Getting Students to School: Using Family and Community Involvement to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

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Abstract

Students who are chronically absent are more likely than other students to drop out of school. Many schools have goals to reduce student truancy and to help chronically absent students attend school regularly. Few studies, however, have focused on whether or how family and community involvement help reduce rates of chronic absenteeism. In this longitudinal study, data were collected from 39 schools on rates of chronic absenteeism and on specific family and community involvement activities that were implemented to reduce this serious problem for student learning. Results indicate that school, family, and community partnership practices can significantly decrease chronic absenteeism, even after school level and prior rates of absenteeism are taken into account. In particular, communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors measurably reduced students' chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. Also, schools that conducted a greater total number of attendance-focused activities were more likely to decrease the percentage of students who missed twenty or more days of school each year.

Key Words: student attendance, truancy, parental involvement, school outreach programs

Introduction

Schools and school districts across the country are concerned with improving or maintaining student attendance. According to the U. S. Department of Education (1998), 15% of public school teachers report that student absenteeism is a "serious problem" at their school. Efforts to get students to school range from the use of enticements such as ice cream to threats of imprisonment for parents or guardians of chronically truant students (Henderson, 1999). Often, decisions to employ these methods are based on anecdotal evidence, rather than empirical studies. This may be due to the fact that little research exists on school programs or practices to improve student attendance (Corville-Smith, 1995; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Importance of Attendance

The paucity of research on school practices to improve attendance and reduce absenteeism is striking because truancy is associated with several important indicators of student failure and poor adjustment to school. Studies of dropouts show that leaving school is merely the culminating act of a long withdrawal process from school (Finn, 1989; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992), forecast by absenteeism in the early grades (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1995; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). Other studies show that truancy is a strong predictor of alcohol, tobacco, and substance use in adolescents (Hallfors, Vevea, Iritani, Cho, Khatapoush, & Saxe, 2002). Finally, research indicates that students with better attendance score higher on achievement tests (Lamdin, 1996; Myers, 2000) and that schools with better rates of student attendance tend to have higher passing rates on standardized achievement tests (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees, & Ehrenberg, 1991). Together, these studies provide convincing evidence that educators and researchers need to take seriously the issue of student absenteeism and ways to improve attendance.

School-Family-Community Approaches

Improving student attendance at school requires a holistic approach that addresses school and classroom factors, as well as factors outside of school. Several school characteristics and classroom practices are predictive of student attendance rates. Finn and Voelkl (1993) found that large schools were more

likely to have attendance problems than small schools. Also, student perceptions of the classroom or teacher as chaotic, uncaring, or boring were associated with student absenteeism and truancy (Duckworth & DeJong, 1989; Roderick et al., 1997). By contrast, attendance was better, even in high-poverty schools, if there were quality teachers, courses, and extra curricular offerings (Eskenazi, Eddins, & Beam, 2003). Schools and teachers, however, cannot solve attendance problems alone.

Family processes also are important influences on student absenteeism. Specific parental behaviors such as monitoring students' whereabouts, parent-child discussions about school, volunteering at school, and PTA/PTO membership have all been shown to predict lower levels of truancy among students (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Duckworth & DeJong, 1989; Lee, 1994; McNeal, 1999). Although most schools have not collaborated systematically with families to reduce absenteeism, home-school connections are recognized as an important strategy to increase student attendance (Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, & Wright, 1984; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1992; Ziesemer, 1984).

Educators have a responsibility to help families and communities become involved in reducing student absenteeism. Studies show that when schools develop programs of school, family, and community partnerships, they have higher levels of parent involvement (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Sheldon, 2003b; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004), higher percentages of students pass standardized achievement tests (Sheldon, 2003a), and schools take fewer disciplinary actions with students (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). There is, then, good reason to believe that the development of partnership programs can decrease absenteeism.

High quality partnership programs implement a range of family and community involvement activities focused on specific school goals for students (Epstein, 1995; Epstein, et al., 2002). There are six types of involvement through which schools can connect with families and the community in order to improve specific student outcomes: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with the community. Comprehensive, high quality partnership programs include practices for all six types of involvement, focused on specific school goals for students.

