Using Group Counseling to Improve the Attendance of Elementary School Students with

High Rates of Absenteeism: An Action Research Study

Eleanor Webb-Landman

Ithica Elementary School

Author Note

Eleanor Webb-Landman is a professional school counselor in Georgia. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to the author at Ithica Elementary School 75 Whitworth Road Villa Rica, GA 30180.

Abstract

The foundations of academic and social learning are laid in the early years of school, and attendance is critical to school success. However, research suggests that chronic absenteeism is a significant problem at the elementary school level (Chang & Romero, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2007).   This paper presents the results of an action research study (ARS) exploring the impact of small group counseling on the attendance, self-concept, and attitude toward school among students with high rates of absenteeism at one elementary school in Georgia. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: school counselors and absenteeism; elementary students and absenteeism

Using Group Counseling to Improve the Attendance of Elementary School Students

with High Rates of Absenteeism: An Action Research Study

The purpose of this action research study (ARS) was to determine the impact of small group counseling on the attendance, self-concept, and attitudes toward school of students with high rates of absenteeism at one elementary school. While school professionals have recognized absenteeism and truancy as problems with serious consequences in middle and high schools,

until recently, little attention has been paid to the issue in elementary schools (Romero & Lee, 2007). However, a growing body of research now suggests that chronic absenteeism during the elementary years is not only a significant problem but also one that, in many ways, sets the stage for future academic and social difficulties. With the increasing pressures on schools to achieve standards set by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the need to identify effective measures for ensuring regular school attendance of students becomes even more pressing.

Review of Related Literature

Definitions and Scope of the Problem

"Truancy" is a term that refers only to unexcused absences and typically, educator use the term with middle and high school students. The term usually implies that the student is absent without the parent's or guardian's knowledge. In addition, "truancy" usually connotes inappropriate behavior by the student (Chang & Romero, 2008). At the elementary level, a student is usually not absent without parental or guardian knowledge, and attendance records typically distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. While attendance reporting procedures and protocols vary widely from district to district, Chang and Romero (2008) argue that both excused and unexcused absences should be taken into account when considering the impact of absenteeism. They propose defining "chronic absenteeism" as missing 10% of any given school year.

In a study by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), Romero and Lee (2007) reported that over 11% of kindergarteners and almost 9% of first graders are chronically absent, although statistics vary widely across districts and sometimes from school to school within a district. In another brief reporting on the same study, Chang and Romero (2008) pointed out that students are exposed to basic academic and social learning during the early years

of school. Chronic absence during this time places the student at risk of future academic failure

and eventually dropping out of school.

Absences during kindergarten frequently begin a pattern that continues into future years.

Romero and Lee (2007) found over half of the students who were chronically absent in

kindergarten were also chronically absent in first grade. Data also seem to suggest that among

children living in poverty, the risk for absenteeism is compounded and that the lower the family

income, the higher the absenteeism rates. While attendance tends to improve during the

elementary years, a greater proportion of children living in poverty were chronically absent more

others. One consideration of these data about children living in poverty and absenteeism is that

children living in poverty may have difficulties getting to school if they have unmet basic needs

such as adequate clothing. Further, some poorer school districts have eliminated school bus

service, rendering some elementary students as "walkers" even though the school may be three

to four blocks from their homes. Parents or caregivers who may not be able to walk their

children to school (e.g., due to health or mobility issues or work responsibilities) may elect to

keep their children at home.

Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Many researchers and practitioners agree that the reasons for chronic absenteeism have

multiple components and include community, school, family, and individual factors (Bell,

Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Chang & Romero, 2008; Falis & Opotow, 2003). Community factors

include elevated rates of high school dropouts, poverty, violence, unemployment, as well as a

lack of resources to assist families with positive child development and support for school

attendance. School factors may include a failure to communicate adequately the school's

attendance policies or to monitor absences and make family contacts in a timely manner. School

factors might also include a failure to provide a safe environment in which instruction is engaging, high quality, and relevant. Family factors may include lack of awareness of the importance of attendance, lack of resources to support regular attendance (such as transportation, food, and clothing), unmet physical or mental health needs, or high rates of mobility (Chang & Romero, 2008). Individual factors might include low self-image, academic difficulties, or peer conflicts (Carlson, Clark, Nerad, & Taylor, 1993).

