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The Contributing Factors to Student Absenteeism/ Truancy and the Effectiveness of Social Services and Interventions

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THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO STUDENT ABSENTEEISM/ TRUANCY
AND THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL SERVICES
AND INTERVENTIONS

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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ABSTRACT

One major issue that schools are currently facing and seeing little or no improvement with is effectively dealing with student absenteeism and truancy. Despite early interventions, programs are still failing to effectively motivate students to attend school.

This research study examines the success of an implementation of a perfect attendance award within an elementary school to increase student attendance. An examination of student attendance from the 2006-2007 academic year and from the 2007-2008 academic year, suggested that the perfect attendance certificate distributed monthly to students with no absences for that month is a positive motivator for students to attend school every day. The data from the months of September, October and November in the 2006-2007 year had a mean score of 54.5 and the 2007-2008 year had a mean score of 59.5, which indicated from an Independent Samples Test that the data proves to be statistically significant, thus the certificates accounted for increased attendance rates.

Follow up surveys also provide evidence that the attendance certificates are an overall positive motivator for students and help to increase student attendance at one elementary school. Recognizing student's strengths of attending school every day is a powerful tool of empowerment, and reduces absenteeism.

Outline

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 - A. The problem facing schools is how to effectively deal with student absenteeism and truancy.
 - a. Interventions used to control truancy/absenteeism
 - b. Effects of truancy/absenteeism
 - B. Attendance rates do not seem to be improving
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 - ii. Elementary years
 - iii. Middle School years
 - iv. High School years
 - b. Educational/ short term consequences
 - i. Miss out on assignments
 - ii. Classroom connections are not made
 - iii. Fall behind in school work
 - iv. Poor social skills
 - v. Isolation from friends
 - vi. Failure to be passed to the next grade
 - c. Factors contributing to students not attending school
 - i. transportation problems
 - ii. bad weather
 - iii. poor health
 - iv. unsupportive family environment
 - B. Truancy
 - a. Unexcused/unlawful absences

- i. Parents are usually unaware
 - ii. Students are often engaged in promiscuous activities outside the home
- b. Influenced by contributing factors
 - i. Peers
 - ii. Relations with teachers
 - iii. The set up of the curriculum
 - iv. Bullying
- c. Long term consequences
 - i. Joblessness
 - ii. Lowered income
- d. Legal consequences
 - i. Juvenile delinquency
 - ii. Alcohol and drug use
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C. Interventions

- a. School interventions and incentive programs
 - i. Peer tutoring
 - ii. Mentoring
 - 1. A teacher that a student looks up to is a good role model
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- a. Service workers and agencies are overwhelmed
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 - ii. Agencies are large, small cases get overlooked
 - iii. Multiple tasks of the workers create less time for interventions
 - b. Families cannot be located
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 - ii. Parents work multiple jobs/ off hours and students are unable to be located
 - iii. Parents are unaware of their child's whereabouts
 - iv. Families are unwilling to participate in interventions
 - c. School interventions cannot happen if the student isn't there
 - i. Interventions are set up and wasted because students don't show up.
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- A. Physical health of a child is more important than attending school
 - a. Health related appointments precede school attendance
 - b. Children's early physical health and development set the stage for their health in later life

- c. Schools are filled with germs and viruses which impact students well being

B. Truancy is part of a larger social problem

- a. Students come from poverty
 - i. Parents cannot provide for their schooling needs
 - ii. Parents do not have money to buy gasoline for the car to get to school
 - iii. Money is used toward food rather than school supplies and clothing
 - iv. Families are barely making ends meet, so education is not the top priority
 - v. No other choice but to leave children home
 - 1. Have to work to get money
 - 2. Parents are neglectful to their children's best interest in education
- b. Parental job issues
 - i. Students have to take care of their siblings because the parents have to work and there are no other options
 - ii. Parents leave for work earlier than a student needs to be up, and does not get up for school
 - iii. If only one parent in the household, balancing between everyone's schedule is even harder
 - iv. High rate of mobility
 - v. Substance abuse within families
- c. Parents do not see education and learning as a priority within their family values
 - 1. Parent's prior lack of commitment to education influences their children
 - 2. Being part of the family is more important
 - i. Staying together through hardships i.e. homelessness

3. Contributing to the families income is important
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C. Interventions do not work with all students

- a. Special Education students have barriers that may inhibit interventions to take on their full potential
 - i. Students with learning disabilities
 1. More in depth interventions at a slower pace may be needed
 - ii. Students with behavioral disabilities
 1. Programs may need to be adapted to a students behavioral needs
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 1. Interventions should be consistent with a students physical or mental challenges
- b. Students with language delays may have trouble grasping what the services are trying to do
 - i. Second language students, where English may be their second language
 - ii. Students who moved from other countries and have been in and out of schools

D. Interventions take so long to be put into place, other variables intervene to contribute to the change

- a. Changes in a student's environment
 - i. Movement of home closer to the school
 - ii. Home is now in a safer neighborhood to walk
 - iii. Home is on the bus route
- b. Socioeconomic status changes
 - i. Job promotions to help pay for student's schooling needs
 - ii. Meals, utilities and gasoline for transportation are not an issue anymore

- iii. Daycare or other care can be provided for the younger siblings
- c. Family changes
 - i. Both parents are in the student's life
 - ii. A more stable family system has been put into place
 - iii. Siblings grow up so students are not needed to watch them
- d. Student changes
 - i. Grow and realize importance of education
 - ii. Older and can walk to school
 - iii. Student is more competent to get oneself awake and ready for school in the morning
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 - v. Students now have a wide social network

IV. Hypothesis

- A. Whether the implementation of an intervention/incentive within an elementary school prove to decrease student absenteeism and truancy.

