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Factors Contributing to the Problem of Student Absenteeism in a Rural School

A dissertation in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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ABSTRACT

Student attendance would seem to be a vital link in measuring student success in school. If students are not in school, they miss instruction from the teacher. Without instruction it seems incredibly difficult to complete the work needed to pass classes and be successful in school. The research explored the problem of practice of student absenteeism in a rural school. The study was conducted using mixed methods research methodology, specifically a sequential mixed methods research design. The research questions were as follows: (1) What explicit or implicit messages are parents and the school sending about school attendance? (2) What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy? (2) What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school? Quantitative data was collected to answer the question of whether or not the participating school had an attendance problem and to create a demographic profile of students who are chronically absent. Qualitative data was collected to better understand the nature of the problem, potential causes of the problem, and how to possibly create interventions to help solve the problem. In answering the research questions findings suggest the participating school does have an attendance problem and can be related to three major themes: (1) The messages sent and received by families and employees of the school, (2) the frustrating nature of an unenforced attendance policy, (3) the attitudes and values of parents and employees of the school regarding attendance and how they communicate those values with students. Specific recommendations are made to address the implications of continuing with an attendance policy perceived to be ineffective and in regards to interventions that may be successful at slowing the tide of chronic absenteeism in the participating school.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all my kids. Baylee, Ryleigh, Sean, and Avery your talents and your potential outshine anything I could ever hope to do. I love you so. To all my students past and present, you are capable of great things and you will always be my kids.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the problem of practice of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School; including why students miss so much school. Research is thorough; and supports the idea that missing school may be harmful for student achievement (Gottfried, 2010). It is well understood, at some point and time in their K-12 career, most students will need to be absent from school on occasion. The issue is not with occasional absence, but rather; with absence that is frequent, prolonged, or for illegitimate reasons. This study searched to identify the risk factors for student absence, sought answers to the why behind excessive student absenteeism, and attempted to provide potential solutions to the problem of student absenteeism that affects Ridgeview School.

Problem Statement

The problem of practice is defined as the gap between the current state of high rates of student absenteeism and the desired state of little to no student absenteeism. The problem of poor student attendance is currently plaguing Ridgeview School. For example, in 2013-2014 there were two cases of students missing as many as 40 school days, or 22% of the school year. District administrators are in agreement that attendance is something that needs attention. Student absenteeism may lead to increased drop-out rates which negatively affects school finances (Flaherty, Sutphen & Ely, 2012; Kearney, 2008). Finally, students who are absent from school may cause trouble in the community by exhibiting delinquent behavior (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d).

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues

Student absenteeism is an instructional issue because teachers cannot teach students who are not in attendance. Students who are chronically absent miss crucial instruction and typically

fall behind their peers (Chang & Romero, 2008). Teachers sacrifice instructional time with other students to catch-up students who are absent. Student absenteeism is a systemic issue because it affects whole school achievement. As individual states ramp up accountability measures, Ridgeview's state is no different. Ridgeview School is "graded" on student assessment scores and graduation rates among other things. Student absenteeism has the potential to affect these areas because some students who are excessively absent may not score as well on state assessments as they would if they were in school. Excessive absenteeism has also been shown to lead to an increased risk for dropping-out of school altogether which would negatively affect accountability measurements (Office of Juvenile and Delinquency Prevention, n.d).

Is Directly Observable

Student absenteeism is directly observable. Teachers in Ridgeview School district often notice the patterns and trends of student absence. Additionally, school districts are required to collect a multitude of data on attendance. Although truancy laws vary from state to state, each state has a bar for truancy and data must be collected on any student labeled truant. Chronic absence is directly observable by tracking attendance patterns. Qualitative data could also be useful in measuring the perceived effect student absenteeism has on the community or on parent/student perception of the reasons behind student absenteeism.

Is Actionable

Student absenteeism is actionable. Many studies show that properly timed interventions before the chronic absences become entrenched habits are effective at curbing absence (Chang & Romero, 2008; Cole, 2011;.OJJDP, n.d.). Interventions are aimed at better connecting students and their families to the school, often through the use of a mentoring program, and by offering incentives to students who exhibit exemplary or improved patterns of attendance. Connecting

students and families to the school and district involves creating a sense of trust, and creating a safe place to voice concerns, which often happens with a mentor/mentee relationship.

Connects to Broader Strategy of Improvement

The over-arching goal of every portion of Ridgeview School's Action plan is increased student achievement. Every goal is designed to provide an education that will lead to better outcomes for students. Research shows improving attendance rates for students could possibly help meet those goals by improving student achievement. A study completed in Ohio showed a moderate positive relationship between student achievement and student attendance (Roby, 2003). Gottfried (2010) says it makes sense that students with better attendance have better grades simply because the increased seat time accounts for greater exposure to academic concepts. Studies show students who have good attendance tend to make better grades and score better on standardized tests (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ready, 2010).

Improving rates of attendance and reducing chronic absence connects to the school's broader strategy of improvement and action plan, by directly aligning with the first goal of Ridgeview School's Action Plan, "Retain Students in the District." We are a small district and losing students hurts in many ways. Losing students hurts sports and activities because we might not have the numbers needed to compete. Low numbers can have a negative impact on afterschool programs where grants require a minimum number of participants. An increase in drop outs or transfer rates impacts funding negatively, which decreases available opportunities to other students in the district.

The first action step under Board Goal 1 is "Increase by 5% the number of students in grades 7-12 who participate in at least one extra-curricular activity." The district believes connecting students to outside activities, and to a caring adult who coaches or sponsors that

activity, will keep them in district and potentially in school by keeping them from leaving school prior to completion. This is also the main theme of many of the interventions to combat chronic absenteeism and truancy in the literature (Cole, 2011).

Is High Leverage

The impact of addressing student absenteeism is high-leverage because attendance (good or poor) may affect students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. The need for creating interventions for student absenteeism in our district is critical. Research indicates students who are truant are more likely to develop substance abuse problems, engage in delinquent and criminal activity, drop-out of school, and be unemployed after completion of schooling (Flaherty, Sutphen, & Ely, 2012; Kearney, 2008; OJJDP, n.d.). Students who are chronically absent can easily be denied opportunities to achieve by missing school too often. The consequences of not addressing attendance as a facet of student achievement are serious, and may result in students failing to reach their full potential.

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Research Questions

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The research questions guiding the study were open-ended and intended to gauge perceptions about attendance. If the district has determined there is a problem with student absenteeism, we need to determine why we are having a problem and how we might solve it. Therefore, the following questions guided this study:

1. What explicit or implicit messages are sent about school attendance? The messages students hear from family, school, and community are important and long-lasting. This question is designed to examine the messages students are hearing from Ridgeview School and community about school attendance. When speaking of explicit messages, this study gathered data about the current attendance policy. Was the message coming

from policy being heard and understood by students, parents, and teachers? Implicit messages are those the school and community send indirectly. Were we indirectly supporting habits of chronic student absenteeism?

2. What was the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy? The current attendance policy played a large role in determining the messages being sent to parents and community members about the value Ridgeview School places on attendance. The aim of this question was to uncover the perceptions stakeholders hold about our attendance policy. Did they believe the policy is effective? Was the policy clearly communicated?

3. What was the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school? It seems simple; if all stakeholders found value in good attendance then chronic student absenteeism would not be a problem. However, this question was designed to go further than just saying stakeholders find no value. The goal of this question was to find out why stakeholders hold the opinions or feelings they do about school attendance. Only by understanding why stakeholders value attendance at the level they do would the study be able to explore and make recommendations about how to increase the value placed on school attendance.

Overview of Methodology

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2015). Explanatory sequential design describes the method of data collection involving both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected first and was contextual as it is specific to our district. I gathered attendance data from Power School to determine exactly

how much school students have missed. I also distributed surveys to parents at Ridgeview

School enrollment to gather quantitative data on student absenteeism.

The qualitative data was collected after the quantitative data and was used to further

explain the quantitative data. The perceptual data I gathered came mainly from interviews. I

conducted interviews with numerous stakeholders to determine attitudes and values concerning

student absenteeism. The stakeholders I interviewed included parents, administrators, and

teachers. Each of these groups provided me with more detailed information about the issue of

student absenteeism, and each helped me investigate the root cause of why some students miss

excessive amounts of school. Teacher and administrative interviews also led me to data which

explained their thoughts on the potential connection between student achievement and student

absenteeism.

Interviews with multiple stakeholders also added credibility to the study.   The types of

information the interviews collected included attitudes and values placed on education, the

effects of student absenteeism on student achievement, and the effect motivation has on student

attendance. The interviews also collected data speaking to the relationship between teacher

absence and student absence, as well as the perceived effectiveness of the district's absence

policy. Finally, the information gathered from the interviews helped answer the question of

whether or not our community views attendance as a "big issue." The study helped determine

whether or not Ridgeview School and community views attendance as a critical piece of student

success, and why or why not.

The data were initially analyzed by coding participant's narratives and using those codes

to determine what participants value about student attendance. Using the codes to better

understand the data, patterns emerged which allowed me to begin grouping the codes. From

these patterns, themes emerged combining thoughts about attendance into an idea or theme about student absenteeism the data supports. Those themes were then interpreted to discover the meaning behind the data.

Positionality

This section is designed to define and describe the positionality of the researcher. Positionality refers to my own experiences and life and how those things fit into the context in which I am studying. Positionality affects the stance I take on student absenteeism issues, how I feel about student absenteeism issues, and even why I chose to study attendance. My position on issues determines how I created my research tools, and how I related to responses of my participants. My positionality affects how I fit into the context and how my participants view me as a researcher and how they view the research I conduct.

Researcher's Role

My current role in Ridgeview School is a classroom teacher part-time and a role called Dean of Students part-time. My Dean of Students role is new; yet the main reason I feel I was hired to take on this role is because of my passion for students and my drive toward success for every student. I am currently working toward finding ways to help all students find success in secondary and post-secondary institutions and I view attendance as a pillar of success for all kids.

I am also a member of the community the study will be taking place in. I have lived in the town for ten years and have become an adopted member of the Ridgeview community. I feel as though people in this town trust me, and they know I have the best interest of their students at the core of everything I do. I believe this well-established position will provide support for my

goals of solving the problem of excessive student absenteeism. I view my role as a researcher as one of a partner in the attempt to solve the problem of excessive student absenteeism.

Assumptions

The biases I bring to the study come from my background as a Caucasian female in a middle-class home. School attendance was valued strongly because my parents saw it as a chance at upward mobility. Neither of my parents attended college and I was pushed from a young age to attend school, work hard, and go to college. This causes me to wrestle with an assumption that all parents value school attendance and highly value school success when this is not necessarily true. I make the assumption that a good education can improve your life and open doors to better opportunities. At the same time I make the assumption that a good education comes from regularly attending school. I also operate under the assumption that everyone wants an education and is able to see the value of an education to their future. That leads to my final assumption that when you see the value in something, and you want something, you are willing to show up and work hard for it. It will be important for me to constantly recognize my experiences and background have formed these biases and created these assumptions as I conduct my study.

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Definition of Key Terms

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Attendance Intervention– Attendance interventions are attempts by the school to improve the level of attendance on a student by student level.

Chronic Absenteeism– Student absenteeism that is frequent, prolonged, or excessive. Chronic absenteeism is frequently excused by parents.

Student Absenteeism– The term that will be used throughout this dissertation to encompass all student absence both excused and unexcused.

Student Achievement– The amount of content a student is able to learn and master in a set time, often measured each year of formal schooling.

Truancy– Being absent from school without permission.

Organization of the Dissertation

Directly following this chapter is Chapter 2– a review of the literature. The Literature Review situated the problem of student absenteeism in the literature that already exists. The literature review was also used to explore the different types of absence and show, in this study, how they all fall under the umbrella of student absenteeism. The literature review discussed theory and the idea of "tenacity" academic mindsets as a subset of attendance. The literature review explored some possible interventions attempted by other authors and what has worked in other contexts. Finally, Chapter 2 introduced the conceptual framework which at its most basic is a map of how the literature, existing theories, and my professional experience in my context all fit together.

Chapter 3– Inquiry Methods is the next chapter in the dissertation. The Inquiry Methods section is a break-down of the methods used in the study. Chapter 3 focused on the research paradigm used and provided an explanation of why I chose that particular method. This chapter also provided more detail about the context of the study. Chapter 3 outlined sample selection criteria, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. Chapter 3– Inquiry Methods ended with a description of the trustworthiness of the study and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

CHAPTER TWO- LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the problem of practice of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School; including why students are missing so much school. I searched for literature that would speak to the issue of student absenteeism to identify potential solutions to the problem of excessive student absenteeism. I used many databases including the University of Arkansas library, Ebsco, the ERIC database, and Google scholar to find information regarding student absenteeism. Table 2.1 presents the number and types of sources reviewed:

Table 2.1 *Number and Types of Sources Reviewed*

Type of Source	Number Reviewed
Peer Reviewed Articles	40
Scholarly Books	3
Government Reports	10
Scholarly Websites	7

I used many search terms during the course of my search. I used terms such as, "effectiveness of school attendance policies," "school attendance policies," "systems theory" "academic mindsets" "noncognitive skills" "student tenacity" "student attendance," "truancy", "chronic absence," and "student attendance interventions" to find information for my study.

Review of the Literature

The following sections present topic areas that were explored to further understand the problem of student absenteeism: definition of student absenteeism, noncognitive skills and adolescent development factors that promote attendance, what makes student absenteeism a

problem, importance of attendance, effectiveness of school attendance policies, and interventions to combat student absenteeism.

Definition of Student Absenteeism

Truancy is defined differently from state to state, as well as defined differently in research studies. Truancy is often defined as, "missing school without permission" ("Truant" n.d.). The state of Kansas defines truancy as missing three unexcused days in a row, five unexcused days in a semester, or seven unexcused days in a school year (School Attendance, Curriculum, and Accreditation, 2012). Every state in the United States has compulsory attendance laws, making K-12 school attendance mandatory; but the level of intensity of those laws varies from state to state (Nolan, Cole, Wroughton, Clayton-Code, & Riffe, 2013). Student absenteeism can become a problem at any age. Chang and Romero (2008) point toward the importance of identifying "chronic early absence" or "students missing an extended period of school when both excused and unexcused absences are taken into account" (p. 3). The National Center for School Engagement (2006) points out that truancy can be absences that are excused by parents, because it is the school that determines the validity of excused absences, not the parents.

Because the definitions of truancy are varied and inconsistent between states, studies, and authors, the term this study used was "student absenteeism." This term encompassed all student absence, whether excused or unexcused. This term fit the context because the challenges unique to our district are students missing school with parental knowledge (and often support) who would not fall under the typical "truant" umbrella.

Noncognitive Skills and Adolescent Development Factors that Promote Attendance

Noncognitive skills and adolescent development factors are important when discussing student attendance. Students who are consistently absent may not have had opportunities to develop noncognitive skills that would make attending school easier and more rewarding. Students who experience excessive absenteeism may also share early adolescent development factors that make relating to their peers and engaging in their environment more difficult. One adolescent development factor that may contribute to students experiencing excessive absenteeism is their affiliation with a peer group.

Adolescent affiliation with peer groups is often viewed as a crucial part of growing up. Studies show that as children grow older they begin to individuate from their family group and become more affiliated with peer groups (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993). Adolescent peer groups can be based on many things, but are often forged based on commonalities and student interests (Brown et al., 1993). Adolescents who are affiliated with groups who participate in deviant behavior such as skipping school, drug use, and alcohol use are more likely to engage in those activities as well. In fact, social factors were presented in one study as one of the strongest predictors of individual students' behavior (Dolcini & Adler, 1994). If students have a strong influence of friends who are more likely to skip school, that student will possibly have a greater problem with absenteeism as well. Brown et al. (1993) mentions that this does not mean that parents have no control over adolescent behavior. Usually parents have already shaped the disposition of the child and that disposition and those personality traits influence the peer group the child selects as an adolescent (p. 469).

It also stands to reason that if students are engaged at school and with their peers, they are less likely to affiliate with groups of students who will provide a greater negative influence.

Research defines student engagement as a commitment to school, and participation in the school environment (Christenson et al., 2008). It is important to consider the role caring adult relationships play in the lives of students, including their decision to affiliate with negative or positive peer groups. Even though adolescents may individuate from the family and parental message, there is still the opportunity to caring adults– particularly at the school level, to make a positive impact on kids.

Noncognitive skills or attributes are defined as, "academically and occupationally relevant skills and traits that are not specifically intellectual or analytical in nature. They include a range of personality and motivational habits and attitudes that facilitate functioning well in school" (Rosen, Glennie, Dalton, Lennon, & Bozick, 2010, p. 1). Student absenteeism in some students may be a sign they do not possess the noncognitive attributes such as perseverance, motivation, or self-regulation often viewed as necessary for success in school and in post-secondary education and the workforce. Research has shown that student attitudes and self-belief systems influence their behavior and their academic success (Lipnevich & Rogers, 2012). Studies have shown positive results of school programs aimed at reducing absence by increasing noncognitive skills such as self-confidence and motivation (Holmlund & Silva, 2014).

Research has shown a relationship between noncognitive skills and student achievement, yet an even more powerful relationship is now being seen between noncognitive skills and post-secondary and employment outcomes for students (Rosen et al., 2010). One study goes so far as to say that noncognitive behaviors are as important, or even more important, than cognitive behaviors when it comes to post-secondary success (Lleras, 2008). Motivation and student conscientiousness and how those affect attendance are critical skills for success in the workplace. One study stated that researchers have spent time speculating that school absence might indicate

a predisposition to job absence. Lounsbury, Steel, Loveland, and Gibson (2003) said "Possibly, adolescents evidencing proclivities for absenteeism from school mature into adults with a proclivity for absence from work" (p. 463). Research has shown those noncognitive skills are often developed and reinforced at an early age (Holmlund & Silva, 2014). Lipnevich and Rogers (2012) have shown that age is critical and that children's personality related variables may impact their achievement as early as preschool (p. 173).

Problems Associated with Student Absenteeism

Student absenteeism may affect all parts of a school system. The student who is chronically absent or truant may fall behind, leading to poor grades, and an increased risk of dropping out (Office of Juvenile and Delinquency Prevention, n.d). Shannon and Bylsma (2003) state, "Risk of dropping out is linked to negative self-perceptions or low self-esteem, low aspirations, being bored or alienated by school, and pursuing alternatives such as taking jobs or helping families" (p. 22). Other students could be affected by an interrupted learning environment when teachers are trying to catch up chronically absent or truant students (Chang & Romero, 2008). Principals, counselors, and school office staff might spend an inordinate amount of their day contacting parents or tracking down those students who are chronically absent or truant (Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012). The community is affected legally by the potential for increased criminal activity, financially by a less educated workforce, and burdened sociologically by providing an increase in social services (Maynard et al., 2012).

A vast majority of the studies conducted on student absenteeism focused on the homogeneity of truant and absent students. The focus was placed on how the students were alike, assuming some commonality between the students that caused them all to miss school. The research focuses primarily on the low-socioeconomic status of students who miss school

(Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2006; Chang & Romero, 2008). Students from low-income households miss school for many reasons including; greater health issues, transportation problems, or nonparticipation in early childhood education (Chang & Romero, 2008). Shannon and Bylsma (2003) report students who come from low-income families are three times more likely to drop out of school than students from more affluent families. Ready (2010) provides a statistic in regards to the relationship between low socioeconomic status and student absenteeism by stating, "Compared to more affluent students, children living in poverty are 25 percent more likely to miss three or more days of school per month" (p. 272).

Maynard et al. (2012) contradicted this common belief and instead studied the heterogeneity of truant youth and presented evidence to suggest that truant youth are very heterogeneous and fit into different typologies. This study was conducted using both quantitative data from the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health; and qualitative data using interviews with a random sample of youth who took part in the survey. This is critical in our district because Ridgeview students who struggle with excessive absenteeism are different in key areas. Students in Ridgeview School who miss school come from both affluent and low socioeconomic households, they vary in age, and they vary in level of parental engagement. The students who have high rates of student absenteeism all have different reasons for why they do not attend school. At first glance this thought could be discouraging because the students involved seem to come from all different walks of life, have varying degrees of support at home, and seem to have little in common. Finding an intervention that is likely to work for all students might be more difficult when a school is dealing with many different background causes of student absenteeism.

Student absenteeism is a problem when it becomes excessive. It is an accepted idea that situations will arise that will cause students to miss school. However, it is when student absenteeism is seen as acceptable and is allowed to persist that it becomes an issue both for individual students and for schools. Roby (2003) says, "Good weather, vacations, and peer group pressure excuses effect daily attendance averages and student achievement to a greater degree than illnesses and family deaths" (p. 5). This means it is not the occasional legitimate absence that is affecting students, but the thoughtless day or hour here or there that is stolen from the school day. Many parents do not realize or understand how quickly one or two absences a month might affect a child's learning or ability to keep up with what is happening in the classroom (Chang & Romero, 2008). Education is a scaffold built upon itself, where students must learn early concepts to proceed onto more rigorous material and student absenteeism may cause students to miss out on important pieces of building that scaffolding simply because they are not in attendance at school.

Importance of Attendance

Attendance is important because students who have better attendance tend to make better grades, have better outcomes at the completion of schooling, and score better on standardized tests (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Lamdin, 1996; Nolan et al., 2013; Ready, 2010). When all other factors are held constant, Lamdin (1996) reports that good attendance has a positive influence on student performance. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) reiterate this point by describing the increase in the achievement gap at all levels of schooling between students who struggle with absenteeism and students who attend school. A study done in fourth, sixth, and twelfth grades in Ohio showed moderate positive relationships between student achievement and student attendance (Roby, 2003). Students with low rates of absenteeism often score better on standardized tests

than students with high rates of absenteeism (Sheldon, 2007). Students who attended school regularly scored 15 to 20 points higher on standardized tests. As the authors reported, that is "… a bigger achievement gap than the one separating poor students and English language learners from better-performing peer groups" (Sparks, 2010, p. 13). Gottfried (2010) argues that it makes sense for students with better attendance to most often experience greater academic success strictly upon the greater amount of seat time equaling greater exposure to academic content.

Parents recognize the importance of attendance. Almost all parents want their children to do well in school (Mapp, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Although many parents find value in school attendance, the same study found that many parents of students struggling with high rates of student absenteeism were less likely to think their children's safety was at risk if they were not at school. Dalziel and Henthorne (2005) also reported, "Fewer parents of children with school attendance problems believed that pupils who did not attend regularly would do badly in their schoolwork, and similarly, a smaller proportion of these parents/carers believed that young people needed qualifications" (p. 19). Clearly there is much work to do in communicating with parents the value of school attendance.

Another critical piece of the importance of attendance relates to the poor choices students can easily make when they do not attend school. Students who are experiencing excessive absenteeism are often found to be more likely to develop substance abuse problems, experience teen pregnancy, and/or have family problems (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Henry and Thornberry (2010) provide insight into the connection between truancy and substance abuse:

> …results suggest that truancy is a particularly salient predictor of adolescent substance use. Not only is truancy associated with an increased odds of initiation of substance

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abuse, but once an adolescent initiates substance use, truancy is also related to a substantial escalation of use (p. 123).

Students who experience excessive student absenteeism are often more likely than students who attend regularly to drop out of school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) also describe the research that shows oftentimes drop-outs begin exhibiting long-term patterns of behaviors that begin distancing them from education at an early age. Often the patterns of escalating student absenteeism over the years of school is an indicator that students are on track to dropping out of school when compared with attendance rates of students whom go on to graduate (Sparks, 2006). Truancy is described as a "problem that affects multiple levels of society" (Fantuzzo et al., 2005). Student absenteeism could be described the same way. When students do not attend school, it may lead to larger, unintended consequences including trouble in the community such as vandalism and increased criminal activity, substance abuse, dropping out of school, and poor job outcomes later in life (Fantuzzo et al., 2005, p. 657).

The importance of attending school is multi-faceted but it primarily involves the ideas that student absenteeism may affect student achievement and that excessive student absenteeism may create problems for families, schools, and communities when students are not in school (Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). School attendance is important because it affords students opportunities to learn the concepts and skills that will allow students to seek additional schooling or training at the completion of school in order to gain employment. School also serves the important task of providing a safe place for children.

Effectiveness of School Attendance Policies

School attendance policies are a staple of student handbooks across the country. The quality of written attendance policies may vary, but it is a common practice to create and implement an attendance policy. Attendance policies can be lengthy and very in-depth. Parents sometimes need help deciphering the language related to attendance policies.

Sheldon and Epstein (2004) found that keeping parents informed about attendance policies and expectations was found to be one of three practices in the study that had the strongest ability to lower rates of absenteeism. This was a surprise to the researchers, seeing as respondents initially reported that "orienting parents to school expectations and policies about attendance was widely implemented, but was perceived to be among the least effective practices for improving attendance" (p. 48).

Another potential problem related to school attendance policies is the intent and focus of the attendance policies. A vast majority of attendance policies are focused on truancy and the punitive measures schools will take to keep students from being truant (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2006). The report from the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2006) explained it as a "disincentive" or punishment. Suspension for poor attendance may only exacerbate and intensify the feelings students have that they do not belong in school and it may exacerbate withdrawal behavior and convince students they do not belong in school at all, leading them to drop out (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). Many policies in schools take attendance into account when it comes to grading (e.g., no make-up work for unexcused absences) or the policies spell out a loss of privileges for students who have unexcused absences. Punitive policies are common across the country. Reardon (2008) found that the most frequent type of attendance policy in Florida was the punitive policy. Yet many students who struggle with

student absenteeism are young and are not necessarily viewed as being truant or absent without excuse. The policies set out the escalating consequences of absenteeism without describing why attendance matters. The policies fail to discuss the idea that attendance matters and is critical to student success even in kindergarten or first grade. It is easy to see why many parents do not believe one or two absences a month can add up to an achievement problem for their child, if that is not explained by the school or shown with the attendance policy.

