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Finding Support & Significance at School- Program Evaluation of a Chronic Absenteeism Reduction Initiative

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Finding Support & Significance at School- Program Evaluation of a Chronic Absenteeism Reduction Initiative

Abstract

The impact of chronic absenteeism is devastating nationally as it can lead to poor academic achievement, increased dropout rates, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Balfanz & Cornfeld, 2016). The purpose of this program evaluation is to examine the attendance program at large suburban high school in the southeast United States. This program evaluation uses longitudinal data over six years, retrieved from the Department of Education's website, to show the impact of the attendance program on rates of absenteeism, specifically the percentage of students that were absent 21 or more days. Findings show that the chronic absenteeism prevention program was successful as it lowered the percentage of students that were absent 21 or more days from 13.42% in the 2013-2014 academic school year to 5.00% in the 2018-2019 academic school year.

Keywords

chronic absenteeism, at-risk youth, dropout prevention, student engagement

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EFFECTIVENESS OF A CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REDUCTION INITIATIVE

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing ten percent or more of the school year regardless of whether the student's absences are excused or unexcused (Antworth, 2008; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Faria et al., 2017; My Brother's Keeper 2016 Progress Report, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, "eighteen percent of all high school students are chronically absent" (2016, p. 7). Students who are chronically absent could ultimately face more obstacles, including lower academic achievement, which may eventually lead to dropping out of school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz, 2016; Balkis et al., 2016; My Brother's Keeper 2016 Progress Report). Poor attendance can be confounded when race and socioeconomic status are considered (Balfanz, 2016; My Brother's Keeper 2016 Progress Report; Ready, 2010). When individuals are affected by multiple factors for marginalization, their academic performance can suffer even more. Educators and policymakers cannot truly understand achievement gaps or efforts to close them without considering chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an attendance program ("Finish Strong") at a large suburban high school in Florida.

Background

Students cannot learn the intended curriculum if they are not in school. Chronic absenteeism is devastating because it can lead to poor academic achievement, increased dropout rates, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Balfanz & Cornfeld, 2016; Smerillo et al., 2017). Missing 10% of instructional time in the first year of high school is an excellent indicator of eventual dropping out or failure to graduate, as is poor attendance during the first 20 school days of any academic period (Indiana Department of Education, 2015, para. 3). Thus excessive absences need to be detected as quickly as possible, and strategies incorporated to improve attendance.

Reporting of Absences in Florida Public Schools

Although Florida does not track or report the number of students who are chronically absent according to the literature definition (missing 10% or more of the school year, which in Florida consists of 180 school days), districts do monitor and report to the Florida Department of Education the number of students

who have 21 or more absences, and the Department reports that figure by both district and school. During the 2018-2019 school year, 11.3% of Florida students were absent 21 or more total days, according to the Florida Department of Education (2020). (The current study includes references to both criteria for chronic absenteeism, 10% of the school year and 21 or more absences.) In addition to absenteeism being a negative influence on academic achievement, other risk factors such as socioeconomic status and race can increase the achievement gap.

Strategies to Reduce Absenteeism

Absenteeism reduction strategies should, and generally do, involve a combination of monitoring, prevention, and intervention strategies (Indiana Department of Education, 2015). The strategies described here form the basis for the practices of the Finish Strong program at Surf High School (a pseudonym for the high school under study here).

Identify Contributors to Poor Attendance

There are many reasons for poor attendance and chronic absenteeism (Balfanz, 2016; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Some students have health issues such as asthma or migraines. In recent years, depression or anxiety related absences have increased (Balfanz, 2016). Some parents keep their older children home to watch sick younger children, because the parent(s) must work to support the family (Balfanz, 2016; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Additionally, some students just do not like school and either the parent(s) do not force the child to go to school or the child pretends to go but never gets there (Balfanz, 2016; Duckworth & DeJung, 1986). Furthermore, poor attendance can be compounded when race and socioeconomic status are considered (Balfanz, 2016; My Brother's Keeper 2016 Progress Report, 2016; Ready, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016):

...Chronic absenteeism is an equity issue, and it is particularly prevalent among students who are low-income, students of color, students with disabilities, students who are highly mobile, and/or juvenile justice-involved youth--in other words, those who already tend to face significant challenges and for whom school is particularly beneficial. (para. 5)

Develop Rapport with Students

Students who have good relationships with caring adults have fewer absences and better academic achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). One of the biggest catalysts for increasing attendance is to create a positive school climate and build rapport with students so that students come to know that staff really do care about what they do and how they are doing.