Previous research found that several family and community involvement practices were associated with student attendance including rewarding students for good attendance, communicating with families about student attendance, providing families with information about people to contact at school, conducting workshops on attendance, and providing after-school

programs for students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). That study suggested that student attendance should improve if schools take a comprehensive approach by implementing activities that support good attendance, conducting effective home-school connections, and remaining focused on the goal of improving and maintaining student attendance.

Other research indicated that communicating clearly with families was an especially useful strategy reducing student absenteeism. Studies found that phone calls to parents of absent students were associated with improved student attendance (Helm & Burkett, 1989; Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991). Also, providing timely information to families about attendance helped improve attendance rates in high schools (Roderick, et al., 1997). Keeping parents informed of their children's attendance at school allowed parents to monitor and supervise their children more effectively.

This study extends the previous research by exploring whether family and community involvement activities help reduce rates of chronic absenteeism. Chronically absent students miss school 20 or more days per year. These students are the most at risk of school withdrawal and failure.

Method

Procedure

This study analyzes longitudinal data to examine the effects of family and community involvement activities on rates of chronic absenteeism. The schools in this study were part of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University. NNPS invites schools to use research-based approaches to develop programs of family and community involvement that focus on specific school goals. A cover letter and baseline survey were sent to key contacts describing the study and asking them to participate if their schools were using partnership activities to help improve student attendance. Respondents were informed that full participation involved the completion of the baseline and a follow-up survey one year later. In return, each participating school would receive a book or gift certificate for publications or materials to support their work on school, family, and community partnerships.

Sample

Thirty-nine schools provided information on rates of chronic absenteeism for the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years. The sample included 29 elementary and 10 secondary schools. Ten schools were located in large urban

areas, 9 in smaller urban areas, 11 in suburban communities, and 9 in rural areas. Schools ranged in size from 135 to 1,753 students, with an average enrollment of just over 650.

The schools served students from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. On average, 51% of the students received free- or reduced-price lunches, ranging across schools from 1.3% to 100%. An average of 20% of the students came from families in which English is spoken as a second language, ranging across schools from 0% to 95%. The highly diverse sample represented a wide range of elementary and secondary schools.

Dependant Variables

Chronic Absenteeism

Respondents provided the percentage of students who missed 20 days or more of school during the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years. Change in chronic absenteeism is the difference between 2001 and 2000 rates, indicating a decrease or increase over time.

Independent Variables

Practice Implementation

Respondents reported whether or not they had implemented fourteen attendance-focused activities during the 2001 school year. Ten activities represented schools' efforts to directly connect with and involve family and community members in ways that support student attendance. The direct connections with families and the community included activities for four of the six types of involvement. *Parenting practices* included three items: conducting workshops about getting children to school, making home visits, and using contracts to commit parents to getting their children to school. *Communication practices* included four items: conducting parent orientations to explain school expectations and policies regarding student attendance, sending home newsletters listing the names of students with excellent attendance, giving families information about how to contact the school, and providing access to children's attendance information on the internet. *Volunteering* was measured with one item: inviting parents to attendance award ceremonies. *Collaborating with the community* included two items: bringing in speakers to talk about the importance of completing school, and connecting chronically absent students with a community mentor.

Four other activities focused mainly on students to encourage good attendance or to correct chronic absence: providing awards and incentives to students for good or improved attendance, providing an after-school program for students, referring chronically absent students and their families to a counselor, and referring chronically absent students and their families to a truant or court officer.

Practice Effectiveness

Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they felt each practice implemented was effective for improving student attendance. Effectiveness was assessed using a four-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all effective" (0) to "highly effective" (3).

Data Analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted in order to better understand whether schools' use of family and community involvement activities can help schools reduce chronic absenteeism. First, descriptive analyses compared chronic absenteeism across school level and school setting and investigated the relationship between chronic absenteeism and school demographic and partnership characteristics. Next, regression analyses examined the extent to which the use of different types of family and community involvement practices predicted changes in chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. Finally, OLS regression analyses, in a series of equations, tested the effects of individual partnership practice implementation on chronic absenteeism over time.

Results

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and range of scores for key variables used in this study. As indicated, school respondents reported that in the 2000-01 school year an average of 5.32% of their students missed 20 or more days of schools. This figure ranged from 0.0% to 17.4%. On average, respondents reported a 0.5% decrease in chronic absenteeism from the prior school year. The change in chronic absenteeism varied widely across schools, ranging from a decrease of 6% to an increase of over 7% of students.