V. Methodology

- A. Sample
- B. Data Gathering
- C. Data Analysis
- D. Findings

VI. Conclusion

- A. Student absenteeism and truancy is an increasing problem facing schools in all areas
 - a. Research study examined whether the implementation of a perfect attendance award would increase attendance
 - i. Findings proved hypothesis to be true
- B. Implications for social work
 - a. Practice, Research, Policy

Preface

This study is an experimental design which provides an analysis of the problem of student absenteeism and truancy within an elementary school setting. Specifically this research examines the implementation of a perfect attendance award as a successful intervention/incentive to decrease student absenteeism and truancy and promote school attendance. Findings suggest the implementation of the award proves to be effective in decreasing absenteeism/truancy.

Introduction

A major problem facing schools is how to effectively deal with student absenteeism and truancy (DeSocio et al., 2007). When a student has not attended school for a long period of time or frequently misses school, they are classified as truant. These students forgo opportunities to learn. When a student does not come to school for a lengthy period of time, one may assume these students are learning elsewhere, but unfortunately in most circumstances this is not the case (RI Kids Count, 2007). Students start truanting in primary school, and often continue through secondary school and so on (Reid, 2005). Student absenteeism and truancy have become a large problem with students today and receives little attention due to the abundance of other issues and priorities that social workers and other service agencies are faced with (Teasley, 2004).

Absenteeism is a period of time when a student does not attend school (Teasley, 2004). Students who do not attend school will generally fall behind their classmates in their academic success (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). They have fewer opportunities to learn the materials that will help them to succeed (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The focus of student absenteeism ranges from early schooling until adolescent years (Ford & Sutphen, 1996).

Reasons students do not attend school can be influenced by a number of factors ranging from a lack of community support and an unsupportive school environment or family to bad weather, transportation problems and poor health (Teasley, 2004).

Truancy is like absenteeism, but truancy is an unexcused absence from school or classes about which parents typically do not know. Truancy in students has been found to stem from an influence of peers, relations with teachers, the way the curriculum is delivered to the student, family aspects, bullying and others (Reid, 2005). The main difference between truancy and absenteeism is that truancy is unexcused and unlawful absence from school without parental knowledge or consent (Teasley, 2004).

Despite early interventions such as peer tutoring, mentoring, interventions within the school, family, neighborhood and community, incentive programs are important to battling school truancy and absenteeism (Teasley, 2004). Although a critical factor to breaking the habitual pattern of truancy is intervention, existing social service interventions are failing to effectively get students to attend school (DeSocio et al., 2007).

There is little evidence to accurately estimate the long-term effects of absenteeism and truancy on a student's future adult lifestyle (Reid, 2005). Social services need to be more targeted to the specific truancy problem, assess risks and factors related to absenteeism and truancy and support collaborative efforts between agencies, families and students (Teasley, 2004). Interventions and incentives need to be tailored to individual student's needs and these interventions work best when there is an alliance between the teachers and parents (Teasley, 2004).

Attendance rates within schools do not seem to be improving (Reid, 2003). Collaborations of service have suffered for a number of reasons. National aims and

objectives for services need to be agreed upon and staff working in education, social work, and other services should be operating at the same level. Workloads for service agencies are notorious for being high which may be a factor to why many of these interventions are not happening early on (Reid, 2003).

Within each state, laws regarding truancy are in effect, but often national trends do not reflect local policy (Teasley, 2004). School social workers must be familiar with the legal aspects of truancy in the states in which they practice. Social workers must also work within the parameters of the law and do what is acceptable to effectively intervene with truant individuals (Teasley, 2004).

Across the nation in 2005, 19 percent of fourth grade students and 20 percent of eighth grade students were reported to have missed 3 or more days of school in the previous month. Of fourth grade students only 52 percent of the students reported perfect attendance, and only 45 percent of eighth graders reported perfect attendance. Also rates of absenteeism varied by characteristics of students and in both grades students were more likely to miss 3 or more days of school if a language other than English was spoken at home (NCES, 2006). These statistics indicate that in reality only half of all students are attending school everyday and that the factors which contribute to student absenteeism and truancy seem endless.

In Rhode Island during the school year of 2005-2006, 22 percent of students residing in Rhode Island's core cities were absent more than 20 days and as a whole, 14 percent of the state was absent. In order to improve the current rate of 85 percent to 92 percent in the core cities, 1,194 students on average would have to attend classes each day of the school year (RI Kids Count, 2007). This indicates that it is nearly impossible to increase attendance rates by

7 percent because it would require over a thousand students to attend school each day for the entire year; a virtual impossibility.

