Parents' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Student's Attendance

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

Truancy is a serious, nation-wide problem for students, schools, and society. Previous research

suggested that the root causes of truancy must be understood before effective interventions can

be implemented (Henry & Huizinga 2007; Reid, 2005). The literature suggests that the causes of

school truancy often fall into four categories; individual, school, family, and community factors.

A critical element in model truancy intervention programs across the country is parent

involvement (McCray, 2006). There has been little research done; however, regarding parents'

perceptions of factors that influence their child's truancy. Quantitative data is presented that

reveals parents' perceptions of the factors that influenced their child's absenteeism at a suburban

high school in the United States. Results are discussed, and implications for counselors are

presented.

Parents' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Student's Attendance

Truancy is considered a pressing societal issue that is becoming increasingly prevalent in many schools throughout the United States (Kearney, 2003, 2007; McCray, 2006; Reid, 2005). Henry (2007) found that approximately 2.8 million students across the United States were absent from school at least once each month. As cited in Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley (2004) a nationwide survey of adolescents indicated 11% of eighth grade students, 16% of tenth grade students, and 35% of twelfth grade students reported missing one or more days of school during the previous 30 days (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) labeled truancy a top national priority in their annual report (Flores, 2004). The statistics mentioned above raise concern, especially due to research findings that indicate attendance in schools is the best predictor of school success (Daniels, 2008; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Kearny, 2007; Reid, 2005). Given the importance of attendance, truancy is a concern that should be addressed.

Throughout the literature, truancy and problematic absenteeism have been identified and related to various problems. According to Stoolmiller (1994) the consequences of problematic absenteeism often result from the unstructured and unmonitored free time that being absent allows for students. Researchers discovered that problematic absenteeism is detrimental to a student's academic success (Couillard, Garnett, Hutchins, Fawcett, & Maycock, 2006; Kearny, 2003). Truancy has a direct link to juvenile delinquency, gang activity, and drug use (The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007).

School counselors are responsible for recognizing and addressing the underlying issues that influence students' attendance. Many factors that influence a student's attendance are often within the school counselor's role. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Model

is a framework for school counseling programs which focuses on the school counselor

supporting student development in three domains: academic, personal/social, and career

development (ASCA, 2005). Problematic absenteeism affects student development in these

three domains. School counselors should understand the various causes of absenteeism

(individual, school, family, and community), in order to develop early prevention and

intervention techniques (Reid, 2005). School counselors hold the responsibility of identifying

students who are chronically absent and/or truant. School counselors are then expected to work

with the students' and their families and teachers in order to promote a positive change in the

students' attendance. Gysbers & Henderson (2006) explained that counseling was a common

intervention for students with excessive absences and that effective school counseling programs

often showed improvement in attendance. School counselors, due to the important role they play

in the well-being and healthy development of students, are responsible for identifying the causes,

risk factors, and solutions related to problematic absenteeism.

The review of literature presented in this paper will cover a variety of topics to further

understand student absenteeism. The review of literature first discusses the conceptual

difficulties regarding defining absenteeism. The impact of absenteeism on students'

development and the negative effects and risk factors of absenteeism are then explored. The

causes of absenteeism are then examined in depth, followed by an overview of theoretical

frameworks to support the causes. Next, interventions to address absenteeism are then

addressed. Lastly, the importance of stakeholders and parents identifying and addressing

absenteeism is discussed.

Review of Literature

Conceptual Difficulties

Researchers, counselors, and school professionals have difficulty properly and consistently defining student absenteeism (Reid, 2005; Teasley, 2004). Researchers use terms such as problematic absenteeism, truancy, and school refusal behavior interchangeably with the term absenteeism, making it difficult to understand the differences and similarities between the terms (Kearney, 2003, 2007; Reid, 2005). State and school districts also vary in how they define absenteeism due to their specific attendance policies and procedures (Kronholz, 2011). According to the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), state law determines the age at which a child is required to begin attending school, the age a child may legally drop out of school, and the number of unexcused absences at which a student is considered legally truant (Heilbrunn, 2004). With schools determining on an individual basis what counts as an excused and unexcused absence, defining absenteeism and truancy become even more loosely defined.

According to Reid (2005), absenteeism is defined as simply not attending school, with or without an excuse. Problematic absenteeism often refers to being absent from school or class without a reason that would qualify as a legal and/or excused absence under the school's attendance policy, whether or not the parents have knowledge or gave permission. The primary issue of chronic absenteeism, or truancy, is not that there is no excuse provided, rather the excuse is not a valid one. Reid (2005) described sub-types of student absenteeism: "specific lesson absence, post-registration absence, parentally condoned absence, psychological absence, school refusal behavior, and school phobia" (p. 59). Due to individuals' different perspectives about which sub-types of absenteeism could be considered truancy most researchers provide situation specific definitions of truancy.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) stated that most educators and court personal define truancy as an unexcused absence from school, but states enact their own school attendance laws (Heilbrunn, 2004). Truancy can be defined by each state as a specified number of illegal, unauthorized, and unexcused absences from school or class in which the parent is unaware (Kearney, 2008; Reid, 2003). Schools define what constitutes an unexcused absence according to the attendance policies and procedure of their school district, thus making it difficult to universally define truancy. For example, the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (2007) noted truants as children, who are between the ages of seven and 16, who skipped school for more than four days in any one month or have ten unexcused absences. In Texas, a student is considered truant if he or she has 10 unexcused absences within six months, whereas a student is considered truant in Maryland if they have 18 unexcused absences per semester (Kronholz, 2011).

Kearney (2008) stated that truancy is associated with problematic school absenteeism. Problematic absenteeism was defined was "school-aged youth who (1) have missed at least 25% of total school time for at least two weeks, (2) experience severe difficulty attending classes for at least two weeks with significant interference in a child's or family's daily routine, and/or (3) are absent for at least 10 days of school during a 15-week period while school is in session" (Kearny, 2008, p. 9). Nonproblematic absenteeism was defined as legitimate absences, in which both parents and school professionals agreed the rationale for missing school was justifiable.

School refusal behavior is a term that is used interchangeably with absenteeism and truancy (Kearny, 2007). The term is used to define absences from school due to difficulty attending school or remaining in school for the entire day. School refusal behavior covers many sub-types of students with problematic absenteeism, such as truancy, school phobia, and anxiety-

based school refusal (Dube & Orpinas, 2009). Despite the sub-type of problematic absenteeism, the outcomes can still be detrimental to a student's overall success in school (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Roby, 2004).

Attendance and Students' Overall Development

The literature suggests that attendance in schools is the best predictor of academic, social, and career outcomes (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Roby, 2004). When students are absent from school; they are missing out on valuable curriculum, as well as social and life skills that are important for future success.

Academic development. Poor school attendance and not being present in class have been linked to low academic achievement, graduation rates, and standardized test scores (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Couillard et al. 2006; Gehring, 2004). Roby (2004) found a positive relationship between attendance and student achievement in grades four, six, nine, and 12 (Roby, 2004). Henry and Huizinga (2007) study examined school-related risk factors associated with truancy among at-risk urban youth. They found that students who performed well in school and held high educational aspirations reported fewer days of truancy. Students who regularly attend school are less likely to fail standardized tests (Daugherty, 2008). Daugherty discovered that students in eighth and tenth grade, who had 17 or more absences, received a mean scaled score below the state proficiency for reading and math in the Delaware Student Testing Program. A direct correlation also exists between students' attendance rates and their grade point average (Couillard et al., 2006). Students who attend classes regularly, however, were shown to have a 9.4% to 18.0% improvement on their exams (Chen & Lin, 2008). Ultimately, academic failure can lead to suspensions, expulsion, or dropping out of school (The Colorado Foundation for

Families and Children, 2007). Academic achievement is negatively impacted by lack of

attendance (Kearny, 2003).

Career development. Students whose problematic absenteeism leads to school dropout

encounter several disadvantages in regards to their career development. School dropouts have

fewer job opportunities, lower salaries, and increased rates of unemployment than youth who

stay in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2003.). These outcomes are often due to lack of

education in regards to skills and qualifications. According to the United States Department of

Labor, about 400,000 individuals dropped out of high school from 2004 to 2005 which resulted

in a 32.9% unemployment rate among these high school drop outs (U.S. Department of Labor,

2006). High school dropouts are also more likely to be dependent on welfare due to their lower

lifetime earnings compared to high school graduates. Reid (2005) found that lack of education

can also result in limited career options and overall lower long term career aspirations. Lack of

education has been linked to limited career options, increased rates on unemployment, and

reduced income for the individual student (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Social development. Henry and Huizinga (2007) stated "school is a primary context for

social interaction, cultivation of interpersonal skills, formation of peer groups, self-expression,

and development of self" (p. 514). Students who are chronically absent and/or truant from school

become isolated from peers and adults (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). Isolation from

social interactions have detrimental impacts, especially based on the findings that that positive

relationships are protective factors in regards to academic performance and overall success

(Henry & Huizingia, 2007). Teasley (2004) suggested that truancy is also significantly

associated with antisocial behaviors that can lead to negative life outcomes, such as delinquency

and drug use. School provides students with an environment to interact socially, resulting in their development into healthy and social individuals.