Unfortunately the literature is clear that school attendance policies as written are often ineffective because they are reactive (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2006). The policies only kick in when students have been absent excessively. The most ineffective policies seem to only address students who are truant, or absent without excuse and do not even take into consideration the idea of excessive student absenteeism that is excused by parents (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2006). School attendance policies will continue to be less effective than they could be until schools begin to use the policies as proactive and preventative tools to decrease student absenteeism.

The research is scant when it comes to what makes a policy effective. Reardon (2008) found no significant relationship between the type of policy implemented and the policy's effectiveness across sixty-seven districts in Florida. Shannon and Bylsma (2003) acknowledge there is a connection between school attendance and discipline policies and students who drop-out; but the study cautions that dropping out is a multi-faceted issue and should not be attributed to only one cause. That study does not specifically state any attendance policy that might be effective for all schools. Some school districts have taken a different angle to try to move away from punitive measures that cause students to miss more school (e.g., suspension) when they are already missing school to begin with. There are also schools that have incentivized attendance

(Vaishnav 2005). The incentives include everything from gift cards for good attendance to cash for perfect attendance. Kube and Ratigan (1992) discuss the importance of creating a system where students monitor themselves and allow that incentives are a good way to achieve that self-monitoring. There is no universal guideline for the most effective type of policy, how to create a good attendance policy, or how to share the policy with parents. Policies vary so much based on different school factors and it appears there is no one size fits all policy that will work for every school in the literature. Although many studies referenced what not to do, or ways to make policies more effective, there is little research addressing ways for schools to create effective attendance policies (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2006).

The research that does speak to the effectiveness of attendance policies is clear. Attendance policies must set clear standards and high-expectations for students in order to help students develop self-discipline (Railsback, 2004). The policies should encourage students to attend, rather than just be "zero-tolerance" punitive policies (Kube & Ratigan, 1992; Railsback, 2004). The policy needs to be clearly communicated to both students and parents and consistently enforced (Kube & Ratigan, 1992; Railsback, 2004). The ultimate goal of an effective attendance policy is to change the behavior of the chronically absent student, not to punish them.

Interventions to Combat Student Absenteeism

The literature related to student absenteeism came from two main sources: the juvenile justice system and educational journals. It is critical schools find positive interventions to combat student absenteeism, because of the implications for students when we do not find solutions. It begins with schools and education, yet the juvenile justice systems have to be

involved when schools are not able to find solutions. This topic is one in which the stakes are high, often impacting and affecting students long after they have left school.

Student absenteeism is a problem that is difficult to change but there are interventions in the literature that may lead to a decrease in student absence. Interventions often work best when targeted toward young students before the absences become chronic or before truancy patterns become an entrenched problem and are more difficult to alter (OJDP, n.d.). One example of such a program is the Check and Connect program (Cole, 2011). Check and Connect is an intervention program aimed at elementary and middle school students; designed to begin building the habits of staying in school in order to increase graduation rates. As Cole (2011) states, "Key features of the program include relationship building, routine monitoring of alterable indicators, individualized and timely interventions, long-term commitment, motivation and continuity regarding education, problem solving, and affiliation with school and learning" (p. 64). The Check and Connect intervention provides ways for students to connect to important adults in the school system and the community in order to hold them accountable for their attendance.

Attendance interventions also commonly use incentives for good attendance. Incentives can be material or emotional. Emotional incentives are often provided in elementary and middle schools with the use of recognition at assemblies for good attendance and for improved attendance rates. Material incentives such as stickers, pens or pencils, or small toys are sometimes used in conjunction with emotional incentives in order to promote positive attendance habits (Balfanz &Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008; Cole, 2011). Cole (2011) specifically found that incentives work for elementary students. In this study, students who attended school, and had perfect attendance were recognized and celebrated. In a different incentive program

students who met attendance goals, or showed measurable improvement were rewarded for that improvement. The reward/incentive method has been most used to combat chronic absenteeism at the elementary level, before students begin showing patterns of truancy (Cole, 2011).

Student absenteeism and the interventions to address it may change as students reach high school. One intervention method mentioned is to provide a mentor for students who present risk factors for absenteeism (Cole, 2011; OJDP, n.d.). Mentors help students connect to school because they present a caring, positive relationship with an adult in the building.   Mentors also can be critical in addressing alterable behaviors early, before absenteeism becomes a problem (Cole, 2011).

There exists a vital connection between school and home factors in preventing truancy and identifying those students at risk for truancy (Mapp, 2003). The more closely parents are connected to the school; the more they set high expectations, attend school events and parent teacher conferences, and have an open line of communication with teachers and school officials— the more likely their child is to develop good attendance patterns (Sheldon, 2007). Family and community involvement in education is also linked to improvements in attendance (Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007). Sheldon (2007) states that school efforts to include families and community members are often uncoordinated. Family, school, and community partnerships are often overlooked or relationships are created sporadically. Sheldon (2007) found that when a strong program of school, family, and community partnership programs were implemented in Ohio grade schools, student attendance was improved. This was done by providing participating schools with tools and guidelines for establishing, maintaining, and improving school and family partnerships. The schools in this study did not rely on individual members of the school community to connect parents to the school. Instead the schools created action teams and

committees that focused on connecting all families in the school to the school's message (Sheldon, 2007).

Empirical studies that focused on student absenteeism mention the vital link between schools, parents, and community (Cole, 2011; Sheldon 2007; Chang & Romero 2008). This link is critical to any interventions created to combat student absenteeism. This link has been investigated as a potential resource to help those students who are chronically absent and/or truant. The Chang and Romero (2008) study stated, "Chronic absence decreases when schools and communities actively communicate consistently to all students and their parents, and reach out to families when their children begin to show patterns of excessive absence." (p. 4)

Conceptual Framework

The problem of practice of student absenteeism is related to an important piece of the Ridgeview District's action plan. Increased student absenteeism that leads to students dropping out of school is a focal point of Board Goal 1- "Retain Students in the District." We are a small district and losing students hurts in many ways. Losing students hurts sports and activities because we might not have the numbers needed to compete. Low numbers hurts afterschool programs where grants require a minimum number of participants. An increase in drop outs or transfer rates may impact funding negatively, which decreases available opportunities to other students in the district.

The first action step under Ridgeview Board Goal 1 is "Increase by 5% the number of students in grades 7-12 who participate in at least one extra-curricular activity." The district believes connecting students to outside activities, and to a caring adult who coaches or sponsors that activity, will keep them in district. This is the main theme of many of the interventions to combat student absenteeism in the literature (Cole, 2011; OJJDP, n.d.; Sheldon, 2007).

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Addressing the problem of student absenteeism could help facilitate the realization of district goals by keeping students in school and in-district. Planning and implementing interventions to improve student achievement including mentoring; school, family, and community partnerships; and incentives/rewards will possibly plug students and families into the school. Connecting families to the school could improve attendance, reduce truancy, and possibly keep students in-district who could potentially be thinking of changing districts or dropping out altogether.

Theory may also play a role when it comes to connecting families to schools to create partnerships. There are two theoretical perspectives that informed the study: systems theory and family systems theory. Systems theory deals with the way systems are established and the way systems interact with one another. Schools are social systems, created by value systems shared by the majority of people in society (e.g., the idea of educating the next generation). Families are often viewed as the most basic and enduring social system. Families are viewed as systems for many of the same reasons schools are: They are comprised of a whole made up of parts, they have hierarchical structure, and they adapt to change as a whole (Cox & Paley, 2003). School systems abide by a set of norms, values, and expectations; that should offer both guidance and take suggestions from families. Families abide by a set of norms, values and expectations they often feel should be mirrored by schools. In most instances schools recognize the superior position and influence of a student's family. In a majority of cases families value and enforce the expectations set forth by schools to encourage learning and success for all students.

Family systems theory centers on the idea that it is impossible to separate individuals from the family groups they are connected to— instead, each individual needs to be viewed as a part of a whole. The reasoning behind this is that families are tightly bonded and connected,

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sharing experiences, emotions, and opinions (Kerr, 2000). Family systems theory also describes the degree to which individuals hold tightly to, or distance themselves from the family message. There are families that put a lot of pressure on members to conform to the family expectations, and other families where individuals are allowed to develop a sense of self. Bertrand (1962) states, "family as a social system sets certain standards of behavior for its members" (p. 232). Individuals who have a well-developed sense of self can distance themselves from the family system when working within another system; whereas, those who do not have a well-developed sense of self tend to feel greater stress when messages of other systems conflict with family messages (Kerr, 2000).

By nature, schools are open systems. Schools constantly co-exist and cooperate with other systems within their environment by the degree to which they interact with parents, communities, and local, state, and federal policy makers. Open systems are characterized by five basic elements: inputs, transformation, outputs, feedback, and the environment (Lunenburg, 2010). Schools have permeable borders, allowing the free-flow of inputs, outputs, and feedback between the system and the environment outside the system. Schools use inputs (teachers, curriculum, and instruction) and transform (through teaching and learning) the inputs into outputs (educated workforce, college and career ready students) all the while receiving feedback from the environment (state policies, community, parents) (Lunenburg, 2010). Schools are systems that have to control behavior in order to transform inputs into outputs. Schools have to be open systems because optimally the outputs of a school will be "released", if you will, on the outside environment.

Parents and extended family members are stakeholders in the education process. Families influence students, who then come into classrooms to learn. Families influence

decision-makers at the building and district level by creating relationships with teachers, administrators, and school board members. The porous boundaries between school and community create a relationship between school systems and family systems. This does not mean that relationship is always symbiotic or without difficulty (Hanson, 2001). In some contexts the relationship routinely expresses itself only when negative situations arise; such as a teacher's need to call home to discuss bad grades, or a parent's phone call to the office when their student is distressed or upset about a situation at school (Epstein, 1990). School systems are often viewed as "allowing" behavior that detracts from student achievement, such as chronic absence. Often it is not a school system allowing the behavior. Schools are often stuck between policy, expectations, and practice, in some instances being seen as "too rigid" and others being seen as "too flexible" (Hanson, 2001). For example, every state has a compulsory attendance law, but the laws vary greatly in the level of intensity from state to state (Nolan et al, 2013).

At Ridgeview School, currently there seems to be an overstating of the level of "harmony" between schools and families (Bertrand, 1962). There is often a rift between social systems, particularly in regards to the importance of school attendance. The disconnection happens when school systems and family systems do not share a common value of ensuring students are regularly attending school. Researchers who suggest intervention for chronic absence and truancy recognize this in the literature (Chang & Romero, 2008; Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007; Sheldon, 2007). A number of interventions found in the literature focus around the idea of creating and sustaining connections between schools and families. Epstein (2010) lends credence to the argument for schools finding ways to connect to families by saying, "If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the

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schools" (p. 81). This study was designed to explore the gap between school systems and family systems by addressing the messages both systems are sending to students, the effectiveness of the attendance policy, and the perceived value of school attendance held by stakeholders.

Ridgeview School is a rural school with cemented family systems. Families are connected to one another by generations of both blood and community ties in this small town. Those family systems can often connect many students in a school, and may also branch out to include board members, teachers, and prominent community members. Often things such as excessive student absenteeism may be overlooked because of the vital family systems connection or "clan-like" mentality and messages of major players in the school system. One example is the "forgiveness" of unexcused absences by the school board to enable students to participate in extracurricular activities or class trips, simply because those students were connected to prominent family systems in the town.

If family systems and Ridgeview School exist to cooperate with one another there would be overlap between the messages students receive at home and school about what is significant for success. Kube and Ratigan (1992) reported students receive the message that school is not important when their parents support their continued search for ways around good school attendance. Ridgeview Schools need parents to reiterate the message that school attendance is critical. That message must be consistently shared with families if Ridgeview desires families to promote that message. Ridgeview Schools must find ways to communicate with parents the importance of good attendance. Positive and open relationships must be created in order for students to receive the message that attendance matters. Figure 2.1 shows an example of the relationships between schools and families.
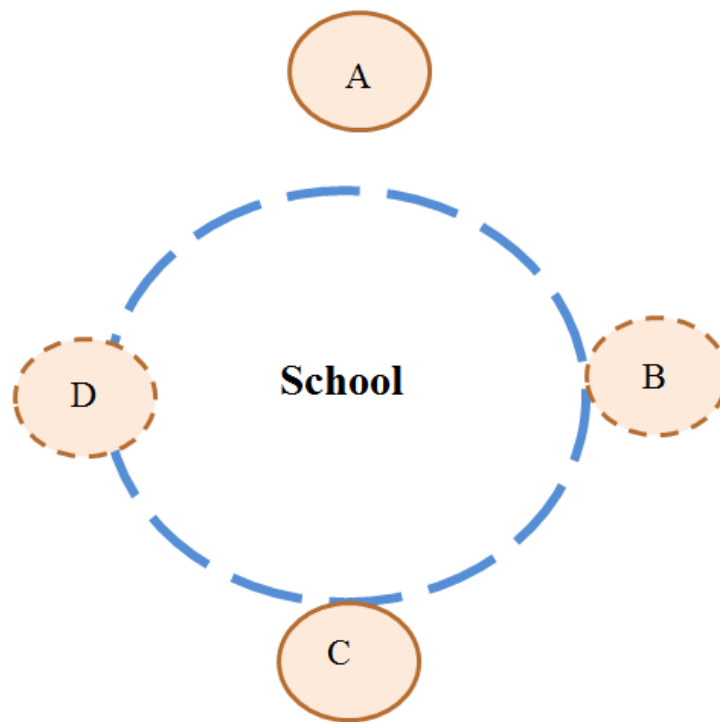
Figure 2.1. Example of levels of openness in regards to communication between home and school.

       The optimum relationship is one where boundaries overlap, allowing the free flow of communication and messages to and from home and school (See Circle D in Figure 2.1). This overlap would allow families to work with schools to help develop attendance policies and clearly understand the importance of students attending school. This overlap would allow the school's message of the importance of attendance to become part of the family and community messages of the importance of school. Some families exhibit a close relationship with the school, yet are closed systems. The family message is solidified and there is no free-flow of messages between the two systems (see Circle C in Figure 2.1). There are families who do not exhibit a close relationship with the school and do not pay much attention to the messages the school is sending, even though the family is an open system and potentially would be willing to share information between the two systems, it is only a lack of closeness between the two systems that prevent this (see Circle B in Figure 2.1). Finally there are families who are very closed off from

any message and distance the family from the school. These families are quite possibly the most difficult to reach because the family system is not open to messages from the school and the relationship is very distant between the school and the family (see Circle A in Figure 2.1).

It bears repeating that student absenteeism becomes an issue when it is excessive. Research indicates students who are truant may be more likely to develop substance abuse problems, engage in delinquent and criminal activity, drop-out of school, and be unemployed after completion of schooling (Flaherty, Sutphen, & Ely, 2012; Kearney, 2008; OJJDP, n.d.). This study focused on the reasons students are chronically absent and the level to which parent and school faculty were willing to accept and support those absences. Increasing these attendance rates can help keep students in school, and increase student achievement (Chang & Romero, 2008; Mapp, 2003; Sheldon, 2007). Understanding why students are absent and finding ways to keep them in school is a problem worth finding a solution to.

Sheldon and Epstein (2004) describe the process of keeping kids in school as a "holistic" process, involving many groups of people including schools, families, and community members. The small school of Ridgeview is perfectly balanced to provide that holistic process for students. The district is closely bonded, tightly-knit, and relationships are intricately woven between the school, the families it serves, and the community it resides in. If those relationships and family systems were part of a holistic process of solving the problem of student absenteeism, rather than a permissive system of allowing student absenteeism to continue, the hard-won solution might be found.

Chapter Summary

This literature review was written to further explain the problem of student absenteeism. Student absenteeism was expounded upon and explained by subheadings including: a definition of student absenteeism, what makes student absenteeism a problem, importance of attendance, effectiveness of school attendance policies, and interventions to combat student absenteeism. The literature review is a thorough review of existing literature as it related to the problem of student absenteeism. This section also included the conceptual framework designed to further define the problem of student absenteeism as it exists in the context of Ridgeview Schools. The conceptual framework outlined the basics of systems theory including the open-system nature of school and family systems theory to help evaluate the relationships that exist between the systems co-existing within Ridgeview Schools.

Following this chapter is Chapter 3– Inquiry Methods, an in-depth look at the research method and design used to explore the problem of student absenteeism. Chapter 3 provided a rationale for the study, explained the context of the study in detail, and described the data collection methods and analysis of the study.

CHAPTER THREE – INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the problem of practice of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School; including why students miss so much school. The methodological approach of the study was mixed methods, involving the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2015). The goal was to determine the root causes of excessive student absenteeism in Ridgeview School.

The research questions that were addressed are as follows;

- What explicit or implicit messages were parents and the school sending about school attendance?

- What was the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy?

- What was the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school?

Chapter 3 followed headings that will provide the rationale for the study, the setting or context of the problem, the research sample and data sources, data collection methods, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and a summary.

Rationale

The research design of this study was an explanatory sequential mixed method study for two reasons. Quantitative data was necessary to this study to create a picture of students who struggle with excessive absenteeism. It was necessary to find out attendance rates of the school and to develop a description of the groups of students who were absent. The quantitative research preceded the qualitative data collection in order to guide, support, and enhance the qualitative data collection. The quantitative findings also allowed the researcher to determine

which quantitative results to explain and explore further, as well as which participants were chosen to be interviewed for the qualitative portion of the study. The primary reason qualitative research was used was because of the ability of qualitative research to speak to individual experiences and how they fit into the context of Ridgeview School. Attendance is behavior based and was easily measured with quantitative research, but the feelings and perceptions parents have toward attendance were more effectively uncovered using qualitative research. Those feelings and perceptions were best uncovered by conducting a semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2013). The research questions related to the messages the school was sending and the perceived value held by parents and school employees were best answered with qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews.

The research methodology of this study was mixed methods. A mixed methods approach was chosen because of the necessity of both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions. The collection of quantitative data alone could tell Ridgeview Schools they had a student absenteeism problem, but it is qualitative data that helped paint a picture of why Ridgeview Schools had a student absenteeism problem. The biggest strength of a mixed methods approach was the ability to obtain two different perspectives on the problem of student absenteeism, and the ability to gain a wider and more comprehensive view of the problem (Creswell, 2015).

The two theoretical perspectives that informed the study, discussed in-depth in Chapter 2, were systems theory and family systems theory. Systems theory deals with the way systems are established and the way systems interact with one another. Schools are social systems, created by value systems shared by the majority of people in society (the idea of educating the next generation). By nature, schools are open systems. Schools constantly co-exist and cooperate

with other systems within their environment by the degree to which they interact with parents, communities, and local, state, and federal policy makers. Open systems are characterized by five basic elements: inputs, transformation, outputs, feedback, and the environment (Lunenburg, 2010). Schools have permeable borders, allowing the free-flow of inputs, outputs, and feedback between the system and the environment outside the system. Schools use inputs (i.e., teachers, curriculum, and instruction) and transform through teaching and learning the inputs into outputs (i.e., educated workforce, college and career ready students) all the while receiving feedback from the environment (e.g., state policies, community, parents) (Lunenburg, 2010). Schools are systems that have to control behavior in order to transform inputs into outputs. Schools have to be open systems because optimally the outputs of a school will be "released," if you will, on the outside environment.

Families are often viewed as the most basic and enduring social system. Families are viewed as systems for many of the same reasons schools are: They are comprised of a whole made up of parts, they have hierarchical structure, and they adapt to change as a whole (Cox & Paley, 2003). School systems abide by a set of norms, values, and expectations; that should offer both guidance and take suggestions from families. Families abide by a set of norms, values and expectations they often feel should be mirrored by schools. In most instances schools recognize the superior position and influence of a student's family. In a majority of cases families value and enforce the expectations set forth by schools to encourage learning and success for all students. Parents and extended family members are stakeholders in the education process. Families influence students, who then come into classrooms to learn. Families influence decision-makers at the building and district level by creating relationships with teachers,

administrators, and school board members. The porous boundaries between school and community create a relationship between school systems and family systems.

This study was designed to explore the gap between school systems and family systems by addressing the messages both systems were sending to students, the effectiveness of the attendance policy, and the perceived value of school attendance held by stakeholders.

Problem Setting/Context

The setting of the problem was Ridgeview School, a rural school in the corner of a Midwestern state. Ridgeview School serves approximately 230 students in grades kindergarten through twelve. The school is situated in a small town of approximately 1,000 residents. The town is devoted to the school, and dutifully supports all of the activities and functions the school holds. The school is the heartbeat of the town as well. A mutually beneficial relationship exists and the town uses school facilities for everything from patriotic assemblies to town festivals.

The City of Ridgeview has recently experienced a decline in jobs and in population. The past five years of school enrollment serve as evidence of this predicament with enrollment dropping by approximately 19%. As the town erodes, jobs are lost and the poverty level of city residents and the students served by Ridgeview School has increased. The school has a rate of 74% students on free or reduced lunches. Students come from low-income homes and come to school with many of the typical problems of low-income students, such as a lack of early education, food insecurity, lack of appropriate clothing, and poor housing and health outcomes.

The school is experiencing budget problems and has seen their budget shrink over the course of the last five years. Teaching positions have been eliminated or reduced to half-time, supply and extra-curricular activity budgets have been sharply reduced, and support positions have been eliminated or consolidated. This has put pressure on teacher recruitment and

retention. In the past school year the junior high/ high school saw a turnover of almost 30% of the teaching staff.

Another pressing issue for the school has been consistent turnover of administration. In the past five years the school has been served by four principals and four superintendents. With each change of administration, the culture, climate, policies, and fidelity to policy shifted and changed causing even more pressure to build on staff members and families. Each new set of administrators came to the school with their own vision, mission, and goals. Often those were communicated to staff with little opportunity for buy in by staff members and families. With the ever-changing administration it has proved difficult the past five years to truly create a mission and vision that is long-lasting enough for staff members to internalize and communicate to students and parents. The major effect of this is the erosion of the culture of the school. There is not currently a culture of high expectations or academic success for all students.

The academic history of Ridgeview School is varied and inconsistent. Students often seem to lack motivation to excel academically, and traditionally have been allowed to "skate" by with grades and course offerings that do not challenge them or push them. Student opportunities are limited, one example being the distance students have to travel to continue their education. Ridgeview School does what it is capable of, and both staff and administrators wear many hats (i.e., club sponsors, scheduling college visits, offering enrichment opportunities) to provide stimulation and academic enrichment as often as they can. Only 10% of Ridgeview students who took the ACT in the past year qualified as "college ready" in all four areas. A vast majority of Ridgeview students either continue their education at a nearby community college or leave high school and enter the workforce.

Beginning in January of 2016 students at Ridgeview School experienced a shift to a four day school week. The change was put into action primarily for budgetary reasons. Another potential benefit of a four day week is the ability to more easily recruit and retain high quality teachers during a time when budgets are uncertain. This change is important because of the affect it may have on student absenteeism. The district realizes student absenteeism rates are high. One thought related to student absenteeism is the idea that students might be more motivated to attend if they have a three day weekend every week. Only time will tell if this is a benefit of a four day week for Ridgeview School.

The history of Ridgeview School is filled with both triumphs and failures. The past is filled with many accomplishments; yet recently the school has had trouble motivating and pushing students to find success both academically and in the post-secondary world. Ridgeview School currently has a dedicated staff and conscientious and competent administrators who are all willing to work hard to create an environment that will encourage students to reach for more academically. The timing is right for an attendance intervention aimed at reducing student absenteeism in order to promote and solidify student engagement and success in the post-secondary world.

Research Sample and Data Sources

The research sample for the study was chosen using convenience sampling. Parents, teachers, and administrators were selected from the context for the study based on their connection to the problem. Convenience sampling allowed for the selection of a sample that was a part of the school district, was close and easy to access, and was rich in experience and information to add to the study (Creswell, 2005). Forty-nine parents responded to the survey distributed at Ridgeview enrollment. One hundred fifty surveys were distributed for a response

rate of 33%. Seventeen participants were chosen to be interviewed in semi-structured interviews including seven teachers and administrators and ten parents.

The criteria to be selected for semi-structured interviews by convenience sampling was that participants were willing to participate and that they had information or experiences related to student absenteeism that helped formulate solutions to the problem of student absenteeism. The criteria for selected teachers and administrators included they had prior experience dealing with students who struggled with absenteeism. This was important because it was those educators who had struggled with student absenteeism whom were able to offer ideas for interventions or solutions to the problem. The criteria for selected parents were that they had attendance issues with their child in the past. Attendance issues were defined as having had eleven or more excused or unexcused absences in the school year. Attendance issues were also broadened to include extreme tardiness. Parents who had students who were extremely tardy and missed a significant portion of a school period (greater than fifteen minutes) were also selected. Eleven absences represented a 7% absence rate. This was a threshold used to help find solutions or answers to the problem, without using participation as a weapon to point fingers at "other parents." This criterion also encouraged participation by parents who might otherwise be too embarrassed to participate.