Consequences of Chronic Absenteeism

It is not surprising that academic skills suffer when students miss school. Gottfried (2009) found a significant positive relationship between school attendance and academic achievement. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten have lower levels of achievement in reading, math, and general knowledge in first grade (Chang & Romero, 2008). Among children living in poverty, those who were chronically absent during kindergarten had the lowest levels of academic achievement by the end of the fifth grade (Romero & Lee, 2007). When academic difficulties result in grade retention, the risk becomes even greater. Rumberger (1995) identified grade retention as one of the most significant factors predicting a student's decision to drop out of school.

Chronic absenteeism influences more than just academic achievement. These students are also at greater risk for social and behavioral difficulties. Students who were rated by teachers as less mature in social-emotional functioning than their peers had higher rates of absenteeism (Romero & Lee, 2007). Poor attendance is also associated with a student's engagement in delinquent behaviors (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Wang, Blomberg, & Li, 2005), and with risky activities such as tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drug use (Hallfors et al., 2002).

These negative effects on academic achievement and socialization often follow students throughout their academic career and beyond. Some retrospective studies indicate that students who will drop out of school can be predicted with relative accuracy from attendance, academic achievement, and discipline records beginning at the elementary level (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Rumberger, 1995).   These factors highlight the need for early intervention to reduce chronic absenteeism at the elementary school level.

Effective Interventions

Recent investigations into promising practices for improving attendance point to a need for a comprehensive, non-punitive approach that identifies and addresses all factors that influence attendance (Chang & Romero, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Bell, et al., 1994). One trend in the literature is the practice of increasing family and community involvement in the schools. Schools implementing school, family, and community partnerships are finding success in improving student attendance, as well as overall student achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; National Center for School Engagement, 2005; Sheldon, 2007).

While partnerships show promise at addressing school, family, and community factors that influence nonattendance, the question remains how to address some of the individual factors that put students at risk for attendance problems. McPartland (1994) argues that a climate of caring and support is critical in motivating students to stay in school and work hard to achieve learning goals. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) recommend reaching out to help students feel less anonymous, and explicitly communicating the importance of being in school.

There is considerable evidence demonstrating that increased interaction of at-risk students with adults at school has a positive impact on attendance. Ford and Sutphen (1996) found counseling of students with attendance problems by supervised social work practicum

students improved student attendance. Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, and Huffer (2008) also found students who received social work services showed an increase in satisfaction with school, self-esteem, and perceptions of their academic performance. The Check and Connect program provides another example of the positive effects of increasing adult interaction with students who have attendance problems. This program, which pairs the student with an adult monitor, has been successful with middle and high school students, and, in a study with elementary school students, Lehr, Sinclair, and Christensen (2004) found students who participated in the program for at least 2 years had significant decreases in absences and tardies.

Using Group Counseling to Improve Attendance

While the evidence supports the contention that increasing adult interaction with at-risk students can improve attendance, high caseloads and competing responsibilities can limit the possibility of one-on-one services to students in need. Working in groups could increase the number of students served. Group counseling is usually an integral part of a school's comprehensive guidance and counseling program, and seems to address many of the social, emotional, and behavioral issues associated with chronic absenteeism.

Keat, Metzger, Raykovitz, and McDonald (1984) conducted a multimodal friendship group for third graders with poor attendance and found 4 of the 5 participants' attendance improved. Waltzer (1984) found that an 8-week behavioral group increased attendance among chronically absent junior high school students. Baker (2000) reported that elementary students participating in attendance groups improved their attendance. Baker also found improved self-concept and attitudes toward school as measured by teacher input and the Piers Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1983). However, little recent research has studied the

effectiveness of group counseling on improving the attendance of students with high rates of absenteeism.

The leadership team at the elementary school where the principal investigator (PI) is employed as a school counselor has identified a goal of improving student attendance. The school has an enrollment of approximately 610 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade. It is a Title I school, with about 59% of students eligible for free or reduced meals. In 2009/2010, 12.3% of students missed more than 15 days of school, and 17.4% missed between 10 and 14 days. The PI wanted to determine if group counseling might be effective in helping the school improve attendance. Action research was determined to be an appropriate research design because it allows practitioners to study the effectiveness of interventions in their own environments with the goal of improving their practice (Mills, 2011). This ARS sought to answer the following questions:

- How do self-concept and attitudes toward school influence attendance among study participants?

- What effect does group counseling have on self-concept, attitudes toward school, and attendance among study participants?

