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# A Mixed Methods Study of the Causes of Chronic Absenteeism in a Large, Urban High School

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**A Mixed Methods Study of the Causes of Chronic Absenteeism  
in a Large, Urban High School**

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## Abstract

Failing to graduate from high school can be related to problems during adulthood, individually for students who drop out and collectively on communities and the nation as a whole (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Balfanz, Herzog, & Maclver, 2007; Orfield, 2004; Providence Public, 2012). Two factors, attendance and self-efficacy, have been linked to academic achievement and graduation rates and were the focus of this study.

Recent studies suggest a strong relationship between students' attendance rates and graduation rates. A study of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in Chicago found that students with satisfactory attendance graduate at a higher rate than those with chronic absenteeism. Many interventions aimed at decreasing student absenteeism fail to address the needs of students who are chronically absent as they do not consider the role of student self-efficacy and the stated reasons why students miss school.

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to determine if a relationship exists between academic self-efficacy and rates of absenteeism and also to determine what students report as the causes of their absenteeism. An academic self-efficacy scale was administered to 9<sup>th</sup> grade students ( $N=99$ ) to determine if a relationship exists between academic self-efficacy and rates of absenteeism. Focus groups were conducted with 9<sup>th</sup> grade students ( $N=17$ ) who were chronically absent during the first half of the 2014-2015 school year in order to identify the reasons that high school students report they are chronically absent.

Two of the student survey items were found to be significantly correlated with rates of absenteeism. The concept of persistence ( $r=.183$ ,  $r^2=.03$ ,  $p=.040$ , small/medium effect size) and meeting the expectations of others ( $r=.220$ ,  $r^2=.05$ ,  $p=.019$ , small/medium effect size) were positively related to higher absentee rates. No significant correlations were found for any of the dimensions or remaining items on the survey. The focus group findings indicated that students understand the connection between attending school and future success and that lack of parental encouragement, teacher support and follow-up and disengaging classes cause students to miss school. Results of the current study will help school, district and national educational leaders develop appropriate interventions to reduce student chronic absenteeism.

## **Problem Statement**

Failing to graduate from high school can be related to problems during adulthood, individually for students who drop out and collectively on communities and the nation (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Balfanz, Herzog, & Maclver, 2007; Orfield, 2004; Providence Public, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that students who fail to earn a high school diploma earn less throughout their lifetime than those who successfully complete at least a test of General Educational Development (GED). Students who drop out of school earn approximately \$1 million less in a lifetime than their peers who graduate from high school. A disproportionate number of people who are unemployed failed to complete high school. Students who drop out of school are more likely to have more health concerns and to be in prison, costing the national economy more than those who earn a high school diploma or equivalent. Students who drop out of school are more likely to be in prison, which causes increased costs due to incarceration and increases in crime rates. There is also an impact on healthcare costs and social services. The cost of a high school dropout can be anywhere from \$1.7 million to \$2.3 million when these factors are considered. In comparison, students who graduate from high school earn more money and cost the national economy less than students who drop out (Bridgeland, DiLulio, & Morrison, 2006; National Council, 2012).

Many factors have been linked to dropping out of school. In particular, two factors, attendance and self-efficacy, are the focus of this study. Both have separately been linked to academic achievement, and chronic absenteeism has recently been strongly linked to graduation and dropout rates. Attendance will be the primary focus of this study, while academic self-efficacy will be examined for its relationship to attendance.

## **Rationale**

Many recent studies have shown a strong link between attendance rates and graduation and dropout rates. In fact, attendance has been classified as one of several early warning indicators of eventual high school graduation. A recent study of students in Baltimore City Public Schools focuses on early warning indicators, including, specifically, attendance. Students who exhibit early warning indicators graduate from high school at a rate of 30%, compared with 92% among students who do not exhibit these factors. Students who are chronically absent graduate at a rate of 56%, while their peers who have satisfactory attendance graduate at a rate of 82% (Mac Iver & Messel, 2012). Further, students who are chronically absent for four years between 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> dropout at a rate of 60% (Balfanz, et al, 2013).

Students who are chronically absent are more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who are not chronically absent. In addition, students who have attendance problems are less likely to go to 2- and 4-year colleges than students without attendance problems. Students with satisfactory attendance in 9<sup>th</sup> grade are four times more likely to enroll in college than their 9<sup>th</sup> grade peers who are chronically absent (MacIver & Messel, 2013). In addition, “research shows that students are far less likely to master reading, pass courses, and gain credit when they are regularly absent. This is particularly true for low-income students, who are both more apt to be chronically absent in the early grades and less likely to develop literacy skills because of the lost time on task” (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013, pg. 53).

Students also report that attendance is linked to dropping out of school. In a 2006 study in which students gave first-hand accounts of the reasons they dropped out of

school, many reported that they dropped out of school because they missed too many days of school and had difficulty catching up with the work (Bridgeland, 2006).

For most schools in one large, urban school district in New England, which serves as the site for the current research study, approximately 71% of students graduate in four years of high school (Personal Communication, Providence Public School Department, 2015). In addition, over the past several years in this particular school district, more than 50% of high school students were chronically absent, meaning they missed more than 10% of the school year, or more than 18 days of school. Students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade are absent even more frequently; 60% of all 9<sup>th</sup> graders in this urban district were chronically absent in 2010-2011 (Providence Public, 2012). Nationally, a direct relationship has been shown to exist between attendance among 9<sup>th</sup> graders and graduation rates. A study of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in Chicago found that only 9% of students who were chronically absent graduated in four years, compared to 67% of students with satisfactory attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Providence Public, 2012).

The Rhode Island Department of Education has pinpointed attendance and graduation rates as an important factor in classifying schools on the degree to which they are achieving. According to the RIDE, the minimum acceptable attendance rate for elementary and middle schools is 90%. This year, RIDE's target graduation rate for the urban high school in this research project is 80% (RIDE, 2011).

Low attendance rates and poor academic achievement in math and English are issues that have plagued urban high schools for years (Gottfried, 2010). Over the past four years, the average daily attendance rate in the urban school district which houses the research site, has hovered around 85%. Moreover, the percentage of students who

graduated within four years has been approximately 72% since 2013 (Personal communication, Providence Public School Department, 2015).

Research indicates that attendance is connected to student achievement, including graduation rates (Keegan, 2012; Lamdin, 1996; National Council, 2012). Furthermore, academic self-efficacy has been found to have an important relationship to academic achievement (Niehaus, Rudasill, & Adelson, 2012). If fewer than 10% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who are chronically absent graduate, and 60% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in this urban district, and others like it, are chronically absent, an assumption can be made that graduation rates will not improve unless chronic absenteeism is addressed. Therefore, this study investigates the reasons for chronic absenteeism, as well as the ways it is linked to academic self-efficacy.

### **Review of Literature**

Students miss school for a number of reasons, but despite the wealth of information confirming that attendance problems are linked to poor student achievement (Chang & Romero, 2008; Gaylon et al., 2012; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), there is a lack of information about what students report as the causes of their absenteeism. Some studies have surveyed students, but the responses students provide are limited, due to the fact that surveys limit student responses to pre-selected answers. In addition, some studies have reported a relationship between academic self-efficacy and attendance (Gaylon, Blondin, Yaw, Nalls, & Williams, 2012; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Adelson, 2012), a relationship that will be explored through the current research study. There is a need to understand more about the causes of absenteeism as well as the relationship between

academic self-efficacy and absenteeism. This section will define absenteeism, discuss early indicators and causes of absenteeism, examine the impact of attendance on academic achievement, discuss the relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic achievement, explore the relationship between attendance and graduation rates, discuss absenteeism as an Early Warning Indicator and, finally, explore recommendations and further research on the topic of student absenteeism.

### **Setting the Stage: The Link between Absenteeism and Graduation**

During his first State of the Union Address in 2009, President Obama set the national goal for graduation at 90% by the year 2020. In 2010, the Grad Nation campaign was launched by America's Promise Alliance in order to bring his message nation-wide with the hope of motivating a country to achieve the graduation goal he set (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010).

