

School Counselors Improving Attendance

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The purpose of this study was to determine the outcomes of interventions implemented at a middle school located in Southern United States. The school has been experiencing an increase in attendance rate. For the purpose of this study, the attendance rate is defined as the percentage of students who missed 15 or more days of school during the school year. The attendance rate is important in schools because it is one of the areas in which schools are evaluated when looking at Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Improving the attendance rate will not only assist the school with making AYP, but students will also improve academically. Improving student attendance also helps them to feel a sense of connection to the school and decrease the dropout rate.

Importance of Attendance

It is important for schools to monitor attendance due to the many areas

that attendance impacts. Educational leaders are familiar with the impact of attendance and included it in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. As a result of NCLB, schools must make AYP, which includes attendance guidelines. It is evident that poor attendance negatively impacts other areas of a student's academic success. If a student has poor attendance, it contributes to low achievement (Gottfried, 2009; Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). This includes a negative impact in different subject areas, including math (Balfanz, & Byrnes, 2006) and reading (Gottfried, 2010). This also contributes to a student not passing exams (Nichols, 2003), which leads to not being promoted (Neild, & Balfanz, 2006). When a student has poor attendance and they return back to the class, they feel alienated from teachers and other peers (Johnson, 2005). With

attendance impacting academic success, it is important for schools to implement programs that focus on improving attendance.

Factors that Impact Attendance

There are multiple factors that impact attendance. Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001) identified four categories that truancy fall into: family factors, school factors, economic influences and student variables. Family factors include lack of parental guidance, poverty, drug abuse or domestic violence in the home. Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, and Walsh (2003) agree that family factors such as abuse and neglect can impact student attendance, along with physical and mental health disorders. Physical and mental health disorders, lack of social competence, and, drug use and abuse can be classified as student variables (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). School factors include the attitudes of the teacher, other students, and administration and the inability to meet the needs of different learning styles (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001; Eneau & Dafinoiu, 2009). Economic influences include single parent homes, parents with multiple jobs, lack of affordable childcare or transportation, and financial difficulties (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, & Walsh, 2003). School counselors and administrators want to be aware of and address these factors to prevent or decrease absenteeism. This may also include collaborating with community resources to help improve student attendance (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent; Chang & Romero, 2008).

Attendance Interventions

Administrators, teachers, community leaders, and other stakeholders are aware of the impact attendance has on the academic achievement of students. Numerous interventions have been implemented in schools to help improve attendance. This study will focus on interventions implemented by school counselors. These interventions include a school monitoring program, incentive programs, and counseling interventions.

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Abstract

This study examined the outcomes of interventions used to address attendance issues at a middle school located in the Southern United States. School-wide interventions were implemented to address absenteeism of all students and individual interventions were implemented to address absenteeism with targeted students. An explanation of each intervention is provided. Post-intervention data indicated that the attendance rate improved. For the purpose of this study, the attendance rate is defined as the percentage of students who missed 15 or more days of school during the school year.

The Check & Connect program was developed to increase student engagement in school (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003), which will decrease the risk of a student dropping out of school. The Check & Connect program is data-driven and focuses on a monitor building a relationship with the student and monitoring the student's grades, attendance, and suspensions (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson). Check & Connect received positive effectiveness ratings from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) What Works Clearinghouse (IES, 2006). The report supports the studies conducted with elementary (Lehr, Hansen, & Christenson, 2004) and high school students (Sinclair & Kaibel, 2002). After implementing the Check & Connect program at the elementary schools for 2 years, 86% of the students participating in the program were getting to school on time and were successfully engaged in school (Lehr, Hansen, & Christenson, 2004). When the Check & Connect program was implemented with high school students, 65% of the students participating in the program had no incidents of failing courses and were successfully engaged in school (Sinclair & Kaibel).

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Incentive programs have also been used to improve attendance in schools. The Perfect Pals program was implemented by an elementary school counselor, to increase student attendance (Peek, 2009). The Perfect Pals program monitored students' attendance monthly and if they achieved perfect attendance during the previous month, they were invited to a lunch and received a small treat during the lunch. The students' pictures were also placed on a bulletin board designated for the Perfect Pals program. The school also developed an Attendance Review Team to monitor attendance at the school. The number of student absent 15 or more days during the previous school year decreased after the implementation of the Perfect Pals program and the Attendance Review Team.

