

IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE IN TWO
RURAL MISSISSIPPI ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of low student attendance for two elementary schools in southwest Mississippi by reviewing interventions designed to improve average daily attendance among elementary students. This study sought to review previous interventions and determine which initiatives worked to improve student attendance using qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods such as interviews and document analysis were conducted with staff and administrators who work within the school district, ensuring attendance regulations are being met. Their responses, along with a review of related literature, provided insights into recent initiatives undertaken to address attendance issues. Quantitative methods, specifically a teacher survey, was designed based on themes resulting from the literature review. This feedback helped to place the problem of attendance in perspective and was used as a baseline measure to determine if previous initiatives had any impact on student attendance rates. A search of the literature indicated that numerous studies address the causes of student absences, absenteeism, and truancy, yet there is limited data that addressed what schools are or are not doing to combat the increasing problem of excessive absences in the elementary grades. Data gathered from semi-structured interviews, surveys, and document analysis provided a basis for remedying this problem. Using indicators obtained from research data may provide school districts with a starting point in which to develop or improve existing strategies for improving attendance at the elementary grades.

Keywords: attendance, truancy, school refusal behavior, absenteeism, compulsory education

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Dedication

In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.
1 Thessalonians 5:18 (KJV)



In loving memory of my son, Jarod “Sauce” Antoine (1989–2017)
In God’s Care; Always in my Heart

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The writing of a dissertation can be an overwhelming experience, yet it is not possible without the personal and practical support of numerous people. First, I want to thank God for answering my prayers and providing me with the right people that made this journey a success. I would like to thank my family, who have always been there for me and have shared their expectations of me continuously and, in turn, supported me in my efforts to pursue an education at its highest level. I would like to acknowledge President Jerry Falwell, Jr. and the faculty and staff at Liberty University, Dr. Patrick Sweeney, Director of Applied Doctoral Research, along with my Committee Chair and mentor, Dr. Leldon Nichols, who, I believe, was sent to me by God to aid me in the completion of this process. Many thanks are given to my dissertation committee member, Dr. Amy Jones and editor Dr. Katherine Todd who has been instrumental in making this dissertation a reality.

There are two exceptional individuals that I would like to acknowledge and recognize: Dr. Shannon Smith and Dr. Thaddeus J. Peters. These individuals were always available to provide feedback and support no matter what time of day or night without hesitation as well as ready to share their varying wealth of knowledge and experiences. Finally, to district personnel for your willingness and participation: without you, this would not have been possible. The focus and, indeed, the intent of this study were concerned with improving student attendance in the elementary grades. The outcome was to develop initiatives that would develop positive patterns of attendance in students, thereby reducing the probability of continued attendance issues.

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List of Abbreviations

Average Daily Attendance (ADA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Local Education Agency (LEA)

Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Other Academic Indicators (OAI)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Professional Development (PD)

Quality/Student Success (SQSS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this applied study was to analyze past initiatives and develop new initiatives or amend past initiatives in order to improve attendance rates for two southwest Mississippi elementary schools and students in Grades K4–2 and Grades 3–5, thereby increasing average daily attendance (ADA) rates in the district at these two elementary schools. The problem of practice is that most initiatives by Mississippi schools have not improved the low rates of students' ADA. Chapter One will present information that provides an overview of the research including background knowledge in three areas: historical context, social context, and theoretical context; the statement of the problem; and the significance of the research. It then presents the research finding that supports the need for such a study by analyzing and reviewing previous research related to the topic of student attendance. Chapter One concludes by summarizing the significance of the study and identifying terms relevant to this study.

Background

Historical Context

It has long been taught that education is the great equalizer, lifting less advantaged children out of poverty and improving their chances for success in adulthood. The opportunity for economic and social mobility depends heavily on access to high-quality education. Recent research has raised concerns about degradation in the quality of schools serving higher-poverty neighborhoods: The achievement gap between low- and high-poverty students appears to have widened over the last quarter-century (Reardon, 2011). Amidst the ever-changing educational and political landscapes, policy initiatives, and the belief that regular school attendance plays a critical role in students' success, it is at the forefront of legislative reform efforts. Recent reform

efforts have incited national initiatives focused on reducing student absenteeism on a large scale (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

In order to understand the development of our current public educational system, it is appropriate to look at how far obligatory attendance has come; this can be done by developing a timeline using new documentation on school attendance. Beginning in 1891 with an Ohio case, *Quigley v. State of Ohio*, courts were able to justify compulsory attendance on *parens patriae*, which allowed the state to act in the best interest of the child when the parent was determined negligent or incompetent. By the 1900s, 32 states besides Ohio had adopted school attendance laws, and by 1918 every state in the union had followed suit (Trujillo, 2006). In 1922, the Compulsory Education Act (Oreg. Ls., § 5259) required parents or guardians to send children between the ages of 8 and 16 to public school in the district where the children resided. In 1925, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, brought forth by an Oregon corporation, facilitated the care for orphans and the education of youth; the corporation also established and maintained academies or schools.

Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925) is one of two court cases where the United States Supreme Court affirmed the mandate of compulsory school attendance based on the Fourteenth Amendment. The court's position was that "parents do not have the right to determine whether their children are educated, but they do have the right to determine where such education takes place" (Lunenborg, 2011, p. 2). Since that time, compulsory education in the United States is mandated by a complex system of state laws requiring attendance at either public schools or some other acceptable learning environment (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 1925). "Compulsory laws aimed to achieve universal school attendance and were primarily directed at lower-class and immigrant families who did not already send their children to school" (Rauscher, 2015, p. 1402).

Since that time, every state in the nation has established a system of free public education and laws governing attendance (Ensign, 1969). Also, each state has developed a department of education and enacted laws regulating finance, the hiring of school personnel, student attendance, and curriculum (Thattai, 2001). Presently, seven of 50 states require only nine years of compulsory education; each of these states has a maximum requirement of only 16 or 17 years of age for school-age children and do not require compulsory education until a child turns 7 or 8 years of age (Aragon, 2015). However, “in January 2012, President Obama also called for states to extend compulsory education in the United States to age 18” (Rauscher, 2015, p. 1397).

Social Context

Annually, more than 13% of the nation’s children, 6.5 million to be exact, miss three or more weeks of school (Chang & Balfanz, 2016). Encouraging regular school attendance is one of the most important ways to prepare children for success. When school attendance becomes a priority, children get better grades, develop healthy life habits, avoid dangerous behaviors, and have a better chance of graduating from high school. Ensuring that free and compulsory education is available to children is generally considered a hallmark of a developed society and is emphasized as a fundamental right to which children should be entitled (Blyth & Milner, 1999). Ormrod (1999) stated that social learning theory has focused on learning that occurs within a social context. Dewey (2010) believed that if educational institutions provided young students space and opportunity to develop their interests in education naturally, those students would be better equipped to handle unpredictable changes in society. Would this ideology encourage a love of learning and school attendance among school-aged children?

It is crucial to understand how children develop their social-emotional skills. This knowledge can have vast implications on other aspects of their development (Dotterer & Lowe,

2011). Excessive absences in kindergarten have been linked to lower academic and social-emotional outcomes (Gottfried, 2015).

By the time children living in poverty are 4 years old, they lag 18 months below what is “normal” cognitive development for their age group. By third grade, their vocabulary is one-third that of their middle-income peers: about 4,000 words to their peers’ 12,000.

Poor parents are typically less educated and often too stressed making ends meet to engage their children in challenging verbal exchanges. (“When Poverty Comes to School,” 2014, p. 4)

All children, regardless of socioeconomic background, do worse academically in first grade if they are chronically absent (missing 10% or more of the school including excused and unexcused absences) in kindergarten. A recent study in California found that only 17% of children chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were proficient readers by the end of third grade as compared to 64% of their peers who attended regularly (missing less than 5% of school; Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011).

Concerning many educational leaders are indications that the adverse effects of absenteeism are compounded for students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds (Gottfried, 2014). Poor attendance also has negative impacts on the learning environment within the school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; Humm Patnode, Gibbons, & Edmunds, 2018). If a classroom has a high proportion of chronically absent students, lower reading and math scores are observed even for the students with good attendance (Gottfried, 2015). Research shows that social emotional learning not only improves achievement by an average of 11 percentile points, but it also increases prosocial behaviors (such as kindness, sharing, and empathy), improves student attitudes toward school, and reduces depression and stress among students (Durlak,

Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Students who are frequently absent report alienation from their peers and teachers and demonstrate more social disengagement (Gottfried, 2015). Although all these factors are in play, Ehrlich et al. (2014) indicated that parents believed attendance in early grades was not as important as attendance in later grades. This research suggests that parental beliefs about the importance of regular school attendance in kindergarten and elementary grades may be an area that should be addressed when developing interventions.

Theoretical Context

An underlying assumption of the educational system is that students regularly attend school. Students must be present and engaged to learn. Understanding why students miss school and assessing associated factors (i.e., emotional or behavioral) may help develop appropriate interventions to overcome the problem; however, recent research has called this assumption into question (Chang, Bauer, & Byrnes, 2018). During the first half of the 20th century, the behavioral school of psychology became a dominant force. The behaviorists posited that all learning was a result of direct experience with the environment through the processes of association and reinforcement (Cherry, 2019). Lev Vygotsky (1978), a Russian teacher and psychologist, first stated that we learn through our interactions and communications with others. Vygotsky's social development theory argues that social interaction precedes development; consciousness and cognition are the product of socialization and social behavior. Knowledge construction occurs within Vygotsky's (1962) "social context that involves student-student and expert-student collaboration on real-world problems or tasks that build on each person's language, skills, and experience shaped by each individual's culture" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). Vygotsky (1978) argued that "language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities like reading and writing" (p. 91).

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory of learning views individuals as active agents who both influence and are influenced by their environment. The social cognitive theory holds that observational learning, a subset of developmental theory, and modeling is the process of learning both desirable and undesirable behaviors by observing others and then reproducing those behaviors to receive maximum rewards (Vinney, 2019). Constructivists recognize that each person has his or her frame of reference that comes from his or her values, concepts, and ideas. Constructivists also realize there are "multiple interpretations of reality" (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 866). Vygotsky's theory is one of the foundations of constructivism. It asserts three major themes regarding social interaction that play fundamental roles in the process of cognitive development: the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development, and social interaction. The first major theme within this theory is the more knowledgeable other. The "more knowledgeable other" refers to anyone who has a better understanding or higher ability level than the learner concerning a task, process, concept, and the zone of proximal development. Thus, the student can perform a task in different situations as follows: (a) under adult guidance, and/or (b) with peer collaboration, and (c) the student's ability to solve the problem independently (see Figure 1). Most notably, social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development (David, 2014).

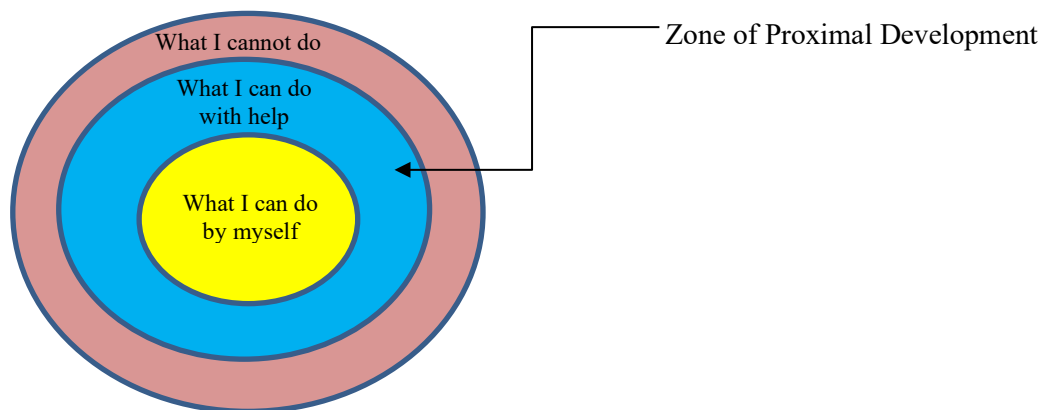


Figure 1. The zone of proximal development.

Problem Statement

The problem is that most initiatives by Mississippi schools have not improved the low rates of student ADA. For many years, educators, researchers, and policymakers focused on attendance chiefly in secondary school (i.e., middle school and high school), viewing truancy or unexcused absences as an indicator of student disengagement and eventual dropout. In 2008 when the National Center for Children in Poverty published a report detailing the extent of absenteeism—for excused and unexcused reasons—in the elementary grades (Attendance Works, 2014). Research suggests that this report may have been published because schools often blame their reduced attendance rates on individual students who are chronically absent, rather than consider what they may or may not be doing to cause the problem (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Fallis & Opotow, 2003). According to Attendance Works (2016), many poor rural districts have high rates of chronic absenteeism, and many districts reported rates of 30% or higher in rural areas.

The Local Education Agency (LEA) in rural Mississippi, the site of this study, understands that if students are not in school, they are not learning; thus, schools are required to take an active role in enforcing school attendance as a means of improving student learning. It is Mississippi law that each district's school personnel be responsible for enforcing the state's compulsory attendance laws. Besides the academic impact, student absenteeism also has a significant fiscal impact on schools. In many states, including Mississippi, there is a budgeted cost for office personnel and computer programs that are used to track attendance (Landsberg, 2007). It is costly when looking at the ramifications of students with chronic absences (Christie, 2006). If students are absent on the days used for the state count, monies that a school district receives for the upcoming year are negatively affected by the funding formulas used in many

states (Bafile, 2007), including Mississippi. Mississippi school funding is determined by ADA during the second (September) and third (October) months of school unless May ADA is higher from the previous school year.

Absenteeism is an unforeseen force that wreaks havoc on efforts to improve life outcomes (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) asserted that despite the long history of concern over student attendance, the issue had received little attention from educational researchers. Due to the increase in reported student absenteeism, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, conducted a Schools and Staffing Survey in 1990 and 1991. The statistical results from the teacher questionnaire showed that absenteeism and tardiness are a serious problem nationwide. In fact, 15% of Mississippi public school students (74,299) were chronically absent during the 2013–2014 school year based on a 2015 analysis (Buffington et al., 2015). The review of literature revealed that absenteeism rates in kindergarten (14%) tapered off in early elementary years and increased steadily throughout middle school and high school. The highest was 36% in Grade 12. Gottfried (2014) found that 13% of kindergarteners missed more than 10 % of the school year, with 10% of those students missing 11 to 19 days and 3% missing more than 20 days. Gottfried (2014) further explained that studies regarding chronic absenteeism are virtually nonexistent. Most initiatives do not consider the type (i.e., excused or unexcused) of absence in the matrix being implemented, which may have a significant effect on implementation success.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this applied study is to analyze past initiatives and develop new initiatives or amend past initiatives in order to improve attendance rates for two southwest Mississippi elementary schools for students in Grades K4–2 and Grades 3–5, thereby increasing average

daily attendance rates. A multimethod design was used, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first approach used semi-structured interviews. The second approach surveyed teachers in the target grades. The third approach used document analysis to collect data about district attendance trends.

Significance of the Study

The decision to choose the issue of improving student attendance was based on observations, discussions, and research on student attendance concerns across the country. While research has an abundance of data on secondary school attendance, little is known about chronic school absenteeism among early elementary school students, as well as among children in preschool programs. Successful schools work on attendance issues on multiple fronts, over time, learning from the field, and learning from the results of their efforts. These schools know that boosting attendance is a continuous process. As students, families, communities, and schools change, so must strategies that are designed to improve attendance (West, 2012). Despite considerable government funding to both LEAs and schools to promote new measures to improve school attendance, non-attendance at school is a relatively neglected topic as far as researched-based literature is concerned (Blyth & Milner, 1999). Excessive absences significantly impact a variety of student outcomes, including mathematics and reading achievement, social-emotional development, grade retention and dropout, and student discipline (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018; Gottfried & Gee, 2017). The significance of this study on how to improve elementary school attendance helps to fill a void that exists in research, thereby providing a template for school districts to improve students' daily attendance rates. A review of the literature indicates that properly timed interventions before absences become chronic and entrenched habits are effective at curbing absences (Cole, 2011). One key issue to consider

when it comes to absenteeism is how many national data exist on how frequently children—from all socioeconomic and racial groups—are skipping class, and whether those absences are considered excused or unexcused by the schools (Richmond, 2015). This research can add to the expanding collection of data on intervention programs, which can affect positive change in districts that are struggling with attendance rates. Reviewing previous research provides a way to identify topics, and research methodology can guide the direction for future research studies.

According to Wicks (2017), few states have reported or tracked attendance information, making it difficult to gauge the impact of chronic absenteeism on student success. Schools and districts traditionally have focused on ADA as a measure of healthy student attendance because ADA is so closely associated with per-pupil funding for districts and schools. Furthermore, past research suggests that parents do not necessarily believe attendance in early grades is as important as attendance in later grades (Ehrlich et al., 2014). Programs such as *Every Student, Every Day* focused on the 5 million to 7.5 million students who, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) estimated, are chronically absent each year. Chronic absenteeism puts students at heightened risk of falling behind in their schoolwork or dropping out of school altogether.

A fundamental expectation of education is that students attend school daily. Students must be present and engaged if they are expected to learn; however, recent research has called this expectation into question (Chang et al., 2018). Research indicated a long history of examining specific types of absences or truancy; research also revealed that chronic absenteeism in schools was not consistently measured until recently (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The reauthorization of federal education law with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 prompted a state-level focus on student attendance as a robust measure of school quality/student success (SQSS; Jordan & Miller, 2017). During the 2015–2016 school year, the most recent

national data available, the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) found that nearly 8 million students were chronically absent, defined as missing 15 or more school days during the year (Chang et al., 2018). In 1980, Mississippi ranked 50th in the nation in student performance on national standardized assessments. Only 45% of the state's first graders would finish 12th grade. According to Mississippi Justice Dawn Beam (2018), Mississippi is currently ranked 44th in education. Beam believes the 44th-place ranking reflects the state's poor performance in terms of the number of young children not in school, fourth-grade proficiency in reading, eighth-grade proficiency in math, and on-time high school graduation.

