

Interventions to Combat the Many Facets of Absenteeism: Action Research

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Author Note

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Abstract

This paper operationalizes the definition of action research (AR) and the importance of conducting such studies to improve the lives of students and professionals. This paper provides an overview of literature regarding variables related to truancy and absenteeism. The paper discusses the importance of students being present and engaged, negative implications associated with poor attendance and dropping out of school, and reviews the effectiveness of Check & Connect and other multimodal approaches used to increase attendance. Evidence presented in the paper supports the usefulness of having a check-in and reward system for students with frequent absences reduces truancy. Lastly, the paper presents study results and implications. *Keywords: absenteeism, truancy and school counselors, school refusal interventions*

Mills (2011) defines action research (AR) as a systematic inquiry conducted by the principal investigator (PI) to gather information regarding their environment. AR is a great tool to examine programs already in place and evaluate new approaches being implemented. One goal of AR is to enhance the lives of students; however, it can also improve the lives of professionals.

The purpose of this action research is to give insight on ways to improve student attendance. The need to keep students in school and off the streets is imperative. Studies have suggested that individuals who drop out of school tend to have a higher rate of incarceration and other difficulties financially (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004); hence,

finding ways to keep students in school is vitally important to students and the community.

After reviewing literature on absenteeism, the PI, who is also one of the school counselors, decided to administer a dual method approach to combat the problem of absenteeism. The Check and Connect model and incentives were two promising methods used in similar school settings to decrease student absences. Elementary school is the time when students learn the core curriculum and develop attitudes and habits regarding formal education. Therefore, attendance is vital. Making students active members in the school community should help them learn and grow in all aspects of life. The literature is replete with studies that point out students who are truant feel disengaged (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). This AR created a safe and nurturing atmosphere conducive for students who could benefit from extra support in making the transition to high school. The program emphasized the importance of attendance, fostered a sense of belonging, and increased academic performance.

Review of Literature

This literature review reports and assesses interventions that implemented to increase student attendance and various reasons why students are not present and engaged. After reviewing the literature concerning student absenteeism, it seemed essential to conduct an AR project to gain insight and evaluate the current programs in place to combat the problem of student attendance.

With guidelines set forth by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the need to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), student attendance has become a main focus. Elementary school provides the foundation for learning and is a time when students learn basic skills they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Therefore, early interventions with students who are at risk for dropping out of school will have a positive impact on student attendance. Chang and Romero (2008) stated students who do not obtain these basic social and academic skills by third grade require extra assistance and are in great danger for eventually dropping out of school.

Low graduation rates have plagued public schools since their inception. Rush and Vitale (1994) reported that the

first public high school opened in 1821, but only two years after opening, 76 of the original 176 students had dropped out. Graduation rates continued to increase and by the 1950's the graduation rate climbed 50%. By the 1960's, 70-75% of students graduated from high school. The number of students dropping out of school in urban areas is on the rise. Since the 1970's, 60% of students in urban centers fail to graduate.

Absent students may have difficulty meeting the graduation requirements. As educators strive to increase academics, the more important attendance becomes. Cunningham (2010) notes that in today's classroom the shift is to use hands-on activities and actively engage students; however, when students have poor attendance, it can be detrimental to their education. With increased emphasis on higher order thinking and scaffold learning, students' attendance and engagement becomes even more important. Every school day has formal and informal learning opportunities that students cannot capture if they do not attend school. Students who have difficulty engaging in the school environment may choose unproductive activities that lead to delinquency and problems in later life (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2001). Moreover, problems associated with truancy affect the individual and the community at large (Baker et al., 2001; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Schools that do not engage elementary students who struggle with consistent attendance, full participation in academic and peer interactions, and low academic achievement set the stage for high school dropouts (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, as cited in Spencer, 2009). Therefore, attendance is a critical issue and as a nation it is imperative to improve attendance in our schools. How can educators and other stakeholders help these at risk students?

