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Combating Chronic Absenteeism in Rural Maine Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This quantitative study was designed to determine if there is a correlation between chronic absenteeism and student achievement and if increased teacher communication with positive messages around attendance would affect the rate of chronic absenteeism in rural elementary schools. Four schools were analyzed looking at attendance and achievement data while implementing a new attendance protocol that increased teacher communication and the spread of positive messaging in regards to attendance. Findings indicate there is evidence that those students who were chronically absent struggled academically to meet local and state benchmarks. Preliminary findings also indicate that the implementation of the new attendance protocol improved attendance. In conclusion, making small changes in attendance protocols that add nothing to existing budgets appears to be an effective way to combat the national attendance crisis.

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism is a growing concern nationwide with nearly 8 million students (16%) reported as chronically absent (Chang et al., 2018). Throughout the state of Maine, schools are struggling to get students to school. Almost 17% of students in the state of Maine missed 10% or more of school. Teachers and administrators are worried, justifiably so, that if the students are not at school then they will not make adequate growth to become successful global community members.

Research shows that students who are chronically absent show lower achievement in reading and math in later grades, run the risk of dropping out or failing out of school and those chronically absent students have even been linked to poor socioemotional outcomes (Gottfried, 2014; Romero & Lee, 2007). Of students with chronic absenteeism patterns in the earliest grades, only 17% can read on grade level after 3rd grade (Attendance Works, n.d.).

These startling statistics have led Maine to look at attendance in a different way. The state mandates schools to monitor those students considered truant but that is only part of the big attendance picture. Up until recent years the state tracked the percentage of students in attendance each day, also called the average daily attendance. Tracking attendance data in this way hid those students who were chronically absent and masked the problem.

The research shows that chronic absenteeism leads to a lack of adequate student growth, increased behavior issues and a higher risk of dropping out of school.

Knowing this, it is imperative that we do something to help our learners get to school and grow.

Literature Review

Attendance has been an issue for public schools for many years. Schools have had to report out on truancy in their district but this measure alone does not show the whole picture. Recently our schools have started to look at not only those students with excessive unexcused absences but those students who have high numbers of absences period, these students are considered chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing ten percent or more of the academic year for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences, suspensions and time missed due to changing schools (Gottfried, 2014; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Fuhs, Nesbitt & Jackson, 2018). While this may seem like a lot, it comes out to be 18 days. If a student misses just two days each month they would exceed the 18 day threshold. Chronic absenteeism is at an all time high with over eight million students considered chronically absent. That rate triples in areas of poverty. In 2017 the Maine state average for chronic absenteeism was 15.74%. In 2018 those numbers grew to a statewide average of 16.51%(Chronic Absenteeism Data Reporting, n.d.).

Effects

Why does this matter? Common sense tells us that students must be in school to learn and research supports that. Studies indicate a correlation between students with poor attendance and low academic growth and increased behavior issues (London,

Sanches, & Castrechini, 2016; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Chang & Romero, 2008).

Chronic Absenteeism is even a predictor of high school dropouts (Childs, 2018).

Michael Gottfried's work supports the claim that chronic absenteeism has an adverse effect on both the academic and social emotional growth of Kindergarten students (Gottfried, 2014). These findings align with research done earlier that showed an increase in absences had a correlation with a decline in achievement as well as engagement (Gottfried, 2009; Ready, 2010). It was discovered that while there was a slightly larger decline in math scores than reading it was the consistent patterns in the analysis that suggests the effects are not specific to an academic domain. The students who have both moderate (11-19) absences and high (20 or more) absences are performing worse than their peers across multiple academic areas (Gottfried, 2014). This claim was supported in its inverse in a study by Balfanz and Byrnes. Students who stopped being chronically absent saw an academic improvement across all academic areas (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018). It has also been shown that students of poverty in kindergarten and first grade with good attendance improved their literacy more than those who were chronically absent (Ready, 2010). While it is shown that poor attendance does impact a student's growth, Attendance Works also shares that when absenteeism reaches high levels in a classroom or school, all students, even those who have good attendance may suffer. The time spent catching students up affects the teachers' ability to engage their learners, progress the learning and meet their needs (Attendance Works, n.d.). The continual rise above state average of chronic absenteeism suggests that what we are currently doing in our schools is not working. As

absenteeisms continue to rise and our achievement scores continue to decline it seems imperative that we focus our attention on getting our young learners to school.

