kates & Galbraith, 2007) provides a design of choices that influence behaviors in organizations. Evidence of the five components: (a) strategy, (b) structure (c) processes, (d) rewards and (e) people were identified as organizational indicators used by the participants in this study. The researcher recommends a study to examine the components of organizational design implemented at schools with non-satisfactory attendance rates to determine how to realign design models that may improve attendance.

The impact of Covid-19 abruptly closed schools and school systems pivoted to virtual learning models. Makeshift models for taking attendance and tracking attendance substituted for traditional models of calculating seat time at school. For future studies, the researcher recommends investigating how schools captured, measured, and documented attendance during the various modes of virtual, hybrid, and asynchronous models of education during the pandemic in order to determine whether more flexible ways of measuring student presence may increase attendance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine how school personnel at urban elementary schools in Georgia, implemented strategies and practices to address chronic student absenteeism. School leaders utilized the strategies and practices of inspiration, personal relationships, motivation, attendance engagement, and student support. Inspiration was shared with students to foster hope. Four of the five leaders served in schools with poverty levels of 60% to 80%. Similar circumstances of poverty had been experienced and overcome by the majority of the leaders or their parents. The school leaders understood their students' backgrounds and helped them navigate through life situations by developing endurance and perseverance. Personal insight enabled the leaders to better understand that attendance meant more than students showing up for school. Daily student presence allowed leaders the opportunity to provide guidance and life skills that spanned beyond academics.

Establishing personal relationships, built bonds of trust between school personnel, students, and their families. The school leaders greeted students and parents during arrival and remained visible throughout the day. Informal conversations were held with students to check in on them and find out little things like their favorite subject, books they were reading, or what they did during the weekend or a school holiday. The participants attributed relationships as the primary factor for their positive school culture. The school leaders also acknowledged the strategy of building relationships allowed them to learn intimate details about their students' lives and intervene when necessary.

Motivation was another important strategy that helped encourage students to meet or exceed the attendance expectations. The school leaders used rewards, incentives, or recognition to create positive habits of attendance. Competition was also utilized to teach students to push hard and show up for school. Leaders and personnel encouraged students to meet quarterly attendance goals. Attendance pride was developed on personal and school-wide levels. Motivation helped students focus on the prize and cheer for their peers. Students wanted to exist among other students who achieved goals and earned rewards.

Attendance engagement included how school personnel created attendance practices. The leaders utilized attendance engagement strategies and practices to establish routines at the beginning of the school year to familiarize stakeholders with attendance expectations. Each school employed key staff members to monitor daily attendance-taking practices. Personnel collaborated about attendance through professional learning communities or care teams. School teams examined student attendance habits and worked proactively to identify needs.

The final strategy and practice identified were student and family support. Professional learning communities or care teams conducted routine weekly meetings to discuss student progress and offer tiered support. Collaborative teams developed personal relationships with students and families. Students in need of transportation, clothing, medical accommodations, food, shelter, or additional resources received assistance or were provided recommendations for solutions. Interim goals were personalized for students with high rates of absenteeism. The support teams executed creative approaches to decrease student barriers for attendance.

The researcher also explored the extent to which the attendance success at the participants’ schools may have been attributed to the use of an organizational design model. The research study was framed using the Star Model (Galbraith, 1977), which included five components utilized by to influence behavior and performance through choices and decisions (Kates & Galbraith, 2007). Additional findings of this study included strategies and goals that aligned with the organizational design components of strategy, structures, processes, motivation, and people (Galbraith et al., 2002).

Similar to the strategy component of the Star Model, the participants created an attendance vision to provide direction for their schools to help students meet the attendance goals. Processes and structures of the Star Model assists in organizing people in order for the work to flow between people. School leaders organized personnel through teams to engage stakeholders about attendance and support their needs. The people component of the Star Model includes training and development for employees to carry out the work. Leaders ensured personnel were trained to build capacity for providing attendance support and implementing the school's attendance vision. The rewards component of the Star Model aligns individual performance behaviors with organization goals. School leaders offered rewards through incentives, recognition, and celebrations to motivate students to attend school. The Star Model provided a frame to examine how the work was conducted within the individual schools. School leaders and personnel in the study utilized strategies and practices to increase student attendance, and executed strategies and practices aligned with the organizational components of the Star Model.