Table 1 also shows that schools in this study, on average, implemented over eight practices to help reduce the percentage of students missing 20 or more days of school each year. They implemented more of the four student-focused activities that were listed than any other type ($\bar{x}$ = 3.41), followed by practices aimed at increasing communication between the school and home ($\bar{x}$ = 2.15).

On average, schools in this sample implemented 1.69 practices to help parents structure the home environment in support of school attendance and used about one of the two listed activities that connect the school to the community to help improve student attendance.

Table 1. Descriptive Information on Variables

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mini-mum	Maxi-mum
Chronic Absenteeism					
Chronic Absenteeism (99-00)	39	5.82	4.33	0.00	19.00
Chronic Absenteeism (00-01)	39	5.32	4.40	0.00	17.40
Change in Chronic Absenteeism	39	-0.50	2.95	-6.00	7.40
School Demographics					
School size	39	654.08	369.78	135.00	1753.00
% Free & Reduced-Price Lunch	39	51.38	30.17	1.30	100.00
% ESL Families	37	20.44	28.28	0.00	95.00
% Mobility	36	11.71	14.23	1.00	76.00
Practice Implementation					
# of Parenting Practices	39	1.69	0.89	0.00	3.00
# of Communication Practices	39	2.15	0.71	1.00	3.00
# of Community Practices	39	0.72	0.64	0.00	2.00
# of Student-focused Practices	39	3.41	0.79	1.00	4.00
Number of Total Practices	39	8.64	2.05	3.00	12.00

Table 2 presents data on chronic absenteeism across elementary and secondary schools and across settings. As shown, chronic absenteeism was more problematic in secondary schools (6.6%) than in elementary schools (4.9%). Also, elementary schools reported a decrease in chronic absenteeism from one year to the next (- 0.8%), whereas secondary schools reported an increase in chronic absenteeism (0.4%). Chronic absenteeism was a greater problem for schools located in large urban areas (7%) than in rural schools (3.1%). Both large urban and rural schools reported decreases in chronic absenteeism of over 1%. By contrast, suburban schools did not see reduced chronic absenteeism.

Table 2. Chronic Absenteeism Across School Locations and Levels in 2000 and 2001: Means and Standard Deviations

	N	Chronic Absenteeism 99-00	Chronic Absenteeism 00-01	Change in Chronic Absenteeism
		Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)
School Level				
Elementary School	29	5.71 (3.76)	4.88 (3.70)	-0.83 (2.51)
Secondary Schools	10	6.15 (5.90)	6.59 (6.08)	0.44 (4.00)
School Location				
Large Urban	10	8.28 (5.86)	7.20 (4.98)	-1.08 (3.65)
Urban	9	5.61 (3.57)	5.06 (2.92)	-0.55 (2.35)
Suburban	11	5.04 (4.04)	5.63 (5.36)	0.60 (2.99)
Rural	9	4.27 (2.43)	3.12 (3.09)	-1.15 (2.70)

Table 3 shows that chronic absenteeism was highly correlated from one year to the next ($r = .771$, $p \leq .001$). Chronic absence also is highly correlated with schools' poverty levels. Schools serving more poor students had higher rates of chronic absenteeism than other schools in 2000 ($r = .375$, $p \leq .02$) and 2001 ($r = .321$, $p \leq .05$). There was a negative correlation between the rate of chronic absenteeism in 2000 and change over time ($r = -.315$, $p \leq .051$). Schools that started with higher rates of chronic absenteeism in 2000 reported greater declines in 2001 than did schools where chronic absenteeism was initially less of a problem. Table 3 also shows that, although clearly patterned with secondary schools reporting more absenteeism and less change over time, the associations of chronic absenteeism and school level were not statistically significantly different. School mobility and rates of chronic absenteeism were positively correlated in 2000 ($r = .261$) and 2001 ($r = .283$), but these associations were not statistically significant.