Contributing Factors

There are many factors that contribute to our students chronic absenteeism. Some factors to consider are public health systems, crime, transportation or the lack thereof, and poverty (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Students in schools with high concentrations of poverty are less likely than other students to have recess and high-quality physical education (Carlson et al., 2014). While this information may seem irrelevant, it has been shown that higher physical fitness participation is connected with better school attendance (Geier, Foster, et al., 2007; Welk G., 2009). Ensuring students have the opportunity to be physically active for 60 minutes a day is a key strategy for supporting student attendance. These high-poverty schools are also less likely than higher-income schools to have a school nurse available to help with chronic illnesses like asthma (Basch, 2011). But no matter the reason, it is important to identify how to get our young learners to school every day.

Strategies

There are strategies that school districts across the country have tried to use to lower the rates of chronic absenteeism. Urban schools have had some success with incentives (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018; Allen & Fryer, 2011) and collaborating with community organizations (Balfanz & Byrnes 2018; Childs & Grooms, 2018). A randomized experiment in the Philadelphia school district unveiled that communicating with guardians about attendance reduces student absences (Rogers, et al, 2017). Robinson

and Lee (2018) looked specifically at elementary schools in California and targeted all kindergarten students as well as students in first through fifth grade with less than average attendance the previous year. Eighteen percent of these students were socioeconomically disadvantaged. The targeted students missed eight percent fewer school days than their peers. The mailings had the greatest effect on students with the lowest attendance and was credited with a 15% reduction in chronic absenteeism.

Conclusion

There is very little literature about rural, low income schools. These schools do not have access to a wide array of community organizations that many of the more urban schools that are written about have. Nor do they have access to money and prizes for incentives sponsored by the larger cities and the organizations that make up those cities. Chronic absenteeism affects our schools and we need to find proven ways that will lower our rates of chronic absenteeism and that are sustainable for our districts.

Research Design

Purpose of the Research

Chronic absenteeism is at an all time high with over eight million students considered chronically absent. That rate triples in areas of poverty. In 2017 the Maine state average for chronic absenteeism was 15.74%. In a rural school district in Maine, covering 440 square miles, the percentage of students who were chronically absent was 22.95% ("Chronic Absenteeism Data Reporting," n.d.). In 2018 those numbers grew to a statewide average of 16.51% and an average in one rural Maine district of 25.66%. A

quarter of one district's population was chronically absent. An alternative way to look at this statistic is one in every four of those students struggled with attendance.

Studies indicate a direct correlation between students with poor attendance and low academic growth and increased behavior issues. Chronic Absenteeism is even a predictor of high school dropouts (Childs, 2018). The continual rise above state average of chronic absenteeism suggests that what we are currently doing in our schools is not working. As absenteeisms continue to rise and our achievement scores continue to decline it seems imperative that we focus our attention on getting our young learners to school.

The administrative team at a rural school district in Maine decided to try to implement strategies to increase attendance. In looking at other studies and with guidance from Count Me In, it was determined that communication with families was key to improving student attendance. The purpose of my research was to determine the effectiveness of the implemented strategies. Specifically I analyzed survey data collected by the district, monitored the attendance in the elementary schools, analyzed student growth data and looked for relationships between attendance and academic growth.

Research Question

This research study was designed to collect data on student attendance, achievement and the effectiveness of current protocols established to improve attendance. This research could offer valuable insight for other rural schools with a population of under 200 students. If as a result, there is a high correlation between

increased parent communication and decreased chronic absenteeism, other schools of similar size and demographics may be willing to implement this low cost strategy to improve their overall attendance. In addition, if it is shown that improved attendance leads to higher achievement, then schools can use this data to support its initiatives moving forward. Teachers and parents alike want to know that what they are doing matters and makes a difference. This study could give the data to support them. Much of the current literature is based on large urban areas with a plethora of outside resources. Most of Maine is rural and spread out with little outside resources. The research questions for this study were:

1. Is there a correlation between students who are chronically absent and student growth?
2. What is the impact of teacher communication with parents on the rate of chronic absenteeism?
3. Do positive messages and continued communication with families in regards to the importance of attendance impact chronic absenteeism?

General Approach

This study was designed as a correlational study. Creswell asserts that this design is used when researchers use a correlation statistical test to describe and measure the relationship between two or more variables (Creswell, 2019). In designing this study no attempt was made to control or manipulate the variables, only to look at relationships using correlational statistics.