Absenteeism as Risk Factors for Other Problems

Absenteeism has been identified and related to other problems, such as delinquency (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006; The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007), criminal offenses (McCluskey et al., 2004), gang activity (Newman, 2002), drug abuse (Henry, 2007; Henry & Huizinga, 2007), family conflict, teen pregnancy, and social isolation (The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007). Stoolmiller (1994) proposed the concept of unsupervised wandering, in that delinquent behavior is most likely to occur during periods of unstructured and unsupervised time. The chances that youth will resist peer pressure and behave in a prosocial manner decreases when there is an absence of an adult authority figure. When students skip school they are often in an unstructured and unsupervised environment (Henry, 2007).

Problematic absenteeism and/or truancy have been recognized as one of the early risk factors for youth delinquency (Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006; The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007). A predictable negative cycle of behavior has been used to better understand the link between absenteeism and delinquency (The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007). The cycle starts with early truant behavior that leads to later suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out. Seventy percent of suspended students, 50% of expelled students, and 80% of drop outs were chronically truant in the last year. The cycle explained that suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out are major risk factors for delinquency. Disciplinary actions, that follow the "push out" model, tend to only increase truancy. An increase in truancy also calls for an increase in delinquent behaviors.   Several

studies also described the link between truancy and later negative life outcomes, such as marital

problems, poor outcomes for children, job problems, adult criminality, and incarceration (The

Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007).

As cited in McCluskey et al., researchers have examined the link between truancy and

delinquency, since as early as the 1880s, labeling truancy the "kindergarten of crime" (Gavin,

1997). The U.S. Department of Education (2003) reported that youth who are not in school are

more susceptible to become involved in anti-social behaviors. Anti-social behaviors often result

in criminal offenses. Law enforcement agencies have found high rates of truancy that connect to

daytime burglary, vandalism, and shoplifting. Sixty percent of violent juvenile crime in

California was found to occur between 8:00 am and 3:30 pm, suggesting that the perpetrators

were truant youth (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007). When students are

not in school, they are more likely to be committing crimes. Henry and Huizinga (2007)

discovered students who reported that there were gangs in their school or that they associated

with delinquent peers had higher rates of truancy. Students involved in gangs show an

increasing amount of resistance to school, making truancy more likely (Newman, 2002). The

problematic behaviors discussed are all associated with truancy from school.

The literature suggests that students who skip school are more likely to use drugs and/or

use drugs more often (Henry, 2010; Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Stoolmiller (1994) suggested that

drug use is the most common problematic behavior that often takes place during unmonitored

and unstructured time with peers. Henry and Huizinga (2007) surveyed 12 to 15 year old urban

youth to examine the relationship between truancy and the onset of drug use. The authors

defined truancy as any time when a student skipped school without a valid excuse. Henry and

Huizinga looked at the effects of truancy on the first time students used alcohol, tobacco, and/or

marijuana. The study revealed that truancy significantly increased the odds of beginning to use drugs. The results of this study lead to the conclusion that during unstructured and unsupervised times, youth are more likely to engage in risky behaviors.

Another similar, but more recent study, surveyed 1,000 eleventh grade students from a district in the mid-western United Sates (Henry, 2010). The survey assessed the prevalence rate of alcohol, marijuana, and other drug use while youth were truant from school. The study revealed that "truants had significantly higher odds of recently smoking cigarettes, being intoxicated from alcohol, and smoking marijuana as compared to non-truants" (p. 654). Forty-five percent of the students indicated that they drank alcohol, 50% indicated that they had smoking marijuana, and 27% indicated that they had used other drugs while truant. The likelihood of drug use increases, as the unmonitored and unsupervised time that truancy allows for increases.

Factors Affecting Attendance

Problematic absenteeism and truancy are complex and multi-causal. A comprehensive understanding of the factors that place students at risk for problematic absenteeism and/or truancy is necessary before interventions can be developed (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Reid, 2005). Even though the main causes of absenteeism vary from study to study, a combination of individual, school, family, and community factors are usually involved (Heilbrunn, 2004; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Kearny, 2007; Reid, 2005).

Individual factors. Individual or personal characteristics influence whether or not a student attends school. Each student comes to school with different set of personalities, skills, abilities, experiences, interests, goals, and expectations. Based on these qualities and

characteristics, a student may be more or less susceptible to problematic absenteeism and/or

truancy.

Individuals with inadequate social skills, cognitive skills, emotional problems, low self-

concept, and low self-esteem were more likely to exhibit problematic absenteeism (Reid, 2005).

Petrides, Chamorro-Premuzic, Frederickson, and Furnham (2005) examined individual

differences in scholastic behavior and achievement by looking at students' personality traits.

Students were categorized according to personality traits: psychoticism, extraversion, and

neuroticism. Data was collected by teachers administering a questionnaire battery in class

according to a detailed protocol. Additional data was also collected from school archives.

Results revealed that students who had high verbal ability, low psychoticism (i.e. empathetic and

socialized), and low extraversion (i.e. quiet and reserved) tended to have better attendance in

schools. Students with behavioral problems were more likely to have below average verbal

ability scores and average psychoticism scores (i.e. aggressive and hostile). Reid (2005)

suggested that higher levels of neuroticism and anti social behaviors can be found among

students who are persistently absent and/or truant from school. The results of another study

(Risi, Gerhardstein, & Kistner, 2003) revealed that students, who are viewed as aggressive, were

more likely to be expelled from school than others.   Disciplinary actions, such as expelling a

student from school, only add to the students' poor attendance record.   Characteristics and

qualities of an individual can impact his or her overall success in school.

Students' engagement and attitudes towards school have also been identified as an

individual factor of absenteeism. Henry and Huizigina (2007) discovered that students who

received mostly A's were least likely to be truant, whereas students who got mostly D's or below

were more likely to be truant. Reid (2005) found that truant youth tended to like fewer and

different subjects, underachieved or performed low in a range of subjects, had negative views

towards the school's policies and procedures, and fail to complete their homework. Henry

(2007) found that students with low perceptions of the likelihood of graduating from high school

had the highest probability of excessive absences from school. Students who had negative

beliefs of being successful in school were also less motivated. When students were motivated to

do well in school, they tended to spend more time putting a true effort into doing homework

correctly or studying, which results in better academic behaviors and therefore, grades. With an

increase of grades, another academic behavior that improves is student attendance (Bertrand &

Deslandes, 2005).

Some students experience great anxiety and panic over attending school. The excessive

anxiety that students experience from attending school results in problematic absenteeism and/or

truant behaviors. Researchers have termed this condition school phobia or school refusal

behavior (Fremont, 2003; Kearney, 2007). School phobia is associated with a number of mental

health conditions, including anxiety, mood, disruptive behavior, and learning disorders (Fremont,

2003). According to Kearny (2007) school refusal behavior is a child-motivated refusal to attend

school and/or child-motivated issues remaining in school for an entire day. Fremont (2003)

describes the criteria for a child to be diagnosed with school refusal behavior:

1. Severe emotional distress about going to school (anxiety, tantrums, depression, somatic symptoms).

2. Parents are aware of the absence; student tries to convince parents to allow him or her to stay home.

3. Antisocial behavior is not significant.

4. Child considers staying at home during school hours a safe and secure environment.

5.   Child expresses willingness to do school work and will complete it at home.

While absenteeism is a concern for all students, individuals with special needs and/or health and mental health problems are at a significantly greater risk of absenteeism. Students with individual education plans or 504 plans experience a wide range of difficulties (i.e. learning disabilities, intellectual difficulties, emotional disturbance, and/or poor health). The difficulties that these students experience often result in higher rates of absenteeism (Butler, Reed, & Robles-Piña, 2005). Obese children have also been reported to be tardy and absent more often than normal-weight children (Daniels, 2008). Medical diagnoses that are associated with obesity, such as type 2 diabetes and asthma, require regular visits to the doctor. Frequent visits to the doctor increases students' absences. According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (2004) children with asthma have high rate of absenteeism and often experience learning difficulties. Kaffenberger (2006) stated that approximately 20% of all children have a chronic illness, with about one-third of that number experiencing consequences that interfere with their school attendance. Bulter et al. (2005) suggested that students with severe health problems experience frequent interruptions during the school day. Chronically ill students also miss school days in order to receive and recover from treatments (Kaffenberger, 2006). Although these absences are often considered excused absences, the time spent away from school still has detrimental effects to students' overall success in school.