The gap between the number of students in relation to the number of social workers and other social service agencies shows truant students that there is little risk to being caught. If they are caught, most services for truants are either ineffective or take too long to implement (Reid, 2003).

Absenteeism and truancy is an ongoing problem and although many programs have been put into place to control truancy rates, they may have done just the opposite. Zero-tolerance policies have basically alienated students rather than helping them to improve attendance and learn in school (Teasley, 2004). There are short term consequences to student's absence from school such as falling behind in school work, low educational success, poor social skills and isolation from friends and longer term consequences related to joblessness and lowered income. Not only are there educational consequences but legal consequences such as juvenile delinquency, alcohol and drug use, and sexual promiscuity at illegal ages (Teasley, 2004), indicating that absenteeism and truancy is a current significant social problem.

Contributing factors and consequences of absenteeism

Absenteeism is a period of time when a student does not attend school (Teasley, 2004). Student absenteeism is a problem within school systems involving all ages and there is little evidence that attendance rates are improving (Reid, 2003). The issue of school attendance affects the kindergarten, elementary, middle and high schools. Absenteeism increases with each grade level and students gradually become more disengaged from school (RI Kids Count, 2007). The problems of absenteeism begin in primary school and continue

into secondary school, which makes early intervention necessary to try to prevent students from continuing on this path throughout their educational experiences (Reid, 2005).

When students are absent from school there are a wide range of short term educational consequences that they face. First and foremost, students miss out on assignments. By missing out on assignments, they are more likely to underachieve or perform poorly in different school subjects. Students fail to do their homework even when they do attend school because their absences prohibited them from learning the lessons (Reid, 2005). Students face serious academic difficulty and fall behind greatly in their school work (DeSocio et al., 2007). In the DeSocio et al. study, it was found that within the sample of students, “65% of students were failing six or more of their eight class periods” and their grade point averages range from 0.0 to 2.29, creating a mean of a .30 grade point average. “Nonattenders generally fall behind their peers in academic achievement and the development of social competence” (Ford, 1996) which creates issues in having fewer friends and poor social skills (Reid, 2005). Absenteeism effects a student’s ability to pass to the next grade and the risk for students dropping out is extremely high (DeSocio et al., 2007).

In addition to the consequences of student absenteeism, there is also a range of factors which contribute to students not attending school. Inclement weather and transportation problems are factors to student absenteeism that are often not recognized. Severe weather issues could contribute to a student not being able to leave their home, transportation issues such as the bus not coming to the home, or the car not starting; impact a student’s ability to get to school (Teasley, 2004). Health problems are identified as a major contributor to student absenteeism, whether it is the student’s health issues that are in consideration or family health issues, they prohibit students from attending school. Although students should

not come to school when severely sick, often students do not attend school even if they have a small ailment although it would not prohibit the student from learning in the classroom (DeSocio et al., 2007). Other factors such as an unsupportive family environment or lack of community help contribute to absenteeism. Family factors such as “parentally condoned absence, not valuing education, domestic problems, inconsistent to inadequate parenting, and economic deprivation” (Reid, 2005) play a large role in absenteeism. Community attitudes and socio-economic factors put pressures on students which in turn do not encourage the attendance of school each day.

Contributing factors and consequences of truancy

Truancy is similar to absenteeism, but truancy is an unexcused absence from school or class without parental knowledge or consent. Although truancy stems from a lack of parental knowledge, parents are usually the contributor to student truancy by not taking the responsibility to get their child to school each day (Teasley, 2004). “Truants and persistent absentees are most likely to come from disadvantaged home backgrounds and unfavorable social circumstances” (Reid, 2005). Parents think students are truant because they are bored with the curriculum and it’s failing to meet their needs (Reid, 2005). Truant individuals are usually involved with promiscuous activities outside of the home while not in school.

Truancy is influenced by a variety of factors. The factors include the influence of peers, relations with teachers, the set up of the curriculum, family aspects and bullying (Reid, 2005). Truant individuals are influenced by their peers to not attend school and encourage peers to engage in activities outside of the school with them. Students that have poor or conflicting relationships with teachers will avoid school in order to avoid their teacher. Often the curriculum can be too easy or too challenging for individuals, in the latter it creates a

mindset for students that they cannot achieve success. If a student does not feel they can succeed, there will be no desire for them to attend school (Teasley, 2004). Those who are bullied at school will not let parents or teachers know they are being bullied in fear of further consequences from the bully and will avoid school to stay away from the bully (Reid, 2005).

Ford and Sutphen (1996) suggest there are long-term consequences to student truancy such as joblessness and lowered income which have profound impacts on a student later in their life. Because of their behaviors, they are not prepared to enter the workforce and therefore will contribute to the unemployment population. In relation with the lack of preparation for adulthood, if one is jobless, one will suffer from having no income. If one was able to find a job, their lack of skills and truant behavior as a child would create hardships for them to find a good job, and therefore would have issues involving lowered income which in turn would create even more problems in supporting oneself or others.

