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Improving the Daily Student Attendance Rate at an Inner-City Public School

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

Student absenteeism can have a critical impact on academic performance. Prior literature provides evidence that the incidence of absenteeism is higher in urban, high-poverty school districts. Furthermore, absenteeism is unevenly distributed across students in cities, with at-risk students exhibiting higher rates (Gottfried et al., 2019). This school improvement plan provides an outline of an attendance improvement system as well as extensive research that explores evidence-based strategies that can help increase daily student attendance rates in an inner city public school.

Keywords: chronic absenteeism, urban schools, attendance policies

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Improving the Daily Student Attendance Rate at an Inner-City Public School

Background

Student absenteeism can have a critical impact on academic performance. Problematic school absenteeism has been linked to many serious problems such as internalizing and externalizing behavioral disorders, lower reading and mathematics test scores, lower academic performance and achievement, fewer literacy skills, grade retention, juvenile justice system involvement, and dropout (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). Chronic absenteeism can also put pressure on both the student and teacher to attempt to “make up” or remediate those missed concepts and skills. Prior literature provides evidence that the incidence of absenteeism is higher in urban, high-poverty school districts. Furthermore, absenteeism is unevenly distributed across students in cities, with at-risk students exhibiting higher rates (Gottfried et al., 2019). As part of attempts to address absenteeism, 36 states have made student attendance a core component of their school accountability systems (Hamlin, 2021). This school improvement plan provides an outline of an attendance improvement system as well as extensive literature that explores evidence-based strategies that can help increase daily student attendance rates.

Objective

During the 2020-2021 school year, Thurgood Marshall Elementary School had a daily student attendance rate of 81.8%. The school’s target daily attendance goal is 95%. One of the major goals of this improvement plan is to develop a plan to close that 13.2% daily attendance gap. Thurgood Marshall Elementary currently serves 604 students in total, with 173 students that receive special education services. This means that approximately 25% of students have been identified with a disability. According to the U.S. Department of Education 2016 Report Elementary-age students with disabilities are more than 50% more likely to be chronically absent than general education students (Gottfried et al, 2019).

In summary, there is need for more information about the attendance tracking methods at the school and how those methods take in to account the unique needs of the student population.

Specifically, the following questions need to be addressed:

- What attendance monitoring systems are currently in place at Thurgood Elementary?
- How effective are those systems? (i.e., current daily attendance rates)
- How does the school target students that are at-risk or currently truant?

Scope

The articles that were analyzed to create the literature review of this school improvement plan were all selected from the ERIC database. Research was limited to the following keywords: student absenteeism, attendance, truancy, chronic absenteeism, and attendance improvement. Only articles that were published in the last 6 years were selected, with the earliest article being published in 2016. According to an article published in 2020, educational stakeholders have begun to focus on which school factors might link to how and if students miss school in efforts to address chronic absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2020). The most important components of the improvement plan's topic (attendance improvement) that were explored during the research process were common factors that contribute to student absenteeism and evidence-based strategies that can improve student attendance.

Thesis

The principal finding from previous research is that chronic student absenteeism often has a direct correlation with school and classroom environment. To address absenteeism, many states have recently made chronic absence a core component of their school accountability plans (Hamlin, 2021). Thurgood Marshall Elementary school currently does not have an effective accountability system for addressing chronic absenteeism. The current attendance system has an

automatic email sent to parents when their child is marked absent on a daily basis. If a student is marked absent for three consecutive days, the school secretary makes a phone call to the emergency contact. If a student misses 10 nonconsecutive days of a school, the school counselor home makes a phone call and a formal letter is sent home warning the parent of a truancy referral. If contact is not made with the parent, a truancy referral is made. The ineffectiveness of this system can be seen with the rising rate of daily student absences during the past 2 school years.

Overview

The literature review for this school improvement plan explored the vast number of factors that can contribute to chronic absenteeism, as well as how student attendance has been addressed in both higher and elementary education. There is limited literature that outlines strategies and systems that have been proven to be effective in increasing daily student attendance. For example, best practices of principals in rural schools to achieve high annual attendance rates (> 90%) were studied and identified (Hall, 2021). While these strategies lay effective groundwork for improving attendance rates, additional research is needed for attendance intervention strategies that are applicable specifically to urban schools.

Review of the Literature

Student attendance is influenced by a range of student, school, and community level characteristics, suggesting that a comprehensive and multilayered approach to addressing chronic absenteeism is warranted, particularly in high-poverty urban districts (Singer, 2021). The research reviewed for this school improvement plan explored attendance and chronic absenteeism trends over the past 5 years and the factors that contribute to those trends. Additionally, the implementation of attendance policies and their effectiveness in urban schools was investigated. The research review concludes with summary discussions on implications for research-based interventions and recommendations that can help reduce chronic absenteeism in urban schools.