Table 3. Zero-Order Correlations: School Background, Chronic Absenteeism, and Family and Community Involvement Practices

	School size	% Free lunch	% ESL[a]	% Mobility[b]	School level[c]	Chronic absenteeism 2000	Chronic absenteeism 2001
School size	-----						
% Free and reduced- price lunch	.163	-----					
% ESL families[a]	.359*	.544***	-----				
% Mobility[b]	-.180	.168	-.020	-----			
School level[c]	-.449**	.110	.239	.012	-----		
Chronic absenteeism 2000	.065	.375*	.031	.261	-.045	-----	
Chronic absenteeism 2001	.091	.321*	.021	.283	-.172	.771***	-----
Change in chronic absenteeism[d]	.041	-.070	-.013	.044	-.190	-.315*	.362*
Number of type 1- parenting activities	.246	.541***	.329*	.143	-.072	.176	.053
Number of type 2- communicating activities	.030	-.218	-.286	-.082	-.123	.184	-.138
Number of type 6-collaborating with community activities	-.076	.153	-.039	.156	.018	.124	-.029
Number of student-focused activities	.124	.216	.147	.138	-.144	-.032	-.107
Total number of partnership activities	.158	.343*	.097	.110	-.133	.205	-.020

	Change in chronic absenteeism[d]	Number of parenting practices	Number of communica-tion practices	Number of community practices	Number of student-focused practices	Total number of partnership practices
Change in chronic absenteeism[d]	-----					
Number of parenting practices	-.179	-----				
Number of communication practices	-.476**	.006	-----			
Number of community practices	-.226	.176	.104	-----		
Number of student-focused practices	-.113	.485**	.025	.305	-----	
Total number of partnership practices	-.329*	.716***	.384*	.576***	.733***	-----

* p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001,

N = 39 Schools, (a) N= 37 schools, (b) N= 36 schools, (c) School level: elementary schools = 1, secondary schools = 0,

(d) Change in chronic absenteeism = 2001 rates – 2000 rates.

Practice Implementation

Table 4 shows that respondents rated all of the attendance-focused practices they implemented as generally effective. Providing awards and incentives for excellent attendance was perceived to be the most effective partnership practice ($\bar{x}$ = 2.45) and one of the most frequently implemented practices. Orienting parents to school expectations and policies about attendance also was widely implemented, but was perceived to be among the least effective practices for improving attendance ($\bar{x}$ = 1.97).

Other family and community involvement activities also were viewed as effective for improving student attendance. These included activities implemented in most schools: providing an after-school program ($\bar{x}$ = 2.37); and referring chronically absent students and families to a truant or court officer ($\bar{x}$ = 2.22). Educators also considered sending home newsletters listing excellent attendance as one of the more effective practices ($\bar{x}$ = 2.27). Although respondents rated the activities as more or less effective, it is necessary to control for prior rates of chronic absence to determine the actual impact of specific activities.

Table 4. Implementation of Family and Community Involvement Practices and Rating of Effectiveness

Involvement Practices	Was the Practice Implemented?		Effectiveness Rating
	Yes	No	Mean (sd)
Parenting Practices			
Make home visits to discuss attendance policies and practices with families	29	10	2.17 (0.66)
Conduct workshops for parents including information about how to help get their children to school	13	26	2.15 (0.80)
Use contracts or compacts with parents that state they will help their children get to school	24	15	1.83 (0.82)
Communication Practices			
Send home newsletters listing students with excellent attendance	12	27	2.27 (0.47)
Give families the name and phone number of a person at school that they may call with questions about attendance or other school policies[a]	35	2	2.03 (0.72)
Provide families the ability to access their children's attendance records online via the internet	1	38	2.00 (0.00)
Conduct parent orientations on school expectations and policies for student attendance	36	3	1.97 (0.63)

Volunteering Practices			
Invite parents to award ceremonies for excellent or improved student attendance	26	13	2.08 (0.69)
Collaborating with the Community Practices			
Connect chronically absent students with community mentors[a]	11	27	2.18 (0.60)
Bring in community/business leaders to speak to students about the importance of completing school[a]	17	21	2.06 (0.66)
Student-Focused Practices for Attendance			
Give incentives/awards to students for improved or excellent attendance	34	5	2.45 (0.62)
Provide an after-school program for students	32	7	2.37 (0.63)
Refer chronically absent students and families to a truant officer or court officer	33	6	2.22 (0.83)
Refer chronically absent students and families to meet with a counselor	34	5	2.06 (0.79)

(a) N=39, except for three items with missing data.

Effects of Involvement Practices on Chronic Absenteeism

The effects of family and community involvement practices on levels of chronic absenteeism in 2001 were examined using multiple regression analyses. Each practice listed in Table 4 was entered into a separate regression equation, controlling for school level and then chronic absenteeism in 2000. School level was used as a covariate due to the divergent trends in the rates of chronic absenteeism of elementary and secondary schools. Structural differences between elementary and secondary schools, as well as developmental differences between elementary and secondary students, also make this covariate theoretically important.

