

**STUDENT ATTENDANCE, ACHIEVEMENT, AND  
THE FAMILY-SCHOOL CONNECTION**

by

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A Paper

Presented to the Gordon Albright School of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

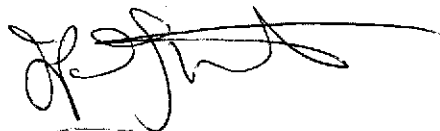
For the Degree of Master of Education

EEA650 Project

March 2016

**Student Attendance, Achievement, and  
the Family-School Connection**

APPROVED:



(Faculty Advisor)



(Program Director)

### **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my instructor and thesis advisor, Dr. Paul Stewart at City University of Seattle. Dr. Stewart was readily available whenever I had a question or needed advice on the writing process. As an instructor for many of my classes, he provided a calm, steady demeanor that led to my increased capacity for information and knowledge.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Dave Khatib at City University of Seattle, who also provided excellent feedback on the writing process and exhibited many traits as a teacher that I would like to encompass for myself.

Other instructors at City University of Seattle also assisted me toward this path of completion. Ms. Heather Henderson, Mrs. Michelle Khatib and Mr. Brent Galloway provided a caring, responsive manner toward teaching their classes and enabled me to see their passion in education. Thank you for that.

Finally, I would like to express my very profound gratitude to my family, friends and coworkers for the provision of support and encouragement. I am very grateful to my parents, who although are no longer with me, raised me with a resilience and fortitude that allowed my success in not only this journey but many others too. I am very appreciative of my spouse Todd Lembicz for his steadfast support and for taking care of everything so that I was able to focus on my classes. Thank you to my daughters Ashley Windle and Vanessa Pfau and my son-in-laws Brendan Windle and Ian Pfau, whose consistent encouragement and steadfast enthusiasm greatly promoted my ability to complete this degree. My three grandchildren, Charlie, Ivy and Bennett remain a source of energy and renewal of love each time I see them. My siblings Linda Then and Dale Caron consistently reassured me and made me feel that this goal wasn't beyond my ability to accomplish. I wish to thank my three amigos, Leah Kotanko, Teresa Motz-Angliss and Rocsan

Williams for providing me with comic relief and holding me up exactly when it was needed.

Finally, to my co workers at David Thompson High School and cohort students at City

University of Seattle, thank you for the continuous reassurance and strengthening words of

support.

### **Abstract**

This study is an educational perspective of envisioning a solution to increase parental engagement at schools to an understanding that the relationship between parents, schools and community must be viewed as a partnership between all parties involved. The historical context of the family will be assessed to show changes in the family unit throughout the past 50 years. It will also review research regarding the necessity of regular attendance to keep students in school as well as possible interventions that assist in creating partnerships between the stakeholders of a school community. The need to educate pre-service teachers will also be examined, as it has been shown that more education in creating partnerships starts with the school level.

**Keywords:** Absenteeism, action research, chronic student absence, dropout, non-attendance, parental involvement, parents, guardians, carer, caregiver, school jurisdiction or school district, student engagement, truancy

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## **Student Attendance, Achievement, and the Family-School Connection**

### **Chapter 1: The Problem**

Parents want the best possible future for their children. When children begin school, their parents imagine a long journey of learning that culminates in a high school diploma and possibly postsecondary education. Students who are regularly absent are at risk of dropping out of school and not graduating (Smink & Reimer, 2005). Those who earn a high school diploma will make more money, have better health, and maintain relationships more easily than those who do not complete high school (Alberta Education, 2016).

Alberta's High School Completion Task Force Report (Alberta Education, 2005) maintains, "There is no typical profile of a student who does not complete high school" (p. 13). A number of factors that remain specific and unique to each student will determine whether they will drop out. The failure to complete high school is a process that can begin before children start school (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). How can society engage students and keep them in school? According to McLaughlin and Pearce (2008), "Engagement at school is all about relationships with family, peers, school staff and the wider community" (p. 22).

The researcher reviewed concerns about nonattendance at school, factors that contribute to truancy and intervention strategies that improve attendance patterns. The purpose of this study was to examine the historical changes of the family unit and how it relates to student attendance and to review current research on the correlation between family involvement at the school and increased attendance. It also highlighted current research that has supported the need to educate teachers formally to share information, guide students, and solve problems as a partnership between teachers, caregivers, and community (Epstein, 2010).