Monitor Attendance on a Regular Basis

Faria et al. (2017) found that monitoring attendance by running regular absence reports and following up with discussions with both the student and a parent can dramatically reduce the number of absentee students. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) suggested that both chronic absences and regular attendance be tracked so that interventions may occur in a timely fashion. Sinclair et al. (2005) described a weekly monitoring program to improve student engagement called “Check & Connect”. According to the authors, “high school students with emotional or behavioral disabilities who participated in ‘Check & Connect’ were significantly less likely to drop out” and “attended school with greater consistency relative to their peers” (p. 10).

Weekly attendance reports allow excessive absences to be caught early and students who are most at risk of chronic absenteeism to be identified. As the number of accumulated absences increases throughout the year, reports should be run even more frequently (Indiana Department of Education, 2015). Such weekly monitoring is a lot of work, but catching attendance issues early allows time to help the student rectify the situation prior to irreparable harm being done to the student’s academics, and helps to prevent the student from becoming chronically absent.

Develop Accountability Systems

If warranted, the student should be given a consequence for absenteeism such as detention. An administrator or attendance dean should check on the student, and the student should know that someone will be checking on them. It is equally important to encourage and praise any progress made (Head & Jamieson, 2006; Won et al., 2017).

Educate Students and Parents

It is imperative to clearly communicate attendance policies to both students and their parents (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; McConnell & Kubina, 2014; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Skinner, 2014). By engaging parents, schools can form

a positive relationship with the family to help combat poor attendance (Florida Department of Education, 2020; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Although there are many reasons for frequent absences, informing students and parents of school policies can help reduce unexcused absences. Weekly attendance reports allow for a timely discussion with any students who have excessive absences and with their families, to determine the cause(s) of the excessive absences and the best course of action to rectify the situation. If there is a medical issue, resources can be found or the student can be given an application for a medical waiver. If it is an ongoing medical issue, the parent(s) and district can decide the best course of action. Most importantly, a systematic process opens dialogue with the student so that if there is a need or concern, they may find it easier to discuss it.

Implement Community Mentoring

In addition to rapport with teachers and staff, community mentors can also improve attendance and thus decrease the dropout rate (Cabus & Witte, 2015). A caring adult who spends time with a potentially truant student can spend the time needed to understand the student's issues and such a relationship outside of the classroom may feel more genuine to the student (Zalaznick, 2015). A mentoring program can connect volunteers with students with excessive absences to help determine the root of the students' absenteeism and help students get the resources needed to stay in school (Skola & Williamson, 2012; Zalaznick, 2015). For example, My Brother's Keeper Success Mentor Initiative is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Education and key institutions to match school-linked mentors with students with records of chronic absenteeism in 30 communities, to help students connect with someone who cares about them and improve their school attendance and achievement (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Evaluate School Policy and Practices

Freeman et al. (2016) found that implementing intervention systems could help improve student attendance and discipline outcomes. Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is a three-tiered system that offers increasing support to students based on individual needs. Tier 1, consisting of effective core instruction aligned with content standards, consists basically of good pedagogical practices and is applied universally to all students. Tier 2, consisting of supplemental services and specialized resources, is applied to the 10-15% of students who need greater support. Tier 3 is applied to the 1-5% of students who need the greatest and most intensive amount of targeted support (Freeman et al., 2016; Kickboard Blog, 2020).

When this system is implemented with fidelity, schools should expect to see better student outcomes over two or more years (Freeman et al., 2016; Sugai et al., 2012).

Additionally, administrators should be conscientious about creating a positive, warm and inviting school climate. This can be nourished by modeling with staff the desired behavior that the administrative team would want staff to use in their interactions with students. By prioritizing the establishment of a positive school climate, administrators can create a school environment that students want to be a part of, thus improving attendance, decreasing discipline problems, and increasing student achievement.

Surf High School

The district of which Surf High School is a part is one of 67 districts in Florida. It has been rated first in the state in total school accountability points and is one of only two Florida districts with an A grade each year since 2010. The high school graduation rate in 2019 for the district was 94.3%, compared to the state average of 86.9%, and the dropout rate was 1.8%, compared to the state average of 3.4%.

In the 2019-2020 school year, the student population in the district was reported as 76.1% White, 6.9% Black or African American, 9.0% Hispanic or Latino, 4.9% Asian, and 3.0% two or more races. In the district 51% of the students were male and 49% were female. There were 15.4% students with disabilities, and 25% of the students qualified for free/reduced price lunch. The graduation rate was 93.3%. The number of students suspended one or more times was 5.9% and the number of students below 90% attendance was 10.0%.

Table 1 shows that 10.0% of students in the district had less than 90% attendance during the 2019-2020 school year, and that high schools in the district had the highest rate of absenteeism. This observation is consistent with data from the 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016), which showed that chronic absenteeism is highest in high school.