Research Methods

Setting

This study was conducted in a rural school district comprising 11 towns covering 440 square miles in Maine. Specifically, this study looked at four of the elementary schools, each of which has less than 200 students. Each school is described in more detail in Table 1.

Table 1

School Demographics

Traits	School A	School B	School C	School D
2019/2020 Enrollment K-5	47	101	71	73
Free/Reduced Lunch	60	59	65	78
Special Ed Student	5	12	8	15
Classroom Teachers	3	7	5	5
Special Ed Teachers	.5	.5	.5	.5
Special Ed Ed Techs	1	3	1	1
Title One	1	1	1	1
Title One Ed Tech	0	1	.5	.5
Principal	.5	.5	.5	.5
Itinerants	Art .2 Music .2 Phys Ed. .2 Garden .2 Library .2 Guidance .1 Social Work .1	Art .2 Music .4 Phys Ed. .4 Garden .2 Library .4 Guidance .2 Social Work .1	Art .2 Music .4 Phys Ed. .3 Garden .2 Library .2 Guidance .1 Social Work .1	Art .2 Music .3 Phys Ed. .4 Garden .2 Library .2 Guidance .2 Social Work .1

Intervention

The team devised a three tier plan based on information from the organization Count Me In to try to lower the rates of chronic absenteeism in their schools. The goals of this intervention plan was to reduce absenteeism by:

- Communicating and recognizing the importance of school attendance to the school community
- Establishing a procedure to review and monitor students who are at-risk or chronically absent
- Developing individual plans for students who are at-risk or chronically absent, including assisting and supporting families

This plan established protocols for teachers as well as administrators and gave clear guidelines for when to call, what to say and what the next steps were. Teachers were a key component of this plan. The teachers were expected to build a positive expectation for attending school and focus on building a relationship with the parent and child and school by communicating directly with families, especially those children who have a history of at-risk or chronic absenteeism. In order to forge the relationships with families the teachers were expected to:

- Message the importance of attendance via class newsletter and calls home.
- Connect attendance to the importance of student learning and school practice.
- Connect why it is important to be present and ready to learn (be responsible) at the earliest contact (kindergarten screening/nights).

- Reach out to families with a positive note to parents when a pattern of absences is noticed.
- Use resources as needed such as guidance, social work, nurse and community agencies.
- Include a discussion of attendance during parent conferences
- Watch for any signs of a pattern emerging: attendance, early dismissals or tardiness.
- As early as the 3rd absence, begin to communicate with parent and child regarding absences (after the 1st absence if the child was chronically absent in previous years).

In addition the plan goes on to give sample prompts to use when connecting with families at tier 1 and tier 2 as shown in Table 2. A more detailed description of the overall plan is seen in Table 3.

Table 2

Sample Prompts

Tier 1	Tier 2
Thank you for calling to let us know your child was going to be absent and I wanted to just let you know we missed your child.	Ask the family their perspective first, be specific as possible and include strengths and positives
Our class is not the same without your child. We care about your child Mention something the child has done well in class or something you enjoy about the child	Acknowledge differences, challenges and suggestions What is happening at school? What do you think the school staff could do to make it easier for your child to attend? Do you and your family feel
I hope they feel better soon.	welcome or comfortable at school?

I look forward to seeing your child tomorrow	It's been a cold winter, is there some support that we can help you with?
What is the best way for us to keep in touch?	How are the mornings going? Are there other people in the community that are already helping you or your child? Are you aware of any fears about school?
	Identify common goals, then develop action steps and/or a follow up plan with the parent/guardian Identify any community agencies or natural supports the school and/or parent can contact and access written permission for any contact

Table 3*Three Tiered Intervention Plan*

Tier 1-Teacher Level	Tier 2- School Level	Tier 3- District Level
<p>As early as the 3rd absence: *Speak with the child (one on one or in a peer group)</p> <p>*Friendly phone call home or e-mail directly to the parent</p> <p>6th absence: *Speak with Child</p> <p>*Phone call home or e-mail directly to the parent</p>	<p>10th absence: *Intervention team will review and determine possible interventions</p> <p>*Intervention team will review plan and determine if a meeting should be scheduled with parent</p> <p>*Principal or designee will call home (for ex. teacher, school counselor, social worker, case manager)</p> <p>*Teachers or <i>designated persons as determined by the</i></p>	<p>18th absence: *Superintendent is informed and if appropriate, meets with the family.</p> <p>*May be referred back to the Intervention Team</p>

school will send a letter via postal or email. The letter will be customized based on the particular needs of the student