Potential ethical and political concerns for the sample included intimidation or participants being ostracized for their opinions or their willingness to participate. Ridgeview is a small community and any information that came from the study and was easily identifiable could potentially cause problems in the community if it did not reiterate the community message. If the study was not presented in a favorable way it would be difficult to encourage many families to participate.

Another political concern was the family bonds and messages that permeate the community. Many of the people in Ridgeview are related to one another in some way; and those family messages of maintaining the status quo are deep and enduring. Any efforts to change are often viewed with suspicion, especially if the messages are coming from people viewed as "outsiders" to the community. It was critical that the researcher worked hard to gain a level of trust and will allow participants to be open with information.

One final ethical concern was a status issue that seemed to take hold in small towns. The sample the study design was aimed at gathering data from was hard to find. Few families were willing to discuss family issues that are viewed in a negative light. The crack down on truancy by both schools and the judicial system in the near history has created a negative connotation in some family messages when it comes to discussing student absenteeism. The willingness to participate was limited in a small town to begin with, and even more so if the study was associated with negative terms such as truancy.

The most important way the researcher protected the study sample was by closely monitoring and guarding all information received from participants and any files created from the survey instrument and interview protocols. All participants had a pseudonym to protect their identity. All returned surveys were stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the researcher. All files created were stored on a jump drive in a locked drawer.

Another important way to protect the sample was to gain the trust of the participants. It was crucial that participants felt as though they could trust the researcher to honor their opinions. For this reason participants were encouraged to sit down with the researcher prior to their interview to discuss any concerns they had about the study or potential threats they felt could harm their family or their children from the study. We addressed the concerns they had and they

were allowed to decide if they felt comfortable moving forward. This step helped create an open, inviting interview space and interview atmosphere which was an important part of gaining participants' trust. In addition to the interview space and atmosphere, another critical step to protect participants was member-checking. Each participant was invited to read interview transcriptions and the researcher allowed the participants access to documents that used their words or opinions. Any level of guardedness or inconsistency could have been viewed as suspicious by participants in the small town of Ridgeview so the researcher took steps to open the process up to participants as much as possible. Finally, the researcher always presented the study in a positive light- as an attempt to find solutions- in order to reach the sample that had the most to offer because of their experiences with student absenteeism.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data was collected through the student record keeping system (PowerSchool) and from school records to determine the extent of student absenteeism. Student records were collected and analyzed, utilizing descriptive statistics to demonstrate the depth and breadth of the problem. The quantitative findings also pointed the researcher to participants who might be able to add to the study through qualitative interviews as well.

Another use of quantitative data was the implementation of a survey tool (see Appendix A). The survey was distributed to the population of parents at Ridgeview School during enrollment and also offered an option for those who wanted to speak more in-depth to participate in an interview. The survey was used to cast a wide net in regards to perceptions of attendance messages, the effectiveness of Ridgeview's attendance policy, and the value of school attendance. The survey items were analyzed to create a snapshot of the family and community

values in regards to the importance of attendance, as well as to give the researcher insight into perceptions of parents in regards to how Ridgeview School interprets absenteeism.

Qualitative data was collected primarily through interviews. Interviews were appropriate because the research questions focused on values and perceptions of student attendance (Maxwell, 2013). Interviews were conducted with parents based on survey results and willingness of participants (see Appendix D). The interviews allowed the researcher to probe deeper into parent-held values and perceptions of attendance, Ridgeview's attendance policy and its effectiveness, and to explore the messages sent to students about the importance of attendance.

Interviews were also be conducted with teachers (see Appendix B) and administrators (see Appendix C) who volunteered to share their views on the school's message on student attendance, as well as on their perceptions about Ridgeview's attendance policy. The ultimate goal of the interviews was to help answer the question of why student absenteeism is problematic and how we could begin to find solutions. The groups (i.e., parents, teachers, and administrators) were asked to provide detailed information about the issue of student absenteeism and to help investigate the root cause of why students missed school. The goal of interviews with parents was to provide a closer look at the way family systems work and to explore the messages families send to students about student absenteeism. Additionally, interviews with parents provided data on the value parents place on school attendance. The interview with teachers and administrators was designed to help determine if student absenteeism was a problem, whether attendance affects student achievement and to what degree, and to find solutions to the problem of student absenteeism.

Data Analysis Methods

The quantitative data collected was analyzed in two main ways. The first type of quantitative analysis was data tabulation. The data received from the student record keeping system and Ridgeview School was tabulated to gain a greater understanding of what the problem looked like across all student demographics and variables. This information was vital to building a common vision of what students who struggle with student absenteeism "look" like. It also allowed the researcher to determine whether students who struggle with student absenteeism share any common characteristics such as low-income homes, ethnicity, age, or gender (Salkind, 2014).

The second type of quantitative analysis that was used is a compilation of descriptive statistics. This tool was used to primarily analyze the results of the distributed survey and to further analyze the data collected from student records. This type of analysis provided simple calculations such as mean, median, mode, and range that allowed the researcher to use ordinal data returned from the survey respondents to describe the level to which student absenteeism is perceived as a problem (Salkind, 2014). Descriptive statistics also allowed the researcher to analyze the perceived effectiveness of Ridgeview's current attendance policy based on participant responses to survey questions.
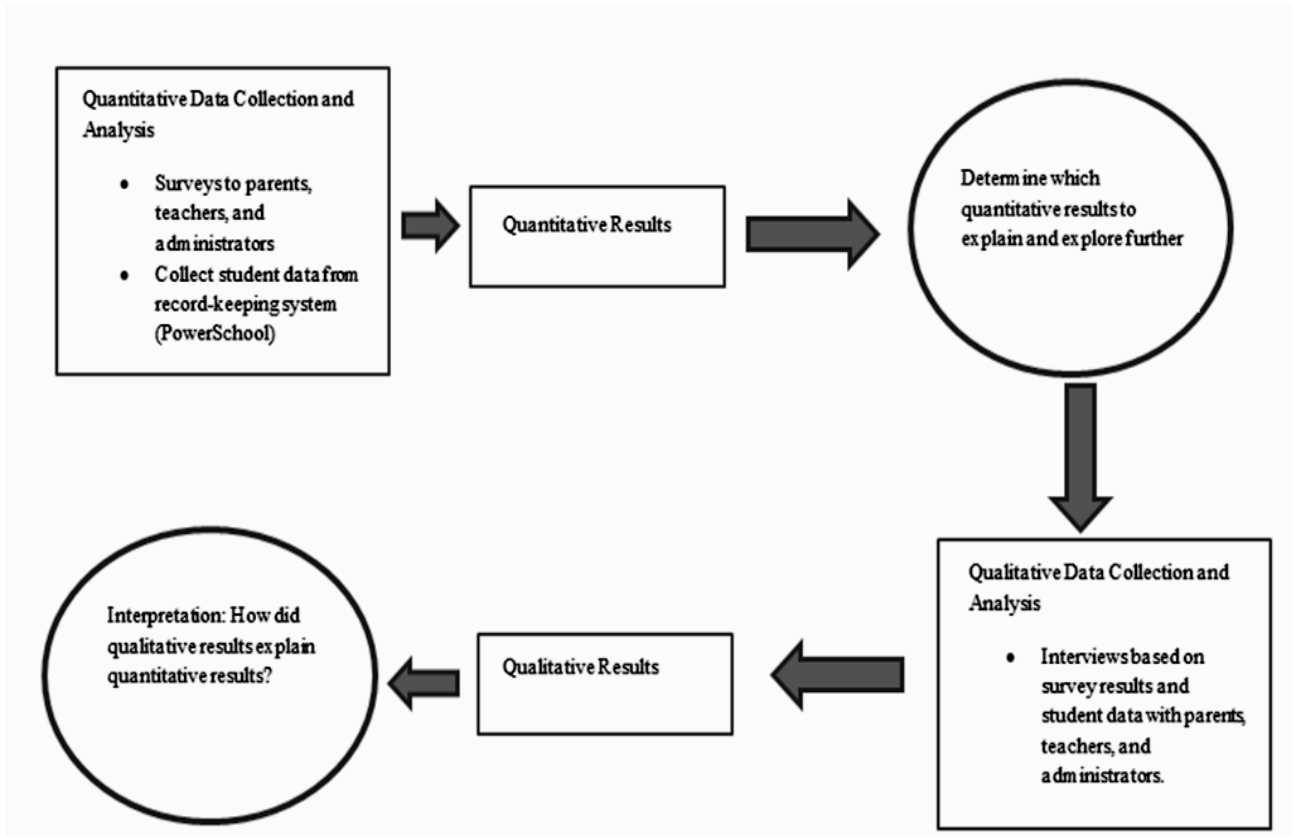
Figure 3.1. An explanatory sequential design of the mixed methods study of student absenteeism.

Overall, the quantitative methods used in this study were designed to conceptualize and describe the problem of student attendance at Ridgeview School. The quantitative data allowed the researcher to create a visual of students who struggle with absenteeism. The quantitative data informed the qualitative data (see Figure 3.1), and allowed the researcher to determine the extent of the problem and how best to approach the problem from a qualitative stance. The quantitative data also allowed the researcher to address the perceived effectiveness of Ridgeview School's attendance policy.

The qualitative data collected was analyzed primarily through coding participant responses transcribed from interviews. The different coding techniques the study used were multiple cycle coding (first and second cycle coding), in vivo coding, structural coding, and

focused coding (Saldaña, 2013). Multiple cycle coding was used to analyze the qualitative data to ensure the data was thoroughly analyzed (see Figure3.2). In order to truly understand the themes that emerged from three different groups of participants (i.e., parents, teachers, and administrators) the researcher used multiple cycle coding to peel back the layers of what the participants were saying in the interviews.

DATA

First Cycle Coding Methods

In Vivo Coding

"Attendance is very valuable, very important, and when it's not happening it's a problem."

"But I will say when my kids have a reason to be gone we're probably more lenient than what some parents are."

"I think most parents are searching for a connection with their child's school. That what they want- they want to feel like they're a part."

"Disengagement is at the heart of our attendance problem."

"Sometimes I just feel like parents just don't feel like they're a part of things."

"We're making a terrible mistake by not involving parents."

"We have kids here that are not involved with anything."

Second Cycle Coding Methods

Structural Coding
RQ1– Messages Sent

"If you stay up too late you're getting up and going, I don't care how tired you are."

RQ2– Policy

"We never got a paper that said here is the attendance policy."

RQ3– Value of Attendance

"Whatever is important to the parent is going to be important to the kid."

Focused Coding
Parent Experiences

Parent Attitudes

Do We Have a Problem?

Parent/School Connection

Teacher Absenteeism

Teacher Attitudes

Incentives

Student Engagement

Figure 3.2. Coding schematic illustrating coding techniques and examples of codes.

During the first cycle coding the researcher employed in vivo coding to allow the participants words and phrases to guide the data analysis. In vivo coding was critical to the study

because all of the research questions focused on participant perceptions and feelings. Recording participants' specific words allowed the researcher to focus more closely on their perceptions and feelings about attendance.

Second-cycle coding was used to connect the interviews in order to find the theoretical and perceptual links that existed between participants and between groups of participants (parents, teachers, and administrators). Second-cycle coding methods were used to create patterns and organization amongst all the codes that were generated during first-cycle coding. The two primary second-cycle coding methods used were structural coding and focused coding.

The first form of coding that was used during second-cycle coding was structural coding. Structural coding provided a way to easily categorize large sections of interviews that applied to specific research questions. Codes were highlighted and organized by color if they specifically spoke to a particular research question. Focused coding was used to categorize the data. Focused coding allowed the researcher to elaborate on themes by grouping the most prevalent and significant codes generated in first-cycle coding and structural coding. Focused coding was used to create labels for codes from first-cycle coding and to begin to explore the interconnection of themes and sub-themes. The strength of focused coding in this study was the ability to gauge the transferability of codes from first-cycle coding from one participant to the other to explore the themes that emerged.

Each of the coding methods involved in multiple cycle coding pushed the study to delve deeper into the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of the participants (Saldaña, 2013). Coding was an essential part of this study. The quantitative data collected drove what qualitative data to collect, but it is the coding of qualitative data that helped explain and interpret the problem of student absenteeism.

Trustworthiness

It was important to take steps to ensure the study was credible and trustworthy. Because the researcher is employed by Ridgeview School, one potential threat to validity is researcher bias. In order to combat the potential for researcher bias and to ensure the credibility of the study, the study was designed to gather data from multiple sources including quantitative data from the school record-keeping system and qualitative data from teachers, administrators, and parents. Structural corroboration existed in quantitative (attendance data) and qualitative data (interviews) that pointed to the extent of the problem.

The second step to ensure validity and to eliminate researcher bias was to triangulate the data from different types of data sources (Crewswell,2005). Triangulation of the data is a method for ensuring the reliability of the data collected. The study used data from surveys, student record keeping system, and from stakeholder interviews to ensure validity of the results. The study had built in the capability for data triangulation by using mixed methods and exploring the problem from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective.

One final method of ensuring the study was trustworthy is the use of member checking. Member checking allowed participants a chance to check the interview transcripts for accuracy. This ensures there was no misinterpretation of the participants' words, opinions, or perceptions regarding student absenteeism. Participants were aware from the interview data that they were welcome to check the interview transcripts for clarity and accuracy. The researcher provided opportunities for participants to meet to further discuss interview transcriptions. Member checking was a valuable tool used to gain participant trust, as well as a method for ensuring the reliability and trustworthiness of the study.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

As with any research design, the design of this study had limitations that must be addressed. One major limitation of this study's design was the lack of generalizability. This study was conducted in a specific context based on a problem in one setting. Interventions that work in this particular setting may not be easily generalized to other settings or groups of students. This limitation was minimized by the use of multiple-cycle coding to create theory or expand upon existing theory. Even if specific interventions cannot be generalized to other contexts, new theories or expansion of existing theory could be used by other contexts to create interventions that work expressly for that context.

A second limitation of the study derives from the sensitivity of data gathered on student absenteeism. The topic has become a hot button issue lately in our district, particularly because of the focus placed on truancy by both school and judicial system officials. Many parents view the school in a negative light and feel their children are "in trouble" because of attendance issues. A limitation of the study could come to light if stakeholders were not honest in interviews for fear of repercussions. Although this does not seem to have been a limitation at the conclusion of interviews, after the study parents still might view the questions as a way for the researcher to punish the family or the child for their child's poor attendance habits rather than an attempt to understand the reasons why students are excessively absent. The best way to minimize this limitation is to continue to be sensitive to family needs and opinions. This was accomplished by building trust with participants. That trust was built by creating positive feelings about participation in the study, by creating a safe interview environment, and by crafting interview questions in such a way that parents did not feel attacked about their child's attendance.

Delimitations

The delimitations of the study were straightforward and related to the topic and research questions. The first delimitation was the convenience sampling of only those parents, teachers, and administrators who had experience with student absenteeism. This was done to ensure the study collected rich data on the problem of student absenteeism. The availability of participants in the context who could add to the data were limited because people with no experience with student absenteeism would not have any way to add to theory about why students are absent. The study was intentionally limited to participants who could add to the data collection about the messages Ridgeview School is sending to students, the effectiveness of Ridgeview School's attendance policy, and the perceived value of school attendance.

The second delimitation of the study was the context. Ridgeview School is one school in a two-school district. The second school, Park Lane School, was not included in the study because that particular context does not face the same contextual factors as Ridgeview School. Ridgeview School and Park Lane School differ dramatically in the towns' socioeconomic status, in the make-up of students, in their course offerings, in their enrichment opportunities, in their history, and in their level of family involvement. Park Lane School is also different from Ridgeview School in their contextual difficulties. Student absenteeism is not as critical an issue for Park Lane School as it is for Ridgeview School. For this reason, Park Lane School was not included in this study.

The third delimitation of the study was the decision to collect qualitative data from parents and school employees rather than students. The decision to not include students was two-fold. Because the research questions centered around families and their connection to schools and their interpretation of Ridgeview's attendance policy, parents became the center

focus. The decision was also made in an effort to protect potentially vulnerable populations.

Since Ridgeview is a K-12 school, a number of the students having issues with attendance were

quite young, so the study did not include their opinions as a method of protecting them.

Summary

The overall methodological design of the study was explanatory sequential mixed

methods. The quantitative data collected helped determine the scope of the problem and allowed

the researcher to search for any commonalities of students who have poor attendance. The

quantitative data was collected first, in the form of surveys and data from the student record

keeping system. This data was critical to the convenience sampling used during the collection of

qualitative data, because it allowed the researcher to know which students struggle with

absenteeism, or had a history of attendance issues in order to identify the parents that were

critical to interview for qualitative data collection. The qualitative portion of the study focused

more on the perceptions of the problem of student absenteeism. The quantitative data helped

establish the degree of the problem of student absenteeism, and the qualitative data helped

understand the reasons why the problem exists. The study collected data from several sources in

order to have data from the various angles of the student absenteeism problem.

In order to answer the research questions and develop theory, the study needed to

understand the problem in context. Once the problem was identified the data had to be collected

to better understand why it was a problem. Answering the research questions allowed the

researcher to better understand the messages being sent to parents and students about the

importance of attendance; the perceived effectiveness of Ridgeview's current attendance policy;

and the perceived value of school attendance. Answers to each of these research questions

helped craft and uncover theory about why students miss school.

CHAPTER FOUR- RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the problem of practice of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School; including why students are missing so much school. Chapter Four was designed to analyze the data collected from parents, teachers, and administrators concerning student absenteeism at Ridgeview Schools. The findings in this chapter represent analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from five different sources: student demographic and attendance data from the student record-keeping systems at Ridgeview Schools, student attendance surveys distributed to parents of students at Ridgeview Schools at school enrollment, a semi-structured interview with a Ridgeview Schools administrator, six semi-structured interviews with Ridgeview Schools teachers, and ten semi-structured interviews with parents of students at Ridgeview Schools. The chapter is organized around the three research questions proposed in the Introduction section of this study: (1) What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance? The messages students hear from family, school, and community are important and long-lasting. This question is designed to examine the messages students are hearing from Ridgeview School and community about school attendance. Implicit messages are those the school and community send indirectly. Are we indirectly supporting habits of chronic student absenteeism? (2) What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy? The current attendance policy plays a large role in determining the messages being sent to parents and community members about the value Ridgeview School places on attendance. The aim of this question is to uncover the perceptions stakeholders hold about our attendance policy. Do stakeholders believe the policy is effective? Is the policy clearly communicated? (3) What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of

student attendance in school? The goal of this question was to find out why stakeholders hold

the opinions or feelings they do about school attendance. The first part of this chapter was a

discussion of the quantitative data collected from surveys and student record keeping systems as

it relates to the research questions. The second part of this chapter was a discussion of qualitative

results related to research question (1) What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about

school attendance?   The third section of this chapter was a discussion of qualitative results

related to research question (2) What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance

policy? The fourth section of this chapter was a discussion of research question (3) What is the

perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school?

Quantitative Data Results

The research design of the study was explanatory sequential mixed methods, meaning

data was collected quantitatively during the first stage of data collection. Because quantitative

data was used to drive qualitative data collection, the results of quantitative data collection will

be discussed first. Student demographic data was collected through the student record-keeping

system of Ridgeview Schools to analyze and determine what the problem looks like across all

student demographics and variables.

Student Demographic Data Results

Student demographic data was collected and tabulated from the student record-keeping

system, in this case PowerSchool, an independently owned company of Vista Equity Partners.

Student information related to participation in clubs, sports, and organizations was gathered from

Ridgeview Schools teachers and office staff. The decision was made to combine the data into

two distinct groups for analysis: elementary data and secondary data. This decision was made

because of the participatory nature of junior high and high schools. Elementary students are not

given nearly as many opportunities to participate in extracurricular and/or co-curricular activities. The discussion in the literature is also quite different as to what leads to increased chronic absenteeism for elementary students as opposed to what leads to chronic absenteeism for junior high and high school students.

Secondary Student Data Tabulation and Analysis

Junior high and high school student results were tabulated (N=110). The mean number of absences for students was 5.8. The median number of absences was 4.0. Almost 54% of all junior high and high school students analyzed had zero to four absences. The standard deviation was 6.6 representing a large deviation between individual student absence rates. Thirteen percent of students analyzed missed 11 or more days of school and 4.5% of junior high and high school students missed 20 or more days of school.
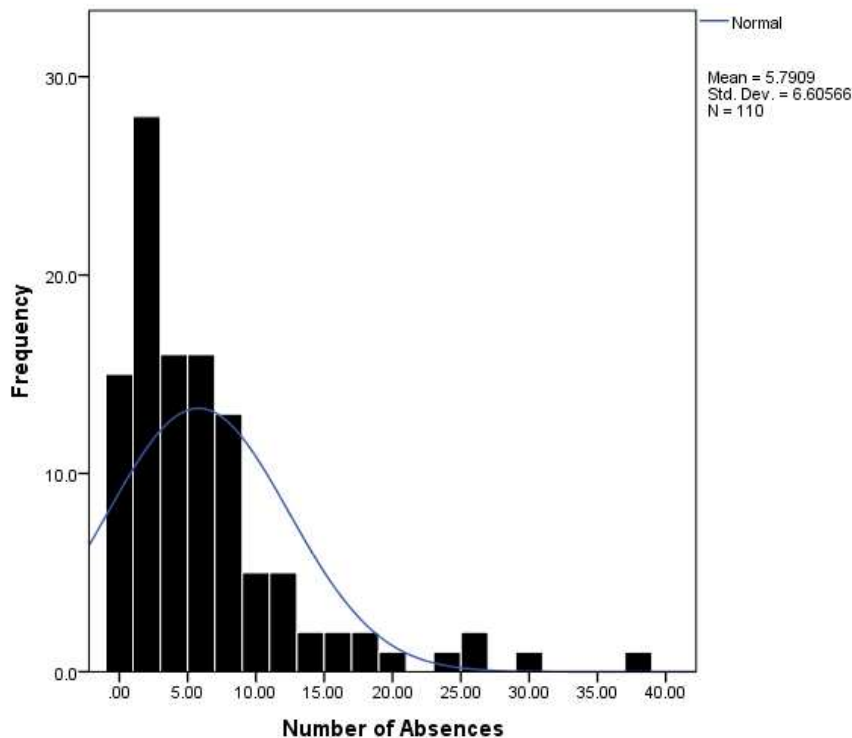
Figure 4.1 Frequency of absences among secondary (6-12) students.

In order to find differences between student absences at separate grade levels in the secondary level, means were compared across the individual grade levels. Differences in mean absences were found at each grade level.

Table 4.1

Secondary Mean Absences by Grade Level

Grade Level	Mean Absences
Sixth Grade	5.31
Seventh Grade	4.94
Eighth Grade	6.50
Freshman	6.20
Sophomore	3.43
Junior	2.40
Senior	12.23

The data was analyzed by looking at different segments of the junior high and high school student data to determine what sub-types of students were more likely to be absent from school. Student absenteeism was compared with gender, socioeconomic status, and participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

Secondary student data was analyzed to determine if absenteeism varied by gender. Simple descriptive statistics showed a mean difference between males and females at the secondary level in relation to attendance.
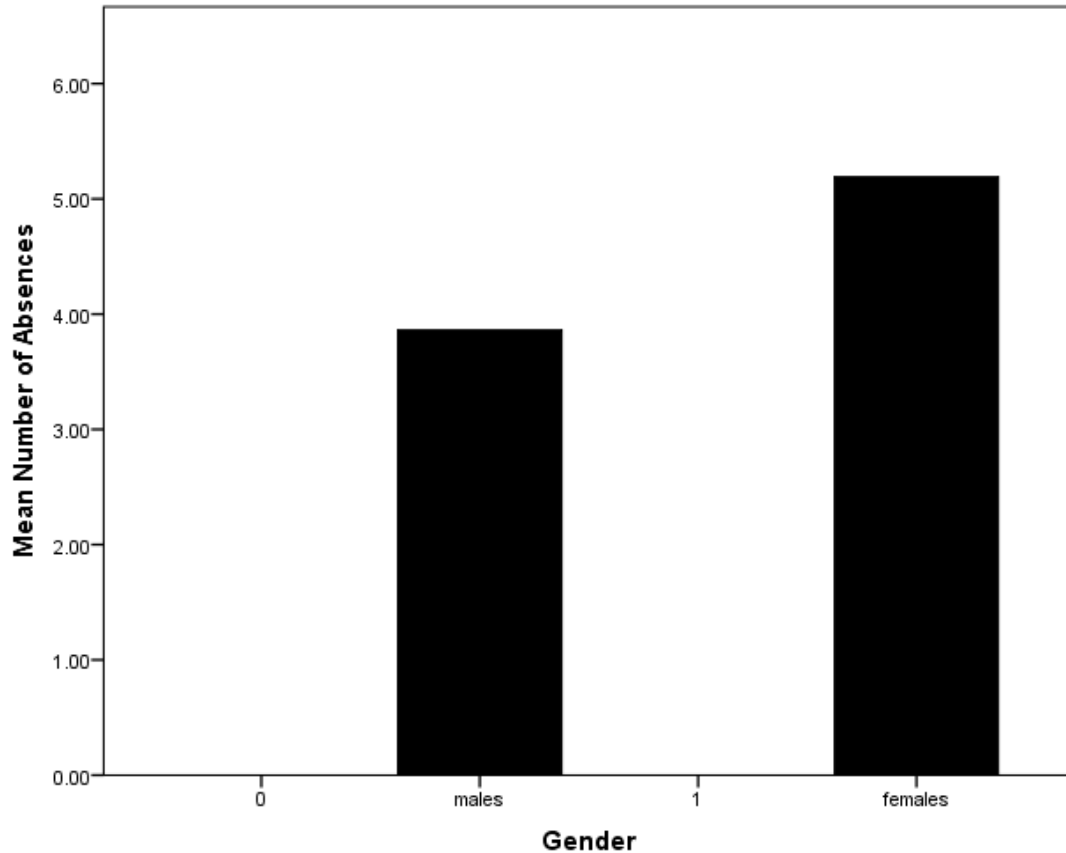
Figure 4.2 Mean absences by gender at the secondary level.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine if there were differences in absences between males and females at the secondary level. Absences were higher for female students (M = 6.31, SD = 7.55) than male students (M = 5.28, SD = 5.57) but it was not a statistically significant difference of .42 (95% CI< [-3.35 to 1.47], t(108)= -.816, p = .417.