This study provides more empirical evidence in order to fill a significant gap in research that exists on what schools are (or are not) doing to improve low student attendance in the early grades. From a social change perspective, this study is well suited to the directives of the 2009 education reform legislation signed into law by President Barack Obama, which promotes significant improvements in attendance and access to quality education for all Americans.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the study are open-ended and intended to garner information related to the district's efforts to improve attendance rates. The following research questions served as a general guide to facilitate the explanation of the research problem. This study answered questions drawn from prior research to discover attendance practices within the district among two elementary schools. This research concerns itself with the following issues:

Central Question: How can the problem of low student attendance be improved in Grades K4–5 for two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?

Sub-question 1: How would the administrators and attendance personnel describe the collective efficacy of the organization toward student attendance in a qualitative face-to-face

interview in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?

Sub-question 2: How would quantitative research data in the form of an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey guide the implementation of attendance initiatives?

Sub-question 3: How would qualitative data in the form of a Daily Attendance document analysis reveal patterns in attendance based on initiative implementations?

Definitions

Research on the topic of student attendance has found that there are a variety of terms that describe school attendance, nonattendance, absenteeism, and truancy. These terms are often used interchangeably, a fact that can make it difficult to measure the importance of the issue. The following terms and definitions were retrieved from the state of Mississippi Education codes and the Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement:

1. *Absenteeism* – all student absences, including excused and unexcused absences (Miss. Code Ann. §37-13-91).
2. *Chronic Absenteeism* – incorporates all excused and unexcused absences and suspensions of students enrolled (Miss. Code Ann. §37-13-91).
3. *Compulsory attendance* – describes the law that mandates any minor between the ages of 6–17 to be enrolled in a private, public, or homeschool program (Miss. Code Ann. §37-13-91).
4. *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)* – defines a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students in a school to achieve social, emotional, and academic success (Miss. Code Ann. §§ 37-9-69 and 37-11-57).

5. *Truant* – a student that has accumulated five or more unlawful absences in a school year, excluding suspension and expulsion days (Miss. Code Ann. §37-13-91).
6. *Habitually Truant* – a student who has accumulated 12 or more unlawful absences, excluding suspension and expulsion days, in a school year, which shall result in the filing of a petition in a court of competent jurisdiction by the school attendance officer (Miss. Code Ann. §37-13-91).

Summary

Chapter One is an introduction to the research that was conducted and provides the context and background information of the study including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the research questions, as well as the essential terms of this study. The problem is that most initiatives by Mississippi schools have not improved the low rates of student ADA. This research sought information related to previous districtwide attendance initiatives to increase attendance rates among K4–5 students. The purpose of this applied study was to solve the problem of how to improve attendance rates for two southwest Mississippi elementary schools among students in grades K4–2 and 3–5 by developing or revising initiatives to address the problem.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chang and Balfanz (2016) stated, “The promise of an equal opportunity to learn regardless of the circumstances or social class is a widely accepted civil right that binds us together as a nation” (p. 4). The strength of our democracy lies in its citizens, having the ability to engage in civil discourse productively. Some suggest that one of the main priorities of schooling should be preparing students to be active participants in our democratic society (Edwards, 2014). Absenteeism in school is not a new issue; this crisis, when thoroughly researched, can be found in the late 19th century when a quarter of the juveniles jailed at the Chicago House of Correction in 1898 were there for truancy (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). Attendance Works (2017), a national initiative, reported more than seven million students nationwide are chronically absent from school. This study sought to determine what can schools do to assist parents with the ever-growing concern regarding low attendance rates in rural school districts. While most initiatives by Mississippi schools have not improved low rates of student average daily attendance, schools are still in a better position to address this phenomenon than parents alone.

In order to shape the perspective of this research, it was vital to have a functioning familiarity with the history of the phenomenon being researched. Chapter Two examines the literature regarding student attendance, school refusal behaviors, and absenteeism, which are relevant to the study of improving student attendance in two elementary schools in southwest Mississippi. The review of literature provides a guide to compulsory education in Mississippi and the United States and the constant battle that rural school districts face when it comes to attendance rates in the lower grades. The chapter establishes a theoretical framework for this

study while providing relevant background knowledge. Literature related to compulsory attendance laws, truancy, poverty, and attendance interventions amongst other vital areas are reviewed. Documents reviewed include academic journals, educational periodicals, bulletins, reports, manuscripts, dissertations, theses, and books. This literature review provides a context for the challenges of excessive absences and the impact of low attendance and one district's efforts to address a national problem with local implications.

Many contributing factors determine a child's ability to learn and succeed at any grade level. This chapter examines the literature regarding absenteeism, attendance, truancy, student refusal behaviors, leadership responsibilities, parents' role, state and district policy, the impact of excessive absences, state of Mississippi guidelines, financial impact of absences, poverty's role, and researched interventions as it relates to the problems facing two public schools in rural Mississippi. Of primary concern is whether initiatives alone lead to higher or lower attendance rates in the elementary grades. The review of literature focuses on several interrelated areas and considers essential elements in the relationship between school attendance and student success. Moreover, these areas provide background information and a theoretical framework for the study. From a review of the literature, many organizations, community leaders, and even political leaders view attendance as essential to the development of academic success in the lives of children. It is also clear that regular school attendance is widely expected. Districts with successful school attendance initiatives, irrespective of student socioeconomic status, have students who are more likely to attend school regularly.

Theoretical Framework

Social learning theory proposes that individuals seek guidance from role models and base their own behavior on these observations (Brown & Treviño, 2014; Morgan, Sibthorp, &

Tsethlikai, 2016). In this same context, four elements make up social learning theory: observational learning, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1977). Observational learning happens via observing and imitating others (Bandura, 1977; Veale, Gilbert, Wheatley, & Naismith, 2015). Self-regulation occurs when an individual evaluates different behaviors to determine how to behave. Self-efficacy is an individual's beliefs in his/her abilities, capabilities, and behaviors. According to Bandura's (1977) social cognitive learning theory, one could conclude that a student learns from his environment. Bandura (1977) stated,

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous if people had to rely solely on the effects of their actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned by observation through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

Therefore, if students are absent from school, they are not learning. Student absenteeism can usually be categorized by one or a combination of four factors—individual, family, school, and community (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). There are multiple lenses through which this research could have progressed, one of which is the functional model of school refusal behavior, and another is to understand child-motivated school refusal. School refusal behavior refers to child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulty attending classes for an entire day (Kearney & Silverman, 1996). School refusal behaviors also refer to a spectrum of problematic, illegitimate absenteeism that includes youths who miss school for extended periods of time, youths who miss school sporadically, youths who skip certain classes or who are tardy to school, youths with severe morning misbehaviors to attempt to miss school, and youths who attend

school with high anxiety and somatic complaints that precipitate ongoing pleas to miss school in the future (Kearney, 2003). Another lens recognized by Bandura (1986) is the link between the collective efficacy of an organization and the individual personal efficacy of an organization. Bandura (1997) defined the construct of “collective efficacy” as a “group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p. 477). According to Bandura (1986), of all the thoughts that affect human functioning and standing, at the very core of social cognitive theory are self-efficacy beliefs: “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1997, p. 391).

Low rates of school attendance in Mississippi coupled with the idea that most initiatives have not improved low rates of student ADA encourage schools to find better ways to implement school attendance initiatives. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that rewarding elementary students for good attendance with parties, gift certificates, and recognition at assemblies was meaningfully correlated with reducing chronic absenteeism as well as increasing daily attendance rates. Others have questioned whether incentives are short-term strategies for a problem that needs a long-term systemic solution (Wagstaff, Combs, & Jarvis, 2000). During this study it was found that these incentives, while consistent, did not provide long-term results.

This concern is related to states’ responsibility of choosing at least one indicator to measure school quality or student success as outlined by ESSA. The idea that school refusal behavior affects about 5-28% of school-aged youths at one time or another and is present equally across gender, race, and income groups is of great concern (Kearney, 2001). Ehrlich, Gwynne, Allensworth, and Fatani (2016) emphasized that school attendance is a crucial component in shaping the foundation for student learning and success. Also, Ehrlich et al. (2016) found that

students who were frequently absent were more likely to fall behind in school or develop weaker academic skills. Thus, they suggested implementing strategies to increase student attendance.

The most dominant lens in this study is social learning theory, whose main component is observational learning. This critical concept provides direction and relevance to this study.

Furthermore, the knowledge gleaned from this study could be used to inform schools about initiatives that can assist in better meeting the individual needs of students with low attendance rates.

Related Literature

Public education is an integral part of American society and the subject of interest to researchers (Beets et al., 2009). It can be agreed that school attendance matters. It is arguably one of the most important indicators of school success (Meador, 2017). Secondly, there is no standard recording of truancy that is uniformly used across states. Third, truancy numbers do not include excused absences or suspensions, which unmediated also have an impact on learning (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Gage, Sugai, Lunde, and DeLoreto (2013) pointed out there are typically two types of student absences: excused and unexcused, though specifics are defined at the state level. Excused absences are documented and approved due to illnesses, medical appointments, and school-related absences (Gage et al., 2013). The literature reviewed indicates that student absences equal fewer instructional hours, and because of these missed instructional hours, students often have gaps in their educational foundation that are never filled (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014). Building a connection between what has been implemented and taking a closer look at what programs worked to improve attendance may be instrumental in improving district-wide programs to address attendance concerns.

Kearney (2008) found that until 1993, researchers neglected the variable of attendance. Epstein (2008) conducted one of the earliest analyses of attendance, which showed a positive influence on student performance. Epstein (2008) implied that variables of average school attendance also exerted a positive influence on student performance. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz (2009) suggested that districts prioritize efforts in order to develop a comprehensive approach to combating truancy and dropouts. The importance of accurate data collection, setting high expectations for all students, communication, and alternative learning environments may help to increase student attendance rates, especially in the lower grades. Addressing poverty-related factors that interfere with students' ability to learn are also essential factors to consider when developing interventions. These issues include health and well-being, limited literacy and language development, access to material resources, and level of student mobility. Research conducted by Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010), suggesting that absenteeism, skipping classes, and truancy were indicators of potential dropouts; students with high absenteeism were almost six times more likely to drop out of school.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that in order to understand the way children develop, it is necessary to observe their behavior in natural settings while they are interacting with familiar adults over a prolonged period of time. Recent revisions to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasize culture and the diversity of human experience as being central to human development (Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrando-Oppenheimer, Vega-Molina, & García-Coll, 2017). Therefore, it can be gathered from the literature that positive relationships among teachers and students play a contributing role in improving student attendance. Epstein (2010) lends credence to the argument for schools finding ways to connect to families by saying, "If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the

school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools” (p. 81).

Since 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty in his State of the Union speech, programs to address the education of the country’s most vulnerable citizens have also been addressed (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). In 1997 the nation was challenged by then-President William Jefferson Clinton to adopt high national standards, ensuring that every fourth grader was reading, and every eighth grader was proficient in math. These standards represented what all students must know to succeed in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton stated,

Every state and school must shape the curriculum to reflect these standards, and train teachers to lift students up to them. To help schools meet the standards and measure their progress, we will lead an effort over the next two years to develop national tests of student achievement in reading and math”. Raising standards will not be easy, and some of our children will not be able to meet them at first, the point is not to put our children down, but to lift them up. Good tests will show us, who needs help, what changes in teaching to make, and which schools need to improve. (par. 30)

The next mandate towards education came with President George Bush in 2002, with legislation that has become commonly known the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, signed into law on January 8, 2002. NCLB increased the level of accountability on states, school districts, and individual schools for student success. NCLB legislation transformed the face of public education in the United States. Strauss (2015) quoted President Bush as saying,

We have got considerable challenges here in America. There is no greater challenge than to make sure that every child—and all of us on this stage mean every child, not just a few

children every single child, regardless of where they live, how they are raised, the income level of their family, every child receives a first-class education in America. (para. 4)

This legislation gave state departments of education a directive to establish new standards and models of accountability for every public school in the nation that wished to continue receiving federal funding. NCLB mandated that all schools develop a timetable for improvement in student achievement in various academic areas. If student performance on standardized testing assessments and other academic indicators (OAI) are not at acceptable levels, and a prescribed level of growth is not met each year by the schools, then the district would receive sanctions. In some cases, the schools would fall under the control of that state's department of education.

The latest educational mandate came from former President Barack Obama with the passage of Every Child Succeeds Act of 2015, which reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students. In his speech, former President Obama (2015) stated:

The goals of No Child Left Behind, the predecessor of this law, were the right ones: High standards. Accountability. Closing the achievement gap. Making sure that every child was learning, not just some. However, in practice, it often fell short. It did not always consider the specific needs of each community. It led to too much testing during classroom time. It often forced schools and school districts into cookie-cutter reforms that did not always produce the kinds of results that we wanted to see. Moreover, that is okay—sometimes reform efforts require you to try something, it does not work, you learn some lessons, and you make modifications. (para. 3)

The ESSA of 2015 represents the first time that federal education law specifically mentions attendance as a measure of accountability. The inclusion of attendance reflects the increasing awareness in Washington and across the country that chronic absences are a key-indicators for assessing school and student success. On page 47 of the ESSA, chronic absenteeism appears on a list of metrics that must be included on report cards that states submit to the federal government. Under the new law's language, the information must be broken down by various student subgroups, including racial and ethnic identity and disability status, as well as homeless and foster care students. This section also calls for tracking suspensions and expulsions, which also contribute to school absenteeism.

The Tenth Amendment helps to define the relationship between federal and state governments by explaining who has the power when it comes to education. The amendment states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people" (U.S. Const. amend. X). Julie Underwood (2018), quoting *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), noted that education is a right that should be distributed fairly and equally:

Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

Compulsory Schooling in Mississippi

While in bondage, enslaved black people were prohibited from any source of education. Shortly after the Civil War, during the Reconstruction period, the state of Mississippi established free education for all regardless of race under an educational clause adopted by the Biracial

Constitutional Convention in 1868. To regain control and re-establish the South's pride, White Mississippians enacted the laws of Jim Crow. They gained control over the state's educational, political, and social systems with legal and physical action. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, White officials did everything in their power to maintain "separate but equal" education (Roy, 2018).

These actions emphasized the fact that the United States Supreme Court had ruled that education is not a fundamental right and the notion of compelling formal education has been in existence since the 1600s; although there are subtle differences in every state's compulsory school attendance statutes, every state has laws mandating school attendance for minor children. Mississippi, along with many other states, followed Massachusetts' lead when establishing compulsory schooling laws.

The first laws for compulsory schooling in Mississippi were passed in 1972 (Morgan, 2004). At that time, the law requirements for children residing in Mississippi included school attendance for students ages 5–18. As with all states, public education in Mississippi is free to any child who will be age 5 on or before September 30th of each year. Mississippi places the responsibility of school attendance on parents and guardians of all children between ages 6 and 17. Parents are to provide an education to their child or children either through a public school or non-public school. The only exceptions are students under age 17 who have already earned a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate or are currently enrolled in a GED program. The other exception is a child enrolled in a homeschool. The specificity of the law in Mississippi clearly outlines who should be receiving an education either in a public school, private school, or homeschool. Individual districts have policies and procedures in place to monitor the type of education students receive in their districts. In

addition, Mississippi publishes an attendance policy in student handbooks, which describes attendance expectations. All guidelines established by the district are according to laws outlined by the State of Mississippi. Mississippi school policy for all schools within the state indicates that school sessions for at least 180 days each school year shall be conducted. All students should have the opportunity to attend, and the school system is responsible for any consequences to those who fail to comply. Teachers are to take attendance daily, and the teacher's records must be retained for up to two years. The storage of these records is within the district's control.

To improve outcomes for Mississippi children legislation was passed in 1997. Legislation known Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) was considered a means to ensure that every child in Mississippi received an adequate education (MS Code Sections: 37-151-1; 37-151-5; 37-151-6; 37-151-79; 37-151-81; 37-151-83 and 37-151-85). MAEP was designed to provide additional resources for districts that educate high numbers of students who are labeled at-risk. At-risk for MAEP purposes is defined as students who come from economically disadvantaged households as defined by participation in the United States Department of Agriculture's Free and Reduced Lunch Program.

The MAEP law contains a formula that the Mississippi Department of Education uses to determine a base cost for each student in the state. The state of Mississippi contributes 73% or more of that base cost, and the local school districts are required to contribute up to 27% of the remaining cost depending on what each district can provide through local tax revenue. The amount of the state contribution to the student base cost is then multiplied by the ADA of each school. The ADA metric is the average of the number of students that attend a school per day. For funding purposes, the data must be reported to the state accurately (White & Dendy, 2018). On April 25, 2013, the Mississippi State Legislature amended the MAEP statute in order to

standardize attendance reporting across the state by clearly defining what constitutes an absence for the attendance component of the funding formula. The new law set the minimum percentage of the school day a student must attend at 63%. In other words, if a student misses more than 37% of the academic school day, they will receive an absence for purposes of MAEP attendance reporting (House Bill 1530; White & Dendy, 2018).