Analyses were conducted to examine whether or not specific types of involvement in attendance-focused activities affected rates of student chronic absenteeism in 2001. Four sets of family and community involvement practices were identified: (1) parenting activities (Equation 1), (2) communication activities (Equation 2), (3) community involvement activities (Equation 3), and student-focused activities (Equation 4).

In all of the equations tested, prior chronic absenteeism is the strongest predictor of the rate in 2001. Schools with problems during one year tend to have problems the next year, as well. In all equations, secondary schools have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than do elementary schools, though the coefficients do not reach standard levels of significant difference. This is due, in part, to the relatively small sample of secondary schools and to the strong effect of the schools' prior rate of chronic absenteeism.

Equation 2 in Table 5 shows that, after accounting for chronic absenteeism in 2000 and school level, schools that used more communication practices about attendance with families reported significantly lower levels of chronic absenteeism in 2001 (β = -.311, $p \leq .002$). Also, Equation 5 in Table 5 shows that, after taking prior rates of chronic absenteeism and school level into account, schools that implemented more of the 14 practices reported lower levels of chronic absenteeism in 2001 (β= -.207, $p \leq .05$).

Table 5. OLS Regression Analyses: Effects of Types of Family and Community Involvement on Chronic Absenteeism in 2001

Involvement Practices	
Equation 1	
School Level	-.144
Prior rate of chronic absenteeism	.781***
Number of parenting activities implemented	-.095
R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.622 (.589)
Equation 2	
School Level	-.173+
Prior rate of chronic absenteeism	.820***
Number of communication activities implemented	-.311**
R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.705 (.680)
Equation 3	
School Level	-.135
Prior rate of chronic absenteeism	.780***
Number of community activities implemented	-.124
R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.628 (.596)
Equation 4	
School Level	-.153
Prior rate of chronic absenteeism	.761***
Number of student-focused activities implemented	-.105
R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.624 (.592)
Equation 5	
School Level	-.163
Prior rate of chronic absenteeism	.806***
Total number of activities implemented	-.207*
R^2 (Adj. R^2)	.653 (.624)

Standardized Betas Shown
School level: elementary schools = 1, secondary schools = 0.
* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$
N= 39 schools

Delving into the details of the analyses of different types of involvement activities, we found that three specific practices had particularly strong effects on lowering rates of chronic absenteeism in 2001: orienting parents about school expectations and policies for attendance (β = -.256, $p \leq .01$), sending home a list of students with excellent attendance in school newsletters (β = -.209, $p \leq .05$), and connecting chronically absent students with a community mentor (β = -.227, $p \leq .02$).

Similar analyses, not shown, were conducted controlling for the percentage of students receiving free- and reduced-price meals and chronic absenteeism in 1999-2000. The results of these analyses did not differ from those reported above in which school level and prior levels of chronic absenteeism were used as covariates.

Discussion

This study extends previous research (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) on the effects of school, family, and community partnerships on student attendance by including a larger and more diverse sample of schools and a more extensive set of partnership activities focused on student attendance. The earlier study included only elementary schools, whereas this study included elementary and secondary schools. The addition of secondary schools to the sample is important because of differences in school organization and in student and family development from elementary schools. The data indicated that chronic absenteeism was more problematic in large urban schools, high-poverty schools, and secondary schools. Elementary schools decreased chronic absenteeism over time, compared to secondary schools, which, on average, increased percentages of chronically absent students. Although these differences were not statistically significant, the consistent patterns across school levels were striking and suggest the need for future investigations with larger samples that permit separate analyses of effects on attendance for elementary, middle, and high schools.

The results provide new evidence that school efforts to connect with students' families and communities about attendance can help keep students in school. In particular, even after the strong effects of prior rates of absenteeism were accounted for, communicating with families about attendance, celebrating good attendance with students and families, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors measurably reduced students' chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. Also, schools that conducted a greater total number of attendance-focused activities were more likely to decrease the percentage of students who missed twenty or more days of school each year.