School factors. The structures, policies, environment, and staff that make up a school are critical factors that can influence students' absenteeism (Heilbrunn, 2004; Lindstadt, 2005; McCluskey et al., 2004). Students in secondary school are more likely to associate their absences from school to school related factors, rather than family and community factors (Reid, 2005). According to the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) the lack of effective

and consistent procedures and policies for dealing with absenteeism can send the wrong message to students, in regards to the importance of school (Heilbrunn, 2004). Schools with poor methods of attendance record keeping, as well as vague definitions of what constitutes excused and unexcused absences struggle with effectively assessing attendance issues (McCluskey et al., 2004). Some schools use a "push out policy" instead of addressing the underlying issues that may be causing behavioral or attendance issues. The "push out policy" consists of disciplinary actions that that focus on excluding, suspending, automatically failing, and/or transferring out students. Other schools' policies and procedures are inflexible in addressing the diverse needs of students. Kaffenberger (2006) discussed the importance of well planned and effective school reentry plans for students with medical health conditions. Schools that fail to have effective transition plans in place are failing to meet the diverse needs of their students. Teasley (2004) suggested large school systems in low income and inner-city school districts are more susceptible to higher rates problematic absenteeism and truancy. Students often have external factors and circumstances in their lives that prevent them from attending school.

According to the NCSE, an unsafe environment is another school related factor that can affect students' attendance (Heilbrunn, 2004). Schools with ineffective discipline policies that allow bullying to be tolerated create unsafe environments for students. Gastic (2008) identified bullying as a potential factor that increases students' nonattendance in school. Being bullied was found to be positively associated with increased risk of being frequently absent (Gastic, 2008). Victims often felt hopeless or defenseless and choose to miss school, rather than having to face their bullies and/or the social stigma that is associated with being a victim of bullying (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). Gastic (2008) also discovered that victims of bullying were more likely to engage in behaviors that result in disciplinary actions, such as in or out of school

suspensions. Juvonen et al. (2003) explained that disciplinary behaviors occur when victims

decide to stand up to the bully and fight back. Disciplinary actions contribute to missed days of

school. When a school displays ineffective discipline policies, the message is conveyed that

bullying is tolerated and that school is an unsafe and unwelcoming environment.

The climate of the school, especially in regards to the classroom climate, is important for

student engagement (Leyba & Massat, 2009). Teachers' characteristics and attitudes have been

recognized as a factor that influences students' problematic absenteeism and/or truancy (Reid,

2005). Lindstadt (2005) found a correlation between teachers' attitudes and students' truancy.

Students who thought their teachers displayed positive and supportive attitudes were less likely

to be truant. Students who thought their teachers displayed a lack of support, respect, and

attention towards diverse student needs were found to have more attendance difficulties.

Teachers, with low expectations for student achievement, were also identified as a truancy factor.

Hallinan (2008) studied the unique role that teachers play in shaping students' attachment and

engagement to school. Attachment to school has been shown to impact student's attendance and

academic performance (Boesel, 2001). The research examined the extent to which teachers

support students socially and emotionally (Hallinan, 2008). Results revealed that teachers, who

support their students by caring, showing respect, and praising them, are meeting their students'

needs. When students' needs are being met, students are more engaged in school. Overall

students who have positive relationships with their teachers are more likely to have good

attendance and academic success (Boesel, 2001; Hallinan, 2008, Leyba & Massat, 2009).

Family factors. Families influence student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002;

Gonzales, 2002; Reid, 2005). Kearny (2007) uses the term, "non-child-motivated conditions,"

to describe circumstances that influence a student's attendance and are beyond his or her control.

Younger children, primarily in their elementary school years, are more likely to be absent from school due to family factors. School and community factors, however, are more likely to be the cause of absenteeism among middle and high school students (McCluskey et al., 2004).

According to Gonzales (2002) parent involvement had a significant impact on students' attendance and overall success rates. Attendance, as well as behavior, attitude, motivation, aspirations, and self-esteem were found to be higher among families who were involved in their child's education compared to families who had little involvement. Gonzales discovered truancy, poor behaviors, drug use, depression, poor grades, and disciplinary problems are likely to be a result of lack of parent involvement.

Parents' perceptions and attitudes about the importance of school can also impact student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). If parents had negative attitudes and perceptions about their own education, they may find it difficult to be involved in their children's education. Parents who did not have a successful experience in school, may hold the same assumptions regarding their children's success in school. Henry (2007) examined characteristics of truants in eighth and tenth grade. Henry discovered that students whose mother or father received a college education had a significantly lower chance of being truant. Children learn by modeling the behaviors and social interactions they observe (Hartnett, 2008). A child's motivation level is affected by the level of motivation they see their parents exhibiting (Bertrand & Deslandes, 2005). Children whose parents set boundaries, rules, and standards for their academic performance are more likely to be less disruptive, more focused, and more respectful to others (Gonzales, 2002).   In conclusion, if parents had a negative education experience and/or negative attitudes towards school, they are less likely to be fully committed and involved in their child's education.

Students whose families may be suffering economically are at an increased risk to have poor attendance (Drumond & Stipek, 2004; Heilbrunn, 2004; Henry, 2007; Zhang, 2003). For example, researchers have found a link between free or reduced school meals and students' non attendance (Henry, 2010; Zhang, 2003). State and federal data suggests that truants are more likely to live in single-parent households, and about one-third of truants live in poverty (Kronholz, 2011). A project called Attendance Counts, calculated that children who live in homes without enough food missed two more days of school than children who were well-nourished. Children whose mothers were unemployed missed two more days of school than children whose mothers who had jobs. Families who have a low socio-economic status are usually working minimal wage jobs that require long and/or unusual work hours. When parents are busy working, they are not also able to attend to their children's needs (Gonzales, 2002). Parents who are working unusual hours and cannot afford a babysitter and/or daycare may feel obligated to have their child stay home to take care of younger siblings (Drumond & Stipek, 2004). Families who are experiencing financial difficulties may lack the resources for their children to be fully successful in school (Heilbrunn, 2004; Reid, 2005). Families without Internet access or a computer in their homes lack resources that are often required for several homework assignments. A family's socio-economic status can directly impact a student's performance in school, especially in regards to their attendance.

According to the National Center for School Engagement, most truant students have been exposed to negative life circumstances (Heilbrunn, 2004). Capps (2003) stated "truants often perceive the world around them as unstable and confusing, with many coming from dysfunctional, unstable, and insecure homes" (p. 34). The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC), revealed 13% of truant youth have difficult relationships with family

members. Divorce has been identified as a factor that can influence student performance in

school. Henry (2007) revealed that tenth grade students living with no parents or just one parent

have higher rates of truancy, than tenth grade students who live with two parents. Child abuse,

neglect, and parental irresponsibility have been found to be characteristics of the lives of truant

youth (Heilbrunn, 2004; McCluskey et al., 2004). Parents are responsible for getting their

children to school. Parents who violate attendance laws can be brought to court for educational

neglect (Kronholz, 2011). Educational neglect is a legal term that is considered a misdemeanor

offense. Consequences can result in a fine and/or jail time. Family factors can negatively

influence students' attendance (Reid, 2005). Due to this reason, family interventions play an

important role in increasing student attendance.

Community factors. The literature suggested that community and neighborhood factors

can influence student attendance (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Teasley, 2004). Teasley (2004)

found that students who live in low-income neighborhood and communities are more likely to be

truant, as they are often exposed to violence and drugs. Students from low-income

neighborhoods are more likely to attend schools that are poorly funded. Poorly funded schools

often have overcrowded class rooms and a lack of resources, making it more challenging for

students to have a successful school experience. Peer pressure and negative peer role models

have also been identified as factors that can influence absenteeism, especially during high school

(Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hartnett, 2008; Henry & Huizinga, 2007). During high school

teenagers are at a developmental stage where they are prone to environmental influences

(Hartnett, 2008). Teenagers are struggling to form their own identity, while they are also

struggling for acceptance from their peers. Henry and Huizinga (2007) found involvement with

delinquent peers to be one of the main factors that influenced students' decision to skip school.

With peer pressures being so hard to resist during this developmental stage; high school students are at an increased risk to become truant.

Theoretical Frameworks

There are various theoretical frameworks that help researchers, counselors, and school professionals better understand the causes of problematic absenteeism and truancy. Self-determination theory holds the premise that individuals are motivated to complete a task when they feel capable to do the work and when they have the freedom in how they choose to complete the task (Kronholz, 2011). Students', who hold the belief that they are not capable of having success in school, are not motivated to go to school. When students believe that they have no freedom at school, due to expectations and policies, students can become defiant. Expectancy-value theory states that individuals are motivated by what they expect gain or lose. Students who view attending school as a loss, will be frequently truant. Students who view attending school as a gain; however, will be more likely to have good attendance. Cloward and Ohlin's strain theory, as cited in Henry and Huizinga (2007), proposed that individuals are more likely to engage in problem behaviors when there is a discrepancy between personal aspirations and their perceived opportunities for achievement. Students become avoidant towards school when they do not believe they can reach their goals and aspirations. Avoidance of school is usually demonstrated through truant behaviors. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model explains how a lack of commitment and attachment to school may lead to attendance issues (Lerner & William, 2006). Maslow, Erikson, Kohlberg, and other developmental theorists examine how environmental influences can impact an individual's ability to keep growing and developing. Developmental theories help us better understand why school, family, and community factors can influence student attendance. The social development model, as cited in Hartnett (2008),

proposed that prosocial bonds help prevent problem behaviors. Students that have weak bonds

towards school are more likely to engage in problematic behaviors. Truancy is one of the

dominant problematic behaviors that students with weak bonds towards school exhibit.