Factors that Contribute to Absenteeism

There are many different reasons students do not make it to school each day. Most research emphasizes four main circumstances for poor attendance. The main components are family factors, school factors, economic influences, and student variables (Baker et al., 2001; Peek, 2009; Wall, 2003). Chang and Romero (2008) add community related issues to this list. Family factors include lack of supervision, drug and alcohol abuse, the lack of knowledge regarding the laws of attendance, and differing attitudes toward

education. Chang and Romero (2008) note that families may be unaware of the importance of kindergarten, and many families struggle with basic necessities which hinder their ability to ensure their children attend school on a consistent basis. Homelessness, turmoil in the home, neglect, and over-protectiveness also play a role in students' absenteeism (Baker et al., 2001; Peek, 2009; Wall, 2003). Chang & Romero (2008) reported that the absentee rate for kindergarten and first grade students was about four times higher for those living in poverty; the researchers postulate that this result may stem from lack of stable, affordable housing, parents working multiple jobs, transportation issues, and inability to access medication or have limited health care.

In addition to home factors, school factors can also influence student absenteeism. These school factors consist of poor rapport between teachers, students and their families. Climate issues including the size of the school, attitudes of the teachers, administration, and other students play a major role in the high rate of truancy (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004). Many schools have a difficult time reaching the various learning styles of the students and meeting the diverse cultural backgrounds of the individuals (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). Schools lack consistent attendance policies and meaningful consequences; they fail to report the importance of attendance especially in the lower grades. Effective communication is imperative to ensure students attend school on a regular basis especially with the Latino population (Chang & Romero 2008). Having Spanish-speaking facilitators is a key component to engage these families. Chang & Romero (2008) discuss poor placement and the lack of skills and knowledge as a factor pertaining to attendance.

Lack of familial economic stability influences school attendance. For example, single parents working multiple jobs, lack of transportation, and inadequate childcare can contribute to truancy and absenteeism (Baker et al., 2001). Further, some students lack appropriate clothing to wear or their homes might not have alarm clocks (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). Logsdon, Burrell, Monroe, & Boes (2004) noted that students living in poverty with inadequate nutrition might have hindered concentration and cognitive development. Children who transfer from school-to-school face many difficult challenges ranging

from finding new friends to following to different methods of teaching.

Besides school and familial factors, student factors that shape absenteeism can include drug and alcohol abuse, poor health, behavior problems, and the lack of social skills. Students who are frequently truant often feel disengaged or incompetent when it comes to skills and knowledge of the material (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008). Community factors incorporate the way different cultures view education and the resources and opportunities available in the various communities. Children growing up in communities where violence is prevalent may have a difficult time finding positive role models who view education as important and have a hard time trusting others (Chang & Romero, 2008). Having effective programs for students at risk will improve attendance and help them academically and socially.

Attendance Intervention Programs

There is a need for intervention programs especially in the early grades when habits, values, and attitudes are formed (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004; Rush & Vitale, 1994). Research suggests several different strategies available to tackle the problem of student attendance (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Lehr et al., 2004; Logsdon et al., 2004; Sheldon, 2007). For example, Lehr et al. (2004) reported that the Check and Connect model is a program originally designed to increase graduation rates and assist middle school students with learning and emotional/behavioral concerns by engaging students in school and learning. The goal of this approach is to increase student attendance. Key features of the program include relationship building, routine monitoring of alterable indicators, individualized and timely interventions, long-term commitment, motivation and continuity regarding education, problem solving, and affiliation with school and learning (Lehr et al., 2004). This intervention provides opportunities for students to check in with an adult mentor on a regular basis. Students were able to discuss school work, personal problems, social skills and any other issues that may arise (Lehr, et al., 2004). Martin, Tobin, & Sugai (2002) reported a 50% reduction in dropout rate using this model. Lehr et al. (2004) conducted a study with several elementary schools in an urban area in the midwestern United States. The mean age for the 147 participants was 8 years and 11 months. Absences declined from 83% to

60% for those involved in the program for at least 2 years. About 48% of the students remaining in elementary school were engaged and present. This model allows the students to make those important connections in school and within the community. Creating student advisory teams employs a similar strategy in which school staff assign to a mentor (Martin et al., 2002). This method did not directly report effects on dropout rates but did indicate students were better equipped to handle problems and take responsibility for school and personal accomplishments as well as maintain positive adult relationships in the school setting.