State and District Attendance Policy

In Mississippi, the Office of Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement is responsible for ensuring that all students in the state can attend school and enforce the state's compulsory school attendance law §37-13-91 of the Mississippi Code 1972 Annotated. The law requires a parent, legal guardian, or custodian who has legal control or charge of a child age 6 to 17 to enroll him or her in an education program (i.e., public, private or homeschool). Student enrollment must occur except under the limited circumstances specified in subsection three of §37-13-91, which include, but are not limited to, sending the child to a state-approved, nonpublic school, or educating the child at home in an organized educational program. July 1, 2003, the law was amended to include the following: a child, 5 years of age, who enrolls in public kindergarten, will have to abide by the same guidelines as outlined in the §37-13-91 (MS Department of Education, 2012).

In 2018, the Mississippi Office of the State Auditor conducted a review of school attendance data and policies. White and Dendy (2018) reported that Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) should re-evaluate existing policies and procedures related to attendance reporting to ensure the accuracy and reliability of attendance data. The Office of the State Auditor's Performance Audit Division recommended that the MDE determine whether appropriate internal controls are in place in order to provide reasonable assurance of the accuracy

and reliability of attendance data. In addition, a more in-depth study of the current attendance standard is required to determine whether to retain or alter the current state attendance standard to align with the federal standard. Key conclusions from the report were that the MDE appeared to lack appropriate internal controls at the school level to ensure the accuracy and reliability of data used for funding calculations. It was further found that superintendents had previously expressed concerns regarding the effect of the state attendance standard. According to the report, 67% (six out of nine) schools had discrepancies between the data reported by teachers and the data reported in enrollment and attendance reports during unannounced headcounts that raised concerns regarding the internal controls in place to ensure accurate student counts (White & Dendy, 2018).

Importance of School Attendance in the Early Grades

The research on the importance of school attendance has been researched in great depth. It shows that absenteeism in preschool and kindergarten can influence whether a child will be successful or unsuccessful by third grade. Due to the abundance of research data, the link between absenteeism in early elementary and a child's ability to master reading by the end of third grade was targeted by Mississippi leaders. In Mississippi, third grade has been deemed as an important pivot point in a child's education; at this point, the student's education shifts from learning to read to reading to learn. To ensure that students are progressing as needed to be successful, in 2013, Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant signed Senate Bill 2341, Mississippi's 3rd Grade Literacy Retention Promotion Act. This act ensures that Mississippi students address reading issues before third-grade promotion (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

While there are multiple benefits of attending school regularly, regular attendance involves the idea that student absenteeism may affect student achievement and that excessive

student absenteeism may create problems for families, schools, and communities when students are not in school (Fantuzzo, Grimm, & Hazan, 2005). Ehrlich et al. (2016) found that early learners are among the groups that suffer from chronic absenteeism. The findings of a 2011 longitudinal study indicated that children who attended center-based care in prekindergarten had lower odds of being chronically absent in kindergarten (Gottfried, 2015).

In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), the United States Supreme Court affirmed the mandate of compulsory school attendance. Early settlers believed that children should be educated so they could read and study the Bible. Compulsory attendance was a way of “getting children into school and out of the workforce, which allowed adults to work for higher wages and support their families” (Kotin & Aikman, 1980). The court’s position was that “parents do not have the right to determine whether their children are educated, but they do have the right to determine where such education takes place” (Lunenburg, 2011). According to Gichuru, Riley, Robertson, and Park (2015), embracing the diverse cultural backgrounds of children in pre-school classrooms helps children to develop and further understand their true identities. It also allows other children opportunities to get to know their classmates and grow to respect the backgrounds of those who are different from them.

Impact of Excessive Absences

Excessive absences in the classroom produce an adverse effect on students’ academic performance in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Missing school in the early grades can have a snowball effect. It sets kids up to fall behind in the fundamental reading skills they need in order to move on to more complicated work (Kelly, n.d.). While there is no consistent definition of chronic absenteeism either in the academic literature or across states (Dougherty 2018), chronic absenteeism significantly impacts a variety of student outcomes including

mathematics and reading achievement, social-emotional development, grade retention, and dropout rates, and student discipline (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). Gottfried and Gee (2017) found that in the early grades, absenteeism is most rampant in kindergarten, and its consequences are particularly detrimental, often leading to poorer academic, behavioral, and developmental outcomes later in life.

“Children who miss class fail to benefit from teacher-led lessons, peer interactions, and other activities designed to foster learning, which is harmful to school success” (Morrissey, Hutchinson, & Winsler, 2014, p. 1). Compared to their peers, students who do not attend school regularly have lower academic performance, limited future employment opportunities, and will possibly experience social and emotional problems in adulthood (Askeland, Haugland, Stormark, Boe, & Hysing, 2015; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Social development theory as articulated within Vygotsky’s work (1978) stated that every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level. Therefore, the social setting is crucial to cognitive and social development. Without parents or parent substitutes, without peers, and without other important adults to model appropriate behavior, learning is severely compromised within social learning theory.

Attendance Works (2014), a national advocacy organization that focuses on the importance of students attending school regularly, has become the go-to source of attendance research data for many states. Through their research and others, it has been confirmed that school attendance has a significant influence on student success. The research conducted by Attendance Works cited indicators that districts need to consider:

- Poor attendance in the first month of school can predict chronic absence for the entire year.

- Absenteeism in kindergarten can affect whether a child develops the grit and perseverance needed to succeed in school.
- Absenteeism in preschool and kindergarten can influence whether a child will be held back in third grade.
- Absenteeism in middle and high school can predict dropout rates.
- Absenteeism influences, not just chances for graduating but also for completing college.
- Improving attendance is an essential strategy for reducing achievement gaps.
- When students reduce absences, they can make academic gains (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

The root causes of chronic absenteeism are often multifaceted and unique to each student, but to put measures in place to improve attendance requires an understanding of these causes (Chang et al., 2018). Absences not only affect the academic progress of the student but also influence the in-class planning of teachers and, at the same time, the motivations of the other students in the class (Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013).

How the State of Mississippi Is Addressing Attendance Challenges

Chronic absenteeism has been linked to multiple negative academic and social outcomes (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). Educational stakeholders seek ways to improve problems of attendance in schools, especially since truancy has been linked to problem behaviors, including academic failure, school dropout, and delinquency (Mueller & Stoddard, 2006). Sheldon and Epstein (2004) described the process of keeping kids in school as a “holistic” process involving many groups of people, including schools, families, and community members. In 2013, Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant signed Senate Bill 2341, Mississippi’s 3rd Grade Literacy

Retention Promotion Act. The act focuses on improving literacy skills beginning in kindergarten and extending through third grade. The act requires every school district to provide a strong reading-intensive based curriculum as well as an intervention for students displaying a substantial deficiency in reading. The act also mandates that the school district deny promotion from the third to the fourth grade for any student whose deficiency is not remedied before the end of third grade. Mississippi leaders have put in place strategies to address reading deficits in the early grades but have failed to implement measures to address poor attendance in those foundational years.

Numerous reports point to the academic impact of school attendance; few of them address what schools are (or are not) doing to improve student attendance rates. When a student misses school, who is responsible? This question is not directed at the student but the parent or guardian. Regardless of the reason that a student is absent from school, it falls to the classroom teacher to work diligently to ensure that the student is well prepared for future academic pursuits. To see long term change, parents, teachers, and educational leaders must understand that when students are habitually absent from school, they are not receiving those much-needed skills that will ensure educational and ultimately life success. The causes of frequent absences are often divided into four broad categories: family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kopperud & Weaver, 2002).

School factors include the following:

- School safety issues (e.g., bullying).
- School climate issues.
- The flexibility to meet the diverse cultural and learning styles of students in the school.

- Failure to successfully notify families about each absence can be considered negligent.
- Lack of consistency and uniformity to attendance and attendance policy within schools and districts.

Family factors include the following:

- Lack of familiarity with school attendance laws.
- Lack of parental supervision and/or guidance.
- Ambivalent attitudes about the importance of education.
- Domestic violence.
- Drug or alcohol abuse in the home.
- Serious mental health or medical issues.
- Involvement in the criminal justice system.

Student variables include the following:

- Poor academic performance, sometimes due to special education needs, and a resulting lack of self-esteem.
- Unmet mental health needs.
- Alcohol and drug use and abuse.
- Lack of vision of education to achieve goals.

Economic influences include the following:

- Single-parent households and teenage motherhood.
- Poverty.
- High rate of mobility or relocation.
- Parents who work multiple jobs.

- Families that lack affordable transportation and/or childcare.
- Severely distressed neighborhoods.

In addition to these four categories of concern, schools also have to be mindful of the impact of student attendance as it relates to the fifth indicator outlined in the ESSA. This indicator requires states to add at least one measure of school quality or student success (SQSS) to their statewide accountability system that is evidence-based, systematically measurable, and meaningfully differentiated between schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Under ESSA, chronic absence is a required reporting metric for local and state report cards and an optional measure for school accountability (Attendance Works, 2017).

The School Leaders' Role in Addressing Student Attendance

Although regulating school attendance is an important endeavor due in part to ESSA indicators, it can prove to be a very taxing endeavor. Failure to positively impact attendance rates is something school leaders cannot afford to avoid. School leaders often have very little direct control in ensuring that students attend school regularly, but positive school climate and behavior management and incorporating community and parental involvement are key to positive change (Preston, Goldring, Guthrie, Ramsey, & Huff, 2017).

As the primary leader of the district, the Superintendent of Schools is the one person who can lead the charge for change to improve the district's ability to improve attendance rates. Although the ultimate responsibility falls to the student's parents, guardians, or other responsible adults, district leaders are in the best position to facilitate change through leadership and guidance of building administrators (i.e., principal and assistant principal).

Community leaders are yet another role that principals are expected to fulfill in today's world (Khalifa, 2012). This role is related to the principal's primary responsibility, which is to

produce positive student outcomes that lead to the students being prepared for college and being career-ready (Wallace Foundation, 2013). The principal is in a strategic position as a community leader to bring together the internal and external stakeholders to provide increased opportunities for all involved (Khalifa, 2012).

Researchers who have examined education leadership agree that effective principals are responsible for establishing a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students (Wallace Foundation, 2013). Attendance improvement is part of fostering a school culture conducive to learning, and principal leadership is key to creating a culture that encourages positive school attendance. Through a constant and comprehensive data review, leaders can address the different forms of attendance problems their school is evidencing absences, tardiness, class skipping, or suspension/expulsion. Data related to each campus are unique, and strong leaders have their finger on the pulse of their school and understand that monitoring and reviewing student data is the first key step to intervening with individual students who are missing many school days. While all stakeholders must ensure students show up to class every day, the leadership role that a principal play is irreplaceable. Principals are uniquely positioned to ensure their school adopts a comprehensive, tiered approach to improving attendance that fits with their overall approach to promoting academic achievement (Attendance Works, n.d.). Principals must consider the importance of mining attendance data on an ongoing basis, using year-end data for accountability does not consider that some chronic absences are outside of a school's control (Blad, 2017).

Principals play an important role because they can make a difference when they do the following:

1. cultivate a school-wide culture of attendance

2. use chronic absence data to assess need for added support
3. develop staff capacity to adopt effective attendance practice
4. advocate for resources and policies to improve attendance (Attendance Works, n.d.).

The growth and development of children is not just a current trend regarding the need for children to learn, because the education of children has always taken place but has varied among cultures. According to the literature by Roopnarine and Johnson (2013), a wide range of religious beliefs and backgrounds affect the school's ability to build appropriate systems of learning geared towards meeting the developmental needs of children in early childhood education programs. In order to build a school-wide culture of attendance, administrators and teachers must set the example by being present every day. They set the standards and expectations for students. Pullen (2014) discovered teachers have a greater role than was previously perceived when dealing with attendance issues, but these teachers needed more training on the district's attendance policies and should also have a greater role in the creation and implementation of their district's policy. Rice (2015) suggested taking a strategic approach with a combination of data collection, communication, and bolstering family supports.

Parents' Role in Student Attendance

Students who live with parents, guardian, or other responsible adults that value education are usually more successful than students whose responsible adults do not value education. These adults do not realize that there are often consequences that districts face because of their student's absences. A large body of research supports the view that the attitudes, behaviors, and activities related to the child's education are influenced by those behaviors, and these individuals are critical partners in ensuring that children get to school on time and every day. Often even well-intentioned parents do not fully understand the negative consequences of absences,

particularly in the early grades when many assume not much “learning” is taking place. Other times they face real barriers to getting their children to class. Kearney and Ross (2014) have found that the earliest indicators of future disengagement include crying or clinging, limited participation in class, frequent trips to the bathroom during class, and bargaining future school attendance. Although these variables may have a direct impact, others would attribute absenteeism to school-controlled features such as student disengagement, classroom workload, or teacher quality (Velloso & Vadeboncoeur, 2015). While illness is a big factor in the early grades, the research shows that parental attitudes toward attendance and the comfort level with the local school can affect absenteeism rates (Attendance Works, 2014). Sheppard (2007) found that students with continued absences are more likely to come from families who are socially excluded, concluding that parents could benefit from learning how to become more involved with their children’s education.

Students and their parents need to have shared beliefs and understanding about long-term success in school. Parental beliefs may be shifted to value regular K-5 attendance when communications emphasize that students in grades as early as kindergarten experience rigorous, standard-based schooling that forms the foundation for future learning (Duardo, 2013; Ferguson, 2016). Parents generally fall victim to the Lake Wobegon effect (Harrison & Shaffer, 1994; Maxwell & Lopus, 1994), believing their child’s school attendance is better than that of their classmates. The key to improving attendance in kindergarten and elementary school lies in changing parent beliefs toward school attendance in the early grades.

Rogers and Feller (2016) found that providing direct communication with parents regarding their student’s attendance effectively decreased student absences. Research has suggested that, directly or indirectly, family attitudes play a part in keeping children from school

(Kinder, Harland, Wilkin, & Wakefield, 1995; Kinder, Wakefield, & Wilkin, 1996; Hallam & Roaf, 1997). Teachers believe that family and community factors, such as parentally condoned absence, parents not valuing education, domestic problems, inadequate or inconsistent parenting, economic deprivation, and a community lack of self-esteem were contributing factors (Kinder et al., 1995).

A review of the literature reveals that everyone brings with him or her different life experiences and values in the classroom. While there are certainly numerous complex interrelationships between family, community, school, and peer groups and the effect those relationships have on a student's well-being, districts must work to ensure that current initiatives include measures that meet parents where they are both intellectually and economically. Buehler, Tapogna, and Chang (2012) suggested that more research needs to be done investigating the forces influencing good attendance, thereby allowing school districts to implement effective policies and practices. Additionally, Chang and Romero (2008) believed schools know enough about chronic absenteeism to act, yet rural school districts lack the additional resources to bring about effective change to improve attendance.

Edwards (2005) stated the following regarding the role adults play in the education and development of children:

From this perspective, sociocultural theory represents a view of development in which interactions between children and adults are viewed as crucial to the process of knowledge acquisition, whereby knowledge itself is defined according to the 15 sociohistorical practices, beliefs and experiences of the community into which the child is born. (p. 39)

One of the most important jobs that parents have is to ensure that their child has his or her basic needs met. The most powerful way parents can prepare their child for success in both school and life, in general, is to ensure that he or she is educated.

High Cost of Low Attendance

Most people would agree that students do better in well-funded schools and that public education should provide a level playing field for all children. Nearly half of the funding for public schools in the United States, however, is provided through local taxes, generating large differences in funding between wealthy and impoverished communities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Public school funding in the United States comes from federal, state, and local sources, but because nearly half of those funds come from local property taxes, the system generates large funding differences between wealthy and impoverished communities. Such differences exist among states, among school districts within each state, and even among schools within specific districts (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

According to a report by Leachman, Albares, Masterson, and Wallace (2016), most states provide less support per student for elementary and secondary schools, in some cases, much less, than before the Great Recession. Worse, some states are still cutting funding eight years after the recession took hold. Our country's future depends crucially on the quality of its schools. Nevertheless, rather than raising K–12 funding to support proven reforms such as hiring and retaining excellent teachers, reducing class sizes, and expanding access to high-quality early education, many states have headed in the opposite direction.

For districts in Mississippi, October and November are the two months with the most importance as it relates to student attendance. Stakeholders would agree that student presence in the classroom is the first step in development. Beyond that basic concept of showing up in order

to learn, school attendance determines funding. This funding formula considers one major component of average daily attendance (ADA). ADA tells school leaders how many students typically show up every day, and it does not reveal how many or which students have missed so much school that they are academically at risk (Chang, Russell-Tucker, & Sullivan, 2016).

In Mississippi, the state provides per-pupil funding based on the attendance rates in October and November (Mullan, 2018). Each state has a method to determine funding for education. In Mississippi school funding is determined by the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP), a law passed in 1982 and revised in 1997. This formula was designed to ensure an adequate education for every Mississippi child. This legislation was considered the cornerstone of Governor William Winter's term from 1980 to 1984. This formula was intended to outline a base funding measure for per student expenditures within school districts. This base amount, in theory, is the amount needed provide each Mississippi student an adequate education. This formula assumes that each independent school district would provide 27% of the base student cost through local taxes contributions. Leaving the state to fund the difference between what communities can provide from tax contributions and what was needed. The remaining 73% is then multiplied by the school district's average daily attendance to get the district's allocation of funds through MAEP. The formula is recalculated every four years and is adjusted for inflation in the intervening years by multiplying 40% of the base student cost by the current rate of inflation as computed by the state's economist. This funding is not intended to pay for administrator and superintendent salaries. That portion of the base student cost is paid out of each district's local contributions.