Theoretical frameworks allow researchers, counselors, and school professionals to understand

factors that influence student absenteeism in greater depth and detail.

Solutions to Absenteeism

Student absenteeism, whether unexcused or excused, can result in negative consequences

to students' overall success (Henry & Huizinga, 2007); effective interventions should be

developed and implemented in order to address this serious issue (Dembo & Gulledge, 2008;

Flores, 2004). There have been several programs implemented to address problematic

absenteeism and truancy at national, state, and local levels.

Unexcused absences. The National Center for School Engagement defines truancy as

unexcused absences from school (Heilbrunn, 2004). Gandy and Schultz (2007) examined the

effectiveness of truancy prevention programs. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency

Prevention (OJJDP) stated several key elements that should be included in truancy reduction

programs (Flores, 2004). First and foremost, the goal of the program must be clearly understood

and defined. The scope of the program, such as the geographic range and target population,

should also be determined. Truancy intervention programs are often grouped by setting: school-

based, community-based, or court-based programs (Dembo & Gulledge, 2008; Flores, 2004).

Services that will be offered should be documented and recorded, describing who is in charge of

which services (Flores, 2004). Truancy reduction efforts are effective when consistent

attendance policy and practices are known and understood by students, parents, staff, and

community agencies. Meaningful parent involvement, special attention to health and special

education needs, data-driven decision making, and business involvement are important components of truancy reduction efforts.

School-based programs that focus on increasing school engagement are effective in reducing problematic absenteeism and truancy (Dembo & Gulledge, 2008). Relationship-based and individualized treatments work best for re-engaging students who are excessively absent and/or truant from school (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). Check and Connect, an effective school-based intervention, monitors and addresses the early signs and risk factors of truancy (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Within this program, individual student and family needs are addressed. A one-on-one mentor and monitor system is also present. The mentor and monitor system creates positive, long-term relationships with the student, family, and school staff. Lehr et al. (2004) found students who participated in the program, for at least two years, had lower absence rates than they did prior to their participation in the program. School-based programs that focus on school reorganization were also found to be effective (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Such programs work to improve structural aspects of the school, by adding and/or revising policies and procedures, targeted to engage students and prevent truancy.

Several truancy interventions are community-based. According to Sutphen et al. (2010) the majority of community-based interventions, tend to use punitive responses, which involve partnerships with community agencies and family involvement. The Project Stop Truancy and Recommended Treatment (S.T.A.R.T.), collaborates with various community agencies to reduce truancy (Gandy & Schultz, 2007). S.T.A.R.T. operates under the premise that a multi-faceted approach to truancy reduction is needed to better assist truant youth. When an individual is referred to this program, there are semi-formal meetings and court hearings that the individual and his or her family attend. Caseworkers assist the individual and his or her family throughout

the process, by providing direct services and/or referrals to the families. Evaluations of

S.T.A.R.T. interventions indicated significant decreases in truancy level over time, compared to

truant youth who were not referred to the program. Limits of this program include the difficult

task of engaging families to participate and the limited financial resources to collect

comprehensive data on the effectiveness of the program.

Several truancy programs use legal and court systems to deal with truant behavior and

problematic absenteeism. Truancy Intervention Initiative, Truant Recovery Program, and Police

Eliminating Truancy are programs that are all lead by local law enforcement agencies (Flores,

2004). Once a student has been identified as truant and the school has exerted their efforts to

improve the issue, stronger sanctions may need to occur (Mueller et al., 2006). Collaboration

with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system, allow for contact with community police

officers, probation officers, and juvenile judges. These contact persons are valuable, as they are

the individuals who design and implement sanctions. Law enforcement can also be helpful

identifying out of school youth in the community.

McCluskey et al. (2004) found that multi-faceted approaches, which combine

interventions from individual and family-based, school-based, and community-based programs,

were most effective in reducing truancy. McCluskey et al. developed and implemented an

intervention that included written notification from school, referrals to outside agencies, visits

from law enforcement agencies, and communication with parents. The Truancy Reduction

Demonstration Program is another example of a program that looks at all the components of

truancy and uses a multi-agency collaborative approach (Flores, 2004). The Truancy Reduction

Demonstration Program was initiated in 1998, by: the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency

Prevention (OJJDP), the U.S. Department of Justice's Executive Office for Weed and Seed, and

the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Office. The purpose of the

program was to encourage communities to develop comprehensive ways to identify and track

students who are truant. A key component of the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program

was the collaboration among community members such as social service agencies, probation,

and mental health organizations. Collaborative participants also included law enforcement and

courts.   Parent involvement was also critical in this program. A variety of programs were

provided through the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program that connect truant students

with community-based services. Truancy case managers were part of this program and they

worked directly with truant youth and their families, providing services such as home visits,

monitoring school attendance, tutoring, and referring to outside agencies. Truancy reduction

programs have been found to be most effective when they include a wide range of participants

from many disciplines, not just from one agency (Flores, 2004, McCluskey, 2004; Reid, 2005).

Excused absences. It is important to acknowledge that excused absences can be just as

damaging to an individual's overall success as unexcused absences (Reid, 2005).

Communication between school and the students' parent(s)/guardian(s) is critical in determining

the reasoning behind excessive excused absences. According to the NCSE, clearly defined and

consistent attendance policies will make it clear to parents and their children what constitutes

excused and unexcused absences. Family-based approaches are critical when dealing with

students who are chronically absent from school (Kearney, 2003). Cognitive-behavioral

approaches are most effective in improving attendance for students who meet the criteria for

school refusal behavior. Cognitive-behavioral approaches focus on the anxiety and worry that

students experience in regards to attending school. Techniques are used that gradually

reintegrate the student back into a regular classroom setting. Students with special needs and/or

medical health conditions generally make up the population of excessive "excused absentees" (Kaffenberger, 2006). With the permission of the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the student, the school can contact the student's primary care doctor and/or the student's medical team in order to receive official documentation excusing the student from school. According to Kaffenberger, it is important to provide successful transitions back to school for these individuals. The transition back to school is most effective when school, families, and hospital teams collaborate together. School counselors should play a major role in this process, by providing services to the children and their families to make the transition back to school as smooth and efficient as possible. Some services include; collecting homework, creating and/or revising Individual Education Plans or 504 plans, educating teachers' about the nature of students' situation, and meeting with parents, administration, and teachers. Model school reentry programs include direct services to the student, consultation with the family, education of school personnel, and involvement with the individual primary care doctor and/or medical team. Excessive excused absences can negatively impact students' success in school. Solutions to excused absences are just as important as unexcused absences.

Importance of Determining Causes of Absenteeism

Research suggests that the factors that contribute to absenteeism generally fall within four domains: individual, school, family, and community (Heilbrunn, 2004; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Kearny, 2007; Reid, 2005). Effective interventions address the factors specific to each of the four domains. They are categorized accordingly as individual and family-based, school-based, and community-based interventions. According to Teasley (2004) truancy interventions that take into account the impact individual, school, family, and community factors can have on student attendance are most effective. Multi-modal intervention is the term that is used to

describe an intervention that includes the four domains. Instead of looking at only one domain, all domains are examined. Comprehensive interventions as well as assessments, that examine individual, school, family, and community issues that affect students' attendance behavior, are ideal. (Teasley, 2004)

Truancy has been considered a "symptom" of broad underlying factors: individual, school, family, and community. Therefore it is important to understand and identify the factors that influence a student's attendance, in order to minimize and/or remove the "symptom" (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Henry and Huizinga suggested that, before effective interventions can be developed and implemented, the causes as to why students are absent and/or truant must be identified. Early intervention is also critical; it is more effective to implement truancy interventions in elementary school, because that is when the indicators or risk factors of truancy become present (Lehr et al., 2004). The goal is to provide interventions early on so that this population of students can be reached before their attendance behaviors worsen. School districts often fail to identify the underlying causes of absenteeism until after the individual's absenteeism becomes chronic (Kearny, 2007). Research studies tend to assess the consequences of truancy, while little research examines the factors that influence truancy (Reid, 2005). More research should be conducted that assesses the factors that influence student attendance. It is imperative to know the factors that influence student attendance, before interventions are developed and implemented.

Importance of Stakeholder Involvement

Student absenteeism not only impacts the students, but also the stakeholders involved (McCray, 2006). Student attendance is a measure of the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for which elementary and middle schools are held accountable under the No Child Left Behind

Act of 2001 (Sutphen et al., 2010). The amount of funding schools receive is determined by the

number of students in attendance. When funding is cut, resources decrease, which impacts the

school as whole, and ultimately impacting students' opportunities to have the best education

possible.