Table 1

District Students Below 90% Attendance (2018-2019 School Year)

	# Students Enrolled	% Students < 90% Attendance
District	39,724	10.0%
Elementary School	17,358	5.9%
Middle School	9,703	7.7%
High School	12,510	17.7%

Surf High School enrolled 2,291 students in 2018-2019, reported as 82% White, 9% Black or African American, 4% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian, and 1% two or more races. At Surf, 52% of the students were male and 48% were female; Students with disabilities accounted for 3% of the total, and 8% qualified for free/reduced price lunch. The graduation rate was 98%, the number of students suspended one or more times was 7%, and the number below 90% attendance was 6.5%. Absenteeism rates are reported in the Results and Analysis section that follows.

The Finish Strong Initiative

At Surf High School, the Attendance Dean position was created in fall 2014, and the Dean of Students was assigned this additional responsibility. The new Attendance Dean created the Finish Strong initiative to reduce chronic absenteeism. The program included strategies recommended in the literature, including monitoring student absences regularly, building positive supportive relationships with both students and their parents, clearly communicating attendance policies, helping families receive necessary resources, assigning students mentors, and finally issuing consequences when needed to students who do not comply with the attendance policies. In addition, Surf High School's program included two unique aspects, enhancements to timely monitoring and notification and to staff visibility.

Timely Monitoring and Notification

Surf High School follows all state and district attendance policies, which concern excused and unexcused absences, acceptable excuses, planned absences, make-up work, truancy, tardiness, notification of the Department of Motor Vehicles (Florida mandates driver's license ineligibility for minors who fail to satisfy attendance requirements), release from school, exemptions, and illness.

The state of Florida (Enforcement of School Attendance, 2011) mandates the following steps for monitoring and responding to excessive absences:

- Parent must justify every absence.
- Schools must respond in a timely manner to include contacting the home for every unexcused absence and every absence for which the reasons are unknown.
- Identify potential patterns of non-attendance:
 - Student has 5 unexcused absences or absences for which the reasons are unknown.
 - Within a calendar month the student has 10 unexcused absences or absences for which the reasons are unknown.

- If there is a pattern of nonattendance the child is referred to a child study team and a parent meeting is scheduled. If the parent meeting is not successful, an attendance contract is made.

The district policy includes the following additional steps:

- Students are required to turn in absence notes within two days of returning to school.
- Letters are generated and sent home 7 days after the trigger dates.

In addition to state and district requirements, the Finish Strong Initiative at Surf High School incorporated the following monitoring and notification strategies:

- Attendance reports were generated *every day* to determine which students had accumulated 5, 10, or 15 unexcused absences, and which students had accumulated 15 total (excused and unexcused) absences.
- Staff printed absence letters that had been triggered two days prior, allowing students two days to turn in their notes. Staff then mailed one copy of each letter home to the guardian and kept one copy for reference. Staff also called or emailed each student's guardian to inform the guardian that the student must turn in absence notes within two days of returning back to school, restate the consequences the student faced for not attending, and offer resources to the student or parent if needed to help the student attend.
- Each student who had accumulated 5, 10, or 15 unexcused absences or 15 total absences was called to the Attendance Dean's office. The Attendance Dean used this face to face time to emphasize the importance of valid absence notes, discern the reason or reasons for the excessive absences, and again to identify and offer additional resources to help the student attend.
- Consequences for absences, such as parent conferences or detention, were issued as needed.

Staff Visibility

A second unique practice in Surf High School's Finish Strong program was the visibility of the Attendance Dean at sporting events, in the cafeteria, and at extracurricular activities. She also visited as many classrooms as possible throughout the day, in order to know what specific students were learning in class, what was due, or if there were an upcoming project, quiz, or test, giving her something to talk with the student about in the hallway or at lunch.