In 2016 school districts in Mississippi began to offer pre-k programs, although neither pre-K nor is kindergarten a state requirement. The decision to offer these services is left up to the

individual school districts. The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013 increased the state's budget for pre-K to \$3,000,000 (Atchison, Bruce, & Workman, 2015); since then, the legislature has increased its commitment to the program twice more—to \$4 million in 2016 and then to nearly \$6.7 million in 2019 (Mississippi First, n.d.). Although the state has decided to provide a funding source, investing in pre-K programs, the amount of money spent is very little in comparison to the what other states are devoting: Tennessee \$86,366,000; Arkansas \$103,500,000; Alabama \$38,624,146; and Louisiana \$90,281,071 (Atchison et al., 2015). States bordering Mississippi are spending considerably larger amounts of money in comparison to Mississippi in order to invest in the education of 4-year-old children.

Poverty and Absenteeism

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010, 13 million school-aged children lived in poverty, or “one in four students come to school from impoverished economic backgrounds each day” (Howard, 2010, p. 47). People in poverty are as diverse as people in any other socioeconomic class. “Poor students are at schools that have higher levels of instructional spending, but less experienced teachers and schools in worse physical conditions” (Lane, Linden, & Stange, 2018, p. 25). They present, like other groups, a wide array of values, beliefs, dispositions, experiences, backgrounds, and life chances (Parrett & Budge, 2016). Review of literature revealed that school absenteeism is strongly associated with child poverty, with pupils at primary schools being much more likely to be affected by an area's economic and employment deprivation than their counterparts at secondary schools. “Chronic absenteeism follows poverty wherever it is found in significant concentrations” (Balfanz et al., 2016, p. 15).

Students who reside in poor communities are often faced with difficult obstacles pertaining to low access to medical attention, poor health, malnourishment, family issues,

violence, and stress, which typically prevent many from achieving academic success (Reed & Bhat, 2014). Gottfried and Gee (2017) found that children from large families with lower socioeconomic status and students with poorer health faced increased odds of chronic absenteeism. School absentees normally start the habit of non-attendance when they are at primary school, with child poverty as a main associated factor. Students who live in communities with high levels of poverty are four times more likely to be chronically absent than others often for reasons beyond their control, such as unstable housing, unreliable transportation, and a lack of access to health care (Balfanz, 2016).

While nationally nearly one in four children live in poverty, in Mississippi, one child in every three struggles to survive at or below the poverty level. This impacts the children at home, in school, and their neighborhoods and communities (Hood, 2012). According to a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University in six states, chronic absenteeism occurs at rates three to four times higher in high-poverty areas than in other areas. The most alarming part is that multiple studies across various states show kindergartners to have the highest rate of absenteeism outside of high school students (Cutillo, 2013). Children who live in poverty are at greater risk of poor academic achievement, school dropout, abuse and neglect, behavioral problems, physical health problems, and developmental delays. The adverse impact poverty has on academic outcomes of children is especially evident during early childhood (Hood, 2012). Hernandez (2011) wrote,

Families in poverty are more likely to live in neighborhoods with low-performing schools. Consequently, children in poor families tend to develop weaker academic skills and to achieve less academic success. Many arrive at kindergarten without the language or social skills they need for learning. (p. 7)

Most often, “poor students are at schools that have higher levels of instructional spending, but less experienced teachers and schools in worse physical conditions” (Lane, Linden, & Stange, 2018, p. 25). Students who reside in impoverished environments often suffer from poverty-related issues that negatively impact their abilities in school (Rogers, 2016). Because students reared in poverty benefit the most from being in school, one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to do what it takes to get these students in school every day (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Interventions

Attendance improves when schools engage students and parents in positive ways and when schools provide mentors for chronically absent students (Bruner et al., 2011). When absenteeism is problematic, efforts must be in the direction of encouraging and informing students, parents, and teachers of good school attendance (Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2016). “Determining which factors affect chronic absenteeism is critical for schools and other youth-serving agencies so that they can identify the types of supports that students and their families may need to improve attendance” (London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016, p. 21). Although considerable financial resources have been spent to implement programs aimed at improving attendance rates, the effectiveness of the programs remains unclear (De Witte & Csillag, 2012; Mac Iver, 2011). According to the National Center for Student Engagement, schools are most effective in achieving high attendance rates when parents, school leaders, and community members work together to focus on reducing absences and truancy and keeping kids in schools. Extensive research has found no specific strategy that works better or more effectively than another to increase attendance (Railsback, 2004). Therefore, instead of research attempting to determine the root cause of chronic absences, research may be better suited to developing a

better understanding of the barriers that students face, which could inform effective interventions (Rafa, 2017). Schools must tailor strategies to be specific to their attendance situations.

Numerous field experiments examining the impact of interventions on student outcomes imply that low-cost and scalable interventions are feasible (Gehlbach et al., 2015). However, a review of the literature indicates that early identification of poor attendance patterns of students is vital to ensuring a successful school experience. There is no magic formula, nor is there a canned approach capable of reaching and sustaining high levels of student attendance.

Successful schools work on attendance issues on multiple fronts, over time, learning from the field, and learning from the results of their efforts. These schools know that boosting attendance is a continuous process (West, 2012).

Attendance problems and truancy usually begin in the elementary grades. When identified early, attitudes and behaviors can often be changed before they are deeply entrenched. These strategies are most effective when implemented at birth but continue throughout a child's school years (Smink & Reimer, 2005). In Mississippi, this recommendation of intervening at birth has produced a significant early intervention program called Excel by 5. Excel by 5 is a little-known community-based certification program designed to improve a child's overall well-being beginning at birth and ending by age 5:

The first-of-its-kind in the United States, this program emphasizes the important roles communities play in educating their children during their most formative years—birth to five. This program sets forth a variety of standards involving parent training, community participation, childcare, and health to help communities focus on supporting young children and their families. (“Excel by 5,” 2018)

The literature provides numerous recommendations to prevent and/or reduce chronic student absenteeism. Many of these strategies have been implemented in small school settings—the idea of intervening with educating parents who live in poverty to the importance of daily school attendance. In the race to improve attendance, existing research once again does not find that any single strategy is the most effective strategy (Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012), but all agree that intervention is necessary. Attendance Works (2018) suggests five basic steps to address and reduce chronic absence in schools:

- *Engage Students and Parents* - attendance improves when a school community offers a warm and welcoming environment that emphasizes building relationships with families and stresses the importance of going to class every day.
- *Recognize Good and Improved Attendance* - school communities can send a clear message that going to school every day is a priority by providing regular recognition and incentives to students and families who have good and improved attendance.
- *Monitor Attendance Data and Practice* - the best way to identify students with chronic absence is to use the attendance data already collective by schools to examine which and how many students are missing 10% or more of the school year.
- *Provide Personalized Early Outreach* - Perhaps the most critical strategy is using data to trigger early caring outreach to families and students who are already missing too many days of school.
- *Develop a programmatic response to barriers* - if large numbers of students are affected by chronic absence, that suggests some type of systemic barrier or barriers are at play.

Another intervention model that was discussed in the literature was called Response to Intervention model. The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (Paige, Jones, & Pasternack, 2002) recommended the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) as a framework for assessment, intervention, and decision-making, as it pertains to the placement of children within special education. In most school settings, RtI represents a philosophical shift in how schools identify and respond to students' academic and/or behavioral difficulties (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010). RtI refers to a systematic and hierarchical decision-making process to assign evidence-based strategies based on student needs and in accordance with regular progress monitoring (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010). Mississippi's model for RtI is a comprehensive, problem-solving, and multi-tiered strategy to enable early identification and intervention for all students who may be at academic or behavioral risk (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010). Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is defined as an evidence-based, integrated, and comprehensive framework to align all necessary systems for an individual student's success (Mississippi Department of Education, 2018). The use of these models was mandated in the United States by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 (Dougherty-Stahl, 2016). MTSS is an umbrella term that encompasses the RtI processes and all other support programs (Mississippi Department of Education, 2018). The goal of MTSS models is to evaluate an individual child's response to interventions by tracking assessment results (Dougherty-Stahl, 2016). When dealing with student attendance and interventions, districts must decide whether punitive or non-punitive actions will be taken as a result of excessive absences.

There are current practices in many districts that include court proceedings aimed at enforcing parental supervision of attendance by fining parents for their children's absences.

However, Birioukov (2016) noted that the approach of criminalizing chronic absenteeism has mixed results, with evidence suggesting that many prosecutions led to higher absence rates following the court proceedings. The use of in-kind incentives, which are nonmonetary incentives paid or given in goods, commodities, or services, and awarded on the condition of reaching a particular educational goal for classroom performance, conduct, and attendance, together with communication conferences on the significance of learning and academic achievement (Dulleck, Silva-Goncalves, & Torgler, 2016) may be one successful intervention that can be used to improve attendance.

Summary

This literature review was written to further explain the problem of student attendance from the view of student absenteeism rates. Research shows that students experiencing chronic absenteeism in the elementary grades are at a higher risk of experiencing chronic absenteeism in later grades; preventative methods, policy changes, or attendance interventions are only a few strategies for states and school districts to consider in order to combat this problem (Ehrlich et al., 2016). Student attendance and student absenteeism are interconnected and were explained within the literature review. The America Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has said that truancy can be considered a “school-to-prison pipeline” (Skola & Williamson, 2012). Skola and Williamson's (2012) notion of “school-to-prison pipeline” became more evident as schools and districts began to implement more zero-tolerance policies, suspensions and expulsions became more frequent, and missing school became more criminalized (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014). The results caused more truant behaviors which resulted in suspension, expulsion, and adolescents being funneled into the juvenile justice system (Jones & Lovrich, 2011; Monahan et al., 2014; Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). Although the attendance

efforts of schools and districts focused primarily on reducing truancy, the punishment associated with truancy led to increased student exposure to the juvenile justice system (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). Criminalizing absenteeism not only punishes students, but it also impacts their parents/legal guardians (McCluskey et al., 2004). Instead of criminalizing absences, districts must work together with students, parents, and community leaders to address these issues in a more positive light.

This research explores initiatives that can effectively address this cycle that exists within the educational system. Factors such as single-parent status, family mobility, and lack of parental supervision all contribute to truancy (John W. Gardner Center, 2012). The literature review is a comprehensive review of existing literature as it related to the problem of low student attendance rates, especially in elementary grades. This section also included the theoretical framework as a method of defining the problem of student attendance as it exists in the context of southwest Mississippi schools. The theoretical framework outlined the social learning theory and school refusal behaviors among students who have excessive absences. It is evident from the review of literature that many factors contribute to the causes of high rates of student absenteeism. There are so many that a list could never identify all of them. The same is true for prevention and early intervention strategies. However, what is clear from the research is that there is no comprehensive method for improving attendance. The research also makes it very clear that each school district needs to look at the district's individual needs and, most importantly, the identified student's individual needs when creating a plan to improve attendance. Instead of research attempting to determine the root cause of chronic absence, research may better be suited to developing a better understanding of the barriers that students face, which could inform effective interventions (Rafa, 2017).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The review of literature provides a solid basis for the importance of ADA in the elementary grades. The purpose of this study was to explore the problem of low student attendance at two southwest Mississippi elementary schools and to take a critical look at how to improve those rates. This study uses a multimethod design involving the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative measures to answer questions around how to improve student attendance. The research study explored past student attendance initiatives at two elementary schools that have been applied systemically and strategically to address low student attendance rates. The notion that most initiatives by Mississippi schools have not improved low rates of student ADA is the basis for this research and is the guiding ideology behind this study.

Chapter Three begins by presenting the applied multimethod design used to collect data for this research; it includes the categorization of three phases. Each of the three methods: qualitative interviews, a quantitative survey questionnaire, and qualitative document analysis, are presented in detail. The chapter also contains a section on research questions, settings, and participants. Additional sections contain an overview of the procedures for collecting research data for this study, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. After the collection and review of data for this study, the researcher answers the central question related to the research showing the connection between improved student attendance and attendance initiatives implemented within the school district.

Design

This research used a multimethod design, which incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), “different scholars have

used different terms (e.g., integrative, combined, blended, mixed methods, multimethod, multi-strategy, etc.) to identify studies that attempt such integration” (p. 283). According to Creswell (2015), multimethod research is an approach to research in the social, behavioral, and health sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative (close-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two, and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems. The multimethod design is the most appropriate to answer the research questions. Case study research is said to allow for an “in-depth review of new or unclear phenomena while retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2004, p. 4). According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), there is a growing consensus among researchers that multimethod research is more critical than individual qualitative or quantitative research alone. The combination of qualitative and quantitative can provide richer insights and raise more interesting questions for future research than if only one method is considered independently.

It is important to use personal interviews and related literature to identify information to create a clear and focused survey. Quantitative tools, specifically an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey, was utilized to identify impressions of the success or failure of initiatives used within the district to increase attendance and decrease chronic absenteeism. Quantitative methods are essential for this study to get a broader perspective on how chronic absenteeism is being addressed in school districts. Using archival documents (district attendance records) provides another level of information that may be used to develop the research further (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

Research Questions

Central Question: How can the problem of low student attendance be improved in

Grades K4–5 for two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?

Sub-question 1: How would the administrators and attendance personnel describe the collective efficacy of the organization toward student attendance in a qualitative face-to-face interview in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?

Sub-question 2: How would quantitative research data in the form of an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey guide the implementation of attendance initiatives?

Sub-question 3: How would qualitative data in the form of a daily attendance document analysis reveal patterns in attendance based on initiative implementations?

Setting

The researcher utilized a multi-site format encompassing two elementary campuses in the same geographic location. The location of the study was a public-school district in southwest Mississippi. The two rural schools in Mississippi were on separate campuses: one campus houses Grades K4–2 and the second campus houses Grades 3–5. The district is in a rural community with a population of approximately 3,894 in southwest Mississippi. A purposeful sample of the population was collected from two schools with similar socioeconomic status population attending the school (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The socioeconomic status was determined based on the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch at each school campus. Seventeen percent of students in this area live below the poverty level. Fifty-five percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher was motivated to conduct this study due to familiarity with students who are not making educational gains due to excessive absenteeism. This researcher has witnessed firsthand the struggles of learners and teachers' attempts to make adequate educational gains that

are derailed by excessive absences. A major component that is considered when a student is referred for a special education evaluation to determine eligibility for services is adequate access to instruction, which encompasses student attendance. The researcher has had a long interest in the strategies, methods, and policies that districts employ to improve student attendance and whether those efforts provide the expected results. The results of this research may play a significant role in answering the researcher's personal questions while developing programs to inform administration on successful, existing programs that can be adapted or implemented to improve school attendance rates.

Procedures

This section outlines the steps taken to conduct the multimethod study, including but not limited to information about securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, soliciting participants for the study, gathering the data, and recording procedures. Three methods were used to collect data regarding the variables of the research: interviews, surveys, and document review. Before any data collection or administration of this research project, permission to conduct research was obtained from the IRB of Liberty University and the Superintendent of Schools from the prospective school district. Upon receiving IRB and Superintendent of Schools approval, invitations to participate were sent to six administrators within the target district. Once invitations were accepted, time and locations were established to conduct interviews. Face-to-face interviews have a distinct advantage of enabling the researcher to establish rapport and allowing participants to respond in a non-threatening setting where they are free to express themselves without judgment. These interviews may yield the highest response rates in qualitative research. They also allow the researcher to clarify unclear answers when appropriate and seek follow-up information. Face-to-face interviews are not recommended for a large group

setting (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). All interviews were recorded for notetaking purposes. The technique of memoing was used, as well: “Memoing serves to assist the researcher in making conceptual leaps from raw data to those abstractions that explain research phenomena in the context in which it is examined” (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008, p. 68).

For the survey portion of the research, once the Superintendent of Schools gave his/her consent to conduct research within the district, an email link was sent to identify principals who then forwarded the link to the teachers on their campus. Participants were asked to complete the Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey within a one-week window via Google Forms. Reminders were sent to complete the survey on the day before the last day of the window (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey window was extended one week, and one final reminder including the link was emailed to teachers by the campus level principal to increase the number of respondents to the survey. As themes were identified, transcripts were analyzed for alignment to the themes within the case. The within-case analysis is essential to allow for distinction of thoughts and feelings of the participants within the case. The cross-case analysis provided “a thematic analysis across the cases” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 322). As themes were identified, transcripts were analyzed for alignment to the themes between the case categories. A between-case analysis is vital to allow for some generalization across the cases (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection and Analysis

Creswell (2013) describes the following procedures in the data analysis: spiral representing, visualizing, describing, classifying, interpreting reading, reading, memoing, and organizing the data. The researcher followed the procedures described by Creswell (2013) as they pertained to this multimethod applied research study. In this section, the data analysis

procedures are identified, and a rationale for the analysis is given. The three data collection methods used in this multimethod applied research study were interviews, surveys, and document analysis. Interview data were collected using an interviewer- designed instrument. Interviews were face-to-face, semi-structured, and utilized interview guides that contain questions that were consistently asked of all participants during this phase. The researcher utilized reflective listening along with non-directive probes to encourage participants to communicate their full thinking regarding each topic (Creswell, 2013). With participant permission, interviews were recorded. The qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews with attendance personnel, campus principals, and positive behavior specialists, and documents of attendance data and attendance initiative implementation schedules were reviewed and analyzed. Quantitative data were collected through teacher surveys addressing the problem of low attendance rates of students in the classroom setting.

In the review of each participant's transcript, the "meaning units," the words and sentences that conveyed similar meanings, were identified and labeled with codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The coding process allowed for the interpretation of large segments of text and portions of information in new ways. Assessing how these meaning units are linked led to the identification of themes.

