Teacher Initiatives to Reduce Truancy Among High School Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to improve the attendance of high school students using teacher initiatives. There were two teachers and about 140 students involved. The interventions used were improving lesson plans, developing better relationships with students and positive incentives.

The students at this school had a history of very poor attendance. There were around 40 truant students each day, or about 20% of the students in the program. Attendance was the number one reason for student failure and for students dropping out without receiving a diploma. Teachers at the school rated it the number one factor negatively affecting their classrooms.

The research suggested that students will show up more consistently for lesson plans that interest them, teachers that care about them, and for extrinsic rewards. This research was a combination of secondary sources that had addressed the issue and primary research done at the school. Through a combination of attendance records and interviews with students and staff, it became apparent that teachers could influence the attendance of their students if they used the proper strategy. Students commented that they often missed school because they were disinterested, so an effort was made to make school more relevant, engaging and challenging. Students explained that they show up more for a teacher that they like or respect, so an effort was made to improve the relationship between students and staff. Finally, students react to positive reinforcement, so rewards were offered for students with good attendance.

This project resulted in better attendance in several individual classrooms, though not in the school overall. Students began to display more responsibility and discipline concerning their attendance in many of the classes this project affected, some improving by five fewer absences per student. This project was a positive step in the direction of improving student attendance.

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

For this project we will be addressing the issue of poor student attendance, or truancy. This study will be looking specifically at an alternative high school where truancy is a problem every day. Less than 80% of students show up to this school on an average day. Most students fail one or two classes a semester because of this, thereby greatly affecting their chances of graduating. Often, while truant, students get themselves into trouble with the law. Regardless, they are missing important educational opportunities by missing school. Even if students were to acquire all of the content knowledge they would have gained in class on their own, they are missing the very important social development they could have benefited from in the cooperative classroom setting. There is the concern among educators that students who are not learning the importance of attendance will struggle in the workplace where truancy can easily cost workers their livelihood. It is also important that this school maintain its funding, which is largely based on average attendance and progress in improving it.

The motivation behind wanting to solve this problem is that truancy is very often a warning sign of failure. Failure too often leads to students dropping out or not graduating, which can greatly hurt their chances of success (Railsback, 2004). When a student fails, the responsibility is not theirs alone and it must be the intention of the educator to do as much as possible to solve the problem.

This is a complex issue, and not one that teachers can solve by themselves. In order to truly solve the problem, parents need to work hard to support their children and get them to school. Communities need to respond to this problem and come up with policies for solving chronic truancy. School administrators need to come up with attendance policies that work for their schools. Students themselves need to take responsibility for their own futures. All of these things need to occur in conjunction to solve the problem, but these things are not controlled by teachers. The teacher can control the classrooms and policies, however, and this study is going to explore how that ability can be used to combat truancy.

<div style="text-align:center">Immediate Context of the Problem</div>

As an alternative high school, this school services students who have not found success at their regular high schools. This school services a different number of students every semester. The average during the 2004-05 school year was 131 students. Teachers often have each student several times because of the size of the staff, so it is easy to know our students and their backgrounds very well. The student body changes considerably every semester as students graduate, drop-out, return to their home schools, or enter school for the first time. Currently the ethnicity of this school can be categorized as 70% Hispanic, 20% African-American, 10% Caucasian, and 1% other. This changes frequently, and such characterizations are almost obsolete in this student body. However, there are a large number of Hispanic students, most of whom speak English as a second language. The gender orientation is currently 54% male and 46% female.

As with most alternative high schools, the students and their families come from the lower brackets of the socio-economic scale. The average annual household income of the area that students come from is $66,180 (City, State webpage), but the students at this school generally do not come from the more affluent sections of town. Research into the student body is difficult because of its fluid nature and because of the sensitivity of the subject for many people. Concrete numbers about our student body cannot be provided here, but the evidence of students' economic background is obvious. For instance, a poll of recent U.S. history students at this school found that three students out of 24 had a computer at home and only one had a vehicle. A similar poll conducted at a comprehensive high school in the area found that 18 out of 23 students had a computer and 12 had their own car. It is fair to say that the students at the school in question are from disadvantaged homes.

This school is a small learning community. Currently 16 teachers occupy one floor of a building. The staff salary scale runs from $30,000 to $70,000 depending on years of experience and level of education. Currently, seven teachers have their Masters' degree. Only three staff members have been teaching for more than 10 years, one for 12 and the other two for 20. The remainder of the staff has been teaching for five years or less. Ethnically, the staff is comprised of four African-Americans and eleven Caucasians. Currently there is a 15:1 teacher to student ratio with an average class size of 17.5.

The curriculum in this learning community is very basic. The goal is simply to graduate students. With a small student body and a correspondingly small

staff, options are limited when it comes to what can be offered. Students are usually behind on credits by the time they get to school, so the goal is to catch them up. To do this, schedules are offered in which they complete a semester's worth of work every nine weeks by spending 100 minutes a day in every class. Students can only take four classes at a time at this rate, but it does allow them to get caught up. Basic, required classes are offered with only a few exceptions.

Graduation rates for the students at this school are not available. Tracking of students who return to their home schools is not allowed, and the students that graduate from the alternative school are still counted with their home schools. The alternative school does not have any official records and therefore in many ways doesn't officially exist. District information, however, is available on the Illinois State Report Card for 2005, where it was reported that the district graduation rate is 89%. Students at the alternative school graduate at a much lower rate. For instance, in the third quarter of the 2005-2006 school year 19 students dropped out during the term and eight graduated. That is fairly typical of a semester at this school. The test scores of students are also unavailable for confidentiality reasons. The district averages a 19.5 on the ACT, 67% on the ISAT, and a 50% on the PSAE. It is clear that students at this school would prove to have lower scores on these tests if statistics were allowed to be compiled for them. During the 2004-2005 PSAE/ACT session 40% of students didn't even show up to school, although methods have been put into place to improve that.

The administrative structure of the school is very simple. A principal is in charge of the program. The other administrator is a dean, who acts as an

assistant principal as well. The dean has three assistants to keep order in the hallways. There is also a counselor, social worker, registrar, four secretaries, and a part-time nurse.

The key thing to understand when looking at this program is that it exists mainly because of this attendance problem. It is mainly funded by a grant that was designed to increase attendance among students. Students are referred to this school when they convince their home schools that they are not going to be successful there, and most of the time they convince them by not going to school consistently. Then they are sent to this school where they are expected to change their ways. The grant stipulates that student attendance will increase from the current rate of 75% to 80% in order to maintain funding.

The school building itself is unique. It is housed in a wing of the old city high school. The building has the character of a well-used school, with evidence of the passing of many years of students, which is both positive and negative. Ancient woodwork and brick facing add to the character of the building while exposed wiring and water damage display the difference between antique and old. When students enter the building, they go up two flights of stairs to get to the school. The school is centered around the old high school library, which currently only houses obsolete text books. There are 11 classrooms, the library, a computer lab, a small cafeteria, and two sets of offices. There is also a 1930s era gymnasium with a warped floor and sparse athletic equipment. Our school has many other drawbacks for our students: there is not a field outside for sports, there is no real hot lunch served, there is no functioning library, and the

temperature is too frigid or too warm inside the classrooms throughout most of the winter. There are some benefits as well, though. The New Deal texture of our building's construction is sharply contrasted by the technology present in our classrooms. Every classroom is lined with 10-15 computers, as well as DVD players, SMART boards, and other educational resources.

It is important to understand the students and the school in order to better understand the problem and the intention of the study. The students at this school often do not feel wanted or respected outside of this school, as displayed by their removals from their home schools. That, combined with their often fragile home lives, does not mix well with an old high school that seems to be as discarded as they have been. The curriculum can be a problem as well, as students are less likely to be able to take classes that interest them at this school because of the size of the staff. The schedule can work against our students as well, as they have to sit through classes that are 15-50 minutes longer than those at their home schools.

The most important information is about the socio-economic background of our students. If students are from a lower economic bracket than the average student in the area, then they are at greater risk of failure. In fact, only 52.5% of the students in the district from economically disadvantaged families graduated in 2005 (Illinois School District, 2005). Truancy is a warning sign and a cause of failure in high school students. Fixing this problem is critical.

Local Context of the Problem

Our school is in the downtown area of a suburb. We pull students from several area high schools, some of which exist in more affluent suburbs. The number of students that come from these areas is very limited, and most of the research focus is on the city. The information in the following paragraphs will be organized with the numbers for the city this school is in first, the area the school pulls from second, often in parentheses.

According to the city chamber of commerce website, the population of this city is 97,000 people (186,000 including the rest of the area). This city is growing rapidly. It is expected to be home to over 160,000 people by the year 2030. The surrounding area is growing at a comparable rate, although some neighboring communities are limiting the number of people that can move into their community. The average family income of this city is $52,605 ($66,180 with surrounding community). It is a city of relatively young age, with a median age of 31 years. The distribution of age favors the young, with 29% of the population age 18 or younger, 18% from 45 to 64, and 9% 65 or older. Ethnically, this city is very diverse. Currently 43% of the citizens are Caucasian, 35% Hispanic, 7% African-American, and 5% other. The community averages are 71% Caucasian, 17% Hispanic, 4% African-American, and 8% other.

This community is very similar to most of America in that the traditional family is as often the exception as the rule with just 54% of the households containing married couples. That number rises slightly with the rest of the community the school is involved with, coming to 65%. This fact, combined with

the economic state of the community, goes a long ways toward explaining some of the problems students face getting to school. The low average income of the area, along with the 8% poverty rate and the rising crime rate are facts that most of the students are aware of more than the staff would like them to be (City, State webpage).

This is a very typical community for this area. It was settled as an agricultural center, became an industrial town, and has since become a suburb. As it transitions into a part of the greater urban community, it is attracting many new jobs. Using special funds recently acquired, the city has been able to construct a new arts center, recreational center, a bike path, as well as clean up its many parks and improve its transit system. This was all done with the idea of attracting new jobs to the area and improving the tax base. On the west side of town alone, 14,000 homes are currently slated for construction. This is an area not unlike much of Midwestern America, recovering from its declining industrial base, but with a lot of reasons to hope for the future (City, State webpage). The goal is to have our students can tap into this hope with successful careers, and the first step is to get them to school.

This school district is one of the largest in the state with over 38,000 students. It is a district recently recovering from financial troubles and many of the programs that were cut in the past are coming back. Of course this is taking place within the context of changing state standards and No Child Left Behind, so the types of programs and their focus is often different than in the past. The mission of the district and this small school is being altered to focus mainly on

getting students to meet standards in reading, writing and mathematics. The district is slightly ahead of the state with the attendance issue, with a 94.6 Attendance Rate and a 1.6 Chronic Truancy Rate as compared to 93.9 and 2.2 (ISD, 2005). This does slightly obscure the problem, though, as the district is so large that it does not really show what the attendance is like locally, and certainly not at this school.

The information on the community and district helps to illuminate the many factors this school faces. This is an extremely diverse community, with many different cultural viewpoints on education to consider. This is a community that is less affluent than those surrounding it, with a higher crime rate and a much higher likelihood that our students come from families that are not traditional. This is a large, complicated district in transition that does not have a significant attendance issue as a whole and is likely to overlook these students. These are all factors that need to be considered when we analyze the problem and attempt to solve it.

National Context of the Problem

Truancy is not a new or even an unrecognized problem in America, and educational research shows that. Since the 1980s educators have been searching for ways to identify and address this problem as it has become rampant (Capps, 2003). However, while research on the attendance issue across America is extensive, research concerning what teachers can do or have done to improve attendance in alternative high schools is rare.

Much of the research on this subject has centered on what communities, parents, and administrators should do to solve this problem. This is certainly an issue that involves many different parties and angles, but most of it is not useful for this study. Additionally, much of the research that gives suggestions as to what teachers can do to improve the situation is aimed at teachers at comprehensive high schools. Some of those ideas are useful for this study, but the situation is different. There are fewer resources, fewer teachers, and far more truant students.