In addition to long-term consequences, there are legal consequences to student truancy. "Truancy is associated with sexual promiscuity, alcohol and drug use, delinquency, and dropping out of school" (Teasley, 2004). Truant individuals become involved with alcohol and drugs which lead to health issues later in life and addiction. Along with the alcohol and drug use, these factors can contribute to sexual promiscuity at illegal ages and unprotected sexual activity for these truant individuals (DeSocio et al., 2007). In addition to these consequences, many families and students become involved in the court systems by being summoned to attend truancy court for a judge to make a decision on behalf of a child who is not attending school, and the outcomes of these court decisions are usually undesirable.

Interventions for absenteeism and truancy

For student absenteeism and truancy, there are a number of interventions that have been implemented within the schools, families, and the community. Within the school setting administrators have implemented interventions and incentive programs with hopes to promote student attachment to school (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Peer tutoring has become an intervention in schools which older achieving students are trained to work with younger students who have attendance issues. “The dropout rate for students who participated in the program was one percent, whereas the comparison group rate was 12 percent” (Teasley, 2004). Teacher or administrative mentors is also an approach at intervening with students with attendance issues. Mentors provide students with opportunities for “prosocial identification.” They provide empathic support in helping to activate self-development, and they also promote experiences that contest students’ lowered academic ambitions (DeSocio et al., 2007). Students often look up to their mentors as a good role model and someone they aspire to be like. The mentor is able to overlook the student’s progress and see if there are any ways in which the student can be further helped in getting them to attend school. Mentoring has been seen to be particularly effective and works best when there is a relationship between the student and the mentor. Students feel more comfortable checking in with someone they know and can have some frame of reference to (Teasley, 2004). Within the mentoring program, students usually have a check-in and check-out type procedure. Before school starts, they would check-in with their mentor and at the end of the day they would check-out with their mentor, this provides an easy way for the mentor to know if the student is in school, and if the student stays at school the entire day. The mentor would also

be able to check-in with the student regarding their school work and see how their day academically went as well (DeSocio et al., 2007).

Perfect attendance awards and certificates are used as an incentive to student attendance. This type of incentive helps to encourage students by a school wide recognition as well as a personal certificate or award. In some instances, the principal read student names over the public announcement system (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Other ways of using a reward incentive to increase daily attendance has been done through parties, gift certificates, recognition at assemblies and small items that a student can receive if they attend school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). “It may be that official recognition of improved attendance motivates some students to attend school more regularly” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Family interventions have also been implemented to link the family, student and school as one unit. Family-based interventions consist of home visits or telephone contact with parents encouraging parents to be more actively involved in getting their children to school. Family-based services help parents to set up fixed schedules for students to follow and help families to identify and deal with the problems that are surrounding their child’s low attendance (Ford & Sutphen, 1996).

Within family interventions, the schools are really encouraging a family-school collaboration. Within this collaboration the schools are looking for the families to support their decisions in regards to discipline for low attendance. The schools are looking for the families to work with them to figure out ways in which they can get these children to want to attend school regularly. Also within this group effort, schools are constantly in contact with the family regarding student’s attendance (Teasley, 2004).

Community and neighborhood interventions are also important to increasing student attendance. Community organizations and getting students involved outside of their home and within their community have shown to be effective in motivating students. After school community organizations are available to help students with their school work and to provide a healthy atmosphere for success. Weekend programs help students to set goals and provide procedures to help students feel a consistency which will promote the consistency of attending school everyday. Within the community there is leadership and community-based activities which give students a sense of pride and make them feel a sense of achievement for being a leader. Having a community around a student's home that is supportive to their needs is essential, and a place near their home would most likely have the same socioeconomic and ethnic makeup which would not intimidate a student or make them feel out of place (Teasley, 2004).

Problems with interventions

Although some interventions appear to be effective there are problems with interventions. Service workers and agencies are overwhelmed with cases.

The widespread disparity between the differential pupil/school ratios to number of education welfare/ education social work employers also needs resolving. Truancy thrives when pupils know there is little risk of being caught or, when they are caught, knowing that court action is often ineffective and takes too long to implement. Reid, 2003

Agencies are extremely large, and small cases often are overlooked. Also the multiple tasks of workers and teachers create less time for interventions and incentives to be implemented (Teasley, 2004). People are not working along the same baseline, so it makes the operation of interventions difficult because some people want to do the intervention a certain way and

others want to do it their own way, causing conflict and further prolonging the intervention process (Reid, 2003).

A problem with family intervention is that the families simply cannot be located. It is a critical challenge to interventions because there is an inability to locate and connect with the families (DeSocio et al., 2007). Family members often give inaccurate information to where they live because they may have lost housing elsewhere and do not want their students to be kicked out of the school system for not having a permanent address. Many absences are linked to limited or inconsistent parental involvement in routines for school preparation, such as a lack of fixed bedtimes or homework times, no encouragement to get ready for school, or students are left on their own in the morning to get themselves to school (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Problems with family interventions also arise when parents are not interested in their child's progress at school and are unwilling to participate in interventions (Reid, 2005).

There are problems also with families who do not insist that their child attends school and do not take notice of their child's absence from school. Families that are at the lower end of the social scale have parents who are employed in unskilled or semi-skilled work and are forced to work many hours in order to make ends meet financially. Other family factors such as child-rearing issues, emotional needs of parents, family structure and family size can contribute to the problems of family intervention (Reid, 2005).