Interviews

Using the first data collection method of face-to-face interviews, the researcher attempted to answer Sub-question 1: "How would the collective efficacy of the organization toward student attendance be described by the administrators, attendance personnel and school counselors in a qualitative face-to-face interview in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?" Bandura (1997) defined the construct of "collective efficacy" as a "group's shared belief in its conjoint

capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p. 477). Therefore, instead of research attempting to determine the root cause of chronic absences, research may be better suited to developing a better understanding of the barriers that students face, which could inform effective interventions (Rafa, 2017). These interviews served as a source of data on phenomena from the past, present, or (potential) future of interviewees, including "persons, events, activities, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, . . . other entities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 268), and the complex interrelations between all of these. Interviews can help to verify ("member check"), extend, and triangulate data and information already obtained via other methods (Creswell, 2015).

The following section lists the nine interview questions and explains the rationale for each question.

1. *What role do administrators play in developing a collective efficacy among their staff?*

This question lends itself to the idea that school leaders play a significant role in addressing student attendance. Although school leaders often have very little direct control in ensuring that students attend school regularly, they can ensure a positive school climate and behavior management. They can also incorporate community and parental involvement, as this is a key to positive change (Preston et al., 2017). This interview question sought to determine if administrators for K4–5 schools have a shared collective efficacy or if each campus leader works in isolation to develop campus and staff goals. It also sought to determine what the campus leaders view as their role in developing a collective efficacy among their staff.

2. *What specific processes does the district use to build relationships with students and help them to discover their own self-efficacy?* It is believed that when schools and

communities work together, student attendance improves. A review of the literature indicates that attendance improves when a school community offers a warm and welcoming environment that emphasizes building relationships with families and stresses the importance of going to class every day. School leaders must ensure that parents, as well as other stakeholders, feel welcomed within the school gates. Building relationships both inside and outside of the school ensures a sense of ownership from the community. When each stakeholder claims ownership of what the school district achieves, schools will have a successful school attendance initiative. This question sought to determine if this district considers student feedback in its decision-making process when developing attendance initiatives.

3. *What specific professional development do teachers participate in to develop organizational and collective teacher efficacy?* It is understood that teachers and other educational leaders participate in numerous professional development opportunities throughout the year. Often schools in Mississippi utilize the RtI model to ensure that struggling students are easily identified. These students are often the ones who show up frequently on the absentee report. However, RtI is only one strategy used to identify at-risk students. It was important to this study to understand what other measures this district uses to ensure that teachers have a collective efficacy as it relates to student attendance. Therefore, this question sought to determine what other measures are used to address student attendance by classroom teachers as individual and as grade-level teams.
4. *What socioeconomic factors affect student attendance within this district?* “Students come to school from impoverished economic backgrounds each day” (Howard, 2010, p. 47). People in poverty are as diverse as people in any other socioeconomic class. “Poor

students are at schools that have higher levels of instructional spending, but less experienced teachers and schools in worse physical conditions” (Lane, Linden, & Stange, 2018, p. 25). This question sought to determine if socioeconomic factors are considered when determining programs to improve attendance. More specifically, are certain students targeted for extra supports as it relates to the family’s socioeconomic status?

5. *What can be done to improve outcomes for students in low socioeconomic settings?*

Outcomes for students is the one category that each educator can agree upon. However, the question remains regarding how to achieve specific outcomes for certain socioeconomic groups. A review of the literature indicates that attendance improves when schools engage students and parents in positive ways and when schools provide mentors for chronically absent students (Bruner et al., 2011). This question sought to determine if students are targeted based upon their low socioeconomic status. It also sought to discover what in-house programs, if any, the school uses to ensure that the student’s educational needs are met in addition to other needs based on its understanding of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

6. *At the district level, who is responsible for developing organizational self-efficacy? As*

the primary leader of the district, the Superintendent of Schools is the one person who can lead the charge for change to improve the district’s attendance rates. Although the ultimate responsibility falls to the student’s parents, guardians, or other responsible adults, district leaders are in the best position to facilitate change through leadership and guidance of building administrators (i.e., principal and assistant principal). This question sought to determine which district strategic plan discusses attendance or if attendance is discussed in isolation from other important district issues like the budget.

7. *How can self-efficacy be developed in parents in order to improve student attendance?*

Students and their parents need to have shared beliefs and understanding about long-term success in school. Parental beliefs may be shifted to value regular K–5 attendance when communications emphasize that students in grades as early as kindergarten experience rigorous, standard-based schooling that forms the foundation for future learning (Duardo, 2013; Ferguson, 2016). This question sought to determine if the district has employed any other measures of informing parents about the importance of student daily attendance.

8. *How does the district deal with lost funding due to excessive absences?* Public school funding in the United States comes from federal, state, and local sources, but because nearly half of those funds come from local property taxes, the system generates large funding differences between wealthy and impoverished communities. Such differences exist among states, among school districts within each state, and even among schools within specific districts (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Nearly half of the funding for public schools in the United States is provided through local taxes, generating large differences in funding between wealthy and impoverished communities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Schools in Mississippi receive funding through what is known as MAEP. This funding formula determines how much of the state’s overall budget is allocated to education. One key component of the MAEP funding formula is student attendance. Districts receive so much more per student enrolled in their district; when that student is absent, that money is lost to the district for the next year, especially if attendance is low during the critical accounting months of August, September, and

October. This question sought a clearer understanding of how low attendance during these months can impact the district's overall budget.

9. *How are the consequences of excessive absences and/or tardiness communicated to parents?* Although the attendance efforts of schools and districts focus primarily on reducing truancy, the punishment associated with truancy has led to increased student exposure to the juvenile justice system (McCluskey et al., 2004). Due to the importance of student attendance and the critical role it has in ESSA, many districts have begun to seek assistance through legal channels with parents of the student who have excessive or frequent absences. This question sought to determine what measures the district employs to articulate the importance of daily student attendance before the district seeks assistance from the judicial system.

Survey

Using the second data collection method of a survey (see Appendix A) the researcher attempted to answer Sub-question 2: “How would quantitative research data in the form of an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey guide the implementation of attendance initiatives at two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?” Surveys allow characteristics of a population to be estimated, via statistics, through analysis of the quantified responses given to questions by a small sample of the population. Research indicates that attendance improves when schools engage students and parents in positive ways and when schools provide mentors for chronically absent students (Bruner et al., 2011). Teachers encourage student motivation in many ways (Williams & Williams, 2011); therefore, having input from those individuals who are on the frontlines of education and who are responsible for ensuring that students are making adequate educational gains is beneficial in developing strategies to combat student attendance in

southwest Mississippi elementary schools. Pullen (2014) discovered teachers have a greater role than was previously perceived when dealing with attendance issues, but these teachers needed more training on the district's attendance policies and should have also had a greater role in the creation and implementation of their district's policy. The use of surveys consists of "a set of items, formulated as statements or questions, used to generate a response to each stated item" (Hank, Jordan, & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 257). Although most research surveys have a special purpose and focus, the data collected in this survey also describe the beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or behaviors of participants on varied topics (Fowler, 2014).

Document Analysis

Using the third data collection method, the researcher attempted to answer Sub-question 3: "How would qualitative data in the form of a Daily Attendance document analysis reveal patterns in attendance based on initiative implementation?" Document analysis is a social research method, an important research tool and an invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation, the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). Data related to each campus are unique, and strong leaders have their finger on the pulse of their school and understand that monitoring and reviewing student data is the first key step to intervening with individual students who are missing many school days. For funding purposes, the data were reported to the state accurately (White and Dendy, 2018). Using a qualitative approach known as document analysis, the researcher gave voice and meaning to the attendance data that districts were required to collect and report to the state department of education. Bowen (2009) stated that documents were stable data sources, meaning that they were read and reviewed multiple times and remain unchanged by the researcher's influence or research process. During this portion of the data collection process, the researcher explored past attendance data

records to identify attendance patterns and compared that data to previously implemented attendance initiatives during the same window of time. The researcher also noted which days of the week were the least—or best—attended and which calendar months were associated with better or worse attendance and whether specific events such as holidays or testing had any impact on attendance. The qualitative data were collected to drive strategies and to improve the overall attendance initiatives at two southwest Mississippi elementary schools.

The qualitative research design utilized for this study incorporated an applied research design utilizing a multimethod approach to determine high rates of attendance and low rates of attendance to determine if student attendance improved after specific initiatives were implemented. Student attendance records from previous school years for the target grades were compared to attendance initiatives, which is qualitative by nature because they are fixed numbers (time frames; Schwandt, 2007). The attendance data is straightforward and describes a specific area the researcher wished to address.

Participants

The participant selection for this multimethod research study included inviting two district level attendance officers, four campus-level administrators, and two district positive behavior specialists to participate in an interview. Gall et al. (2007) defined purposeful sampling as the process of selecting cases that are likely to be “information-rich” (p. 178). This purposeful sampling method was used because the researcher wanted to understand something specific and selected a sample that would provide the most information for understanding (Creswell, 2015). By choosing the individuals intentionally, homogeneous purposeful sampling was developed because the individuals participating in the interviews shared similar characteristics and knowledge (Symon & Cassell, 2012). The attendance officers and administrators all knew the

school district attendance challenges and how attendance fits into the state accountability model. Once invitations were accepted, time and location were arranged for the interviews. After the interviews were conducted and themes developed, 42 teachers were invited to participate in a Likert scale survey. Potential participants for this study were all classroom teachers in the target grades: Grades K4–2 and Grades 3–5. The surveys were distributed via online methods (i.e., Google Forms). The final subjects of the study were selected based on this researcher's familiarity with the area and out of convenience of locality to the researcher. The teachers chosen to participate were based on the criteria established of having knowledge of attendance initiatives and teaching in one of the target grades.

Creswell's (2013) approach of six to eight persons per group for interviews was utilized and adapted to include six participants. Interview protocols were established and utilized to include semi-structured interview questions with faculty who have been involved with student attendance for the district to gather information pertaining to the phenomenon. Pseudonyms were used for participants to ensure anonymity.

The size of the group was small, which allowed for a broader inquiry into the problem and possible strategies to address the attendance challenges of the schools in question. For this study, the protocol contained the interview questions with space to take notes. During the interview, memos was used to capture any research thoughts during and after each interview session. The interviews were recorded electronically using a handheld recording device. A consent form was signed and collected before the interviews took place.

Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data were analyzed using the following procedures. Customarily in qualitative data analysis, interviews are transcribed in order to code and categorize information

into themes. The interview sessions were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the participant responses, with the participant's permission. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that it is important to use open coding that organizes the information into major categories of data for analysis. The interview questions were derived from the literature review in order to gain maximum detail concerning the factors of low student attendance. The original open-ended questions aided in identifying themes during the transcription of interview audio files. Once the interview data were transcribed and coded to reveal themes, a survey was distributed to teachers in the target district via an administrative email.

Document analysis was used to give voice and meaning to a topic of interest. Analyzing documents incorporates coding content into themes like how document analysis or interview transcripts are analyzed (Bowen, 2009). Conducting a document review of the two school's past participation in the attendance initiatives provided the researcher with a baseline with which to determine if the initiative implemented improved ADA among students in the target grades. The document review analyzed the data month by month to see the exact attendance patterns of the students in Grades K4–2 and Grades 3–5. This analysis included disaggregated data on attendance by grade level, noting absenteeism rates. The document review did consider gender, ethnicity, disability, English language mastery, or types of excuses/reasons for absences. In utilizing a document analysis, the researcher was allowed an in-depth look at the data, including which days of the week were the least—or best—attended, which calendar months were associated with better or worse attendance, and whether specific events, such as holidays or testing, had an impact on attendance. A review of attendance records and other reference material that the district is bound to collect and retain as relevant data in the monitoring of

student attendance provided baseline data for determining initiative implementation effectiveness.

Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures

The quantitative analysis deals with data in the form of numbers and uses mathematical operations to investigate their properties. Most surveys result in quantitative data (Walliman, 2011). The quantitative data collected using an online survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. According to Gall et al. (2007), descriptive statistics are appropriate because they summarize the data using measures of central tendency to include mean, median mode, deviance from the mean, variation, percentage, and frequency counts. The Likert scale format survey was established and administered to teachers in Grades K4–5. According to Gall et al. (2007), surveys can be used to supplement data that have been collected by other methods; the data would be collected using “questionnaires or interviews” (p. 230) to collect data from the sample representative of the population. For this study to reflect the views of school personnel, an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey (see Appendix A) was administered to teachers in Grades K4–5 to survey the strategies they believe were working to improve student attendance. Participants received a link to an online survey with instructions, informed consent, and information about the survey. The within-case analysis provided a detailed description of the case and the themes within it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The present study utilized a 10-question Likert scale questionnaire (see Appendix A). Once themes were developed from the literature and interviews, an online Likert survey was developed and administered. Each item used the following labels for response choices: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). In an analysis, each of the items were assigned a numeric rating (1–5) and summed to form Likert scales for the study.

The researcher manually accounted for positive and negatively worded questions based on the results. Data retrieved from instrument responses were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet and manually categorized by topic and item response. Based on the review of research data, reverse coding was completed to ensure that any negative phrasing would not cause any inaccurate reflection on the teachers' understanding by summing the responses.

Ethical Considerations

There are several issues that were considered while conducting research at these sites. First and foremost was ensuring the privacy of the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out that research involves the study of a research site and permission to study the site in a way that will enable easy collection of data. One way to ensure that ethical considerations were addressed was through an informed consent statement. All participants were asked to complete the university-developed consent document before beginning any interviews.

Summary

Chapter Three outlined the research methods being used for this study in order to answer the research questions. An in-depth discussion of the procedures, study participants, data collection, and interview questions were all outlined, and the specifics of how the study was conducted and who participated in the study were described. The data collection methods that the researcher utilized included an interview instrument, survey instrument, and document analysis review. The interview questions were developed and served as a catalyst to elicit more in-depth and more detailed information from participants. The rationale for the selection of this instrument was due to the value of the instrument in qualitative research.

Following all procedures for ethical studies and permissions, the study took place with face-to-face interviews, document analysis, and surveys (Creswell, 2007). The data were

collected at an agreed-upon location through electronic recording and note-taking. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, the researcher identified participants by pseudonyms. Each participant signed a consent form that encompasses a statement of confidentiality, permission for recording the interviews, and permission for the researcher to use the data collected during the interviews (see Appendix C). The Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey was administered at the campus level via electronic means; no personal data were requested. The document review was limited to district calculated absenteeism data. No other identifiable data was requested.

According to Creswell (2015), an applied multimethod design approach is grounded in the data. Case study research is an approach in which the investigator explores the real-life, contemporary bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources. The applied multimethod research study, like other research strategies, is a way of investigating a topic by following a set of prespecified procedures; in this research study, the researcher investigated the problem that most initiatives by Mississippi schools have not improved low rates of student ADA. The researcher explored what two elementary schools in southwest Mississippi were doing to improve student attendance rates. The focus of this research was not to determine cause and effect or predictions. The emphasis in this research was placed on exploration and description of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the findings of a multimethod study designed to better understand the problem of low student attendance in Grades K4–5 at two rural southwest Mississippi elementary schools. Data were collected over a period of two weeks and were analyzed. As noted in the literature review, there is systemic concern over low student attendance rates nationwide. The findings, which were conducted through coding and the identification of emerging themes from interviews, including field notes, results of the Likert-scale survey, and documents, are illustrated in the tables. Themes emerging from this data analysis include (a) district leadership, (b) poverty, and (c) interventions.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used due to the need to select participants that were familiar with the district attendance initiatives and attendance guidelines as mandated by the state of Mississippi and individuals who were concerned with student attendance at the classroom and district level. A total of 51 participants were included in this study for either the interview portion or survey portion of the data collection. All participants met the criteria for inclusion in at least one component of the study. All interview participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. No demographic data were collected from the survey since such data was not considered necessary for the study's purpose.

Interview Participants

A total of eight participants were invited to participate in the face-to-face interviews; one participant declined the invitation, and seven participants took part in the face-to-face interviews. The participant criteria for this portion of the study were employment in the role of attendance

officer, administrator (principal or vice-principal), school counselor/social worker, curriculum coach, or familiarity with the district problem of student attendance. Because of their familiarity with attendance concerns at the campus/district level, these participants have been directly involved in developing attendance initiatives within the district.

LM. The first interview participant was LM; this district attendance officer has been with the district for 12 years. Before entering her current position, she worked at a post-secondary institution of higher learning. Because of her years of experience, LM brought a wealth of knowledge of what the district does to improve student attendance in this study. LM recognizes the need to improve attendance to break the generational cycle, which exists among specific families that live within the district. She mentioned several factors that affect what the district does to improve attendance at the elementary grade level, which include considering the literacy levels of family members, transportation, and making school fun for students. She further explained, “To get parent buy-in, we as a district work together to improve outcomes for not only students but parents as well.”

AG. The second interview participant was AG, who serves as one of two positive behavior specialists and has been with the district for two years. Before entering her current position, she worked as a licensed clinical social worker at a long-term care facility for adolescents. AG brought a wealth of knowledge of what approaches the district may want to consider when developing plans to improve student attendance at the elementary level. AG also recognized the need to improve attendance to break the generational cycle which exists among specific families that live within the district. She mentioned her concerns as it related to the emotional poverty of the students and that teachers within the district needed to work together to

develop an understanding and be able to recognize the signs that students are projecting and recognize that there may be underlying problems to be addressed.

ML. The third interview participant was ML, who serves as one of four curriculum intervention specialists for the district and has been with the district for 16 years. Before entering her current position, she worked as an elementary classroom teacher. She also served as a behavior modification classroom teacher. One of her current duties is to assist the campus level administrators with scheduling and ensure that teachers are aware of the guidelines and dates for attendance implementations. ML recognized that, to receive the best education possible, students must be present each day at school. She also voiced her understanding of the safety implications that exist when a student misbehaves on the bus. She suggested that the district could devise another transportation option for students who were suspended due to violations on the bus. She said, “We work together to ensure that all students are given the best opportunity possible.”