Secondary student data was analyzed to determine if absenteeism varied by socioeconomic status. Using the student record keeping system students were divided into two groups with group one representing "full pay" and group two representing "free/ reduced". Simple descriptive statistics showed a slight mean difference between the two groups representing socioeconomic status at the secondary level in relation to attendance.
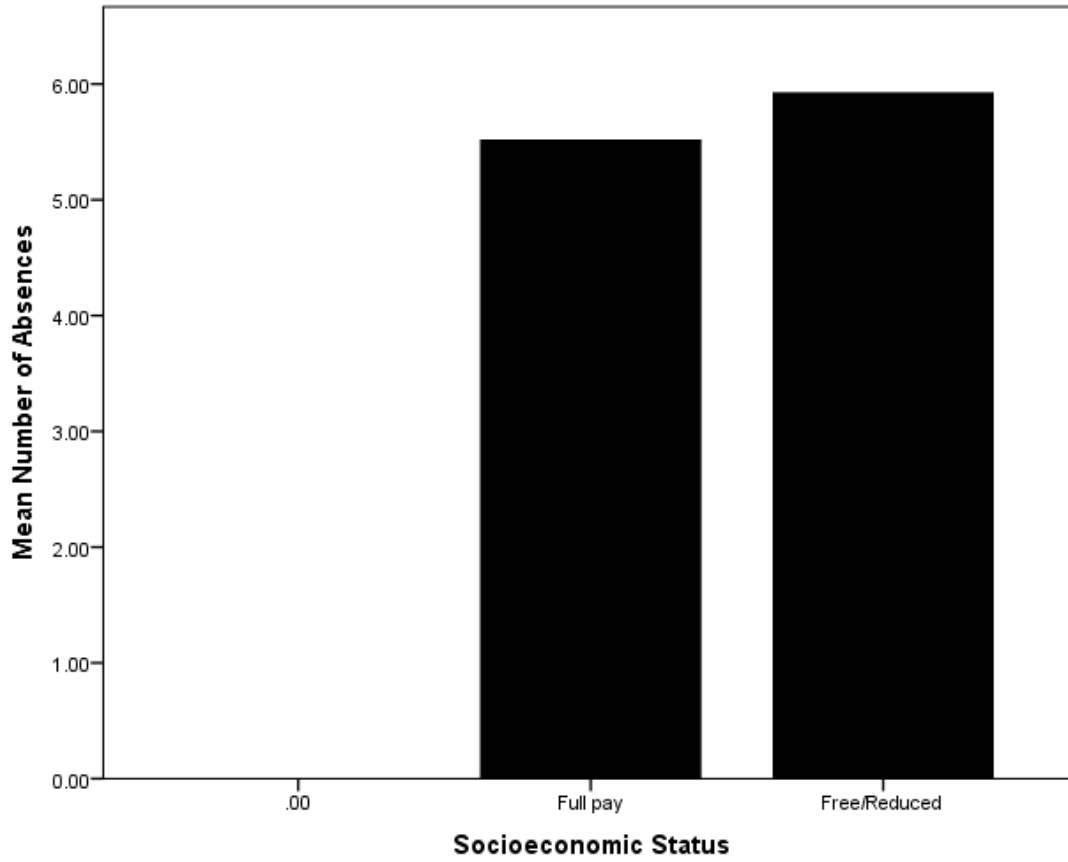
Figure 4.3 Mean absences by socioeconomic status at the secondary level.

Because the socioeconomic data displayed outliers and was non-normally distributed a Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were differences in absences between full pay and free-reduced lunch students. Distributions of the absence score for full pay and free/reduced students were not similar, as assessed by visual inspection. There was no statistically significant difference in absences between full pay and free/reduced pay students, U=1,472, z=1.028, p=.304.

Secondary student data was analyzed to determine if absenteeism varied by participation levels in either co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. Using the student record keeping system and information from Ridgeview School's office staff and teachers, students were divided into four groups with group one indicating participation in no activities, group two

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indicating participation in fall activities, group three indicating participation in spring activities, and group four indicating participation in both fall and spring activities. Simple descriptive statistics showed a slight mean difference between the four groups representing participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities at the secondary level in relation to attendance.
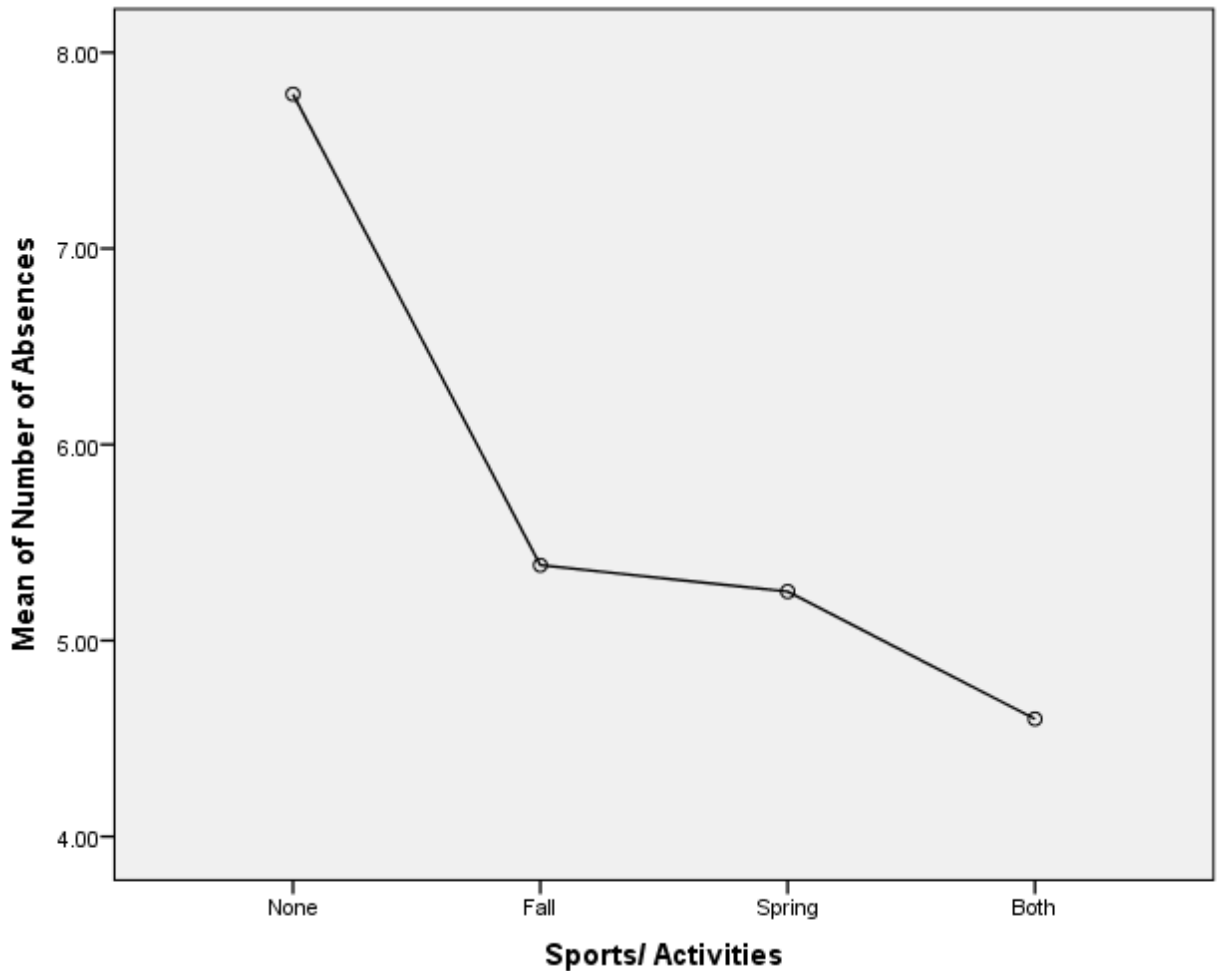
Figure 4.4 Mean absences by participation at the secondary level.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if absences were different for groups with different participation levels. Participants were classified into four groups: no participation (n=33), fall participation (n=13), spring participation (n=24), and participation in both semesters (n=40). There were outliers, as assessed by boxplots; data was normally distributed for each group, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilkes test (p>.05); and there was homogeneity of variances, as

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assessed by Levine's Test of Homogeneity of Variances (p=.542). There were no statistically significant differences in absences between the different participant groups, $F(3, 106) = 1.5$ p = .211.

Elementary Student Data Tabulation and Analysis

Elementary student results were tabulated (N=78). The mean number of absences for students was 4.57. The median number of absences was 3. Sixty-one percent of all elementary students analyzed had 0-4 absences. The standard deviation was 5.09 representing a large deviation between individual student absence rates. Six percent of elementary students analyzed missed 11 or more days of school and only 1.3% of elementary school students missed 20 or more days of school.
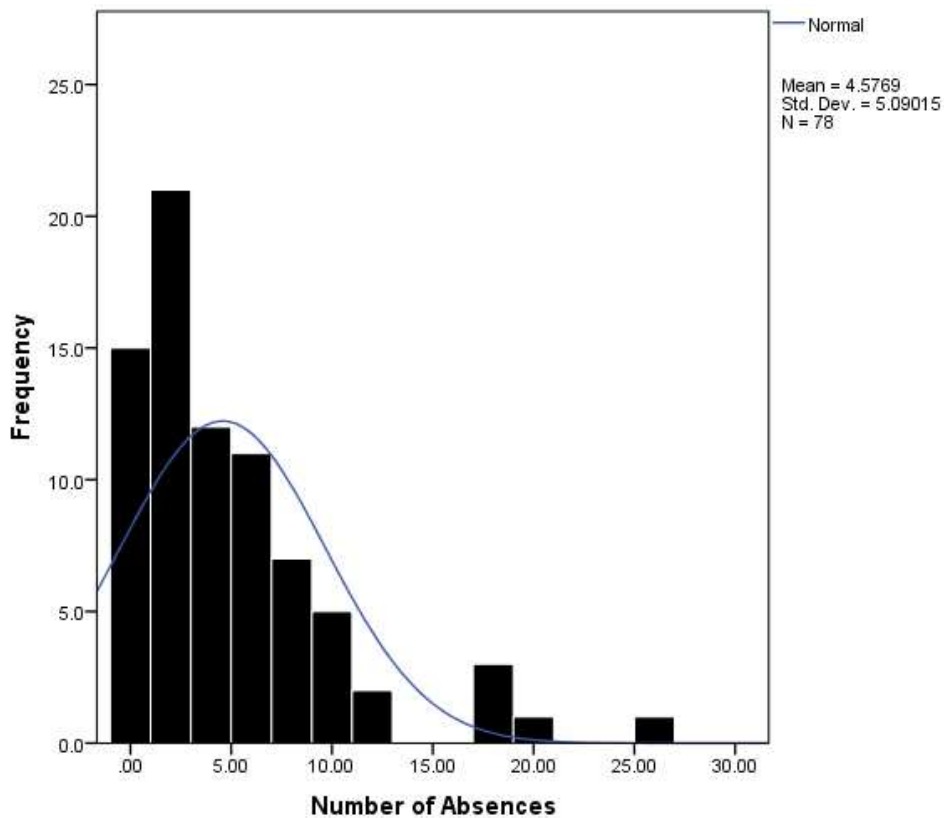
Figure 4.5 Frequency of absences among elementary (K-5) students.

In order to find differences between student absences at separate grade levels in the secondary level, means were compared across the individual grade levels. Differences in mean absences were found at each grade level.

Table 4.2.

Elementary Mean Absences by Grade Level

Grade Level	Mean Absences
Kindergarten	5.00
First Grade	3.00
Second Grade	2.00
Third Grade	3.00
Fourth Grade	2.00
Fifth Grade	3.50

The data was analyzed by looking at different segments of the elementary student data to determine what sub-types of students were more likely to be absent from school. Student absenteeism was compared with gender and socioeconomic status.

Elementary student data was analyzed to determine if absenteeism varied by gender. Simple descriptive statistics showed a mean difference between males and females at the elementary level in relation to attendance.
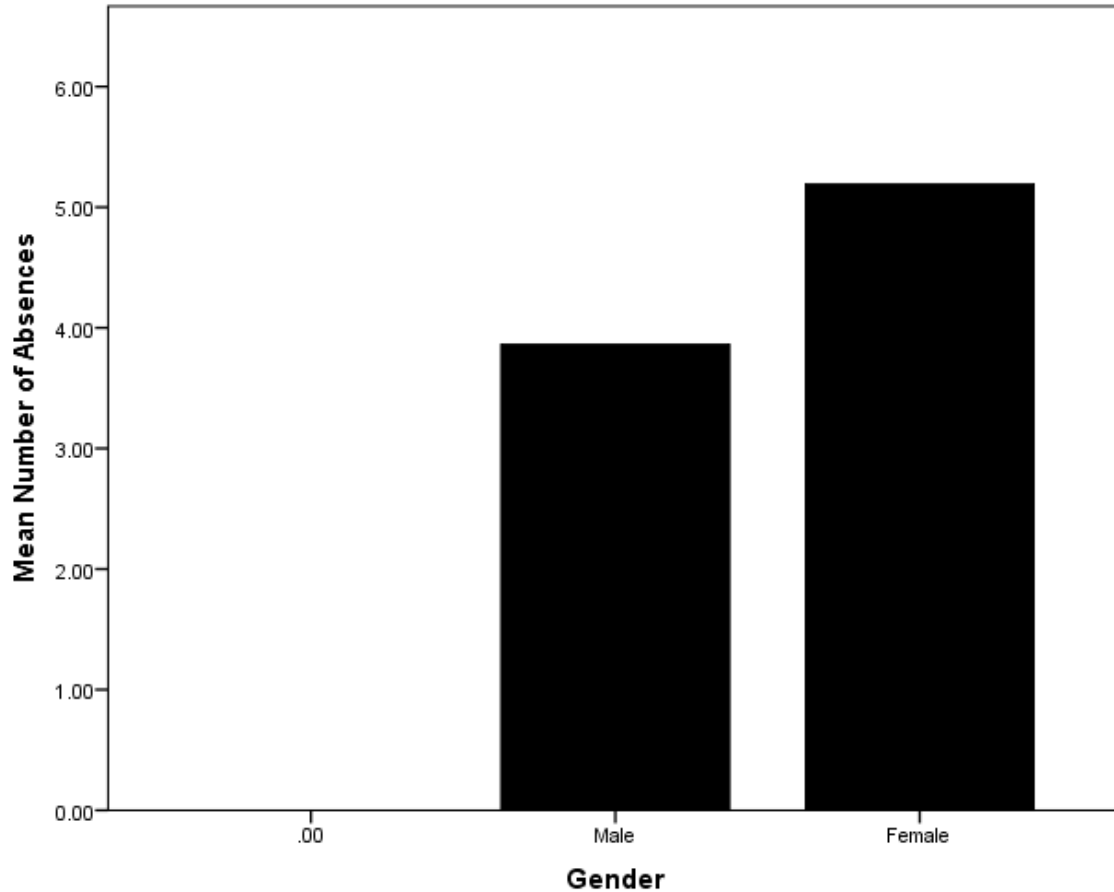
Figure 4.6 Mean absences by gender at the elementary level.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine if there were differences in absences between males and females at the elementary level. Absences were higher for female students (M = 5.19, SD = 5.79) than male students (M = 3.86, SD = 4.10) but it was not a statistically significant difference of .24 (95% CI [-3.57 to .91], t(73.54)= -1.18, p = .241. Elementary student data was analyzed to determine if absenteeism varied by socioeconomic status. Using the student record keeping system students were divided into two groups with group one representing "full pay" and group two representing "free/ reduced". Simple descriptive statistics showed a mean difference between the two groups representing socioeconomic status at the elementary level in relation to attendance.
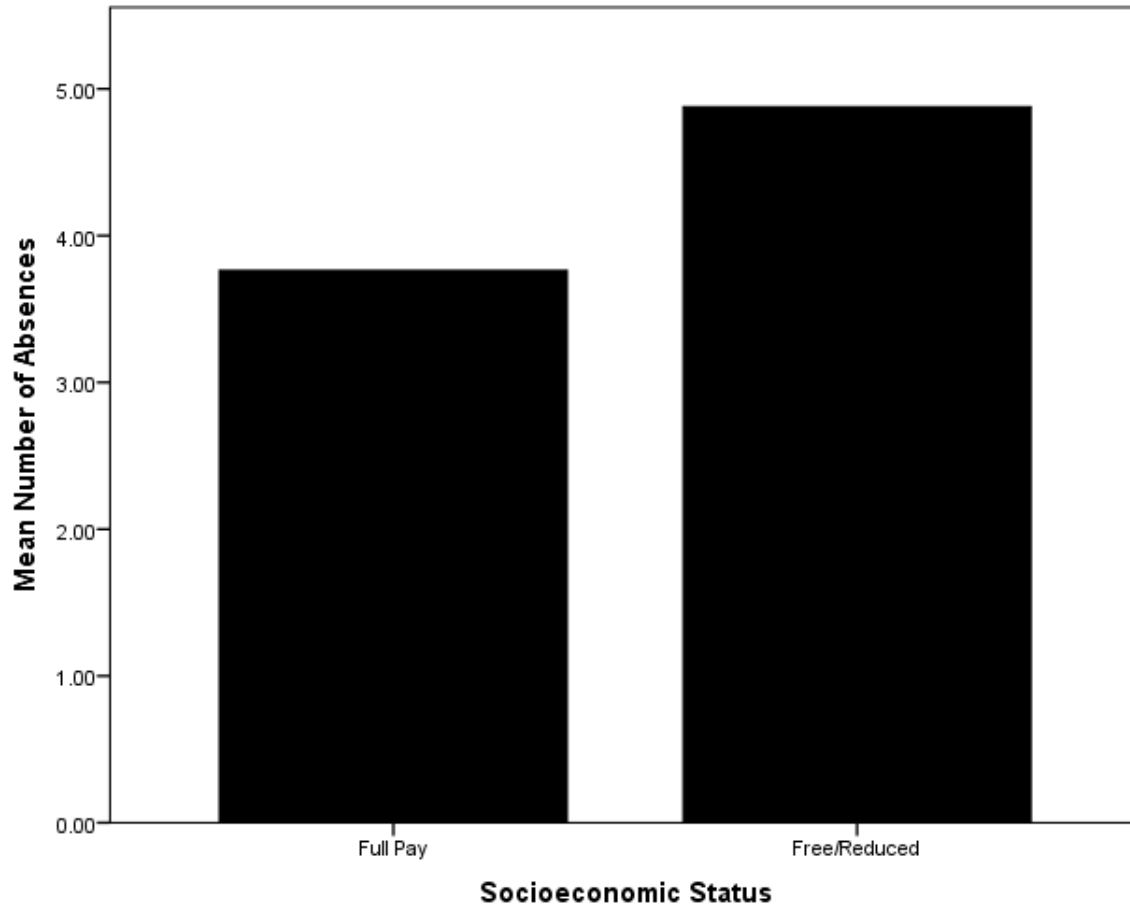
Figure 4.7 Mean absences by socioeconomic status at the elementary level.

Because the socioeconomic data displayed outliers and was non-normally distributed a Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were differences in absences between full pay and free-reduced lunch students. Distributions of the absence score for full pay and free/reduced students were not similar, as assessed by visual inspection. Median absence score was not statistically significantly different between full pay and free/reduced pay students, U=633.5, z=.397, p=.691. Absence scores for full pay students (mean rank 37.83) and free/reduced pay students (mean rank 40.11) were not statistically significantly different, U= 633.5, z=.397, p=.691, using an exact sampling distribution for u. There was no statistically significant difference in absences between full pay and free/reduced pay students U = 633.4, z = .397, p = .691.

Survey Results

Survey data was also collected during school enrollment to in order to determine parent perspectives on student absenteeism and in order to gauge parent perception on the problem of chronic student absenteeism. The survey instrument (see Appendix A) was administered to all parents attending Ridgeview Schools enrollment at the start of the current school year (n = 150). The number of completed survey responses was 49 for a response rate of 33%.

Student Absenteeism is a Problem

Question 1 of the survey asked respondents to respond to a Likert scale question "Student absenteeism is a problem in our school." The mean score for Question 1 was 3.1 which fell just slightly above the "neither agree nor disagree" range on the Likert scale. Thirty-seven percent of respondents answered either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" on the question.
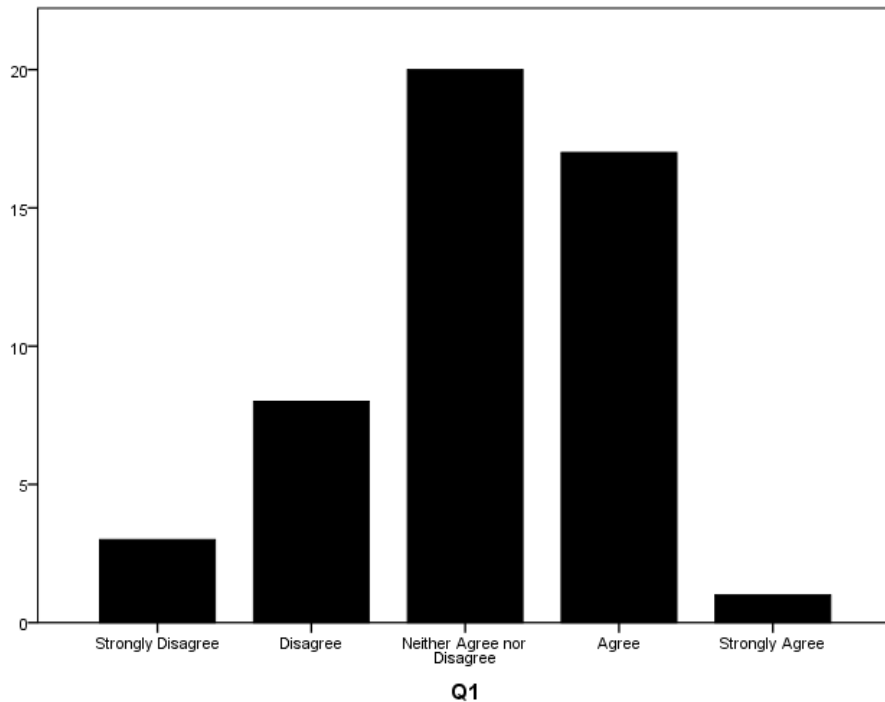
Figure 4.8 Respondent answers to Q1– Student absenteeism is a problem in our school.

Question 2 asked respondents to respond to a Likert scale question "Absenteeism is an issue for my child(ren)." The mean score for Question 2 was 1.55 which fell between Strongly Disagree and Disagree. Six percent of respondents answered "Agree" on the question.
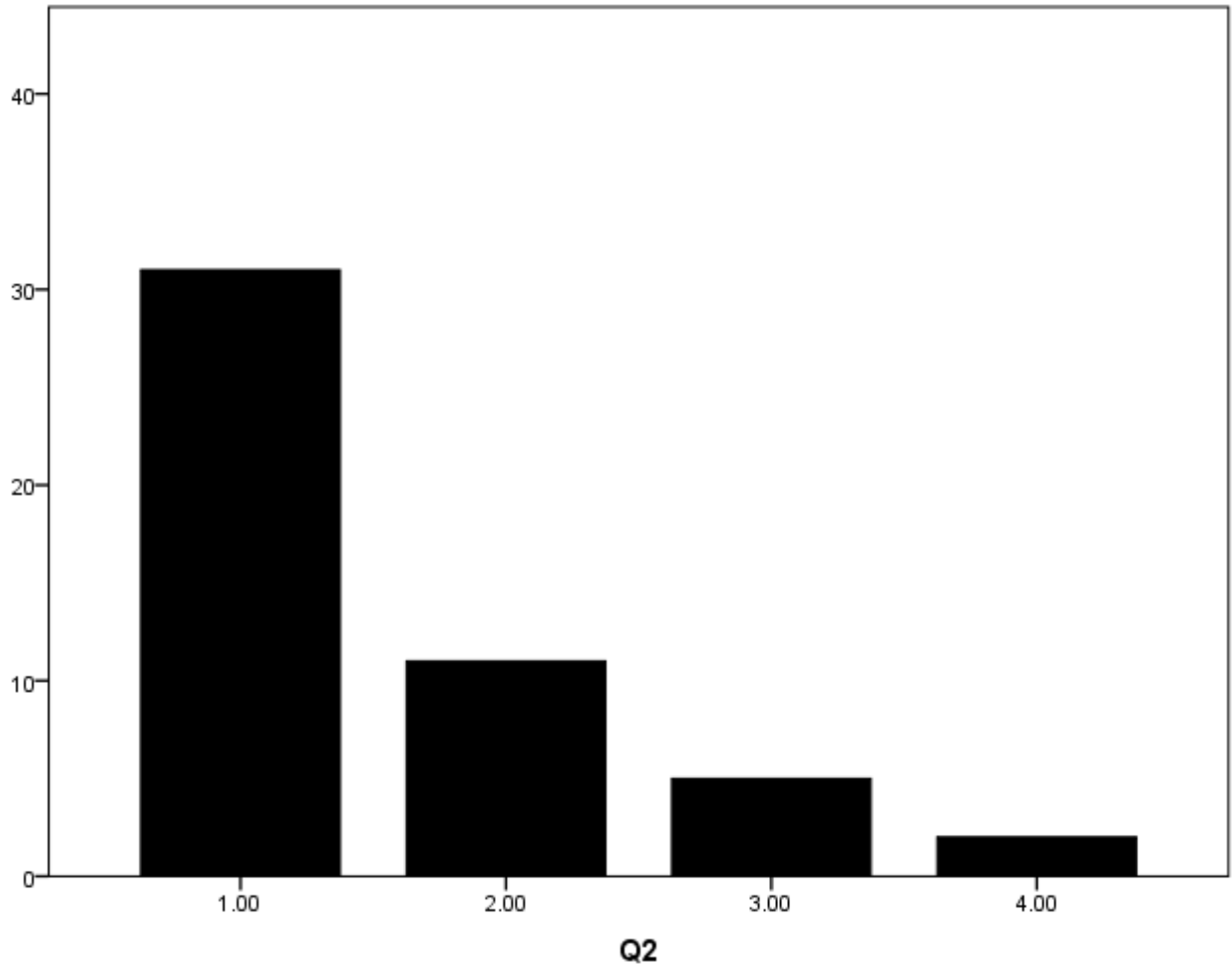
Figure 4.9 Respondent answers to Q2– Absenteeism is an issue for my child(ren).