Methodology

Participants

Potential ARS participants were identified based on attendance data for the 2009/2010 school year and the first 12 weeks of the 2010/2011 school year. Students with 15 or more absences for the 2009/2010 school year and five or more absences during the first 12 weeks of the 2010/2011 school year were considered. Twenty-four students were identified using the

above criteria. One student with an emerging pattern of absences was included in the study at the request of the school's administrators.

Parents or guardians of the identified group were informed of the ARS by letter, and permission to include their children in the study was requested. Once parent permission was secured, the PI met with each student individually, explained the ARS to him or her in developmentally appropriate language, and requested permission to include them in the study. Permission was granted to include 18 students in the ARS: 1 repeating kindergartener, 2 first graders, 6-second graders, 3 third graders, 1 fourth grader, and 5 fifth graders.

Procedure

Three counseling groups were formed based on the grade level of participants. The intervention involved weekly group counseling sessions. In addition students were asked to check in with the PI each morning to mark their attendance on individual goal charts.

The PI met with each group weekly for approximately 45 minutes during January, February, and March 2011. Groups met early in the morning to reinforce the importance of punctual school attendance and to set a positive tone for the day. Groups were named "Awesome Attendance Groups" and the slogan "When you're not here, we MISS you, and you MISS a lot!" was posted and referred to frequently. Two of the groups met upon arrival, ate breakfast, and watched the school's morning announcements together. In addition, they reviewed their individual attendance charts and marked their collective attendance on a group attendance chart. Individual students earned tokens for reaching attendance goals. These tokens could be used to purchase items from the school store. Each group also earned a party with special breakfast treats for meeting group attendance goals. Other group activities included discussions and activities that supported self-esteem and positive attitudes toward school. Due to

scheduling issues, the third group met during first period. The format for this group was identical to the other two except the students did not eat breakfast or watch morning announcements.

Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation

Student attendance data were collected from the school's student information database. Each student's number of absences during the second 9 weeks of the school year (prior to the start of the intervention) was compared to his or her number of absences during the third 9 weeks, during which the group counseling intervention took place.

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers-Harris 2) was used to measure self-concept. The Piers-Harris 2 is a 60-item self-report questionnaire designed to provide a general measure of the respondent's self-concept as well as subscales that measure six specific components of self-concept. The instrument is appropriate for use with children and adolescents in grades 2 through 12 who demonstrate at least a second-grade reading level.

The Piers-Harris 2 was administered to third, fourth, and fifth-grade participants prior to the first group meeting and again at the end of the intervention. The Piers-Harris 2 is not appropriate for kindergarten and first grade students. Therefore, the participants in these grades did not complete the scale. In addition, because some of the second-grade participants did not meet the reading level criteria, the PI decided to exclude second-graders from the administration for consistency sake. T scores for total self-concept (TOT) were compared from the pre- and post-administrations to determine if there was a change in self-concept scores after the intervention.

Teacher perceptions gathered through a brief questionnaire (see Appendix 1) and student group evaluation forms (see Appendix 2) administered during the third week of March, were also

analyzed to determine if the intervention had a positive effect on the study participants' self-concept and attitudes toward school. Case notes kept by the PI were also analyzed. These notes, teacher perceptions, and student evaluations were particularly important for the younger students for whom Piers-Harris 2 data was not collected.

Results

The Relationship of Self-concept and Attitude Toward School to Attendance

Pre-intervention Piers-Harris 2 scores did not suggest a link between low self-concept and poor attendance for these study participants (see Table 1). The 10 participants in grades 3, 4, and 5 took the Piers Harris 2. Five of those students had Total Self-Concept T Scores (TOT) in the low or low average range, while 2 participants had TOT scores in the average range, and 3 participants had TOT scores in the high or low high average range.

Teacher perceptions also did not suggest a link between low self-concept, negative attitudes toward school and poor attendance (see Table 1). Teachers rated the self-concept of 4 students as positive or very positive prior to the intervention, while they rated the self-concept of 8 participants as neutral, and 4 particpants as negative or very negative. (Note: teacher ratings were not available for 2 participants.) Similarly, teachers rated the attitude toward school of 5 students as positive or very positive; they rated the attitude toward school of 6 students as neutral, and they rated the attitude toward school of 3 students as negative or very negative.