There is some evidence that educators may not fully understand how family and community involvement can help improve student attendance. For example, school respondents rated parent orientations as among the least effective activities for improving student attendance. This type of activity, however, was among the few practices that predicted a significant reduction in chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. Thus, it is not sufficient to report educators' perceptions or rating alone as a evidence of an effective practice. Rather, longitudinal analyses are needed to ascertain the independent and measurable effects of particular practices on student attendance.

Some activities that respondents rated as effective had no measurable effect on reducing chronic absenteeism, in part because the activities were used by just about all schools. That is, schools that decreased chronic absenteeism and those that did not were equally likely to conduct these activities. It will be necessary to look into details of the design and implementation of these and other common involvement activities (e.g., phone calls to parents of absent students) to learn whether and how these can be effective strategies for increasing attendance.

Conclusions

Some educators view absenteeism as a problem between the school and its students. This study suggests that reducing chronic absenteeism requires a partnership of the school, students, families, and community. Three main conclusions may be drawn from the results of the analyses.

1. ***Schools need to take a comprehensive approach to involve families and the community in ways that help students reduce chronic absenteeism.*** Schools that conducted more attendance-focused partnership practices across the six types of involvement reported reducing their rates of chronic absenteeism from one year to the next. In any school, families face a variety of challenges and demands that may make it difficult for them to remain active in their children's education. By conducting a wide range of involvement activities, schools may enable more families and community partners to encourage, monitor, and support student attendance.

2. ***Frequent and positive communications with parents about attendance are needed to reduce chronic absenteeism.*** This study shows the importance of consistent, two-way communication between schools and families for improving the most serious attendance problems. Research has shown that just about all families want their children to succeed in school (Laraeu, 2000; Mapp, 2003). Many parents need help, however, in understanding how to guide their children in school, starting with helping students attend school regularly. All

parents need to be kept informed of their children's attendance and academic progress. Communications between teachers and parents, therefore, are essential for the kinds of collaborative work that will help get students to school.

The finding that the use of activities to celebrate good attendance is associated with improved attendance outcomes is consistent with previous research. Epstein and Sheldon (2002), too, found that the use of activities celebrating good attendance helped improved levels of student attendance from one year to the next. In the present study, chronic absenteeism decreased over time when schools publicly praised students for having strong attendance habits. The consistency of this finding provides strong evidence of the need for schools to encourage student attendance, and not wait until attendance is a serious problem to collaborate with families or community members on this issue.

3. ***Future studies need larger and comparative samples to improve knowledge on school practices for family and community involvement to reduce chronic absenteeism.*** Although this study included more schools than previous studies, the number of secondary schools in this sample still was too small to test whether particular involvement activities have different effects in elementary, middle, and high schools. Future studies should include at least 20 schools at each level to identify effective practices for reducing chronic absenteeism over time.

In this study, data were drawn only from schools that were working to strengthen their programs of school, family, and community partnerships and that had set student attendance as a priority for their partnership efforts. The results may be interpreted to generalize only to schools attuned to the importance of partnerships. However, most schools in the U.S. do want to connect more effectively with students' families. The benefits of activities identified in this study that link family and community partnerships to improved student attendance may be accessible to all schools.

The fact that schools voluntarily participated in this study may have attenuated the associations between the implementation of partnership practices and changes in chronic absenteeism. Using only schools that were interested in this student outcome may have reduced variability in the extent to which schools used partnership practices to improve student attendance, making it more difficult to identify statistically significant findings. Also, the educators' ratings of the effectiveness of specific partnership practices for improving student attendance may be higher in this sample than in schools that were not working deliberately to develop school, family, and community partnership programs.

Future research should compare a matched sample of schools that are and are not investing resources in developing school, family, or community partnerships to improve student attendance. Using this methodology, as well as

collecting additional data on other types of practices schools are implementing to improve student attendance and achievement, should increase the variation in the use of partnership practices and produce stronger evidence of the effects of partnership activities on student attendance. In addition, future research should collect data on school, family, and community partnership and student attendance for more than two years in order to investigate the long-term impact partnerships have on students' attendance behaviors.

This study suggests that school, family, and community partnerships are an important ingredient in schools' efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism. Other research indicates that poor attendance strongly predicts students' low achievement and dropping out of school. By collaborating with community partners and keeping families informed about attendance, educators can help more students get to school. In school, students who are presently truant will be safer and more likely to learn the academic material required to succeed.

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