Another problem with interventions is that school interventions cannot happen if the student is absent. Interventions are set up and wasted because students do not show up for school, or they do not meet with their tutors or mentors. In addition to these students losing out on the intervention that was set up for them, mentors and peer tutors fall behind in their

own schedules because the time they set aside for the absent student is now wasted and they could have been focusing that time on something else (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Health precedes attendance

A student's attendance at school is not nearly as important as a child's physical health. A child's early physical health and development set the stage for their health later in life. Parents of children who have attendance problems believe that health related appointments precede school attendance. "Parents felt it was more acceptable to use school time for doctor's appointments than for dentists' appointments" (Reid, 2005). The parents of students with attendance problems also believe that keeping their children away from school for family holidays, health related appointments along with any illness, come before school attendance (Reid, 2005). Schools are constantly being effected by germs and viruses which impact students overall health and well-being. Seventy percent of the days of absence from school were accounted for by medical and non-medical reasons such as, respiratory infections, abdominal pain, headache, medical examinations, helping at home, family events, and excursions (Bendel, Halfon, Ever-Hadani, 1976).

Truancy is linked to poverty

Student truancy is part of a larger social problem. Students come from poverty which is linked to their lack of attendance at school. "Poor housing and 'poor prenatal care' led to higher incidence of illness among pupils from relatively poor families" (Zhang, 2003). Out of the 137 people in the study that were described as truant, thirty-three of the student's homes were categorized as poor and seventy-four of the student's homes were categorized as extremely poor (Zhang, 2003). Money becomes a large issue for families in poverty; there is no money for daily necessities such as food, clothing, supplies and transportation. Many of

the homes are where “children are poorly clothed and tend to eat cheap, low-quality food” (Reid, 2005) In the study regarding truancy offenders in the juvenile justice system, “juveniles from lower income families were more likely to be referred because of truancy whereas those from higher income families were more likely to be referred due to other offenses” (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Willson, 2007). Because these families are barely making ends meet, education is not the top priority for them, and parents are therefore neglectful to their child’s best interest in education.

The home and social backgrounds of truants and persistent absentees include factors such as, one-parent families, families with an above-average number of children, families living in overcrowded conditions, families living in council-owned housing, families living in poor-quality or old housing in a dilapidated state both internally and externally and families involved with social services (Reid, 2005). Therefore poverty and housing issues really affect a student’s attendance in schools.

Poor attendance is related to parental employment issues

In addition to poverty, because these families are poor, parental job issues take a toll on their student’s ability to attend school. While parents are out of the home trying to acquire an income, students are left at home to care for their other siblings (Zhang, 2003). “Parents of children with school attendance problems were four times more likely to think that children might have something more important to do at home than at school” (Reid, n.d.). Parents often leave for work much earlier than a student needs to be up, and the student is left to get to school on their own, which often does not happen. In addition to this factor, if the student lives in a single parent home, the balance between everyone’s schedules is even harder (Zhang et al., 2007). The high mobility rate of families, families with substance abuse issues,

lack of social competence, and mental and physical health problems also contribute to a student's lack of attendance at school (Zhang et al., 2007).

Attendance is not the priority

Within households, parents do not see education and learning as a priority within their family values. Students who have parents that attended universities have lower absenteeism rates and are less likely to intend to leave school early. The term 'parental education unknown' and 'social class unknown' have similar negative effects which indicate lower performance and commitment to school among students (Smyth, 1999). "Significantly more Hispanic than white or African-American children were attending school, suggests that their mothers particularly valued schooling opportunities for their children and that the availability of bilingual educational support services may have facilitated their school attendance" (Timberlake & Sabatino, 1994).

Being part of a family is more important, and families staying together through hardships such as homelessness are essential. Timberlake & Sabatino (1994) suggest older children who do not attend school were experiencing homelessness more often and for longer periods of time than those who attended school. School and other educational services may not be available, acceptable, or accessible to homeless families (Timberlake & Sabatino, 1994).

Students that contribute to their family's income or have tasks within the home often come before school attendance. Students identified that household labor affected school attendance and children had to miss school for that reason (Postiglione, Jiao, & Gyatso, 2006). Also, the task of caring for siblings within the home prohibits students from attending school. "Significantly more boys than girls were attending school suggest the possibility that

the girls were needed to care for their siblings and to help with the day-to-day maintenance of their families” (Timberlake & Sabatino, 1994). In relation to student’s taking care of their siblings, this becomes the case when parents are unable to afford daycare for their younger children.

Interventions do not work for everyone

Although interventions have been put into place to try and combat school truancy and absenteeism, interventions do not work with all students for a variety of reasons such as students with special educational needs, disabilities, and language delays. Students who are labeled as special education may have barriers which inhibit interventions to take on their full potential. “Poor attendance is a problem of general concern, it is particularly salient for special education students” (Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991) and special education students have higher rates of student absenteeism and higher drop-out rates. Students who are identified as having learning disabilities, more in depth interventions are carried out at a slower pace when needed. Students with behavioral disabilities or physical/mental challenges may need interventions that are consistent and adapted to their abilities (Licht et al., 1991).