Chronic Absenteeism

Michael Gottfried conducted two separate studies that both explored the characteristics and connections linked to chronic absenteeism. In one study, Gottfried et al. (2020) examined whether a student was more likely to be chronically absent in the spring semester of a school year if they had a chronically absent classmate in the fall. This study used administrative data from an urban school district in California, which consisted of 13 public elementary schools. According to the findings, students who were chronically absent in the fall semester were more likely to be chronically absent in the spring semester by 48 percentage points, and students who received free or reduced lunch were more likely to be chronically absent in the spring by 2 percentage points. This connection, discovered by Gottfried, seems to indicate that there are a number of student- and environment- related variables that can impact the likelihood of chronic absenteeism. These variables were also found to play a significant role in student absenteeism in

the Singer et al. (2021) study. Singer's study found that student-, neighborhood-, and school-level factors were significant predictors of chronic absenteeism in Detroit.

Similar findings were also seen in Gottfried's 2019 study, which explored how the rates of chronic absenteeism compare between students with disabilities and students without disabilities attending the same traditional school. Gottfried et al. (2019) examined attendance data from 653,736 students in grades 1–6 who attended a traditional NYC public school between 2006 and 2012. According to the findings, chronic absenteeism is considerably higher for students with disabilities than students without disabilities in traditional schools, and there is important heterogeneity by disability classifications. Further, students with disabilities in GEN-majority classrooms are less likely to be chronically absent than those disability majority classrooms, again with variation by disability. These connections found by Gottfried indicate that the size and make up of students in a classroom can have a significant impact on absenteeism. These claims were also supported in the Tran & Gershenson (2021) study, which found that class size significantly increases chronic absenteeism. Specifically, reducing class size by 10 students would decrease the probability of chronic absence by 3 percentage points, or 21%. However, in contrast to Gottfried's findings on students with disabilities and their attendance rates, the results of Tran and Gershenson's study indicated that having a peer with a special education designation generally has a small effect on the likelihood of chronic absence. In other words, chronic absenteeism is dependent on individual student, environment, and school level variables.

Attendance in Urban Schools

According to Singer et al. (2021), chronic absenteeism rates in high-poverty urban districts are typically two, to as much as four times, higher than the national average. Singer's study used from all students who lived in Detroit and attended a public or charter school in

Detroit since the 2015–2016 school year to examine the ecological determinants of absenteeism for students in Detroit. According to the findings, chronic absence was highest in the early grades, declined during elementary and middle school, and rose again in high school. Students were more likely to be chronically absent if they were economically disadvantaged, received special education services, moved schools or residences during the year, lived in neighborhoods with more crime and residential blight, and went to schools with more economically disadvantaged students and less stable student populations. In summary, the findings of this study seem to indicate that chronic absenteeism in urban schools is more likely to be seen in young students that depend on parents/guardians to help them get to school and high school age students who are typically responsible for getting themselves to school. Similar findings were seen in the Stein & Grigg (2019) study, which explored the relationship between high school age student transportation and attendance. This study found that that changes in public transit are associated with changes in school attendance within the same students from one year to the next. More difficult commutes, either in the form of increased travel time or complexity, leads to students missing more days of school.

Consequences for Chronic Absenteeism

An underlying theme that emerged from both the Singer et al. (2021) and the Stein & Grigg (2019) studies was the consequences students face for chronic absenteeism in urban schools. A study by Reyes (2020) examined previous research that explored the topic of truancy in schools with a diverse student population. According to prior research, several major factors can affect truancy, yet 40 states regard their truancy policy as a status offense. According to Reyes's findings, simple law and order school attendance policies have not met the complex needs of large, diverse student populations. These findings suggest that suggests that school

compulsory attendance policies should provide a comprehensive package of retention and prevention policies that keep students engaged throughout their schooling, and take into consideration the individual factors that contribute to absenteeism. For example, a study by Everhart et al. (2018) noted that in comparison to their nonurban counterparts with asthma, urban children with asthma experience substantial health disparities in both asthma prevalence and morbidity. The study found that children with asthma whose caregivers have a chronic condition are at increased risk for missed days of school. Everhart's findings highlighted just one out of the several unique complications that families in urban settings face that can contribute to student attendance rates.

Attendance Policies

Similar to the themes found in Reyes (2020) study, a research study conducted by Anderson (2020) provided evidence on the student- and school level outcomes of schools that were affected by a state law prohibiting OSS as a consequence for truancy. Between 2016 and 2017, at least 31 states proposed legislation directly related to suspensions and expulsions, with 20 bills passed in 13 of these states. Using 9 years (2007-2008 through 2015-2016) of de-identified student achievement, demographic, attendance, and discipline referral data, from all Arkansas K-12 public schools, Anderson utilized comparative interrupted time series (CITS) analysis to examine the effects of the implementation of this legislation. Specifically, the study explored how the student-level outcomes such as math and English Language Arts (ELA) test scores, attendance, chronic absenteeism, truancy, and disciplinary infractions changed in "policy-affected" schools (i.e., those using OSS as a consequence for truancy). According to the findings, there were slight increases in attendance, particularly for disadvantaged students, with suggestive evidence of improvements in test scores and reductions in disciplinary referrals for some

students. The evidence from this study suggests that policies that prohibit suspension as a consequence for truancy may help reduce absenteeism. A separate study conducted by Lasky-Fink et al. (2021) supported Anderson's findings on limiting disciplinary actions for truancy, and furthered this research by evaluating the effectiveness of existing state-mandated administrative communications to parents on their child's attendance. The findings from Lasky-Fink et al. (2021) suggested that combining simplified language with messaging that reinforced parental efficacy and emphasized the potential cumulative consequences of periodic absences could yield improvements in student attendance. In summary, research suggests that policymakers should continue to evaluate the effect of their attendance policies rigorously, and ensure that communication about student attendance to parents/guardians is being done in a non-discriminatory and direct manner.

A study conducted in South Korea brought a unique attendance policy to light. Jung (2018) explored the attendance and achievement outcomes from the implementation of a "9 o'clock" attendance policy that was adopted by 90% of Gyeonggi province elementary and middle schools in 2014. The policy staggered school starting times from 8:00–8:20 to 9:00. The policy was made in response to medical research that suggested that students who start school later could typically sleep longer, which is regarded to be positively related to student's health, well-being, and performance. Jung used a difference-by-difference empirical design model to compare observable characteristics that were correlated to student's academic attainment among 3,541 4th-grade students in 85 elementary schools and 4,051 7th-grade students in 63 middle schools in the Gyeonggi province. After testing a variety of specifications checks, Jung found evidence of slight increases in attendance, particularly for disadvantaged students, with suggestive evidence of improvements in test scores and reductions in disciplinary referrals for

some students. Jung's findings indicate that school start time is yet another important factor for policymakers to consider when creating attendance policies.

Student Awareness of Policies

In contrast to Anderson, Lasky-Fink and Jung's studies which examined the effectiveness of attendance policies in elementary and high schools, Bukoye & Shegunshi's (2016) study approached the topic by evaluating student awareness of attendance policies in a higher education program through the use of an engaging teaching model (ETM). In order to provide an in-depth picture of student understanding of an attendance policy, Bukoye & Shegunshi created a student survey and collected data from students enrolled in a Business School of a university in the east of England. On the survey, 29% of students indicated that they were not aware of the school's attendance policy. 29% of the students indicated that students' absenteeism is attributed to financial (job) commitments and 26% for health reasons. 17% highlighted academic pressure and 16% felt that family pressure was responsible for students' absence. The remaining 10% indicated course and tutor-related issues such as wide gaps between lectures and limited impact from the tutor on teaching and attendance awareness. The implication of this study is that policymakers should consider adopting flexible and engaging learning options for students in order to reduce absenteeism.

Factors that Contribute to Student Attendance

Balkis et al. (2016) examined the direct and indirect relationship between student school absenteeism, personal factors (academic self-perception, attitudes towards teacher and school, goal valuation and motivation/ self-regulation), family factors (parents' educational level and income), and academic achievement in a structural equation model. Using data from 423 high

school students from two public schools in an urban city in Turkey, Balkis et al. (2016) found that student absenteeism was negatively related to academic self-perception, attitudes towards teacher and school, goal valuation, motivation/ self-regulation, and academic performance. Results from this study also indicated that student absenteeism differed in respect to parents' educational level and income, This study provides strong evidence to support that personal and family factors can significantly predict previous and current student absenteeism.

School Climate

Two studies that were reviewed for this research review examined whether school climate variables were directly and inversely related to absenteeism. The first study, Hendron & Kearney (2016), examined the relationship between school climate and absenteeism percentage and psychopathology in a diverse community sample of 398 truant youths and their parents in Nevada. Hendron & Kearney collected rating scales from both students and their parents and pulled attendance from school staff. The school climate variables that were examined in the rating scales included sharing of resources, order and discipline, parental involvement, student interpersonal relations, and student–teacher relations. The study found that school climate does in fact relate inversely to absenteeism severity and psychopathology among youths specifically referred for attendance problems. In addition, school climate subscales related inversely to anxiety, depression, and oppositional behavior, though more so in male respondents. This study provided implications for preventive strategies for youths with problematic absenteeism, such as system wide models for truancy prevention that target certain aspects of school climate, the hiring of school-based social workers, after-school programs with tutoring, and field experience options to engage students more with the school.

Hamlin's (2021) study examined the relationship between student perceptions of school climate (i.e., school safety, relational environment, personal connectedness, and academic engagement) and total absences and chronic absences. For this study, two consecutive annual administrations of New York City's Learning Environment Survey in 2011 and 2012 were linked to administrative data containing information on student absences and sociodemographic background characteristic. In contrast to the findings from Hendron & Kearney (2016), Hamlin (2021) found that school-level changes in perceived school climate between middle and high school were only marginally associated with student attendance. Hamlin's findings suggest that school climate seems to have stronger positive effects on academic achievement, student behavior, and the efficacy of school improvement strategies.

Leadership

School leadership is another variable that can potentially impact student attendance rates. Bartanen's (2020) study explored the effects that principals have on student attendance by comparing student attendance rates with principals' rubric-based observation scores. This study collected data from 3,800 principals working in 1,700 Tennessee schools from 2006–2017. Using data value-added (VA) and fixed effect methods to analyze the data, Bartanen found that principals do have substantial effects on student attendance. The results showed that replacing a principal who scored in the 25th percentile on their observation scores with one at that scored in the 75th percentile decreased the absence rate of all students in the school by 0.8 percentage points on average. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of hiring and retaining high quality principals at disadvantaged schools. The results also suggest that high-quality principals use strategies that are specific to their student population to reduce absenteeism.

Discussion

In summary, prior literature provides extensive evidence to support that there are several personal, school level, and environmental factors that can contribute to student absenteeism. While many efforts have been made to create preventative and responsive attendance policies and interventions, there is still a need for research on the outcomes of those strategies over time. Additionally, certain elements at both the school and personal level need to be investigated. At the school level, Tran & Gershenson (2021) noted that that future research should investigate the effects of class size, peer composition, and teacher qualifications on middle and high school students' attendance. At the personal level, Gottfried (2020) suggested that future research should aim to gain a better understanding of the nuances in what kind of absences are composing the chronic absences problem, and further explore the link between fall absences and spring absence. Both of these areas could be beneficial to research further within the context of Thurgood Marshall Elementary. Additionally, Thurgood Marshall could benefit from additional research on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on both general education and special education student attendance rates.

Site Profile

Community Characteristics

Thurgood Marshall Elementary is located in the Olney neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Olney section is only 1.62 square miles, with an approximate population of 42, 211. According to most recent statistics, 54% of residents identify their race as African American, 27% Hispanic/Latino, 12% Asian, 4% White, and 2% two or more races. Approximately 31.3% of the population lives below poverty level, with a median household income of approximately \$43,215. As for education levels, 3% of residents hold a masters degree or higher, 10% hold a bachelor's degree, 24% have completed some college or an associate's degree, 37% hold a high school diploma or equivalent, and 26% have less than a high school diploma (Niche.com, 2022).

School District Characteristics

The School District of Philadelphia currently serves 198, 645 students. The district has 323 schools in total, with 216 of the schools being district operated, 85 charter operated, and 22 alternative education. According to the most recent district census, 52% of student identify their race as African American, 22% Hispanic/Latino, 13% White, 7% Asian, and 5% Multiracial/Other. There are 169 languages spoken by students/families. 2021-2022 school year data indicated that 80% of students graduated from district operated schools, and 70% of students graduated from alternative schools (The School District of Philadelphia, 2022).

School Building Characteristics

At the end of the 2021-2022 school year, Thurgood Marshall Elementary had 604 students in total. Out of 604 total students, 352 students identify their race as Black/African American, 183 Hispanic/Latino, 32 Asian, 32 Multi Racial/Other, 3 White, and 1 American Indian/Alaskan Native. According to most recent data, 18% of students are English Language

Learners, 25% of students have IEPs, and 100% students enrolled at Thurgood Marshall come from families that participate in state and/or federal public assistance programs multiplied by the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) factor (The School District of Philadelphia, 2022).

Student Portfolio & Performance

The mission of Thurgood Marshall Elementary is “to develop highly intellectual, charitable, globally responsible scholars who aid in creating a world that is innovative, peaceful, and respectful of all humankind” (Thurgood Marshall Elementary, 2022). This school is pursuing authorization as an IB World School. IB World Schools share a common philosophy – a commitment to high-quality, challenging, international education – that we believe is important for our students.

The school leadership team works collaborates at the beginning of each school year to set academic and behavioral goals for the students. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, the team set the following 6 goals:

- **ELA:** At least 47.4% of grade 3-8 students will score proficient/advanced on the ELA PSSA
- **Math:** At least 33.8% of grade 3-8 students will score proficient/advanced on the Math PSSA
- **Attendance:** At least 54.7% of all students will attend school 95% of days or more
- **Behavior:** At least 95% of students will have zero out-of-school suspensions
- **Special Education:** At least 38% of grade 3-8 students with IEPs will score proficient/advanced on the ELA PSSA (includes PASA)
- **English Learners:** At least 23% of grade 3-8 students who are English Learners will score proficient/advanced on the ELA PSSA (includes PASA)

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

Thurgood Marshall uses a variety of research based general curriculum programs for the diverse population and age range of learners at the school. Special education students receive instruction through the use of research based intervention programs that fit their specific needs. Almost all students (with the exception of students that have been identified with Intellectual Disabilities and Multiple Disabilities) participate in the STAR universal screening assessment program. STAR diagnostic assessments are administered quarterly, and Tier 1, 2, 3 interventions are created for students based off of that data set.

The school has been implementing a PBIS system since 2016, which aims to reduce student suspension and disciplinary referral rates. The school is staffed with a climate team, which consists of two school deans, two school counselors, and 15 climate staff that aid with hallway transitions as well as lunchroom and recess periods.

Professional Development Practices

Teachers at Thurgood Marshall are required to participate in monthly district wide professional development sessions, with at least 4 professional development sessions held at the school level each year. A professional development catalog is sent out by a district administrator at least one week prior to the PD day, and teachers are required to sign up for a session that has either been assigned to them or they find most beneficial. Teachers register for PD sessions using the program Cornerstone, and receive ACT 48 service hours for each PD they attend.

Needs Assessment

After analyzing monthly school attendance data and interviewing school staff, it was determined that professional development and staff capacity were major elements that impacted the communication and follow up on student absenteeism. During the 2021-2022 school year, the Thurgood Marshall Elementary leadership staff facilitated 4 school-led professional development sessions. The first PD focused on behavior and classroom management strategies, the second and third PDs focused on STAR data, and the final PD focused on cumulative student achievement data for the school year. Student attendance was not discussed during any of those sessions, despite attendance rates being at an alarmingly low percentage in the winter of 2021. According to the school's current attendance policy protocol, the main office staff and school counselors are responsible for keeping track of student attendance and communicating with parents when a student has an unexcused absence. However, these staff members also have several other duties to attend to at the school daily and sometimes cannot make those important phone calls in a timely manner. The findings from Lasky-Fink et al. (2021) suggested that combining simplified language with messaging that reinforced parental efficacy and emphasized the potential cumulative consequences of periodic absences could yield improvements in student attendance. Thurgood Marshall Elementary could benefit from this strategy when communicating with parents about their child's attendance, as well as a reassessment of the chain of command for attendance protocol. The following questions continue to need further investigation:

- What factors, aside from the pandemic, are significantly contributing to the decrease in student attendance?
- How is student absenteeism being communicated to parents by school staff?

- Is the school leadership team communicating attendance data effectively to teachers?

Data Analysis

Summary

According to data from January 2022, approximately 60% (59.5%) of students were attending school at least 80% or more daily. Although this percentage meets the attendance goal that was set by the leadership team in the beginning of the year (54.7% of students daily), it should be noted that there was a significant decrease in student attendance in comparison to data from the previous school year. In June 2021, the school reported that approximately 81.8% of students were attending school daily. Individual student attendance data indicated that several absences during the month of December were coded as “excused” in relation to COVID-19 quarantine measures. While it is undeniable that the pandemic played a critical role in the decrease of daily student attendance, the data indicated that there were also several students that had unexcused absences during this time period. The data also indicated that students that have complex needs such as physical disabilities or housing issues had the highest rates of absenteeism. This data aligns with the findings from Singer et al. (2021), which suggested that students were more likely to be chronically absent if they were economically disadvantaged, received special education services, moved schools or residences during the year, lived in neighborhoods with more crime and residential blight, and went to schools with more economically disadvantaged students and less stable student populations.

Strengths

The school leadership team set an achievable attendance goal at the beginning of the year and was able to surpass the target percentage within the first 3 months of the school year. The

school also began using an automated email system that sent an instant alert to parents when their child was marked absent via email. This system was developed and implemented by the school district in response to the increase in chronic absenteeism across the entire school district during the 2020-2021 school year. The school secretary shared that she noticed a significant increase in absent notes being submitted this year in response to the implementation of parent email alerts.

Challenges

The school secretary, Ms. W*, and the school counselor, Ms. S*, were asked to provide input about their responsibilities and challenges with attendance at school. Ms. W shared that as the school secretary, it was her responsibility to call a parent/guardian when a child is marked absent for three days without providing an absent note. If a parent does not respond, Ms. W leaves a voice message and attempts to call the following day. After she has made three valid attempts to contact the parent via phone and is unsuccessful, a formal letter is sent home to the parent and the situation is then turned over to the school counselor. Ms. W noted that she frequently receives phone calls from parents after they receive the formal letter in the mail stating that they had no idea their child was marked absent. When asked if they received the automated email, several parents have shared that they do not have access to a computer in their home or the email was sent in English, which is not their primary language. When it comes to improving attendance, communications that make parents feel efficacious in their abilities to help their child attend school more may motivate them to take action (Lasky-Fink et al., 2021). Based on Ms. W's observations, it is likely that Thurgood Marshall is in need of a more effective and equitable system for communicating with parents.

Ms. S, the school counselor, shared that she is required to hold a meeting with families after a student has been marked absent 10 nonconsecutive days. During these meetings, Ms. S asks the families what challenges/obstacles are preventing their child from attending school frequently, and if they have any absent notes that can excuse the absences. If Ms. S is unable to get in contact with a family after 3 valid attempts, she is required to report the case to truancy. Ms. S stated that her biggest challenge with monitoring attendance is finding time to check on student attendance rates daily. As a school counselor, Ms. S is required to meet with specific students daily and respond to intense behavior incidents as soon as they occur, leaving her very little time to analyze and respond to attendance trends. Prior research has revealed that school climate relates inversely to absenteeism severity and psychopathology among youths specifically referred for attendance problems (Hendron & Kearney, 2016), so it is crucial that Ms. S is provided with adequate time to both monitor the climate of the school and follow up with students that are chronically absent.

Assessment Options

Overall, it is evident that there are at least three separate elements of the school's current attendance plan that need to be revamped. First, the school counselor is in need of an additional staff member to support her with the responsibility of conducting meetings with students that are chronically truant and following up with those families in a timely fashion. Second, data needs to be collected on parent awareness and access to the automated attendance emails. Finally, attendance data needs to be analyzed in order to determine what are the most frequent factors that warrant an "excused absence", and what are the most common obstacles that families with students that are chronically absent share during attendance meetings.

Action Plan

In order to reduce absenteeism, school staff, parents, and students must share the responsibility of keeping track of attendance. To begin the process of improving attendance at Thurgood Marshall, two separate trainings will be conducted; one for all teachers and one for a designated attendance improvement liaison and committee to outline the school's updated goals and protocol for attendance. Next, a parent survey will be sent out during the first week of school to collect baseline data about how parents prefer to receive important information from the school and confirm the language that messages should be sent in. After the survey results are collected and analyzed, a link will be added to the school website for parents to submit absent notes electronically. Finally, the school will promote attendance through the use of monthly incentives for classrooms that achieve the 95% goal by the end of each month.

Selecting Attendance Committee and Training Teachers

The findings from Hendron and Kearney's 2016 study noted that school-based social workers could play a prominent role in designing and implementing models of truancy prevention. Thurgood Marshall is currently staffed with two school counselors, however, the school could benefit from hiring a staff member that has experience in social work and can focus solely on improving attendance. Depending on budget restrictions, the leadership team will prioritize either hiring or selecting an already employed staff member to be the attendance improvement liaison (AIL). After that team member has been selected, at least 4 other staff members will be selected to form an attendance committee.

A study conducted by Al-Shammari (2016) found that classroom attendance management techniques and classroom attendance rules could dramatically enhance higher education student attendance and on-time class arrival. The participant teachers in this study used a colored card

system in their classroom to bring awareness to students about their attendance. When a student attended on time, they received a green card next to their name on the attendance chart; late attendance was marked in blue; and absence was marked in red. During teacher training, Thurgood Marshall teachers will be asked to incorporate this strategy into their morning routine and encouraged to put their own creative spin on it. For example, teachers may use digital attendance charts or picture cards. The goal is to display student attendance in every classroom to bring awareness to the students.

Parent Survey

Lasky-Fink et al. (2021) tested the effectiveness of mailing attendance and truancy letters to students' homes. The researchers noted that all letters were mailed in black and white, and colors are used only to illustrate key information such as dates and action steps. While a critical part of this action plan will include moving to an electronic way to track absences, the school will first use Lasky-Fink's method of mailing home a paper copy of the parent survey using black and white ink with key information and return date in red to catch parent's attention. The survey will be provided in both English and any additional language that is listed in each student's SIS profile. Parents will have the option to send the survey back to school with their child, or complete it electronically using a QR code provided at the bottom right corner of the paper. The survey will require parents to select their preferred method of communication (phone call, text, email, or written notice) and provide reliable contact information. Parents will also be asked to select their preferred language for communication, and signature an "I understand" statement underneath a clause that explains the attendance policy and procedures for the school.

Implementation of an Electronic System for Absent Notes

The findings from a student survey conducted by Bukoye & Shegunshi (2016) suggested that schools should consider adopting flexible and engaging learning options for students in order to reduce absenteeism. This strategy could be applied to Thurgood Marshall's struggle with collecting absent notes from parents in a timely manner. Currently, the school requires parents to send in or drop off a hand written note to the school within 3 days of an absence in order for the absence to be considered excused. In order to provide parents with a more convenient way to submit absent notes, an electronic system will be created using Google Forms. A link to the absent note form will be input on the school's website to provide parents with easy access to the form. The form will require parents to identify their child's name and ID number, select the date of the absence, explain the reason for the absence, upload a picture/scan of a medical note if applicable, and sign the form digitally. The form will automatically collect the email of the person completing the form. If the email address collected does not match the parent email listed in the school system, the parent will be contacted immediately to provide verification and the absent note will not be accepted until it is submitted from a verified email address.

Use of Monthly Incentives

A survey conducted by Hall et al. (2021) revealed that using incentives and student recognition to reward perfect or near-perfect attendance can help create a positive school culture with high expectations. On the survey, principals shared their use of attendance rewards including giving gift cards, special privileges, extra grade points, or exemption from taking semester exams. Thurgood Marshall will begin using monthly incentives, weekly student recognition, and school wide initiatives to promote attendance this year. The attendance committee will create a calendar to lay out monthly attendance initiatives and incentives that will

occur over the school year. Weekly “shout outs” will be made during the morning announcements on Fridays to recognize the classrooms that received 95% attendance or above that week. The attendance committee will also create a bulletin board to house attendance expectation signage and highlight classrooms that achieve 95% goal each month.

Summary

The proposed action plan to improve attendance for Thurgood Marshall Elementary school will begin in August 2022 and end in June 2023. Attendance trends will be monitored weekly by the attendance improvement liaison (AIL), and reviewed biweekly during attendance committee meetings, during which attendance data from the Early Warning Indicator (EWI) reports/initiatives will be reviewed by 95%+, 90-94%, and <90%. Students who accumulate 3+ unexcused absences will receive a notice via the preferred choice of communication indicated on the parent survey. If a student accumulates 6+ absences, the AIL will schedule student attendance improvement conferences (SAICs) with the students and families to identify barriers to attending school and develop a student attendance improvement plan (SAIP) that outlines interventions that target these barriers. If a student reaches 10 unexcused absences, truancy paperwork will be completed and sent to the Attendance and Truancy Office. The ultimate goal of the action plan is to use positive and preventative strategies to significantly reduce the amount of truancy referrals during the 2022-2023 school year.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Actions steps, time frames, persons responsible and materials/resources needed to complete the action plan have been outlined in Table A. The plan will begin during the week of August 22, 2022 and complete by June 14, 2023. During the week of August 22nd, only teachers

and staff will present in the school building, providing ample time for classroom set up and trainings. Students will return to school on August 29th.

Table A

Action Steps	Anticipated Start Date	Anticipated Completion Date	Lead Person/Position	Materials / Resources Needed
Select/hire attendance improvement liaison (AIL) and select at least 4 staff members for attendance committee	8/22/2022	8/23/2022	Principal & Assistant Principal	Conference room for interviews
Collaborate with attendance committee to create a training plan and presentation and parent survey; create a checklist of attendance protocols, attendance roles and action steps	8/23/2022	8/25/2022	Principal & Assistant Principal, AIL, attendance committee	Google Slides for presentation
Train teachers in their role in implementing the school's attendance plan. This includes checking in with students/families with 1-3 absences to ensure attendance policies are understood and surveys are completed, correctly taking attendance daily, and implementing attendance awareness strategies	8/26/2022	8/26/2022	Principal, AIL	Google Slides presentation in auditorium, print out checklists
Implement system to accept absent notes electronically, including inputting a link on the school's website; print parent survey with QR code	8/26/2022	6/13/2023	AIL, technology coach	School website, Google Forms

Mail parent surveys home	8/26/2022	8/29/2022	AIL, attendance committee, school secretary	Colored ink, copy paper, envelopes, stamps
Create calendar to lay out monthly attendance initiatives and incentives to occur over the school year	8/29/2022	8/29/2022	AIL	Google Calendar, Spreadsheet
Create bulletin board to house attendance expectation signage and highlight classrooms that achieve 95% goal at months end	8/30/2022	8/30/2022	AIL, attendance committee	Bulletin board, additional signage
Facilitate biweekly attendance committee meetings, during which attendance data from the Early Warning Indicator (EWI) reports/initiatives will be reviewed by 95%+, 90-94%, and <90% attendance band, and school wide initiatives or targeted interventions will be discussed.	9/2/2022, every other Friday	6/13/2023	AIL, attendance committee	EWI Report
Contact parents that have not completed the survey; send home copy of survey with student	9/16/2022	9/23/2022	AIL, attendance committee	Google forms
Students with 3+ unexcused absences will be contacted via their preferred method of communication	09/30/2022	6/13/2023	AIL	Use of parent survey responses
Schedule quarterly student attendance improvement conferences (SAICs) with the parents of students with 6+ unexcused absences.	Q1- 10/28/2022 Q2- 1/27/2023	Q1- 11/18/2023 Q2- 2/10/2023	AIL, attendance committee	SIS, Letters, MTSS records, Sign-in sheets, Attendance

	Q3- 3/17/2023	Q3- 3/31/2023		Contract
	Q4- 5/4/2023	Q4- 5/19/2023		
During SAICs, the attendance committee will work with the students/families to identify barriers to attending school and develop a student attendance improvement plan (SAIP) that outlines interventions that target these barriers.	10/28/2022	6/13/2023	AIL, attendance committee	SIS, Letters, MTSS records, Sign-in sheets, Attendance Contract
Once a student reaches 10 unexcused absences, truancy paperwork will be completed and sent to the Attendance and Truancy Office.	09/30/2022	6/13/2023	AIL	SIS, Letters, MTSS records, Sign-in sheets, Attendance Contract

Monitoring Success

The proposed action plan allocates time for both biweekly and monthly monitoring cycles for the attendance committee and AIL. Additionally, the attendance committee will progress monitor attendance trends for specific students for 30 days after their SAIP meeting to determine if additional interventions are needed. At the end of the school year, the attendance committee and leadership team will review the school year data and begin planning next steps for the following school year. The attendance committee will also need to evaluate the effectiveness of the parent survey by tracking attendance rates for the month after the surveys are mailed home. In the Lasky-Fink et al. (2021) study, the researchers noted that when they sent home letters highlighting parents’ role in reducing student absences and reminded parents that absences can

add-up to have negative consequences on academic performance, the number of days a student was absent in the month following was reduced by approximately 2%. Tracking these trends can help the attendance committee determine if additional notices should be sent home throughout the year, or if the survey letter needs to be revised.

Limitations

Thurgood Marshall currently serves a high population of special education students (approximately 25%). Within this population of students, there are several students that are considered “medically fragile” and often miss school for extended periods of time for various health reasons. Also within this population are students that have been identified with a mental health disorder. According to the findings from Lawrence et al. (2019), students with mental disorders have lower school attendance, and symptoms of these mental disorders are a major reason for absences from school. It is important for all team members that are reviewing data to take those attendance rates into consideration when calculating weekly and monthly rates. Additionally, the School District of Philadelphia is currently in the process of updating COVID-19 protocol for the upcoming school year. Last year, students were excused of absences related to COVID-19 and quarantine regulations, however, these rules are subject to change and therefore could affect attendance rates.

Conclusion

Prior research on the topic of student absenteeism found that reducing absenteeism increases achievement and student engagement while improving average daily attendance and school funding (Reyes, 2020). In order for schools to reduce absentee rates, the use of organized communication systems, engaging teaching strategies, incentives, and proper school staffing have been identified as critical components of increasing attendance in inner city public schools.

Research has also found that there are several different student-, neighborhood-, and school-level factors were significant predictors of chronic absenteeism (Singer et al., 2021). It is the responsibility of every school leadership team to identify which of these factors affect their students the most and create preventative plans to address absenteeism.

Future research may be required to determine the reliability of virtually submitted absent notes and explore the effectiveness of using technology to monitor attendance. Additionally, future research could examine how the use of incentives for monthly and quarterly attendance affects attendance rates. This expanded research could be beneficial for school leaders looking to implement school wide attendance interventions that align with Tier 1 positive behavioral intervention support programs.

The attendance monitoring system that is currently in place at Thurgood Marshall Elementary was unsuccessful in addressing high absence rates during the 21-22 school year, therefore, implementing an action plan that proposes new communication methods, staffing changes, teaching strategies, and incentives could be beneficial for the school team and help increase student attendance rates for the 22-23 school year. Moving forward, the school should continue to monitor the effectiveness of their attendance monitoring system each year, and analyze data trends quarterly to pinpoint which months of the school year may need more intervention and incentives.

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