Question 3 asked respondents to respond to a Likert scale question "Teacher and administrator attendance can affect student attendance." The mean score for Question 3 was 3.57 which fell between "Neither Agree nor Disagree" and "Agree." Sixty-seven percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" on the question.
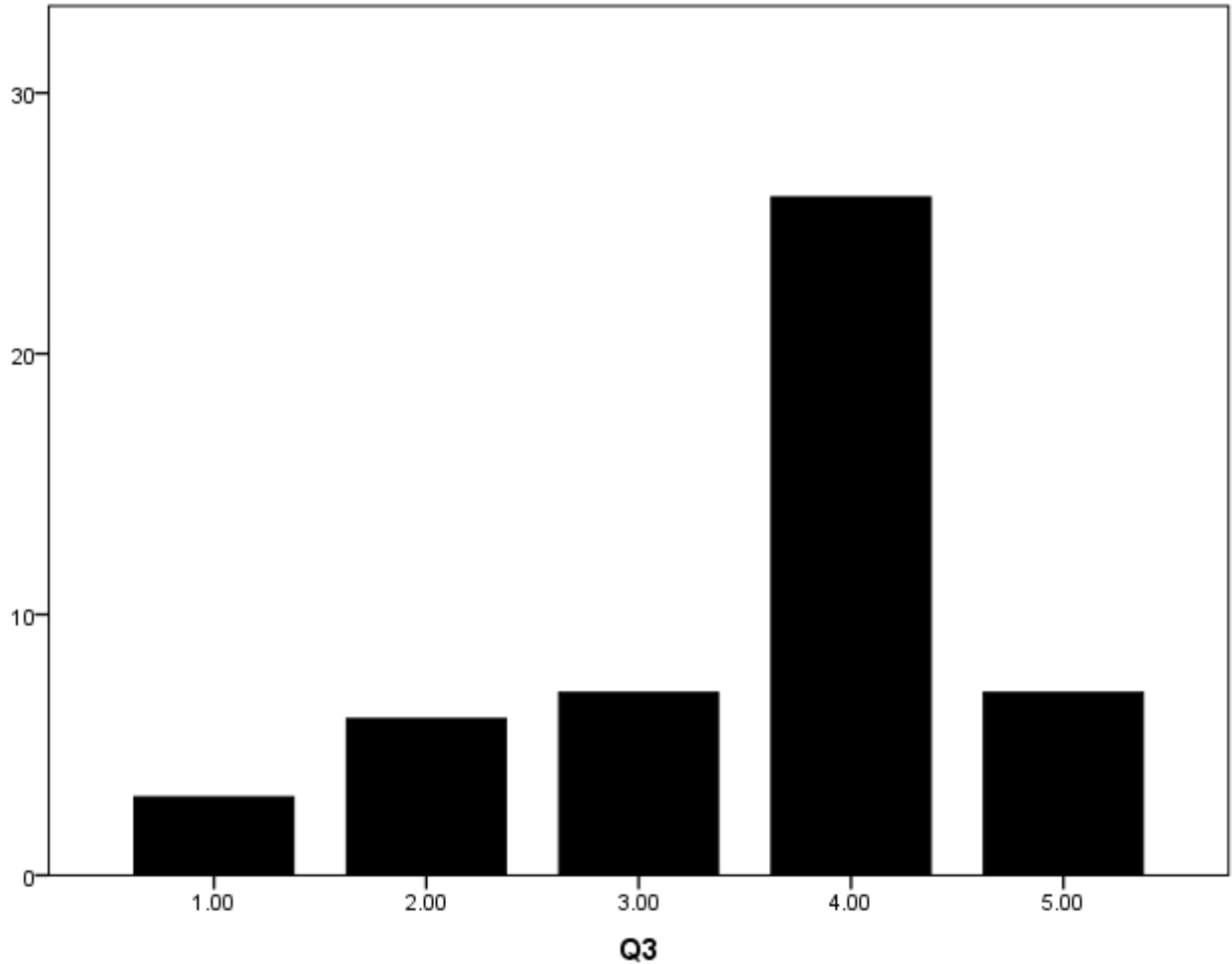
Figure 4.10 Respondent answers to Q3– Teacher and administrator attendance can affect student attendance.

Parental Knowledge of Policy and Policy Effectiveness

Questions 4, 5, 6, and 7 evaluated Ridgeview's current attendance policy. These questions asked respondents whether or not they were aware of the details of the school's attendance policy (Q4), whether they understand the school's attendance policy (Q5), and whether they found the school's attendance policy valuable and helpful to families (Q6). These questions were all viewed positively by respondents. The mean score for Q4 was 4.14 which fell between "Agree" and "Strongly Agree." Ninety-four percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" on the question.
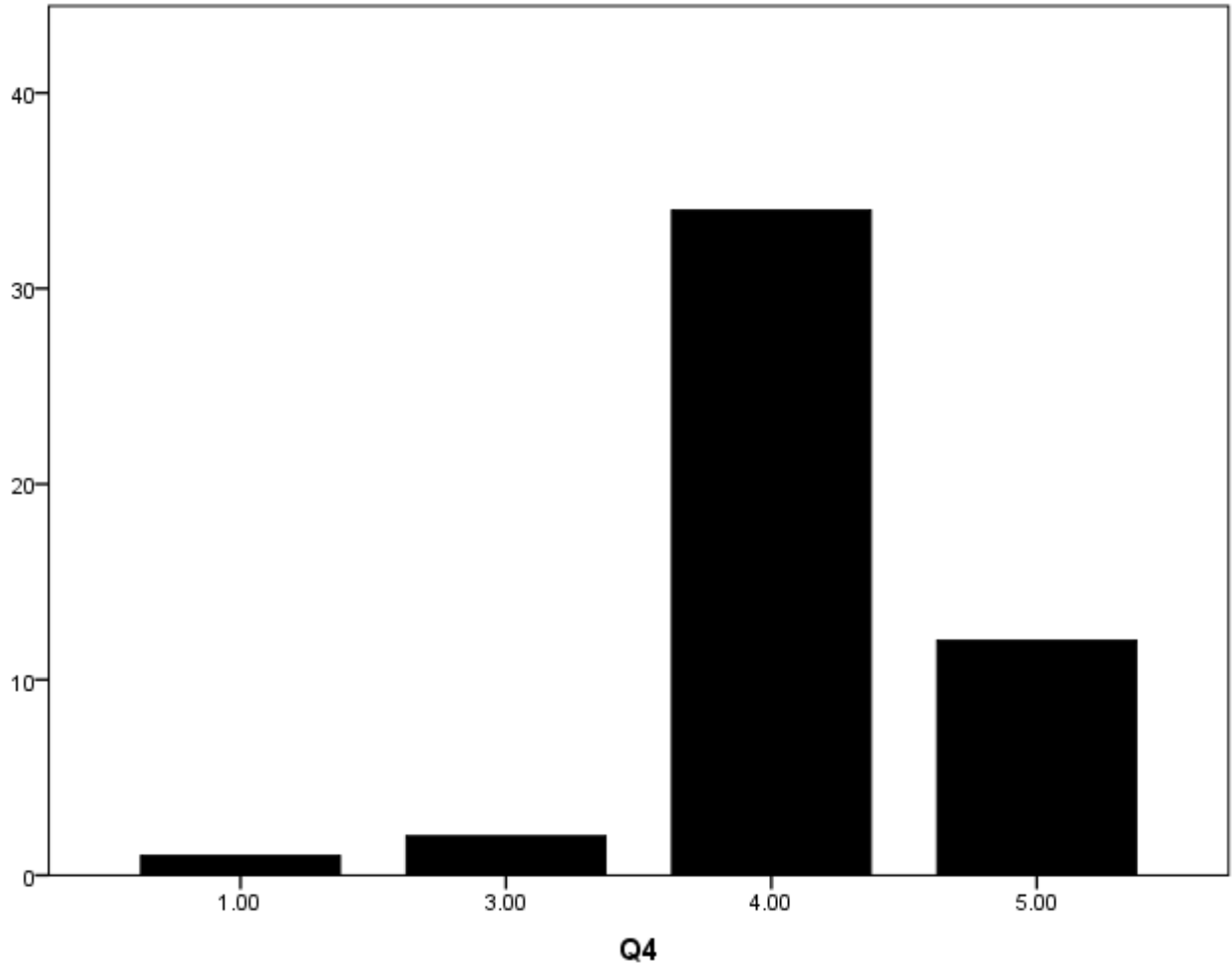
Figure 4.11 Respondent answers to Q4– I am aware of the details of the school's attendance policy.

The mean score for Q5 was 4.18 which fell between "Agree" and "Strongly Agree". Ninety-six

percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."
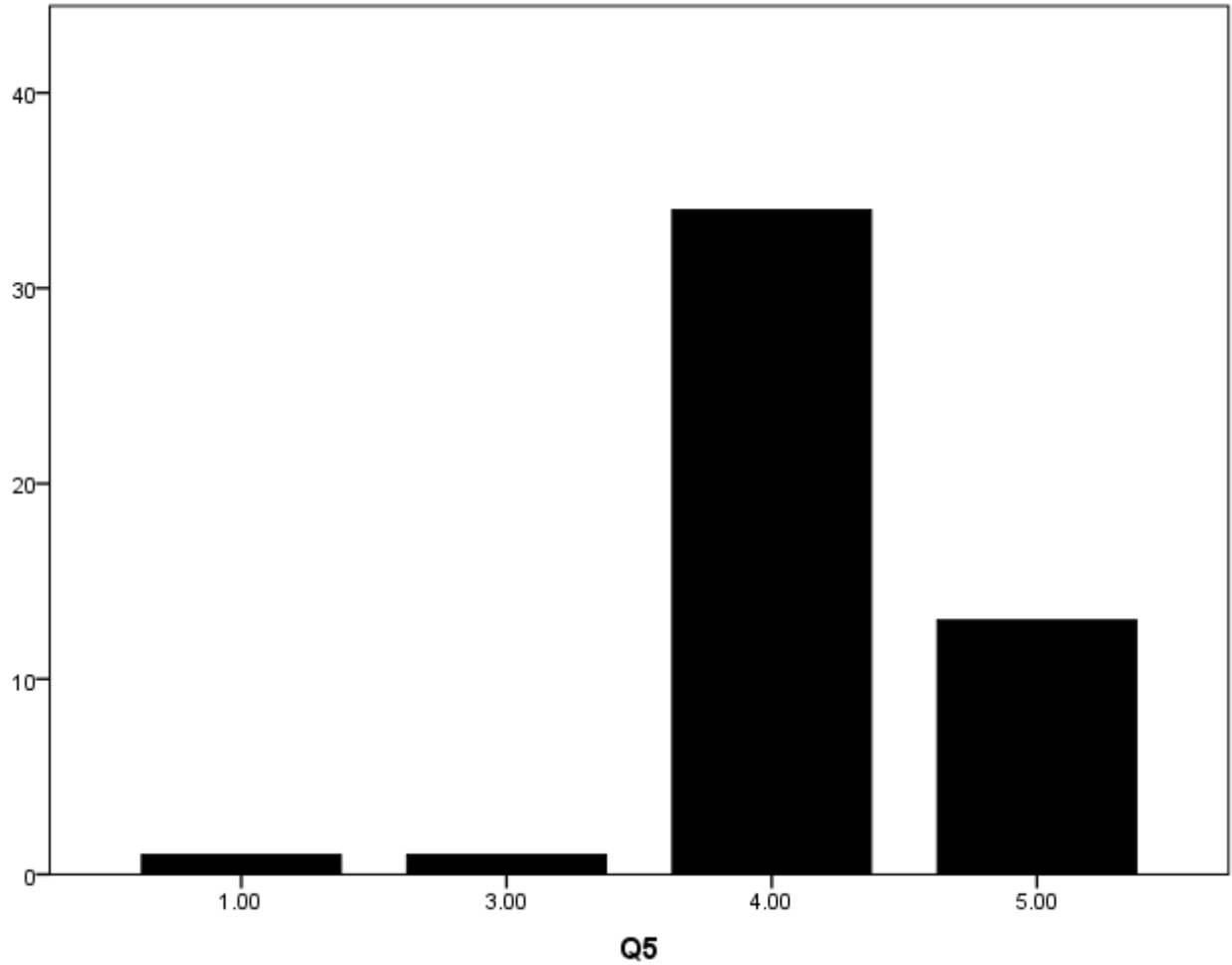
Figure 4.12 Respondent answers to Q5– I understand the school's attendance policy.

The mean score for Q6 was 3.95 which fell between "Neither Agree nor Disagree" and "Agree".

Seventy-eight percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."
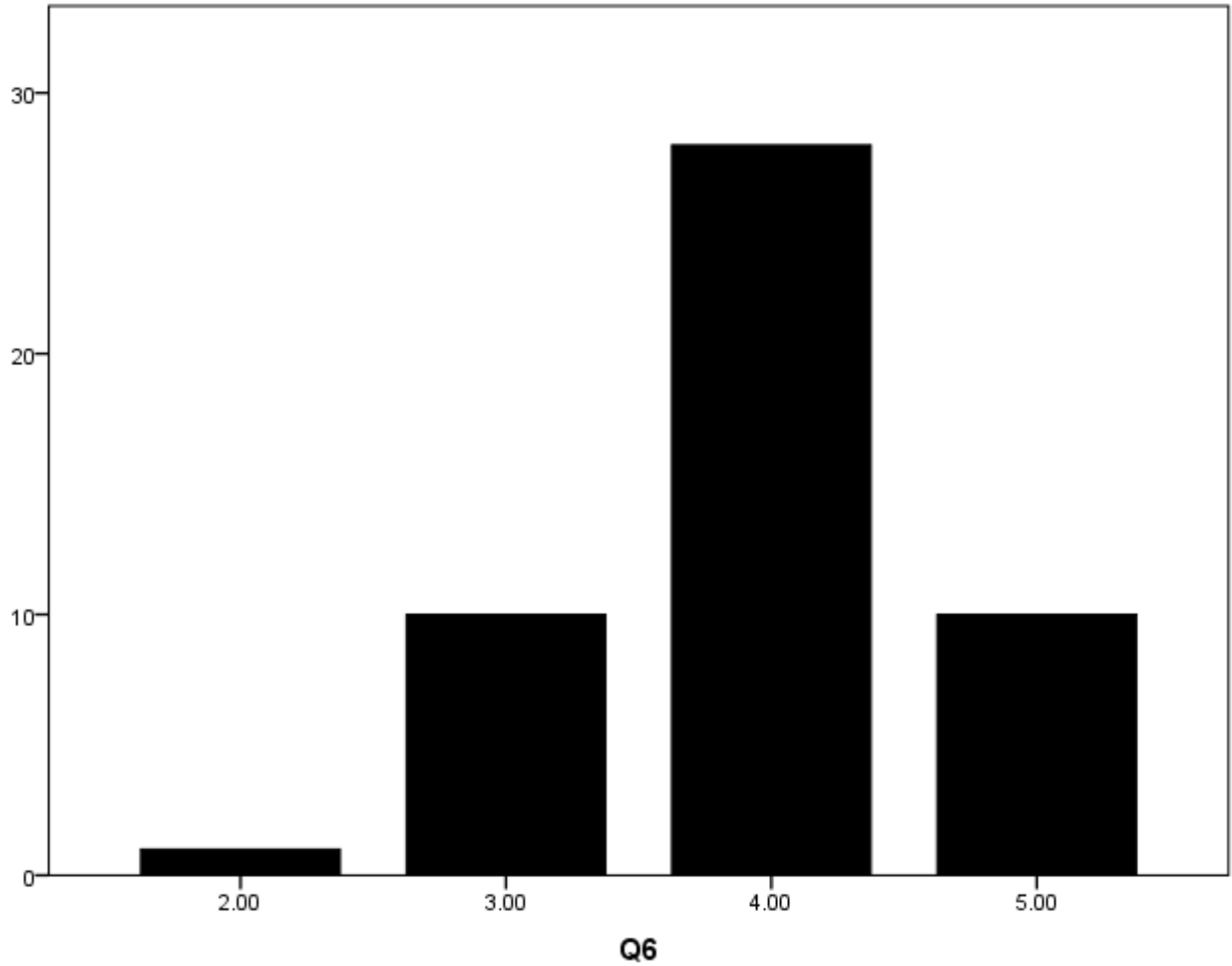
Figure 4.13 Respondent answers to Q6– I think the school's attendance problem is effective.

The mean score for Q7 was 4.04 which fell between "Agree" and "Strongly Agree." Eighty-six

percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."
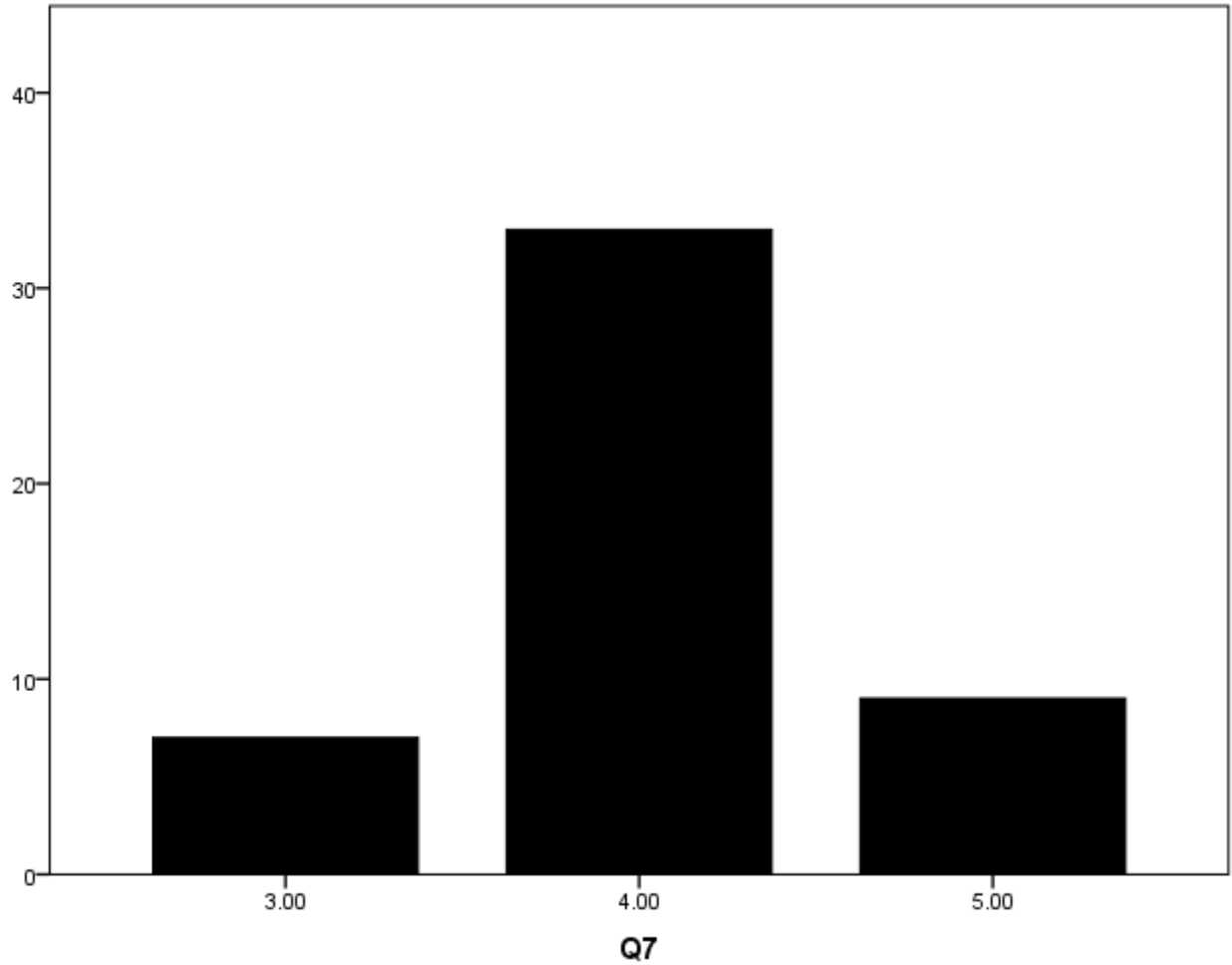
Figure 4.14 Respondent answers to Q7– I think the school's attendance policy is valuable and helpful to families.

The mean score for Q8 was 3.37 which fell between "Neither Agree nor Disagree" and "Agree."

Fifty-five percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree".
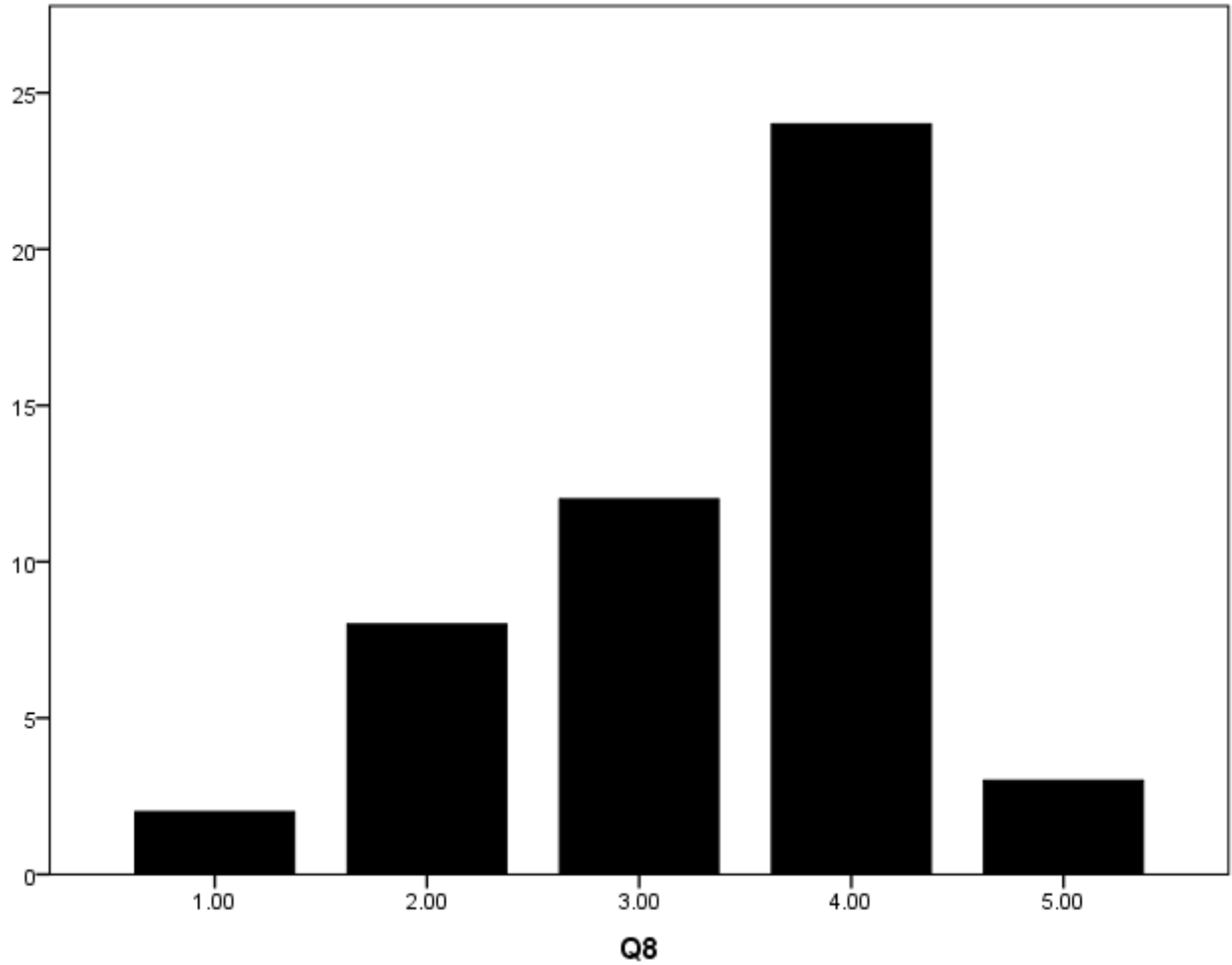
Figure 4.15 Respondent answers to Q8– I think students should be allowed to occasionally miss school for social events.