### **Background to the Problem**

Nonattendance at school was established as a major concern in English-speaking education systems such as in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States (US), and Canada (Davies & Lee, 2006). The British government allocated substantial resources to reducing truancy in the education system. In 2003 the British government estimated that around 50,000 students were not attending school each day (Davies & Lee, 2006). The Department of Housing in Australia funded a comprehensive summary of reports to understand and address chronic student absence in primary and secondary schools (McLaughlin & Pearce, 2008). In the US two national organizations, the National Center for Student Engagement (2015) and the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2015), continuously utilized research and worked with school districts and various state and federal agencies to promote student engagement and reduce truancy in schools.

Provincial and federal organizations in Canada consistently work to develop methods to reduce truancy and the high school dropout rate. The Canadian Education Association & Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (2011) established a project based on educational research titled, “How Can We Prevent High School Dropouts?” In 2014 Alberta Education published the “Every Student Counts: Keeping Kids in School Report” to provide leadership and support in the area of student engagement and student attendance. Earlier, in 2010, the Alberta School Board Association (ASBA) released a report called “Improving High School Completion” that identified risks, barriers, and strategies for high school completion (Schmold, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The framework for this research problem is located in a small, rural high school in central Alberta. The school was concerned with how to promote more positive attendance patterns

among the student population, and the staff had identified it as a teaching issue (P. Dedora & R. Moore, personal communication, June 26, 2014). According to Alberta Education (2011), “Once attendance becomes an issue, disengagement is heightened, and once a student is disengaged from their learning, then the student struggles with the purpose of their education” (p. 1). Teachers in the school felt they needed to implement interventions to increase attendance and graduation rates within their school population.

Students might be away from school for various reasons. The staff at the high school in central Alberta anecdotally identified the following factors related to absenteeism: medical reasons, family holidays, illness, shopping, extracurricular activities not related to the school (club volleyball/basketball/baseball, dance, hockey, and church events), lack of engagement, failing grades, and school-based activities (school staff, personal communication, December 12, 2014). The school has an attendance policy with clear sanctions: After 5 absences the teacher will call home; after 10 absences, the teacher requires a meeting with the student, parent, teacher(s), and administrators; and after 15 absences, removal from the class and alternative programming are possible (David Thompson High School, 2015). Although the school’s handbook states that the teacher must phone the parents after 5 absences, it does not appear to have had a large enough impact on absenteeism. One month into the second semester of the 2014/2015 school year, 25 students were absent for more than 5 classes; some students were absent from as many as 18 classes. The communication between the school and parents was not sufficient to decrease absenteeism (M. Glass, personal communication, March 5, 2015). This attendance policy has been in place for a number of years, but the staff considered it outdated.

**Purpose of the Study**

McLaughlin and Pearce (2008) acknowledged the family as “the most important protective factor in the life of a child. When it ceases to be a protective factor it becomes a risk factor” (p. 24). How can parents or caregivers obtain support to recognize and acknowledge the factors that affect their children’s nonattendance? According to Sheldon and Epstein (2004), the solution to improve student attendance requires a holistic approach. They emphasized that it is important to acknowledge school and classroom elements and relational factors outside the school. In other words, all of the stakeholders involved must address the problems of attendance in partnership students, caregivers, teachers, schools, and even the community. Reid (2013) contended that teachers who are raised with middle-class values often find it difficult to understand the hardships in their students’ lives and how they might be affected, which can lead to disconnection between school and home. He also addressed the concerns that persistent truants might receive little encouragement or support at home and parents might feel that they do not receive adequate support. Their children still fail even though they believe that they are doing everything that they possibly can to help them (Reid, 2013).

Parents or guardians are legally responsible for ensuring that their school-age children are enrolled and attending school. In Alberta, the School Act (Province of Alberta, 2010) mandates children between the ages of 6 and 16 to attend school. Additional interventions from appropriate service providers might be required that focus on supporting and building capacity within the family to help parents to ensure that their children are prepared for and attending school (McLaughlin & Pearce, 2008).

**Research Question**

Olmstead (2013) explored the concept of increased parental involvement with schools and reported that students benefit from higher grades and test scores, graduate from high school, and continue to postsecondary education when their parents are actively involved in their education. She further argued that lack of parental involvement creates obstacles to improved student achievement at school.

A review of the research on students, parental involvement, and schools led to questions such as, Is there a disconnection between parents and school? Why do some parents seem not to fully support their children's regular attendance at school? How can schools increase parental involvement? Whose responsibility is it to create those connections? These questions set in motion the eventual research question: Can schools increase student attendance and achievement by adopting effective ways of communicating with parents?

**Importance of the Study**

Regular attendance at school is essential to the academic success of students. Sheldon (2007) observed that researchers have demonstrated distinct correlations between student attendance and academic success and that attendance patterns as early as Grade 1 have differentiated between high school graduates and dropouts. Students are also less likely to engage in risky behaviors when they regularly attend school. In a study that compared delinquent and nondelinquent student behaviors, Sheldon reported that poor student attendance is a factor that distinguishes the two groups: "Keeping students in class may help protect them from engaging in delinquent behaviors and facilitate learning through increased exposure to instruction" (p. 267).

## Definition of Terms

**Absenteeism:** frequent or habitual absence from school.

**Action research:** a research-process problem solving in which an individual or teams use a reflective process to improve upon a specific issue: Learn to do by doing.

**Chronic student absence:** habitual absence from school.

**Dropout:** a student who does not graduate or complete high school.

**Nonattendance:** failure to attend school.

**Parental involvement:** the amount of interaction between parents or caregivers and the school.

**Parents/guardians/carer/caregiver:** the adults at home who are in care of a student or students.

**Preservice teacher:** a university student who is in the process of guided, supervised teaching.

**School jurisdiction or school district:** a geographical area that contains a set number of schools and is overseen by a school board.

**Student engagement:** students' psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn what school offers.

**Truancy:** intentional unauthorized or illegal absence from compulsory education.

## Scope of Study

Searching for successful intervention strategies to address school absenteeism and truancy is a growing interest among researchers (Reid, 2013). Some of the strategies include mentoring, group and peer support, counseling, incentive programs, early intervention, psychiatric and social work programs, and multidisciplinary interventions. For the purpose of

this study, the researcher explored two main areas of intervention strategies: family-based or family-related interventions and how to involve parents in school (Reid, 2013). Although it is accepted that all of the aforementioned strategies are important, it is ideal to focus on a specific topic. According to Reid:

Intervention programmes that tend to show the most potential for improvements in school attendance cases normally (i) involved specialised and/ or intensive case management, (ii) was [*sic*] family-orientated and focused, and (iii) incorporated both sanctions for continued truancy and rewards for good attendance. (p. 517)

### **Summary**

Stakeholders such as parents, teachers, administrators, social workers, counselors, coaches, and community members are involved over the course of a student's education. Parents, guardians, or caregivers are the first stakeholders in children's lives and exert the most influence on their future. Understanding the factors that contribute to the success and failure of students' educational careers in relation to parental involvement will help stakeholders to ensure that they are providing the best possible outcome for their future.

### **Outline of the Remainder of the Paper**

Chapter 2 of this research study is a review of the historical background of the family unit and how it has changed over time. Including the Alberta School Act (Province of Alberta, 2010) is important, because it lends legality to the issues of absenteeism. The researcher characterizes and discusses her interpretation of parental involvement, including how schools communicate with parents, and research on the importance of parental involvement.

Chapter 3 is a review of the research, and the researcher makes recommendations for further study to address the issue of student attendance and achievement. It introduces this

research study, which incorporated new initiatives to increase parental involvement over the course of one school year, in the form of an action research plan.

Chapter 4 encompasses a discussion of the findings of this research project and reviews nonattendance and truancy issues, the reasons that schools need to increase their involvement with parents and community, and the proposed action research described in chapter 3.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Research has supported the theory that more parental involvement in children's learning results in higher academic achievement (Sheldon, 2007). The historical background of the family unit is important, because it has changed considerably over the past 50 years. Reviewing the Alberta School Act (Province of Alberta, 2010) in relation to attendance establishes legal grounds for keeping students in school. The researcher discusses current research related to the issues of student absenteeism, including methodology and analysis, in addition to parental involvement in schools, and gives examples of how schools communicated with parents in the past as well as current communication tools. Finally, she identifies intervention strategies, including the rationale for why parental involvement is essential to overcoming chronic absenteeism at school.

### **Historical Background**

Families have changed significantly in the past 50 years. According to Statistics Canada (2015), economic and social changes that occurred in the country have resulted in a convincing change in family dynamics. In the later 1960s, events within Canada such as the legalization of birth control, the introduction of no-fault divorce, and women's access to higher education and work outside the home enabled changes to occur in the family unit. Women began to delay childbirth until later years, families were smaller, and diversity within the family structure was more common. Utilizing census information from the 50-year period from 1961 to 2011, Statistics Canada identified three areas of significant change to the family unit:

1. The number of married couple families has decreased. Common-law couples and lone-parent families have increased significantly. Married-couple families increased from 4.1 million in 1961 to 9.4 million in 2011. The decline in married-couple



- families is attributed to the increased number of common-law couples, and this has continued to grow steadily over time, with an eventual increase to 16.7% of all census families in 2011.
2. The number of one-parent families has increased. The 2011 census identified that 16.3% of families had one parent. This is attributed to higher divorce rates as well as the number of parents who have never married.
  3. Families have become smaller. After the baby boom ended in 1965, the fertility rates decreased significantly in Canadian families. The average number of children in 1961 was 2.7, but the census reported an average of only 1.9 children in families in 2011. Relatively high rates of divorce and separation also contribute to small family households.

A recent concept that reflects social changes within families, communities, and schools over the past 50 years is the model of overlapping family and school spheres (Epstein, 2010). This model is built on the theory of how family and school interactions can influence students' experiences in school. The overlapping spheres account for the "history, development, and changing experiences of parents, teachers and students" (p. 31). This theory includes two models: external and internal. The external model contains three spheres, family, school, and community that overlap by various degrees throughout the school years. During the elementary years more overlap is expected because parents and community are typically more involved. During middle and secondary school the overlap tends to shorten, with less involvement typically between parent, community, and school (Epstein, 2010). The overlap among the spheres also depends on the parents' perspectives on school as well as the degree to which the school involves the parents. Other factors affect the number of interactions in the spheres of

influence, such as students' encountering new teachers every year or moving to a new school and the family unit's changing through divorce or death (Epstein, 2010).

The internal model is located with the external model of the overlapping family and school spheres. Interpersonal relationships and influence patterns within and among the three spheres varies depending on the levels of interactions among school, family, and community; as well as the number of family interactions of each student. This also relates to the types of communications within those spheres: teachers' e-mail to the entire class or a phone call to an individual parent (Epstein, 2010).

### **Alberta School Act**

Students of specific ages are legally required to attend school. In Alberta the School Act (Province of Alberta, 2010) defines education as compulsory: "13(1) An individual who (a) is eligible to be enrolled in a school, (b) at September 1 in a year is 6 years of age or older, and (c) is younger than 16 years of age, shall attend school" (pp. 20-21). This reiterates the necessity of keeping students in school.

### **Current Research**

The importance of regular attendance for students is well researched and documented. In *Managing School Attendance: Successful Intervention Strategies for Reducing Truancy*, Reid (2013) identified seven factors that contribute to high rates of absenteeism: social, economic, community, home background, psychological, institutional, and individual. Social, economic, and community factors are related to low socioeconomic status, poor housing, adult unemployment, local culture, feelings of safety, transitional family moves, criminality, child abuse, and drug abuse (Hickman et al., 2008; Reid, 2010, 2013; Schmold, 2010). Reid (2013) identified the home-background factors as one-parent families, parental disabilities,

transportation issues, parents' lack of interest in education, and caring commitments. Reid also acknowledged that parentally condoned absences, the lack of value for education, domestic problems, inconsistent or inadequate parenting, and economic deprivation are contributing factors related to home background. Other researchers have recognized the home as an important factor in children's attendance patterns. Parental substance abuse, neglect, and lack of childrearing skills have contributed to truancy issue in schools (Reid, 2010; Schmold, 2010).

The psychological factor that Reid (2013) identified includes low self-esteem, neurotic behaviors, and feelings of isolation or loneliness. Institutional factors are specific to schools: students' lack of engagement in the curriculum, students' lack of relationships with their teachers, and schools' undervaluing of the importance of attendance and academic achievement. Individual factors refer to students themselves. Kinder et al. (1995, as cited in Reid, 2010) summarized them as a "lack of self-esteem, social skills, confidence, poor peer-group relationships, lack of academic ability, special needs, lack of concentration and self-management skills" (p. 4). Many factors are responsible for students' failure to attend school, and a combination of those may contribute to the problem.