SG. The fourth interview participant was SG, who serves as the principal for the lower elementary school. Before entering her current position, she worked as a classroom teacher at the middle school, a librarian, and a campus test coordinator. SG is very passionate about her position and student attendance at the elementary level. SG believes that the biggest challenges that the district faces when it comes to improving attendance on her campus are that as a society, we have removed imaginative play from the classroom and replaced it with facts and assessments. So many of these students deal with adult concerns such as “poverty, family dynamics, and plain old survival.” Because these concerns are so prevalent in the home, children do not have an opportunity to do the things that they need to be “well rounded.” Often older siblings are raising younger siblings, and they are getting ready for school and on the bus, and

there may not be a parent in the home. Another concern is that students in Grades PK, K, 1, and 2 frequently get sick because many have never been around other children. Lastly, there are parents who are having a hard time letting go. SG recognizes that for students to receive the best education possible in the primary grades, teachers have to become entertainers: “We have to entertain children.” SG is looking to develop a team of performers who also can teach and understand that children have to be allowed to be children, and they have to have fun because sometimes at school is the only time they do not have to worry about life.

NM. The fifth interview participant was NM, who serves as the assistant principal for the lower elementary school. Before entering her current position, she worked as a classroom teacher at various grade levels within the district. NM is very passionate about her position and student attendance at the elementary level. NM believes that the biggest challenges that the district faces when it comes to improving attendance are when families are in chaos. She recognizes that family expectations and family values play a significant role in student attendance. NM stated that “to improve attendance, the district must find a way to get parents involved” and “build the school’s brand.” Since this is a technological society and people believe what they see on social media, the school has to do a better job of showing parents what the school has to offer daily.

LN. The sixth interview participant was LN, who serves as the assistant principal for the upper elementary school. Before entering her current position, she worked as a classroom teacher at various grade levels. NM is very passionate about her position and student attendance at the elementary level. NM recognizes that building relationships with families, especially at the upper elementary level, is important. “We have to let parents know that a day missed from school is quality instruction that their child has missed.” She noted,

Often, we as educators and administrators give parents the impression that we do not want them present on the campus, but there are so many different family dynamics that it is hard to engage families because you do not know whom to contact and what the situation is. I truly believe that working together to build relationships within the school first and then with parents will help improve attendance.

LP. LP The seventh interview participant was LP. LP served as the principal for the upper elementary school for 15 years. Before entering his current position, he worked for the government and as a high school agriculture teacher. LP is a very passionate, by-the-book administrator who understands the importance of student attendance at the elementary level but also the problem it creates when teachers are held accountable for ensuring student success: “We have to hold students and parents accountable for absences. . . . There have to be consequences for not attending school regularly.” He also commented on problems with the school’s treatment of absenteeism:

From my perspective we have made it too easy for students because regardless of the absences (excused or unexcused) each student is allowed to make-up his or her work and classroom teacher is held responsible for the student receiving the instruction and assignments that they missed when they were absent.

Results

The purpose of this multimethod study was to solve the problem of low student attendance in Grades K4–5 at two rural southwest Mississippi elementary schools. For this applied research study, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques was used. Interview questions (Appendix B) and survey questions (Appendix A) were developed to align with the central research question of the study. Participants were

purposefully selected based on their position within the district as attendance personnel, teachers in Grades K4–5, or campus administrators. Before data collection began, IRB approval was obtained, and informed consent signatures were acquired from all participants. The semi-structured interviews consisted of eight questions (see Appendix B) and were conducted with school administrators, attendance personnel, a curriculum coach, and school counselors from two southwest Mississippi elementary schools. The purpose of these interviews was to explore the collective efficacy of the organization toward student attendance by leaders in the district.

Before beginning each interview, participants were provided with a summary of the purpose of the study in addition to the information they received when invited to participate. Interviews were conducted at each research site with one participant's contributions provided via written response per the participant's request.

The survey was administered via Google Forms and was structured in a Likert-scale format. Forty-four participants responded to 10 questions related to attendance and collective efficacy. In order to reduce bias and potential identification of individual participants' responses, email addresses were not collected, and demographic information was not requested. Participants had to consent to participate before accessing the online survey, which reduced the risk of a breach of anonymity for participants and their responses since a signed paper consent form was not required for participation.

Field notes were recorded during and after each interview, along with a transcription of each interview. Documents were also gathered from the district office, including those that are publicly available related to student attendance. These documents provided further supporting evidence for the themes developed. All participants remained in the study until its completion.

Sub-question 1

Sub-question 1 for this study asked, How would the administrators and attendance personnel describe the collective efficacy of the organization toward student attendance in a qualitative face-to-face interview in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools? All interviews were coded manually during open coding. The interviews were analyzed in batches of two participants, allowing analysis time before moving on to additional participants. The researcher coded each batch and analyzed it for categories or themes (see Tables 1 and 2). Clarifying questions were added to the interview method following the completion of the eight interviews.

Table 1

Open Coding of Themes, Faculty Interviews

Open Code	Examples of Participants' Words
District Leadership	District leaders set the mission and vision for the district. Campus level administrators ensure that the mission and vision are given to staff members, and everyone is working with the vision and mission in mind. Teachers ensure that parents are aware of the goals for the district.
Poverty	Students who live below the poverty line often face difficulties with clean clothes and food. There also those students who are in the care of a grandparent, aunt, or uncle. Their whole world has changed because of parents who are impaired in some way and can no longer take care of them. The district has to do a better job of building relationships with families. Parents have to understand that they are a parent on the team. Importance of students being present at school and how to handle bus suspensions.
Interventions	Current and past initiatives that have been used to improve attendance.

Table 2

Frequency Table

Themes	Frequency
District Leadership	9
Poverty	17
Interventions	7

Theme 1: District leadership. The first of the three themes that became evident from the interviews was the District Leadership. It was evident that in rural communities, the school district plays a significant role in setting the tone of the community. The following statements indicate how campus level interview participants described their view of district leadership.

LM: “The administration plays a big role. The superintendent, the assistant superintendent, the principals, and vice-principals all work together to develop the attendance policies and procedures to make sure that we are utilizing our resources in the best way. To make sure we have the highest attendance and to make sure that any children who are struggling with attendance issues that we address those one-on-one, but ultimately, that responsibility falls on the superintendent.”

ML: “The leadership team gives clear vision for the school.”

LN: “The Superintendent gives the direction, and each administrator can take it back and implement it in a way that works for them on their campus. . . . Leadership team works together toward the vision of the school.”

SG: “I believe that the person who is responsible for developing our organizational self-efficacy is our top leader. I think they establish the vision for the entire district, and then it is our job as administrators to adapt that vision to our school, our appropriate grade level. . . . If the leadership of the school does not set the tone, then nothing will happen.”

NM: “Leadership sometimes has to be the bad guys but for the good of the students, especially when students have several unexcused absences.”

AG: “The administration sets the pace. They set the direction. They give the plan.”

LP: “The superintendent is the district leader and responsible for the efficacy of the district.”

A typical response among all participants’ responses was the idea that school leaders were the ones that drive change in the district. As the primary leader of the district, the Superintendent of Schools is the one person who can lead the charge for change to improve the district's ability to improve attendance rates—following that it is the leadership team that ensures that staff members are implementing the expectations for the district. Administrators act as the first line of defense, ensuring that initiatives are being implemented on the superintendent's timeline and that they are gathering student feedback after each implementation.

Theme 2: Poverty. The second of the three themes that became evident from the interviews was poverty, parent impairment, family dynamics, and parent engagement. These statements were shared among participants’ thoughts towards poverty and absenteeism:

LM: “Poverty is an issue. . . . The biggest issue is when a parent is impaired for some reason. . . . When the primary caregiver is impaired due to alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness when the family dynamic is challenged, that is the biggest indicator of absences for students. . . . Often, these concerns lead to homelessness, which in turn leads to the family unit having to relocate several times throughout the school year, which equals student mobility issues.”

ML: “The biggest challenges that the district faces when it comes to improving attendance is just simply getting students to school. . . . I think our biggest issue is

transportation. . . . Certainly, poverty is an issue. . . . Clean clothes and decent shoes, really those basic needs that many of us do not even consider.”

AG: “The biggest challenges that the district faces when it comes to improving attendance is financial poverty, emotional poverty, family dynamics, a trauma that may be internal from separation or depression.”

SG: “Poverty plays a big role. . . . We [the district] have a high number of non-custodial parents, and maybe they are in poor health. In Mississippi, kindergarten is not mandated, so parents and guardians do not take it seriously. . . . Often, students enter school and lived with a relative who ‘babysat’ them and it is challenging for them to get that student to be comfortable away from home.”

NM: “If parents are working late or working overnight hours where they are not able to get the kids up in the morning and, you know if the parents are working late at night or they are sleeping in the morning they do not want to argue with the child about getting up. . . . For us, we need them here every day; for the parent, they need to be rested so they can return to work and getting them to school falls by the way-side.”

LN: “Poverty, transportation, and custodial situations are a big challenge. . . . Maybe there is an issue of lack of respect with non-custodial parents where they cannot make the kid come to school or, you know, they try to tell the student to go to school, and the student says, well, you are not my parent. You cannot make me. So, they feel like their hands are tied. They are doing the best they can. . . . The biggest challenges that the district faces when it comes to improving attendance is how the parents view the teachers and the school. The schools have to do a better job of getting parents into our schools to

see what their students are involved in to ‘walk a mile in their student’s shoes’ daily. The initiatives do not work if parents do not have ownership in them as well.”

LP: “It’s not so much a poverty issue but an issue between the elite and the non-elite. . . . Teachers at this school go to great lengths to ensure that if a student needs something those needs are met. . . . The school has unrestricted funds to assist students if the need is known.”

Students who reside in poor communities are often faced with challenging obstacles pertaining to low access to medical attention, poor health, malnourishment, family issues, violence, and stress, which typically prevent many from achieving academic success (Reed & Bhat, 2014). Mobility is a symptom of poverty as poorer students tend to move around more than wealthier students and are educationally disaffected by the forced transitions (Brown, 2017).

Theme 3: Interventions. The third of the three themes that became evident from the interviews was interventions. Common among participants were thoughts towards improving attendance in lower grades and the implementation of initiatives to decrease absenteeism and increase attendance.

LM: “The district uses many initiatives, especially in October and November. . . . The district has done as much as give away a Chromebook computer to something as simple as a free dress day [no uniform day] or a piece of candy. . . . Family Night, parent-teacher conferences, and open house are initiatives/strategies that have been implemented in the districts efforts to improve school attendance rates.”

ML: “The district or school or even the grade levels will work toward attendance initiatives such as free dress day once a week or a grade level getting a candy reward or extra recess for attendance. . . . Just educating parents that it is important.”

LN: “On her campus, they work with the initiative that the district has established for that particular period. . . Parent-Teacher Conferences, Open House, Fall Festival Family Night.”

Harrison and Shaffer (1994) and Maxwell and Lopus (1994) noted that the key to improving attendance in kindergarten and elementary school lies in changing parent beliefs toward school attendance in the early grades. When absenteeism is problematic, efforts must be in the direction of encouraging and informing students, parents, and teachers of good school attendance (Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu, 2016).

Sub-question 2

Sub-question 2 for this study asked, How would quantitative research data in the form of an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey guide the implementation of attendance initiatives at two southwest Mississippi elementary schools?

While teachers within the elementary grades are well-trained, innovative, and remarkably passionate about teaching their students, interviews with principals at these schools indicated that teachers feel that they cannot improve student outcomes if students are not present at school each day. The survey instrument (see Appendix A) was administered to all certified teachers in the two southwest Mississippi elementary schools for grades K4–5. The survey was used to collect quantitative data related to educators’ understanding of the initiatives supporting attendance and the idea of collective efficacy within the school. A total of 44 participants completed a 10-statement Likert scale survey to collect quantitative data related to collective efficacy and attendance. Table 3 shows the frequency and average of responses to each survey statement.

Table 3

Frequency and Average of Survey Results

Question	Strongly Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. As the classroom leader, attendance is part of campus discussions with students.	2 4.5%	1 2.3%	1 2.3%	17 38.6%	23 52.3%
2. Campus leaders provide parents with information related to ongoing attendance initiatives.	2 4.5%	0	1 2.3%	17 38.6%	24 54.5%
3. Campus leaders take the necessary actions to follow up on students who are absent.	2 4.5%	1 2.3%	6 13.6%	19 43.2%	16 36.4%
4. Classroom teachers have conversations with parents when students are frequently absent.	2 4.5%	0	3 6.8%	27 61.4%	12 27%
5. Campus leaders allow teachers input into attendance initiatives being implemented.	2 4.5%	3 6.8%	7 15.9%	19 43.2%	13 29.5%
6. In an effort to improve attendance initiatives, campus leaders ask for feedback from students concerning their wants.	1 2.3%	11 25%	14 31.8%	13 29.5%	5 11.4%
7. Campus leaders use every measure to forge positive relationships with parents to encourage student's attendance.	0	3 6.8%	6 13.6%	20 45.5%	15 34.1%
8. Campus leaders use attendance to target students who are at risk from excessive absences.	1 2.3%	1 2.3%	6 13.6%	22 50%	14 31.8%
9. As a classroom leader, I use classroom data to guide attendance initiatives.	1 2.3%	6 13.6%	13 29.5%	16 39.4%	8 18.2%
10. As the classroom leader, I have my own classroom attendance initiative that is separate from the school's initiatives.	1 2.3%	14 31.8%	12 27%	11 25%	6 13.6%

Theme 1: Attendance initiatives. During data analysis of the survey, the researcher grouped survey questions to develop the theme of attendance initiatives and how teachers perceive them as a collective unit. The survey results indicated that 52% of participants strongly agree that as the classroom leader, attendance is part of their campus discussions with students, yet only 27% of participants strongly agreed that teachers have conversations with parents when students are frequently absent. Another 55% of participants strongly agreed that campus leaders provide parents with information related to ongoing attendance initiatives. Only 14% of participants strongly agreed that as the classroom leaders, they have their own classroom attendance initiative that is separate from the school's initiatives. Only 18.2% of participants strongly agreed that as a classroom leader, they use classroom data to guide attendance initiatives (see Figure 2).

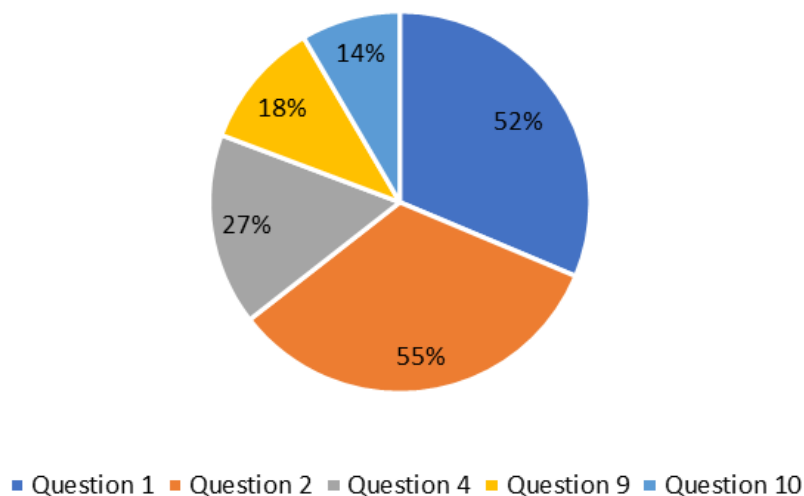


Figure 2. Theme 1: Attendance Initiative Survey Response.

Theme 2: Collective efficacy. When determining the idea of collective efficacy on the elementary campuses that are working together to improve student attendance, only 29.5% of participants surveyed strongly agreed that campus leaders allow teacher input into attendance initiatives being implemented. Another 11.4% of participants surveyed strongly agreed that campus leaders asked for feedback from students concerning how to improvement initiatives. Thirty-four percent of participants surveyed strongly agreed that campus leaders use every measure to forge positive relationships with parents to encourage students' attendance, and 32% strongly agreed that campus leaders use attendance to target students who are at risk for excessive absences. Lastly, 36% of participants strongly agree that campus leaders take the necessary actions to follow up on absent students (see Figure 3).

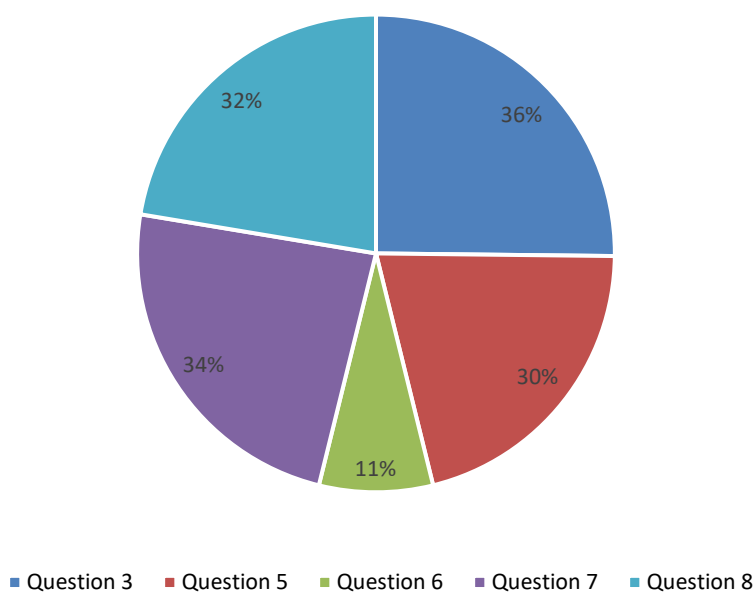


Figure 3. Theme 2: Collective Efficacy Survey Response Chart.