One study done by Vinnie Strickland at the University of Illinois was useful in setting up the rationale for doing a study like this because it showed that poor attendance does in fact produce poor performance. This seems like common sense, but Strickland was reacting to research that had suggested otherwise. At the time of his study (1998), there had not been a great deal of conclusive research on this subject, and there was still much debate on it. After doing a statistical study of high school juniors for two years, he found both times that there was a moderate-to-strong correlation between poor attendance and poor grades. Strickland went on to give several recommendations for solving this problem. These recommendations include ideas such as counselor/mentoring, tutoring, and parental involvement, all of which are in line with our ideas for this study. He does not appear, however, to have actually implemented them.

There is an abundance of research that suggests that truancy is a growing problem in America. The average daily absentee rate in high schools in America is approximately 7% and is generally rising each year (Capps, 2003). That

means that the average student is missing 13 days of school each year, a number that definitely could negatively impact their grades, retention, and success in school. Of course that kind of absenteeism also sets a poor pattern of behavior that could lead to poor job performance in the future for our students (Strickland, 1998).

There is also an abundance of research that suggests that there are things that teachers can do to improve student attendance. The methods suggested are varied, but most argue that teachers must gain rapport and trust relationships with students, engage students in interesting and relevant lesson plans, and positively reinforce good attendance (Kube & Ratigan, 1992; Railsback, 2004; Strickland, 1998). These ideas are repeated in most of the literature on this subject and are in line with our own philosophies on education. They will be the cornerstones of our plan to combat this problem.

This is obviously an important and complex issue. Solving one of the most prevalent issues in education with this study is not easy. What this study is going to do is take the role of two teachers and do as much as possible to get kids to school. The national research on the topic shows that there are many parties and angles on this topic and in order to actually solve it, all need to be involved. For this study, teachers are going to be taking the initiative alone and hope that the communities, parents, administrators and students do the same.

Reflection

It was our belief that this project was going to improve our ability to help our students to succeed, which would also enhance our own goals for

professional development. Effective teachers tie the success of their students to their own success. When students fail, the teacher failed. That was why this project was so important. The number one reason for the failure of our students is their attendance. We needed to improve that in order to be the kind of educators that we strive to be.

However, we did realize that we were not going to bring our average daily attendance from its depths up to compete with national averages. We realized that our role in our students' truancy was comparatively small. We measured our success with this project by the small victories. We were confident that our methods for getting our students to school will reach some of them. Every student that informed us that (s)he came to school that day because of what we did would be a victory, and were confident that we would have many of them.

CHAPTER TWO

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The purpose of this research project was to increase student attendance through teacher interventions. The reason for this focus was the recognition of how poor the attendance had gotten at this school. With the undeniable and documented relationship between attendance and academic achievement, this problem is central to the teachers' role in helping students to succeed. There were approximately 300 students and 17 teachers involved in the problem documentation. The evidence was documented through attendance records, student interviews, teacher interviews, and personal reflections from the teacher researchers. All of this evidence was collected during the 2005-2006 school year and the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year.
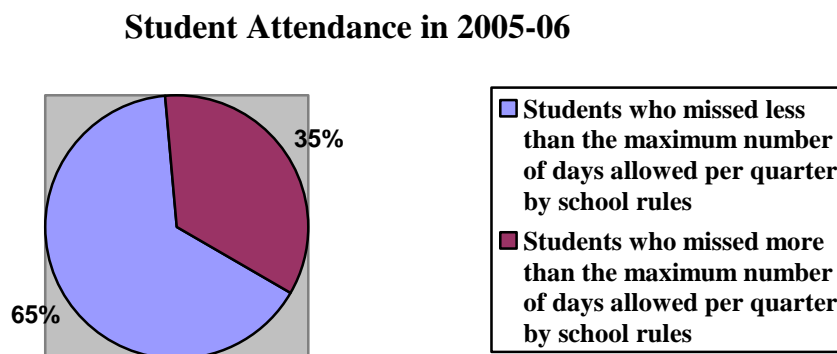
Attendance Records

One of the tools used to document the extent of the problem of poor attendance in the building was a review of the attendance records for the previous school year. This tool was used to find out how many students were missing school, how many days or periods they were missing, and identify any trends in the calendar that correspond to the attendance rates. (See Appendix A).

The attendance records revealed that attendance was a very real problem at this school. The minimum number of school days that a student can miss and still pass, which varied throughout the quarters during the 2005-06 school year,

was exceeded by 102 of the 303 students, or 34% of the entire student body

(See Figure 1). The average daily attendance was 78%. This number did not

include the students who were dropped due to poor attendance, which was

reported as 50 by the Dean of Students.

Figure 1.

Student Attendance in 2005-06

35%

65%

□ Students who missed less than the maximum number of days allowed per quarter by school rules

■ Students who missed more than the maximum number of days allowed per quarter by school rules

The attendance records make it evident that the central issue concerning

student achievement at this school is their attendance. With 22% of the students

truant on a given day and 25% of the students failing at least a class per quarter

due to attendance, it is apparent that this is a problem that needs to be

addressed. (See Figure 1).

Figure 2.

Student Attendance Failures Per Quarter
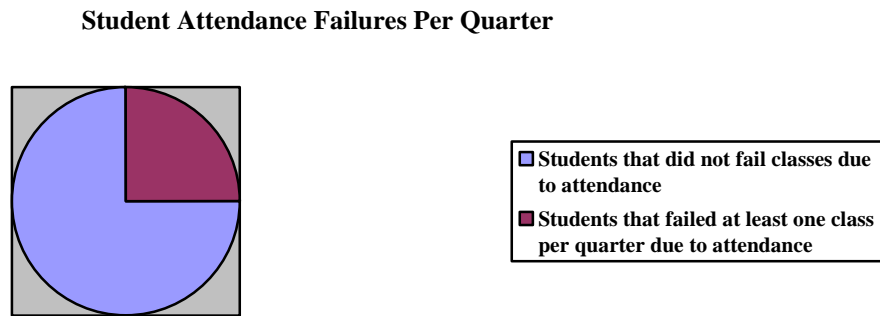
Teacher Survey

      Another tool used to measure student attendance issues at this school was a Likert scale survey given to all 17 teachers in the program. The purpose of this survey was to determine whether the teachers in this school viewed student attendance as a serious problem that affected student achievement in their classes. The response choices were "strongly agree, agree, indifferent, disagree, or strongly disagree". The survey consisted of three questions about attendance and there was a 100% return rate. (See Appendix B).

      The first question on the survey was "Student attendance is a serious problem in my classes". Out of the seventeen teachers surveyed, seven teachers "strongly agreed" that student attendance is a serious problem and nine "agreed" that it was. That brings the total to 94% of teachers in the school that believed that student attendance was a serious problem (See Figure 3).

Figure 3.

**"Student attendance is a serious problem in my classes."**
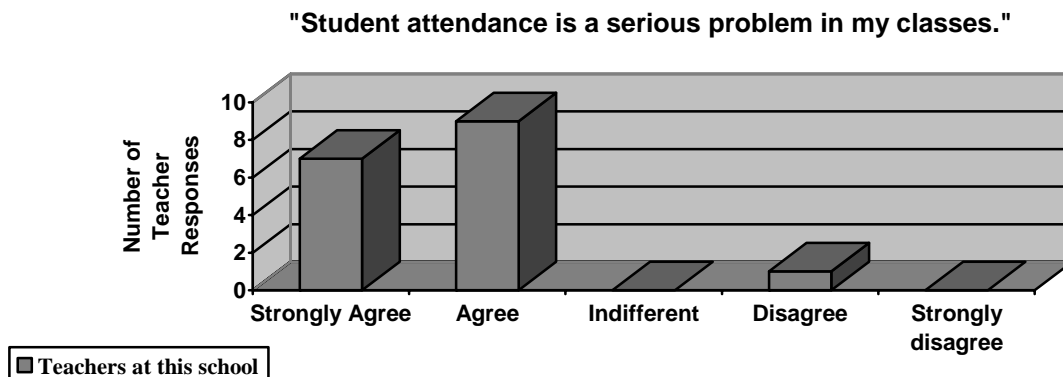
It was apparent that the teachers at this school believed that student

attendance was a serious problem. This relationship was important to establish.

Although it would seem obvious that poor attendance is a problem given the

results of the attendance records, this poll was necessary to show that the

teachers viewed it as a serious problem.

The second question on the survey was "Student attendance negatively

affects the learning atmosphere in my classroom." Every teacher answered the

question and eleven teachers, or 65%, strongly agreed. Five more teachers

registered the more moderate "agree", bringing the total to 16 out of 17, or 94%

of the teachers at this school that believe that attendance is a serious problems

(See Figure 4).

Figure 4.

"Student attendance negatively affects the learning environment in my classes."
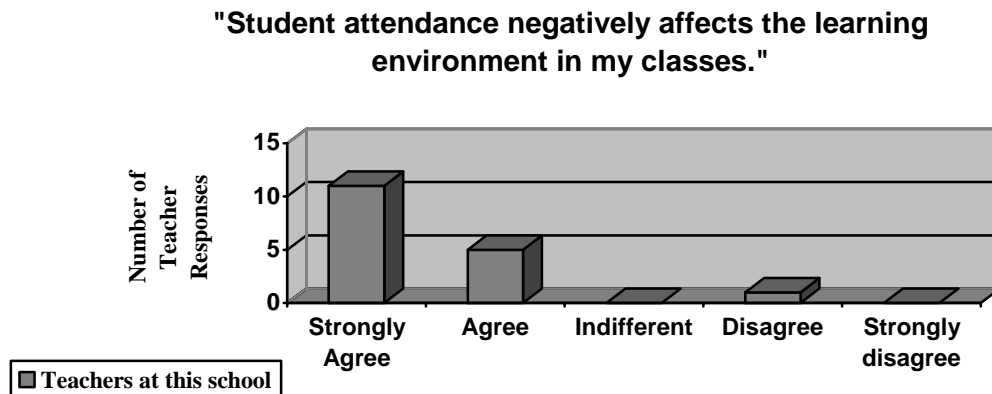
This question was intended by the teacher researchers to establish that poor attendance negatively affects the atmosphere in the classroom. It was their belief that absenteeism not only harms the students who miss school, but their absence can also adversely affect the rest of the students in their classes. It was apparent from the responses that the teachers in this school agree with that hypothesis.

The third and final question on the survey was "Poor attendance is the number one reason that students fail my classes." Every teacher in the school answered this question as well, and the results once again confirmed the seriousness of the problem (See Figure 5).

Figure 5.

"Poor attendance is the number one reason that students fail my classes."
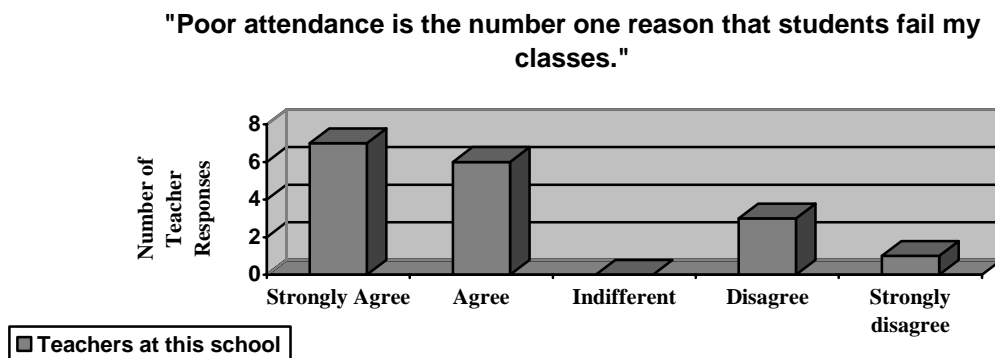
The wording of this question was extreme on purpose. The teacher researchers wanted to establish that this was not only a real problem, but one of the most serious problems facing this school. They thought it was important to make it clear that poor attendance has a strong and direct impact on student failure. The results of the survey do exactly that with seven teachers, or 45%, strongly agreeing that poor attendance is the number one reason that students fail their classes. Six more teachers, or 35%, agree with the statement, making the total 13 teachers, or 76% of the staff that believe that this is the most important factor in student failure.