Students in grades kindergarten through twelve are required to demonstrate AYP in the

areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, as well as graduation rates (Sutphen et al., 2010).

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that states use standardized assessments in order to

measure AYP. Students, who are excessively absent and/or truant are missing valuable

academic time that is needed to perform well on standardized tests. Students' poor scores

negatively affect the overall grade of the school. Schools with low overall grades on

standardized tests become limited in their opportunity for additional, or sometimes even

continuing, funding. If a school fails to make AYP for two consecutive years it enters

improvement status. Schools identified for improvement status must develop new or revise

existing improvement plans by incorporating empirically-based research strategies, policies, and

procedures. Improvement status affects the entire school community; teachers, administrators,

and parents must identify the specific areas that need improvement and develop a plan to raise

student achievement. Parents are notified of the AYP and are given the option of sending their

child(ren) to a higher performing school within the district. Schools face more serious

consequences as the number of years they fail to meet the AYP increases. Students who were

excessively absent and/or truant in school are more likely to be less educated and less prepared

and qualified to join the workforce. Businesses are impacted by students' lack of readiness to

work. According to Baker et al. (2001), businesses profits decreased due to the money that has

to be spent on increased employee training. Research suggests that students who are truant are

more likely to engage in juvenile delinquency and crime. Crime, such as vandalism, burglary, and shoplifting, impacts the community as a whole. Taxpayers also suffer the costs that are associated with truancy (McCray, 2006). Law enforcement officers are responsible for handling juvenile delinquent acts that are often committed by truant youth. Truant youth who drop out and are unable to find employment go on welfare. As a result, more tax money dollars are spent because of increased welfare and law enforcement costs. Truancy is a societal problem, not just an individual one (McCray, 2006; Reid, 2005); stakeholders are directly impacted by this issue.

Importance of Parent Involvement

Truancy and/or problematic absenteeism are issues that require a balanced partnership between the students' families and their school (Constable & Lee, 2004). Schools are more effective in their efforts to solve attendance issues when they have parents' willingness to collaborate with the school. Constable and Lee (2004) noted, "families cannot educate their children in a complex modern society without the assistance of schools and schools cannot education without the cooperation of families" (p. 224). Under the No Child Left Behind Act, the development of school-family-community partnerships in Title I schools is mandatory (Sutphen et al., 2010).

According to the National Center for School Engagement, parent/guardian involvement is a major component of effective truancy reduction programs (Heilbrunn, 2004). There are different causes that prevent and/or hinder parents' involvement in their child's education. Therefore, it has become the responsibility of the school district to reach out to get parents involved.   Attendance policies and procedures should involve parents being notified of their child's truancy through phone calls, letters, and/or meetings (Reid, 2003). Letters home to parents that alert them of their child's truancy have shown the greatest effect in improving

attendance (McCluskey, 2004). Providing parents with the contact information of the school

staff member who is in charge of attendance record keeping have also been shown to increase

students' attendance (Espstein & Sheldon, 2002). Parent education is also critical, as it helps

parents understand their legal responsibilities in regards to their child's attendance in school.

Workshops are an effective way to inform parents about attendance policies, procedures, and

consequences. For students who have a period of significant absences from school, parent

education on reintegration strategies is also beneficial (Reid, 2003). Home visits are another

effective way for schools to create collaborative partnerships with students' families (Constable

& Lee, 2004). Epstein & Sheldon (2002) found that home visits by school staff resulted in a

decreased percentage of students who were chronically absent. Home visits provide schools with

valuable information regarding the contextual factors that influence a student's attendance and

overall performance in school. The level of family involvement in the child's education and

families' perceptions of the importance of attendance and education can be determined through

home visits. School counselors and/or social workers are predominately assigned the home visit

responsibility; such visits provide an opportunity for schools to reach out to families who are

struggling with their student's behavior, especially in regards to truancy. Attendance issues

cannot be solved solely by the school (Constable and Lee, 2004; Espstein & Sheldon, 2002;

Sutphen et al., 2010). Partnerships between the students' families and their school are important

in addressing attendance issues.

Current Study

The body of literature suggests that absenteeism is a serious, nation-wide, problem for

students, schools, and society (Reid, 2005). The root causes of problematic absenteeism must be

understood before effective interventions can be implemented (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). The

literature suggests that the causes of problematic absenteeism often fall into four categories: individual, school, family, and community factors. A critical element in model truancy intervention programs across the country includes parent involvement (McCray, 2006). Parents often hold valuable information as to why their child is absent, that may not be conveyed by the student. Constable & Lee (2004) reported that the reduction of absenteeism requires a balanced partnership between the students' families and their school. There has been little research done however, regarding parents' perceptions of factors that influence their child's attendance. The proposed study hopes to add to the body of literature by gaining parents' views of the reasons why their child was excessively absent during the 2010-2011 school year. The dependent variable of this study was "absenteeism" with three independent variables: individual, school, family/community factors. For the purpose of this study, terms are defined as follows:

Absenteeism- unexcused and excused absences

Excused Absence- an absence from school or class for reasons qualifying as legal and/or excused under school districts' attendance policy

Unexcused Absence- an absence from school or class for reasons not qualifying as legal and/or excused under school districts' attendance policy

Individual Factors- personal characteristics and/or conditions influence whether or not a student attends school

School Factors- the structure, policies, environment, and staff that make up a school influence whether or not a student attends school

Family/Community Factors- the circumstances and environment that is present in a student's home and/or community can influence whether or not a student attends school

Below are the research questions for the current study:

1. What are parents' perceptions of the factors that influenced their child's absenteeism during the 2010-2011 school year?

2. To what extent was poor attendance due to individual, school, and family and community factors?

Method

Research Design

The study was a mixed-method descriptive analysis. Descriptive data was reported by collecting parents' perceptions of the factors that influence their child's absenteeism via questionnaire that included an open-ended question. The data from the questionnaire was gathered through quantitative and qualitative techniques. Responses from Part I of the questionnaire (Likert-scale items) were into a statistical analysis program. The first research question (what are parents' perceptions of the factors that influenced their child's absenteeism during the 2010-2011 school year) was analyzed by running descriptive statistics. Means and standard deviations of the responses were rank ordered. The second research question (to what extent was poor attendance due to individual, school, and family and community factors) was analyzed by comparing the grand means of the questionnaire items which were grouped according to factors. Participants' responses from the open-ended question in Part II of the questionnaire (list the top 3 reasons why your child was absent during the 2010-2011 school year) was analyzed by transcribing each response onto an index card. Index cards were then coded according to themes and findings. The qualitative data was used to further understand both research questions.

Setting

The setting is a high school from a large, suburban school district in the northeast region of the United States. The high school consists of approximately 1220 students, grades nine through twelve. The school is comprised of a predominantly White student population with approximately 75% Caucasian, 14% African American, 7% Hispanic, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. Approximately 41-50% of students received public assistance for the 2009-2010 academic year. During this year 31% of the student population was eligible for free lunch and 14% was on reduced-price lunch. The school's 2009-2010 report indicated 85% of graduates received a Regents Diploma and 41% received a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation. Thirty-two percent of graduates became enrolled in a four-year college and 43% became enrolled in a two-year college. The school's 2008-2009 accountability report revealed the annual attendance rate to be at 88%.

Participants

The parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) of students who missed twenty or more days of school during the 2010-2011 academic year were selected to be participants for the study. The data was gathered by the Attendance Clerk at the high school. The Attendance Clerk ran "Attendance Day Count Reports" for 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students in 2010-2011. These reports were run by using the school's record system, called Infinite Campus.   Current ninth grade students (2011-2012) were excluded from the survey, as they would have not been at Greece Olympia High School during the 2010-2011 school year. The "Attendance Day Count Reports" revealed that 180 students fit the criteria. Only 132 parent(s) and/or legal guardian(s) of the students were asked to participate in the study. Forty-eight students who missed twenty or more days of school last year were no longer enrolled at the high school so their

parents/guardians were not asked to participate in the study. Of the 132 surveys that were

distributed, 24 surveys were returned for a response rate of 18.18%. Participants were not able to

be added to the study, to help increase the sample size, since participants were only selected if

their child had missed a certain number of school days. There were more surveys completed that

reported male students' attendance ($n = 13$, 54.2%) than female students' attendance ($n = 9$,

37.5%). Four of the students were currently in 10th grade, eight were in 11th grade, and 12 were

in 12th grade. Four students had 504 plans and three students had an Individual Education Plan.

The remaining 17 students were in the general education placement. Racial and ethnic

information was not gathered.

Materials

The researcher developed a questionnaire that consisted of three sections. In the first

section, participants were asked to rate their perceptions of the factors that influenced his or her

child's attendance from school last year by using a four-point likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*,

2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*) to answer eighteen quantitative items. This section

was developed in order to address the first research question, "what are parents' perceptions of

the factors that influenced their child's absenteeism during the 2010-2011 school year?" In the

second section, qualitative data was collected by having participants list the top three reasons as

to why their child was absent last year. Participants were given the option of writing the number

of the question that match their top reasons and/or to write their own personal answer. This

section was developed in order to obtain more specific data for the first research question. In the

last section, participants were asked to provide some background information about their child

(gender, current grade level, educational placement if applicable) in order to gather more

information for the results section.