The mean score for Q9 was 3.92 which fell between "Neither Agree nor Disagree" and "Agree."

Seventy-four percent of respondents answered "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."
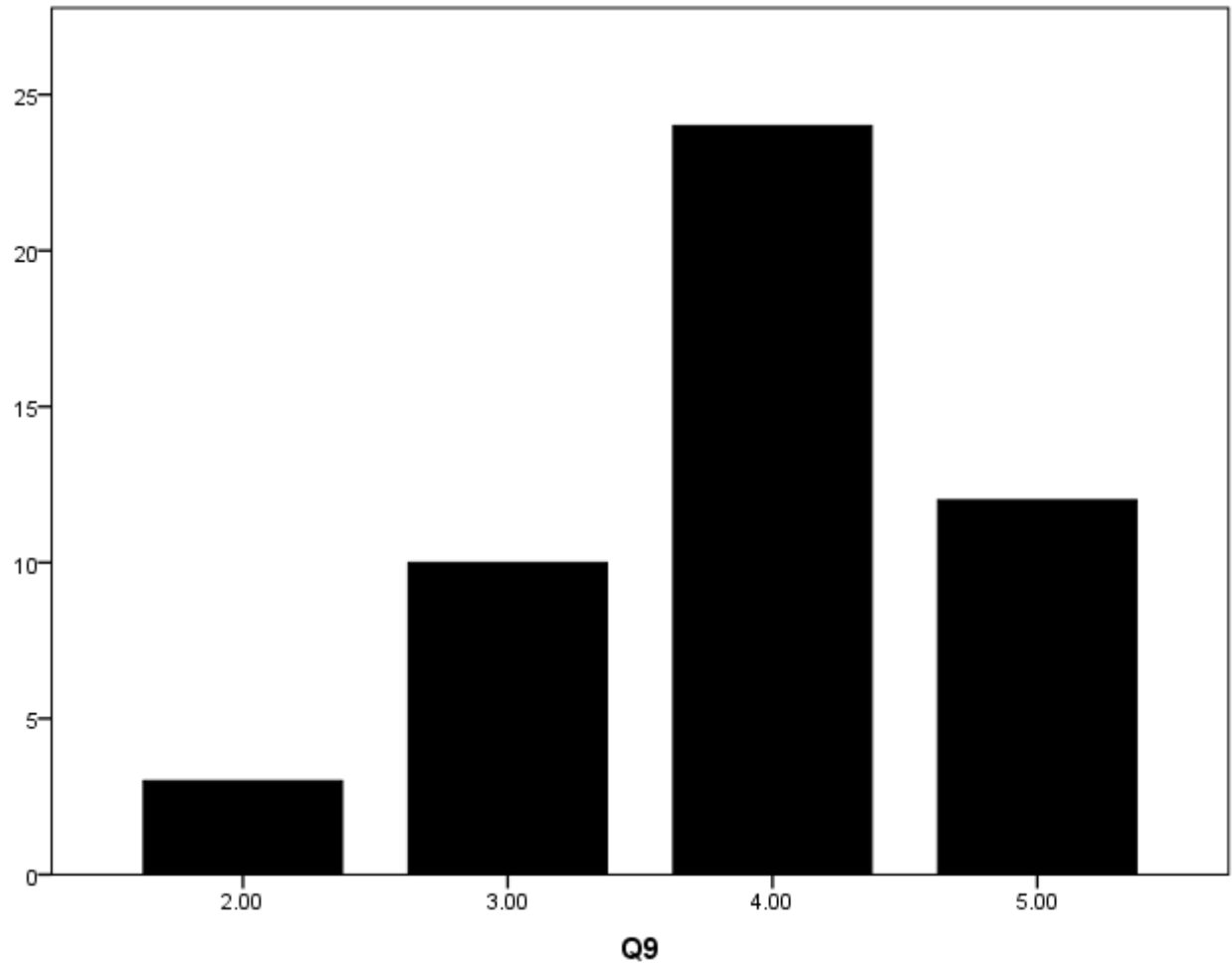
Figure 4.16 Respondent answers to Q9– I think moving to a four day school week positively affects student attendance.

Survey results enabled the researcher to start the process of answering the research questions.

Survey data combined with data from student record-keeping systems also brought to light

questions to be explored during semi-structured interviews.

Table 4.3

Compilation of Survey Questions and Mean Scores

Survey Question	Mean Score
Q1– Student absenteeism is a problem in our school.	3.12
Q2– Absenteeism is an issue for my child(ren).	1.55
Q3– Teacher and administrator attendance can affect student attendance.	3.57
Q4– I am aware of the details of the district's attendance policy.	4.14
Q5– I understand the district's attendance policy.	4.18
Q6– I think the district's attendance policy is effective.	3.95
Q7– I think the district's attendance policy is valuable and helpful to families.	4.04
Q8– I think students should be allowed to occasionally miss school for social events.	4.00
Q9– I think moving to a four day school week positively affects student attendance.	3.91

Qualitative Data Results

Following the collection of quantitative data, the way forward with qualitative data began to present itself. The outliers from tabulating quantitative data began to show the problem of student absenteeism was not widespread, but did show some critical areas. The quantitative survey data had also given direction to the search for answers to the research questions. Qualitative data was utilized to better address the initial research questions: (1) What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance? (2) What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy? (3) What is the perceived value held by teachers,

administrators, and parents of student attendance in school? Qualitative data was also driven by

the major themes that had shown themselves during quantitative data collection. Questions

probed through semi-structured interviews for greater depth included: (1) What drives the

increase in absenteeism after elementary school? (2) If the problem cannot be isolated to certain

student demographics, what causes the problem? (3) Are parents really as certain of the details

of the attendance policy as they indicated? (4) What role do teachers play in student

absenteeism? (5) Does the idea of systems theory– or how schools and families interact with

one another have a role in reducing student absenteeism?

Messages Sent In and Around the School System

Research Question One focused on messages being sent sending about school attendance.

Messages are sent back and forth by employees and students of a school system each day.

Messages are also sent between school systems and family systems each day. For the purposes

of this study, the messages discussed pertain to attendance. Messages pertinent to this study are

messages between Ridgeview Schools and parents, between parents and Ridgeview Schools,

between parents and students, between Ridgeview Schools and students, and messages from the

community of Ridgeview to students. The first research question of the study addressed

messages sent to and from all stakeholders of Ridgeview Schools.

When this question was developed the assumption was made that all the messages sent

about school attendance would be positive, supportive, and encouraging. One job of an effective

school is to convey the importance of attending school to both students and families. It also

seemed likely that parent messages to students indicated the same importance of attendance.

Initially, interviews with teachers and parents reinforced this idea. Participants from Ridgeview

School staff said, "You cannot lower the expectation, you cannot. If you do it once they'll meet

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your lower expectation and then fight when you try to set it higher." And, "Certain things have to be consistent and schooling is one of them." Another participant said, "Good attendance is just a habit that has been built." A Ridgeview teacher said, "These and simple skills and a simple message. They are the same skills employers will be looking for in the workforce. Employers expect you to attend, they expect you to be on time, they expect you to get along with your co-workers, and all of these are skills we teach in school." Faculty members stated emphatically the messages needed to be clear and be consistent with a culture of high expectations.

Parent participants agreed with much of what faculty members were saying, and said they often reiterated the importance of school at home. One parent said, "I think at the end of the day my kids know how important it is to be here and how important education is when it all boils down to it." Parents also mentioned how non-attendance wasn't an option for their kids with messages like, "I hear quite a bit from my kids about what does it matter, I'm not going to need this class? In the end they knew it didn't matter because I had set the expectation that they were going regardless." Another parent said, "My kids have to do it. Not going to school is not an option." One participant said, "School is not an option. It's not. It's kind of like work for me, work is not an option either. You go. School is the same way, you go." Participants also spoke about a common message to their children, responsibility. "School is your thing– like a job. You have to take care of it, you have to go." Another parent explained, "My kids always take care of business though because they know if they don't I'll be up here at the school and they don't want that." Parents reiterated the importance of a strong message to their children that school is important and attendance is vital; much like the messages that teachers spoke of sending.

As interviews progressed, however, both groups also began to note the importance of Ridgeview Schools and families sharing the same message, and also began to provide instances where that did not happen effectively. Seventy-one percent (12 out of 17) participants said they were unsure if the school even sent a unified message to students and families about attendance. A participant claimed, "I don't know that we really have a message on attendance. Honestly." One administrator articulated, "I don't think we send messages to families and kids about why attendance is important. I think sometimes we assume and we probably shouldn't do that. At the same time, how do you tell a parent without them feeling like you're pointing a finger at them?" A teacher echoed that statement and added, "I think we've always felt as a school that it's important– but I don't know that we've always clearly communicated that to students and to parents." Members of the faculty of Ridgeview Schools began to show doubt that the messages they intended to send matched the messages they actually sent to students.

Some of the lack of messages conveyed frustration on the part of teachers, "Even when we try to send messages about why kids need to be at school I don't think kids and often parents find much value in being here." Another teacher phrased it differently, "I think any message we send home tends to compete or be at odds with the parents' messages. I don't think most of the parents think much of their kids going to college or getting out of this town." One teacher voiced the lack of consistency in the message as a problem with teacher and administrative turnover, "I think it's hard for kids to get the same message, especially when we have different administration all the time. Our school struggles to find a structure or culture that keeps the expectations the same for kids and families." Later in the interview that same teacher said:

> With constant administration and teacher turnover it leads to an inconsistent message and culture for teachers which I believe gets passed on to students and families. We don't have the same thoughts or messages about attendance because for so long we've been

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allowed to think and act how we want in regards to a lot of things. There has not been a consistent force saying– this is the why, this is what we want you to push for.

As interviews progressed it seemed teachers came to a realization that they knew what messages they needed to send, but often those were not the messages that students actually received.

Parents who were clear about the messages they sent their children, also stumbled over the idea of the school sending messages to their family about why students should be at school. "As a middle school parent I feel like there's really no communication home anymore. I don't get notes home anymore and that was what I was used to." A second parent said, "I don't think the school sends any explicit messages home to us. I think kids just know they're supposed to be here." One parent openly said:

> I never came and talked to the school. I struggled because we're a prominent family in the community and it's our kids missing school. One of our kids probably missed more school than she attended and there's that, "Oh I don't want them to think I'm a bad parent. There's a genuine fear there you know? My kid might not graduate because she can't make it to school. Or, "Gosh every teacher here must think I'm an idiot because my kid won't come to school. They probably think I just let them do whatever they want to do.

Parents warred with this idea that they felt like if their children missed school the school would judge them or think they were lackadaisical parents, at the same time the parents felt as if they really were not involved in a partnership with the school in regards to getting their kids to school.

Teachers also spoke about the frustration and sadness they feel and how they wish they could communicate to parents what poor attendance does to students. "I think when kids miss a lot you can see them falling behind and I also think sometimes you see behaviors start because they're kind of brushing off that they don't understand the content." A second participant echoed that and said, "I think it's a cycle. If they fall behind it's hard for them to catch up and it can build frustration." One other teacher remarked, "Unfortunately the consequence for being absent from school is that you have a lot of extra work to do and you may not always understand

how to do it if you've missed big chunks of instruction." Even a parent speaking about their own said, "The minute they miss is a minute they have to make up. Once they fall behind chances are they're going to get frustrated and overwhelmed and then they just shut down." Participants were in agreement that part of the solution to this frustration on the part of students might be solved by sending more encouraging messages to students and families about the importance of attendance.

During the course of interviews it became clear from the faculty members of Ridgeview School that were interviewed they want to send messages to parents and be more open and honest about the importance of attendance. When asked about messages they would like to send to parents a teacher said, "Don't you think if we did, 'Here's what's going on in my class' more often maybe parents would go, 'There's value in my child being at school'?" One participant said, "I try to get my students and their parents to realize that we're all in this together." Another teacher said, "I want to tell parents of elementary students, these are their foundational skills! Everything else they will learn for the rest of their school years begins here. They have to be here." Another elementary teacher added, "When kids miss school they just miss so much." A high school teacher said, "If I can build better relationships with the students then they seem to be more willing to attend and then they go home and talk positively about school. Hopefully their parents start seeing that school is a great thing." One other teacher, with equal parts frustration and hope, said:

> Attendance is definitely important, but I don't know how we improve it. I think we just have to keep at it and keep trying and try different ways and different things. I know one thing, we absolutely cannot give up.

Faculty members at Ridgeview School recognize the importance of creating relationships and cultivating those relationships in order to get their message to be more impactful on students and

families. They want to use those relationships to convey the message that attendance is important every day.

Effectiveness of Policy

Research Question Two centered on policy and whether or not the current Ridgeview School attendance policy is effective. To clarify– Ridgeview School has a two-part attendance policy. One portion of the attendance policy is the truancy policy set forth by the Midwest State Ridgeview is in. The second portion of the policy is the addition to that bare bones truancy policy that has been customized and is specific to students of Ridgeview Schools. When asked in interviews, teachers had many things to point out about the attendance policy. One respondent answered, "Clarity of the policy is not the issue. In fact, I'd say policy is not the issue." Another participant said, "My first few years the attendance policy wasn't very clear to me, let alone me explaining it to students." One teacher said she goes over the policy with her classes, but she does not see long-term results from that. "We talk about the attendance policy in class a lot. It might help for like a week but it doesn't ever seem to lead to long-lasting improvements." Overall the results from interviews were mixed in regards to the attendance policy. Teachers also spent time discussing whether or not an attendance policy can be truly effective for each student.

Teachers agreed it was nearly impossible to craft a policy that would be effective for all students. One teacher said, "I don't know that the attendance policy is effective because I think some of these kids that are missing are going to miss regardless of what any policy says." A second participant said, "No matter how thorough your attendance policy is there's still going to be those few students that just don't get it." Another teacher claimed, "I don't believe you can create a policy that's effective for every student." One teacher summed it up and stated, "It's

effective for some kids and it's just like anything else, I don't think there's anything you could do to make it effective for all students." Although teachers felt a clear policy was of utmost importance, they were certain that a one size fits all policy would not solve the problem of excessive student absenteeism.

Parent consensus was clear in regards to the attendance policy, 90% (9 of 10) participants said although they knew there was a policy, none of them could describe the policy or its' main points. One parent was clear:

> I really don't know what the attendance policy is because as a parent that don't matter to me. I know what my kid needs, I know they need to go to school, so I don't really think the attendance policy makes a difference.

Parents were clear and honest in their admission that they did not really know the attendance policy. "I really don't know the policy because I've never had an issue with it." "I really do not know the attendance policy– that's horrible isn't it?" "I'm sure there are attendance rules but I don't know them because I don't have to deal with it." "Before last year I didn't even know we had an attendance policy." "I bet they gave me the policy to read at the beginning of the year but it's probably one of those things I don't really read." "I didn't even know what the policy as, even just recently." Parents did not seem to find a connection between the attendance policy and improved attendance. They claimed they did not know the policy or seek it out because they never had issues with the attendance policy. The fact that these parents also had students who had attendance issues at one point or another, yet still did not know the policy, in itself points to the ineffectiveness of the policy.

There were many reasons discussed why parents were unfamiliar with the attendance policy. One teacher said:

I don't think parents have clear access or exposure to the attendance policy. Many of our families have no Internet access and I don't think the attendance policy is on many of their lists as far as top concerns at school.

The lack of access or of knowing where to look for the policy was a commonly repeated theme by participants during interviews. Another teacher proposed the idea of sending notes home and more effectively notifying parents of absences and tardies because the days and hours often add up and parents do not understand the consequences of their children missing those days and hours.

Ultimately parents and teachers could not form consensus about whether or not Ridgeview's attendance policy is effective. One thing they all agreed on is that the policy is not effective if it is not implemented with fidelity. One participant said, "We have a policy but it doesn't have any teeth and we don't back it up. It doesn't work." The idea of not supporting or enforcing the policy was a common theme with teachers. "The policy is in the book, but we don't always do a good job of getting it out there to the kids at the front and keeping them aware of it." Another teacher said, "Sometimes no matter how strong the policy you have it's hard to enforce when you have parents who are looking for ways to avoid accountability." One participant stated, "You can have a policy but without the means to enforce that policy it's tough to do anything." One teacher said, "I don't know that we always follow through with our policies. I think we're good at parts of it, like truancy– but the kind of marginal areas I don't think we always follow up on that." The attendance policy questions in the interviews showed that although participants did not find much value in the attendance policy it might be because they really do not know what the policy is. The attendance policy at Ridgeview School has been ignored and not always followed with fidelity for many reasons including administrative and faculty turnover, lack of consequences set forth in the policy, and a push toward digitizing

documents and thrusting less paperwork at parents. None of these alone would probably be enough to show the ineffectiveness of the policy but all three together may have created an environment where they policy is not as effective as it could be, is not updated, and does not have any informational value to parents.

Perceived Value of School Attendance

Research Question Three focused on the perceived value of school attendance by teachers and school faculty. Participants stated unequivocally the importance of attending school. One hundred percent of participants (17out of 17) agreed that coming to school is critically important for students. One parent phrased it well, "The importance of attendance has to be instilled in kids by parents first and foremost." Teachers and parents also agreed that the value of school attendance has to come from parents at home in order to maximize the impact on students. One parent said, "Whatever is important to the parent is going to be important to the kid." A second parent said, "When your parents don't encourage you and tell you how important education is it kind of makes you think you're doing something wrong because you care. My parents never really valued education." Another parent echoed that sentiment and said, "My attendance was not always good and I feel like me being able to be successful in spite of that has probably had an effect on how I parent and my level of leniency on school attendance." One participant said:

> I've been around this school a lot in the past ten or twelve years since my kids have gone here and I worked here as a para for a few years. I've seen parents not caring and not seeing the importance of their kids being here every day, who would let their kids off the hook for anything and everything. Then the kids really struggled and more of the time never made up the work they missed. You can see those results in poor test scores, poor grades, poor everything.

Every participant was adamant that the importance of school attendance must be a joint effort between families and schools, even if that means schools need to be more committed to teaching parents the importance of attendance so they could pass that on to their children.

Teachers also agreed that attendance is extremely important. A teacher commented, "We need to make sure attendance is a priority. Like I said earlier, we can't teach students anything if they're not here." One teacher said, "Once the child is given the okay not to come to school from a parent they begin believing themselves that it's okay to miss school." Faculty members were in agreement, 100%, that attendance was a critical factor in the success of most students.

Teachers reinforced that they definitely think school attendance is important. One teacher said, "When kids aren't here they miss out on opportunities to learn and gain new skills." A second teacher said, "I think attendance is important because if they're not here they miss out on what they would have learned that day and it is hard to catch up when you miss a day of school." Another teacher said, "I think every minute you miss at school you miss so much because when you don't get that instruction you miss more than just minutes in a school day." Finally a teacher commented:

> My perception is that socioeconomic status might come into play with school attendance. I believe middle class people tend to think attendance is very important because it's kind of like being at your job. I feel like because we deal with so many parents of poverty it's not as important in our community.

Teachers were uncertain about where students hear the idea that school is not important. One teacher stated, "I think the school has a huge challenge in parents not seeing the importance of education and insisting kids be in attendance every day." Another teacher said, "Kids are not forced to attend, they're not made to, they don't care and it's just– you know somewhere twenty-five years ago their parents missed something. School wasn't important for them or they had a bad experience." One teacher said, "I believe our attendance issues are mainly apathy issues. I really don't think all our students or their parents care if they're at school." A teacher summed the sentiments up nicely when she said, "Listen, parent attitudes make a huge difference in

student attitudes. Parent beliefs make a huge difference in student beliefs. Family messages have the biggest impact on kids." An exasperated teacher explained:

> Some kids, I just don't get it, they just don't understand the importance of school. They don't understand why it's so important and then when they get to the end and they don't graduate they're like, "Uh, well this wasn't supposed to happen this way."

Teachers lamented their repeated messages on the importance of school attendance sometimes fall on deaf ears. They did not really have many solutions, but they were aware of the impact families had on a student's motivation to attend.

Some teachers believe there are parents in the school district who might not say school attendance is unimportant, but who show it by their actions. "I've had students that you can tell attendance is not important at home so it's not important to the kid to be here at school." Another faculty member said, "We had a student once who missed a lot of school. When we communicated with the parent the importance of attendance, this parent simply pulled the child out of school altogether." One teacher said, "Most of the messages kids get from their parents on attendance are non-verbal. I think our parents often show with their actions that they don't find attendance to be high value." Many teachers believed parents were not intentionally trying to teach kids that school attendance was unimportant, rather the parents sent implicit messages that students picked up on. Some teachers believed parents might not see the importance because they had struggled with absenteeism themselves or had poor school experiences.

Increase in Absenteeism after Elementary School

One of the themes that presented at the conclusion of quantitative data collection was the increase of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School after students leave elementary school. Elementary school at Ridgeview consists of grades kindergarten through fifth grade. In sixth grade kids transition to middle school and are considered to be in secondary school. Teachers,

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administrators, and parents were all in agreement that convincing kids of the importance of staying connected and involved during those transitions was critical.

One parent said outright, "Convincing kids about the importance of attendance becomes harder as they get older." Another parent said, "As my kids get older it's a fight to get kids to school. I've been attacked and I've attacked right back, it's a two-way street." A teacher reiterated this thought and said, "I think kids in junior high and high school– their interests grow and they have a little more flexibility with their time. I think their parents probably give them a little more free rein too." Another parent said, "You know kids don't always see the importance of attendance. The older they get the harder it is to get them to school." Another parent spoke about the helpless feeling she had with her children's school refusal after they reached high school:

> Now it feels like your hands are tied on how to get your kids to school. Usually I had to call the local police because you can't, you know, hog-tie your children. Even as the parent you can argue, beg, and plead but you know, your hands are really tied on getting your child to school.

The feeling of children growing older and more autonomous and fighting back against attending school was a surprisingly common theme for parents during the course of interviews.

Another aspect of the attendance drop after elementary school was the idea of a drop in parent support after elementary school. A Ridgeview faculty member first broached the topic, "Why do elementary kids as a whole tend to attend better than high school students? It's about the parents and about the family and about the level of engagement and partnership with the school during the early school years." Another teacher said bluntly, "I think one of our biggest challenges is parents that cover for their kids." As children grow up and begin to make more decisions for themselves, some teachers felt parents were allowing students to make choices to miss school.

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Several parents agree that their message and enforcement changes as kids get older. One parent of junior high and high school students said, "If (missing school) is not going to affect their grades I think giving them a break every once in a while when they're asking for it– they'll be better off in the long run." A second parent of a high school student said, "I think excessive absences for fun stuff or days off would be five to ten, but, you know, I get fourteen sick days at work so I guess kids might need days off too." Another parent of high school students said, "Sometimes if they get home later from a ballgame or an activity, as long as their grades or good I'll let them stay home. I've probably done that a lot." Other parents responded that they know they have probably been too lenient as their children get older. One parent of a high school student added:

> I would be okay with my child missing school every once in a while if they didn't have other issues like bad grades, bad attitude– stuff like that. Occasionally to me would be once or twice a nine weeks and it would depend on a lot of things. It would almost be a reward. You've been doing a great job so I can live with that. But I know I can be lax sometimes too.

Most parent participants did not view it as a drop in support of the school or the attendance policy, more along the lines of trying to give their children space to grow up. One parent lamented, "As far as connecting with the school, at parent teacher conferences, looking back now I think I felt like once they were in high school I didn't really need to go. Why did I do that? I don't know." Another parent told a similar tale in regards to giving older students space:

> I've kind of stepped back and allowed my kids to create some distance now that they're in high school. I war with that too. I mean, my kids are growing up so how do I give them the space to grow up and start to let them handle their problems on their own but not let their problems get so far out of control that I can't help?

This message reiterates the idea that parents of Ridgeview students might struggle at times with how to parent students on the cusp of adulthood and are turning school attendance over to their

children with the idea that the students need to learn how to be responsible and take care of any potential problems more independently.

Teachers and administrators were quick to point out that often school reinforces this idea of engaging more with the kids about their achievement, attendance, and discipline issues and neglecting to maintain solid contact with parents. One faculty member said, "They don't call home. The higher the grade level is the more likely that is." The same faculty member described the issue in-depth:

> As kids get older one, they distance themselves from the parent. Then we as a school staff begin to fall into the incorrect belief that, "Well we really don't need to involve the parents as much now." We hand more of the educational responsibilities over to the kid and less to the parent. I think we make a grave mistake when we do that. Just look at the difference in attendance at parent teacher conferences between elementary kids and junior high and high school students. High school teachers do not want to communicate with parents. They don't call the parents. They hesitate even when there's an issue. In elementary teachers view their job as a partnership between themselves and the parents. In high school teachers view their job as a partnership between themselves and the students and many times they ignore the parents.