Students with language delays may have trouble grasping the ideas and goals that services are trying to put into place. “Many children have higher levels of language development in the language spoken at home” (Greenspan, 2005). In the case where student’s second language is English, English will emerge just by a child’s opportunities to listen and speak with others, which is not available if students do not attend school (Greenspan, 2005). Students who moved from other countries have been in and out of schools and primarily within their home; a different language is being spoken. These

challenges generate difficulties at school creating an atmosphere that students want to avoid (Smyth, 1999).

Since interventions take so long to be put into place because of the contributing factors such as, the overwhelming number of cases at social service agencies, effectively locating families in a timely manner, and the sheer fact that if students persistently do not show up to school, interventions simply cannot be put into place (Teasley, 2004; DeSocio et al., 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) other variables intervene to contribute to the change. Changes in a student's environment at home can improve attendance such as the movement of a student's home closer to the school which would make transportation to and from school easier. If the neighborhood in which one lives is now safer, students will be able to walk to school, or take a bus that drops them off in a particular area that is close to home. In addition to these changes, a student's new home could be now on a bus route that goes directly to and from school, so there would be no excuse why the student could not get to school (Goldstein, 1963).

Intervening variables contributing to changes in attendance

Socioeconomic status changes within a family can also be a variable which intervenes in increasing student attendance (Lloyd-Nesling, n.d.). Changes in parental employment can contribute to an increase in income and therefore help to pay for schooling needs. In addition to schooling needs, payment for daily necessities can be met such as meals, utilities, clothing, and transportation factors. Daycare issues are no longer a problem. There would be money to pay someone to watch the children while the parents are at work. Students would no longer have to stay at home and watch their siblings rather than attending school (Lloyd-Nesling, n.d).

Changes within the family structure can intervene to improve student attendance. Parental involvement becomes more stable and a more stable family system was put into place. Other family members outside the home help to contribute to the well-being of the entire family system (Reid, n.d.). Siblings of students with attendance problems also grow and become older which would discontinue the need for students to stay at home and watch them (Reid, 2005).

Students can make a change for themselves which contribute to better attendance. Students have the ability to grow and realize the importance of education. As students get older, they have more freedom, and parents have a higher trust in students to walk to and from school. Students also become more competent to get themselves to school. The increase in a student's social network can help to increase student attendance, and they now have more of an enjoyment of school (Railsback, 2004).

Hypothesis

Absenteeism and truancy is a problem in elementary, middle, and high schools. Students with attendance issues face a range of educational and legal consequences. Absenteeism and truancy are influenced by the family's culture as well as larger social problems, such as poverty and unemployment which challenge families. Although interventions to decrease absenteeism and truancy have been designed to include cooperation among the family, school, and community, the problem remains because many interventions are never implemented or implemented inconsistently.

So therefore, does the implementation of an intervention/incentive within an elementary school prove to decrease student absenteeism and truancy?

Methodology

Sample

This experimental research study used a convenience sample of students in grades 2-6 from Charles N. Fortes Elementary School in Providence, RI. The sample included both male and female students from a variety of racial backgrounds such as African American, Caucasian, Filipino, Cambodian, Dominican, Hispanic, Liberian and more. On average in 2006-2007 the total number of students enrolled for the five months investigated was 398. In the five months examined in 2007-2008, the average number of students enrolled was 356.

Data Gathering

This experimental study seeks to confirm the hypothesis by measuring the dependent variable before and after a manipulation of the independent variable. The dependent variable was the number of students who had zero absences in a given month in comparison to the total enrolled for that month. The independent variable was the perfect attendance awards. Researcher made an award certificate each month that was distributed to students having perfect attendance (see Appendix 1). Data was gathered for this research study using two different methods due to the inability to access previous attendance records for the entire school.

In examining the student attendance and enrollment for 2006-2007, each student enrolled in the school during the academic year (shown on a computer print out from the main school department office), was entered into the network information system manually. The academic school year was changed to 2006-2007, and a detailed attendance summary for the student was displayed. The attendance history for each student and the months in which the student had no absences (perfect attendance) were recorded manually next to their name,

i.e. S for September, O for October etc. The months indicated next to each student's name was tallied up and recorded by grade. The number of students enrolled each month was also recorded by grade.

The data collected for the 2007-2008 school year was done differently. An attendance monthly summary was available from the main office in which students whom showed a zero for days absent were highlighted. After highlighting each student with perfect attendance each month, the total number of students with no absences each month was recorded by grade. The total number enrolled each month was also recorded by grade. Students who were shown to be inactive (indicated by an asterisk on the summary) were not included in the sample.

Data Analysis

The recorded data for each academic year was tallied and entered into Microsoft Excel. In the excel spreadsheet, the two academic years were separated. Grades 2-6 for each year were indicated along with the number of students enrolled each month, and the number of students with perfect attendance each month was indicated (see Table 1).

The percentages located at the bottom of each year report were calculated by dividing the number of students with perfect attendance by the number of students enrolled for the given month. This percentage indicated the percent of students with perfect attendance each month in comparison to the number enrolled (i.e. 54.5% of students enrolled in September had perfect attendance).

The percentages for students with perfect attendance in the given months were examined to determine if the intervention incentive of perfect attendance awards each month was effective.