Student Interviews

Another tool used to document the problem of student absences were interviews conducted with students. The purpose of this tool was to uncover student attitudes, motivations, and viewpoints concerning their attendance. The questions were designed to get the students to share why they miss school, what the results of that are for them academically, and what they believe can be done by teachers to help motivate them (See Appendix C).

The first question (Figure 6) was, "About how many days do you normally miss in a semester?" The purpose of this question was to get the framework for the rest of the interview, to find out if the student being interviewed had poor attendance. The responses to this question suggest that the students at this school often have a great appreciation for how much school they actually miss. One exception to this was the number of students that believed that they normally had perfect attendance. Out of 67 students interviewed, eight students,

or 12% of the total believed that they had perfect attendance. Per the attendance records, the first documentation source for this project, only one student, or less than 1% of the student body, had perfect attendance in the first semester of the 2006-2007 school year. The average number of students that achieve perfection in their attendance through a quarter is 1.25 in the last five semesters.

The discrepancy went further than the number of students that believed that they normally had perfect attendance. Out of the 67 students interviewed, 18 stated that they missed only 1-3 days a semester, or 27% of the total. That is actually only true of 15% of the students. The same number, 18, believed that they only miss 4-6 days a semester. That is actually the average for students at this school, with 52% of the students at the school averaging this many absences a semester. Thirteen students, 19%, stated that they miss between 7-10 days a semester. This is close, with it actually being true of 21% of the students. Finally, ten students, or 15% admitted that they missed more than 10 days of school in a normal semester. This was actually true of about 11% of the students.
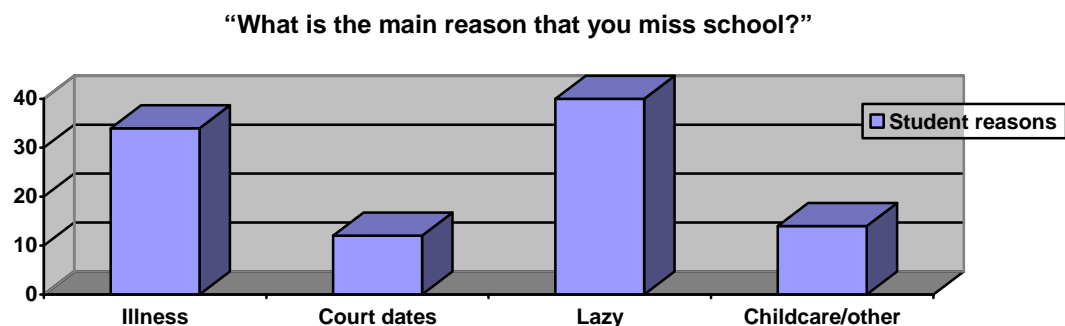
Figure 6.

Student perception of attendance versus the reality
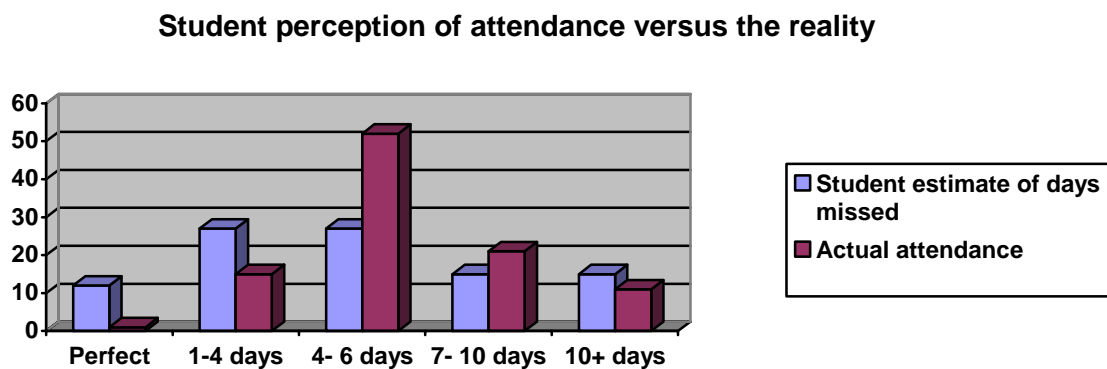
The second question (Figure 7) was, "What is the main reason that you miss school?" This question was included to discover the reasons for the poor attendance among students in this school. The teacher researchers believed that it was important to find out why the students miss school, or at least why they believe that they do. Documenting the personal reasons for the absences of the students in this school, then comparing them to the reasons stated by researchers that have tried interventions for their truant students nationwide was useful in developing interventions that suited this specific institution.

The teacher researchers found that the reasons stated by the interviewed students for missing school varied. 23 students, or 34%, stated that they usually missed because they were ill. Eight students, 12%, said that court dates were the reason, while 27 students, or 40% stated that they were too lazy or disinterested to go to school. Childcare and suspensions were also cited by a few students.

Figure 7.

**"What is the main reason that you miss school?"**

The third question (Figure 8) was, "Do you think that the days that you miss have negatively affected your grade or how much you learned?" The purpose of this question was to document the connection between poor attendance and poor academic performance. Like the teacher surveys, the

teacher researchers felt it was crucial to not only show that students miss school,
but that their absenteeism negatively affects their success.

The answers given by the students to the third question show that many of
them do understand the correlation between attendance and achievement. A
strong majority, 78% of the whole, agreed that poor attendance affects their
grade and learning. Only 19 students disagreed.

Figure 8.

**"Do you think that the days that you miss have negatively affected your
grade or how much you learned?"**
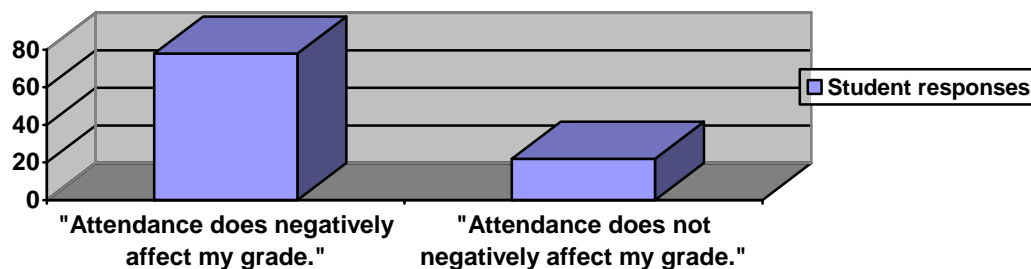
The fourth question (Figure 9) was, "What, if anything, do teachers do to
encourage you to come to school regularly?" This question was included to
document what students felt could be done by a teacher to encourage good
attendance. The teacher researchers felt it was useful to find out what students
believed about teacher interventions.

Students answered this question in a variety of ways. While 37% of the
students said that nothing could be done by teachers to improve their
attendance, 18% stated that grade-based incentives help. Additionally, 28% of
the students replied that making the class fun and interesting would help, and

16% stated that consequences, both positive and negative could have an effect on their attendance.
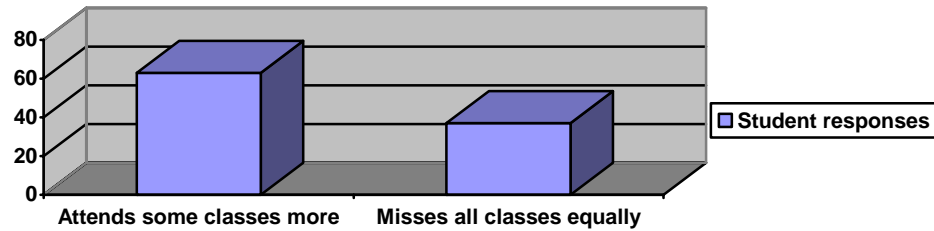
Figure 9.

"What, if anything, do teachers do to encourage you to come to school regularly?"
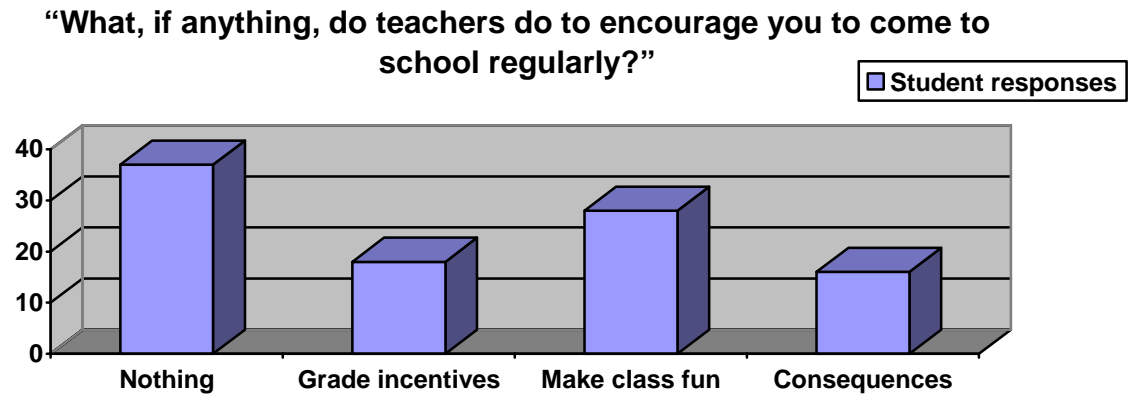
The fifth question (Figure 10) was, "Have there been teachers that you've had in the past whose class you've shown up to more often than others? Why is that?" This question was included so the teacher researchers could discover what teachers have done for the students in this school in the past that has worked. This information was used to develop the action plan for solving the problem of poor student attendance.

The results of this question gave the teacher researchers hope. A majority, 63%, of the students stated that they have shown up for some teachers more than other. The reasons for going to one class more than others were divided between liking the subject, 28%, the teacher, 55%, or the time of day at 7%.
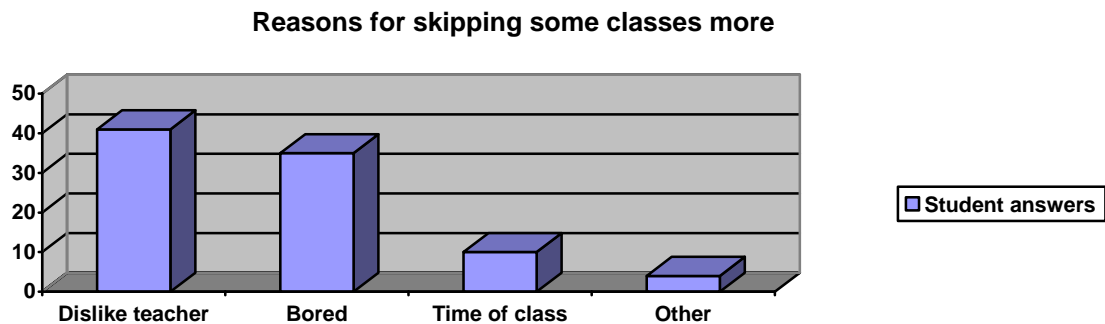
Figure 10.

"Have there been teachers that you've had in the past whose class you've shown up to more often than others? Why is that?"

The sixth question (Figure 11) was, "Have there been teachers whose class you have skipped more often than others? Why is that?" This question, the converse of question five was included to find out what teachers have done wrong in the area of encouraging student attendance. The students' answers to this question were important for the teacher researchers to understand what not to do when solving the issue of poor student attendance.

The results of this question showed that it was the mirror reflection of question five. A similar number 61% stated that they have missed one class more than others. The reasons for missing were varied, with not liking the teacher at 41%, being bored at 35%, the time of the class at 10%, and 4% with other reasons.

Figure 11.