To solidify the Grad Nation campaign and create a tangible pathway to achieving the national graduation goal of 90% by the year 2020, leading researchers in the area of increasing graduation rates were tasked with reporting on the progress toward achieving that goal. The first report, in what has now become a series titled *Building a Grad Nation*, was published in 2010. Since then, it has been updated on an annual basis. This report, commissioned by the Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, America's Promise Alliance and the Alliance for Excellent Education and sponsored by AT&T and State Farm, was written by Balfanz, a leading researcher on attendance and early warning indicators, Bridgeland, Bruce and Fox. The initial report conveyed national and state-wide data around graduation and set forth a comprehensive plan, titled the Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation, to



improve graduation rates and achieve the 90% goal set by President Obama during his first State of the Union Address. In each subsequent year, the annual report focused on reporting of data and trends around graduation rates and also on the progress and challenges of the Civic Marshall Plan to Build a Grad Nation.

The sample for the 2010 report was regular high schools with an enrollment of 300 students or more and that have at least four years of data for classes that graduated between 2002 and 2008. The 2010 report used two data points to determine graduation rates. The first was the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR), which looks back at the average of enrollment in 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and divides it by the number of regular diplomas granted in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The second was promoting power, which is the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders divided by the net number of 9<sup>th</sup> graders three years earlier. There are several drawbacks to using these calculations. First, not all states report their graduation rates in this manner, so reporting may be uneven. Second, neither of these calculations accounts for students who transfer out of schools. In transient communities or in schools with high mobility rates, this can mean a large variation between what states report as graduation rates versus what was included in the report.

The Building a Grad Nation annual report lists graduation rates for each state and for the nation as a whole. It is important to note, however, that the calculation and reporting of graduation rates has only recently become standardized, with the U.S. Department of Education requiring states to utilize a common cohort measure, known as the adjusted cohort graduation rate, starting with the cohort of students who entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2011. This adjusted cohort measure is different from prior reporting measures in a few ways. First, graduation rates are reported as 4, 5, and 6-year graduation rates. Second,

students are tracked as they move from one school to another, from one state to another. Therefore, under this new guideline, graduation rate reporting is much more accurate now than it was when this report was first published.

### **Indicators of Dropping Out/Districts with Early Successes**

Balfanz et al. (2010) reported that while some districts had made gains in raising graduation rates over the few years prior to the report, and while the nation as a whole had increased the rate of graduation by approximately .7% each year, this was not enough growth, should the rate remain constant, for the nation to hit President Obama's goal of 90% by the year 2020. Balfanz et al. (2010) identified several key areas for schools and districts to focus on in order to raise graduation rates. Among these are dropout prevention programs, community and family engagement and increasing attendance. It was reported that schools with low graduation rates typically have high levels of student absenteeism. Two particular cities that were applauded for improving graduation rates as of this report were Chicago and Baltimore, two school districts that will be referred to frequently in this review of literature for their work with identifying early warning indicators for eventual high school dropout, one of which is attendance.

In the fourth annual update of Building a Grad Nation, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce & Fox (2013) reported that, for the first time since 2009, the national graduation rate, should it continue to grow at its current rate, is on target to meet the 2020 goal of 90%. It was also reported that the new way of calculating graduation rates made it easier and more consistent to track graduation rates, no matter what school students attended. They also report that improvements were uneven, with several subgroups of students still graduating at significantly lower rates, specifically students who are ethnic

minorities, students with low SES, those with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency. Additionally, they report that while gains have been made in several areas highlighted in the original and subsequent reports (Civic Marshall Plan), actual gains in attendance still remain to be seen. They recognize that since the first report, there is a more coordinated and cohesive focus on improving chronic absenteeism, however implementation of actual interventions along with actual gains is still uneven. According to Balfanz et al. (2013), significant gains in graduation rates, especially for students who come from families with low SES, cannot be achieved without dramatically decreasing chronic absenteeism.

### **Defining Absenteeism**

Absenteeism is a broad term that can be reported and interpreted in many ways. However, over the past five years, much work has been done to operationally define absenteeism and what it means in relation to academic achievement. Average daily attendance (ADA) refers to the average number of students who report to school each day, and some school districts use this number as a gauge of how successful their attendance is (Providence Public, 2012). For example, in the large, urban district that is the focus of this study, the minimum satisfactory average daily attendance rate for all schools is 90% (K. Cuellar, personal communication, October 5, 2012). Nationally, the average daily attendance rate is approximately 91% (Gage, Sugai, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013). However, recent reports on absenteeism suggest that limiting the measure of attendance to average daily rates may misrepresent the true rates of individual student absenteeism. In 2012, Balfanz and Byrnes compiled a report commissioned by the Everyone Graduates Center out of Johns Hopkins University School of Education, in

partnership with the national Get Schooled organization. As noted by Balfanz and Byrnes, chronic absenteeism is sometimes defined differently by various states. The goal of this report was to build upon the knowledge base around chronic absenteeism and examine and report out on national attendance trends. Utilizing a quantitative, ex post facto methodology, attendance data was examined and analyzed for common trends. Largely, data were analyzed from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and its file on Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLK-K). It can be difficult to determine exact attendance trends due to the fact that various states have different operational definitions of chronic absenteeism (i.e., a student in Georgia is chronically absent if he misses 15 or more days, but a student in Rhode Island is chronically absent if he misses 18 or more days, while a student in Florida is chronically absent if he misses 20 days or more), but, generally speaking, students who miss approximately 10% of the school year fall into this category (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). As the body of research on chronic absenteeism expands, a more consistent recommendation for operationally defining chronic absenteeism has emerged.

### **Individual Student Absenteeism Versus Average Daily Attendance**

Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) note that there is a difference between individual absenteeism and the average daily attendance for a student body as a whole. They define “chronic absenteeism” as students missing 10% of the school year consecutively or non-consecutively, whether those absences are excused or unexcused. Chang and Romero (2008), leading researchers in the area of student attendance, recommend operationally defining chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of the school year. The

reason for their recommendation is because that is the rate of absenteeism some studies have found where academic achievement is impacted by absenteeism.

### **Causes of Absenteeism**

Several research studies have shown a relationship exists between academic achievement and attendance. In order to address the problem of chronic absenteeism among students, it is necessary to determine why students miss school. While much recent research has focused on and defined the problem of absenteeism, not many have gone as far as to explore why students miss school. The research that does exist is spotty, with inconsistent data collection methods. Kleine (1994) analyzed the effect of a pilot program in a medium-sized city that was participating in a pilot program aimed at decreasing chronic absenteeism conducted by the New Futures Initiative. The focus of this pilot program was to use community agencies and services to meet the needs of students and their families; thus causing them to attend school more. This qualitative study utilized interviews with multiple stakeholders in the program, including advisors, teachers and students. The results of this study show that a gap existed between what adults assume to be the causes of students absenteeism and how students feel about attending school.

As part of Kleine's study, causes of chronic absenteeism were determined and analyzed. She found that financial difficulty, as well as parents who had a high level of responsibilities, are the two most common causes of absenteeism (Kleine, 2012). In addition, it has been reported that students who have high rates of absenteeism often have parents who have low educational levels. Many of these students experience

frequent unsupervised after school time, have poor grades and do not have high aspirations for their own education.

The National Center for Children in Poverty at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University commissioned a study, conducted by Chang and Romero (2008), on addressing chronic absenteeism among students in the lower grades, and the findings were published in the report *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*. This mixed method study took place over two years, from 2006-2008 and utilized quantitative analysis of existing national attendance data (ECLK-K longitudinal study). Chang and Romero's research only utilized data on students who completed all five years of schooling during the timeframe of the ECLK-K longitudinal study. In addition, qualitative phone interviews were conducted with practitioners and researchers who were considered experienced in working with absenteeism. Other causes of poor attendance include lack of reliable transportation, illness, transient housing patterns, family obligations, such as child-care and employment, fear of bullying and harassment, and lack of belief that they are missed when they do not attend, parents who work long hours, unstable housing, poor healthcare and violence in the community (Chang & Romero, 2008; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kleine, 2012; Gage, et. al., 2013).

Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver (2007) conducted a longitudinal analysis of attendance data consisting of 13,000 students over the course of eight years, from 1996 through 2004. The focus of this study was on effective interventions aimed at decreasing and preventing disengagement among students, especially during middle school. One of the factors associated with student disengagement, which they focused on as part of this

study, was absenteeism. The outcome variable the researchers focused on was whether or not students eventually graduated from high school within the Baltimore school district either on time or within one year of their expected graduation date. This was examined based on four predictor variables, one of which was attendance. Even though the focus of the study was on determining what leads to student disengagement and eventual on-time graduation, while examining the role attendance plays in disengagement, they discovered that five factors predict student attendance in middle school: how supportive teachers are towards student success, high expectations for student achievement, how involved parents are in the school, perceived relevance of school work, and student interest in coursework (Balfanz et al., 2007).

One study by Gage et al. (2013) found that at one high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those who received Special Education services (i.e., had an IEP) had higher rates of absenteeism than students who did not belong to those groups. In addition, students with high rates of absenteeism were less likely to be enrolled in upper level courses in their high school (Gage et al., 2013).

### **The Gap between What We Think and What We Know**

As can be seen through a review of relevant literature, several research studies have reported on the causes of absenteeism among students. However, there is a limitation to much of the work that has already been done; few studies move beyond quantitative data collection methods and analysis, thus limiting the voice of the causes of absenteeism. Nelson, McMahan, and Torres (2012) conducted a research study of community partnerships and programs aimed at increasing student attendance. Qualitative interviews with students and teachers were used as part of a larger mixed

methods study to determine the effectiveness of a community intervention program in reducing absenteeism. This study revealed a difference between what students report as reasons they miss school and the reasons adults believe students miss school. In this study, the main reason students reported missing school was due to rules being too strict, while adults reported they believed students missed school because of bullying and gang violence (Nelson et al. 2012). While the data gained from the qualitative interviews with students and teachers provides insight into what students report as the reasons they miss school, the focus of this study was not on causes of absenteeism. Therefore, the information obtained through these interviews may be limited. The present study seeks to build on current literature around causes of chronic absenteeism by utilizing focus groups to gather rich descriptions of the reason students miss school.

### **Impact of Attendance on Academic Achievement**

Decreasing chronic absenteeism is crucial due to the strong correlation between student attendance and academic achievement, especially in urban schools (Gottfried, 2010; Lamdin, 1996). In a recent study, Belfanz and Byrnes (2012) examined the relationship of attendance, academic achievement and high school graduation. They determine that “course performance in the ninth grade was the strongest predictor of the likelihood that students would graduate” (p. 25). It is an even stronger predictor of eventual graduation than academic performance and prior course grades. This is important because attendance acts as a moderating variable. They found that failure rates are higher among students with stronger academic performance than those with low test scores if they have more than 10 absences in a school year (Belfanz & Byrnes, 2012).



In 2008 Pinkus, of the Alliance for Excellent Education, through a grant funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, issued a policy brief in which she urges that early warning data can improve graduation rates. In this brief, she reveals that students with attendance rates lower than 80% drop out a higher rate in urban areas such as Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago (Pinkus, 2008). Further, the academic area in which students with high absences struggle most is mathematics (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). A similar relationship has been found to exist between student attendance and performance on state tests. A positive direct relationship exists between student attendance and pass rates in reading and math on state tests (Balfanz et al., 2013).

The relationship between attendance and academic achievement is evident far earlier than 9<sup>th</sup> grade, however, especially among children from low socioeconomic status. A recent review of data of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, through an action research project, at a school similar to the study site for this research project, reveals a link among attendance, achievement in math and English courses and the dropout rate. Of students who failed to graduate from the school in four years, 90% of them failed Algebra 1. For most students, Algebra 1 was the only math course they took during their freshman year. Furthermore, of the 45 9<sup>th</sup> graders who failed Algebra 1 during the 2010-2011 school year, 44 of them were chronically absent that year (Keegan, 2012).

### **Relationship between Academic Self-Efficacy and Academic Achievement**

#### **Defining Academic Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a construct that has been examined many times, usually as it relates to another variable. Albert Bandura conceived this construct, and it has since been examined by many researchers and practitioners as it relates to academic achievement.

According to Bandura, self-efficacy is “people’s judgments of their capabilities to arrange and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (1986, p. 391). Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy links one’s beliefs about his/her capability in an area to his/her behaviors in that same area (Bandura, 1977a, 1977b, 1982a, 1982b, 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1993, 1997, 2001; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Pajares, 1996; Schwarzer, 1992). Typically, the higher one’s self-efficacy, the better he/she will perform on a given task. Academic self-efficacy is the concept of self-efficacy applied to an academic setting, essentially students’ beliefs about their ability to perform school-related tasks.

### **Relationship of Academic Self-Efficacy to Attendance**

Lucio Rapp-Paglicci and Rowe (2010) conducted a study to determine which school-related factors predict student academic achievement. School-related factors included, but were not limited to, academic self-efficacy, attendance, school safety and school quality. Student academic achievement was defined as a student’s grade point average. For this study, 217 participants from three different urban high schools made up the sample. Most participants were from school A, a regular high school with approximately 2,000 students, while the rest were from schools B and C, both of which are drop-out prevention schools. This mixed-methods study utilized multiple measures to acquire data to analyze. First, students’ GPA (the study’s definition of student academic achievement), was taken from the unweighted, cumulative GPA contained in school records. Various data points were used for the school-related factors referenced above, but this review will simply discuss attendance and academic self-efficacy, since those two factors are the focus for the present study. Data on attendance were obtained from

school records. Academic self-efficacy was measured using the academic subscale of the self-efficacy questionnaire for children, or the SEQ-C, developed by Muris (2001) and Suldo and Shaffer (2007). This questionnaire utilized a Likert-scale and had data with good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha=.81$ ).

The purpose of the study conducted by Lucio et al. (2010) was to determine risk factors for low academic achievement among students (as measured by student GPA) with the hopes of eventually creating an index that could predict risk. Academic self-efficacy was found to be a possible predictor of academic achievement; in many cases, the higher a student's level of academic self-efficacy, the higher his/her GPA (Lucio et al., 2010).

Niehaus, Moritz Rudasill and Adelson (2012) conducted a longitudinal study that examined, in part, how academic self-efficacy, among other factors, is related to academic achievement among 47 Latino middle school students (grades 6-8) in a large urban school district over the course of one school year. Almost all participants were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch, indicating that they were of low socioeconomic status. Niehaus et al. (2012) found that, among Latino students, academic self-efficacy was related to both student attendance ( $p<.001$ ) and achievement in math ( $p<.001$ ).

### **Relationship of Academic Self-Efficacy to Graduation Rates**

Research studies have also been conducted to determine if academic self-efficacy is related to graduation rates. Bandura, along with Vittorio Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Del Bove, Vecchio and Barbaranelli (2008) conducted a longitudinal research study with 412 Italian students over the course of 10 years, beginning when they were 12 years old and culminating at age 22 years old, to determine if students' level of academic self-

efficacy was related their decision to remain in school throughout high school. Students were administered a scale developed by Bandura that measured perceived efficacy for self-regulated learning at six points throughout this longitudinal study, over the course of 10 years. Academic achievement was measured by students' grades in their core academic courses, and whether or not they remained in school was measured by whether or not they graduated. After conducting a latent growth curve analysis, Bandura et al. (2008) found that students with low academic self-efficacy had lower grades and dropped out of high school at a higher rate than students with high academic self-efficacy.

Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) built upon the Bandura et al. (2008) study mentioned and conducted a longitudinal study of 426 high school students in an urban area in Italy to determine what role, if any, students' self-determined motivation played in their intent to drop out of high school. In order to gauge their level of self-determined motivation, the relationship of students' self-efficacy and perceived parental and teacher support to their self-determined motivation were examined. In this study, the researchers took into account participants' academic performance and socioeconomic status. A combination of various quantitative instruments were used to determine academic motivation (The Academic Motivation Scale), student self-determination (Relative Autonomy Index), perceived teacher support for autonomy (Learning Climate Questionnaire), perceived parental support for autonomy (Perceptions of Parents Scale, adapted), and self-efficacy (Perceived Efficacy Scale). Intentions to persist versus drop out were measured on a questionnaire (Likert-scale) and academic achievement was measured through students' self-reported grades. Through this study, Alivernini and Lucidi found that for

high school students, low academic self-efficacy among students was associated with increased intent to drop out of school. In addition, low academic self-efficacy was associated with lower academic achievement.

The relationship of self-efficacy to attendance was examined in the quantitative study conducted by Nelson (2012) on the impact of community interventions. While the results of the study overall (determining the effectiveness of a community intervention program) were inconclusive due to a significant change in the study site, data analyzed at the end of the first year of the 2-year study revealed that students who attended the school where the community program intervention occurred experienced an increase in self-efficacy, significant at the  $p < .001$  level, while students attended the control site did not.

There is a significant amount of literature that suggests a relationship exists between academic self-efficacy among students and student outcomes such as academic achievement and high school completion. The question remains whether there is a relationship between academic self-efficacy and student attendance, which is one of the research questions for the present study.

### **Absenteeism and Graduation Rates**

Graduation rates are used as an indicator of a school's performance throughout the country. Studies over the past 20 years have shown that absenteeism as early as elementary school, but especially in middle school, can be a significant predictor of eventual high school graduation (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; MacIver, 2010; Orfield, 2004).

Mac Iver (2010) conducted a study of students who dropped out of high school in Baltimore during the 2008-2009 school year. The goal of this study was to determine

what this population of students had in common so that early warning indicators could be identified. A secondary goal of this work was to use what was discovered about the collective profile of student dropouts so that interventions could be recommended and implemented to reduce the number of students who drop out of high school. The author assumed that high school dropouts exhibit signs, or indicators, early on that they will not graduate. She also assumed that there were characteristics that distinguished this group from those who graduate. Finally, she assumed that most students in the cohort examined were over aged and under credited, meaning they had spent more than one year in a single grade and were older than typical 4-year high school graduates. Mac Iver (2010) utilized an ex post facto quantitative design and measure to collect and analyze data from 1,646 students who had dropped out of school in 2008-2009. Student data files were examined for the following variables: attendance, test scores, suspensions, high school credits earned and grade level. According to Mac Iver (2010), this approach “differs from traditional cohort analyses in that it focuses on all students with a particular outcome (dropout vs. graduate) in a particular year, and then follows them back in time through district records rather than following them forward in time.” (pg. 53). Mac Iver (2010) discovered that students who dropped out of Baltimore schools during the 2008-2009 school year had a few things in common. First, almost 9 out of 10 students who dropped out had missed more than 10% of the days in the previous the school year. In addition, 8 out of 10 students who dropped out had been absent for more than 20% of the previous school year. Chronic absenteeism was not just displayed during the year prior to dropping out, however. Students who dropped out of school in Baltimore during the 2008-2009 school year had significant absenteeism

several years prior to dropping out. Three quarters of these students had missed 10% or more during the previous two school years, and 50% missed 10% or more during the previous three school years (Mac Iver, 2010).

### **Absenteeism as an Early Warning Indicator**

As student disengagement and graduation rates have become the focus of educational and national leaders, over the past several years experts have begun to determine whether there are particular signs or characteristics of students that would indicate a student is at risk of dropping out of high school. What they have found through recent studies is that there are early warning indicators that place students at greater risk for dropping out than their peers. Recent studies around absenteeism and graduation rates have consistently demonstrated that absenteeism in 9<sup>th</sup> grade is a strong predictor of graduation rates (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). One study in Chicago found that attendance in 9<sup>th</sup> grade was a strong predictor of eventual graduation. In fact, 87% of students who missed fewer than 5 days graduated on time from high school as opposed to approximately 40% for students who missed more than 10 days of school during their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. There was a connection between days absent and graduation rate. Data from the district in this dissertation research indicate that during the 2010-2011 school year 60% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were chronically absent (Providence Public, 2012). Only 9% of students who missed more than 20 days (i.e., severe chronic absence) of school during their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year eventually graduated (Providence Public, 2012).

In 2012, the Baltimore Council of the Great City Schools commissioned a study to build on already existing knowledge of early warning indicators. Through the Senior

Urban Education Research Fellowship Series, Mac Iver, an Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University in the School of Education and lead researcher for Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC), led this study. The main purpose of this study was to determine whether findings about early warning indicators in other cities applied also to students in Baltimore schools. Specifically, this study sought to expand on findings about key indicators, chronic absenteeism, student behavior problems and course failure in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The sample included 7,729 student records from 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the 2004-2005 and 2006-2006 school years (i.e., graduating classes of 2007-2008 and 2008-2009). This cohort of students was followed for data through one year past their on-time graduation year. It is important to note that this study followed only the cohort of students who were enrolled in a Baltimore high school during their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year; no data from students who transferred in after this time was included. Descriptive statistics were run on the data for the full sample and also for subsamples. Sequential analyses were run on demographic variables, then on behavioral variables and then on school-level variables. For the purpose of this dissertation, the analyses of behavioral variables studied by Mac Iver and Messel are particularly important, since this is where early warning indicators such as attendance, behavior and course grades are contained. This study found that in Baltimore, students who exhibit Early Warning Indicators, such as chronic absenteeism, graduate from high school at a rate of 30%, compared with 92% of students who do not exhibit Early Warning Indicators. Students who are chronically absent graduate at a rate of 56%, while their peers who have satisfactory attendance graduate at a rate of 82% (Mac Iver & Messel, 2012). Other



recent studies corroborate this data, finding that students who are chronically absent for four years between 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> dropout at a rate of 60% (Balfanz et al, 2013).

The Mac Iver and Messel (2012) study of absenteeism in Baltimore City public schools found that the year students are most likely to fall off track towards graduation and with their attendance is in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Further, once they are off track, they are not likely to recover. For example, the percentage of students off track in 8<sup>th</sup> grade who get back on track in 9<sup>th</sup> grade is far less than students who suddenly become off-track in 9<sup>th</sup> grade (Mac Iver & Messel, 2012).

### **Research Questions**

The two research questions that guided the inquiry were as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between academic self-efficacy and absenteeism among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students?
2. What do students report as the reasons for poor attendance in one urban high school in New England?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This mixed methods research study utilized quantitative and qualitative approaches. To determine if a relationship exists between academic self-efficacy and chronic absenteeism among students, a quantitative approach, utilizing an academic self-efficacy scale, was used. To determine the reasons that high school students report they are chronically absent, focus groups were conducted with 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who were chronically absent during the first half of the school year.

## Participants

**Survey.** To determine if a relationship exists between students' academic self-efficacy and rates of absenteeism, a survey measuring academic self-efficacy was administered to 9<sup>th</sup> grade students ( $N=99$ ) who represent all subgroups of rates of absenteeism (satisfactory, at-risk, chronic and severe chronic). See Appendix A.

**Focus Groups.** To determine what students report as the causes of chronic absenteeism, all  $N=35$  9<sup>th</sup> grade students who, during the first half of the 2014-2015 academic year, missed between 10% and 19% of school days, or between 9 and 18 days of school were identified. From this group,  $n=20$  students were randomly selected to participate in four focus groups. Three of the focus groups were conducted in English, and one focus group was conducted completely in Spanish. This was done to ensure equal opportunity for participation among all subsets of students at the study site.

## Instrumentation

**Research Question 1.** Research Question 1 was assessed using an academic self-efficacy survey, which contained items from three of Bandura's self-efficacy surveys (see Appendix B). This survey contained four sections that measured different constructs within academic self-efficacy. The response format was a 5-point Likert agreement scale (*Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

**Research Question 2.** Research Question 2 was assessed using focus groups to elicit what students report as the causes of their chronic absenteeism (see Appendix C). Questions were developed with participants' ages in mind and

contained a combination of low-risk, structured, standardized questions and key questions that directly asked them why they miss school.