15th absence:

*The principal or designated person communicates with the family via phone or in person

*The Principal determines:

*The need for sending a letter home

*The need to notify the superintendent

*Requesting a meeting with the family

Each principal was responsible for holding their staff accountable. Schools C and D both have a formal process for staff members to follow each week. At the end of the week if any of their students are missing for the third, sixth or tenth time they must fill out a short form alerting the principal as well as telling the principal who they talked to at home and what was discussed. This form is included in the appendix. In the other two schools the process was a bit less formal with the principal checking in monthly.

Data Collection

The correlational research study utilized archival and survey data. Archival documents were collected from the State of Maine archives as well as the archives

housed at the office of the superintendent. The data analyzed included attendance data of students from four rural elementary schools with less than 200 students for the last four years and local achievement data for the same four years as well as MEA data for schools C and D. Each student's individual data was de-identified and was analyzed to determine whether there was a correlation between the number of absences and tardiness and the overall achievement of the student. In addition I analyzed data collected from the parents of students in regards to the implementation of new protocols put in place by the school. The data was also analyzed to see if the new protocols had an impact on the rate of absenteeism in the rural schools.

Data Analysis

The data collected was organized to see if there were correlations between attendance and achievement as well as change in school protocol and change in attendance. The quantitative data from this study was utilized to determine whether the intervention was effective in improving chronic absenteeism. Local assessment data was recorded and coded as proficient or not proficient. This data was used to look for relationships between chronic absenteeism and low achievement. Descriptive statistics were used to help analyze the data. Cresswell (2019) states that descriptive statistics help to summarize the overall trends or tendencies in the data and provides insights into where one score stands in comparison with others. All of the data was organized using Google Sheets and tables and charts were created to report out the results along with a narrative discussing the findings.

Expected Findings

Based on prior research explored during the literature review, I am expecting to find that there is a correlation between chronic absenteeism and low academic achievement. I also expect to find that the increase in communication with families will have a positive impact on attendance.

Results

The data collection for this research project had four sections to focus on. The first focus area was the creation, distribution and collection of a parent survey. This survey asked parents what were valid reasons for missing school, to rate the importance of school and asked how often their child's teacher reached out to them about attendance the prior year. The survey was shared again in the spring about this year's experience with attendance.

Seventy seven percent of parents surveyed in the fall said that attendance was important or very important compared to 84% of parents in the spring. The fall data indicated that parents felt that there were many valid excuses for missing school including family vacations (41%), doctors or dentist appointments (77%) and mild illness (50%). The spring data saw a decline in all three of these categories with several parents adding in comments such as “a family vacation once every couple of years” and “mild illness if there is a fever or has been going on for several days” to clarify their ratings. The spring data was at 32%, 75% and 38% respectively. The final question asked was in regards to the communication from teachers to parents in regards to

attendance. Table 4 shows an increase in parent perception of communication in regards to attendance.

Table 4

How often did your child's teacher reach out to you in regards to the importance of attendance?

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Fall 2019	64.7%	21.6%	7.8%	5.9%
Spring 2020	20.4%	40.8%	18.4%	20.4%

The second focus area was the collection of attendance data. I used the school data manager to record the attendance data for each student at each of the sample schools for the last four years. I then broke the data into three sections. The first section was from the beginning of the school year through January 31. The second section was from February 1 until the end of the school year. The third section was the entire year. I then recorded which students were chronically absent for each of the three parts as well as recorded the rate of chronic absenteeism for each grade level each year.

Figure 1 summarizes the results of the attendance data collected. This data represents three years of attendance data, the fourth year had not been completed at the time of this paper. The four schools' percentage of chronically absent students hovered around the 20% mark.