Sub-question 3

Sub-question 3 for this study asked, How would qualitative data in the form of a Daily Attendance document analysis reveal patterns in attendance based on initiative implementation? Attendance data were collected using the school system's information database and provided to the researcher in raw form. All identifying information was stripped per district agreement.

The raw data consisted of the attendance data for students in two southwest elementary schools in Mississippi. Attendance data were separated by pre-initiative and during initiative attendance data. The Mississippi academic school year consists of 180 days. The data were collected for the specific period of August to November 2019. This time frame of 80 days was chosen due to the reporting for MAEP funding in Mississippi. Pre-initiative data were collected from August 6 until September 30, 2019 (38 school days). The attendance initiative began on October 1 and concluded on November 22, 2019 (36 school days). During the pre-initiative periods, students had one school break of one full school day, and there were no emergency weather days taken. During the initial period, the district had two days for fall break in October, and the initiative concluded before Thanksgiving break (November 25–29, 2019). Data for pre-initiative and during-initiative periods can be seen in the following graphs (see Figures 4–7).

The study provides evidence that although the district has emphasized students being present every day, initiatives had minimal influence on improving the ADA on each campus. Analysis of Grade K4–2 and Grades 3–5 data shows an average of students' monthly absences on the following graphs and tables.

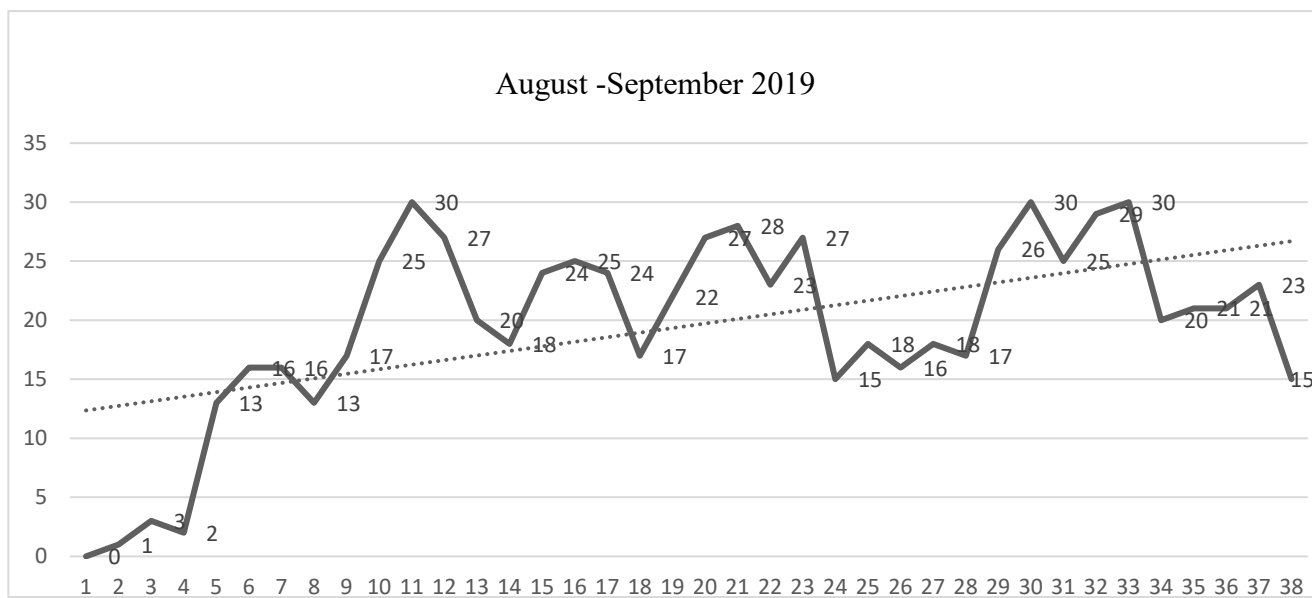


Figure 4. Lower Elementary Pre-Initiative Attendance Data.

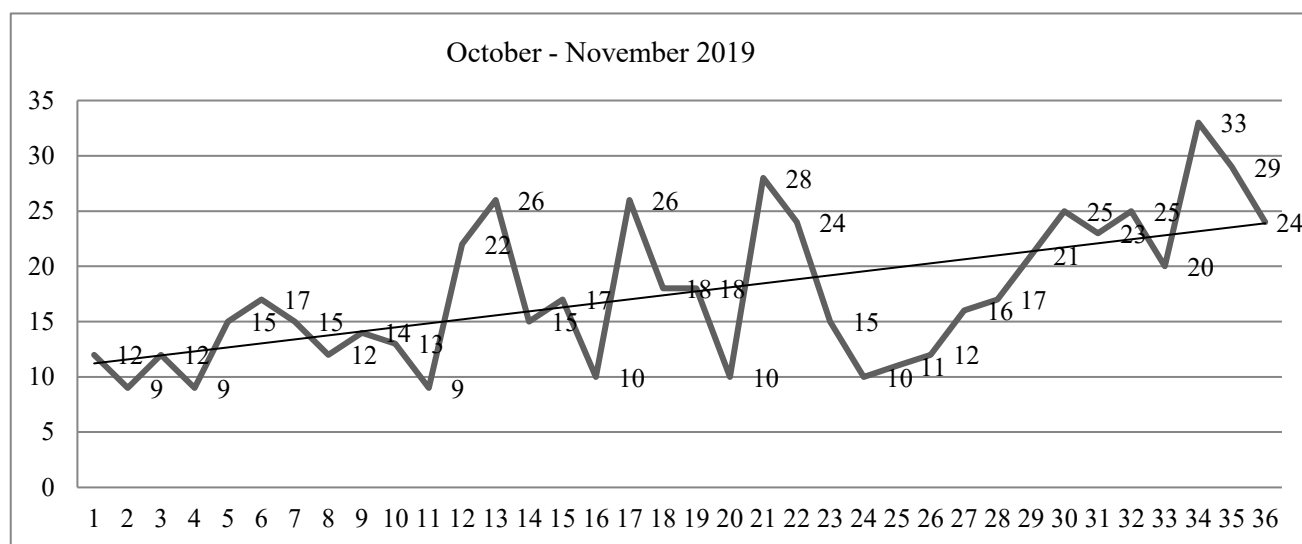


Figure 5. Lower Elementary During-Initiative Data.

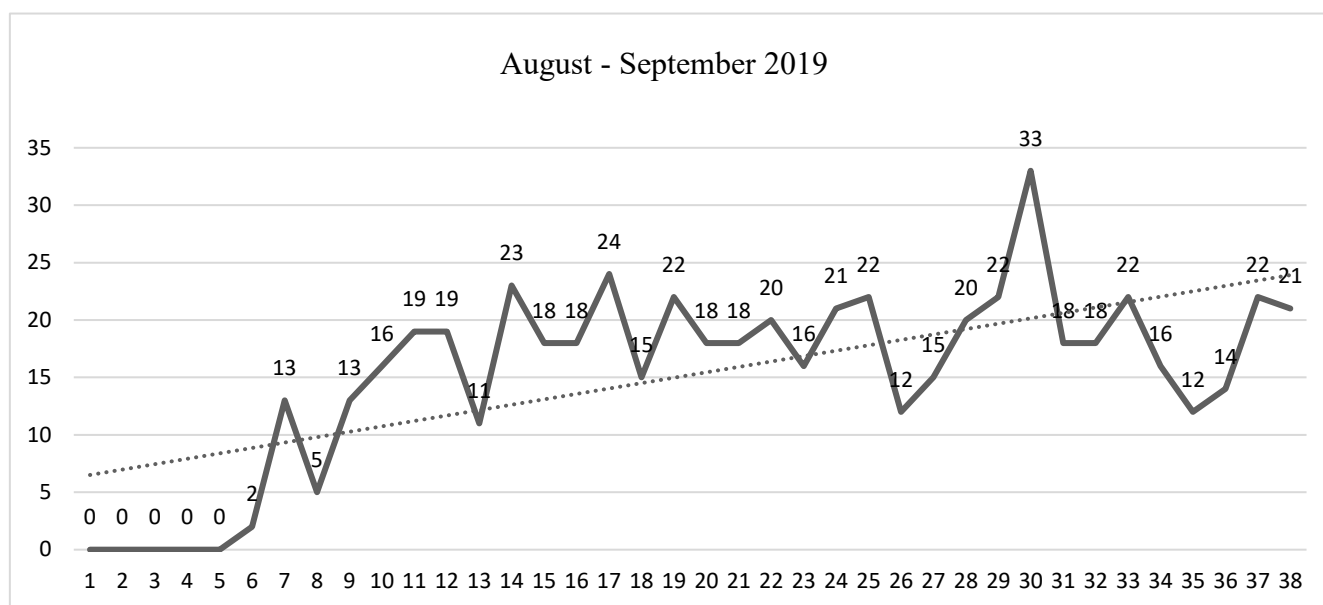


Figure 6. Upper Elementary Pre-Initiative Attendance Data

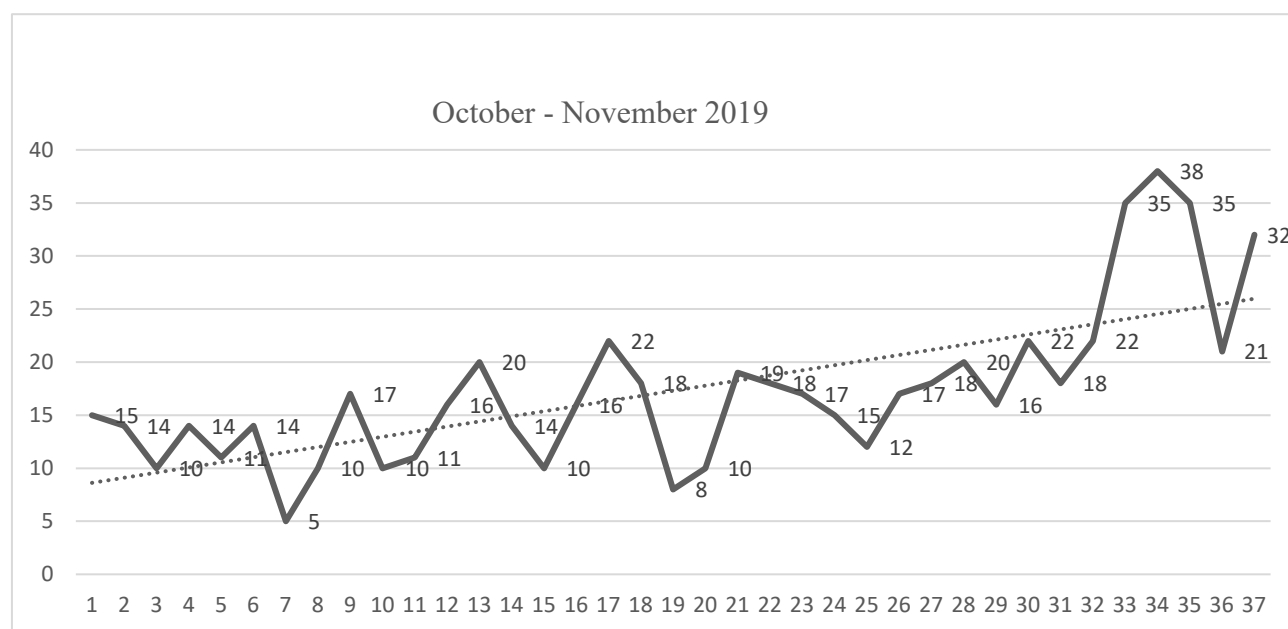


Figure 7. Upper Elementary During-Initiative Data.

Table 4

Lower Elementary ADA Summary

Lower Elementary	School Enrollment	Absent Count	Monthly AVG absent
August	430	16	3.72%
September	430	19	4.42%
Avg. pre initiative	430	18	4.1%
October	429	15	3.50%
November	429	17	3.96%
Avg. during initiative	429	16	3.73%
Decrease in student absences			0.34% (2 students)

Table 5

Upper Elementary ADA Data Summary

Upper Elementary	School Enrollment	Absent Count	Monthly AVG absent
August	421	11	2.61%
September	421	15	3.56%
Avg. pre initiative	421	26	6.18%
October	426	14	3.29%
November	426	22	5.16%
Avg. during initiative	426	36	8.45%
Increase in student absences			2.27% (10 students)

Finally, the review of attendance documents provides clear evidence that most initiatives do not improve attendance in these two Mississippi schools. While the reports indicate that there is still much work to be done if the school wishes to improve student attendance in the elementary grades, becoming familiar with the struggles that students and their families face and finding ways to partner with these families could improve attendance in these southwest Mississippi schools as they are moving students forward.

Discussion

Public education is an integral part of American society and the subject of interest to many researchers (Beets et al., 2009). According to Bruner et al. (2011), if children are not in school, they do not learn. Chapter Two examined the literature regarding student attendance, school refusal behaviors, and absenteeism, which were relevant to the study of improving student attendance in two elementary schools in southwest Mississippi. Although the data from the online surveys in this study were significant to this district, those interviewed agreed that more parent education is crucial to improving student attendance at the primary grades.

Family patterns and issues of generational poverty place some students at a disadvantage in the primary grades. Solon (1999) indicated that social and economic deprivation during childhood can have a lasting effect on individuals, making it difficult for children who grow up in low-income families to escape poverty when they become adults. Administrators in this district identified the negative effects of poverty as one barrier affecting student attendance rates. According to SG, “the district was seeing more and more students each year who live in low-income situations. Furthermore, these family units are focused more on survival than education.” Generational poverty is defined as having been in poverty for at least two generations (Payne, 2005, p. 45). The data in this research support the conclusions drawn by

Bandura's (1977) social cognitive learning theory, which concludes that a student learns from his environment this is predicated on students being present at school each school day. These results both confirm and support empirical and theoretical research of Ehrlich et al. (2016) which emphasized that school attendance is a crucial component to shaping the foundation for student learning and success.

Theoretical Literature

In examining the results and developing themes that address the research questions, three significant concepts emerged. Each of these concepts and potential solutions may be supported through previous research. The results of this study both confirm and support theoretical research previously discussed in Chapter Two. The themes developed in this study can enhance future initiatives by broadening the scope of the school district's responsibilities to providing programs that provide attendance education to students and parents.

Theme 1: Low Attendance

Compulsory education laws, along with attendance regulations, have led many Mississippi school districts to develop and implement attendance initiatives to improve average daily attendance rates. The members of this rural school district in Mississippi work within the community to control the behavior of individuals and groups in the school community to improve attendance rates with targeted actions. While chronic absenteeism is an accountability measure, no quantitative empirical evidence exists to determine if these initiatives or other factors like collective efficacy work to improve average daily attendance in the primary grades. School administrators use all available resources to establish effective strategies designed to improve chronic absenteeism.

The data analysis corroborates previous research that the initiatives developed within districts to address low absenteeism rates had minimal effect on the ADA of each elementary school campus in two southwest Mississippi schools. This rural school system has had district-wide initiatives for at least 12 years. Over the years, these initiatives have evolved into more rigorous expectations used to measure student success. The qualitative data analysis confirms that for students to meet the requirements set by the state of Mississippi successfully, students must attend school regularly or at least 63% of the school day.

Qualitative data analysis further supports research that identified the importance of all stakeholders at the table when developing programs designed to increase attendance. Members of the community, especially local businesses, can become invaluable resources in the fight to combat absenteeism. Interview participants noted the importance of involving all stakeholders in plans that encourage and improve attendance. SG explained,

Our goal is to increase student attendance rates for all students. I feel that the primary grade sets the foundation for a student's educational success. The experiences they get at this level will be the standard by which each grade will be measured; hopefully, we make a positive impact, but often our hands are tied. When students are frequently absent, it indicates that something is not right, that something is not working in the family.

Theme 2: Efficacy

The purpose of this section was to discuss the study findings concerning the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. In Chapter Two, student attendance, school refusal behaviors, student mobility, and absenteeism were discussed as being a real issue in rural schools. When reviewing the data from the online surveys, the data indicated that the participant responses fall between agree or strongly agree, which would indicate that overall participants

believe that the district is doing what it can to improve attendance at the primary grades as a collective unit; therefore, data supported the idea of collective efficacy within the district.

However, those interviewed agreed that more education/training, along with access to available resources, would provide parents with a better understanding of the importance of average daily attendance in the primary grades.

This study extends previous research by highlighting what one rural Mississippi school district does to address attendance. The teachers interviewed all suggested that more parent engagement, making school fun, and ensuring resources (i.e., transportation and clothes) are available to meet student needs. Improving student attendance and the development of new initiatives should be a priority for the district, while a review of the literature indicated that “chronic absenteeism follows poverty wherever it is found in significant concentrations” (Balfanz et al., 2016, p. 15). This research would suggest that poverty precedes chronic absenteeism.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the research results depicting the efforts of one district to combat attendance at the primary grades. The study carefully examined the behaviors described in participant interviews that provided substantial text from which themes were identified; these themes were further supported by the quantitative data from the Likert-scale survey data and review of documents, including data from pre-initiative and initiative periods. The findings of this study revealed three themes related to collective efficacy, attendance, and parental involvement and what the district is doing to improve student attendance. Following Chapter Four, Chapter Five will provide a proposed solution, along with necessary resources, funds, roles and responsibilities, implications, and evaluation of the solution.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This multimethod research study sought to identify the factors that impact students' average daily attendance. In this chapter, the problem is re-explained, and a solution to the problem along with the necessary resources, funding, roles and responsibilities, timeline for implementation, and evaluation of the solution is presented. After a thorough analysis of the data on student absences, it was concluded that attendance initiatives implemented at the time of data collection did not have a direct impact on the overall average daily attendance rates for each campus. Despite the uncontrollable factors such as illnesses and family emergencies that may have contributed to students' needs to be absent from school, the data demonstrated that there are factors that the school district cannot control including poverty, working parents, uninvolved parents, custodial arrangements, foster care, and emotional poverty. The results of this study were further supported by existing literature that has found that parent engagement is a contributing factor in student attendance.