Survey items. Questionnaire items were developed from current research and literature on factors that influence student attendance (Heilbrunn, 2004; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Kearny, 2007; Reid, 2005). The National Center for School Engagement stated that although the main causes of absenteeism vary from study to study, a combination of individual, school, family, and community factors are usually involved (Heilbrunn, 2004). Each survey item that was developed fell into one of the four categories: individual, school, family, or community factors. For example, some of the items that assessed individual factors impact on student attendance included, "Unpreparedness to do school work", "Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse", "Behavioral and/ or emotional problems," and "Medical health conditions." Items such as, "Fear of not being safe going to school," "Experience with being bullied" and "Teacher characteristics" assessed school factors impact on student attendance. The third research question, "to what extent was poor attendance due to individual, school, and family and community factors?" was developed since each survey item represented either an individual, school, family, or community factor. See Appendix A for all questionnaire items grouped according to factors.

Procedure

The questionnaire was mailed home to participants who fit the following criteria: "Parent or legal guardian of student who missed twenty or more days of school during the 2010-2011 academic year." Participants were also given the option of completing the questionnaire online (SurveyMonkey). Each envelope that was mailed to the participants' residence included a questionnaire (see Appendix B), informed consent statement (see Appendix C), and pre-addressed and stamped envelope to mail back to the school. Participants were informed that reading the informed consent form and completion of the questionnaire demonstrated consent. The participants were also made aware that their participation was voluntary; that they would

receive no type of compensation for their participation, and that they could have withdrawn from the study at any time. They were also informed of the services available if they experienced adverse effects during or after completion of the survey. On the questionnaire, participants were given directions that explained the option of completing the hard copy questionnaire and anonymously mail it back to the school or the option of completing the same questionnaire online by typing in the URL link that was provided. Participants were instructed that if they chose to complete the hard copy survey to not write their name anywhere on the survey, in order to ensure that all participants' responses remained anonymous.

The primary researcher also provided automated phone voicemail messages to the participants by utilizing the school's automated phone messaging system. An automated phone message was sent to all participants on the day that the questionnaire was mailed home, alerting participants of the letter that they would be receiving by mail. A second automated phone message was sent home within one week of distribution of the mailing, reminding participants of the opportunity to participate.

Completed questionnaires that were returned by mail to the school were kept locked in a filing cabinet. Participants who chose to complete the questionnaire online were tracked by utilizing the features of the online survey program. Electronic data was stored in a locked folder on a password protected computer. The raw data was destroyed after the data was analyzed.

Results

The first research question posed by the present study was: What are parents' perceptions of the factors that influenced their child's absenteeism during the 2010-2011 school year? The second research question was: To what extent was poor attendance due to individual, school, and family and community factors?
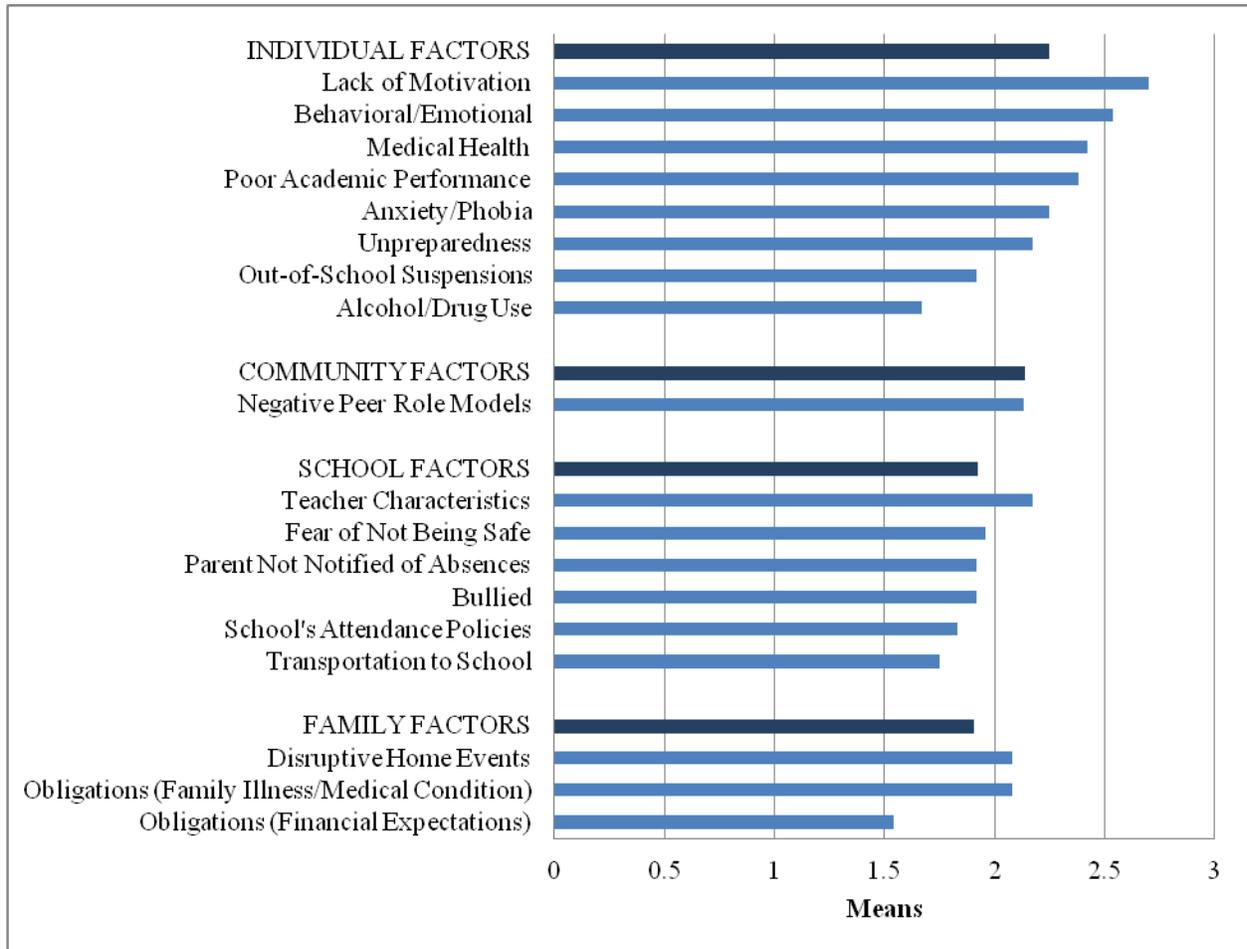
Quantitative data

Table 1 displays the mean rating of each questionnaire item, organized from highest to lowest mean (see Appendix D). Mean scores ranged from 2.7 to 1.54, with standard deviation scores ranging from 1.14 to .88. The survey item, "child's lack of motivation to achieve academically," revealed the highest mean with a relatively low standard deviation ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.02$). Approximately 20% of respondents "strongly agreed" and 42% "agreed" that their child's lack of motivation influenced their absenteeism. A low standard deviation explains that the responses for the survey item were less varied, meaning that responses were more alike. The survey item, "behavioral/emotional problems," had the second highest mean, with a rather high standard deviation ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.10$). This standard deviation explains that the responses for this survey item were more varied, meaning the responses were mostly different. Approximately 20% of respondents "strongly agreed" and 38% "agreed" that their child's behavioral/emotional problems influenced their absenteeism. "Medical health condition," "poor academic performance," and "anxiety and/or phobia towards attending school" also fell within the top five highest means. The following survey items were ranked as having the five lowest means: "experience with being bullied," "school's lack of effective/consistently applied attendance policies," "transportation to school," alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse," and "obligation to stay home due to financial expectations," with the first survey item listed having the highest mean and the last survey item listed having the lowest mean. Although the survey item "obligation to stay home due to financial expectations" had the lowest mean, it had the lowest standard deviation. Approximately 63% "strongly disagreed" and 29% "disagreed" that this survey item influenced their child's absenteeism.

Table 2 was developed in order to address the study's second research question. Survey items were grouped according to which factor the item was associated with: individual, school, family, or community (see Appendix E). The grand means of each factor was calculated by taking the sum of the survey items that fell within that factor and dividing that number by the number of survey items for that factor. "Individual factors" had the highest grand mean. The top five highest means were all survey items that fell under the "individual factors" category. The means indicated that participants had a higher belief in individual factors affecting their child's absenteeism as opposed to school, family, or community factors. Although their appeared to be a trend for individual factors to have higher means, this does not hold true for every survey item. "Suspensions" and "Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse" were ranked as having relatively low means. "School factors" had the second highest grand mean, followed by "family factors," and "community factors". The means of the survey items that comprise "school factors" and "community factors" varied. For instance, a "school factor" item, "teacher's characteristics," had a relatively high mean ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.09$), while another school factor item, "school's lack of effective/consistently applied attendance policies" had a relatively low mean ($M = 1.83$, $SD = .92$). The "community factors" category only had one survey item, "negative peer role models." The mean for this survey item fell relatively in the middle.