Table 1

Piers-Harris 2 Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores

Partici-pant Code	TOT T-Scores		
	Pre-test	**Post-test**	**Change**
I	52	52	0
J	43	43	0
K	66	63	-3
L	35	41	6
M	34	30	-4
N	69	63	-6
O	60	69	9
P	38	43	5
Q	47	52	5
R	36	44	8

TOT Score Interpretive Labels:
30T - 39T= Low
40T - 44T= Low Average
45T - 55T = Average
56T – 59T = High Average
60T – 69T = High

The Effect of Group Counseling on Self-concept and Attitude Toward School

Comparison of Piers Harris 2 pre-intervention T-scores to post-intervention scores for

Total Self-Concept (TOT) were mixed. Five students' scores increased between 4 and 9 points;

2 student's scores remained the same, and 3 student's scores went down between 3 and 6 points.

Teacher perceptions provide additional insight into the effect of group counseling on

participant self-concept and attitude toward school (see Tables 2 and 3 below). Teachers

believed the self-concept of 12 of the participants improved during the intervention, while they

believed that the self-concept of 4 of the participants remained the same.   Regarding attitudes

toward school, teachers reported that 9 of the students had more positive attitudes toward school

during the intervention, while they perceived the attitudes of 6 of the students to be unchanged and 1 student's attitude toward school was more negative. When asked to what they attributed the change in self-concept, some themes emerged from teacher comments. Some suggested the group had a direct impact on the change with comments such as "He loves going to group," or "Having something to look forward to each week." Other comments suggested changes in behaviors that may or may not have been related to the group such as "She is a little more outspoken in class," or "He has really tried harder in school and come in much more prepared."

Table 2 Teacher Perceptions of Changes in Self-Concept

If you perceive a change in self-concept, to what do you attribute the change?			
Parti-cipant Code	Pre-inter-vention	Post-inter-vention	Response:
A	0	P	
B	0	VP	He has really tried harder in school and come in much more prepared.
C			
D	0	P	The positive attention has given her value.
E	VN	P	She knows we care about her and miss her when she is not here.
F	VP	VP	
G	N	P	Not sure. She seems much happier since group started. She has been present more often.
H			
I	0	VP	He does not want to miss anything at school. He wants to be active in outside of class activities.
J	0	P	Having something to look forward to each week. Knowing she is held accountable in a positive way.
K	0	P	She has been a little more outgoing and believes in herself. I hope this group helps her continue to shine.
L	VN	VP	He loves going to group.
M	0	P	Getting some individualized attention.
N	P	P	
O	P	VP	
P	N	N	
Q	O	P	She is a little more outspoken in class. Seems more comfortable and confident.
R	P	P	

VP = Very Positive P = Positive 0 = Neutral N = Negative VN = Very Negative

Table 3

Teacher Perceptions of Changes in Attitude Toward School

Partici- pant Code	Pre- inter- vention	Post- inter- vention	Response
A	0	P	
B	0	P	He is completing more tasks successfully, scoring better on tests, reading better, etc., so he doesn't feel as defeated.
C			
D	VN	P	She wants to avoid disaapointing anyone at school.
E	VN	P	She enjoys learning and being praised for a job well done.
F	VP	VP	
G	0	P	She seems almost joyful to be here.
H			
I	0	VP	
J	P	P	She enjoys school, just not the academics.
K	P	P	
L	VN	N	I have backed off of putting any pressure on attendance. I am leaving that to the group.
M	N	P	Feeling more confident.
N	0	N	
O	P	P	
P	N	N	
Q	0	P	The counseling group attendance.
R	P	P	

VP = Very Positive P = Positive 0 = Neutral N = Negative VN = Very Negative

Students' perceptions of the effect of group counseling on attitudes toward school were measured, in part, on the group evaluation form by asking them to respond to the statement "This group helped me like coming to school more." Fifteen students responded "Yes" to this statement, while 3 students responded "Don't know" to the statement. Student commentary about what they liked about the group suggested that students found the group to be "fun" and they enjoyed the games, treats and completing the attendance charts (see Table 4).

Table 4 Student Group Evaluations

Q1: This group helped me like coming to school more.
Q2: This group helped me have better attendance.
Q3: One thing I liked about this group is:

Participant Code	Q1	Q2	Q3
A	Y	Y	I like that we're making a show (skit).
B	Y	Y	It's fun.
C	Y	Y	
D	Y	Y	I like the group because it's fun.
E	Y	N	It is fun.
F	Y	Y	I like eating here.
G	Y	Y	We have fun.
H	Y	DN	We played games.
I	Y	Y	Fun.
J	Y	DN	It's fun.
K	DN	Y	We have fun together and it makes us have better attendance.
L	Y	Y	We get to eat donuts.
M	Y	Y	We do stuff that helps me.
N	Y	Y	Playing games and the chart.
O	Y	Y	Playing games and the chart.
P	DN	Y	Parties.
Q	Y	Y	The games.
R	DN	Y	Playing games. Parties!