Restatement of the Problem

The study provides evidence that regardless of district initiatives designed to improve attendance, the initiatives used during the implementation period did not improve low rates of student average daily attendance. Educators, researchers, policymakers, and others have focused on attendance chiefly in secondary school (i.e., middle school and high school) viewing truancy or unexcused absences as an indicator of student disengagement and eventual dropout. A multimethod approach was used for data collection, including a series of interviews, a Likert-scale survey, and a review of attendance documents, all of which aligned with the theoretical and empirical evidence provided by prior research studies.

Proposed Solution to the Central Question

After careful analysis of the data collected in this study, it is evident that most attendance initiatives in Mississippi do not improve student attendance. Data suggested that current initiatives had minimal or no effect on improving student attendance. In considering the development of new initiatives, team members must consider that students in preschool through fifth grade do not have much independent control over their attendance in school; therefore, the initiatives must have an impact on the school community, and especially the parent/guardians, for them to be successful. The data further suggests that new incentives, parent education, and teacher training may assist with improving student attendance outcomes. This study allowed participants the opportunity to provide input on past and present attendance initiatives used by the district.

Further development of a solution shall be guided by the “Ten Steps to Designing Effective Incentive Programs” provided by the Incentive Marketing Association (see Appendix F).

Proposal 1: Attendance First Steering Committee

Establish a district Attendance First Steering Committee consisting of diverse members including district employees, students, parents, and community leaders. A maximum of 20 participants is recommended. This will allow the Attendance First Steering Committee the opportunity to be broken into subcommittees to distribute responsibilities (Policy Committee, Data Committee, and Program Committee).

Goal 1. The district's first goal will be to secure committee members and locations for the organizational meetings and determine if the current attendance initiative program produced the required results (see Appendix E).

Goal 2. Explore opportunities to educate parents on the importance of daily attendance, as well as providing them with information on resources that might assist them in meeting those basic needs. Educating parents about the dangers of students' missing school could play a positive role in increasing student attendance rates.

Proposal 2: Professional Development

Provide targeted professional development for teachers to enhance professional practice and develop an understanding of the seriousness of student attendance across grade levels.

Goal 1. Bring awareness of the importance of building positive relationships with students and parents through professional development (PD) to improve ADA.

Goal 2. Have resources available to help build a culture of attendance in classrooms, in the school district, and the community.

Each of these proposals ensures that everyone in the district is working toward the same goal of increasing student ADA rates. These solutions can empower the school district, parents, and the community, ensuring that students are attending class regularly.

Resources Needed

The district realizes the importance of having students present every day, and its goal is to ensure that students are meeting educational milestones. To do so, Mississippi has provided schools with allocated funds to support PD of teachers and programs that support students who struggle with attendance. The resources are available to lead a data-driven plan to improve schools' attendance programs. The researcher is not requesting additional resources; however, the researcher is recommending that district leaders create the conditions and ensure the capacity needed for principals and teachers to be data literate.

Regarding human resources, the suggested Attendance First Steering Committee will

need approximately 20 participants, who must have access to monthly attendance data to drive decision making and work collaboratively with the program committee in the development of additional activities to increase ADA rates at the elementary schools. The suggested ongoing PD should include access to Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) strategies, evidence-based behavioral interventions, campus-level professional learning communities (PLCs) and other resources that parents may need. The suggested parent training should include an open house, family night, parent-teacher conferences, communication based on the school district policy, and Parent Teacher Organization activities. The district must create a better presence in the community.

Funds Needed

Based on the results of this research, there are minimal funds needed to implement changes to the current attendance initiatives. The district currently implements initiatives that have little impact on increasing attendance rates. A potential barrier to implementation at a high level could be insufficient funding to develop professional development for teachers and training for parents. The district could utilize the Federal Program Coordinator as a school liaison to facilitate collaboration with local businesses and community leaders. This person could also be used as a resource to seek out and write grants along with other measures to help cover some of the district costs for events and training.

Solution Implications

The purpose of this section is to provide a clear explanation of both the positive and negative implications of the solution. Although teachers may not understand the benefits of attending more training, the development of ongoing PD and by implementing PLCs, teachers will be able to work collaboratively to develop better understanding of the concerns that students

face outside of the classroom, which can negatively affect the student ADA and ways to identify these issues before they become a systemic problem. Offering professional development to best support collaborative planning efforts is critical to enhancing communication and relationships with students and parents. Using different platforms (i.e. technology) to reach students and parents sends a positive message about the district's goal to improve ADA rates and outcomes for students.

Roles and Responsibilities

Attendance First Steering Committee's role will be to develop and manage the strategic plan, objectives, meeting agendas, and program evaluation plans developed to improve student attendance. The Policy Committee's role will be to develop recommendations for support of objectives established by the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee. The Policy Data Committee's role will be to review monthly attendance data, keeping track of trends and initiatives implemented at that time to support objectives established by the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee. The Program Committee's role will be to coordinate and execute activities in support of the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee and form partnerships with parents and community members. Each committee will determine the frequency and length of individual meetings as needed. Each committee should report to the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee on a bi-monthly basis. Recommendations formulated in subcommittee meetings should be submitted to the Steering Committee for review before being added to the agenda at the bi-monthly meeting.

Timeline

The timeline outlines how this district can implement the proposed solution in the school year. However, these actions should be continual each year.

Plan – Weeks 1–4

- Form the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee –include at least five members of the school district’s leadership team, at least five teachers represented from lower and upper elementary school, students, parents, and community leaders.
- Establish the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee’s mission and vision, which will guide the decision-making process.
- Establish the Attendance Initiative Steering Committee’s subcommittees.
- Establish committee goals along with school attendance goal – based on data.

Implement – Weeks 5–10

- Promote school attendance in the entire school community.
- Conduct professional development on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) strategies.
- Conduct Family Night activities.

Evaluate – Weeks 11–30

- Assess implementation strategies and adjust as needed.
- Assess program plans – ensure the inclusion of various strategies to encourage parent involvement.
- Conduct formative assessments immediately after implementation to measure success of initiatives.
- Collaborate within and between other subcommittees to find ways to combine efforts.

- Conduct observations and on-time follow-up with Steering Committee Members.

Improve – Weeks 31–36

- Analyze results of attendance data.
- Reflect on initiative successes and failures.
- Evaluate what can be done to improve for the following school year.

Evaluation Plan

Student absenteeism is a silent epidemic that school districts rarely consider in their strategic planning. School administrators must operate as instructional leaders who continually monitor and assess students' attendance goals. In order to improve attendance in the primary grades, the district should create a school culture based on planning and collaboration with fidelity. The proposed solutions are designed to address the problems of low student attendance rates. An outcomes-based evaluation plan of the recommendations is needed to determine what changes are needed as new data are released. The main purpose of the outcomes-based evaluation is to assess the needs of the district, analyze current programs for effectiveness and to review the district's goals, take a closer look at motivators (i.e., rewards) and resources available to the district, and utilize all the information to produce effective planning, thereby shaping the program's purpose to achieve desired district outcomes.

Evaluation of the efficacy of each solution will be based on a comparison of student attendance data during each implementation period. Evaluation of this improvement plan will encompass multiple assessments and require stakeholder input throughout. The solutions proposed by this study will be ongoing so that up-to-date research is reflected in the training formats. As new information is released, the training and programs designed to increase attendance will need to reflect these changes.

Limitations

Several limitations are noteworthy concerning the results found in this study. The data were obtained from members of one school district, all from the same rural, southwest Mississippi geographical area. The results of the study only apply to the two elementary schools studied within one southwest Mississippi school district and cannot be generalized to other schools within the district or to other districts in the same geographical area. The study only used participants from the elementary administrative and staff level along with district administrative level participants within a single southwest Mississippi school district.

Another limitation of this study was that the data used for this study were only collected based on the state's MAEP funding schedule. The study could have been strengthened by collecting data from one academic school year or by a review of data from the previous school year to get a better picture of the problem that exists with average ADA rates in the elementary grades. At the time of this study, a breakdown of the attendance data for each grade level during the previous school year (2018–2019) was no longer available.

This study did not consider the changes in student enrollment that could skew the data due to students having to remain on the district's roll until a request for transfer records was received from the enrolling district. The practice of not releasing students until a school request is made is based on a safety procedure to ensure that students are accounted for and not "missing." The study did not consider students with out of school suspension, modified schedules, or homebound status in the document data analysis, nor did the study consider excused or unexcused absences.

Summary

This multimethod applied research study focused on the central question of how attendance can be improved in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools and was designed to determine the success or failure of current attendance initiatives in improving student attendance rates. The problem was identified as the need to improve the ADA rates for the district. By triangulating data from interviews, an online survey, and a review of documents, it is evident that there are areas in which the district can improve. The themes produced concepts for solutions which included improving the current actions being implemented by the district. This study has illustrated the importance of creating a uniform approach to improving attendance at the elementary level. The results revealed that the perceived collective efficacy that exists within the school district was a positive one. Based primarily on findings from the participant interviews, it was determined that attendance education for parents should be a stronger focus throughout the school year rather than relying solely on handouts provided at the beginning of the year. Further, utilizing technology and human resources in the form of teacher input and the use of up-to-date information to create ongoing PD may benefit all stakeholders. Teachers will become more comfortable with engaging parents in discussion about student attendance concerns, and parents will see schools as allies, resulting in improved student attendance rates and as well as academic gains.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation Survey

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	Question	1	2	3	4	5
1	As the classroom leader, attendance is part of campus discussions with students.					
2	Campus leaders provide parents with information related to ongoing attendance initiatives.					
3	Campus leaders take the necessary actions to follow up on students who are absent.					
4	Classroom teachers have conversations with parents when students are frequently absent.					
5	Campus leaders allow teachers input into attendance initiatives being implemented.					
6	In an effort to improve attendance initiatives, campus leaders ask for feedback from students concerning their wants.					
7	Campus leaders use every measure to forge positive relationships with parents to encourage student's attendance.					
8	Campus leaders use attendance to target students who are at risk from excessive absences.					
9	As a classroom leader, I use classroom data to guide attendance initiatives.					
10	As the classroom leader, I have my own classroom attendance initiative that is separate from the school's initiatives.					

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Date and Time of interview:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Questions to interviewees:

1. What role do administrators play in developing a collective efficacy among their staff?
2. What specific processes does the district use to build relationships with students and help them to discover their own self-efficacy?
3. What specific professional development do teachers participate in to develop organizational and collective teacher efficacy?
4. What socioeconomic factors affect student attendance within this district?
5. What can be done to improve outcomes for students in low socioeconomic settings?
6. At the district level, who is responsible for developing organizational self-efficacy?
7. How can self-efficacy be developed in parents in order to improve student attendance?
8. How does the district deal with lost funding due to excessive absences?
9. How are the consequences of excessive absences and/or tardiness communicated to parents?

Appendix C: Consent Form

Improving Student Attendance in Two Rural Mississippi Elementary Schools

Angela Bonner
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on how to improve student attendance in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools. You were selected as a potential participant because you are a district-level attendance officer, a campus-level administrator, or a district positive behavior specialist in the Poplarville School District. The purpose of my research is to examine the relationship between social efficacy as it relates to student attendance. I propose to study the relationship from a leadership (i.e., administrative) prospective and the classroom perspective (i.e., teachers). Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Angela Bonner, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this **applied study is to analyze past initiatives and develop new initiatives or amend past initiatives in order to improve** attendance rates for two southwest Mississippi elementary schools for students in grades K4-2 and 3-5, thereby, increasing average daily attendance rates. The central question for this study is How can the problem of low student attendance be improved in grades K4-5 in two southwest Mississippi elementary schools? The questions the researcher would like to answer are 1) How would the collective efficacy of the organization toward student attendance be described in a face-to-face interview by the administrators and attendance personnel of two southwest Mississippi elementary schools? 2) How would quantitative research data in the form of an Attendance Initiative Campus Evaluation survey guide the implementation of attendance initiatives at two southwest Mississippi elementary schools? 3) How would qualitative data in the form of a document analysis reveal patterns in attendance based on initiative implementation?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: Participate in a face-to-face interview. The interview should take approximately 1 hour, and I plan to record the session for accuracy with your permission.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. Data will be retained for three years upon completion of the study. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Angela Bonner. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or angbonner@gmail.com. The researcher's faculty mentor is Dr. Leldon W. Nichols, and you may contact him at lwnichols@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 5, 2020

Angela A. Bonner
IRB Exemption 4150.020520: Improving Student Attendance in Two Southwest Mississippi
Elementary Schools

Dear Angela A. Bonner,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,



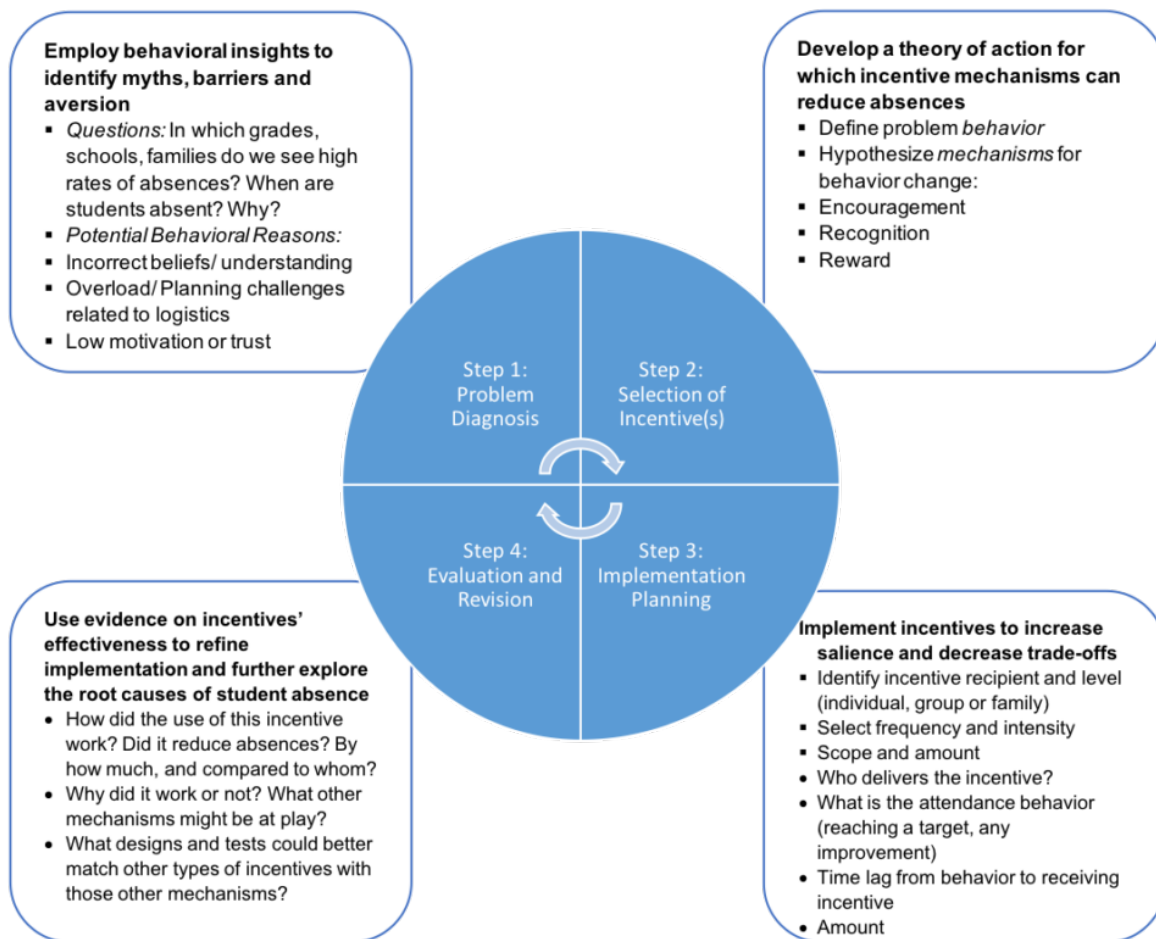
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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Appendix E: Visual Representation of Steps to a Successful Incentive Program

The following figure describes the most important areas for educators to focus on when designing incentive programs and consider whether they are likely to produce the desired effect. The following graphic can guide the use of incentive development to improve attendance through problem diagnosis, selection of incentive(s), implementation planning, and evaluation and revision.



Note: Reprinted from “Making sense out of incentives: A framework for considering the design, use, and implementation of incentives to improve attendance,” by Balu, R., & Elrich, S. (2018). *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 23(1–2), 93–106.

Appendix F: How to Develop an Incentive Program



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https://www.incentivemarketing.org/IMA/IMA/Resources/How_to_Develop_an_Incentive_Program.aspx

Appendix G: Permission to Reprint



Request

Karen Wesloh kwesloh@incentivemarketing.org

Sat, Apr 18, 2020 at 2:10 PM

Hi Angela,

I believe you are referring to the chart on this page of the IMA website. If so, you can use it for your paper as long as you credit IMA as noted in your email. If you would be interested in sharing your information with our members after the paper is complete, please let us know. If so, we can explore the options available.

Kind regards,

Karen

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