Table 1: Numbers of students with perfect attendance/ enrolled by month for given years

2006-2007 Grade	Sept. E	Sept. P	Oct. E	Oct. P	Nov. E	Nov. P	Dec. E	Dec. P	Jan. E	Jan. P
2	48	25	48	23	46	26	46	25	47	12
3	88	51	89	52	90	45	92	48	92	34
4	96	47	96	57	98	56	98	57	98	40
5	78	43	78	43	78	38	78	40	76	26
6	86	50	87	54	87	44	87	45	85	37
Totals	396	216	398	229	399	209	401	215	398	149
Percent	54.50%		57.50%		52.40%		53.60%		37.40%	
2007-2008 Grade	Sept. E	Sept. P	Oct. E	Oct. P	Nov. E	Nov. P	Dec. E	Dec. P	Jan. E	Jan. P
2	50	34	51	28	52	29	53	13	51	20
3	47	37	49	30	50	26	30	16	49	24
4	91	61	95	54	94	54	94	26	96	44
5	96	57	100	58	96	47	98	27	96	39
6	69	41	69	38	69	40	67	22	68	28
Totals	353	230	364	208	361	196	342	104	360	155
Percent	65.20%		57.10%		54.30%		30.40%		43.10%	

[E represents Enrolled students; P represents students with Perfect Attendance]

Data was also entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine if statistical significance can be recognized for the given intervention. Data was entered into group statistics in three ways; all months (September through January), only September through November, and September through November including January. Data was entered three different ways because of the low percentage rates for December of the 2007-2008 academic year and January of the two academic years.

Findings

In determining whether the perfect attendance awards had an impact on the increase in attendance, the researcher took into account different factors which helped to understand the data. In looking at the percentages from the two academic years, it can be assumed that the perfect attendance awards did have an impact on increasing attendance due to the rise from 2006-2007 to 2007-2008. Although, the percentages for December and January of the two years respectively are markedly different, showing percentages in the 30 percent range, one can conclude the decrease in December's attendance and low attendance in January of

the sample population is attributed to the importance of holiday time spent with families in other distant countries such as Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic.

In calculating the rate of absenteeism for the two academic years, the number of students with perfect attendance was subtracted from the number of students enrolled for the given months; yielding the number of students absent in that month (see Table 3). The number of students absent in the given months decreased in the 2007-2008 year for every month except December.

In examining the SPSS data, first all months was considered. The mean scores for the two academic years differed by only 0.3 (2006-2007 mean score: 50.7, 2007-2008 mean score: 50.9). In determining whether this would be significant, an Independent Samples Test was used in which showed no significance for the difference in the two academic years.

The second test of examining the data in SPSS used only the months September, October, and November. For the academic year of 2006-2007 the mean score was 54.5, and for the academic year of 2007-2008 the mean score was 59.5, a difference of 5. An Independent Samples Test was also used to determine significance, and under this two-tailed test, the data proves to be statistically significant where $p= 0.033$.

The third test in SPSS for investigating the data used all the months except December. The mean scores for the two academic years were 50.0 and 55.4 respectively, showing a difference of about 5.4. The Independent Samples Test showed no significance for this data, but was insignificant by only a small margin ($p=.083$ on a scale where significance is shown when $p<.05$).

In examining significance using SPSS, the marginal differences in December and January are shown to decrease the significance levels of the data. Taking this into account,

the data was found to be effective based upon the researcher's knowledge and awareness of the increase in student attendance.

The researcher saw an increase in motivation and excitement for students to attend school each day in order to receive the certificate. After the first month of perfect attendance awards, teachers expressed students were "chomping at the bit" for the next month's attendance awards. Students expressed joy when given attendance awards, for many of them had never seen their name on any type of award before. Student's stated they "hung their attendance awards in their living rooms, bedrooms, and in various other rooms around their house" to display their achievement. The researcher also created an attendance award in Braille for the one visually impaired student of the school, creating a way in which she could also experience enjoyment from the certificate.

In addition to the perfect attendance certificates, the researcher put together a "Perfect Attendance" showcase located in the main hallway which displays each student's name who received perfect attendance during the month. Students will stop in the hallway while going by this showcase to eagerly see if their name is present, and will be able to point it out for others to see.

As a final determinant of how effective the perfect attendance certificates were, a "Perfect Attendance Survey" was administered at Charles Fortes Elementary School (see Appendix 2). The survey was anonymous and students were instructed not to include their names. The survey was put in teacher's mailboxes, and teachers were asked to administer the survey to the students and return it. Of the 15 classrooms, 9 classroom teachers administered and returned the survey.

In measuring the attendance of students for this study, the researcher used attendance records from last year and this year, which on the face of it, is a very valid way of measuring attendance.

The pre and post attendance values (2006-2007 academic year of attendance and the 2007-2008 academic year of attendance with implementation of certificates) are both understood to be at an interval level, indicating how much the attendance differs from the two academic years in which the attendance certificate accounts for the positive change in attendance. The means used by the researcher in comparing the difference between the two variables was by tallying attendance totals month by month for both years and looking at percentages. Although the variables are at an interval level, the researcher used an ordinal level of measurement to determine the correlation between the two variables. In measuring the variables ordinally, the researcher looked at which percentages were higher for the months of one academic year in comparison to that of the other academic year which included the perfect attendance certificates. The 2006-2007 academic year (pre) had one rate of absenteeism, and the 2007-2008 academic year (post) had a different rate of absenteeism (see Table 3) in which this difference is accounted for as the result of the implementation of the attendance certificates at the start of the 2007-2008 academic year.