Incentives and rewards seem to be another effective means of increasing attendance. Peek (2009) reported that "Perfect Pals Program"s was the most effective means for modifying student attendance at her school. Perfect Pals was an incentive program used for students who had perfect attendance and no tardies. These students earned lunch in the lobby, small treats, and had their picture on a bulletin board. Fifty seven percent of the teachers strongly agreed that the incentive program was effective for increasing student's desire to attend school regularly and 36% agreed that the Perfect Pals was a good idea, while seven percent strongly disagreed that the program was useful. Barber and Kagey (1977) conducted a school wide incentive program to improve student attendance; they designed the program for students to reach goals that would entitle them to all or part of a monthly party depending on their attendance. Each class had a sticker chart as well that provided immediate feedback and kept a visible record for each student. This program reported a four to six percent increase in student attendance. The literature suggests rewards and incentives appear to be effective methods for improving attendance.

Another successful intervention creates partnerships between schools, families, social workers, outside organizations, the community and sometimes law enforcement (Baker et al., 2001; Chang & Romero, 2008; Martin et al., 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Walls, 2003). Baker et al.'s (2001) evaluation of the multimodal approach showed a dramatic decrease in the number of trancies between two school years, ranging from four percent to 64% depending on the size of the district. According to Sheldon (2007), a collaborative approach in Ohio showed a significant increase in attendance as well. Chang & Romero (2008) reported Project GRAD a community based

approach in Atlanta, Georgia was a success by improving students' attendance for those who were absent 15 or more days. Project GRAD offered guidance, counseling, outside resources from the community, and family aid for those students or families experiencing difficulties. Truancy dropped from 18% to nine percent for students involved in the program for two or more years. The study encompassed 18 elementary schools, 6 middle schools and 3 high schools.

The PI sought to conduct an AR project on absenteeism to support the students in her school. The PI also wanted to examine if students' attendance would improve if they felt engaged in the school community.

Method

Prior to collecting data, the PI wrote and distributed a research request to the Institutional Review Board of a local university, local school administration, and county requesting approval. The program design included a daily check-in system with a student advisory team (SAT) member; school counselors, administration, and office staff comprised the SAT. The AR provided participants the opportunity to earn rewards throughout the AR based on their attendance. The students used a punch card system for the daily check-in with a member of the SAT, and were eligible for a reward if they were at school all week. Once authorization was granted, the PI began looking at data for students who had more than seven absences in the first semester.

Participants

This PI conducted the AR at a suburban elementary school in the metro Atlanta area, which is culturally diverse. The school is a distinguished Title 1 school for 9 years in a row and has about 900 students. The participants for this AR were students in kindergarten and second grade who had between seven to fourteen absences in the first semester of the 2010-2011 school year. This PI collected attendance data from the computer program used by the county school system. After reviewing the data, the PI spoke with individual teachers to determine the benefits of the attendance intervention. Ten students participated in the AR with five kindergarteners (two Latina females; one Caucasian female; one Latino male; and one Caucasian male) and five second graders (one Latina female; one

Caucasian female; one African-American female; one Caucasian male; and one African-American male). The six-week program began in early February and concluded in March.

Interventions to Improve Student Attendance

After reviewing the attendance data, the PI chose ten participants who had numerous absences and sent a letter and brochure home informing parents/guardians of this special program to track attendance (Appendix A). At the onset of this AR, the kindergarten and second grade teachers were informed regarding the purpose and goal of this program and asked to touch base with parents/guardians if a student was absent more than 2 days in a row. The participants met in the school's cafeteria for an overview of the program where they learned about the daily check-in and rewards. The incentives included pens, pencils, penguin puffers, sharpeners, and other items in a large treasure box. If students missed 2 days or less over the duration of the program, they earned a pizza lunch with the PI/school counselor.

During the intervention, the PI collected data using the punch card system and monitored the attendance program. Each participant received a card used to check-in with a member of the student advisory team. The team consisted of two counselors, principal, two assistant principals, and the office staff. The intervention sought to build positive relationships and increase attendance with these students with numerous absences. Having such a program in place established a school culture of caring and concern among students and parents.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this AR, the PI collected data using the computer attendance program used by the local county, informal survey, field notes, and observations compiled by the PI. At the conclusion of the study, the PI then compared the data from the first semester to the end of the program to examine the percentage of change in individual student attendance and attendance change for the group. The PI also looked at the informal survey given to the homeroom teachers that had students participating in the AR and the members of the SAT. The PI looked for themes while taking field notes and informal observations. The PI coded data using an identification system that captured no student names or information.