Figure One

Survey Items Grouped According to Factors by Means (M)

Qualitative data

The researcher then coded participants' responses to the open-ended question of Part II of the questionnaire, which asked what participants perceived to be the top three reasons as to why their child was absent last year. Three main themes emerged from the coding of the qualitative data: individual health/mental health issues (27 responses), individual characteristics (16 responses), and external circumstances (18 responses). Two responses indicating "truancy" were not included in the organization of the themes/subthemes. These responses did not necessarily

fit any of the main themes, as the responses indicated that the respondents were unaware that their child was missing school.

Individual health/mental health issues. The largest theme that emerged from the qualitative data was individual health/mental health issues. Two major subthemes exist within this theme. Medical health conditions served as the largest subtheme for this theme, as well as the largest subtheme out of all the themes. Medical health conditions that were listed varied from diseases such as diabetics, to acquired medical health conditions from external factors, such as a car accident. As stated by one participant:

…Serious injury to eye resulted in doctor appointments, surgeries, and school lighting causing headaches.

Mental health issues, which included behavioral and/or emotional problems, served as the other subtheme. The majority of the responses in this subtheme indicated that "behavioral/emotional problems" were the top reasons as to why respondents' children were absent.   The remaining responses were more specific, stating mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. One response stated "substance abuse" which could be categorized as a mental health issue.

Individual characteristics.   The theme, individual characteristics, revealed several subthemes. Motivation issues appeared to be the most prevalent subtheme indicated by participants as an individual characteristic as to why their child was absent. One response which read, "arguments with parents about going to school," was also coded under this subtheme by the primary researcher. "Lack of interest towards school" was the second largest subtheme. This subtheme included responses that revealed a trend of students feeling as if school was a waste of time and wanted nothing to do with it. Lack of self-esteem/confidence, no hope for the future, inability to wake up, and suspensions were less reported subthemes.

External circumstances. The theme, external circumstances, surfaced circumstances in students' lives that were beyond their control. Family member issues/conditions emerged as the largest subtheme. This subtheme includes responses such as family illness and/or death and divorce. As one participant stated:

...parent was too sick to drive child to school.

Unwelcoming school environment was a subtheme that revealed the following instances: "bullying/harassment," "feeling singled out," and "drugs/weapons being brought and sold at school." Teacher issues were another subtheme, which had the same number of responses as the unwelcoming school environment subtheme.   For example, one participant stated:

…lack of respect, guidance, due diligence.

Transportation issues (2 responses) and negative peer role models (1 response) were also coded under the external circumstance theme.

Discussion

Parents often hold valuable information as to why their child is absent, that may not be conveyed by the student. There has been little research done however, regarding parents' perceptions of factors that influence their child's attendance. The current study intended to add to the body of literature by gaining parents' views of the reasons why their child was excessively absent during the 2010-2011 school year. Parents were selected to participate in the study if their child had missed twenty or more days of school last year. Parents were asked to complete a questionnaire that consisted of Likert-scale items, as well as an open-ended question. The responses to the questionnaire sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are parents' perceptions of the factors that influenced their child's absenteeism during the 2010-2011 school year?

2. To what extent was poor attendance due to individual, school, and family and community factors?

The first research question was answered by rank ordering the means of the questionnaire items, as well as coding the responses from the open-ended question. "Lack of motivation" had the highest mean out of all the questionnaire items. This finding is consistent with the literature. Students who had negative beliefs of being successful in school were less motivated to participate in school (Henry, 2007). Henry found that students with low perceptions of the likelihood of graduating from high school had the highest probability of excessive absences from school. It is important to also note that a child's motivation level can be affected by the level of motivation they see their parents exhibiting (Bertrand & Deslandes, 2005).   Self-determination theory holds the premise that individuals are motivated to complete a task when they feel capable to do the work and when they have the freedom in how they choose to complete the task (Kronholz, 2011). According to this theory, students who do not believe that they are capable of having success in school lack the motivation to attend.

"Behavioral/emotional problems" had the second highest mean. This finding is also supported by the literature in that children with behavioral and/or emotional problems are more likely to exhibit problematic absenteeism (Reid, 2005). Cloward and Ohlin's strain theory, as cited in Henry and Huizinga (2007), proposed that individuals are more likely to engage in problem behaviors when there is a discrepancy between personal aspirations and their perceived opportunities for achievement. Based on this theory it could be implied that students display problematic behaviors as a way to become avoidant towards school when they do not believe they can reach their goals and aspirations.

"Medical health condition" had the third highest mean. The literature suggests that individuals with medical health problems have a significantly greater risk of having high rates of school absenteeism (Kaffenberger, 2006). Frequent visits to the doctor increases students' absences. Chronically ill students also miss school days in order to receive and recover from treatments (Kaffenberger, 2006).

 "Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse," and "obligation to stay home due to financial expectations" had the lowest means. It could be assumed that parents were uncomfortable providing truthful responses for these questionnaire items, as they asked for sensitive information to be disclosed. The literature suggests that parents are often unaware that their child is using and/or abusing drugs which could also help explain the low mean for this survey item (Henry & Huizinga, 2007, Reid, 2005).

The themes that derived from coding the responses of the open-ended question were consisted with the findings of the quantitative data. The largest theme that emerged from the qualitative data was "individual health/mental health issues." The three survey items that had the highest means (lack of motivation, behavioral/emotional problems, medical health condition) all fall within this category. "Individual characteristics" was the second theme that was coded. This theme included the largest subtheme, "lack of motivation". The last theme that emerged from the coding of the data was "external circumstances". This theme included subthemes such as family member issues/conditions, unwelcoming school environment, and teacher issues. These themes all fit under survey items that fell within the middle of the rank ordering of means. Maslow, Erikson, Kohlberg, and other developmental theorists examine how environmental influences can impact an individual's ability to keep growing and developing. Developmental

theories provide better understanding as to why "external circumstances" emerged as a major theme.

The second research question was answered by grouping survey items according to which factor the item was associated with: individual, school, family, or community. The calculation of the grand means of each factor revealed that the "individual factors" category had the highest grand mean. The coding of the qualitative data revealed three themes, two of which were directly related to "individual factors'' ('individual health/mental health issues' and 'individual characteristics'). Although the previous literature and research findings do not suggest which factor is more prevalent, the vast amount of literature focuses on individual factors as the main causes of absenteeism. It is less common for school and/or family factors to influence student absenteeism. Overall the quantitative and qualitative data supported one another, leading to the major finding that "individual factors" were perceived to be the main factors that influenced student attendance.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the study that must be considered when looking at the results. The study was conducted in one high school; therefore, the findings of parents' perceptions of the factors that influenced their child's attendance is limited and cannot be generalized to other high schools or to different school levels (e.g., elementary and middle schools). Similar studies at other schools could easily agree or disagree with the findings of the current study. Limitations to internal validity included the use of a researcher-developed instrument which was not piloted or externally validated before the researcher administered it to participants. The limitations to external validity included the low response rate (24 out of 132 questionnaires completed). The researcher also collected all of the data and analyses. In order to

improve the validity of the results, similar studies could be conducted by multiple researchers.

Another limitation is the uncertainty of the honesty of participants' responses to the

questionnaire. There was also the potential for self-report bias because participants may have

answered items on the survey the way they thought they should answer them. Second, the survey

was based on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The scale did not give participants an option to say they

were neutral and/or indicate if the question did not apply to them. Therefore, participants may

have felt obligated to choose an answer even if they did not believe it matched their perceptions.

The results must be interpreted with caution in light of the limitations with this study.

School Counseling Implications and Recommendations

Based on the results, the researcher offers the following implications and

recommendations to school counselors. The current study revealed that there were a variety of

reasons as to why students were absent from school. This study highlights the importance of

understanding the causes of absenteeism before effective interventions can be put into place.

School counselors should be knowledgeable of the various factors that influence attendance in

order to better detect and address the underlying issues that are influencing students' attendance

and/or academic performance. It is recommended that school counselors continuously

communicate with administrators to ensure that they are familiar with attendance policies and

procedures (Heilbrunn, 2004). School counselors should use the American School Counselor

Association (ASCA) national model as a framework for a comprehensive school counseling

program (ASCA, 2005). The ASCA national model proposes a school counseling program that

is data-driven is most effective. School counselors should use data in order to identify students

who are chronically absent and/or truant. Data can easily be gathered through utilizing the

school's record database system, which tracks all students' attendance, truancies, behavior issues,

grades, etc. After school counselors identify students who are chronically absent and/or truant, the next step is to identify the causes.   School counselors should work with the students' and their families and teachers in order to promote a positive change in the students' attendance. Gysbers & Henderson (2006) explained that counseling was a common intervention for students with excessive absences and that effective school counseling programs often showed improvement in attendance. School counselors, due to the important role they play in the well-being and healthy development of students, are responsible for identifying the causes, risk factors, and solutions related to problematic absenteeism.