Reasons for skipping some classes more

The seventh question (Figure 12) was, "Do threats, such as those of suspensions make you want to come to school more often?" This question was necessary to determine whether negative reinforcement inspired students to improve their attendance. One of the main focus points of the project is to provide positive and creative reinforcement for good attendance as opposed to negative reinforcement for poor attendance, as the research suggests that negative reinforcement does not have a lasting effect on student performance.

The results of this question showed that negative reinforcement does have an effect on the decision-making of some students. 34% stated that threats, such as suspensions, do improve their attendance. 66% disagreed. One stated, "Threats make me more mad. I don't like being bossed around." Another said, "Suspensions aren't bad. I get a day off without getting in trouble for it."

Figure 12.

"Do threats, such as those of suspensions make you want to come to school more often?"

Figure 12 bar chart: Y-axis 0 to 80 (increments of 20). "Threats help" bar approximately 32; "Threats don't help" bar approximately 65. Legend: Student responses.
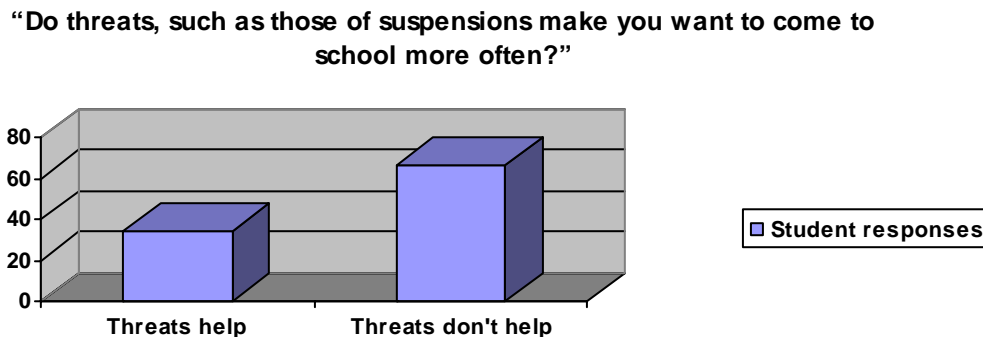
The eighth question (Figure 13) was, "Do planned classroom activities impact whether you come to school regularly?" This question was also included to support the thesis of this project. One of the focal points of the project was to develop interesting and relevant lesson plans with the goal of using them to motivate students to improve their attendance.

A strong majority, 65%, agreed that the activity in the classroom impacts their attendance. Many stated that tests, projects due will make them show up when they don't necessarily want to. Others stated that if the class is doing something that they enjoy, they are more likely to show up for it.

Figure 13.

"Do planned classroom activities impact whether you come to school regularly?" Student responses

Figure 13 bar chart: Y-axis 0 to 80 (increments of 20). "Classroom activities matter" bar approximately 65; "Classroom activities don't matter" bar approximately 33. Legend: Student responses.
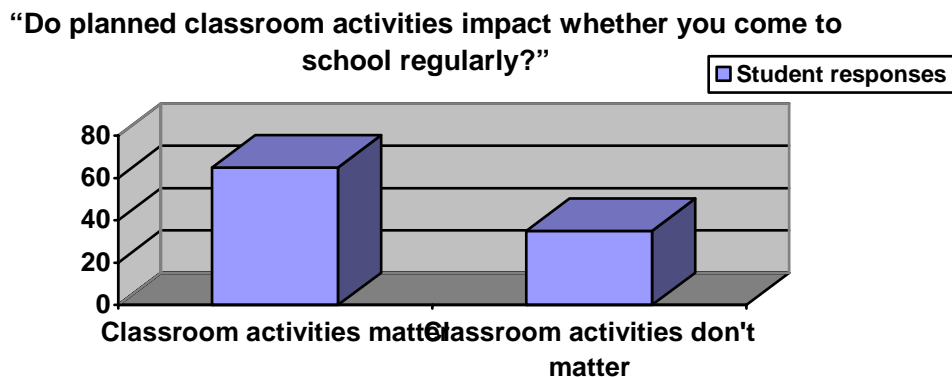
The ninth question (Figure 14) was, "Do positive rewards, such as extra credit or jean days, make you want to come to school more often?" This question was included as the opposite of question seven in that it asked students to articulate the effect of positive rewards on their attendance. This intervention was key to the teacher researchers making progress on improving student attendance, therefore it was important to determine whether students believed that positive rewards had a significant impact.

This question had fairly clear results. A strong majority, 75%, of the students stated that positive rewards did make them want to improve their attendance. The types of rewards preferred by the students were split between extra credit, blue jean Fridays, and field trips.

Figure 14.

"Do positive rewards, such as extra credit or jean days, make you want to come to school more often?"
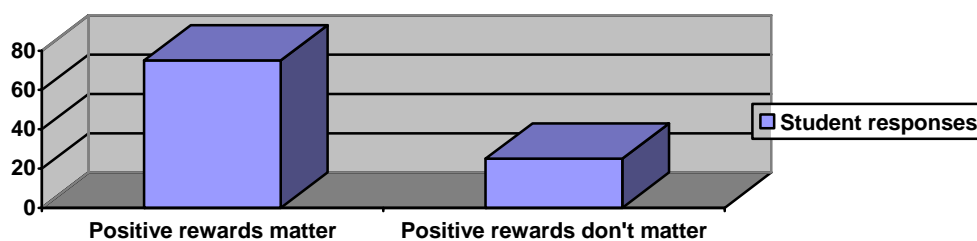
The tenth question (Figure 15) was, "What is your attendance goal for next semester?" This question was included to find out if students have a goal for improving their attendance, or if it was even an important goal for them. The teacher researchers thought that it was important to discover whether students want to improve their attendance and by how much they wished to do it.

In answering this question, many of the students interviewed showed that they wanted to improve their attendance. About a third, 34%, of the students stated that they wanted perfect attendance, and 37% wanted to be within 1-3 days. Finally, 29% wanted to miss the maximum according to the rules, four days of school.

Figure 15.

"What is your attendance goal for next semester?"
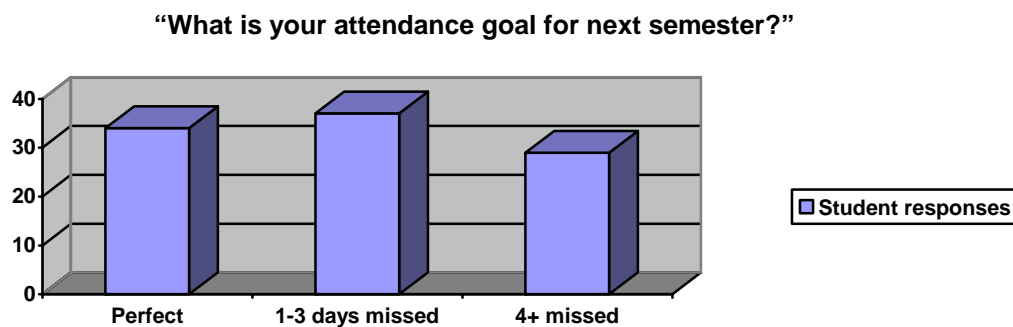
The student interviews were very useful for understanding the motivation of the students in this school for missing school and what they believe can be done about it. The teacher researchers wanted to be sure that the students agreed that positive incentives, positive relationships with teachers, and interesting lesson plans had an effect on the attendance of their students. The teacher researchers believe that is exactly what the interviews showed.

Teacher researcher reflections

The final tool that the teacher researchers used to show that attendance is a serious issue at this school is their own personal reflections on the issue. As staff members at the school that have been struggling with this issue for several years, they thought it would be appropriate to illustrate how they view the issue and how it affects their learning environments.

Teacher A

      The first teacher researcher believed that the best way to illustrate the severity of this issue at this school was to look at the learning environment that is created by poor attendance. The development of social skills is very important in secondary education, and that was a skill that was severely lacking at this school.

      The best way to develop social skills is to have students interact and achieve goals together. The problem with that is that poor attendance makes this difficult. If a group is designated for a long-term assignment, they often have to work fragmented as they alternate days absent. The overall project is affected, and grading is difficult when students are there for varying amounts of days. One answer to long-term projects with unreliable classroom attendance is to have the students that are there do a one day project in small groups. This works well in that everyone that is there has a chance at the same grade, but makes assigning work to absent students difficult.

      This teacher strongly believes that students need to work together to learn and develop skills that are crucial in life, but the poor attendance in the school adversely affected that. It made group work so difficult that the easy choice tends to be abandoning it altogether and assigning individual assignments for the present students to work on, assignments that were also easy to slip into a folder and give to absent students when they returned. Grading and classroom management are easier, the job is less stressful. In fact this teacher believed that many teachers in this school have gone away from group work in response to the

attendance problems. It was obvious to this teacher researcher that attendance was an important issue because it negatively affected the lesson planning. The attendance had to be improved for this school to be successful

Teacher B

The second teacher researcher noticed that attendance is an important issue when planning a content-based lesson. With class periods at 100 minutes apiece, it should have been easy to cover one topic a day and move on to the next or onto an enrichment activity the next day. Unfortunately, this often was not the case.

Too often this teacher had to adapt the lesson plan to include 20 minutes of review so that the absent students have some concept of what was covered. That way the next topic or the activity for the day made sense to everyone. For instance, on one day in the first semester of the 2005-06 school year this teacher covered D-day in World War II. The topic was introduced with a journal question, a 15 minute lecture, and the opening scene of <u>Saving Private Ryan</u> was shown. The plan for the next day was to have the students write a letter to their loved ones as if they were in a boat in the English Channel awaiting the invasion. Unfortunately, 9 students out of 23 were absent when the first day of work was done, so 20 minutes had to be spent reviewing. The absent students could not have done the assignment without the background knowledge, and they deserved a chance to do the work for the day, so classroom time was used to get them caught up.

This happened on a daily basis at this school. If review time wasn't slotted, students would fall behind. If absent students were given other assignments to work on, such as the work that was done while they were gone, they remain behind. Often lessons were simplified if review time wasn't feasible, so the students as a whole accomplished and learned less because of the poor attendance. Additionally, the students understood that if they missed school, adjustments would be made for them to make certain that they didn't fall behind. Therefore missing school wasn't too much of a concern for the students at this school.

If the teachers at this school wished to make challenging lessons that help students to achieve at least at the level of the comprehensive high schools, the attendance had to be improved. Class time could not be used daily on reviewing for absent students and lesson difficulty could not be reduced to cover for them. The students at this school deserved to cover as much material in as in-depth of a manner as students at any other school. If this school was to be successful, the attendance had to be improved.

Summary

The teacher researchers chose the topic of student attendance because it was a problem that they both recognized as being important to the success and failure of their students. After looking at the school attendance records, the results of the teacher survey, the student interviews, and the teacher researcher reflections it was apparent that this problem was pervasive for the entire school.

These sources showed that this problem was one that occurred with great frequency in this school and had serious academic consequences for them.

The attendance records were not shocking because it was obvious to the teacher researchers that poor attendance was an issue before viewing them. If anything, the problem seemed less important after discovering the 78% daily attendance. That number was not too far behind the district average of 92%. Given the student population at this school, 78% seemed like a decent number. What the teacher researchers noticed, however, was that the 22% truancy on a given day has serious consequences. With 50 students being dropped due to poor attendance and 25% of the school body failing at least one class, it was apparent that this absenteeism has negative effects. The number that really stood out to the teacher researchers was the fact that 70 of the students in the school missed more than five days on average every quarter. That suggests that the 22% of students that are truant are not the same few students that tend to miss consistently, as they often are for students at other schools (Garry, 1996).

The teacher survey was a strong connection for establishing that this school not only has an attendance problem, but that it led to a serious academic problem. The questions asked were very simple questions, designed to determine whether the teachers in this school felt that this issue had a negative impact on student performance. The results were conclusive. A strong majority, 94%, of the teachers believed it was a serious problem, and the same percent believed it negatively affected the learning atmosphere. 76% went as far as to say that this is the number one reason that students fail. This evidence strongly

supports the idea that the research in this project is based off of; that poor attendance leads to poor academic performance.