Although absenteeism has existed as a consistent problem throughout the history of education, school leader intervention and support can improve student attendance. The participants in the study focused their efforts on implementing attendance strategies and practices of inspiration, personal relationships, motivation, stakeholder engagement, and student support after the national release of chronic absence data in 2013-2014. The results of the study identified elementary school leaders who implemented strategies and practices earning their schools an average daily attendance rating of 97% for three years, after the baseline year of 2013-2014. An average daily attendance rate above 95% is categorized as satisfactory (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Furthermore, chronic absenteeism rates at each of the leaders' schools ranked below 7% during the three consecutive years after the 2013 - 2014 baseline school year. Schools with chronic absence rates from five percent to 9% are categorized as having modest chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

As a result of implementing strategies and practices, School A and School D increased their average daily attendance rate by half a point during 2015-2016, the first academic year of focus. School C earned district recognition by increasing the average daily attendance rate by 2% during 2015 - 2016. All five schools maintained a three-year average of 97% through the 2015-2017 school years. Student achievement was also impacted by attendance performance. The five schools earned the category of "Beating the Odds" for 2015-2017 (GOSA, 2015; GOSA, 2016; GOSA, 2017) which compares schools' academic performance on the CCRPI with schools of similar characteristics across the state. Despite poverty levels, the schools in the study increased student attendance rates, decreased chronic absenteeism and increased academic achievement during the 2015 – 2017 school years.

The participants in this study learned to prioritize attendance and create a culture of attendance awareness. Strategies and practices were employed to improve and maintain satisfactory attendance. School leaders ensured that relationships were built between students and families and a variety of school and community stakeholders. Through the development of personal relationships, leaders inspired, motivated, and supported students, increasing both attendance and academic achievement.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

	Interview Questions
1. What are the life and career experiences of school personnel at identified Georgia, urban elementary schools that dealt withchronic absenteeism and increasedaverage daily student attendance?	**Interview #1** When and how did you know you would become aneducator? Describe your journey to becoming an educator? How long have you been a school leader? How long haveyou led at your current school? Share a day in the life of a school leader at your urbanelementary school? Provide a snapshot of your school: demographics: (enrollment, how students travel to school, special programs, school grows and grows, description of thecommunity, business partnerships What do you perceive about the value your family placed onschool attendance when you were in elementary school? Share any memorable incidents that have shaped your perceptions. How do you think your family's values regarding schoolattendance have impacted your own beliefs? What are your (personal) beliefs about elementary studentsand school attendance? What do you perceive are the attendance beliefs of thepersonnel at your school? Since an ADA of 97% or higher is considered the bar forhaving "good" attendance and low chronic absenteeism, what do you consider to be your school's formula for success with student attendance?

	What are your perceptions of how your school might differentiate from other schools with student attendance? Even though your school has experienced multiple years ofsuccess with student attendance, discuss any attendance concerns your school continues to overcome. Based on your experiences with attendance challenges andthe nationwide history of attendance issues, what do you think should occur at a higher level to make a greater impact?
2. What practices did school personnel use at Georgia, urban elementary schools to deal with chronic student absenteeism, and increased average student?	**Interview #2** What are your district's attendance policies? What are your school's attendance policies and expectations? How does your school structure and the staff address attendance? How does your school personnel receive training about your student attendance expectations and procedures? What measures are taken to educate parents about student attendance policies and expectations at your school? What measures are taken to inform students about attendance expectations at your school? What student attendance expectations are regularly monitored: for teachers? for parents? How does your school structure and organize the staff to monitor student attendance? How are the attendance related decisions made?

APPENDIX B: IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

ProtocolNumber: 03987-2020 **Responsible Researcher:** MelanieMitchell

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Bill Truby **Co-Investigator(s):** n/a

Project Title: *A Qualitative Study of Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism atUrban Elementary Schools.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