### **Importance of Family, Community, and School Involvement**

In Epstein's (2010) book, *School, Family, and Community Partnership: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*, she discussed various research studies that examined the impact of family involvement in improving students' reading and language-arts skills. The results of these studies support the position that "when family involvement is focused on reading and literacy activities at home, including reading aloud and discussing stories, students' reading achievement increased" (p. 53). Epstein suggested that these results further enable researchers to envision which parental involvement interventions are likely to increase student learning. A

number of studies conducted at the elementary, middle, and high school levels have confirmed that if families are involved in their education, students at all levels will attend more, reach higher levels of achievement, earn more credits, and be better prepared for classes (p. 52).

### **Intervention Strategies for Improving Communication**

Intervention strategies related to parental involvement were the focus of this inquiry, and the researcher further examines them in chapter 4. The circumstances that impact students' attendance or nonattendance at school include the following:

- family rules on attendance;
- parents' leaving for work before their children leave for school and the need for students to get themselves ready in the morning;
- lack of parenting skills to follow through with rules;
- parents' failure to view education as a priority;
- parents' failure to talk with the school or teachers;
- parents' possible negative school experience;
- number of distractions at home for students, such as video games and television;
- and
- lack of parental supervision (Alberta Education, 2014; Reid, 2013).

In examining intervention strategies to promote regular attendance, researchers have looked toward the home and parents for help. Reid (2013) discussed guiding principles for schools to follow to develop intervention strategies. One guiding principle is the need to make parents more responsible for their children's schooling and to become a key part of the solution. He also listed a set of common general patterns that research has supported: family background and home life, school management, and students' self-esteem and self-concept.

In 2009 the ASBA surveyed 43 school jurisdictions in the province to gain further understanding and identify the factors that influence students' failure to complete high school. Five themes arose in the responses: (a) lack of home support, (b) personal factors, (c) school- and achievement-related factors, (d) lack of engagement, and (e) socioeconomic factors (Schmold, 2010, p. 4). According to the responses in the survey, the reasons for the lack of home support are numerous: families do not support or value school; more First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students (FNMI) leave school early because of chronic absenteeism or drug abuse; and students leave early for religious or cultural reasons because schooling past a certain age is not valued (Schmold, 2010). The personal factors in the noncompletion of high school include the need to work, criminal or addiction issues, mental health, exposure to violence, chronic absenteeism, pregnancy, and relationship issues (Schmold, 2010). School and achievement-related factors include barriers to high school completion: students with a history of low achievement falling behind and becoming frustrated, their lack of interest in and failure to see the relevance of the school's curriculum, their failure of more than one course, the school's lack of sufficient resources to address special needs, and the lack of FNMI staff to relate to Aboriginal students. Staff in the school jurisdictions who responded to the survey also noted lack of engagement as a risk factor: students' feeling that they are not cared for in the school, their lack of school-based relationships, and their need to feel that they are valued within the school community (Schmold, 2010). Schmold also identified socioeconomic factors: students' living in poverty, which is often a multigenerational problem; the lack of an environment for learning; and the greater likelihood of ethnic and Aboriginal students to live in poverty and face racial discrimination within the school community.

The ASBA survey conducted in 2009 also included questions on the conditions that are necessary for high school completion. An analysis of the results from each school jurisdiction's responses included five themes: (a) program variety, flexibility, and choice; (b) support for and reduction of transitions; (c) individual student supports; (d) engagement of students and parents and relationships; and (e) effective teaching practices (Schmold, 2010, p. 30). In the survey most school jurisdictions emphasized the availability of program choices and flexibility. Early-intervention programs and community-based programs are some of the promising initiatives that the respondents identified:

Careers and Technology Study (CTS) courses, Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) courses, Knowledge and Employability (K&E) course, Outreach programs, distance or e-learning programs, Alternative programs that emphasize a particular language or pedagogical approach, Locally developed programs, Literacy and Numeracy programs, and programs centered on FMNI languages and culture, to name but a few.  
(p. 31)

Many of the respondents from the school jurisdictions emphasized the need to minimize the negative effects of transitioning between or within schools. They reported some promising initiatives: Aboriginal strategies to support students who encounter problems with changing schools, programming options outside the existing timetable, team collaboration to assist in the transition from elementary to junior to senior high school, and specific integrated career programs that provide personal, career, and family counseling (Schmold, 2010).