The student interviews showed that the students recognize that they have an attendance problem and want to solve it. With laziness or lack of interest being the most often stated reason for their absence, it was apparent that this problem could be improved. The students admitted that classroom activities, relationships with teachers, and positive incentives can improve their attendance. The interviews showed the teacher researchers that their project was important and their interventions on track.

The reflections from the teacher researchers showed how important the issue was to them. If the school was to be effective, if group work was to be used and lessons are going to be challenging, attendance had to improve. The reflections showed that this issue was central to making this program successful.

The problem documentation that the teacher researchers uncovered for this project clearly shows that this issue was central to the success of the school program. It conclusively showed that students are often absent at this school. It showed that this absenteeism harmed the classroom environment, and hurt their chances of success. It was with these suspicions that the teacher researchers chose to combat this issue in the first place, and the sources serve to validate their concerns and effort.

<div align="center">Probable Causes</div>

The literature on the causes of poor student attendance suggests that this was a very serious and national problem. A growing number of reputable sources

had appeared in recent years showing that this problem was escalating and often had dire consequences for students' futures. These sources cite statistics about the growing problem of truancy and document the negative effects that this absenteeism has had on students as they grow older.

The documentation that supports the fact that this was growing problem in America was extensive. One report estimated that 23% of nine-graders were chronically truant (10 or more days) in 2000-01 (Jordan, 2001). Another report stated that in Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest public school system, an average of 62,000 students, or ten percent of its enrollment, were out of school each day (Garry, 1996). Reports of truancy occur throughout much of the nation. During the 2004-05 school year In New York City, 150,000 of the school system's 1 million public school students were absent on a typical day (Garry, 1996). In Detroit, 40 public school attendance officers investigated 66,440 chronic absenteeism complaints during the 1994-1995 school year. That was an average 1661 students per attendance officer or 9 cases per day (Garry, 1996).

The negative consequences of skipping school have also been reported in recent reports. Some of these consequences were dangerous. In San Diego, California, of 403 male juvenile arrestees tested, those who did not attend school were 18 percent more likely to test positive for drug use than those who did attend (Garry, 1996). Clemson University proclaims that truancy negatively affects businesses as reports of shoplifting in the community increase (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2006).

Poor student attendance is often the first sign of student failure (Strickland, 1998). Student failure often leads to students dropping out. After that, their chances of success decrease dramatically. For instance, a recent report stated that students that drop out of high school have been shown to earn $8,000 a year less than high school graduates on average (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2006). They go on to state, "Poor school attendance may be a consequence of and can almost be guaranteed to perpetuate poverty" (p.76). Another report Laird, Lew, DeBell, Chapman 2003) went beyond the financial repercussions of dropping out of school when it stated that, "Dropouts over the age of 24 report being in worse health than those with a high school diploma" (p.54).

The evidence that poor student attendance was a problem in the area of the country where this project took place was also extensive. The State Board of Education reported that the district had 82 truant, or unexcused absences, a day in 2004-05. An average of 355 students were labeled as chronically truant, meaning they missed 10 percent of the enrolled school day.

With the strong relationship between poor attendance and students dropping out of high school, it was apparent that this research was important in solving a serious state and local problem. In the 2002-03 school year this state graduated 76 percent of its students, with 24 percent dropping out. That made this state the 14th highest state in the country for dropout rates. Ethnicity played a role in this as well, as 43% of Hispanic and 48% of African-American students dropped out, well above the state average (Graduation Project, 2006). The

school in which the research is taking place has a large minority population, making this research very relevant.

The research shows that this was an important problem facing our nation's educators. Truancy has been rising, as has the student dropout rate. Truancy is an early warning of failure, which too often leads to students dropping out of high school. The research shows that the chance of success for students decreases dramatically after dropping out. This was a problem that was particularly important in this area of the country and with the ethnic groups that are strongly represented in this school. It was apparent that if the teachers at this school want to help their students to succeed, they have to find a way to get them to come to school.

CHAPTER 3

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Researchers have been studying ways to increase student attendance for many years. The answers that they have come up with are varied. Many of them focus on what groups other than teachers, such as local law enforcement, parents, or school administrations can do to improve attendance. There are, however, several studies that focus on the teachers' role in truancy reduction. These studies show that mentor relationships, positive incentives and relevant, engaging lesson plans increase student attendance among students (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997).

Contrary to common trends in education, it is suggested that common practices such as negative reinforcement do not improve attendance and the feelings of student anonymity also increase the chance for student absence (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997). The same research suggests that stimulating course work, providing students with a feeling of worth and rewarding positive attendance leads to students being motivated to attend school more regularly. Gullat & Lemoine conclude their research by explaining, "It is the function of the school to become a place where students want to attend, not where they have to attend (23)."

Relevant and Engaging Curriculum

Relevant and engaging curriculum is one key solution to improving student attendance. Research shows that thematic units and portfolio development

improve student attendance. At one alternative program using these methods, 87% of students opted to remain at the alternative school when given the choice (Kiltz, 2003). Another study concludes that one of the critical ways students improve attendance is by the creation of a more focused curriculum, examining students' individual learning styles (Olson, 2006). A third study shows data that students increase their achievement level by as much as 53% when taught by a highly effective teacher (Smink & Reimer, 2005). Additionally, studies suggest that teachers must have high expectations and should maximize learning time (Railsback, 2004).

Mentor Relationships

A second tool for successful student attendance is the building and fostering of mentor relationships. According to Smink and Reimer, "Students report that having a person at school who is checking up on them, gives them a sense that someone cares and motivates them to come to school (Smink & Reimer, 2005)." Other research shows that in school where there is trust, caring and support, there are fewer suspensions and students who are mentored have increased attendance (Railsback, 2004)." In a 2003 article, W.R. Capps concluded, "The most important message to communicate to the truant student is that someone cares whether he or she is in school and is experiencing some degree of success" (Capps, 2003).

Incentives

Studies show that there is a third successful tool for improving student attendance. Incentives provide extrinsic reasons for students to attend school.

One study, after examining attendance policies, had suggestions for improved attendance. Included in these suggestions was that teachers should value and reward good attendance, develop instructional incentives and develop grading practices that incorporate class participation (Kube & Ratigan 1992). As part of an additional study, research implied that rewarding good attendance is paramount in decreasing student truancy (Gullat & Lemoine, 1997).

Project Objectives

As a result of building mentor relationships, creating unique incentives and implementing creative lesson plans, during the period of September, 2006 to January 2007, it was intended that students increase their attendance, as measured by comparative attendance data examined during the pre-action and post-action periods.

The objective of this research was to measure and assess increased student attendance based on the effectiveness of increasing mentor relationships with students, providing students with unique extrinsic incentives and creating relevant curriculum.

Processing Statements

In order to accomplish the goal of increased student attendance the following processes were necessary:

1. Greet students with positive and uplifting statements when students enter the classroom.

2. Meet regularly with students to discuss non-curricular issues.

3. Provide students with extrinsic motivators, including extra credit, food, and privileges related to school functions and activities, or jean days.

4. Give students a chance to redeem themselves after missing a day of school with incremental incentives.

5. Ensure that rewards are linked to action which earned them; responsible students earn more responsibility.

6. Provide students with after school motivators such as weekly after school activities in the school gymnasium.

7. Create relevant and engaging lesson plans that include, but are not limited to, individualized lessons.

Project Action Plan

Both teacher researchers collected baseline-data on attendance data September 18th through September 22nd. From September 25th through October 5th, teacher researchers conducted up to twenty interviews per week with students and five interviews per week with faculty. The teacher researcher recorded interviews with pen and pencil. Responses were confidential and kept locked in a safe file cabinet. Interviews during this time were designed to examine attitudes and ideas regarding attendance before the interventions were introduced.

From October 10th, 2006 through March 20th, 2007, teacher researchers implemented their action research plan. During this time, teachers promoted, developed and created incentives, mentor-relationships and relevant and engaging lessons. From March 19th through March 23rd, each teacher researcher

conducted post-intervention interviews with twenty students per week.

Responses were confidential and kept locked in a safe file cabinet.

Methods of Assessment

During the week of January 22nd through January 26^{th,} 2007, teacher researchers examined attendance data for the time period October 10th, 2006 through January 3rd, 2007. Teacher researchers then examined responses from students interviewed in pre- and post- interviews. After the attendance data was reviewed and student interviews were examined, teacher researchers compared data from September 22nd, 2006 and developed a conclusion regarding the triangulation of data. To complete the triangulation of data, teacher researchers reflected on the results.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The teacher researchers implemented a variety of creative programs and incentives to build relationships with students and increase attendance. Teacher researchers used the classroom as a place to create better relationships, develop relevant lesson plans and to provide additional time outside of actual classroom time to build relationships. Outside of the classroom, teacher researchers implemented in-school suspension programs and positive incentives. Outside of the normal school day, teacher researchers offered motivators, such as after-school open gym activities and incentives, such as cook-outs, lock-ins and cultural events, such as community concerts. All program implementation took place between October and March of the 2006-2007 school year.

One of the most important goals was to build trusting relationships between the teacher and the student. This was accomplished in several ways. The teacher researchers implemented bi-monthly conferences with each student. Each conference generally lasted five minutes apiece. Conference topics ranged from academics to social life to career planning. In addition to career planning discussions during individual conferences, the teacher researchers also implemented additional individual career planning talks with students who showed an interest in that topic. The teacher researchers also greeted students in a positive manner each time they entered the classroom at the beginning of

the class with a warm positive greeting, and open door and good introductory lesson activities, such as playing music.

Another important goal for improving student attendance was to create relevant lesson plans that were appropriately engaging and challenging for the students (Kube & Ratigan, 1992). The curriculum of the economics class, for instance was adapted to focus on the social and economic background of the students in the class. Lessons that had been previously difficult to tie into students' lives were adjusted. For instance, a lesson on the state of race relations at the turn of the century was supported with an article and discussion on the state of race relations in the present. The teacher researchers made certain that each lesson was appropriately challenging, being careful not to underestimate the capabilities of the students (See Appendix D and E).

In addition to classroom mentoring, this action research project involved the teacher researchers spending more time with students outside of class. The teacher researchers provided additional time to build relationships by offering their lunch period for academic, social and career mentoring and teacher researchers donated their 50–minute planning period to spend more time with students on academics. This time allowed teacher researchers to foster trusting relationships and help students achieve more academically.

A large part of building a mentor relationship with students is participating in extracurricular activities. An important extracurricular activity was student council. Teacher Researcher B continued the student council program and

worked to hold elections with school wide participation. These elections happened twice a year and included school wide debates and campaigns

The extra time spent with students also occurred outside of school. To coincide with in-school activities, teacher researchers also held a weekly open gym to promote mentoring and reward good attendance. Students had the opportunity to play basketball, soccer or volleyball for two hours after the school day. This reinforced the time investment that the teacher researchers made and also provided students with a positive option for activities after school in a program that otherwise didn't have any.

Building relationships outside of school was not limited to athletic activities. The teacher researchers sponsored, planned and promoted a twelve-hour lock-in open to the entire school. Activities at the lock-in included: movies, hide and seek, ghost stories, athletic activities, a cookout and other unique activities. These activities were planned with the goal of improving the relationship between students and staff.

Another way to improve student attendance is to stop removing them from school for disciplinary reasons. The teacher researchers found, through student interviews, that students found out-of-school suspensions to be a guilt-free day off, rather than a consequence. The teacher researchers suggested and encouraged the administration to institute an in-school suspension program to keep students in school and remove the perceived positive incentive for negative behavior. Students were relegated to a self-contained room where they served their suspension engaged in academic activities instead of missing school.

A large part of the thesis of this project is that positive incentives for good attendance will improve the attendance of all students. The teacher researchers came up with four main ways to do this. The most tangible award for students with good attendance was the Jean Day incentive. An advertisement created by the student council for this purpose is included in Appendix F. This school has a uniform policy. Students are required to wear dress slacks and polo shirts to school daily. Students with perfect attendance throughout the week, no tardies or absences of any kind, are allowed to wear jeans to school on Fridays (or the last day of the week if there is no school on Friday). This award was one that students often touted in their exit interviews as the reason for their improved attendance.

Additional methods to positively reinforce good attendance were extra-credit, grade adjustments, cookouts and field trips. One teacher researcher offered ten points of extra credit for every two weeks of perfect attendance. The same teacher researcher offered a one-letter grade improvement for any student with perfect attendance at the end of the semester. The other teacher researcher went a step further and gave out automatic A's for perfect attendance.

A favorite method of the teacher researchers to reinforce good attendance was to do something special with the students. This could vary from having a cookout run by the student council where free hamburgers were given to students with good attendance to offering field trips to appropriate students. These field trips were to a history museum, a state capitol, and a community cultural concert. The field trips were only offered to students with good

attendance, the definition of which changed for each trip depending on the time of the semester that the trip occurred.

An ongoing intervention used by Teacher Researcher A involved the monetary reward of students for perfect attendance. Money was collected throughout the semester from students for various disciplinary infractions. For example, when a student used inappropriate language, they were charged 25 cents. At the end of each semester the total was split among students without any absences. During the period of research over 200 dollars was collected and given to three students. Students commented that this incentive was often the main motivator in their quest for perfect attendance.

Perhaps the largest scale example of an intervention used by the teacher researchers was a project that actually used all three aspects of the project plan. On the last day of the third quarter of the school year the teacher researchers helped to organize and choreograph an academic competition for the entire school. Students were chosen by teachers to represent the content areas that they were the best at and organized themselves into teams that included masters of each major area. The students that were chosen were students that had positive relationships with their teachers and their involvement in the competition generally served to further that. The teacher researchers took special care to ensure that the questions that were asked during the competition were relevant and challenging questions, not common trivia. The competition itself was kept fun and engaging for the competitors and the audience. Additionally, the day included a raffle where prizes such as school supplies, novelties and even laptop

computers donated by a local entrepreneur were given to students with good attendance. This day was a big part of the intervention and worked to improve the relationship between staff and students, support the relevance and challenge of our lesson plans and to positively reward good attendance.

Presentation and Analysis of the Results

The results of the intervention were mixed. There was evidence of success in some places, as well evidence that the intervention was not effective. The general attendance records in the school did not show significant improvement when compared to the previous year. The attendance records did support the intervention at a class level, however, as the average daily attendance of some of the classes involved showed improvement. The student interviews and teacher researcher reflections also showed that the interventions were on the right track.

Attendance Records

The attendance records showed that the general attendance at this school actually got worse over the last year, while the attendance in the classes in which the interventions took place remained relatively steady. Students in the school as a whole missed more days and failed more classes because of it. The daily attendance rate per month decreased from January to March in 2006. While 82% of students attended class during the month of January, only 74% attended class during the month of March (Figure 17). Additionally, the attendance records showed that attendance became especially bad on the first day of the school

week. Whether a Monday or the day after a break, students showed up progressively less on that day. The interventions did not reverse that trend.
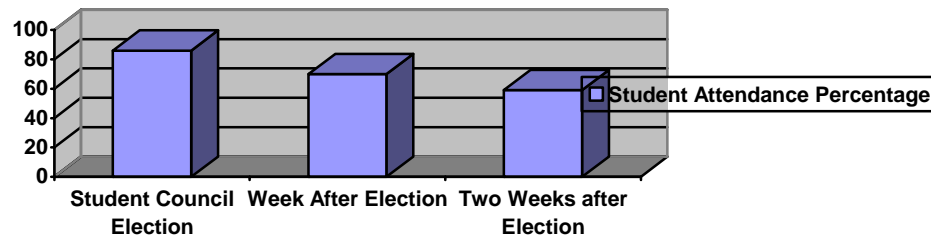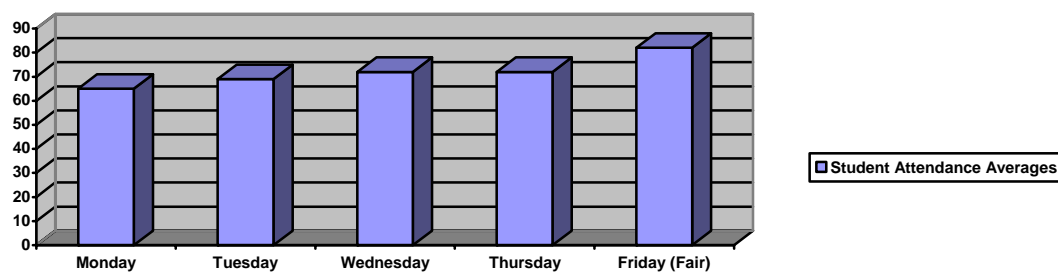
Figure 17.

Attendance patterns
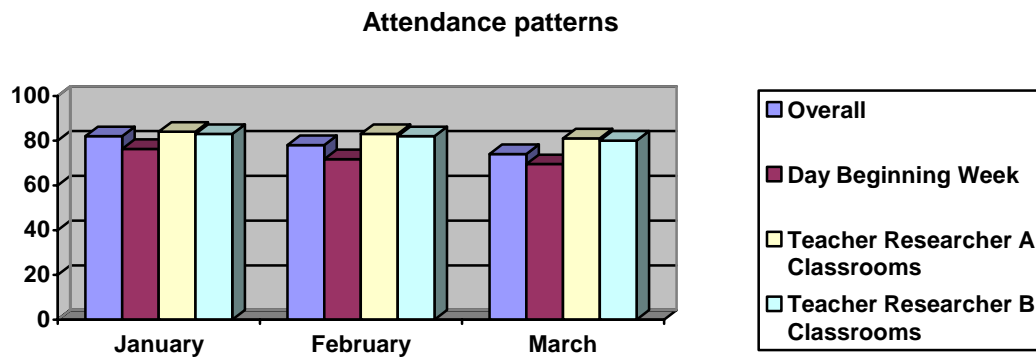
Additionally, some interventions did have a noticeable effect on attendance. Student council elections and the Academic Fair and Bowl both had markedly higher attendance then comparable days. The student council elections were held on a Wednesday and 86% of the students were in school (Figure 18). One week later, 70% of the students were in attendance. Two weeks later 59% of the students were in attendance (a snow day preceded this day). The Academic Fair and Bowl had 82% attendance on a Friday, the final day of the semester. The four days before, no day had attendance higher than 72% including the two final exam days (Figure 19). Both events suggest when students have a reason to attend school, they do. This made the teacher researchers feel that their interventions were having an impact on student behavior.

Figure 18.

Attendance on Wednesdays with Student Council Elections and without
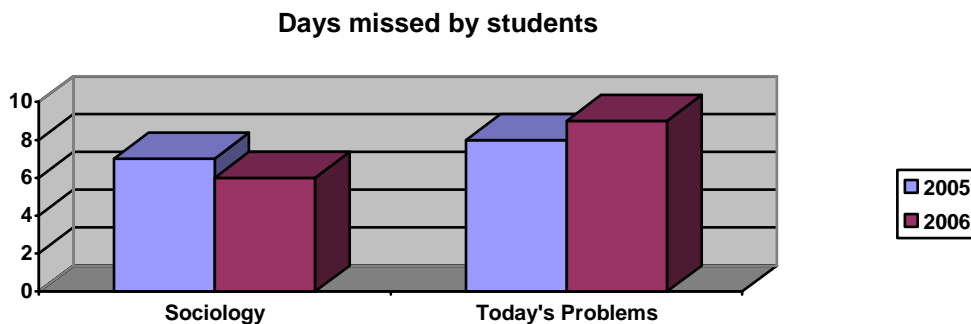

Figure 19.

**Attendance the week of the Academic Fair and Bowl**

The attendance records per class involved did show some improvement. For instance, a civics class that ran from January to March in 2006 missed an average 10 classes apiece. The same class in 2007 only missed five classes apiece (See Figure 20). An economics class and a geography class had similar results, improving by three fewer absences per student.

Figure20.

Days missed by students
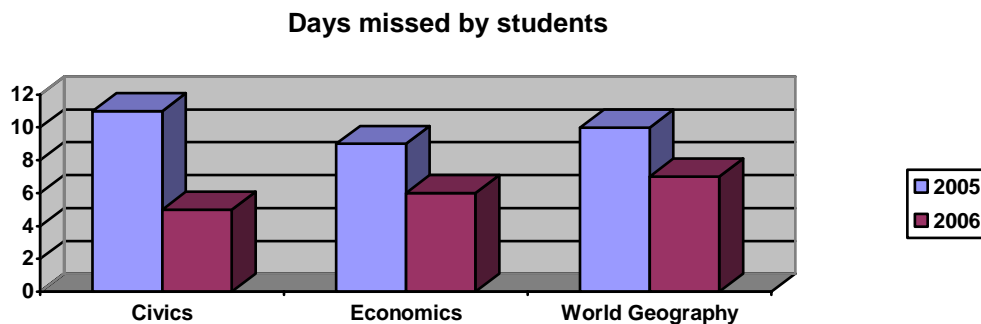
There were, however, classes that did not improve or actually got worse. The classes at the end of the day, sociology and today's problems, stayed about the same. Sociology improved by one fewer absence, today's problems students missed an additional class per term (Figure 21).

Figure 21.

Days missed by students

There was one class that got substantially worse after the intervention. The U.S. history class that meets in the beginning of the day went from 8 absences apiece, which is enough for everyone to fail, to 12 (Figure 22). This class obviously did not benefit from the intervention.

Figure 22.

Days missed by students
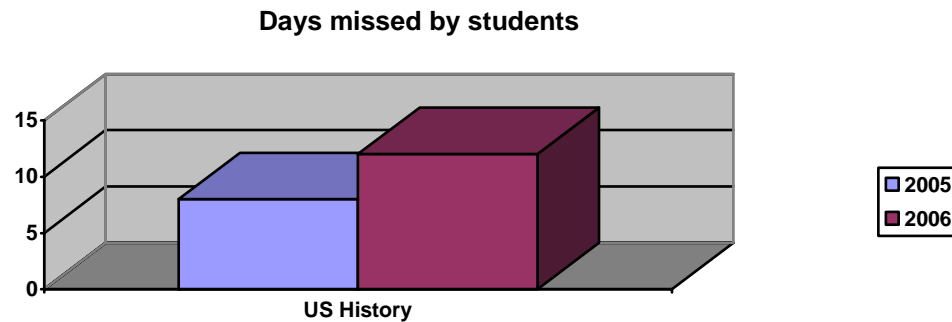
The attendance records show that the school's attendance is still falling, as is the attendance in the classrooms where the interventions took place. This attendance problem is especially evident on the first day of each school week. However, students are showing up to the classrooms with the interventions more often. Although the problem is far from solved, there is some evidence that the teacher researchers are on the right track.

Student Post-Interviews

The post-interviews with the students showed a significant improvement in the area of student attendance. These interviews showed that the interventions made a real impact on the students. Although not every student believed that the interventions made a difference in their behavior, there were enough positive replies to give hope that teachers can improve the attendance of their students.

To determine if the interventions were successful, the teacher researchers repeated the interviews that were used for problem documentation. The students that participated in these interviews were generally the same students as before with some variation due to attendance fluctuations and enrollments changes.

The first question, "About how many days do you normally miss in a semester?" solicited very similar results as the first time it was asked (Figure 23). It was still clear that students were missing more school than they believed. The discrepancy was only slightly less, with the nine students that missed 10 or more days all being aware of it and less students believing that their attendance was perfect.

Figure 23.

**Student perception of attendance versus the reality**
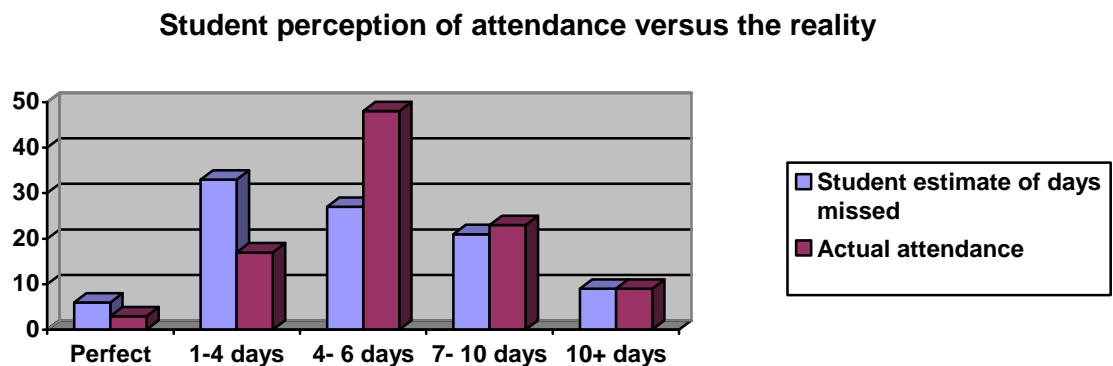
The second question was still, "What is the main reason that you miss school?" Once again, the answers did not change much (Figure 24). Students still reported that they mostly missed school mostly because they were too lazy or disinterested to attend. Illness increased to 40 responses and court dates went down.

Figure 24.

"What is the main reason that you miss school?"
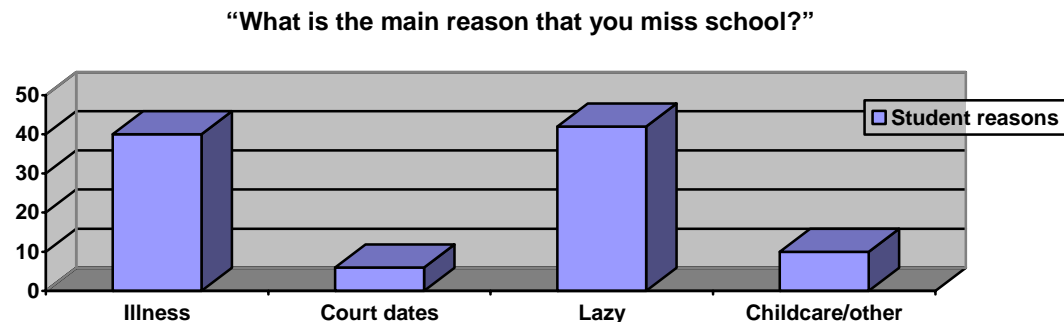
The third question, "Do you think that the days that you miss have negatively affected your grade or how much you learned?" got a little different response in the post interview (Figure 25). More students saw a correlation between their attendance and their grade. Students explained this with comments like, "I failed my first [period] class because I was late everyday." or "I would have passed algebra if I was there more often." It was clear that the students were making more of a connection between their attendance and their academic performance.
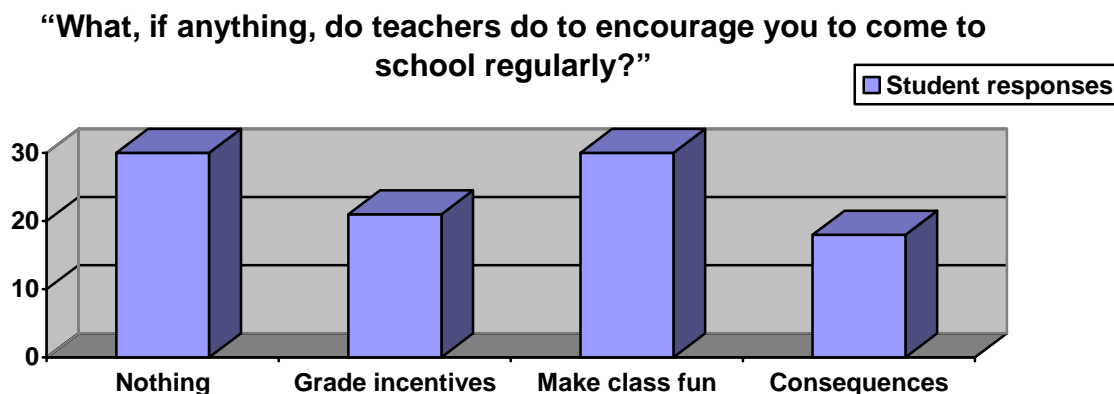
Figure 25.

"Do you think that the days that you miss have negatively affected your grade or how much you learned?"
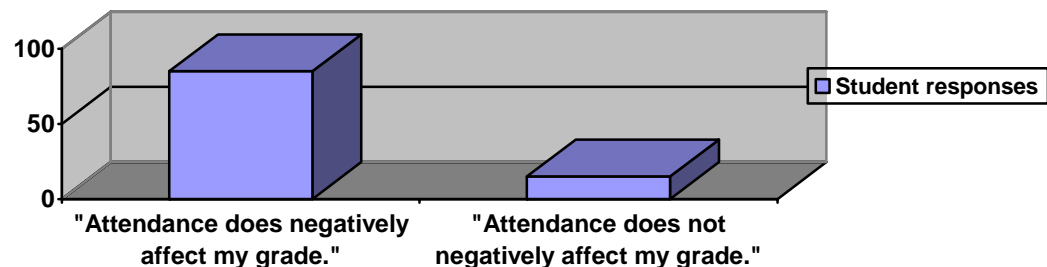
The fourth question, "What, if anything, do teachers do to encourage you to come to school regularly?", showed a significant improvement in that far fewer students believe that nothing can be done by teachers to change their behavior

(Figure 26). The students made comments like, "Sometimes I didn't want to come to school but I wanted the extra credit." Other comments included, "[Teacher A] would have been mad at me if I didn't show up."

Figure 26.

"What, if anything, do teachers do to encourage you to come to school regularly?"

The fifth question, "Have there been teachers that you've had in the past whose class you've shown up to more often than others? Why is that?" was one that gave encouragement to the teacher researchers (Figure 27). With the memory of their experiences in the classes of the teacher researchers fresh, many more students answered this affirmatively. About 81% of the students polled said that they did show up to some teacher's classes more. Only 18 said that it didn't matter.

Figure 27.

**"Have there been teachers that you've had in the past whose class you've shown up to more often than others? Why is that?"**
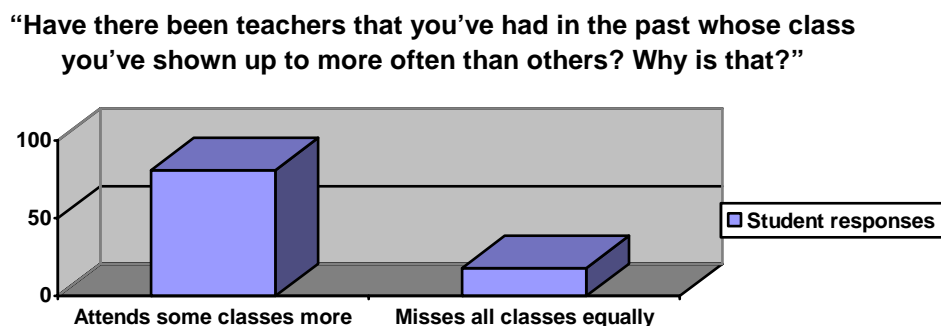
The sixth question, the converse of the fifth, "Have there been teachers whose class you have skipped more often than others? Why is that?", was also much different in the post-interview (Figure 28). Although students did often state that there were some classes that were skipped more than others, now time of day was the deciding factor, not dislike of teacher.

Figure 28.

Reasons for skipping some classes more
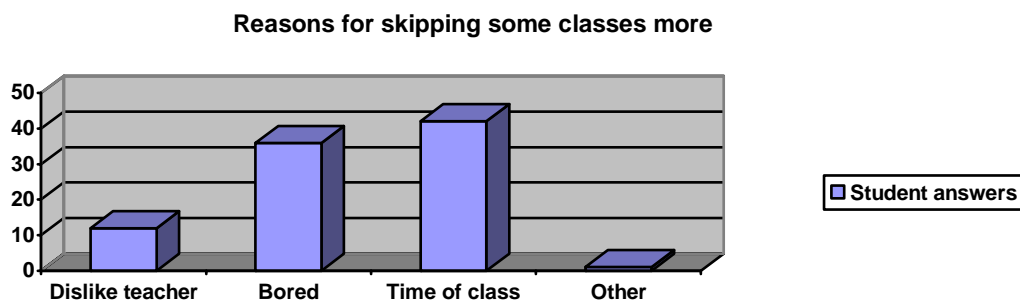

The seventh question in the post-interview survey was, "Do threats, such as those of suspensions make you want to come to school more often?" The students seemed to be even less afraid of suspensions this time (perhaps due to the in-school suspension policy begun that year). It was still clear that the students were not often influenced by negative consequences (Figure 29).

Figure 29.

"Do threats, such as those of suspensions make you want to come to school more often?"

The eighth question was, "Do planned classroom activities impact whether you come to school regularly?" The results were almost the same as before the intervention (Figure 30). Most students still replied that the lesson plans influence their decisions about attendance.

Figure 30.

"Do planned classroom activities impact whether you come to school regularly?"
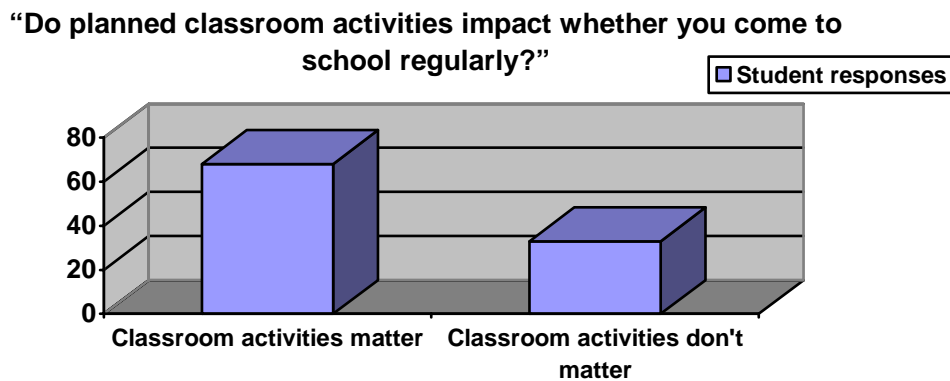
The ninth question concerned positive rewards. The results of this question did not fall into the expectations of the project (Figure 31). Fewer students stated that they mattered this time then before the interventions. It was an even 75% in the affirmative before the project. That was down to about 68% after the intervention.

"Do positive rewards, such as extra credit or jean days, make you want to come to school more often?"
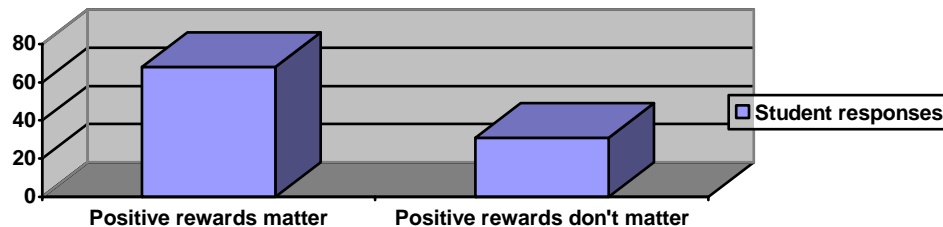
The tenth and final question was the attendance goal for each student (Figure 32). This was interesting for the teacher researchers. A much higher number of students were optimistic about their attendance in the upcoming term than were in the pre-intervention interview. This was especially and noticeably true of the students that intend to miss enough to fail, or more than four days a term. There were 29 of these students the first time and only 14 the final time.

Figure 32.

"What is your attendance goal for next semester?"
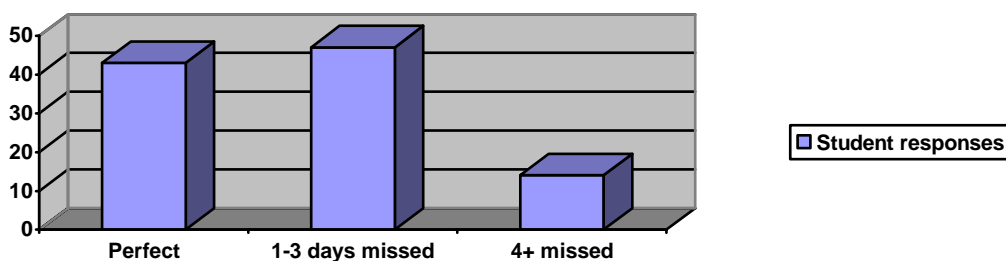
The student post-intervention interviews were very useful in determining whether the interventions succeeded or not. Although the results did not conclusively show that the interventions worked the way the teacher researchers had hoped, they did show very significant progress. The students polled showed

more recognition that certain lessons and certain teachers can improve their attendance. They did not respond more favorably to the positive incentives, but they did aim to continue improving their attendance. The student interviews showed that the students were more aware of their own attendance problems, were more open to solutions, and were more hopeful for the future.

Teacher researcher reflections

The reflections of the teacher researchers are mixed. Both teacher researchers feel the interventions were generally successful. However, both feel that more interventions are needed and a greater initiative from the school is paramount. The lack of success in certain areas correlated to the lack of a school-wide mandate to implement the action-research initiatives.

Teacher Researcher A felt the mentoring and lesson planning was very successful. These were the two areas that the teacher researchers had the most control over because they were classroom activities and represented the general motivations of the teacher researchers. This is not to suggest that the incentive-based action research was ineffective. The incentive-based portion of the research was more susceptible to outside factors that generally took away from the success of the intervention, rather than add to it.

Overall, student attendance did improve and on at least six separate occasions, unrelated to the intervention activities, students suggested that the initiatives implemented were direct motivators for their decision to either come to school in the morning or not leave school during the school day.

Teacher Researcher B believed that one of the biggest factors affecting this project and any improvement attempt at this school was the large student turnover. The goal of the project was important and the interventions were appropriate, but change is difficult when the students come and go so quickly.

The first hour U.S. history class mentioned earlier illustrated the problem well. Those students were new to the class and mostly new to the school. Getting them to come to school with better lesson-planning and better student/staff relationships takes time. Students did not respond to the lessons or the attempts at establishing mentorship bonds right away. They had long-established habits preconceived notions to dispel first. As time went by, more of the students came around, but many had already missed so many days that they could not pass.

The positive incentives do not work by themselves. There were weeks when only 12-15 students qualified to wear jeans on Friday by having perfect attendance Monday-Thursday. Many students were too accustomed to failure to care about extra credit. Teacher Researcher A's financial rewards worked for the good students, but once a student acquired a few absences and could no longer qualify, they did little. This was the same for Teacher Researcher B's grade improvement rewards. It was clear that positive incentives do not make an enormous difference. Some students modified their behavior, most wanted the rewards, but without being combined successfully with the other two ideas, they did not do much.

As the students in Teacher Researcher B's class spent more time with the teacher learning the subjects, progress became apparent. Even if not every

student was able to modify his/her behavior, more and more of them at least wanted to. That was an important step, but it takes time and patience to get there. Unfortunately, that often means that a student will have to fail a few classes before realizing what needs to be done.

The interventions used in this project can be very successful in improving attendance, but they are not easy and they do not work overnight. Teacher Researcher B really believed that a larger increase in attendance would happen, but was disappointed. However, with the progress made with several individual students it was obvious that the idea was sound. With the turnover at this school and in many high schools, addressing this problem successfully will take extraordinary patience and perseverance. Luckily, those are attributes that many teachers share.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The teacher researchers feel that the intervention was a success despite not seeing a significant improvement in student attendance at the school. While teacher researchers felt that within their classrooms actions implemented were successful, school wide initiatives were less so. Teacher researchers felt that building mentoring relationships and developing engaging and content-driven lesson plans were more successful than school-wide incentives such as "Jean Day." Although the intentions of incentives are well meaning and positive they are often empty without the relationships built between teachers and students and curricular rigor.

Recommendations for schools with poor student attendance include a one-year teacher as learner program designed specifically to increase student attendance through mentoring relationships and lesson plans. The program will focus on giving teachers the tools they need to foster strong relationships with students and create lesson plans that are both engaging and relevant. If the program is successful teachers will be prepared to better address the needs of students with poor attendance. This must be a school-wide mandate and be supported by the administration and the staff.

This proposed teacher program would have two phases. Phase One would address all new teachers. New teachers would be required to go through a rigorous one year workshop where they would have a mentor who has previously completed training and completed the requirements of the program. New teachers would provide staff with continuous lesson plans that reinforce the engaging and relevant themes of program and create at least three new incentives to boost student attendance. Also, new teachers would be required to observe at least three teachers, six times during the year and write an observation detailing the ideas that they learned and how they used them in their classroom. At the conclusion of their one year program new teachers would give a one day workshop and present their new ideas and teach the other staff members what they have learned.

In this proposed plan, teachers with more than a year of experience would go through an annual one year workshop program and host a workshop similar to the first year teachers. However, veteran teachers would not have to do frequent

observations, but would instead provide a yearly case-study teaching faculty about tools used to benefit one student and increase that student's attendance,

Phase Two of this proposed plan would reward teachers for improving student attendance. A comprehensive committee would examine student attendance at a school wide level, School wide improvement will be met with rewards. Staff will work collectively and as attendance improves the staff will learn and continue to strive to build a better school environment, with improved student attendance as the altruistic incentive learning from success and failure.

Together, Phase One and Phase Two of this proposed plan would make a significant improvement to the overall attendance in the school. If the school makes a commitment to address this issue and supports new staff members in their efforts, there could begin to be improvement.

Absent a school wide initiative, there are still interventions that individual teachers can implement in their own classrooms to improve student attendance. This project has shown that if teachers are creative and properly motivated they can make students want to show up for school more often. Appendix G has a checklist of recommendations for the classroom teacher.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Attendance Records

APPENDIX A

Attendance Records

APPENDIX A

Attendance Records

APPENDIX B

Teacher survey

1. Student attendance is a serious problem in my classes

Strongly Agree   Agree   Indifferent   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

2. Student attendance negatively affects the learning atmosphere in my

classroom.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Indifferent   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

3. Poor attendance is the number one reason that students fail my classes.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Indifferent   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions for Student Subjects
These interviews will be completely anonymous.

1. About how many days do you normally miss in a semester?

2. What is the main reason that you miss school?

3. Do you think that the days that you miss have negatively affected your grade or how much you learned?

4. What, if anything, do teachers do to encourage you to come to school regularly?

5. Have there been teachers that you've had in the past whose class you've shown up to more often than others? Why is that?

6. Have there been teachers whose class you have skipped more often than others? Why is that?

7. Do threats, such as those of suspensions, make you want to come to school more often?

8. Do planned classroom activities impact whether you come to school regularly?

9. Do positive rewards, such as extra credit or jean days, make you want to come to school more often?

10. What is your attendance goal for next semester?

APPENDIX D

Teacher Researcher A lesson plan example

Lesson Plan for Economics

<u>**Rationale**</u>

This lesson continues the examination of the book, "*Nickel and Dimed*" as the primary tool for critical examination of Economics. This section, the eighth installment of the book, examines the experience of a worker cleaning the homes of the wealthy in Maine during the spring of 2000. This text is essential for Economic understanding because of the relevancy for students at Gifford Street High School. It addresses most Economics standards over the entire text. Those not covered are reinforced with project assessments at intervals throughout the semester.

<u>**Goals and Objectives**</u>

1. Students will write critically, answering provocative questions about both a daily question and a song.

2. Students will establish knowledge of sections 4-6, by taking a fifteen minute quiz.

3. Students will read section 8.

4. Students will reflect on section 8, answering questions at the conclusion of the section.

5. Students will define important terms**.**

6. Students will work on preparing and developing project #1 when their reading work has concluded.

Content/Materials

       Students will use handout with all materials included. Students will also use the computer, internet and Economics textbook to work on project #1.

Activities

    9:22-9:32

       Listen to song, "Galveston Bay" (Lyrics included) and answer questions on page 1 and 2 of daily handout.

    9:32-9:37

       Discuss answers to song and questions.

    9:37-10:37

       Read section 8, pages 81-95 in textbook, **Nickel and Dimed.**

    10:37-10:52

       Answer questions from section 8.

    10:52-11:02

       Work on project #1, if enough time is left.

Assessment

    Students will have three assessments.

1. They will have a quiz that will be an immediate assessment. The quiz will be November 21.

2. They will have project's due that reinforce the reading throughout the semester. This will be an intermediate assessment. These projects are due, November 22, December 19 and January 10, 11 or 12 (Final Date).

3. At the conclusion of the semester they will have a final book exam that

    will be the third, long-term assessment for the class.

Contingency Plan

Students have project #1 to work on and complete. If computers malfunction, they can work out of their economics book.

APPENDIX E

Teacher Researcher B lesson plan example

Class: U.S. history

Objective: Students will learn about the issues and candidates in the 1912 election.

Materials needed: Paper, pencils, computer, construction paper, markers.

Method:
1) Anticipatory journal question

      Students will enter the classroom aware that they need to immediately begin working on the journal question on the board. The question will read, "Who would you have voted for in the 1912 election. Why?" Students will be given 10 minutest to write the answer down based on what they've learned about the candidates. These answers will be shared briefly with the rest of the class for about 5 minutes.

2) Research, electioneering activity

      At this point the class will diverge into two paths. On one path will be the four students that are unlucky enough to have the top four grades in class. These four students will be given the opportunity to choose the candidate they want to be (best grade picks first). Their task will then be to research their candidate and prepare for the debates.

      The other path will include the rest of the class. In groups of two they are to pick a candidate and make a campaign poster for him.

The poster needs to include reasons to vote for that candidate as well as reasons not to vote for the others.

The students will be given about 30 minutes to do this.

3) Debate preparation

On the second day the students will pick up where they left off. The candidates will use the computers to continue to research their positions and prepare to answer questions the way they would have been in 1912. The rest of the class is to prepare three questions for each of the candidates. 20 minutes

4) Debate

It is now time to debate! The candidates take their seats. I introduce myself as the moderator and welcome everyone. The candidates get a chance to make an opening statement. They are encouraged to speak realistically (Wilson uses scholastic language, Roosevelt is nasal and makes hunting analogies, Debs is a rabble-rouser, etc). Then they field questions from the class. The students are all encouraged to ask each candidate at least one question. They have to introduce themselves, including making up the newspaper they represent, and they have to address the candidates by their proper titles. The debate lasts until the   students are out of questions, at which point the candidates are given two minutes apiece for their closing statements. 40 minutes

5) Election

> After the debate, I will hold a secret ballot election. I post the
>
> results on the board or overhead. The winning candidate
>
> receives extra credit. 10 minutes

6) Discussion

> The class will then discuss the results.   We will talk about the
>
> differences between the four candidates. We will talk about what is
>
> important to them in an election. And we will discuss the actual
>
> results of the 1912 election and how it compared to our results. 20
>
> minutes

7) Exit journal

> In either the last few minutes of class or the first few minutes of the
>
> next day's class the students will be asked to write down their
>
> thoughts on the activity. They are encouraged to share what they
>
> learned and how it helped them understand life and politics in the
>
> early 20th century. 10 minutes

APPENDIX F

<u>Wear Jeans on Fridays!</u>

<u>Any student with perfect attendance during the school week can wear jeans to school on Friday!</u>

<u>Lists of qualified students will be posted on the wall near the entrance on Thursday!</u>

<u>Take advantage of this opportunity and have a great week!</u>

APPENDIX G

Checklist for Individual Teachers to Improve their Attendance in their Classrooms

Criteria	Absent	Present
Good attendance is positively rewarded.		
Students have a clean slate periodically.		
Teacher endeavors to build relationship with students.		
Lesson plans are appropriately challenging.		
Relevance of lesson plan is obvious.		
Lesson plan is fun and engaging.		