Results

At the initial meeting, the participants and the PI discussed the importance of school and the students. At the end of the program, the students still responded that the incentives were their favorite part. Most of the students stated the incentives motivated them to come to school. Moreover, two students told how their behavior also improved and expressed a new enjoyment for school. The students also discussed how the check-in made them feel special and proud. At our final meeting, the students noted they felt like the program had a positive effect on their academics; furthermore, most of the students were able to state specific skills or subjects they improved in because they were present.

Baseline data indicated that group attendees had an average of 8.8 absences. However, after the six-week intervention, the attendees had an average of 1.7 absences. Seventy percent of the students increased attendance during the AR. Program data also indicate that the majority of teachers and SAT members found the program extremely effective (60% of the teachers and the members of the SAT); 30% found the program highly effective; and 10% found the program effective. Survey results indicated 80% believed the incentives were extremely effective for increasing attendance, whereas 10% felt it was moderately effective, and 10% gave no response. When asking the teachers and the SAT team if the interventions increased academics, 60% responded with extremely effective, 10% felt it was highly effective, and 30% said it was effective. Based on survey results, 70% of the teachers and SAT members found the check-in cards beneficial, while 10% found the cards effective. Ten percent found the cards moderately effective, and ten percent had no response (Appendix A). These findings support the PI's hypotheses that check-ins and incentive programs would increase student attendance, foster students' feelings of belonging in the school community, and improve students' grades.

Figure 1

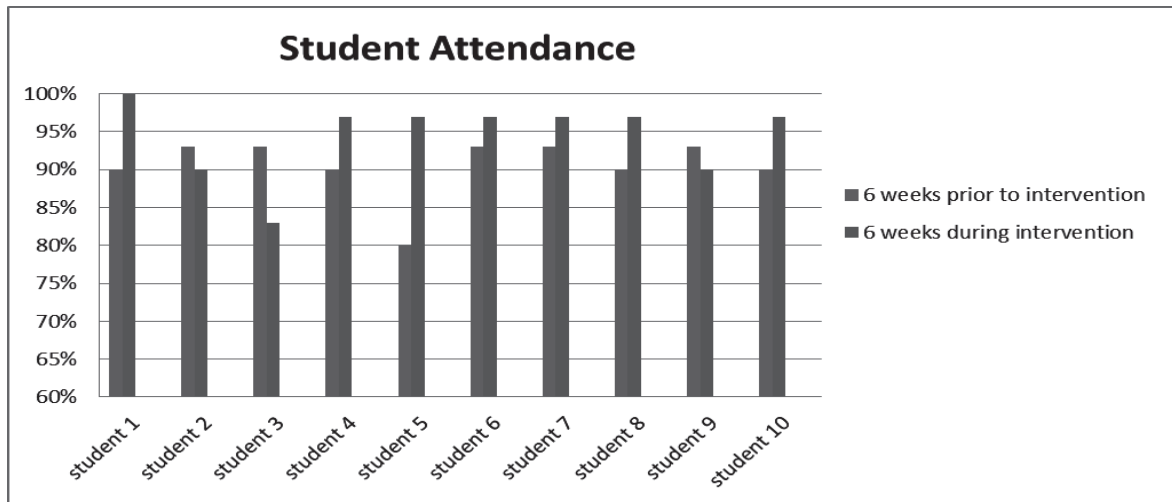


Figure 2

Questions	Extremely Effective	Highly Effective	Effective	Moderately Effective	Not At All Effective	No Answer
1. Rate the effectiveness of the program.	60%	30%	0.0%	10%	0.0%	0.0%
2. Do you think the incentives were effective in increasing attendance?	80%	0.0%	0.0%	10%	0.0%	10%
3. Do you think the attendance program increased academics?	60%	10%	20%	0.0%	0.0%	20%
4. Do you think having the check-in card was beneficial?	70%	0.0%	10.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%

Figure two shows that respondents viewed both interventions as effective. Respondents indicated that the check-in system helped create positive connections with other adults in the building; they also noted that students seemed excited about having the cards signed by members of the SAT. Data also indicated that teachers believed attending school allowed the students to complete work, tests, and obtain the information given during class time. One teacher respondent noticed a decrease in student tardies as well. One teacher felt the program would be most effective with students in second grade or higher.