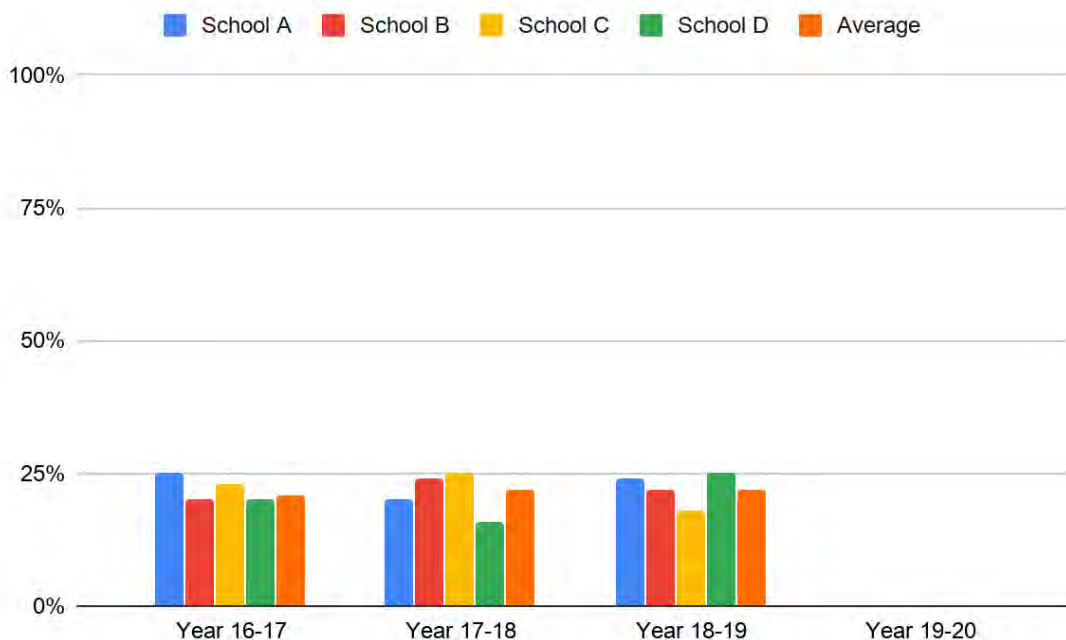
Figure 1*Percent of Chronically Absent Students*

Table 5 shows the rates of chronic absenteeism each fall for the past four years. Specifically it shows a drop in chronically absent students at three of the four schools during the year of the intervention, with a significant drop for School B from 22% in the fall of 2018/2019 to 12%. In addition the average for all four schools in the district went from 21% to 16%.

Table 5*Rates of Chronic Absenteeism Over Time*

Year	School A	School B	School C	School D	Average
Fall 16-17	19	21	17	21	20
Fall 17-18	15	21	28	15	21
Fall 18-19	13	22	19	22	21
Fall 19-20	18	12	16	19	16

The third focus was the assembling of the academic data. I was able to collect local data, Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments, for four years for all of the students in all four schools. I also collected state achievement data for two of the schools for the past three years.

The fourth and final focus was to look at all three data sets to see if there was data to support that there was a relationship between chronic absenteeism and low academic achievement, parents were contacted more frequently in regards to attendance, and that the intervention implemented would have an affect on the rate of chronic absenteeism in the four sample schools.

The data showed that students who were chronically absent struggled to reach proficiency as seen in Table 6.

Table 6

Reading Proficiency Levels of Chronically Absent Students

	School A	School B	School C	School D	Average
Proficient	35%	19%	33%	26%	28%
Not Proficient	65%	81%	67%	74%	72%

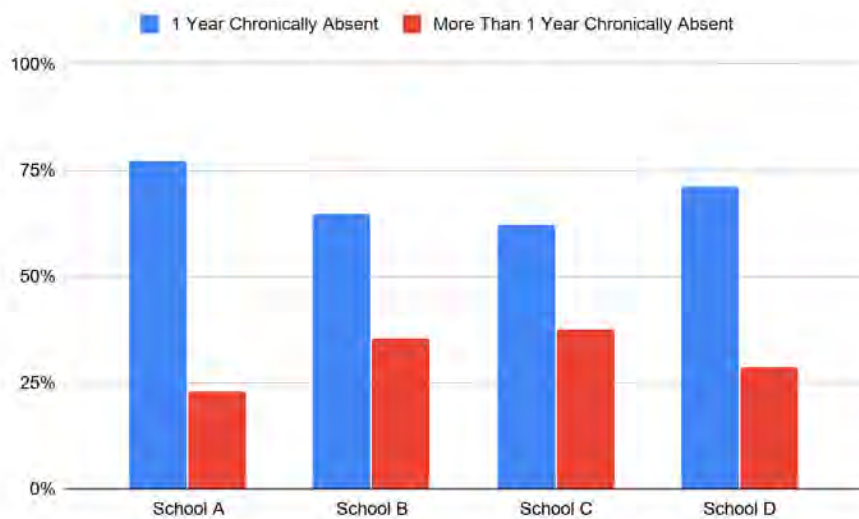
Seventy two percent of chronically absent students from all four schools did not meet local benchmarking standards in reading using Fountas and Pinnell benchmarking tools as a local assessment. School B had the highest average percentage at 81% while school A had the lowest with 65%. I was able to track the class of 2028 for the past four years. The data shows that 100% of those students who were chronically absent in