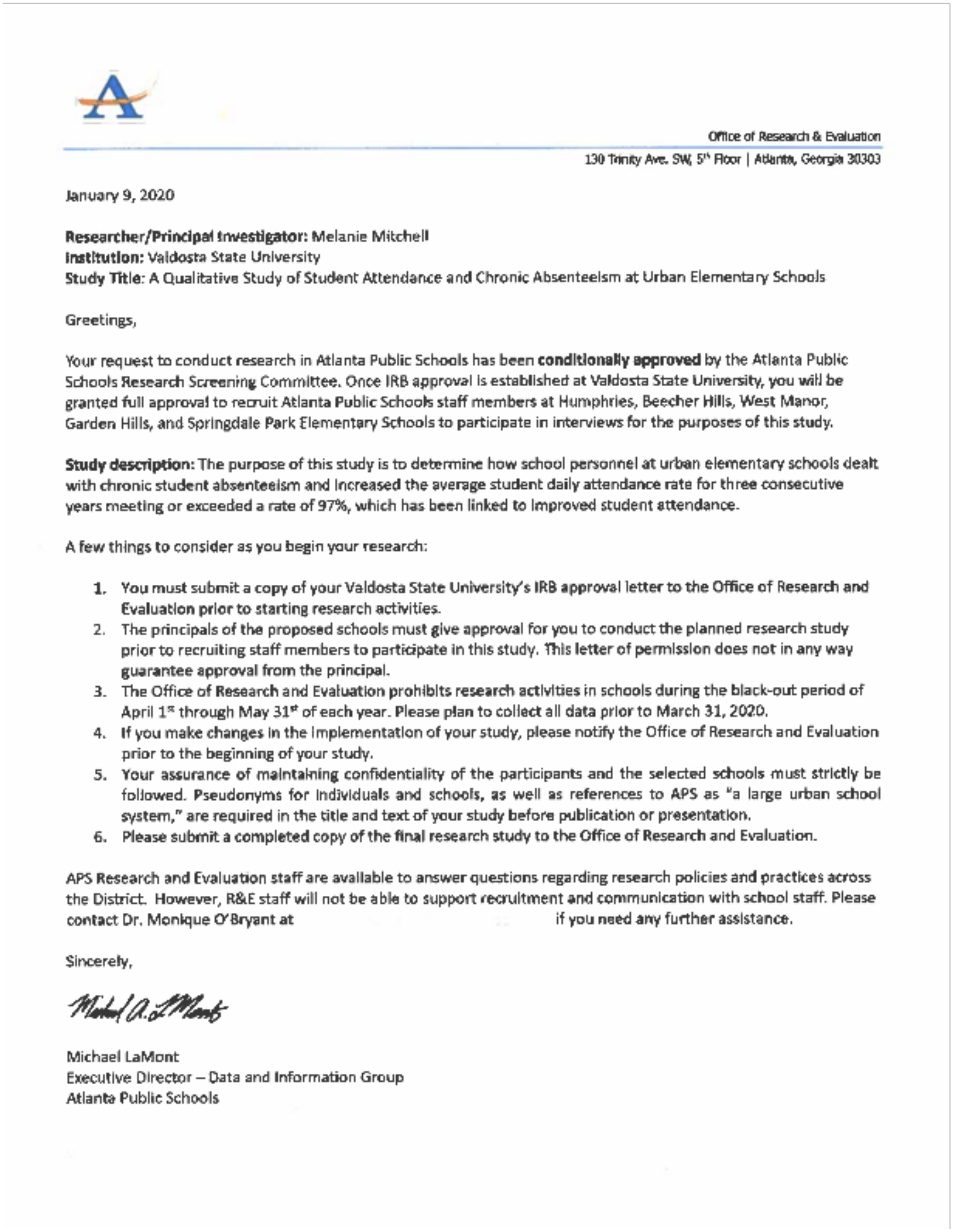
- *Upon completion of this research study all data (email correspondence, surveydata, participant lists, pseudonym lists, etc.) must be securely maintained (lockedfile cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *The Research Statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of each interview session.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines prohibit sharing and/or storing audio recordings. The audio recordings must be deleted from all devices immediately upon creating an interview transcript.*

☒ ***If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRBAdministrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of yourexemption.***

Elizabeth Ann Olphie 01.22.2020 ***Thank you for submitting an IRBapplication.***

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator ***Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.***

APPENDIX C: Site Approval Letter



Office of Research & Evaluation
130 Trinity Ave. SW, 5th Floor | Atlanta, Georgia 30303

January 9, 2020

Researcher/Principal Investigator: Melanie Mitchell
Institution: Valdosta State University
Study Title: A Qualitative Study of Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism at Urban Elementary Schools

Greetings,

Your request to conduct research in Atlanta Public Schools has been **conditionally approved** by the Atlanta Public Schools Research Screening Committee. Once IRB approval is established at Valdosta State University, you will be granted full approval to recruit Atlanta Public Schools staff members at Humphries, Beecher Hills, West Manor, Garden Hills, and Springdale Park Elementary Schools to participate in interviews for the purposes of this study.

Study description: The purpose of this study is to determine how school personnel at urban elementary schools dealt with chronic student absenteeism and increased the average student daily attendance rate for three consecutive years meeting or exceeded a rate of 97%, which has been linked to improved student attendance.

A few things to consider as you begin your research:

1. You must submit a copy of your Valdosta State University's IRB approval letter to the Office of Research and Evaluation prior to starting research activities.
2. The principals of the proposed schools must give approval for you to conduct the planned research study prior to recruiting staff members to participate in this study. This letter of permission does not in any way guarantee approval from the principal.
3. The Office of Research and Evaluation prohibits research activities in schools during the black-out period of April 1st through May 31st of each year. Please plan to collect all data prior to March 31, 2020.
4. If you make changes in the implementation of your study, please notify the Office of Research and Evaluation prior to the beginning of your study.
5. Your assurance of maintaining confidentiality of the participants and the selected schools must strictly be followed. Pseudonyms for individuals and schools, as well as references to APS as "a large urban school system," are required in the title and text of your study before publication or presentation.
6. Please submit a completed copy of the final research study to the Office of Research and Evaluation.

APS Research and Evaluation staff are available to answer questions regarding research policies and practices across the District. However, R&E staff will not be able to support recruitment and communication with school staff. Please contact Dr. Monique O'Bryant at if you need any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Michael A. LaMont

Michael LaMont
Executive Director – Data and Information Group
Atlanta Public Schools

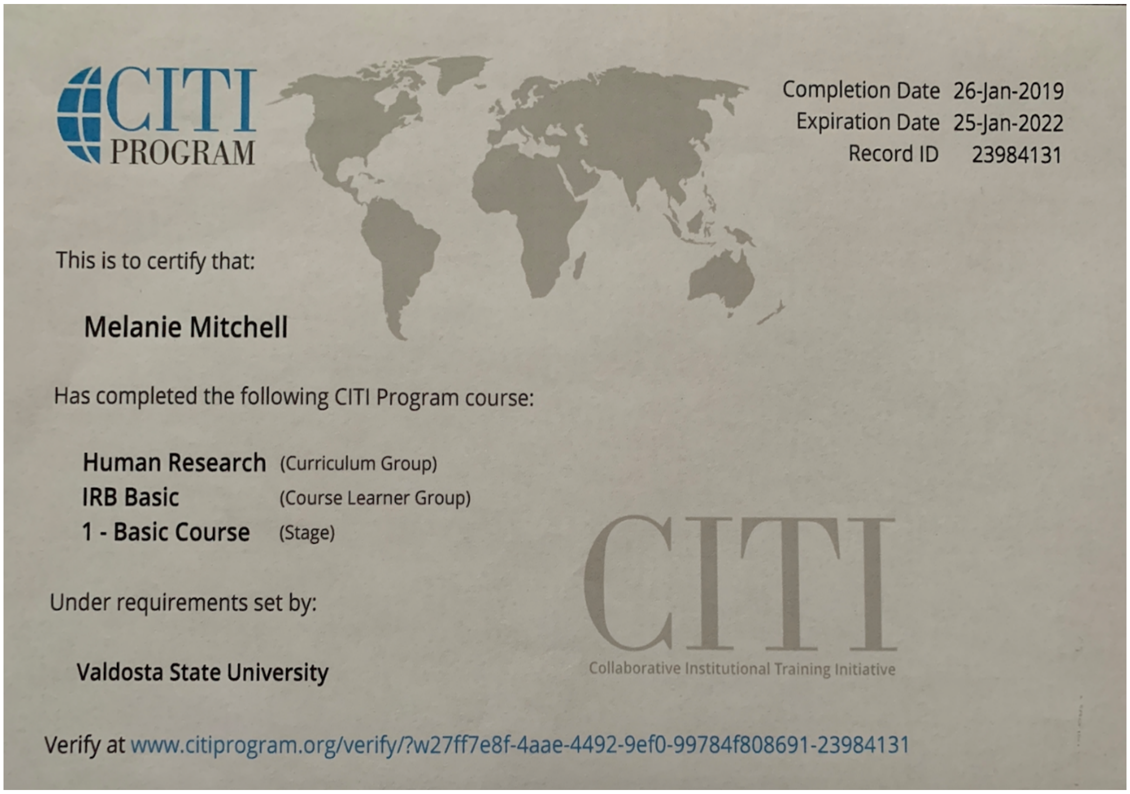
APPENDIX D: Informed Consent Form

Valdosta State University Research Participation Statement

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled ***"A Qualitative Study of Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism at Urban Elementary Schools",*** which is being conducted by **Melanie Mitchell**, a **student** at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to determine how school personnel at Georgia, urban elementary schools dealt with chronic absenteeism and increased the average daily attendance rate for three years meeting or exceeding a rate of 97% which has been linked to improved student achievement. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about filling a void in research addressing strategies school leaders use to increase student daily attendance as well as providing school leaders with a toolbox of best practices. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 90 minutes**.** The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your school will be assigned a pseudonym (School A-E/Participant A-E) to conceal the school's identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Melanie Mitchell at melamitchell@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX E: Cite Program Certificate



CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 26-Jan-2019
Expiration Date 25-Jan-2022
Record ID 23984131

This is to certify that:

Melanie Mitchell

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research (Curriculum Group)
IRB Basic (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Valdosta State University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w27ff7e8f-4aae-4492-9ef0-99784f808691-23984131

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