Parents are not the only ones who view high school students as autonomous and try to give them more responsibility. Ridgeview School is doing the same thing when faculty members neglect to include parents in educational decision-making and give all the power and decision-making to the student.

Lack of Engagement and Participation

Another question that came to light at the conclusion of quantitative data collection was the idea that it is not student demographics necessarily that leads to excessive student absenteeism. In semi-structured interviews the question was asked, why do kids miss so much school? If student demographics do not provide answers, what might provide a clue as to why some students do not want to regularly attend school. The answer came from both faculty and

parents as a lack of engagement and participation in school. In regards to engagement one teacher was honest enough to say:

> I mean if the student is here and the classroom is not engaging we know they're still learning something– but not nearly to the level they would if they were engaged in what was happening. We all know what student engagement looks like, we're just not always very good at doing it consistently.

One participant said, "I think for the most part the ones that miss all the time would just rather be anywhere else." A second participant said, "You get this group that misses more than they're here." One teacher replied:

> I think we've reached what I call critical mass. At first we had a few that didn't really find it important so that created a few more that said, "Well so and so misses all the time and it's not a big deal" and it just continued to grow and now it has spiraled out of control.

Students at Ridgeview School are struggling to stay engaged in school. Excessive student absenteeism is viewed by some staff members as an attempt by students to stray from something they find boring and do not find of high value.

In regards to student engagement, one teacher pointed out, "As kids get older school becomes more lecture, watch a video, take notes, take a test, read these pages in your book–so I think it is harder to keep them engaged and keep their interest." A second teacher passionately said, "We have to get back to engagement, meaning involved, are they involved in activities? I know at my old school the students who had high percentages of absences and truancy issues, they were the kids who were not involved." Continuing on that theme, the same teacher said, "If we had more kids involved and engaged, truly engaged, that felt like this was their place I think we'd have better attendance, easier said than done I know." Another teacher pointed out, "If kids are engaged and involved and they have a purpose and reason, they can do great work." Many teacher participants agreed with the theme of students who are not involved being the ones

most likely to have excessive absenteeism. A common theme of this point in the interviews was summed up by one teacher, "A lot of our kids who struggle the most with absenteeism just aren't involved in anything, they don't participate." Teachers readily pointed to one solution to the disengagement of students is simply– engagement. Ridgeview faculty members pointed out the need to make school an inviting place for all students, somewhere they all felt they belonged so they found value in attending.

Parents agreed with teachers that engagement is important. One parent said, "One thing that works for my kids in high school is the school scheduling classes they were really interested in first thing in the morning." A second parent said:

> My daughter has a desire to come to school. She's in middle school not and she has friends and a social life and she's involved in sports and things. She knows, in return, if she doesn't attend and keep her grades up then she can't play those sports or spend time with those friends.

Parents agreed with teachers. The best way to fight apathy and disengagement was to find a way to engage every student.

Other parents agreed and spoke about the difference in attendance, even with their different children, between the ones who were involved and the ones who weren't. One parent said, "My son had adults in his life, like his high school coaches, who pretty much kept him on his toes. He was involved in every sport and he knew he had to be here." Another parent said, "Most of my kids had athletic ability. They knew that playing sports goes hand in hand with going to school. If you don't attend or keep your grades up you can't participate." Finally one parent pointed out the lack of opportunities for participation, "My kids weren't really involved in sports and that's all they really have to offer here. There's no other activities really, especially below the high school, so we never really felt like we had a reason to be involved." Parents

believed it was about more than just engaging course work, it was about engaging students outside of the classroom as well.

Parents also stated they need the school's help making school a place kids want to be. One parent said, "It's critical that kids are engaged. If they enjoy coming and they have a good relationship with their teachers they are going to want to be here." A second parent reiterated that idea, "School needs to be an environment not just where kids have to be there, but that they want to be there." A third parent said, "School needs to be a place kids like to be." Finally a parent commented, "I'm an adult and I don't want to go to work if I don't like the people I work with. Why would it be any different for kids?" In many of the participants' interviews they state unequivocally that the school has the power to create an environment that increases student motivation and desire to attend.

Teacher Modeling and Attitudes Toward Attendance

Another question addressed at the conclusion of quantitative data collection was the role teachers play in student absenteeism. Survey results showed that 67% of parents responded that they believe teacher and administrator absence can affect student attendance. Teachers and administrators agree with that statement. One school faculty member said:

> I imagine some teachers are comfortable with helping to clearly communicate the policy to students. I imagine others would feel hypocritical if they were to say something like that because their own attendance is at question. I don't think they have the standing to speak to kids about attendance and I bet they would be lambasted if they tried.

The conclusion seemed to be students would find it hypocritical for a teacher who missed many days to speak about the importance of attendance.

Teacher absenteeism was a theme many teachers spoke on. Teachers said things such as, "Our new administrators have come in and set clear expectations for the adults in our building and are holding them accountable to those expectations. Our student absenteeism problem

manifested itself because we had an adult absenteeism problem." This idea was repeated often among teachers. In fact, 75% (6 out of 8) faculty members spoke to adults in the building having absenteeism issues. Teachers said, "In my time here we have had some teachers that missed a lot of school and kids would talk about it. They knew. It's not a secret." A second teacher said, "We've had teachers here in the recent past that were just burnt out. They just didn't want to teach anymore so they jumped at any excuse to miss as many days as they could." Another teacher commented, "In past years we have had teachers who were gone all the time. I think that send a message to kids that they don't think it's important so why should the kids think it's important?" Teachers were also clear that they were not the only ones who recognized an adult absenteeism problem in our building, "We live and work in a small community. People talk and they knew when teachers are gone a lot." Participants were aware of the inconsistency in the messages students were receiving by teachers saying one thing and modeling something else. They were also aware the messages were not just being sent to students– but to parents and members of the community as well.

Ridgeview faculty participants seemed frustrated and upset about the idea that faculty and staff may be communicating the idea that missing school is acceptable. One teacher said, "A few years ago there were teachers that would be off work to go get a new tattoo. They would come back and the kids would see it. I mean, they're not stupid." One faculty member said, "Modeling, plain and simple, you better model it or else you can't speak to it." Another participant said, "We lead by example and so if we're not setting an example or we're setting a poor one than I think that's a really big problem." Another teacher said, "I have seen evidence of teachers modeling not being in attendance at school. If we are not modeling being here every day then we're modeling that it's okay to be gone and it's not." The idea of expecting kids to be

in attendance at school when teachers are not modeling being in attendance every day was a sore spot for faculty members.

Parents also believed that teachers send messages with their attendance at school. One parent said, "I have teachers who have told my kids they're not going to be here because they're looking for another job. I think that tells the kids that we're not important. This place must not be important if they don't want to work here." A second parent said, "Kids build relationships with their teacher; for some of them the teacher is the only consistent thing in their life. If the teacher is gone a lot I think it could change student attitudes about wanting to be here." Another parent said, "It's absolutely important for teachers to be there. If they're not there kids are going to start getting the impression that if it's not important for them to be there on a regular basis then how come we should?" Parents also made comments like, "Teachers who miss a lot of school are not modeling the importance of being in attendance." And, "As a child you're constantly watching adults and you're constantly watching other people and if they don't think it is important why would you?" Another parent tied teacher attendance to the idea of teachers caring about student attendance and said, "If you're gone all the time as a teacher you really must not care what attendance looks like– yours or anyone else's. Bottom line, if the teacher's never here, they don't care." One final parent mentioned the idea that a particular teacher's attendance is a running joke at home. This family has issues with student absenteeism and says her children joke, "This teacher misses more than we do so you know that's a lot!" These quotes drive home the idea that implicit teacher messages are being received at home when teachers miss a lot of school.

Family/School Connection

The final question that was explored as a result of quantitative data collection was the idea of systems theory– or how schools and families interact with one another and the role that might have in reducing student absenteeism. In seventeen qualitative interviews with one administrator, seven teachers, and ten parents, all seventeen mentioned the idea that school and home are not often on the same page. One faculty participant said, "Our greatest challenge in regard to attendance is family engagement. It's the best thing we can do and the biggest thing we're lacking in." Another teacher wistfully said, "I wish parents and schools could be more in tune with each other." Seventy-six percent of participants indicated that they do not even believe the school has a unified message school faculty and staff send to students and parents about attendance or why it is important.

Teachers spoke of instances in the past where they had attempted to bridge the gap between family and school, often unsuccessfully.

> I had a student miss a week of school. I was trying to help him catch up and sending pieces of work home every day after school, keeping him in some at recess, anything I could do to help him catch up. His mother found me one day after school and scolded me because I was giving him too much work and telling him he needed to work on it every spare minute. I mean, she was really ugly about it, even after I explained what I was doing.

A second teacher told a story of another child who had issues with attendance. She spoke of the process and everything that had been done by school staff to work with this child and communicate with parents about the importance of attendance. She said:

> We had a student in elementary school last year and he just didn't feel like coming to school many days and his mom couldn't tell him no. Our principal finally had to become very assertive about the fact that he really needed to be at school. She pulled him out and said she was homeschooling him.

Participants had many stories of students they thought they were helping but it ended up creating division between the school and the family because the family did not understand why the teachers were asking so much of the student. There was a lack of connection and when the school took action the parents were surprised and often reacted poorly to the news rather than being willing to partner with the school to correct the issue.

The idea of families and schools working together is one that teachers at Ridgeview Schools believes would be beneficial for students. Faculty members also spoke to the idea that school might be a place that is uncomfortable to parents, and they would like to find a way to alleviate that. "I just want to help parents understand that we do care about their kids and their education and that we are truly here to help. We're not here to make anyone feel inferior." A second teacher said, "We're making a terrible mistake by not involving parents." Another teacher said, "I think maybe it goes back to cycles– maybe the parents didn't know what to do and they dropped out and didn't have a good school experience so they don't know how to be supportive of their children." Some teachers were excited about the opportunity to provide more ways to connect between families and school. "I also think education is key. We have to instill the importance of attendance with parents. Imagine what might happen if as a school– an entire K-12 campus– we made attendance our focus for the year." A second teacher said, "It all goes back to parent education. If parents hear from us, "This is our focus for the year and this is why", you know, that sounds simple to us but some of our parents don't think like that." Teachers were asked what they would communicate with parents if they had the opportunity to give them any message about why attendance is important. One teacher explained, "If I could communicate with parents I would let them know that I wouldn't do what I do if I didn't think it was important. I feel like what we do here is important and the kids need to be here." Teachers

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were quick to respond to the idea of schools and families being partners in the education of children. Participants believed it would work in the best interest of the students to create as cohesive a front as possible, to keep parents informed, and to continually educate parents about the importance of school attendance.

Parents were on board with the idea of a closer connection between school and families, but they were also skeptical as well. One parent spoke about a lack of reciprocity of messages. She said:

> My theory is the school has always preached, we need the parents, but last year I needed the school and the school was not there for me. I've had to be aggressive about some issues with the school. I haven't always had the best relationship with the school.

That same parent said later, "If I ask for help with an issue and the school doesn't know how to help, I wish they would just tell me that, not tell me things are being handled just to appease me." A second parent spoke honestly and said, "Schools assume a lot of things. I think schools assume everyone knows attendance is important." There was a level of distrust among some of the parents interviewed. A parent said:

> With principals in the past I've felt like I had to be confrontational about issues because I didn't feel like I was getting an answer. I didn't feel like they cared at all. I haven't always had the best relationship with the school because of my struggle with administrators.

One other parent said, "There was isolation, the school was no help at all and we felt all alone trying to deal with huge problems that started at school. At one point we were going to move out of town." That same parent spoke later:

> I don't blame the school for what happened to my child. I blame the administrators who were in charge then who dropped the ball. It's not the school. It ain't everybody in that school. It's the people that was supposed to be handling it that didn't.

Parents who have children who would most benefit from a closer partnership between school and family are often the ones who are the most skeptical of that partnership because they have been

let down before. Just like any relationship, building trust is critical to success between a school and family partnership.

Parents also said it is hard or would be hard to come to the school and ask for help, especially for those families who need it most. "I think you get the parents who are like, Oh it's the school, they think they're better than everybody. You know what I mean?" Parents were quick to point out that they need the school to help establish those ties and that if it's left up to parents it is likely not to happen. "It is hard as a parent to not have any ties and to come in and feel comfortable even asking those questions." "I'm afraid families who have the hardest time don't ask for help. Would you ask for that help? It would be a very humbling experience." One parent said, "I think some families struggle and don't want to connect to the school because they feel like they're being judged or looked down on." Another parent said, "I think schools and teachers need to be more open with parents and parents need help getting over their fears." One parent summed it up well when she said:

> We struggled with our youngest daughter not wanting to come to school when she was younger because she was being made fun of. I'd have to make her go to school not feeling well and knowing here goes my sick child back to class and she's going to get made fun of again. Thinking back, why didn't I come talk to anybody? I think I thought, "I don't want to go up there and them yell at me because she has missed so much school."

Participants were clear the onus would fall on the school to initiate and cultivate a trusting relationship between school and families. Many participants spoke to the idea of parents being overwhelmed and intimidated by the process of school (for various reasons).

Over half of participants claimed their relationship with Ridgeview Schools was good, or at least tolerable. At the same time, many participants said their relationship with the school could always be better. One parent said, "I sometimes felt like the school was too busy for me. I was busy all the time too but I knew they were always busier." A second parent said, "I think I

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could have always worked harder to have a better relationship with the school." One final parent said:

> It's harder for me to feel connected here. It's not that I don't trust you guys, it's just that my kids were older when they started here. I just don't feel that– I don't feel as connected here even with my own girls here. I haven't meant to be standoffish but I know I probably come across that way sometimes.

Participants were clear there is always room for improvement in the relationship between school and families. Even families the school seems to have a close relationship with can sometimes feel neglected and unsure of how to proceed with issues their student may have at school.

Ridgeview Schools teachers were quick to point out that they know the only way to move forward and solve the problem of student attendance is if the school spreads the message to families that educating students is almost impossible without family support. "Family support is critical. You have to have the family behind you." "I think it is important for kids to feel like their family and their school are connected and they are being held accountable by both." Another teacher said, "I think it's important to find ways to strengthen that relationship between the family and the school, you know, making parents feel more welcome and letting them know they can talk to school officials." One final thought on connecting with families was made by a Ridgeview teacher. She said, "Our school needs to establish relationships with parents and communication needs to start happening with these families when these kids are in preschool." Building a relationship takes time. It is difficult and it is time-consuming. Teachers and administrators already have so much on their plates, it may sometimes seem easier to ignore the relationship between school and families. It is a mistake to take those relationships for granted. All participants agreed a close relationship between school and family is an indicator of student success.

CHAPTER 5-DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the problem of practice of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School; including why students are miss so much school. Chapter Five was designed to interpret the data collected from parents, teachers, and administrators concerning student absenteeism at Ridgeview Schools. The findings in this chapter represent analysis and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from five different sources: student demographic and attendance data from the student record-keeping systems at Ridgeview Schools, student attendance surveys distributed to parents of students at Ridgeview Schools at school enrollment, a semi-structured interview with a Ridgeview Schools administrators, six semi-structured interviews with Ridgeview Schools teachers, and ten semi-structured interviews with parents of students at Ridgeview Schools. The chapter is organized around the three research questions proposed throughout this study: (1) What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance? (2) What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy? (3) What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school?

To address the research questions the study employed a sequential mixed methods research design. Quantitative data were gathered first in the form of surveys to parents and collection of student demographic data from Ridgeview School's student information record-keeping system. After quantitative data were collected, it facilitated qualitative data collection. Qualitative data was collected in the form of seventeen semi-structured interviews with participants (parents, teachers, and administrators).

Chapter five included discussion of each of the research questions, including both the quantitative and qualitative data that speaks to each question. Chapter five also included discussion of the themes that presented themselves as a result of quantitative and qualitative data collection, including a discussion of systems theory and the way schools and families connect with one another. Following discussion of the research questions, chapter five revisited the limitations and delimitations of the study followed by implications for practice and implications for future research.

Research Question 1: "What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance?"

Schools and families share an ultimate goal of educating and preparing students for a world after schooling. Students come to school every day with values and norms from home, and carry home each day messages and lessons learned while at school. The research is clear– parents want their children to do well in school (Mapp, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Schools want children to leave school feeling accomplished and knowledgeable about the world they live in. These messages seem clear enough. Yet when asked, time and again participants were vague about the messages that Ridgeview Schools sends students and family about the importance of attendance. Seventy-one percent (12 out of 17) participants said they were unsure if the school even sent a unified message to students and families about attendance. Both parents and faculty members agreed the messages were sporadic, poorly conveyed, and often were merely assumptions that everyone knows you need to be at school every day.

Parent Messages. When parents were asked about their messages sent to their children, they made clear their messages were positive and encouraging, as well as demanding when they had to be. In their own way, almost every parent participant, 90% said they hold their kids to

high expectations when it comes to attendance. Survey results showed the same trend with parent responses. While almost 38% of survey respondents indicated we have an attendance problem at Ridgeview Schools, only 4% of those same respondents agreed that their child has an attendance problem.

The same participants who gave examples of the tough explicit messages they send to their children also spoke of special occasions and social events where they might allow their child to miss school to attend. They gave qualifications their child must meet in order to allow those absences, but the interview participants said they might let their child miss as much as two or three times each nine weeks for special events. Parents participating in the survey agreed–55% of respondents said they believe students should be allowed to occasionally miss school for social events. Participants spoke about letting their children miss school the night after late ballgames or late events, once again reinforcing the implicit message that there are some things that take precedence over school attendance.

These results could possibly mean that none of the students with excessive student absenteeism had parents take the survey or participate in interviews. It is more likely a case of parents underestimating the effects of their child's absences on their education, as well as underestimating the effects of their unintended messages to their children on the importance of attendance. It is easy to see how parents can pass along unintended messages to their students. After all, it is only a day or two here and there, how bad could it be? It appears sometimes parents do not realize how quickly one or two absences a month could possibly affect a child's learning or their child's ability to keep up with what is happening in the classroom (Chang & Romero, 2008). Overall, it seems parents send very good explicit messages about why attending school is important. They responded they are capable of "being the bad guy" and holding their

children accountable for their attendance in school. Based on the qualitative data, these same parents are not always consistent with their implicit or unintended messages about school attendance. Students are given freedom to stay home, or as one participant phrased it, "take a break" every once in a while which shows kids that student absenteeism is not always important to parents.

School Messages. Ridgeview School faculty spent a lot of time in interviews explaining how important they believe attendance to be. They answered passionately about why they feel attendance is important, and what messages they would want to send parents about attendance. They spoke of cases where students fell behind strictly because of attendance. They spoke of students who were consistently tardy and the damage they believe it does to their education. When asked if the school sends a unified message that encourages good attendance and explains the benefits of good attendance, participants were stymied. Faculty participants agreed that Ridgeview Schools does not send a unified message about why student absenteeism is dangerous and why students need to be at school every day.

Ridgeview Schools has struggled with faculty and administrative retention the past five or ten years, and some faculty members felt like that might be the reason there is no clear attendance goal or message. One particular participant said attendance is not part of the vision of where the school is going or an integral part of the mission, of what Ridgeview Schools exists to do. Parents agreed the school does not send home messages about why it is important for kids to be at school. Parents shared they often feel alone in trying to convince their children of the importance of attendance, and that is a burden the school could share by clearly and continually communicating the expectation of attendance.

Research Question 2: "What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy?"

Attendance policies are tools in the fight against excessive student absenteeism. Attendance policies are the way attendance expectations are communicated to parents and students. Sheldon and Epstein (2004) found that keeping parents informed about attendance policies and expectations was found to be one of three practices in the study that had the strongest ability to lower rates of absenteeism. Attendance policies are rules or laws (at the state level) that mandate school attendance. Young (2014) says, "…student absenteeism cannot be stamped out by rule or decree. This is a limited approach to a multi-faceted problem, and it sometimes has unintended consequences" (p. 33). Although school attendance policies alone are not enough to curb excessive student absenteeism, policies are important because they communicate the expectations to parents and students.

Parent Awareness of the Policy. The survey data was clear that parents feel very clear about the details of the attendance policy. Ninety-four percent of parent participants answered they were aware of the details of the attendance policy. Parents also answered that they understood the details of the attendance policy. Ninety-six percent of respondents answered they understood the details of the attendance policy. When probed further in semi-structured interviews it seems parents were definitely aware of the attendance policy. Only one parent admitted to not even really being aware of a policy, and that participant responded that it was only because she never had to use it. More participants, however, reported not understanding the details of the attendance policy. Once again, this could be due to parents never having exposure to the policy in-depth. Ridgeview Schools have recently digitized the student handbook and

stopped handing out paper copies, so many parents reported knowing where the handbook is located, but also reported never accessing the policy.

Effectiveness of the Policy. Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents indicated they think the attendance policy is effective. Again, when probed further in-depth in qualitative interviews, it was clear participants differed on their opinions of the effectiveness of the policy. Many parents interviewed said they believed the policy is effective, but they have never put it to the test because they have never had to deal with it. Teachers and administrators had mixed opinions, some of them felt like the policy is ineffective because it is not always followed with fidelity. The administrator was clear– he does not believe the clarity of the policy is the issue. He does not believe the policy itself is the issue. Other teachers agree that the policy that is in the handbook might be as effective as it gets. Parents agreed with this thought. The general consensus from qualitative data is that it is difficult, maybe impossible, to create a policy that would be effective for every student. Many respondents said there would probably be students who missed school regardless of the strength of the attendance policy.

Overall, the attendance policy of Ridgeview Schools is recognized by parents. At the very least parents seemed aware of the existence of the attendance policy. When pressed for more details about the attendance policy– about where to find it and what it included, parents became much less sure of the details. This shows that the policy might not be clearly communicated to students and parents. Teachers also freely spoke about the lack of general knowledge of the attendance policy, and about how students do not seem to refer to or care much about the details of the school's attendance policy. One important factor for attendance policies to be effective is that the policy needs to be clearly communicated to both students and parents

and consistently enforced (Kube & Ratigan, 1992; Railsback, 2004). Both of these aspects might need to be investigated at Ridgeview Schools.

The attendance policy of Ridgeview Schools is passable. For some families the attendance policy is both clear and effective. This study has shown there is a common belief that there is nearly no way to craft a policy that will work for every student. Parents were clear they liked the flexibility of the policy and they liked the idea of having some input. The policy also clearly lays out the truancy policy and lists examples of absences that are excused versus examples of absences that are unexcused. There are areas that could be improved upon in regards to the policy. Chief among these areas according to teachers and parents in semi-structured interviews is the fidelity to the policy and the communication of the policy to faculty members, parents, and students.

Research Question 3: "What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school?"

The perceived value of school attendance by all participants in the qualitative portion of the study was extremely high. One hundred percent of participants voiced the importance of being at school. The research agrees with the idea that attending school is important. One study revealed an achievement gap at all levels of schooling between students who do not attend school well versus those who do attend well (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Research shows that student absenteeism may affect student achievement and that excessive student absenteeism may create problems for families, schools, and communities when students are not in school (Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Moreover, the research explicitly speaks to the importance of attendance as it shows a relationship between attendance and grades,

outcomes at the completion of schooling, and better standardized test scores (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Lamdin, 1996; Nolan et al., 2013; Ready, 2010).

Value of Attendance from Parents. Participants were clear that the value of school attendance must be clearly communicated to students at home. Parents communicated that they took this role very seriously, and they knew it was their responsibility to convince kids of the importance of attending school. One parent said it perfectly, "Whatever is important to the parent is going to be important to the kid." Parents are aware they are on the front lines of preventing excessive student absenteeism.

Parents also spoke about their own experiences in school when they were young, and the impact it might have on their children. Forty percent of parents interviewed stated they were not always great school attenders as children for various reasons. This makes it more difficult to explain to kids the importance of attendance, when parents did not attend school well. A few parent participants even spoke of their parents' view of attendance as less important and how that affected their schooling and the way they view school as a parent.

Value of Attendance from Teachers. Teachers were resoundingly positive about the value of attendance. Teachers made clear that when kids miss school they miss so much. Students miss content and instruction, but they also miss opportunities to socialize and learn social and communication skills or the opportunity to hone noncognitive skills that may benefit them later in life. Teachers were also clear that maybe we have not made attendance as high a priority as we need to at Ridgeview Schools. A few teachers spoke about the need to educate parents and remind them why attendance is so important, maybe by including a few statistics about attendance in newsletters to parents; just to remind parents how important it is for their kids to attend school.

Teachers also stressed the idea that they believe parents and school faculty are guilty of telling students attendance is important, but not modeling how important school actually is. One participant spoke about the nonverbal messages that parents give. They tell their kids attendance is important, yet still allow the student to miss school for often the most frivolous reasons. A few teachers told a story of a student whose parent was confronted about poor attendance and chose to pull her child out of school rather than allow faculty to work with her to remedy the problem. Students are receiving mixed messages about why attendance is important from faculty and staff at school as well as from parents at home. They hear it is important, yet they do not see it as a point of focus, they are allowed lenience often at home, and they see teachers who do not always model the importance of attendance.

Increase in Absenteeism after Elementary School

The quantitative data was clear that Ridgeview Schools experiences an increase in student absenteeism after students leave elementary school. Ridgeview Schools is divided into an elementary school housing grades kindergarten through fifth and a junior high/ high school for students in grades sixth through twelfth. The mean number of absences for elementary students was 4.6 and the mean number of absences for junior high/ high school students was 5.8. The data shows the average number of days absent increases by greater than one day, just because students switch ends of the building. When this question was presented in interviews with parents and Ridgeview Schools faculty members, they recognized that excessive student absenteeism becomes more common in junior high and high school and gave a few reasons why they think that may happen.

Providing students space to grow up. A few participants spoke about the idea of trying to place more of the responsibility for attending on their children as they grew older. Parents

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talked about the idea of trying to help their children transition from childhood to adulthood by placing more of the responsibility for many new things on their children. Thirty percent of parent participants felt like they walk a fine line between giving their children the chance to grow up and not staying committed to their child's education and what is happening at school. One example that a parent participant gave was parent/teacher conferences. She said she went to every conference when her kids were young, but as they got older she found it less important to attend and by high school she did not attend at all. That was a common theme among parents. The idea that kids know they can come to their parents for help, but that they are also growing up and it is their turn to take responsibility for their own education.

The Ridgeview administrator that was interviewed agreed with the parent assessment. He believes teachers are also caught in the mentality that kids need to grow up and assume responsibility for their education as well. The idea that students get older and should take some initiative for their own learning is one that is firmly entrenched in high school society. Ridgeview Schools shares some teachers between junior high and high school students and so this "grow up" mentality has been pushed down to students as young as sixth grade. Parents of junior high students remarked they can feel a disconnection from teachers in the junior high that did not exist a year or two ago in elementary school. They spoke of the lack of communication that comes home and the idea that gathering information from their child's teacher is more difficult in junior high. Parents of junior high students talked about feeling frustrated and unsure about how to connect to their child's teacher. It is quite possible that frustration or feeling of being pushed out of school helps parents justify the decision to back off and give students more space, creating an even larger divide and distance between parents and their child's education and attendance.

Parent messages change. Parent participants spoke about the way their relationship with their child changes as the child gets older. Most parents spoke about the idea that convincing kids of the importance of attendance becomes more difficult as kids get older and their interests become more varied and as they have friends and activities outside of the home. A few parents even spoke of a lack of respect and being attacked by their children when they try to force them to attend school.

Truancy usually becomes more common as children reach adolescence. Studies show as children grow up the likelihood of school disengagement increases with their growing sense of independence (Henry & Thornberry, 2010). As children grow and change, it is natural that parent messages change. Parents spoke about the idea of being able to trust their children to make their own decisions now, and about how they often become more lenient on things such as attendance as their children mature. Some participants even phrased absenteeism as giving their children a break from school and supported the idea that sometimes junior high and high school students just need a day off. It is important to remind parents that even if their messages change as their children age, one thing that cannot afford to change is their engagement in their child's life and education.

Teachers and faculty members agreed that as students get older the message changes about attendance. Teachers spoke about the increased demand on students' time and the increased flexibility many of them experience at home. Participants also spoke about the idea that once students reach adolescence they believe parents begin giving students more free rein to make some autonomous decisions. Teachers believe parents become less concerned about their child missing school, and believe one of our biggest problems at the secondary level is parents covering for, or calling in, students who are not truly sick.

Decrease in partnership between school and home. Parents spoke about the difficulty in convincing a child who does not want to attend school of the value of being at school. One parent specifically mentioned the importance of school being a place kids enjoyed attending. The idea of school being enjoyable is one that is much more common to the elementary school paradigm. The junior high and high school students seem more resigned to attending rather than excited to attend. The Ridgeview administrator confirmed this and went so far as to say elementary students attend better because of the engagement of the whole family and the partnership mentality between teachers and parents. He believes when students reach adolescence the school does the same thing as parents when it comes to giving students space. He spoke about the idea of as students come into late junior high and high school the school begins the process of slowly pushing the parent out of the picture and viewing the teaching/learning relationship as solely between the teacher and the student. In elementary school the teaching/learning relationship provides much more room for parent participation. Teachers also spoke to this decrease in partnership between school and home. What no one could agree on was where or how it starts. Parents spoke to the idea that the dissolution of the partnership begins more on the school's part whereas teachers feel it is the parents who disengage first.

Lack of Engagement and Participation

Research defines the idea of student engagement with school as one in which students participate, are involved, and feel like they belong to the school. Student engagement is so much more than students valuing the content offered at school. In addition to the academic benefits of being engaged, there are also psychological connections students make at school including the caring relationships with adults, participation in activities, and the degree to which students feel

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like they fit with their peers (Christenson et al., 2008). It comes down to the idea that students who are appropriately academically challenged, who are supported by caring adults, and who feel like they belong with their peers are students who are more likely to regularly attend school and find success at the completion of schooling.

The quantitative research showed the difference in mean absences between junior high and high school students who participate in a sport or club and those who do not. Students who do not participate at all had a mean absence rate of 7.8. Students who participate only in the Fall semester had a mean absence rate of 5.4. Students who participate only in the Spring semester had a mean absence rate of 5.3. Students who participate in a club or sport each semester had a mean absence rate of 4.6. This data showed the two largest groups no participation (n=33) and participation in both semesters (n=40) had mean differences of greater than three days absent. That shows a positive correlation between being involved and being at school. Students who are involved are often those students who are the most engaged with their school. They are the ones who join clubs, play sports, and develop friendships with other students who are engaged.

The qualitative data reiterated the importance of being engaged at school. Parent and teacher participants latched on to this idea of students being engaged and agreed that the students who miss the most school are the ones who do not want to do anything, who do not attempt to foster meaningful relationships with faculty and their peers, and who are the least likely to attempt to make any connections at school.   Teachers spoke about the need to create and maintain as many clubs and organizations as possible in an attempt to connect more students to things happening at school. Parents agreed with this sentiment and said their kids want to attend school when they find it interesting or if they have been able to make a connection with faculty members and feel like they are understood and supported. Parents also commented on the

difference in their own children. Half of the participants (5 out of 10) claimed the difference in attendance between their children came down to some of the kids were involved in an activity that helped them establish connections or relationships with caring adults. If students were not involved, at the very least they had adults in the building they felt like cared for them and had high expectations of them. The students who had more issues with attendance did not have those same connections. Parents and school faculty members agreed that if kids can find or create a place for themselves in the school they are more likely to attend and try to succeed in school. Student engagement is not necessarily caused by student participation; but there is a correlation between students who are involved and students who regularly attend school.

Teacher Modeling and Attitudes toward Attendance

Teachers also understand they model the importance of being at school for their students. The teacher participants were clear that they know how important it is for teachers to model good attendance, but also that the faculty as a whole might not be setting the best example. The quantitative data showed that 67% of parents agree that teacher and administrator attendance can affect school attendance. Qualitative participants were quick to agree with that statistic. Eighty-two percent (14 out of 17) of respondents mentioned the idea that if teachers were regularly absent from school it would make students feel like school was not important and they did not need to attend either.

Teacher attendance was not a point of focus for this particular study, but of the seven faculty members of Ridgeview School, all seven of them admitted that in the past few years Ridgeview has seen more than one teacher be consistently absent. There were recollections of teachers being absent the day they were supposed to proctor state assessments. There were stories of teachers who were absent for the most frivolous of reasons and both teachers and

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parents said students are smart enough to realize when teachers are absent for non-vital reasons. According to teacher participants, attendance is not something that has always been modeled for students and valued by Ridgeview teachers.

This is alarming because research speaks to the importance of students having a caring, solid relationship with adults (Cole, 2011; OJDP, n.d.). If students have strong relationships with teachers who do not model good school attendance, then students are in fact learning the opposite of what the school is intending for them to learn. One parent said as much when she mentioned that her children gauge their attendance problems by a Ridgeview teacher whom they say missed more school than they did. Teachers have to see the importance of being at school each day. Students engage with their teachers, they take social cues from their teacher, and they rely on their teacher to provide academic instruction. If teachers are failing to see the value in this and are consistently being absent from the school, Ridgeview Schools needs to work hard to correct this problem.

More than anything when researching the idea of the importance of attendance, I realized that student absenteeism has manifested itself as a student problem in our school district when it is actually an adult problem. Students are only following what has been modeled for them. It is unlikely that any interventions to combat student absenteeism will be successful until teacher absenteeism is addressed. Any interventions that are attempted are likely to be seen as unfair or ignored as long as teacher absenteeism is allowed to go on unchecked. Luckily Ridgeview faculty members were clear that this pattern seems to be changing. New administrators at Ridgeview Schools have started the process of being more aware of teacher absenteeism and addressing it when it becomes an issue. Hopefully with continued attention and intervention the problem of teacher absenteeism at Ridgeview Schools will be solved.

Family/School Connection

In earlier sections of this study the idea of systems theory and family systems theory were discussed. Systems theory in its most simple form is the way systems are established and the ways they interact with one another. Schools are systems and families are systems. Each system has a unique set of rules and norms, and each system is comprised of a whole made up of parts, they have hierarchical structure, and they adapt to change as a whole (Cox & Paley, 2003). Family systems theory is the idea that an individual cannot be separated from the family groups they are connected to (Kerr, 2000). Earlier in this study I stated that schools are open systems while families can be either open or closed systems. Schools and families have to work together as systems because they share individual members but it does not mean the relationship is always positive or without difficulties.

In qualitative data collection both teachers and parents recognized the difficulty in creating a network that works for both the school and family system. The idea of a connection that needs to be strengthened between family and school was easily recognizable in all semi-structured interviews. Many parents and teachers admitted that both systems are at fault when it comes to the strength of the connection between schools and families. Parents pointed out past attempts they had made to ask for help, where they felt the school never responded. "I've had to be aggressive with some issues with the school. I haven't always had the best relationship with the school." In return teachers spoke about instances they had experienced where they tried to explain to parents the need to present a united front with students and they were rebuffed as well:

> I had a student miss a week of school. I was trying to help him catch up and sending pieces of work home every day after school, keeping him in some at recess, anything I could do to help him catch up. His mother found me one day after school and scolded me because I was giving him too much work and telling him he needed to work on it every spare minute. I mean, she was really ugly about it, even after I explained what I was doing.

Past Experiences. Both parents and teachers pointed out that it is often parents who had poor school experiences themselves who approach the school system warily. Usually one or more adult member of the family does not have fond memories of their days in the classroom and that creates a negative connotation around school. The idea was also broached parents might feel intimidated by a building full of educated, well-dressed people, and those parents might be tentative to admit they do not understand how to help their child with homework and instead they just brush it off as unimportant. Parents also mentioned the idea that some families have physical needs that are not being met and they do not want to ask for help because it makes them look weak or needy, and they are trying to appear capable in the eyes of the school. Some parents claimed that they were embarrassed to come ask for help because their child had already missed too much school and they were afraid school officials were judging their parenting:

> We struggled with our youngest daughter not wanting to come to school when she was younger because she was being made fun of. I'd have to make her go to school not feeling well and knowing here goes my sick child back to class and she's going to get made fun of again. Thinking back– why didn't I come talk to anybody? I think I thought, "I don't want to go up there and them yell at me because she has missed so much school."

Each of these past experiences are experiences that hurt the school family partnership. When the connection between school and families suffer, the individual systems suffer as well. Ridgeview School should take a look at its accessibility to parents and work to discover if parents would like to be more involved. Perhaps there are parents that would be more involved they are just looking for opportunities that fit within their strengths. Ridgeview Schools also has to be realistic and understand that not every family is willing and able to become an open system that shares and mirrors the school system's message. There will always be those family systems whose message is resistant to change. If a difference is made, if even four or five family systems

are brought closer to the school message by a change in perception and practice of Ridgeview Schools, it could make a difference in attendance with numerous children.

Limitations/Delimitations

The study was limited to administrators, teachers, and parents of Ridgeview School, so one limitation is the inability to generalize findings to other schools that may have an issue with student absenteeism. A second limitation of the study is the sensitive nature of student attendance data. As a point of focus, student attendance has been viewed in a negative light and even seen as something families can be punished for, which could have possibly led to dishonesty by participants because of the fear of repercussions. A final limitation of the study was the decision to create an anonymous survey response. This limitation created a situation where it was almost impossible to pinpoint those respondents who would have benefited the study by participating in a semi-structured interview.

The first delimitation of the study was the decision to use convenience sampling to determine which faculty members and parents to interview. This decision was made in order to select participants who would have first-hand knowledge of student absenteeism. In retrospect this delimitation could have been expanded to include parent participants who had also participated in the survey. This would have allowed more quantitative data to be collected from participants that might have led to higher quality qualitative data collection. The second delimitation of this study was the decision made to limit participation to administrators, teachers, and parents of Ridgeview School. This decision was made in part to determine the attitudes and values associated with attendance on the part of adults in the building. This delimitation also existed to protect vulnerable populations of students. However, limiting the study to parents created a void because students were not allowed to give their input on student absenteeism.

Implications

Implications for Practice

With an increased push in accountability for all schools, it is important to take into consideration the benefits of students being in attendance at school. Ridgeview School faculty and parents have proclaimed student absenteeism to be an issue facing the school. The desire to decrease student absenteeism and increase student achievement is a goal that could be achieved in a few targeted ways.

Incentives. Research shows incentives are a common way to increase student motivation to attend. This study was no different, with both parents and teachers recognizing that incentives might at least create an initial push for better attendance. The incentives would need to be targeted and would need to address the highest areas of need. It would also be important that these incentives be aimed directly at attendance, and not just have attendance as a factor in earning the incentives. The high school incentives that include attendance often also include behavior and academic components. Students who might qualify for the incentive on attendance measures are denied participation because they do not meet all of the other criteria. Parents and teachers were both concerned that as of right now Ridgeview Schools offers absolutely no school-wide incentives to junior high students. There are incentives in place for elementary students and for high school students, but none available at the junior high level. This research shows the junior high level is where Ridgeview Schools sees a spike in student absenteeism. Ridgeview Schools should make a coordinated effort to put in place some incentives that are strictly for attendance. Incentives at the elementary level could be ramped up, incentives at the high school need to be redesigned to focus solely on attendance (rather than a laundry list of things), and attendance incentives at the junior high level should be implemented.

Commitment to School/Family Relationships. This study showed the importance of schools and families working together to provide the best possible environment for students. Parent and teacher participants all agree that Ridgeview Schools and families could have a closer connection. Ridgeview Schools needs to find new ways to increase family exposure to the school and its programs and activities. Ridgeview Schools faculty need to be taught to be more open with parents and to increase communication (particularly in the junior high and high school). With the increase in electronic methods of communication, Ridgeview Schools might look into creating an additional method of communication including teachers having, using, and updating classroom webpages, social media accounts, and email. Ridgeview Schools has to be the leader in facilitating and explaining the concept behind a shared message between systems. Parents are listening to the school's message, and many of them want to be a part of what is going on, but they will not if they are not invited or even coaxed by the school. Ridgeview Schools' message must be one of inclusion and welcome for each and every parent by each and every faculty member at Ridgeview Schools.

Staff Buy-In and Participation. Ridgeview Schools is fighting a culture war with faculty members right now. With the constant shift in teachers and administrators over the course of the last five to ten years, the culture and dynamics of the school have changed. It is critical that staff members buy-in to creating a climate where students and families know they are valued. It is up to the staff of Ridgeview Schools to create a culture that welcomes students and families and holds them accountable at the same time. The battle of absenteeism is actually a fight to keep kids engaged in school and showing students what school has to offer. This battle will not be won until teachers believe Ridgeview Schools is a place worth fighting for. Students and parents will not buy into the culture of Ridgeview Schools until faculty and staff members

buy into the culture of Ridgeview Schools. Faculty members need to be encouraged to attend regularly and to remember they are modeling what is important for their students.

Policy Update and Accessibility. The attendance policy was an area most participants claimed they knew well in the course of this study. Upon closer study the policy was not well-known and participants had concerns about Ridgeview School's fidelity to the policy. It is important that the policy be updated to reflect the goals of the current administration and faculty. It is even more important the policy be well-known and easily accessible for both parents and faculty members.

Implications for Future Research

Research is not thorough when it comes to the subject of student attendance. There are large gaps that exist on why it is important to attend. This study suggests a few implications for future research.

Relationship between Teacher and Student Absenteeism. This study found a relationship between teacher and student absenteeism. More research could be done on the connection between teacher absenteeism and student absenteeism to see if a significant relationship exists between the two. This study was conducted at a small rural school, it would be interesting to see if the relationship between student absenteeism and teacher absenteeism exists as strongly in a larger school system or in an urban school system. Future research could also include students to gauge their perceptions of teacher absenteeism and whether it impacts their motivation to attend.

Noncognitive Skills. This study did not delve deep enough into the idea of attendance being a subset of noncognitive skills such as motivation, self-control, and perseverance. Although many participants spoke to the idea of students refusing to come to school missing an

important link, this particular study did not delve into the notion that Ridgeview Schools was not adequately teaching and measuring noncognitive skills. It would be interesting to use this same context and complete a longitudinal study on the impact of teaching noncognitive skills to students and teaching parents the importance of noncognitive and employability skills.

School and Family Connections. Research shows a gap between desired levels of school and family connection and the current level of school and family connection. More study needs to be done on why the gap exists and what could be done to close the gap and strengthen the relationship between families and schools.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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In this sequential mixed-methods study, my purpose was to examine the problem of practice of student absenteeism at Ridgeview School; including why students are missing so much school. The concern in this context was that students were missing too much school and that absenteeism affected other areas of their schooling such as achievement and motivation and student outcomes at the completion of schooling. Existing research is clear that attendance can be related to other areas of schooling including achievement, standardized test scores, peer affiliation, and facilitation of risky behaviors (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Henry & Thornberry, 2010; Nolan et al., 2013; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). The impact of excessive student absenteeism can affect students for the rest of their lives, including impacting their future employment opportunities at the conclusion of schooling.

This study has shown that decreasing student absenteeism is a task that will take all stakeholders working diligently on the problem to find a solution. The underlying support or messages that affirm student attendance must be addressed by the school, community, and families. Research refers to the process of keeping kids in school as a holistic process involving

<div align="center">

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more than just one institution (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). In order to be successful Ridgeview

Schools will need to pull in all resources and be certain to continually explain and reiterate the

benefits of keeping kids in school where they can continue to grow, learn, and find success.

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Appendix A- Survey for Parents

	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither Agree nor Disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Student absenteeism is a problem in our school.					
Absenteeism is an issue for my child(ren).					
Teacher and administrator attendance can affect student attendance.					
I am aware of the details of the district's attendance policy.					
I understand the district's attendance policy.					
I think the district's attendance policy is effective.					
I think the district's attendance policy is valuable and helpful to families.					
I think students should be allowed to occasionally miss school for social events.					
I think moving to a four day school week positively affects student attendance.					
Anything further you might like to add?					

Appendix B- Interview Protocol for Teachers

Research Questions:

1. What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance?

2. What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy?

3. What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student

    attendance in school?

Name of Interviewee: _____

Date of Interview:_____

Preliminary Script: "This is Angie Durborow. Today is [day and date]. It is _____ o' clock, and I am here in [location] with [name of interviewee], the [title] of [institution]. We'll be discussing student attendance.

1. Please tell me about your career. What led you to become a teacher? What degrees do you hold? Where did you get your degrees?_____
    _____
    _____
    _____

2. Do you believe student attendance is an area of concern in your school? Prompt: Can you explain your reasoning? Can you give any examples?
    _____
    _____

3. How would you compare student attendance in your current school to student attendance in schools you have taught in the past?
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

4. Explain the attendance and make up work process you complete for students who miss class for any reason.

_____
_____
_____
_____

5. How much time, if any, would you estimate you spend "catching up" or re-teaching material for students who are absent from class?

_____
_____
_____

6. Are you clear about the details of your school's attendance policy? If so, how did you how do you access that information? If not, what information do you need to have access to?

_____
_____
_____
_____

7. How effective do you find the school's attendance policy to be? Prompt: How would you improve it?

_____
_____
_____
_____

8. What are some ways the school could support good attendance?

_____
_____
_____

9. Why do you believe students do not come to class/school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

10. What are the greatest challenges your school faces in getting kids to attend school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

11. How do you think the four day school week has impacted or will impact student attendance? Why do you think this? What are you seeing in your classroom in regards to student attendance due to the four day week?

_____
_____
_____
_____

12. If given a chance, what message would you communicate to a student's parents about the importance of attendance?

_____
_____
_____
_____

13. What kinds of messages do you think you are sending your students about the importance of being at school? Prompt: Can you give me examples of the messages you send? How do you communicate the importance of attendance to students?

_____
_____
_____
_____

14. What kind of message do you think your school is sending to students about the importance of attendance? Prompt: Can you give me examples of any messages the school sends? How does the school communicate the importance of attendance to students?

_____
_____
_____
_____

15. Where do you think students are when they are not in class?

_____
_____
_____
_____

16. Describe what you think the relationship is between student absenteeism and teacher absenteeism.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

17. Based on your experience, why do you believe it is important for students to be in class?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

18. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the issue of student attendance in your school?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix C- Interview Protocol for Administrators

Research Questions:

1. What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance?

2. What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy?

3. What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student attendance in school?

Name of Interviewee: _____

Date of Interview:_____

Preliminary Script: "This is Angie Durborow. Today is [day and date]. It is _____ o' clock, and I am here in [location] with [name of interviewee], the [title] of [institution]. We'll be discussing student attendance.

1. Please tell me about your career. What led you to become an administrator? What degrees do you hold? Where did you get your degrees?_____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. Do you believe student attendance is an area of concern in your school?
   _____
   _____

3. How would you compare student attendance in your current school to student attendance in schools you have worked at in the past?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. Give me your opinion on the effectiveness of your school's attendance policy. Is it working? How might it be written more effectively?
   _____
   _____

_____
_____
_____

5. How is the school's attendance policy communicated? Prompts: Is it clearly communicated? What are some ideas of how to more clearly communicate the attendance policy to students? Teachers? Parents?

_____
_____
_____
_____

6. What are some ways the school could support good attendance?

_____
_____
_____

7. What are your thoughts on why students do not come to class/school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

8. How do you think the four day school week has impacted or will impact student attendance? Why do you think this? What are you seeing in your classroom in regards to student attendance due to the four day week?

_____
_____
_____
_____

9. What are the greatest challenges your school faces in getting kids to attend school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

10. If given a chance, what message would you communicate to a student's parents about the importance of attendance?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

11. What kinds of messages do you think you are sending your students about the importance of being at school? Prompt: Can you give me examples of the messages you send? How do you communicate the importance of attendance to students?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

12. What kind of message do you think teachers are sending to students about the importance of attendance? Prompt: Can you give me examples of any messages you've heard teachers send? How do teachers communicate the importance of attendance to students?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

13. Where do you think students are when they are not in class?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

14. Describe what you think the relationship is between student absenteeism and teacher absenteeism.

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

15. Based on your experience, why do you believe it is important for students to be in class?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

16. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the issue of student attendance in your school?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix D- Interview Protocol for Parents

Research Questions:

1. What explicit or implicit messages are we sending about school attendance?

2. What is the perceived effectiveness of the current attendance policy?

3. What is the perceived value held by teachers, administrators, and parents of student

   attendance in school?

Name of Interviewee: _____

Date of Interview:_____

Preliminary Script: "This is Angie Durborow. Today is [day and date]. It is _____ o' clock, and I am here in [location] with [name of interviewee], the [title] of [institution]. We'll be discussing student attendance.

1. Please tell me about yourself. Who are you? What grade(s) is/are your child(ren) currently in?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. Explain your philosophy on school attendance.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. Describe your school experiences as a child.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. Do you believe student attendance is an area of concern in your child's school? Why or why not?

   _____
   _____

_____
_____

5. Describe your role in your child's school attendance.

_____
_____
_____
_____

6. How would you describe a typical morning in your household as your child prepares for school?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

7. Is it a battle to get your child to attend school? Why do you think? Or why not?

_____
_____
_____

8. Are you clear about the details of your child(ren)'s attendance policy? If so, how did you how do you access that information? If not, what information do you need to have access to?

_____
_____
_____
_____

9. Explain the nature of your relationship with your child's school.

_____
_____
_____
_____

10. What are some ways to strengthen that relationship between the school and your family?

_____
_____
_____
_____

11. What are some ways the school could help support your family to ensure good attendance for your child(ren)?

_____
_____
_____

12. What are some ways you could help support the school's attendance policy?

_____
_____
_____
_____

13. What are the greatest challenges you face in getting your kids to school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

14. How do you think the four day school week has impacted or will impact your child's attendance? Why do you think this? What are your family's feelings on the impact of a four day week as it relates to attendance? Prompt: For example, has it affected how/when you schedule doctor's appointments, dentist appointments, etc.?

_____
_____
_____
_____

15. What kinds of messages do you think you are sending your child about the importance of being at school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

16. How big of an impact do you believe your attitude about school attendance has on your child(ren)?

_____
_____
_____
_____

17. What kind of message do you think your school is sending to your child(ren) about the importance of attendance?

_____
_____
_____
_____

18. Describe what you think the relationship is between student absenteeism and teacher absenteeism.

_____
_____
_____
_____

19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about the issue of your child's attendance at school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix E- IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

May 10, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Angie Durborow Ed Bengtson
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	New Protocol Approval
IRB Protocol #:	16-04-730
Protocol Title:	*Student Absenteeism: Factors Contributing to the Problem an Interventions in a Rural School*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Approved Project Period:	Start Date: 05/10/2016 Expiration Date: 05/09/2017

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 100 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

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