Kindergarten and are still in the schools A, B, C and D in third grade never reached grade level proficiency in reading even though some of them are no longer chronically absent. In addition to this local assessment we were able to look at the state assessment for schools C and D as well. Seventy two percent of chronically absent students from School C and 74% of chronically absent students from School D did not meet the standard on the state standardized assessment in math. Sixty one percent of chronically absent students from School C and 63% of chronically absent students from School D did not meet the standard on the state standardized assessment in reading. The data indicates there is a strong correlation between those students who are chronically absent and low student achievement.

In looking at the attendance data shown in figure 2 you can see that all four of the schools had less than 40% of their chronically absent students identified as chronically absent for more than one year. Also of note Kindergarten students made up on average 23% of all chronically absent students for those same three years.

Figure 2

Percent of Students Chronically Absent for One or More Years from 2017-2020



Potential Issues and Limitations

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. One of the biggest issues in this study was the time available to do the study. The intervention was designed to take place over the course of one year. I was able to look at data for half of the year and compare it to other years but it would be beneficial for this study to be repeated over a period of time to look at the current trends.

Another weakness of this study was limited access to state achievement data. I was able to procure data for three years from two of the schools but was unable to attain the same data from the other two schools. This was only one set of data among many sets that were analyzed. The local data was available for the past five years and was used to look at correlations.

The final issue was the inability to obtain survey data from parents due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I was able to obtain data from a small population of parents that had completed the survey in the fall. A future study should be used to check the validity of this data.

Discussion

In conclusion, the data indicates that there is a strong association between chronic absenteeism and low student achievement. It also indicates that the parents who participated in the surveys were in fact contacted more than years past in regards to their child's absences. The data also indicates that the new protocol implemented appeared to have positive effects on the rate of chronic absenteeism in rural schools with a population of less than 200 students.

The data collected in regards to attendance and low academic achievement was inline with other studies (Gottfried, 2009; Gottfried, 2014; Ready, 2010) and indicates that an improvement in attendance could lead to higher student achievement. We need to get our students to school so they can learn. Thirty two percent of all chronically absent students were identified as having been chronically absent for multiple years. These students need to be identified early and supported throughout the year. The intervention was designed to catch the absences early and often to try to deter the patterns that were already established.

Ready (2010) indicated that students of poverty in kindergarten and first grade with good attendance had higher levels of proficiency in literacy. The data collected suggests that focusing on this grade level could have a high impact. With Kindergarten students making up 23% of all chronically absent students the data indicates the effects are still being seen in third grade, even if their attendance improves. With so much research focused on high school students, this data implies that schools should really focus on early elementary school to set the tone for coming to school and learning.

Robinson (2018) used mailings to try to increase parental understanding and participation. It was a tier 1 intervention that cost a fraction of interventions tried in other research such as mentors and social workers. This research supports the idea that parents are an asset and valuable partners in the journey to improve student attendance. The intervention implemented builds on the idea that when we invite parents to be a part of the solution and engage in the process of helping to get students to school they will step up to the challenge. Taking the intervention to the next level and

making frequent contact and building relationships is also low cost for low income school districts. Preliminary findings suggest that this improved relationship with parents may have an impact on the rate of chronic absenteeism. This study indicates that any school district could replicate the intervention described in the study. It has no cost and the time required by teachers is minimal making this intervention a good fit for those schools with limited funding and resources.

Future research should continue to see if the trends of lowering chronic absenteeism rates continues. More data needs to be collected as the intervention is implemented to track both the absenteeism rates and the proficiency data to really corroborate the initial findings. This study has the potential to help many schools in rural Maine who are struggling with attendance but do not have the means to support more expensive interventions.

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Appendix

Teacher Communication Log Receipt

Date:

Teacher:

Student: _____ has reached _____ absences.

_____ I communicated with home specifically regarding attendance on _____.

_____ I was unable to communicate due to _____.

Notes: