Present and Accounted for: Improving Student Attendance Through Family and Community Involvement

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ABSTRACT **Reducing student absenteeism and truancy is a goal of many schools across the country. Surprisingly little research focuses on what schools can do to increase and sustain students' daily attendance, and even fewer studies explore how family–school–community partnerships may contribute to this goal. In this longitudinal study, data were collected on schools' rates of daily student attendance and chronic absenteeism and on specific partnership practices that were implemented to help increase or sustain student attendance. Results indicate that several family–school–community partnership practices predict an increase in daily attendance, a decrease in chronic absenteeism, or both. The data suggest that schools may be able to increase student attendance in elementary school by implementing specific family and community involvement activities.**

Key words: family–school–community partnerships, improving student attendance, longitudinal study

Reducing the rates of student truancy and chronic absenteeism has been and continues to be a goal of many schools and school systems. Despite the long history of concern over student attendance, the issue has received relatively little attention from educational researchers (Corville-Smith, 1995). Researchers have focused more attention on the issue of students who dropout of school before receiving a high school diploma than on issues related to rates of daily student attendance. The research that has been conducted on student absenteeism suggests that it may be as important as any issue confronting schools today. Moreover, studies suggest that schools can affect student attendance by implementing specific procedures and activities.

Dropping Out

Although the problem of dropping out of school has drawn a great deal more attention than truancy, research on dropouts points to the need for schools to address problems with student attendance early on. Dropping out of school, although defined by a single event, reflects a long process of disengagement and withdrawal from schooling and educational institutions (Finn, 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). To understand and reduce the problem of dropping out, researchers should consider students' behavior and experiences well before they actually leave school.

Studies of dropouts show long-term patterns of behaviors indicating that these students may begin distancing themselves from school at an early age. Cross-sectional (Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1995; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990) and longitudinal studies (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Rumberger, 1995) have shown that students who eventually drop out of school are absent more often than other students beginning as early as first grade. They exhibit a pattern of increasing absenteeism throughout their schooling. Efforts to decrease high school student dropout rates therefore might be most effective if substantial resources are directed toward preventing elementary and middle school students' withdrawal and distancing from education.

Attendance

Beyond the fact that poor attendance predicts dropping out of school, chronic absenteeism can result in other negative consequences for students and schools. Students who are not in class have fewer opportunities to learn the material that enables them to succeed later in school. Research on truancy and absenteeism suggests that students with better attendance score higher on achievement tests than their more frequently absent peers (Lamdin, 1998).

Attendance not only affects individual students but also can affect the learning environment of an entire school. School funding is often at least partially dependent on the number of students who regularly attend. Fewer pupils

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means fewer resources for educational programs. Finally, in some locations student attendance is used as an indicator of how well a school is functioning, and requirements are set and monitored for ratings (Maryland State Department of Education, 1999).

School characteristics and practices can influence rates of absenteeism and truancy among students. Large schools, for example, are more likely to have problems with student attendance than small ones (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). In addition, students are more likely to skip school or cut class if they believe that the classroom environment is chaotic or boring, that teachers do not listen to them, or that there are no academic consequences for skipping class (Duckwork & DeJung, 1989; Roderick et al., 1997).

Educators can reduce student absenteeism, but research suggests that substantial changes are needed. For example, one troubled high school in Baltimore increased student attendance when the school portioned itself into smaller academies, thereby increasing student–teacher interactions and decreasing the anonymity of students at the school (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998). Other less comprehensive reforms may not improve student attendance. Among the practices that do not predict better attendance in high school are the adoption of uniforms (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998) and the use of the court systems with chronically absent students (Hoyles, 1998). To prevent and correct serious attendance problems, schools need to change the way they are structured, improve the quality of courses, and intensify interpersonal relationships between students and teachers.

Historically, schools have addressed issues of truancy by blaming individual students. Truant and chronically absent students were considered deviants (Corville-Smith, 1995; Hoyle, 1998). Schools rarely involved families until the problem was so severe that the students were failing their courses. Families are now being recognized as an important influence on student attendance and an important resource for decreasing truancy and chronic absenteeism (Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, & Wright, 1984; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1992; Ziesemer, 1984).

To date, studies linking family characteristics to student absenteeism have been inconclusive. For example, some studies of family structure have found that students from single-parent homes tend to have lower rates of attendance than students from two-parent households (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Hoyles, 1998). Another study, however, did not support these results (Thompson, Alexander, Entwisle, & Sundius, 1992). The inconsistent associations suggest that family practices, rather than family structure, affect student attendance and dropping out (Rumberger, 1995).

Studies investigating family practices have suggested that not all parent-involvement activities are associated with attendance (Lee, 1994). For example, parent involvement in checking homework and reading with a child is associated with improved report card grades, achievement scores, and subject-specific skills (Epstein, 1991; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Muller, 1993). Other researchers have reported that specific family involvement practices such as parental monitoring, parent–child discussions, parent participation at the school, and PTA membership are linked to student attendance (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Duckworth & DeJong, 1989; Lee, 1994; McNeal, 1999). Some parenting activities are more likely than others to affect attendance. The extant studies suggest that schools that want to increase daily student attendance are more likely to succeed if they reach out and work with parents in specific ways to address this problem.

Developing productive school–family–community connections has become one of the most commonly embraced policy initiatives in schools and school districts. Kesler-Sklar and Baker (2000) reported that over 90% of the school districts they surveyed had a least one policy supporting parent involvement. Epstein and her colleagues have been working with schools, school districts, and state departments of education to develop programs of school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Sanders & Epstein, 2000). Research and field studies have suggested that effective programs link partnership activities with important school goals using six types of involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995).

When schools design and implement activities that focus on attendance using these six types of involvement, parents and others in the community can make a difference. After controlling for prior rates of student attendance and mobility, a study of 39 elementary schools found that the quality of family, school, and community partnership programs was associated with rates of student attendance (Epstein, Clark, Salinas, & Sanders, 1997). Other researchers also reported relationships between specific school practices to involve parents and student attendance. Telephone calls to parents of absent students were associated with an increase in student attendance (Helm & Burkett, 1989; Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991). Similarly, the provision of timely information to families about student absences and school policies on absenteeism helped improve attendance (Roderick et al., 1997).

In summary, research reveals much important information about student attendance. First, early absenteeism is an important predictor of dropping out of high school. Although typically of greatest concern in middle and high schools, absenteeism should be monitored and addressed in elementary schools. Second, schools can improve attendance by making students feel less anonymous and by showing them that being in class is important. Third, when educators work with families to get students to school every day and on time, these efforts appear to be successful. Therefore, in schools where students have attendance problems, educators may need to go beyond the school building to involve families in reducing absenteeism.

The present study involves elementary schools that were working to develop programs of school, family, and community partnerships and to improve student attendance. Respondents returned a series of surveys designed to explore the relationships between school attendance policies, school practices to involve parents, and changing rates of student attendance.

Method

Procedure

Data were collected during the 1996–1997 school year for the cross-site "Focus on Results—Study of Student Attendance." This is a voluntary activity of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. The National Network guides schools, districts, and state departments of education to use research-based approaches to plan, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs of partnership that focus on increasing student success, including improving attendance. In the fall of 1996, we mailed baseline surveys to key contacts in the National Network and asked them to participate in the study if their schools were implementing family and community activities to improve attendance.

The baseline surveys included questions about the schools' goals for attendance, prior attendance rates, and practices of family and community involvement linked to attendance. Schools that returned the initial survey were sent midyear and final surveys for information about the nature and effectiveness of the activities that were implemented and changes in attendance rates. For each school, the person coordinating the school, family, and community partnership efforts was asked to complete the survey. The respondent, usually a teacher or assistant principal, served as the "key contact" to the National Network of Partnership Schools and as the chair or co-chair of the school's action team of teachers, parents, and administrators who design and develop the school's partnership program. The initial survey required the principal's signature to verify the school's baseline information on attendance and the willingness to participate in the study.

Sample

Eighteen schools returned a baseline, midyear, and final survey, including 12 elementary schools and 6 secondary schools. Because of the organizational differences of elementary and secondary schools as well as the developmental differences of the students, we analyzed data from the two levels separately. Because of the low number of secondary schools, which included a mix of middle and high schools, only data from elementary schools were used in this study. The 12 elementary schools included 5 rural and 7 urban schools. Suburban elementary schools did not participate in the study, perhaps because they had fewer attendance problems.

Variables

Background variables. At each school, the key contact to the National Network described characteristics of the school and student body, including (a) the location of the school in an urban, suburban, or rural area; (b) the size of the school; (c) the percentage of students who received reduced-price or free lunch; (d) the percentage of students from homes where English was the second language; (e) the percentage of students who were homeless; (f) the percentage of students who lived more than one mile from school; and (g) the percentage of students who walked to school alone, walked with someone, were driven to school, took the school bus, took the public bus, or arrived at school by some other means. Other data that previously had been collected by the National Network of Partnership Schools included the state in which the school was located and the racial composition of the school.

Attendance variables. Schools were asked to provide information about average daily student attendance rates for 3 consecutive school years (1994–1995, 1995–1996, and 1996–1997).[1] From these data, two variables were created representing changes in attendance from 1995 to 1996 and from 1996 to 1997. In addition to daily attendance, schools were asked to report the percentage of students who were "chronically absent" (i.e., more than 20 absences) during the 1996 and 1997 school years.

Family involvement variables. Respondents were asked to report whether their schools conducted practices designed to reach out to parents or community groups to improve or maintain student attendance. They were also asked to report the extent to which they believed each practice was an effective method for increasing student attendance.

Use of practices. Respondents were asked whether their schools used any of the following practices: (a) rewarding students for improvements in attendance, (b) calling home when students are absent, (c) visiting the homes of chronically absent students, (d) giving families the name and telephone number of a person at the school to contact with questions about attendance and other policies, (e) conducting workshops on attendance and other related issues, (f) referring chronically absent students to a counselor, and (g) using truant officers or the court system to work with students who have serious attendance problems. Schools also were asked whether they provided after-school programs for their students.

Helpfulness of practices. With the exception of after-school programs, respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they felt each practice was or could be helpful for improving attendance in their schools. Using a 4-point scale, respondents rated the effectiveness of each practice as 4 (*very helpful*), 3 (*a little helpful*), 2 (*not helpful*), or 1 (*cannot do at this school*).

Information to families. Schools were asked to report the extent to which they provide information about attendance to diverse groups of families. Using a 4-point scale, respon-

dents rated the degree of success they have in communicating with (a) all families at all grades, (b) families of chronically absent students, (c) families of chronically late students, and (d) families who do not speak English. The scale for these items ranged from 4 (*very helpful*), 3 (*a little helpful*), 2 (*not helpful*), to 1 (*cannot do at this school*).

Results

Data analyses begin with an examination of characteristics of the elementary schools that returned both the baseline and the final surveys. Then we explore respondents' reports of the effectiveness of partnership practices designed to increase student attendance and their level of success in keeping all parents informed about attendance issues. Finally, we present analyses of the association of home–school–community partnership practices with changes in student attendance and chronic absenteeism.

Description of the Schools and Their Students

The 12 elementary schools in this sample ranged in size from 172 to 1,020 students, with an average school size of about 500 students. Half of the schools were located in Maryland, and the others were located in California, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. The schools served over 5,000 students.

On average, almost 60% of the students in the sample received reduced-price or free lunch. Across schools, this figure ranged from as low as 18% to as high as 100%. Approximately 35% of the students lived more than one mile from school. Schools reported that over half of their students walked to school alone (29%) or with a parent (23%). A substantial proportion of students arrived by school bus (36%), and the remainder were driven (8%), took public transportation (1%), or traveled to school some other way (4%).[2]

The average racial composition of the schools in this sample included White students (54%), African American students (30%), and Hispanic students (11%). Across schools, the racial and ethnic composition of the student body varied from 100% African American to 96% White. Schools ranged from 0% to over one third (37%) Hispanic. On average, almost 9% of the students came from families that did not speak English at home, ranging from 0% to just over 30%.

In the baseline survey, schools reported an average daily attendance rate of 93%, ranging from 89.7% to 97%. Some schools in the study were concerned with improving attendance, whereas other schools were working to maintain good attendance. These percentages are not much different from the national average. On a typical day, about 2.4 million (5.2%) elementary school students are absent from school (NCES, 1996).

Schools reported that an average of about 8% of their students were chronically absent for more than 20 days. The schools varied widely in the percentage of students who were chronically absent, ranging from 1% to 23%.

The sample includes elementary schools that were confronting a variety of challenges concerning student attendance. In some schools, for example, homelessness was reportedly a major obstacle to student attendance, whereas other schools reported that student attendance suffered because parents often pulled their children out for vacations. Still others reported that they lacked the clerical staff to effectively deal with student attendance issues. Given the variation in demographics and school challenges, the small sample of schools is useful for exploring whether some partnership practices may help improve attendance in similarly diverse elementary schools.

The school characteristics associated with student absenteeism in this sample of elementary schools were consistent with prior studies of dropping out and absenteeism in secondary schools (NCES, 1996; Rumberger, 1987, 1995). Schools with more students receiving free or reduced-price lunch had lower average daily attendance (see Table 1). In addition, schools with more homeless students had lower levels of student attendance. Schools with larger percentages of students who lived farther than one mile away reported higher rates of daily student attendance in 1996 (r = .559) and 1997 (r = .688). Consistent with these correlations, schools that had more students receiving free or reduced-price lunches tended to have students who lived closer to the school (r = –.609). Overall, it appears that students in high-poverty communities live closer to their schools, yet are likely to be absent from school more often.

Results also indicated that schools with good attendance 1 year are likely to have good attendance the following year (e.g., 1995 to 1996, r = .826). The fact that the correlations decrease as the span of time increases (e.g., over 2 years from 1995 to 1997, r = .484) suggests that attendance rates may be affected one way or another by school activities and interventions. It should be noted that the number of schools used in particular analyses varies because of missing data and is reported with each table.

Changes in Attendance

We collected information on each school's average daily attendance rate for 3 consecutive school years (1995, 1996, and 1997). Figure 1 shows that, on average, attendance rates increased each year, especially during the 1997 school year when the schools focused on improving school attendance. Prior to their focus on attendance, the schools reported an average increase in daily attendance of 0.12% from 1995 to 1996. After focusing on student attendance between the 1996 and 1997 school years, the schools reported an increase of 0.71% in average daily attendance.

In addition to daily attendance rates, schools also reported changes in the percentage of students who were chronically absent. From 1996 to 1997, as schools developed school–family–community partnerships to help improve student attendance, the average rate of chronically absent students in the schools decreased from 8% to 6.1%. This

Table 1.—Correlation Coefficients Among School-Level Indicators and Student Attendance

Variable	% free or reduced-price lunches	% homeless students[a]	Size of school	% students who live over 1 mile from school	% families who speak English as a second language	Average daily attendance (1995)	Average daily attendance (1996)	Average daily attendance (1997)	Average change in attendance (1995–1996)	Average change in attendance (1996–1997)
% students receiving free or reduced-price lunches	—									
% homeless students[a]	**.564**	—								
Size of school	**–.546**	**–.453**	—							
% students over 1 mile from school	**–.609***	**–.474**	–.078	—						
% ESL families	–.383	.032	**.601**	.180	—					
Average daily attendance (1995)	**–.632***	–.360	.290	.078	–.124	—				
Average daily attendance (1996)	**–.692***	**–.569**	.010	**.559**	–.207	**.826****	—			
Average daily attendance (1997)	**–.697***	**–.740**	.287	**.688***	**.445**	**.484**	**.693***	—		
Average change in attendance (1995–1996)	.100	–.111	**–.477**	**.652***	–.082	**–.568**	–.006	.134	—	
Average change in attendance (1996–1997)	.182	–.129	.295	–.047	**.548**	**–.591**	**–.631***	.122	.132	—

Note. Boldface coefficients greater than or equal to .4 were considered meaningful associations. N = 7–10 schools.
[a]n = 8–9 schools.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$.

change also indicates a potential connection between schools' efforts to implement family involvement activities and improvement in student attendance.

Family and Community Involvement Activities to Improve Attendance

Respondents were asked to report whether their schools conducted up to seven various family and community involvement activities and the degree to which each implemented practice was helpful in increasing attendance. Overall, most respondents viewed each practice as generally useful (see Table 2). On a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*cannot do at this school*) to 3 (*very helpful*), the perceived effectiveness of the practices ranged from a mean of 2.11 to 2.73. Respondents rated making home visits (M = 2.73, SD = .47), rewarding students for improved attendance (M = 2.62, SD = .52), having a person at the school for parents to contact (M = 2.56, SD = .53), and calling home when a student is absent (M = 2.55, SD = .93) as more effective ways to increase school attendance. Schools perceived conducting attendance workshops for parents (M = 2.25, SD = .50), referring students to a counselor (M = 2.18, SD = .75), and using truant

Figure 1. Changes in Average Daily Attendance (1995–1997)

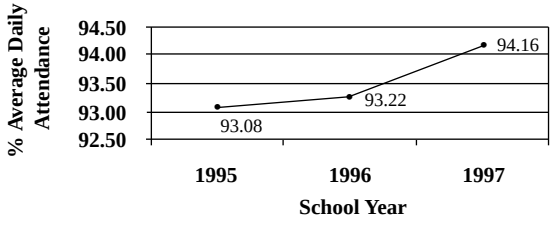

Table 2.—Means and Standard Deviations of the Perceived Effectiveness of Involvement Practices for Attendance

Involvement practice	Implementation of the practice: Yes	Implementation of the practice: No	Perceived effectiveness: *M*	Perceived effectiveness: *SD*
Make home visits to families of chronically absent students.	11	0	2.73	0.47
Reward students for improved attendance.	8	3	2.62	0.52
Establish a contact person at school for parents to work with.	9	2	2.56	0.53
Call home when students are absent.	11	0	2.55	0.93
Conduct workshops for families about attendance.	4	7	2.25	0.50
Refer chronically absent students to counselors.	11	0	2.18	0.75
Use a truant officer to work with problem students and families.	9	2	2.11	0.60

Note. Only scores from schools that implemented a practice were included in the average perceived effectiveness. N = 11 schools that responded to all questions on involvement.

officers (M = 2.11, SD = .60) as less effective than other practices for improving student attendance, though still helpful.

Table 2 also shows the number of schools that reported using each practice to help improve student attendance. On average, schools reported that they conducted more than five of the seven practices listed on the final survey (M = 5.73, SD = .79). Given the low degree of variability in the total number of practices that schools used, analyses focused on the effects of specific practices on daily attendance and chronic absenteeism.

Respondents reported that they were confident about their schools' efforts to keep parents informed about attendance and lateness policies (see Table 3). On a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*need to improve*) to 4 (*very well*), respondents rated their efforts to communicate with all families as generally high (M = 3.55, SD = .82). The schools also reported that they were working to communicate as well with families who do not speak English as they did with other families. Fewer schools responded to this question, probably because some schools did not serve non-English-speaking families. Finally, schools reported that they were least effective in providing information about school attendance policies to families of chronically late students (M = 3.00, SD = .74).

Overall, respondents reported that their schools were effective in communicating with diverse groups of parents (M = 3.33, SD = .74). Correlations between these items were extremely high, ranging from r = .810 to r = .993. Given these strong correlations, only the average effectiveness of communication with families was used as the variable in the remaining analyses.

Table 3.—Perceived Effectiveness of Communicating Information to Diverse Families

Types of families reached	*M*	*SD*
All parents at all grade levels	3.55	0.82
Families of chronically absent students	3.55	0.69
Families of chronically late students	3.00	1.05
Families who do not speak English[a]	3.43	0.79
Average effectiveness of communication with families (4 items)	3.33	0.74

Note. N = 10 schools.
[a]n = 7 schools.

Table 4.—Zero-Order Correlations of School Practices and Changes in Attendance (1996 to 1997)

Effectiveness of involvement practices	Change in attendance	Change in chronic absenteeism
Reward students for improved attendance.	**.624**	**–.478**
Establish a contact person at school for parents to work with.	**.517**	**–.623**
Make home visits to families of chronically absent students.	.081	**–.648**
Call home when students are absent.	.268	.124
Refer chronically absent students to counselors.	**.562**	.111
Use truant officers to work with problem students and families.	**.822**	.140
Conduct workshops for families about attendance.[a]	**.533**	–.295
Average effectiveness of communication with families	**.541**	–.185
Change in average daily student attendance (1996–1997)	—	.152

Note. Boldface coefficients greater than or equal to .4 were considered meaningful associations. N = 7–10 schools.
[a]n = 4 schools.

Factors Associated With Changes in Student Attendance

Change in daily attendance. Table 4 contains correlation coefficients between specific involvement activities for attendance and the effectiveness of communications with families with changes in attendance rates from 1 year to the

next. Several involvement practices had strong, positive associations with changes in average daily student attendance over 1 year, particularly assigning a truant officer to students and families with attendance problems (r = .822), rewarding students for improved attendance (r = .624), connecting parents with school contact persons (r = .581), referring chronically absent students to counselors (r = .562), communicating effectively with diverse families (r = .541), and conducting workshops for families focused on school attendance (r = .533).

Change in chronic absenteeism. A few specific activities that involve families and the community on issues of attendance helped to reduce the percentage of students who missed 20 or more days of school (see Table 4). These activities were rewarding students for improved attendance (r = –.478), connecting parents with school contact persons (r = –.623), and making home visits (r = –.648). Although fewer practices were associated with changes in chronic absenteeism than with changes in daily attendance, analyses suggest that some family, school, and community partnership activities may affect the most frequently absent students.

Controlling for Prior Levels of Attendance

The bivariate correlations suggest that some family involvement practices are associated with increased school attendance rates and decreased percentages of chronically absent students. However, those analyses did not control for the schools' prior rates of attendance or chronic absenteeism and are, therefore, incomplete. To check the results of the analyses using a single change score, we conducted partial correlation analyses predicting student attendance in 1997, controlling for the schools' prior rates of attendance and chronic absenteeism. These analyses ask how family and community involvement activities affect rates of attendance and chronic absenteeism in 1997 after accounting for the schools' prior absentee rates in 1996.

Results of the partial correlation analyses support and extend the bivariate correlation analyses of change scores. Table 5 shows that, after schools' 1996 attendance was statistically controlled, several involvement activities were associated with higher rates of attendance in 1997. The best predictors of student attendance in 1997 included rewarding students for improved attendance (pr = .950), assigning a truant officer to students and families with attendance problems (pr = .755), conducting family workshops focused on school attendance (pr = .749), referring chronically absent students to counselors (pr = .571), and connecting parents with school contact persons (pr = .531). Furthermore, schools that reported more effective communications with diverse families were more likely to report higher rates of daily student attendance (pr = .674).

We also examined partial correlations between partnership practices and chronic absenteeism in 1997. Table 5 shows that after accounting for the percentage of chronically absent students in 1996, in 1997 fewer chronically absent students were reported in schools that conducted home visits (pr = –.577), connected parents with school contact persons (pr = –.506), and gave students awards for improved attendance (pr = –.436). In addition, with prior levels of chronic absenteeism statistically controlled, schools reporting more effective communication with diverse families showed a decrease in chronic absenteeism (pr = –.596). Similarly, after prior rates were accounted for, the small number of schools that conducted workshops on attendance also reduced their rates of chronic absenteeism. The results of the partial correlation analyses suggest that several activities help schools improve attendance regardless of their initial rates of average daily attendance or prior levels of chronic absenteeism.

After-School Programs and Attendance

In addition to the involvement activities previously discussed, we examined the association of after-school programs with student attendance. Changes in daily atten-

Table 5.—Partial Correlations of Family Involvement Activities and 1997 Rates of Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism, Controlling for 1996 Rates

School practice	Average daily attendance (1997 school year)	% chronically absent students (1997 school year)
Reward students for improved attendance.	**.950**	**–.436**
Establish a contact person at school for parents to work with.	**.531**	**–.506**
Make home visits to families of chronically absent students.	.361	**–.577**
Call home when students are absent.	.323	.155
Refer chronically absent students to counselors.	**.571**	–.314
Use truant officers to work with problem students and families.	**.755**	–.233
Conduct workshops for families about attendance.[a]	**.749**	**–.599**
Average effectiveness of communication with families	**.674**	**–.596**

Note. Boldface coefficients greater than or equal to .4 were considered meaningful associations. N = 7–10 schools.
[a]n = 4 schools.

Table 6.—Means and Standard Deviations of Changes in Attendance Across Schools With and Without After-School Programs

	After-school program in school			
	Yes		No	
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Change in daily attendance (1996 to 1997)	1.04[a]	2.10	0.30	1.29
Change in chronic absenteeism (1996 to 1997)	–4.20	4.26	1.44	10.41

Note. $N = 5$ schools.
[a] $n = 6$ schools.

dance and changes in chronic absenteeism were compared for schools that did and did not offer after-school programs (see Table 6). On average, schools with after-school programs reported an increase in average daily student attendance (1.04%) from 1996 to 1997. In comparison, schools with no after-school programs reported a smaller average increase in attendance (0.3%). Also, schools with after-school programs reported a decrease in chronic absences (–4.2%), whereas schools with no after-school programs reported an increase in the percentage of students who were chronically absent (1.44%).

Discussion

This exploratory study suggests that elementary schools that are interested in improving or maintaining good attendance will benefit from taking a comprehensive approach that includes students, educators, parents, and community partners. The data support earlier theoretical perspectives on the multiple influences on student absenteeism and truancy (Cimmarusti et al., 1984; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1992) and prior findings at the high school level (Ziesemer, 1984). Furthermore, this study adds new evidence about which specific family, school, and community partnership activities may help improve attendance rates and reduce rates of chronic absenteeism.

It is important to note that all of the school, family, and community partnership practices listed in our survey were perceived to be at least "a little helpful" in improving student attendance. Also, the analyses revealed no evidence that implementing any of the activities would negatively affect student attendance. In an exploratory study of this sort, we look for patterns of results that are convincing and confirmatory more than we look at any one statistic. Across analyses, some involvement activities were consistently associated with improving attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism over time, and some activities were associated with one attendance outcome or the other.

Activities That Improve Daily Attendance and Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

Awards to students. Several school practices that targeted students directly were effective in reducing chronic absenteeism and increasing daily attendance rates. Schools that rewarded students for improved attendance (e.g., parties, gift certificates, or recognition at assemblies) reported positive changes in attendance from year to year. After schools' prior levels of attendance were controlled, targeted awards were associated with higher rates of daily attendance and lower rates of chronic absenteeism. It may be that official recognition of improved attendance motivates some students to attend school more regularly.

Communications with families. The degree to which schools overcame the challenge of communicating effectively with diverse groups of families was related to gains in student attendance and declines in chronic absenteeism. This finding at the elementary school level confirms research that found that high schools' communications with families about attendance increased student attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism (Roderick et al., 1997). Epstein (1995) argued that communicating with families is a basic obligation of all schools. In this study, we found that elementary schools that effectively fulfill this obligation with all families (e.g., families who do not speak English at home and families whose students have serious attendance problems) make significant gains in attendance.

School contacts for families. Another consistently effective practice was providing families with a school contact person with whom to discuss attendance or other issues. Giving parents the name and telephone number of at least one person who is officially designated to discuss attendance issues may help parents guide students to more regular attendance. Establishing a two-way channel of communication between families and schools appears to be an important partnership activity related to student attendance.

Workshops for parents. Workshops on attendance and related matters were associated with increases in average daily attendance and decreases in chronic absenteeism. The finding is interesting because survey respondents perceived that workshops for parents were less effective than other practices for improving student attendance. The attendance data, however, suggest that schools may consider workshops that are specifically about attendance policies, procedures, and consequences as one way among others to help increase daily attendance rates. Because only a few schools conducted targeted workshops, this strategy needs more attention in studies with larger samples of schools.

After-school programs. Schools that offered after-school programs reported greater increases in average daily student attendance and decreases in chronic absenteeism. After-school programs are beneficial to parents who work and who need afternoon daycare for their children. However, these programs really are targeted to students. Students may be motivated to come to school so that they can

participate in activities that are organized in the after-school program. The impact of after-school programs, however, may also reflect some schools' overall sensitivity to the needs and challenges facing the families and communities they serve.

Activities That Affect Rates of Attendance Only

Other family involvement practices were related to changes in one attendance outcome, but not both.

Referrals of students to counselors and to truant officers. Referring students to counselors and using truant officers or the court system to work with students who have serious attendance problems may help increase daily student attendance. Neither of these activities, however, was associated with changes in chronic absenteeism. Interestingly, respondents perceived truant officers as helpful but less effective than other strategies. However, like workshops for parents, the longitudinal data on attendance rates suggest that these practices may be more helpful than perceived in improving rates of attendance. Schools tended to improve attendance from 1 year to the next when they referred absent students to counselors and included the use of truant officers in their repertory of family and community involvement activities. It may be that the timing and the nature of truant officers' discussions with students and their families affect the likelihood of improving attendance.

Activities That Affect Rates of Chronic Absenteeism Only

Home visits. When schools reached out to families and educators made home visits, they reported decreases in the percentage of students who were chronically absent. Although apparently effective for dealing with chronic absenteeism, the use of home visits did not appear to affect daily attendance rates. It is possible that educators visit only the homes of students who have severe attendance problems.

In sum, comparisons of the effects of involvement activities on daily attendance and chronic absenteeism suggest that some practices may be more effective than others for specific attendance outcomes. Four activities affected both attendance outcomes: giving students awards, communicating well with all families, assigning parents a contact person at school, and offering after-school programs were predictive of improvements in both attendance measures. Other activities affected one, but not the other, attendance outcome. The use of truant officers, referrals to counselors, and parent workshops were significantly associated with the improvement of daily attendance rates, but not with chronic absence. Home visits decreased rates of chronic absenteeism, but did not affect rates of daily attendance.

Limitations and Next Questions

Given the small number of elementary schools in this study, the findings must be interpreted cautiously. Although the schools varied in levels of poverty, racial diversity, and languages spoken at home, we cannot be sure that the specific involvement activities will be effective in all elementary schools. For example, suburban schools did not participate in this project, and the findings presented here may not apply to elementary schools in those locations. Also, we cannot generalize the findings to middle and high schools. Other studies are needed to learn which specific family and community activities are effective in secondary schools, where absenteeism and truancy are bigger problems than in the earlier grades (Roderick et al., 1997).

The small sample size limited the statistical analyses that could be conducted to assess the impact of school practices on rates of attendance and chronic absenteeism. Fortunately, longitudinal data permitted the schools' prior attendance rates to be taken into account. Future studies with larger samples are needed to test more specific models and to understand the main and moderating variables that explain levels and changes in student attendance.