Discussion

The results of the interventions enhanced student attendance and demonstrated the effectiveness of a reward system and student check-ins. Data demonstrated 70% of the students increased attendance during the program. All participants stated they enjoyed the program and wanted the program to continue. Most of the participants stated the incentives were the part of the AR they enjoyed most, but they also enjoyed checking in with a member of the SAT.

Most teachers reported finding the program beneficial; however, two teachers maintained that attendance is parental responsibility and doubted the effectiveness of the interventions. The survey findings indicated that 60% of the teachers and the SAT members found this AR to be extremely effective for increasing attendance, and the majority (80%) also found the incentives effective. Not only did the interventions improve attendance, but also 90% of the teachers and SAT believed the interventions were effective for improving students' academics. Program feedback indicated the usefulness of the program and expressed hope that the program would continue.

Limitations

Small sample size and the short duration of the AR limit findings. Also, the PI developed a survey that had no reliability or validity data. Limited time on campus restricted opportunities for the PI to collect field notes and student observations. Finally, when teachers failed to send check-in results to the SAT members, the PI could not always follow-up with students because of other counseling responsibilities.

Future Recommendations

Future recommendations include making parents aware of the attendance policy from the beginning of school and reiterate the importance of kindergarten and the early grades as they relate to academics and basic skills. Actively involving parents in the AR would clarify other reasons for student absences not considered by the PI's knowledge regarding absences and assist in future modifications for attendance programs. Collaboration with other educators and student service professionals could be helpful when

devising a plan to use with students that are frequently truant. Another recommendation would include adding tardies or creating an additional program concentrating on arriving at school on time.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that using a dual approach to increase student attendance was effective in reducing the number of absences for the members of the group. The study found that using incentives and a daily check-in system increased attendance, improved academics, and created a sense of belonging. The students were motivated using this approach.

The review of literature indicates there are many facets of student absenteeism with many different strategies used to combat the problem. The literature shows that factors contributing to truancy falls along a continuum of student, family, economic, community, and school environment variables. Understanding the root problems and creating effective programs in the early grades will help remedy the problem of truancy. Recognizing patterns of early absenteeism will provide valuable information concerning challenges these students face and allow the schools to take action. Early intervention with social, emotional, cognitive, and familial issues will give these students a chance to have a successful career in school and keep them from falling behind academically (Chang & Romero, 2008). Jacobson (2008) reported that children who were frequently absent in kindergarten had the lowest scores in reading, math, and general knowledge in first grade. Therefore, it is imperative to reach these at risk students early; using productive methods to ensure students attend school on a regular basis is necessary for them to reach their full potential.

School Counseling Implications

Ample research indicated students who lacked consistent attendance demonstrated signs of anxiety, depression and risky behaviors along with other problems later in life (Chou, Ho, Chen, & Chen; Dewey; Hallfors, Cho, Brodish, Flewelling, & Khatapoush; Hallfors et al.; Kearney; Roebuck, French, & Dennis, as cited in Dube and Orpinas, 2009). School counselors promote and help students improve academic achievement and reach their full potential socially and

emotionally. Evidence supports implementing programs using incentives, Check and Connect, and multimodal approaches. This study found that attendance interventions such as a check-in and reward system proved beneficial to participants. Program participants and stakeholders found the program valuable and hoped the program would continue.

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Appendix A

Program Announcement
OPERATION SCATT
(School Counts All The Time)

What: An attendance tracking and incentive program for students with 7 or more total absences.

Why: To ensure academic success through attendance. We want to improve student's attendance and keep as many students as possible under the 15 days absent mark for AYP.

When: January 4, 2011 at 9:00 am

Who: Kindergarten and second grade students who have 7 or more absences after the first semester.

Where: _____ Cafeteria

How: Students will attend an introductory briefing on Operation SCATT rules. During the briefing students will learn why school attendance is important and how it effects overall academic performance. At the close of the briefing, students will receive an Operation SCATT tracking card. The students will stop by the counselor or administrator's office at some point in the day to receive a stamp for being present. If the student is present for the entire week, he/she will receive a reward for that week (i.e. sticker, treasure box, or pencil). If the students have been present for four weeks in a row, they will earn a "bigger" prize like a popcorn dessert. At the end of the project if the student has remained stable at the entry level number of absences (plus 1 or 2) they will be eligible to participate in a pizza party.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact _____ or at _____