Table 3: Rate of absenteeism from 2006-2007 (Pre) and 2007-2008 (Post)

Month	Number of students absent one or more days (Pre)	Number of students absent one or more days (Post)
September	180	123
October	169	156
November	190	165
December	186	238
January	249	205

The way the researcher decided to measure the variables, holds constant and controls for any potentially contaminating variables (race, gender, ethnicity, etc). Although students may have moved in and out of the school system, the only change attributing to attendance over the years examined was the attendance certificates and showcase. If there were any potentially contaminating variables that interfered with the 2006-2007 academic years' attendance records, the same potentially contaminating variables would most likely also interfered with the 2007-2008 academic years' attendance records which would thus have contributed to a change in attendance not solely to the attendance certificates but some other unseen variable.

In addition, the way the researcher measured the variables controls for temporal priority as well; attendance records that were filed in the 2006-2007 academic year were in fact filed during that year on the given days and calculating for human error in recording the attendance at that time could not be measured.

The above with the data analysis process of the level of measurement and statistical procedures to compare the relationship between the pre and post values (attendance for the 2006-2007 academic year and attendance for the 2007-2008 academic year) establishes internal validity.

In determining the external validity of this research study, the researcher determined how generalizable the findings are to the whole population. The findings of the study showed how the implementation of a certificate can increase motivation and give students the positive recognition they strive for. It is within human nature for anyone to thrive on acknowledgements and positive reinforcements, thus it appears to be valid in generalizing this research for the whole population of elementary school children.

Although the findings appear valid internally and externally, there are limitations to this study. The attendance recorded for the 2006-2007 academic year was completed in a way in which human error could have limited the validity of the results. Human calculable errors could have easily been made in tallying the perfect attendance and enrollment each month, thus skewing the resulting totals. In addition, given the sample population, although it is a very diverse school, the majority of the students come from Latino families with very low-incomes. There may be limits as to how valid this study can be generalized in regards to the same motivation and enjoyment for students who come from middle to upper class high-income families. Students from Charles Fortes have a stronger value and sense of how important the recognition of one's strengths is, as opposed to someone who has been handed everything they have ever wanted in life. Although this study appears to have external validity, these threats may have created results in which the researcher is wrong in making a generalization regarding the whole population.

Conclusion

Student absenteeism and truancy is an increasingly important problem which is facing schools in all areas. Many factors contribute to poor attendance, and interventions are constantly trying to help students attend school regularly. This research study examined whether the implementation of a perfect attendance award incentive would increase school attendance. It was found that the perfect attendance award showed an increase in student's motivation to attend school every day of the month in order to receive the certificate. As trivial as a computer printed certificate may seem, the impact and positive recognition the certificates gave to these students, meant more to them than most people will ever know.

It is considered to be so significant by Charles Fortes to increase attendance rates; a secondary award schedule has been implemented in recognizing students for perfect attendance for each quarter of the academic year. As recognition of student's attendance each quarter, colored wristbands with positive sayings on them will be distributed to students to further recognize their success.

This research study displays an implication for social work practice through the use of empowerment. Student's were recognized for their strengths of attending school every day during the different months and this recognition was confirmed by their receipt of a perfect attendance award. Understanding what motivates and moves people is the heart of social work practice. It is about finding out what people want and recognizing that the little things create the big changes.

Although the implementation of such an intervention/incentive is time consuming, the results, positive feedback and touching stories from the students is an immeasurable feeling in which all schools should work towards. Further research should be done at other schools to determine whether they see such an increase in enthusiasm and spirit surrounding their attendance at school. After such research was conducted, additional policies regarding implementations of interventions/incentives could be mandated in schools across the nation to effectively increase attendance based on significant previous research showing its positive implications.

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CERTIFICATE OF

PERFECT ATTENDANCE

This award is presented to:

For having perfect attendance for the month of January

Charles N. Fortes Elementary School

Date: _____

Presented by: _____

Perfect Attendance Certificate Survey

Circle your answers

1. Have you received a Perfect Attendance Certificate this school year?

YES / NO

2. How many Perfect Attendance Certificates have you received?

0 ----- 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5

3. Do the Perfect Attendance Certificates make you want to come to school every day?

YES / NO

4. Do you want the Perfect Attendance Certificates to continue next year?

YES / NO

Thank you for filling out your answers!

****Esta es una encuesta anónima. No ponga su nombre****

Encuesta sobre el Certificado de Asistencia Perfecta

Haga un círculo para indicar sus respuestas

1. ¿Ha recibido un Certificado de Asistencia Perfecta en este año académico?

SI / NO

2. ¿Cuántos Certificados de Asistencia perfecta ha recibido?

0 ----- 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5

3. ¿Le hacen los Certificados de Asistencia querer venir a clases todos los días?

SI / NO

4. ¿Quiere que los Certificados de Asistencia Perfecta continúen el próximo año?

SI / NO

¡Gracias por darnos sus respuestas!