### **Data Collection**

**Surveys.** Self-efficacy surveys were administered to all 9<sup>th</sup> grade students during the Advisory period, which is a 54-minute block of time that occurs once per week where students are grouped by grade level. Students' attendance rates were matched to survey responses.

**Focus Groups** Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. In order to select students for focus groups, the Skyward student information system was used to generate a list of all students who were chronically absent during first half of the current school year.

### **Data Analysis**

**Survey.** Research Question 1 was analyzed using descriptive statistics. First, a table was created to report which students did and did not complete the survey. All subgroups of absenteeism were represented.

Means, standard deviations and the range of scores were reported for all variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to examine internal consistency reliability of the self-efficacy data. Pearson's product-moment correlations and stepwise multiple regression were used to determine the relationship between the academic self-efficacy dimensions and student absenteeism. Effect sizes ( $r^2$  and  $R^2$ ) were reported for significant correlations ( $p < .05$  for dimensions and  $p < .01$  for item-level analyses).

**Focus Groups.** Data from Research Question 2 were analyzed first through coding the text of the interview transcripts. Miles and Huberman (1983) recommend using data reduction throughout the data collection and analysis process in order to remain organized and to thoroughly analyze the data. Then, based on the categorized interview data, larger clusters were created to further categorize the data. Thematic groupings were created in order to prepare data for reporting. According to Namey (2007), thematic analysis allows the researcher to focus on themes and implicit meaning of what participants say.

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

All subgroups of absenteeism were represented among the 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who participated in the survey, however due to the fact that students with chronic and, especially, severe chronic absenteeism are in school less often, it was more difficult to get their input on the student survey.

While all 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were invited to participate in the survey, the participants for interviewing were purposefully limited to only students who were statistically chronically absent from this school during the first half of the 2014-15 school year. This was done intentionally, because in order to determine whether or not a relationship exists between academic self-efficacy and absenteeism among students, representation from subgroups of attendance was needed.

Students were asked a series of questions related to their absenteeism and also direct questions about the causes of their absenteeism. In order for the information gathered from student interviews to be relevant and useful to the research question

it was answering, it was necessary to limit the participants in this portion of the study to those with chronic absenteeism.

## Findings

### Research Question 1

1. Is there a relationship between academic self-efficacy and absenteeism among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students?

Research Question 1 was first addressed by developing Pearson-Product-Moment correlations ( $r$ ) for the survey dimensions and items with the rates of absenteeism. Examination of the correlations in Table 4 indicated that at the dimension level no significant correlations were found. Two of the items were found to be significantly correlated with rates of absenteeism. The first item was *Even with unpleasant tasks, I hold on until I am finished* ( $r=.183$ ,  $r^2=.03$ ,  $p=.040$ , small/medium effect size). The second item was *I am certain I can live up to what my peers expect of me* ( $r=.220$ ,  $r^2=.05$ ,  $p=.019$ , small/medium effect size). Thus, we can conclude that the concepts of persistence and meeting the expectations of others were positively related to higher absentee rates. No significant correlations were found for any of the remaining items on the survey.

**Table 4.** Correlations of Student Survey Dimensions and Items with Rates of Absenteeism

Dimensions/Items	$r$	$p$
<b>General</b>		
If I have the impression something new is complicated, I start it anyway.	.072	.248

If I make a decision to do something, I will do it.	.021	.423
If I make a mistake, I try even harder.	.134	.102
Even with unpleasant tasks, I hold on until I am finished.	<b>.183</b> ( $r^2=.03$ )	<b>.040</b>
<b>Others' Expectations</b>		
	-0.012	.454
I am certain I can live up to what my parents expect of me.	.114	.141
I am certain I can live up to what my teachers expect of me.	.130	.112
I am certain I can live up to what my peers expect of me.	<b>.220</b> ( $r^2=.05$ )	<b>.019</b>
I am certain I can live up to what I expect from myself.	-0.084	.217
<b>Problem Solving/Self-Regulated Learning</b>	-0.012	.454
I am certain I can finish my homework assignments by deadlines.	-0.135	.104
I am certain I can get myself to study when there are other interesting things to do.	-0.076	.240
I am certain I can always concentrate on school subjects during class.	.045	.338
I am certain I can take good notes during class instruction.	-0.029	.393
I am certain I can remember information presented in class and textbooks.	.091	.199
<b>Academic Achievement</b>	.094	.185
I am certain I can learn algebra.	-0.019	.427
I am certain I can learn biology.	.123	.119

I am certain I can learn reading, writing and language skills.	.156	.068
I am certain I can learn a foreign language.	.081	.219
I am certain I can learn history.	.041	.349

*Note.* The correlation of the General dimension and rate of absenteeism was not developed since the data for the items defining the dimension were not reliable. Effect size guidelines for  $r^2$  were as follows: .01 = small, .09 = medium, .25 = large.

Research Question 1 was also answered using step-wise multiple regression where the relationship of academic self-efficacy and rates of absenteeism was further examined.

**Dimension-Level Analyses.** In the first analysis, the three self-efficacy dimensions (i.e., Others' Expectations, Problem Solving/Self-regulated Learning, and Academic Achievement) were entered into the equation and no dimension-level means explained a significant amount of variation in rates of attendance.

**Item-Level Analyses.** For the item-level analyses each separate set of items defining the respective dimensions were entered into the stepwise multiple regression to examine whether they explained a significant amount of variation in rates of absenteeism. For the **General** items no significant relationships were found. Table 5 contains the results of the stepwise multiple regression for the four Others' Expectations items. Examination of the table indicated that the item *I can live up to what my peers expect of me* was a significant predictor of rates of absenteeism. The correlation of  $r=.220$  ( $r^2=.048$ ,  $p=.038$ , small/medium effect size) also reported earlier in Table 4 indicated that students who tended to agree with this statement had higher rates of absenteeism. The remaining three items defining the Others' Expectations dimension did not enter the regression equation, as they did not significantly increment the amount

of variance explained in absenteeism rate beyond the item *I can live up to what my peers expect of me*.

The remaining items defining each set of items in the survey dimensions (i.e., **General, Problem Solving/Self-Regulated Learning, and Academic Achievement**) did not explain any significant variation in rates of absenteeism.

**Table 5.** Stepwise Multiple Regression of Others' Expectation Items on Rates of Absenteeism.

Variable	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>r</i> Change	<i>F</i> Change	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup> Effect Size
I am certain I can live up to what my peers expect of me.	.220	.048	.048	4.460	.038	.220	2.112	.038	Small/Medium

*Note.* The remaining Others' Expectations items (i.e., *I am certain I can live up to what my parents expect of me, I am certain I can live up to what my teachers expect of me, and I am certain I can live up to what I expect from myself*) did not enter the stepwise regression equation, as they did not significantly increment the amount of variance explained in rates of absenteeism beyond item 8 (*I am certain I can live up to what my peers expect of me*).

## Research Question 2

2. What do students report as the reasons for poor attendance in one urban high school in southern New England?

Research Question 2 was answered using a total of 4 focus groups comprised of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who had been chronically absent during the first half of the current school year (2014-2015). A total of 17 students participated in the four focus group sessions. Three of the focus groups were conducted in English and one was conducted



in the participants' native language of Spanish. While one question specifically asked students to report the reasons they miss school, several other questions were designed to elicit students thoughts and feelings about the importance of being in school, how their peers, parents and teachers influence their attendance and what might cause them to want to come to school.

Participants were asked about the importance of being in school, reasons why they and their peers miss school, how it feels to miss school, how their parents and teachers feel when they miss school and what they look forward to in coming to school. Through coding of the transcriptions of their responses, several themes emerged. First, students believe it is important to be in school. Second, parental encouragement and prioritization of school are important to students. Third, teachers can demonstrate they care when students miss school by following up with them when they return (through conversation or by providing make-up work) and calling home when students are absent. Conversely, lack of teacher action causes students to make assumptions about how teachers feel when they are absent, and among this subgroup of students, they assume teachers either do not care or are happy when they miss school. Fourth, students feel bored when they miss school and feel like they are missing out on something, both academic and social. Fifth, when school is not engaging, students do not want to be there. Sixth, transportation is reported as an obstacle to good attendance. Seventh, social media plays a role in causing students to feel too tired to attend school in that they are up late utilizing these tools.