The respondents to the ASBA survey also highlighted the benefits of individual and personalized support for students: career counseling programs; models to support the academic, character, and relationship needs of students; school counselors and family school liaison

workers; the development of pyramids of intervention to support students' high school completion; and teacher advisory programs (Schmold, 2010).

Most respondents also cited the importance of student relationships and the engagement of both students and parents as success factors in high school completion. Some areas of success are individual schools' focus on student engagement and student leadership, and connections with staff and students to emphasize building positive relationships to allow for early intervention in and prevention of problems (Schmold, 2010).

The final theme that the respondents to the 2009 ASBA survey identified to improve high school completion underlines the importance of sound teaching practices. Building the capacity of all teaching staff and staffing schools with caring and capable teachers and principals are key factors. Some of the suggestions for initiatives include utilizing current research to improve teaching practices with the intent of benefiting all students, implementing assessment for learning strategies, increasing communication with parents, hiring and retaining diverse teaching and support staff to reflect student diversity, and maintaining high academic expectations and belief in all students' abilities to meet expectations with appropriate support (Schmold, 2010).

Elementary schools have historically demonstrated successful integration between parents and school community. High schools have not seen as much integration in the culture of community involvement. This lag is attributed to time constraints, the lack of school leadership, and the pervasive idea that parents and schools do not require as much involvement at the high school level (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). Educators must receive training as part of an organized strategy rather than using trial and error to establish partnerships among school, family, and community (Sheldon, 2007).

In a series of studies between 1981 to 1991 that involved elementary, middle, and high schools, Joyce Epstein (2010) developed a framework of six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community” (p. 46).. This framework is a method to involve parents with teachers, students, and community partners and is specifically meant to contribute to the learning and success of students. Epstein briefly explained the six types of involvement as follows:

Type 1: Parenting—helping all families understand child and adolescent development and establishing home environments that support children as students

Type 2: Communicating—designing and conducting effective forms of two-way communications about school programs and children’s progress

Type 3: Volunteering—recruiting and organizing help and support at school, home, or in other locations to support the school and students’ activities

Type 4: Learning at Home—providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and curriculum-related activities and decisions

Type 5: Decision Making—having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees and obtaining input from all parents on school decisions

Type 6: Collaborating with the Community—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families, and organizing activities to benefit the community and increase students’ learning opportunities. (pp. 46-47)

Researchers who want to think in new ways about the partnership among school, family, and community can use this framework for involvement. According to Epstein, more research is



required to resolve the many challenges that can arise with each type of involvement. Epstein also recognized that solutions are not easy to determine:

There are many unanswered questions about the paths between parents' beliefs about education, activities initiated by teachers to reach out to families, families' responses, students' motivation to learn, students' work in school, and students' achievement in specific subjects and overall success in school. (p. 86)

Sanders and Harvey (2002) conducted a case study on an urban school in relation to how the school developed community partnerships to support efforts to improve school climate, parental involvement, and student achievement. Changing demographics among families, professional workplace demands on parents, and growing diversity among the student population are reasons that schools must work with families and communities to ensure that all students receive the support that they need to succeed (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). The results of this case study identified four factors in the success of the parent, school, and community partnership: (a) commitment to learning from the school, (b) support from the principal to incorporate community involvement, (c) how receptive the school is to involving the outside community, and (d) the willingness to become involved in communication with community partners (Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

### **Summary**

Researchers have routinely presented arguments in favor of regular attendance to promote student achievement. Smink and Reimer (2005) suggested that "students who are not in school cannot learn, and frequently drop out. Truant students often engage in high-risk behaviours that eventually entangle them in the juvenile/justice system" (p. 1). Other researchers have reiterated the long-term negative effects of low attendance on a student: low self-esteem,

dropping out of school, unemployment, criminal behavior, unwanted pregnancy, poorer health, lower paying jobs, increased likelihood of a life of poverty, increased incarceration, as well as a greater likelihood of committing criminal offenses, smoking, drinking, and using illegal drugs (Reid, 2010; Schoeneberger, 2012). Keeping students in class can safeguard them from these negative outcomes.

### **Chapter 3: Recommendations**

Parents are considered the first stakeholders in children's education, and schools that develop partnerships with parents can work together on common goals, such as improved attendance (Alberta Education, 2014). Researchers have indicated the need for partnerships between school and home.

Having parents involved in their children's education is beneficial; developing partnerships with the school can lead to parents and school personnel working on common goals, such as improving their child's attendance. Parents really are the first stakeholders in a child's education: they know their children best and would be a great contributor if the school partnered with them. (p. 7)

The research is clear: Students need to attend school daily to succeed (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Studies have continued to support the theory that family involvement at the high school level is important to improve students' attendance and achievement (Epstein, 2007). All stakeholders, including family, students, educators, and community, will benefit from partnership programs that increase family and community involvement. Educators must take responsibility for developing programs that link these stakeholders and are goal oriented to reach all families (Epstein, 2007).

#### **Future Studies**

Extensive research has been conducted in the area of student attendance and achievement; however, most researchers would agree that more can be accomplished: "Few studies, however, have focused on whether or how family and community involvement help reduce rates of chronic absenteeism" (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004, p. 39). The results of Sheldon and Epstein's longitudinal study indicate that specific family and community involvement

activities can reduce chronic absenteeism rates. This study showed that focusing attention on attendance in the form of regular communication with families, acknowledging good attendance, and connecting chronically absent students to mentors in the community reduced overall absenteeism from one year to the next. Attendance-focused activities within the school also decreased the number of students who were chronically absent.

### **Suggested Research Study**

Suggested research in this area has two purposes: to encourage and educate leaders on the importance of the parent-school connection and to conduct action research to compare schools that have increased their parent-school connections to those that have not. This research will require four years to see results. The first two years will involve initiatives to build capacity among teachers in the teacher-caregiver partnership during professional development days and to share research information. According to Epstein (2010), most new teachers and administrators are inadequately prepared to work effectively with all students' families. An informal discussion with two leaders in the field of teacher preparation and education in the province of Alberta revealed that more can be accomplished to prepare teachers to partnership with parents:

Teacher/parental partnerships are recognized as a component of our BEd program. Currently, however, we do not have a specific course that focuses heavily on this component. Instead, this component of the program would be partially addressed in a number of different courses, such as EDU 100 (Contexts of Education) and EDSE 307 (Language, Literacy, and Society in Educational Contexts). There have been some discussions about creating an elective course that focuses extensively on the topic of teacher/parental partnerships, but that is still in the planning stages. (B. Dunn, personal communication, February 1, 2016)

Further communication with the University of Alberta/Red Deer College collaborative Bachelor of Education program also reiterates the need for more teacher education on parental involvement:

Although we don't have a specific course on this matter in the Middle Years Program, we do talk about this matter in our Inclusionary Education course, and the importance of partnering with parents is emphasized in several of our courses. We also have an Ed Communications course in our Year 1/Year 2 program that touches on this topic briefly. Despite this, additional work and learning on this topic would definitely be beneficial to future teachers. (B. Galloway, personal communication, January 31, 2016)

Further education to build teachers' capacity will be pertinent to enable action research to take place. The hypothesis is that the initiative to increase parental involvement reduces chronic absenteeism and improves student achievement. This study will occur within a small, rural school division located in Alberta, Canada. Although researchers have conducted similar research studies, it will be relevant to collect local data to support the previous research (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

### **Research Methodology**

This research will be a two-year study on how parental involvement activities can decrease chronic absenteeism. Schools will receive an introduction letter to explain the study and seek their agreement to participate, as well as a baseline survey. Full participation will also require a survey each year thereafter as a follow-up. Both surveys will be based upon a Likert scale. Quantitative methods will involve obtaining data from the attendance records from the previous school year to record the dependent variable, chronic absenteeism. The independent variable will be the implementation of the parental-involvement initiatives.

**Selection of Subjects**

Researchers will select subjects for this research based on the schools that participate within a school division. Other schools that do not participate in the program might also be included, because their results could also show the need for such programs. Attendance records will be accessed throughout the two-year period; the previous year's records will establish the dependent variable, which is the amount of chronic absenteeism reported throughout the school year. Chronic absenteeism is defined as 20 days or more of absenteeism throughout the school year. The student body in the schools that participate will define the selection of subjects.