Y = Yes   N = No   DN = Don't know

The Effect of Group Counseling on Attendance

Attendance for 13 of the 18 participants improved during the intervention period, while 3 of the participants had the same number of absences, and 2 of the participants had an increase in absences (see Table 5). Of the students whose attendance improved, the decrease in the number of days absent ranged from 1 to 9, with an average decrease of 4.3 days. Of the 5 students whose number of absences increased or remained unchanged, 4 had medically excused absences and 1 had only 1 absence during both 9-week periods. (This student was included in the study because his absences during the 2009/2010 school year and his absences during the first 12 weeks of the 2010/2011 school year met the criteria for inclusion.)

Table 5

Attendance Data

Partici-pant Code	2nd Nine Weeks	3rd Nine Weeks	Change
A	7	1	-6
B	1	1	0
C	7	3	-4
D	4	4	0
E	4	4	0
F	7	1	-6
G	19	18	-1
H	5	2	-3
I	9	0	-9
J	4	2	-2
K	7	0	-7
L	9	1	-8
M	0	7	7
N	9	4	-5
O	5	2	-3
P	10	7	-3
Q	5	1	-4
R	2	4	2

Teacher perceptions shed light on reasons for the changes in attendance from the second to the third 9 weeks (see Table 6). Teachers attributed improvements in attendance to the group counseling intervention for 4 of the participants. Representative comments include "He is excited about the group's positive attendance goals," and "She also, many times, mentions her morning group each week." Other comments suggested reasons that may or may not have been related to the group such as "She seems to enjoy school more and has more confidence in her work," or "The family realizes the importance of making it to school on time and the impact

missing school can have." In several cases, teachers felt the involvement of the student's

parents in the school system's truancy intervention programs caused the decrease in absences.

Table 6 Teacher Perceptions of Changes in Attendance

To what do you attribute the improvement, lack of change, or decrease in attendance during this time period?				
Participant Code	Absences 2nd 9 weeks	Absences 3rd 9 weeks	Change	**Response**
A	7	1	-6	Attendance group.
B	1	1	0	The family realized the importance of making it to school on time and the impact missing school can have.
C	7	3	-4	She had an illness.
D	4	4	0	She had surgery.
E	4	4	0	She enjoys learning and being praised for a job well done.
F	7	1	-6	
G	19	18	-1	
H	5	2	-3	The intervention of the school social worker regarding attendance.
I	9	0	-9	He is excited about the group's positive attendance goals.
J	4	2	-2	
K	7	0	-7	A positive attitude goes a long way. Self-confidence helps with a positive attitude.
L	9	1	-8	I'm sure the counseling group helped, but I believe the biggest reason for the improvement is that (the student's) mother will be sent to truancy court if more absences occur.
M	0	7	7	Lack of parental concern/involvement.
N	9	4	-5	Parents received a letter regarding attendance/
O	5	2	-3	The student had several illness during the second nine weeks.
P	10	7	-3	
Q	5	1	-4	She seems to enjoy school more and has more confidence in her work.
R	2	4	2	

Students' perceptions of the reasons for changes in attendance were assessed on group evaluation forms by asking students to respond to the statement, "This group helped me have better attendance." Fifteen students responded "yes" to the statement, 2 students responded "no", and 1 student responded "I don't know."

Case notes recording the PI's observations during the intervention provide support that the group was a factor contibuting to improvements in attendance for several of the students (see Table 7). Student enthusiasm and active participation in group activities as well as excitement about earning individual rewards suggest that the group was a positive experience for many of the students. Quotes from students such as, "I love my group days," "My throat was hurting a little this morning, but I wanted to come to the party," and "I was feeling a little bad this morning but I said, 'no, I've got to go check off my chart.'" indicate that many of the students found the group activities meaningful and, in some cases chose to come to school because of the these activities or to reach attendance goals.

Table 7 Case Notes and PI Observations

Parti-cipant Code	
A	A comes to check in each morning with a BIG smile to get a hug. She commented once "I love my group days." While playing a game, A could not respond to the questions of what she was good at or that she liked to do. When I told A during group today that her teacher had told me how smart she is, A responded "I'm not smart." .
B	B is very talkative in group. loves spending IES bucks (individual rewards.)
C	C had difficulty in the first few sessions catching on to the routines and remembering to come to check in. Now, he has caught on. He has begun to play around with the other boys, and really got into dancing to the music before morning announcements today. C participated very well for his part of the skit today. AP reported that during attendance team meeting, C's mother stated that there were days she was running late or thinking of keeping C home, but he told her "no, I've got to go to check off my chart."
D	D often has trouble remembering to come to check in. Often, we have to remind her to come. D got very actively involved in planning the skit, and volunteered to make the graphic organizer. Today in group D commented that "My dad (teasing) told me that Ihad to stay home today because he knows how much I love my group days.
E	E seems enthusiastic about group and spending rewards. She often volunteers to help with activities.
F	F remembers to come to check in each day. He often asks to help run errands or remind other students to come to group.
G	G continues to miss a lot of days since group started. She never comes to check in and frequently forgets to come to group until someone goes to remind her. When she comes, she usually has a big smile. G's presence at group today caused the group to earn it's first attendance party. This brought loud cheers from the other students and a big smile from G. G seems to enjoy earning attendance rewards.
H	H always comes to check in and group without reminders. Seems to enjoy group. He is very physical and requires frequent reminders to maintain appropriate control. He often engages the other boys in horseplay which is disruptive. Today, H was very helpful running errands for me. H was busy reading in group today, was not engaged in planning the skit until one of the other members suggested including Zombies in the script.
I	"I" seems enthusiastic about group. As the weeks go on, "I" has begun to engage in more off-task behavior and horseplay. When discussing the skit today, "I" asked "Is that the only reason that we're here? "I" suggested writing Zombies into our skit. The other students were enthusiastic about this.

Table 7 Continued Case Notes and PI Observations

Parti-cipant Code	
J	J seems enthusiastic about group. She comes in daily to check off chart and remembers group days. J commented today "I was absent yesterday because my mom made me go to my dad's doctor's appointmen so it's her fault.
K	K is very helpful and cooperative in group and follows directions explicitely. Today, K got very excited about the skit and came up with many ideas.
L	L usually arrives later than the others to group. He never remembers to come to check in. L participates, but seems more motivated to engage in horseplay with the other boys. L chose not to come to group today, when I asked him about it later, he said he planned to come to future group meetings.
M	M seems to enjoy group, and often comes to talk to me during check in. M has continued to miss several days during the intervention. M was not in group this morning. She came in tardy. Her mother was with her and said "We slept in." Later, M told me that her grandfather wakes her mom up, but he had not done so this morning. When I asked, she said they did not have an alarm clock.
N	N has had several absences since group started. In one group session N reported being absent due to a pet's illness. When present, N participates actively in group activities.
O	O participates actively in group, and offers many suggestions. He loves playing board games. O commented in group today that his mother had said "If your stomach hurts and you stay home, you will waste Mrs. Landman's money." (I had purchased breakfast for the group for meeting group goals.)
P	P has missed several days since group began. Although usually quiet when I've talked to him alone, P smiles and laughs in group and seems to enjoy games. P was excited to purchase a photo album with is reward money today. Today in group P reported that he would be absent next week because he was having tests done (medical condition.)
Q	Q seems to enjoy group and participates actively. Q often goofs off with other group members Q reported today "my throat hurt a little this morning, but I wanted to come to the (group reward) party, and also so my class could spin the wheel (a school-wide attendance incentive.)
R	R seems to enjoy group. Participates actively in all activities. R has had several absences since group began, but seems to be trying to maintain attendance. She asked me today when she came in tardy if she could still check off her chart.

Discussion

This ARS sought to answer whether student self-concept and attitudes toward school influence attendance, and whether group counseling could have a positive effect on attendance, self-concept, and attitudes toward school. The PI expected to find a link between low self-concept, negative attitudes toward school and poor attendance. The results of this ARS do not support this premise. Prior to the intervention, only half of the participants Piers Harris 2 scores

indicated low self-concept, and teachers rated only 4 of the study participants self-concept as "negative" or "very negative." Teacher-rated attitudes toward school were similar with only 3 of the students attitudes toward school considered negative.

While Baker (2000) found increases in self-concept scores, as measured by the Piers-Harris, for each of the 6 participants in her secondary group, in this ARS, Piers-Harris 2 post-intervention scores were mixed. Only 5 of the 10 students who took the scale had increases in self-concept scores, with increases between 3 and 6 points. It must be said that these relatively small changes should be interpreted cautiously, in light of data from other sources. The pre- and post-tests were administered approximately 12 weeks apart, and in some cases, these changes were the result of only one or two items being endorsed differently. Teachers did, however, perceive positive changes in self-concept for 12 of the participants and attitudes toward school for 9 of the participants during the intervention. In addition, 15 of the 18 students reported that the group had "helped them like school more."

Thirteen of the 18 participants in this ARS had fewer absences during the intervention period. These results are consistent with the results of Keat, et al. (1984), Waltzer (1984), and Baker (2000) who found that group counseling resulted in improved attendance. While the improvement in attendance for thirteen participants is encouraging, it may not necessarily be concluded that the intervention caused the change. Other variables that cannot be controlled for in an action research design, such as school-wide attendance incentives or parent contacts by the school or system attendance team, could have also played a role. However, teacher and student perceptions and the PI's case notes indicate that the intervention played a role in improved attendance for a number of the students. Based on the enthusiasm of the students and the support of the school's faculty and administration, the PI has chosen to continue the groups through the

end of the school year, and to include similar attendance groups in the school's counseling and guidance plan.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

There are several limitations to this study's findings. The intervention took place over a relatively short period of time and, at the time of this report, the data only provide a comparison between the first nine weeks of the intervention period and the nine weeks immediately prior to the intervention. Additional research examining whether improvements in attendance are sustained after the intervention concludes would be beneficial. Studies lengthening the intervention period might also be useful.

Another limitation is that the study included a relatively small sample size. Replication of this study by this PI or others would provide additional insights into the effectiveness of group counseling to improve attendance. Future research might also shed light into the characteristics of students most likely to benefit from group counseling, and those who might benefit from other interventions. An additional limitation is that only students in grades 3, 4, and 5 had a standardized measure of self-concept (the Piers-Harris 2). In future studies, it might be helpful to use an instrument that would be appropriate for students at all grade levels.

Conclusions

Regular school attendance is critically important to student achievement. This ARS suggests that group counseling can have a positive effect on attendance. The relatively simple design could be easily replicated in other schools. While ARS results cannot be universally generalized (Mills, 2011), this study will help the PI/school counselor support her schools efforts to improve student attendance and may add to the counseling profession's understanding of how to effectively help elementary students overcome obstacles to regular school attendance.

References

Baker, D. (2000). Using groups to reduce elementary school absenteeism. *Social Work in*

   Education. 22(1), 46-53.

Baker, M., Sigmon, J., & Nugent, M. (2001). *Truancy reduction: Keeping students in school.*

   (Report No. NCJ-188947). Rockville, MD: National Criminal Justice Reference Service.

Barrington, B. L., & Hendricks, B. (1989). Differentiating characteristics of high school

   graduates, dropouts, and nongraduates. *Journal of Educational Research, 89,* 309-319.

   (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED468296)

Bell, A. J., Rosen, L. A., & Dynlacht, D. (1994). Truancy intervention. *Journal of Research and*

   Development in Education, 27, 203-211.

Carlson, S., Clark, J. P., Nerad, D., & Taylor, J. (1993). School social work with children at risk

   and their families. *School Social Work Journal, 17*(2), 45-46.

Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical*

   importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades. National Center for

   Children in Poverty. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf

Epstein, J. L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance

   through family and community involvement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 95*,

   308-319.

Fallis, R. K., & Opotow, S. (2003). Are students failing school or are schools failing students?

   Class cutting in high school. *Journal of Social Issues, 59,* 103-119.

Ford, J., & Sutphen, R. D. (1996). Early intervention to improve attendance in elementary school

   for at-risk children: A pilot program. *Social Work in Education, 18*(2), 95-102.

Gottfried, M. A., (2009). Evaluating the relationship between student attendance and

achievement in urban elementary and middle schools: An instrumental variable approach.

American Educational Research Journal, 47, 234-265. Doi:10.3102/0002831209350494

Hallfors, D., Vevea, J. L., Iritani, B., Cho, H., Khatapoush, S., & Saxe, L. (2002). Truancy, grade

point average, and sexual activity: A meta-analysis of risk indicators for youth substance

use. *Journal of Social Health, 72,* 205-211.

Keat, D. B. II, Metzger, K. L., Raykovitz, D., & McDonald, J. (1985). Multimodal counseling:

Motivating children to attend school through friendship groups. *Humanistic Education*

and Development, 23, 166.175.

Lehr, C. A., Sinclair, M. F., & Christenson, S. L. (2004). Addressing student engagement and

truancy prevention during the elementary school years: A replication study of the Check

& Connect model. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At-Risk, 9*, 279-301.

McPartland, J. M. (1994). Dropout prevention in theory and practice. In R. J. Rossi (Ed.),

Schools and students at risk: Context and framework for positive change (pp. 255-276).

New York: Teachers College Press.

Mills, G. E. (2011). *Action research. A guide for the teacher researcher* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle

River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

National Center for School Engagement (2005). *What research says about family-school-*

community partnerships. Retrieved from http://www.schoolengagement.org/

TruancypreventionRegistry/ Admin/Resources/Resources/

WhatResearchSaysAboutFamily-School-Community Partnerships.pdf

Newsome, W. S., Anderson-Butcher, D., Fink, J., Hall, L., & Huffer, J. (2008). The impact of school social work services on student absenteeism and risk factors related to school truancy. *School Social Work Journal, 32*(2), 21-38.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), P.L. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425. Retrieved from http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdfPiers, E. V., & Herzberg, D. S. (1983). *Piers-Harris children's self-concept scale: Manual*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.

Piers, E. V., & Herzberg, D. S. (2005). *Piers-Harris 2. Piers-Harris children's self-concept scale: Manual* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.

Romero, M., & Lee, Y-S. (2007). *A national portrait of chronic absenteeism in the early grades*. The National Center for Children in Poverty. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/ publications/pdf/text_771.pdf

Rumberger, R. W. (1995). Dropping out of middle school. *American Educational Research Journal, 32,* 385-625.

Sheldon, S. B. (2007). Improving student attendance with school, family, and community partnerships. *The Journal of Educational Research, 100*, 267-275.

Waltzer, F. (1984). Using a behavioral approach with chronic truants. *Social Work in Education, 6,* 193-200.

Wang, X., Blomberg, T. G., & Li, S. D. (2005). Comparison of the educational deficiencies of delinquent and nondelinquent students. *Evaluation Review, 29,* 291-312.

Appendix 1

Dear

As you know, I am conducting a research study looking at the impact of group counseling on self-concept, attitudes toward school, and attendance. I would appreciate your input on the following questions regarding your student participating in this group. Please know that I will keep all of your comments confidential. Thanks very much!

Student: _____

1. How would you rate this student's self-concept <u>prior to</u> the group counseling intervention that began in January 2011?

(Circle One)   Very Positive   Positive   Neutral   Negative   Very Negative

Comments:

_____

2. How would you rate this student's self-concept <u>now</u> (March 2011) after 10 weeks of group counseling?

(Circle One)   Very Positive   Positive   Neutral   Negative   Very Negative

If you perceive a change in self-concept, to what do you attribute the change?

_____

Comments:

_____

3. How would you rate this student's attitude toward school <u>prior to</u> the group counseling intervention that began in January 2011?

(Circle One)   Very Positive   Positive   Neutral   Negative   Very Negative

Comments:

_____

4. How would you rate this student's attitude toward school now (in March 2011) after 10 weeks of group counseling?

(Circle One)   Very Positive   Positive   Neutral   Negative   Very Negative

If you perceive a change in this student's attitude toward school, to what do you attribute the change?

_____

Comments:

_____

ATTENDANCE DATA:

This student missed _____ days during the 10 weeks immediately prior to the group counseling intervention.

She/he missed _____ days during the first 10 weeks of the group counseling intervention.

To what do you attribute the (improvement/lack of improvement/lack of change) in attendance during this time period?

_____

Please provide any additional feedback on this group counseling intervention that may help me improve future interventions:

_____

Appendix 2

Awesome Attendance Group Evaluation

(Circle One)

This group helped me like myself better: Yes   No   Don't Know

This group helped me like coming to school more: Yes   No Don't Know

This group helped me have better attendance: Yes No Don't Know

One thing I liked about this group is: _____

One thing I didn't like about this group is: _____

One thing I learned in group is: _____

One thing that would make group better is: _____