Methodology

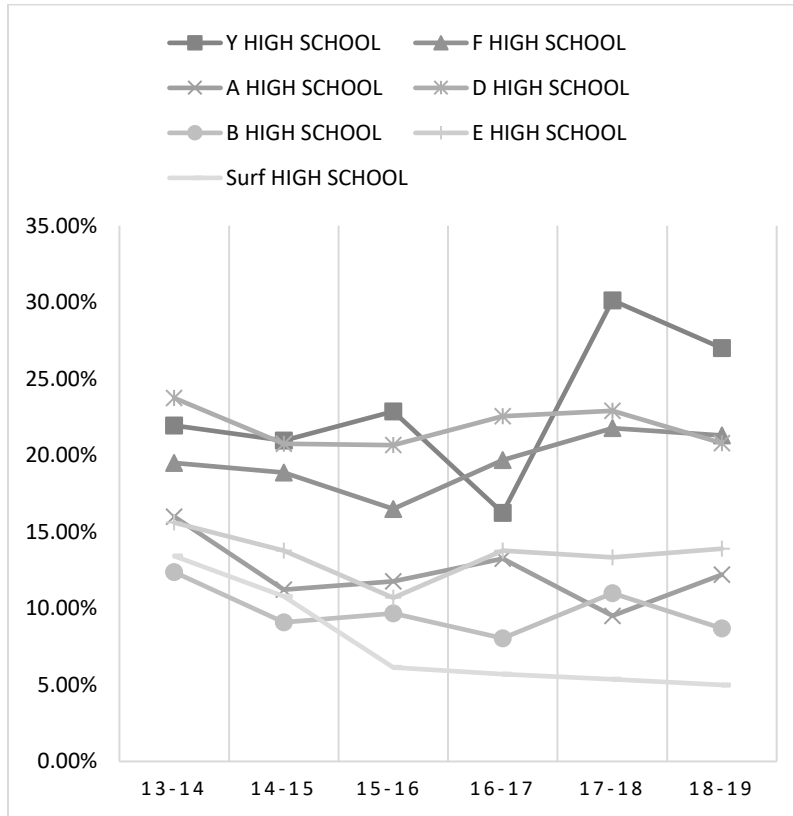
The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Finish Strong attendance program at Surf High School. This evaluation used publicly available longitudinal data to determine the impact of the program on rates of absenteeism, specifically on the percentage of students who were absent 21 or more days. The data set included students' grade levels; percentage who were absent 21 or more days by district, gender, and race; number of discipline referrals; and eligibility for free or reduced lunch status. The data were used to compare the attendance trends at Surf High School with the trends of the other high schools in the district, which did not have similar programs.

Results and Analysis

Figure 1 is a comparison of absenteeism over time in the seven high schools in the district of which Surf High School is a part. Surf High School showed a precipitous drop in the percentage of students with excessive absences within the first two years of the Finish Strong program, from 13.42% in 2013-14 (before the implementation of the program) to 6.15% in 2015-16. In just two years the percentage of excessively absent students was cut to less than half of what it was before the creation of the Attendance Dean role, with further reductions over the next three years. No other high school in the district experienced a similar decline.

By the end of the study period, Surf High School had the lowest percentage of students with 21 or more absences of the seven high schools in the district. Clearly the drop in excessive absences at Surf High School was not a district trend. Similarly, comparisons of demographic data with that of the other schools in the district showed that the reduction appeared to be uninfluenced by enrollment, suspension rate, and minority population (data not shown). The changes appeared to be the result of the additional attendance policies and practices at Surf High School.

Figure 1
Students in District High Schools with 21 or More Absences, 2013-14 to 2018-19



Conclusions and Recommendations

Students who are chronically absent may ultimately face obstacles that include lower academic achievement and dropping out of school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz, 2016; Balkis et al., 2016; My Brother’s Keeper 2016 Progress Report, 2016). The goal of monitoring student attendance is to intervene and minimize the number of student absences, using a combination of strategies including monitoring student absences regularly, building positive supportive relationships with both students and their parents, clearly communicating attendance policies, helping families receive necessary resources, assigning students mentors, and issuing consequences when needed to students who do not comply with attendance policies.

The interventions embedded in Surf High School’s Finish Strong Initiative were intended to improve attendance by enhancing monitoring and notification

steps and by personalizing contact with parents and students, and these practices, which are not mentioned in the literature, may warrant further consideration by other practitioners. The first has to do with the timeliness of notifications to parents. Through the district automated system, letters to parents are sent seven days after the trigger date of when the student reaches five, ten, or 15 unexcused, or 15 total, absences. This seven-day notification window stands in stark contrast to the one to three day notification window at Surf. This shorter notification window allows communication with parents to be more timely and thus more effective. In addition to the letter, staff talk to a parent either by email or phone, making it easier to find out about medical, disciplinary, or other issues of which the school should be aware and for which it could take remedial action.

A second practice at Surf High School that is not described in the literature is the visibility of the Attendance Dean at sporting events, in the cafeteria, at extracurricular activities, and in classrooms. Through frequent appearances, this staff member is able to increase rapport with students, develop more insight into the students' lives, and build trust when dealing with attendance issues. Such personal attention takes a lot of work and practitioners must be intentional in strategizing their use of time.

If state, district, and school administrators could impress on their teachers how important it is to address excessive absences or at least report them to the attendance dean, students who are struggling could be helped even sooner. Additionally, if all teachers, coaches and club sponsors would take the time to build rapport with students, students might make a more concerted effort to attend school. It makes a difference when one person cares, but a much larger difference when several people care.

In addition, school leadership should evaluate the success of attendance programs such as described in this study. It would serve school districts to educate leadership teams about the abundant interventions found in the literature and provide examples such as this program to support changes in practice. Finally, school administrators should be encouraged to experiment with enhancements such as those described here in order to increase the effectiveness of absenteeism reduction programs.

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