Operation SCATT is another incentive program implemented by a school counselor to address poor attendance (Cole, 2011). Similar to the Check & Connect program, Operation SCATT included a daily check-in system, with the addition of a rewards program to help students improve attendance. This program targeted ten elementary students who missed seven to fourteen absences during the first semester. Seventy percent of the students who participated in the program improved attendance during the second semester.

Bickelhaupt (2011) is another school counselor who implemented a program that addressed poor attendance with incentives. In contrast to the aforementioned programs, this program also added a counseling component. The researcher used small group counseling to help students improve attendance. This program targeted six elementary students who had 10 or more unexcused absences from the previous school year. There was a 12% increase in attendance for the students who participated in the program.

Similar to Bickelhaupt's (2011) study, other research suggests that counseling can help students improve school attendance. Enea and Dafinoiu (2009) use motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling to help decrease truancy rates for high school aged students. Nineteen students were in the experimental group, which met eight times over a four month period. Truancy rates for the experimental group decreased 61%, while there was not a decrease in the truancy rates for the control group.

METHOD

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to address the high attendance rate at the school. The school's second indicator for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) was the attendance rate. The attendance rate for the previous school year (2007-2008) was 26.9%. This meant 26.9% of the students were absent from school more than 15 days. The principal was concerned with the high attendance rate and asked the author to develop and implement a program to address this issue. After researching literature on what has been successfully implemented in other schools, a program was developed to decrease the attendance rate. The program focused on multiple interventions that focused on incentives, group counseling, and individual counseling.

Participants

The program was implemented at an urban middle school in the Southern United States. The participants included the entire school population of 470 students. The student population was composed of African-American students (97%) and other students (3%). Twenty-one percent of the students were identified as Students With Disabilities (SWD) and ninety-nine percent of the students were identified as Economically Disadvantaged (ED). The author collected attendance data from the previous school year, from the computer program used by the school system. The attendance data was monitored weekly and reported to the principal.



Procedures

After reviewing the attendance data from the previous school year, I started researching outcome studies to identify interventions used in other schools to address attendance issues. After reviewing the literature, I identified two different ways that I was going to address the attendance issue: incentives and individual counseling. Incentives would be used to motivate students individually and at each grade level. Individual counseling would be used as an intervention for students who missed five or more days the current school year. Each intervention was used throughout the year to help students stay on track.

Most of the research identified incentives as an effective way to improve attendance. After reviewing the literature, it was decided to offer incentives to students individually and as a grade level. Students were involved in the planning process to ensure that the incentives would be well received. The effectiveness of the program depended upon its impact on the students. Students were informed that their attendance would be monitored on a regular basis and incentives would be given out bi-weekly to all the students who were present every day and not tardy for the previous two weeks. The Monday following the end of each two weeks, the grade level team leader would be given a printout of the students with perfect attendance. The team then identifies which teacher(s) would monitor the students with perfect attendance and how the other students would be divided amongst the other teachers. The incentives included game

day, movies and popcorn, homework pass, treats in the cafeteria, treats in a bag, and ice cream. Each incentive was alternated 2-3 times throughout the year. The resources needed for the incentives were provided by local partners in education.

In addition to individual incentives, students also received incentives as a grade level. Every Monday morning, during the morning announcements, the school counselor would announce the results of attendance for each grade level for the previous week.

The number of students absent for each grade level during the previous week was announced. The grade level with the least amount of students absent during the previous week won the grade level competition for the week. The results of the grade level competition were also posted throughout the school, each week, to show students the number of students absent for each grade level. The grade level at the end of the year with the least amount of absences won a pizza party.

Students were also given quarterly incentives to improve attendance. The quarterly incentives included pizza, ice cream, movie gift certificates, restaurant gift certificates, department store gift certificates, and mp3 players. All students who had perfect attendance for the quarter were given pizza and ice cream. The gift certificates and mp3 players were given out after a drawing

from all the students with perfect attendance each quarter. The students who won the drawings were recognized on the morning announcements. In addition to all the previous incentives, students with perfect attendance for the entire school year were recognized on the morning announcements and their names were placed in a drawing for gift cards and bikes. The gift cards for the yearly perfect attendance were valued at \$50.

Another intervention was used to address students individually. When a student missed five days of school, the student was referred to the counselor. The counselor met with the students on a weekly basis for eight weeks. The counselor met with these students individually to identify reasons for absences and discuss ways to avoid future absences. Students were assisted in identifying the negative impact of absenteeism and taught the steps in the decision-making process.

Results

Overall, the interventions seemed beneficial and helped to improve the attendance rate. When comparing the attendance rate for 2008 to the attendance rate for 2007, there was a decrease in the attendance rate. At the end of the 2006- 2007 school year, before any interventions were implemented, the attendance rate was 26.9% for the entire student body, 39.2% for SWD, and 26.5% for ED. At the end of the 2007-2008 school year, after the interventions were implemented, the attendance rate was 19.6% for the entire student body, 27.3% for SWD, and 19.2% for ED. That data shows a decrease in attendance rate for all three areas.

Limitations

There are some limitations to the present study. The study did not address the impact of the individual counseling sessions and the school wide incentives separately. Knowing the impact of each intervention would help school counselors identify the best interventions to implement in their counseling programs. Additionally, the administrators, teachers, and students did not evaluate the program.

The administrators and teachers verbally informed the counselor of the positive impact of the program, but there was not a formal evaluation of the program. Perception data and feedback about the effectiveness of the program would help to make improvements in the implementation of the program in future years.

Implications

The roles of the professional school counselor at the school were changed during this school year, which allowed more time for the school counselor to focus on guidance duties. The school counselor did not have to serve as the testing coordinator or the 504 coordinator during the 2007-2008 school year. These were duties that were given to the school counselor the previous school year. The success of the program be attributed to the collaboration and support of the administrator



during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program. The relationship between the school counselor and administrator built the foundation for the school counselor to implement a counseling and incentive program that improved school wide attendance.

Future Research

It is imperative that school counselors work with administrators, parents, and teachers to implement counseling programs that focus on improving student attendance. Future research on different counseling theories that work best with students, to improve attendance is needed. It is also recommended that counselors conduct research to see what counseling interventions would work best with students depending on the reason for absenteeism. Finally, school counselors want to increase research that not only focuses on the impact of counseling interventions on attendance, but also the impact of counseling interventions on grades, test scores, and behavior.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study demonstrate that using incentives and individual counseling approaches to improve student attendance was effective. The use of incentives to reward students individually and as a grade level positively impacted attendance. When comparing the 2006-2007 attendance rate of 26% to the 2007-2008 attendance rate of 19%, it is evident that the attendance rate dropped seven points due to the implementation of new interventions. The review of the literature shows that absenteeism is mainly caused by four different factors: family factors, school factors, economic influences and student variables. When students' attendance declines, it negatively impacts promotion rates, exam scores, achievement in math and reading, and relationship with peers and teachers. Early identification and intervention of these factors will not only improve attendance rate, but it will positively impact student achievement and overall school success.

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Sisters of Nia: A Social Justice Advocacy Intervention for School Counselors in Their Work with Adolescent African American Females

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Abstract

Adolescent African American females face multiple obstacles that hinder their educational success. High school completion and college attendance rates remain lower for African American females than those for other racial and gender groups, while pregnancy rates for African American teens are higher. Group work holds promise for meeting the developmental needs of adolescent African American females, particularly group work focused on cultural and ethnic relevance. School counselors are called by their professional organizations to respond to the needs of disempowered students through social justice advocacy interventions (ASCA, 2005). The program of group work *Sisters of Nia* (Belgrave et al., 2004) uses cultural and ethnic values to empower adolescent African American female students. *Sisters of Nia* is introduced as an advocacy intervention at the student/client level of the ACA Advocacy Competencies. Implications for further school counseling advocacy efforts at the school/community/systems and public/social/political levels are included.

Lauryn is an eighth grade, African American student in middle school in a small city in Georgia. After her parents divorced, Lauryn and her mother moved to their current home from an urban setting in New York where Lauryn's classes and her neighborhood were very racially and socioeconomically diverse. Her new school is predominately White and middle class and is far from the closest urban area. Lauryn misses her extended family in New York and has been reluctant to become involved in activities at her new school. With her grades suffering, Lauryn has begun to skip school, and when she is in class, finds herself at odds with classmates. In the past month, Lauryn has received three discipline referrals regarding behaviors with