**Ethical Considerations**

The school division will need to be informed and agree to participate in the study. The superintendent or designate will receive an ethics review form to read before he or she authorizes the study in a school. Staff members who agree to participate will be required to sign a consent form. Attendance information will not have names attached; therefore, the students will not be obliged to consent.

**Limitations**

A limitation of the study might be the effectiveness of the incorporation of the parental involvement initiative into the school system. As with any new program in a school, principals and teachers must be willing to participate.

**Conclusion**

Partnerships between schools and the community can assist students as they progress on their educational journey. The families of successful students stay informed and involved in the education of their children (Epstein, 2007). The proposed research in this chapter will show that

increasing parental-school involvement reduces chronic absenteeism and thereby improves students' ability to succeed.

Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of this research paper and includes a final discussion on concerns regarding students' nonattendance at school, the factors that contribute to truancy, strategies to increase parent-school partnerships, and the proposed action research plan to assist school jurisdictions in the quest for higher levels of student attendance and achievement.

### **Chapter 4: Summary**

Chronic absenteeism can result in a number of negative outcomes for students. The academic achievement of students who are chronically absent in kindergarten is lower in Grade 1 (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012), and the correlation between low attendance in Grade 6 and low graduation rates is proven. Moreover, students who are chronically absent in elementary and middle schools are at risk of gaps in their achievement that they cannot regain in high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), students who are absent from school fall into three categories: (a) those who cannot attend school because of the need to work, housing issues, problems with the justice system, illness, or family responsibilities; (b) those who will not attend school because of bullying, harassment, or embarrassment; and (c) those who do not attend school because their parents do not see the value of their children attending school and allow them to skip school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

School, family, and community partnerships can decrease chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Schools can reduce chronic absenteeism from one year to the next by communicating with families, celebrating good attendance, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors. Attendance-focused activities at school can also decrease the percentage of students who are chronically absent during a school year (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

### **Implications**

In 1996 Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, established the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), which is a national program built on extensive research studies on family, community, and school partnerships. As its website (NNPS, 2015) states,



“NNPS invites schools, districts, states, and organizations to join together and use research-based approaches to organize and sustain excellent programs of family and community involvement that will increase student success in school” (para. 1). Dr. Joyce Epstein, who has been researching this topic for the past 30 years, is the founder and director. Her research has revealed four key factors that sustain and ensure the effectiveness of programs for family and community involvement (Epstein, 2007):

1. action teams that include administration, teachers, parents, students, and community partners who make up a committee and are responsible for devising a program of family and community involvement that is directly related to school-improvement goals;
2. Epstein’s six types of involvement (see chapter 2), which encourage schools to connect with families and the community to improve specific student outcomes. This enables family and community to be involved in various ways;
3. action plans that are connected to goals for specific student achievement. The action team devises a plan to implement activities so that the teachers do not work alone; and
4. ongoing evaluation and improvements documented by the action team to sustain the program and continually advance the goals.

The benefits of incorporating the four components are multiple and positive. Research has confirmed that when families become more involved, grades in English and mathematics are higher, students’ reading and writing skills improve, they complete more courses, they arrive at school better prepared, their attendance improves, and they have fewer behavioral issues.

## **Conclusion**

The researcher of this study has arrived at the answer to the research question: Schools can increase student attendance and achievement by adopting effective ways of communicating with parents. Families are crucial to student success, and it is important to learn how to involve all families to gain their support for students' success in school (Epstein, 2010). Researchers must be willing to test alternative strategies to help all stakeholders to build the respect and trust necessary for students to do their best in school. This must encompass all parents, including those who have less formal education, are generally hard to reach, speak a language other than English, and might not historically have been involved in the school. More research on partnerships between family, community, and school and the use of rigorous methods continue to be needed (Epstein, 2010).

## **Final Statements**

The original question in this research study was based upon students' lack of attendance at one school and what the researcher considered the apathetic perspective of students and parents on the importance of attending school. In further examining this issue, the researcher has realized the impact and direct importance of communicating with parents and community. The responsibility was not simply to inform the parents of the importance of attending school, as the researcher previously considered it; rather, the research confirmed that teachers will benefit from more formal preservice education to enable positive partnerships in the family-school connection. The responsibility for partnerships should be established at the school level, with a vision of outstretched hands directed toward parents and the surrounding community in a collaborative, caring gesture.

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