School counselors might consider conducting research similar to the current study within their own school in order to understand what factors are most prevalent among their student population. Once school counselors have addressed the causes of student absenteeism, school counselors can create interventions that are specific to the needs of the students. School counselors should stress and encourage the importance of parent involvement in addressing attendance issues.   It is also importance that counselors collaborate with other school professionals, stakeholders, and outside agencies in order to address attendance issues.

Conclusion

Absenteeism is a serious, nation-wide problem that is prevalent in schools. The current study, based on a sample of parents whose child was excessively absent last year, sheds light on the importance of determining the causes of absenteeism. Previous research primarily focused on students perceptions of the factors that influenced their attendance, rather than parents input. A critical element in model truancy intervention programs across the country is parent involvement (McCray, 2006). The current study added to the body of literature by obtaining parents' perceptions. The results of the study showed that there were a variety of factors that

influence student attendance, with individual factors being the most prevalent factor. The results

have relevance particularly for school professionals, stakeholders, and parents. These

individuals should take an active role in the lives of youth because the impacts of their

nonattendance affect all of us.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Items Grouped According to Appropriate Factor Category

_____

Individual Factors (8 items)

_____

1. Unpreparedness to do school work (did not have school supplies/books; incomplete

    homework.

2. Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse.

3. Behavioral and/or emotional problems.

4. Medical health condition.

5. Lack of motivation to achieve academically.

10. Poor academic performance.

12. Anxiety and/or phobia towards attending school.

17. Out-of-school suspensions.

_____

School Factors (6 items)

_____

6. Fear of not being safe going to school.

8. Experience with being bullied.

11. School's lack of effective and consistently applied attendance policies.

13. Teacher characteristics (lack of respect and/or support of diverse student needs).

14. Transportation to school.

15. I was not notified of my child's excessive absences.

Appendix A (continued)

Questionnaire Items Grouped According to Appropriate Factor Category

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Family Factors (3 items)

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9. Disruptive events occurring at home.

16. Obligation to stay home (due to financial expectations).

18. Child's obligation to stay home (due to family illness and/or medical conditions).

Community Factor (1 item)

---

7. Negative peer role models.

Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions online at **http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/KQBZ6YG** or below regarding your *perceptions of factors that influenced your child being absent during the 2010-2011 school year at Greece Olympia High School*.

Remember that all of your answers will remain anonymous. **Please do not write your name anywhere on the survey or the return envelope**.

Thank you for your taking the time to carefully fill out the following questionnaire honestly.

I: On a scale from 1 to 4 (see key below), please rate your perception of the factors that influenced your child's absences from school last year:

KEY: SD: Strongly Disagree   **D**: Disagree   **A:** Agree   **SA:** Strongly Agree

Questions	SD	D	A	SA
8. Unpreparedness to do school work (did not have school supplies/books; incomplete homework) was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
9. Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
10. His or her behavioral and/or emotional problems were factors that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
11. A medical health condition was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
12. Lack of motivation to achieve academically was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
13. Fear of not being safe going to school was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4

14. Negative peer role models were factors that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
15. Experience with being bullied was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
16. Disruptive events occurring at home were factors that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
17. Poor academic performance was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
18. School's lack of effective and consistently applied attendance policies was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
19. Anxiety and/or phobia towards attending school was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
20. Teacher characteristics (lack of respect and/or support of diverse student needs) were factors that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
21. Transportation to school was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
22. I was not notified of my child's excessive absences.	1	2	3	4
23. Obligation to stay home (due to financial expectations) was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4
24. Child's out-of -school suspensions were factors that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4

25. Child's obligation to stay home (due to family illness and/or medical conditions) was a factor that influenced my child's attendance.	1	2	3	4

II: Please list the top 3 reasons why your child was absent during the 2010-2011 school year (indicate by writing the number of the question and/or your own personal answer):

1.

2.

3.

III: Please answer circle the response that best describes your child:

Gender: Male Female

Current Grade Level: 10 11 12

Identify if your child has a particular Educational Placement:

504 Plan Individual Education Plan

Appendix C

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

This form describes a research study being conducted with parents about their perceptions of factors that influenced his or her child being absent during the 2010-2011 school year at Greece Olympia High School. Parents were selected to participate in this study if his or her child missed twenty or more days of school last year. Parents' participation in this study will be valuable, as it will help determine the root causes of attendance issues. The data collected will be used to help school officials better understand attendance issues. This research project is also being conducted in order for the primary researcher to complete her master's thesis for the Department of Counselor Education program at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. This project has been approved by The College at Brockport, State University of New York Institutional Review Board. Approval of this project only signifies that the procedures adequately protect the rights and welfare of the participants. Please note that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access.

Parents are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in the study. Parents may fill out the questionnaire online at **http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/KQBZ6YG** or complete the paper copy provided and mail it back with the pre-addressed envelope.   By submitting the questionnaire, parents are agreeing with the statements below and signifying their consent to participate. Choosing to participate in this study or refusing to be in it, will not affect the parents or their child(ren) in any way. There are no anticipated benefits; participants may experience emotional responses to the items on the questionnaire.

Parents understand that:

1. Their participation is voluntary and they have the right to refuse to answer any questions. They will be able to contact the researcher to discuss any questions they have about the study before and/or after completing the questionnaire.
2. Parents' confidentiality is guaranteed. Their name will not be written on the questionnaire. There will be no way to connect parents and/or the child to the written questionnaire. If any publication results from this research, parents would not be identified by name.
3. There are no anticipated benefits; participants may experience emotional responses to items on the questionnaire.
4. Participation involves reading and answering a questionnaire of 18 multiple choice questions, three open-ended questions, and four demographic type questions. It is estimated that it will take 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.
5. Approximately 200 parents will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a research project by the primary researcher.
6. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and on a password protected computer by the investigator. Data will be destroyed by shredding the hard copies and deleting the electronic files seven years after the study is conducted.

In the event you experience any emotional effects during or following completion of the questionnaire, you may contact Greece Olympia High School's Counseling Department at 585-966-5162.

If you have any questions you may contact:

Primary researcher	Faculty Advisor
Amy Powell	Summer Reiner
Work: 585-966-5162 Cell: 585-503-6607	Counselor Education Department #395-5497
apowe2@brockport.edu	sreiner@brockport.edu

Appendix D

Table 1

Survey Items Ranked According to Means (M) *with Standard Deviations* (SD)

Survey Item	*M*	*SD*
Lack of motivation	2.70	1.02
Behavioral/emotional problems	2.54	1.10
Medical health condition	2.42	1.14
Poor academic performance	2.38	1.10
Anxiety and/or phobia towards attending school	2.25	1.03
Unpreparedness to do school work	2.17	.96
Teacher characteristics	2.17	1.09
Negative peer role models	2.13	.95
Disruptive events occurring at home	2.08	1.02
Obligation to stay home due to family illness and/or	2.08	1.10
Fear of not being safe going to school	1.96	1.00
Parent not notified of child's absences	1.92	.93
Out-of-school suspensions	1.92	1.02
Experience with being bullied	1.92	1.10
School's lack of effective/consistently applied attendance policies	1.83	.92
Transportation to school	1.75	.99
Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse	1.67	.92
Obligation to stay home due to financial expectations	1.54	.88

Notes. Survey items answered using a Likert Scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = strongly agree.

Appendix E

Table 2

Survey Items Grouped According to Factors by Means (M) *with Standard Deviations* (SD)

Survey Items by Factors	*M*	*SD*
Individual Factors (8 items)	2.24	-
Lack of motivation	2.70	1.02
Behavioral/emotional problems	2.54	1.10
Medical health condition	2.42	1.14
Poor academic performance	2.38	1.10
Anxiety and/or phobia towards attending school	2.25	1.03
Unpreparedness to do school work	2.17	.96
Out-of-school suspensions	1.92	1.02
Alcohol and/or drug use and/or abuse	1.67	.92
Community Factors (1 item)	2.13	-
Negative peer role models	2.13	.95
School Factors (6 items)	1.92	-
Teacher characteristics	2.17	1.09
Fear of not being safe going to school	1.96	1.00
Parent not notified of child's absences	1.92	.93
Experience with being bullied	1.92	1.10
School's lack of effective/consistently applied attendance policies	1.83	.92
Transportation to school	1.75	.99
Family Factors (3 items)	1.90	-
Disruptive events occurring at home	2.08	1.02

Table 2 Continued

Survey Items Grouped According to Factors by Means (M) *with Standard Deviations* (SD)

Survey Items by Factors	*M*	*SD*
Obligation to stay home due to family illness and/or medical condition	2.08	1.10
Obligation to stay home due to financial expectations	1.54	.88

Notes. Survey items answered using a Likert Scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = strongly agree.