**Theme 1.** It is Important to be in School. One question directly asked participants to discuss the importance of being in school, however this theme emerged throughout

participants' responses to several focus group questions. Participants overwhelmingly and consistently agreed it was important to attend school in order to have a successful future, to graduate from high school and have a good job, to avoid falling behind with learning that occurs in high school, including getting good grades and to be the first in their family to graduate from high school.

Participants' responses consistently centered around the connection between education and future success (i.e., graduation from high school and college and getting a good job/making money). When asked to talk about the importance of being in school, one student stated, "to get a job in the future" while another stated it is important to attend school to "graduate, get an education." Another student stated "you need school so that you can go to college and do what you want to do when you get older, and have a career, and get paid instead of just working at Burger King when you're like thirty." Even students who were not ready to think about postsecondary goals, attending school was still linked with future success. One student said it is important to be in school "because you can get an education. It's easier to get jobs and stuff, so that's what I'm trying to do. I'm just trying to get my high school diploma. I'm not even thinking about college yet. Just want my high school diploma." In each of the four focus groups, participants indicated that attending school was extremely important for future success.

Participants also connected attending school with current academic success and, conversely, they connected missing school with struggling to get good grades and falling behind in coursework. In particular, among the participants who were new to the United States, responses tended to be more focused on the connection between

attending school and academic success within the current school year. One student stated,

Why is it important? If you don't go to school, you lose that class and you don't learn. Next day, when you go back, you're missed. 'What did you do yesterday?' 'I don't know, I don't know.' And that is why it is important to attend school.

Another student stated:

For me, it's good if you go to school because if you don't come, you'll be lost and you won't understand anything, as it has happened to me in Biology. I was absent in the first period and I was lost. It's good to come to school because you have to attend class to understand.

Participants also spoke of a sense of pride in being successful in school and in being the first in their family to graduate from high school. For one student:

The importance for me is 'cause I want to be the first one in my generation to finish college and go away and finish high school and go on to college. 'Cause I'm gonna be the first one to do it besides my mom. So, it's gonna be me and my mom right now. Well, just her, the only one that has her high school diploma and her business thing from school. And I just want to be like her 'cause she is my mom and my dad, she's everything to me. So, I'm gonna do it for her.

Other participants also referred to being the first in their family to graduate high school, which will be explained in the following theme about the role of parental encouragement.

**Theme 2. Parental encouragement and prioritization of attending school makes a difference.** Many of the participants reflected on the fact that their parents, especially their mothers, either did not complete high school or, if they did, they did not go on to college. Only one of the participants indicated that his mother had completed some type of post-secondary training. Many participants recognized that their parents prioritized their attendance because it would be an avenue to be more successful than they were.

One student stated that his mom gets upset when he misses school because:

She has got to work for me, she wants me to become something in life, and when I stay out of school at home, she gets angry. She wants me to be someone, like in the future, not like her, working hard.

Added another student:

I feel like my mom gets mad at me when I don't go to school because my mom was pregnant when she was sixteen, and she had to stay home and raise a baby and couldn't get her education. And she didn't have anybody helping her so she wants me to be different and get my college degree before I have kids.

This seems to be linked to why students consider attending school important; it fosters a sense of pride that they will be the first ones to graduate high school.

Almost all participants reported that their parents have negative feelings about their missing school. Some students discussed this in general terms. One student said, "My mom always kicks everybody out of the house and we have to go somewhere, go to school. I guess when we stay home she gets probably annoyed that we're missing out on stuff that we could be learning." Others went more deeply into describing how they know their parents disapprove of their missing school. According to one student:

And then, if I do stay home, my mom takes away my game and stuff. She doesn't make me stay in my room, but like she says I can watch TV, but I can't play my game or anything. And I have to do, like read for an hour or something like that, until school gets out. And then, I can have everything back. Cause she said, if I miss a school day, you're not gonna sit here and play games, so she makes me do that.

When asked why they and their peers miss school, some participants indicated that it was perhaps because no one at home encouraged them to go. When asked why they think their peers miss school, one student explained, "People just don't want to come to school because they don't like to. They don't have parents to tell them to come to school." To that, another student added, "Kids probably don't get forced to go to school." Similarly, when asked why they and their peers miss school, participants referred to the relationship between family stress and missing school. One student referred to the fact that she has to stay with her ill grandmother at the hospital because her mother and father both work 12-hour shifts. She explained that it was a responsibility shared

between her and her sister. Another student was more vague in his explanation, simply stating that, at times, stress at home causes him not to want to go to school. Finally, one participant explained that a reason students miss school is because they may not have anyone at home who can motivate them. For example, some students have parents and siblings who are in prison, and that can take away their drive and motivation to be successful.

**Theme 3. Feeling welcomed, wanted and needed by teachers can be a factor in whether students attend school.** Participants reported that actions taken by teachers show caring in various ways. Participants indicated that they know teachers care when they miss school if they ask why they were absent, provide make up work upon the student's return or call home. One student described how he was unsure of how most of his teachers feel when he is absent but how he knows that one teacher, in particular, cares when he misses class. He said, "But some other teachers, like my gym teacher, he'll like ask me what happened and stuff. My other teachers, I think they don't care." When teachers follow up with students in this manner after an absence, it is perceived as caring. Similarly, participants reported that they know their teachers care when they miss school when they provide make up work to them upon their return. According to one student, who is new to the United States this year, "Some teachers say to me, 'You skipped yesterday. We did something that you like.'" Another student stated that she knows her teachers care when she misses school because, "if I have work to do, they give me the work...so they care." A third action by teachers that made participants feel that teachers care when they miss school is if they make a follow-up phone call to their parents. One exchange in particular captured this.

Student A: "I think they, well I think Mr. M cares, because he be calling my mom like, 'I didn't see your daughter today in my class. What happened?' My mom, she be like, she just stayed home. And he'll be like, 'I want to see her in my class tomorrow.' She'll be like, 'all right, you will.'"

Interviewer: "How does that make you feel when the teachers reach out to your parents or call you or talk about the fact that you missed school?"

Student B: "It feels like somebody cares about you."

Student C: "Yeah, somebody from school."

Conversely, lack of teacher action (i.e. following up with students after an absence in some way) leads students to make their own assumptions about how teachers feel when they miss school, and students reported that they assumed teachers are happy or relieved when they miss class, especially if they perceive themselves to be poor students, behaviorally or academically. According to one student, "I'm not the best student in the class so I feel like all my teachers, they say or they think, 'Oh, she's not here so the class is gonna be an easy, fun, calm day'". Participants also reported that their teachers could feel aggravated when they miss school because it causes them to have to do extra work to catch them up. One student says his teachers feel:

probably mad, because the next day we come back to school, we don't know what's going on, so they have to waste time out of their time of teaching the other kids the new subject to teach you something that you missed, and take time out of their day for you to catch up.

Participants who were new to the United States talked about the importance of their teachers, with their responses indicating that they hold them in high regard. They that they believe teachers try hard to explain concepts to them and that they do the job because they want to help, not because they want to get paid. However, these same participants perceived that the language barrier caused frustrations teachers were happy to avoid on days these particular participants were out.

I think they don't care about me. I think they feel bless if I skip a day because...I'm not bad but when you don't know a language and someone is talking to you in that language all day, I understand nothing and this makes me tense. I know she is nervous, too, because she doesn't understand my language.

**Theme 4. Students have a negative feeling when they're not in school.** Participants reported that when they are not in school, they feel like they are missing something, either academic or social. Participants reported that they felt bored when they weren't in school. "When I miss school, it gets boring because you don't talk to your friends throughout the day and stuff like that and you don't learn anything when you're at home." Another participant indicated that even though he has games and electronic devices at home, he would rather interact with his friends at school.

At home, I have a phone, but I need to be here at school because, even if I can talk with guys with my phone, here, I can lay with them. But at home, I'm bored. I can't hear music. I can do nothing because there's always someone sleeping at home, so even if I'm late, I go to school.

Only one participant out of 17 indicated that it felt good to miss school because had more free time. Participants reported that they were afraid to miss school because it can negatively affect their grades when they are not there. One participant stated:

I just go. I don't like missing school because I don't like having to catch up on homework and learn something I should have learned that day. So when I am sick and stuff, I be literally like so mad I be sitting in my room. I'll sit in my room all day and won't move. If I miss school, I won't go anywhere.

This theme was evident when reviewing participant responses when questioned about what they look forward to in going to school. Participants responded that they looked forward to seeing their friends. They also indicated that they looked forward to eventually graduating from high school. Finally, they responded that they expected to learn something new each day they go to school.

**Theme 5. When classes are engaging, students want to be there.** One participant reported that when students consider a school to be a good, engaging school, they will overcome obstacles to attend. According to one participant:

I have a lot of friends that live far from here. So, they have some schools closer than this one, but they don't want to change because this school is one of the best schools of

Providence. And they say, 'if I have tickets for the bus and I don't skip class and can change my school but I won't study as I study here'.

Participant responses indicate that they perceive lack of attention by teachers as not engaging, causing them to give up and not persevere through challenging academic course work. According to their responses, this lack of engagement can cause them to not want to attend classes. When asked why they think their peers miss school, one participant said it could be that they feel their classes are boring. However, other responses centered around the belief that they miss school because classes are too challenging and they feel they cannot be successful. One student who is new to the United States responded, "Maybe if they can't speak English, they cannot make friends or they cannot understand their classes, so they just skip school." Another participant stated, "I think they don't come to school because they don't understand sometimes what the teachers are teaching, and they feel that they're gonna get made fun of if they ask a question or something." Another participant went into more detail about her own personal experience with feeling frustrated in class and wanting to give up. She related her own experience to those of her peers.

When you're actually sitting there and you're paying attention and you're trying to get the help that they don't to give you, you get aggravated. So then you just not care. Students feel like they're not going to help you with stuff, you don't even feel like going to your class. So you just either leave school for that class and then come back or just not even go to the class, chill in the halls and that's it.

Participant responses indicate that when they feel engaged and supported, they want to attend school and class. "I like when I get involved in stuff like experiments and get together in groups and work. That's why I miss school because it was boring where I was sitting." He went on to say:

I only like to learn when teachers get me into it. I know I'm not gonna have all teachers that are gonna be like, 'Do this, do that', you have to be independent. But I like when I come to school and I feel like it's just another day, but then when we get into class, and we start working, I feel like this is easy and I can do it.



**Theme 6. Transportation is reported to be a barrier to attending school.** When asked to discuss the reasons why they and their peers miss school, participants reported that transportation issues such as living far from school or not receiving district-sponsored transportation to school makes it difficult for them to get to school. Referring to the monthly bus passes students receive on the first of the month, one participant stated, “Say you lose it [bus pass], you can’t get another one, so you’re stuck.” Other participants referred to wanting to sleep later or not walk in the cold to school.

**Theme 7. The influence of social media and peers on attendance.** Participants report that they and their peers miss school because they are too tired to get up due to being up too late at night talking on the phone or on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Referring to his peers, one student reported “They stay awake late using Facebook or their phones or computers and they wake up late. They wake up so late then they think it’s too late to go to school for just a couple of hours.” Participants also indicated that for them, this one of the most frequent reasons they miss school.

I basically already said the reason, like when I’m on Twitter and Facebook and stuff. Then it’s now hard to wake up because you’re mad tired. Yeah, that’s why I be late and absent a lot because I be mad tired. I go to sleep sometimes at like 3 o’clock, 4 o’clock. I be so tired.

Other participants did not give a specific reason for staying up late, but they did refer to being up late causing them to be tired in the morning, thus causing them to miss school.

This chapter has presented a description of the study participants and the quantitative and qualitative data generated to answer the two research questions. Chapter V will summarize the study, discuss the conclusions and offer recommendations for future action.

## **V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, and RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary of the Results: Quantitative**

Research Question 1 was primarily addressed by developing Pearson-Product-Moment correlations ( $r$ ) for the survey dimensions and items with the rates of absenteeism. Examination of the correlations in Table 3 indicated that at the dimension level no significant correlations were found. Two of the items were found to be significantly correlated with rates of absenteeism. The first item was *Even with unpleasant tasks, I hold on until I am finished* ( $r=.183$ ,  $r^2=.03$ ,  $p=.040$ , small/medium effect size). The second item was *I am certain I can live up to what my peers expect of me* ( $r=.220$ ,  $r^2=.05$ ,  $p=.019$ , small/medium effect size). Thus, we can conclude that the concepts of persistence and meeting the expectations of others were positively related to higher absentee rates. No significant correlations were found for any of the remaining items on the survey.

### **Summary of the Results: Qualitative**

We learned through the qualitative measure (focus groups with  $N=17$  9<sup>th</sup> grade students who were chronically absent during the first half of the 2014-2015 school year) that students strongly relate attending school with successes such as getting good grades, graduating from high school, going to college and getting a high-paying job. Several themes emerged through coding of the text. First, students believe it is important to be in school. Second, parental encouragement and prioritization of school are important to students. Third, teachers can demonstrate they care when students miss school by following up with them when they return (through conversation or by providing make-up work) and calling home when students are absent. Conversely, lack of teacher action causes students to make assumptions about how teachers feel when

they are absent, and among this subgroup of students, they assume teachers either do not care or are happy when they miss school. Fourth, students feel bored when they miss school and feel like they are missing out on something, both academic and social. Fifth, when school is not engaging, students do not want to be there. Sixth, transportation is reported as an obstacle to good attendance. Seventh, social media plays a role in causing students to feel too tired to attend school in that they are up late utilizing these tools.

### **Conclusions**

Analysis of the student survey self-efficacy data, as well as themes that emerged from coding the focus group transcripts, led to several conclusions, some of which directly support existing literature on both academic self-efficacy and causes of absenteeism. In addition, new conclusions can also be drawn.

Findings that persistence (*Even with unpleasant tasks, I hold on until I am finished*) and meeting the expectations of others (*I am certain I can live up to what my peers expect of me*) are positively correlated to higher rates of absenteeism is counter-intuitive in that one might expect that students who persist and feel they can meet others' expectations would attend school more regularly than those who do not. When examining item-level multiple regression results, the item *I can live up to what my peers expect of me* is a predictor of attendance. This may link to what students reported in focus groups that they look forward to seeing their friends when they come to school. When asked specifically what they look forward to most in going to school, many of them stated that seeing their friends was what they looked forward to most. What was also interesting was that students talked consistently about feeling tired in the morning

and that socializing with friends late at night can cause them to be too tired to attend school the next day. Perhaps feeling the need to meet the expectations of their peers can be linked to their behaviors at night that are causing them to miss school the next day.

It is evident from the results that students understand the importance of being in school. Despite the fact that the focus group participants fall into the subgroup of chronic rates of absenteeism (which is the rate of absenteeism where significantly lower graduation rates are seen), students consistently discussed the connection between being in school and current academic and future success (i.e. graduation, college enrollment and high paying jobs). This connects to research on the importance of graduating and also the national focus on graduation rates discussed in the review of literature.

Findings from this research are consistent with Kleine's (2012) conclusions that students with high rates of absenteeism have parents with low education levels, as reported by students in the focus groups. However, Kleine (2012) reports that these students do not have high aspirations for their own education. Students who participated in focus groups reported high expectations for themselves. It is important to note that the participants for this current research study fell into the absenteeism category of chronic, which means they missed between 11-18% of the first half of the school year. Students who missed more than that, who are considered to be severely chronically absent, were not represented in the focus groups. Most studies on absenteeism do not distinguish between chronic and severe chronic rates of

absenteeism, therefore it is possible that students who are severely chronic would have reported low expectations for their own academic achievement.

Findings also supported Chang and Romero's (2008) research on causes of chronic absenteeism. They report that students miss school because of lack of reliable transportation, a lack of belief that they are missed when they do not attend school and lack of engaging classrooms. These conclusions were supported by this study. Content analysis and coding of the focus group transcripts revealed among others, similar themes. To a lesser extent, Chang and Romero's conclusion that fear of bullying and harassment causes students not to attend was supported by some student dialogue, however no significant theme could be identified in this area.

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the focus groups was the impact teacher actions have on students feeling like someone cares if they miss school. Students consistently referred to actions such as inquiring why they were out upon their return and providing make up work as things that indicate to them their teachers care. Conversely, lack of teacher action was consistently reported by students to mean that teachers either did not care or were happy and relieved when they miss school. This finding supports the conclusions made by Belfanz et al. (2007) that student attendance can be related to how supportive teachers are towards student success and student interest in coursework.

To take the above finding and connection further, students reported that when they do not feel engaged or supported by teachers, they desire to leave class early or to skip it the following day. Students also reported that when classes are engaging and challenging (with teacher support), they look forward to attending class and school.

Gaylon et al. (2012) found that a correlation exists between self-efficacy and student participation in class indicates that students who lack a belief that they can accomplish tasks given to them by teachers become disengaged easily. These same students reported a desire to leave the class or skip class the next day. This may indicate a possible link to academic self-efficacy and student attendance if controlled for the level of engagement or teacher support.

Previous studies reported a connection between students' family and home life and their rates of absenteeism. While this cannot be verified through the current research study, almost all focus group participants referred to the fact that their parents did not graduate from high school or had to work multiple jobs with long hours to support the family. They did not report this as a cause for their absenteeism or that of their peers, however it was a common thread among participants, all who had chronic rates of absenteeism.

In addition, a possible link could be drawn between parental supervision and attendance rates. Again, while students did not directly indicate this conclusion through specific statements, they discussed at length that one of the causes of their absenteeism and that of their peers was the fact that they were too tired in the mornings to get to school. The cause of their being tired was lack of sleep, and one of the most consistent reasons they gave for lack of sleep was socializing with their peers either through texting or through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Reducing chronic absenteeism is a high priority for urban school districts, including the district in which this study was conducted. As relevant literature suggests, high rates

of chronic absenteeism are related to low graduation rates. Therefore, it is important that district leaders take action to decrease chronic absenteeism. As existing literature suggests (Change & Romero, 2008; Gage et al., 2013) a comprehensive approach is needed in order to reduce chronic absenteeism among high schools students. Results from this study, in combination with existing literature point to the need for this approach to address parent/family circumstances, systemic/district instructional and operational decisions and school-based programs. These will be discussed in more detail below.

**Parents/Family.** Based on the results from this study, the following are recommendations on how to maximize the important role parents and families play in the school attendance of children.

- Schools need to increase meaningful communication with parents and families about the importance of being in school. Specifically, parents and families should be familiar with the connections made through previous studies between attendance and graduation rates.
- Beyond this however, because students discussed at length the importance of having parents who prioritize education and also indicated that social media and peer interactions late at night play a large role in why they are too tired to go to school, parents and families need to be specifically educated and supported in how to address this with their children.
- For schools that have Parent Engagement Committees, focus the work on that committee around creating a meaningful communication and education plan in order to ensure prioritization and follow through. Parent Engagement Committees

can become involved at the school level, especially with communicating the importance of attendance.

**Systemic/District Instructional and Operational Decisions.** As part of a comprehensive approach to reducing absenteeism, it is recommended that school districts adopt practices that will address the causes of chronic absenteeism.

- Because of the strong connection focus group participants reported between lack of engaging classes and their desire to skip school/class, and also their discussion around their feelings of giving up when work is too difficult, it is recommended that districts ensure curricular decisions are made with the goal of engaging students in differentiated lessons.
- Focus group participants consistently discussed the role of various relationships as they connect to school. Teachers make them feel like they matter when they are not in school by following up with them and calling home. Peer relationships are also something students indicated they look forward to in coming to school and miss out on when they are absent. Districts should prioritize Advisory programs or programs that aim at personalizing the school environment and where students can explore the social and emotional aspect of their learning environment.
- Focus group participants indicated that a lack of reliable transportation (i.e., lost bus passes and far distances to travel without district-provided transportation) are obstacles to consistent student attendance. A recommendation for districts is to review transportation policies to ensure students are provided adequate transportation to school.



**School-Based Programs.** Conclusions drawn from this research have implications for programming at the school level. Focus group participants indicated that lack of teacher follow up when they are absent and disengaging classes where they feel like they cannot be successful cause them to want to miss school. Therefore, building leaders must prioritize and address this with the entire school community in order for meaningful gains to be made in reducing chronic absenteeism.

- Teachers need to be provided meaningful professional development that furthers their practice in creating engaging, student-centered, differentiated lessons and classrooms that are designed to meet the needs of the various learners in their classroom, especially English Language Learners
- Share findings with teachers to help facilitate the adaptive change needed to change instructional practices
- Focus group participants specifically indicated actions that teachers do when they are absent from school that make them feel cared about and missed when they are out. Lack of teacher action, whether intentional or unintentional, can cause students to assume no one cares. Teachers should be taught what these actions are so they may incorporate these into their daily practice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Further Areas of Study**

This study explored the relationship between academic self-efficacy and absenteeism and also what students report as the causes of their chronic absenteeism. Findings from the student survey that was administered to  $N=94$  9<sup>th</sup> grade students who represented all categories of absenteeism revealed that persistence and meeting others' expectations were significantly correlated with high rates of absenteeism. The

specific item about meeting others' expectations dealt with peer expectations, and given the focus group findings about the importance of friends and peers, a recommendation would be to:

- Further explore the relationship of socialization among students to attendance and academic self-efficacy. Administer a self-efficacy scale that deals with efficacy around peers' expectations, both positive and negative, to determine if a relationship exists there.
- Conduct research in which academic self-efficacy is related to student engagement. Focus group findings revealed a theme that indicated when students are not engaged they want to skip school. Therefore, a connection between academic self-efficacy and attendance may be moderated by levels of student engagement.
- Conduct focus groups utilizing the same questions as the current study, but with students who make up the remaining three categories of absenteeism (satisfactory, at-risk and severe chronic). One change to the questions would be with the students in the satisfactory category. Asking them *what are the reasons you come to school?* could reveal themes that would help schools replicate for other students the conditions that cause students with satisfactory attendance to go to school.
- Conduct surveys and/or focus groups with teachers on how they think students would respond to the focus group questions utilized in the current research study. If a gap in their assumptions versus student answers exists, then that gap should be revealed to teachers and discussed. This may help bridge the supportive

relationship between adults and students. It also may assist in the creation of meaningful interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism.

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## Appendix A

### Student Survey

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the statements below by checking the appropriate box next to each statement.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree		Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>I am certain I can live up to what...</b>						
1. If I absolutely want something, it usually works out.						
2. If I have the impression something new is complicated, I start it anyway.						
3. If I make a decision to do something, I will do it.						
4. If I make a mistake, I try even harder.						
5. Even with unpleasant tasks, I hold on until I am finished.						
<b>I am certain I can...</b>						
6. my parents expect of me.						
7. my teachers expect of me.						
8. my peers expect of me.						
9. I expect from myself.						
<b>I am certain I can learn...</b>						
10. finish my homework assignments by deadlines.						
11. get myself to study when there are other interesting things to do.						
12. always concentrate on school subjects during class.						
13. take good notes during class instruction.						
14. remember information presented in class and textbooks.						
<b>I am certain I can learn...</b>						
15. algebra.						
16. biology.						

17. reading, writing and language skills.						
18. a foreign language.						
19. history.						

Adapted from Sherer et. al (1982) General Self-Efficacy Scale and Bandura (2006) Guide for Constructing Self-Efficacy Scales