One factor that future studies should consider is how family involvement affects attendance rates in urban, rural, and suburban settings. Analyses not reported because of the small sample suggested that the urban and rural schools in this study differed in the degree to which partnership practices affected student attendance. Family involvement practices seemed to be more strongly associated with improving daily student attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism in urban elementary schools. Studies with larger samples are needed to test this distinction and to provide more information about which family and community involvement activities are likely to improve attendance in different communities.

In this study, having or not having an after-school program is a "black box" variable that is associated with improved student attendance and reduced chronic absence. These programs are responsive to parents' need for after-school care and to students' need for safe, enjoyable, and helpful activities in the late afternoon hours. Larger studies are needed to determine whether and how after-school programs affect students' daytime attendance at school or whether these programs reflect only schools' responses to the needs of families for child care in the afternoon.

Finally, this study could not account for the effects of school factors other than partnership practices that might help to improve student attendance. Classroom practices that affect students' interest and motivation, for example, may influence truancy rates (Duckworth & DeJung, 1989; Roderick et al., 1997). Future studies are needed to consider the independent and combined effects on changes in attendance of classroom and whole-school reform initiatives that occur alongside school–family–community partnership efforts.

Conclusion

This study extends knowledge about a topic that has been largely overlooked in education research. Student absenteeism and truancy are indicators of disengagement

and precursors to dropping out. To prevent or minimize student dropout during high school, elementary and middle schools need to focus on improving and maintaining student attendance and student motivation to learn. Although the data are limited, there are some strong and informative patterns of results.

The study suggests that schools are more likely to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism with three broad strategies: (a) taking a comprehensive approach to attendance with activities that involve students, families, and the community; (b) using more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing activities; and (c) sustaining a focus on improving attendance over time. We explore these strategies for their implications for improving practice.

Attendance improves when schools take comprehensive approaches to family and community involvement. This means conducting a variety of activities that involve students, parents, and community partners in support of good attendance. Two effective activities used by schools in this study focused students' attention on their own attendance: (a) giving them awards for improving their attendance and (b) referring them to counselors to discuss attendance problems. Four activities focused on parents' roles in helping students attend school every day and on time: (a) communicating effectively about attendance with diverse families, (b) providing a school contact person for parents to call, (c) conducting workshops, and (d) conducting home visits. One activity involved links with the community: using truant officers to work with problem students and their families.

Attendance improves when schools implement positive activities that support good attendance and effective home–school connections. Most of the effective involvement activities were designed to improve school-to-home and home-to-school communications, and to recognize positive attendance results. Communicating effectively about attendance with all parents, providing a school contact person for parents to call, and rewarding students for improved attendance are three activities that were consistently associated with increasing average daily attendance and reducing chronic absence.

These supportive activities give a human quality to corrective action. For example, when parents have clear information about school attendance policies and the importance of attendance for student report card grades and classroom learning, more parents may convey messages to their children about the importance of school and good attendance. When families feel that the school cares enough to provide them with the telephone number of a responsive contact person (whether they ever call that person or not), fewer parents may keep students home from school for family reasons. Such activities are more likely to have positive consequences for attendance than punitive approaches such as assigning truant students to group homes or threatening parents with fines or jail terms if their children are chronically absent (Henderson, 1999; Simmons & Farabaugh, 1999).

Attendance improves when schools remain focused on this goal. In this study, schools set goals for the 1996–97 school year for improving or maintaining student attendance, and, on average, increased their rates of daily attendance. Not all of the schools reached the goals that they set for the year, but all reported that they would continue to work toward their goals or set higher goals for the next school year.

Nationally, the average student attendance in public elementary schools is 94.8% (NCES, 1996). Most schools in this sample recognized that they had to keep working in persistent and positive ways with families, students, and the community to reach and sustain an excellent rate of daily attendance.

Even when these data are viewed conservatively, it appears that family, school, and community partnerships can improve student attendance. When schools in this study planned and implemented family and community involvement activities that focused on attendance, they reported increases in average daily attendance and decreases in chronic or frequent absenteeism. The analyses suggest that certain partnership practices may be particularly effective for ensuring that more students are present and accounted for in the daily attendance rates of elementary schools.

NOTES

This work was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The opinions are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the policies of OERI.

The authors wish to thank Mavis G. Sanders, Karen Clark Salinas, Beth S. Simon, Frances Van Voorhis, and Kenyatta J. Williams for their contributions to the questionnaires used in the attendance study.

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1. From this point, each school year is referred to by its end date. The 1995–1996 school year is referred to as 1996, and the 1996–1997 school year is 1997.
2. Percentages are rounded up and may not equal 100%.

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