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Preventing absenteeism for students with disabilities: a handbook for classroom teachers

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Preventing Absenteeism for Students with Disabilities:

A Handbook for Classroom Teachers

Cynthia Charfauros

Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

College of Professional Studies
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Preventing Absenteeism for Students with Disabilities: A Handbook for Classroom Teachers

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Approved by the MAE Graduate Advisory Committee

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Abstract

This study was designed to produce a handbook for classroom teachers of research-based strategies used to prevent absenteeism among students with disabilities. These strategies were derived from an extensive review of relevant literature and then reviewed by a panel of professionals in the field of education. As per their suggestions, the handbook was edited and a final review was conducted. A final draft of the handbook was created and field tested for two weeks with five classroom teachers. A survey was conducted among those who participated in the field test regarding the ease of use, format and usefulness of information in the handbook. Issues regarding the benefits, limitations, and implications regarding the utility of this handbook in supporting teachers to prevent student absenteeism are discussed.
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Chapter I - Statement of Purpose

Introduction

Students with disabilities require more instructional time than that of their general education peers in order to be successful in an academic setting (CDE, State Bill 65, 2001-2). Yet, their higher levels of absenteeism result in less instructional time, thus leading to a lack of success, lower graduation rates and less social training and experience with typical employment related habits like: being on time, attending daily or meeting required expectations of an employer (Terry, 2006). In short, facilities can be top rate, teaching practices may be considered best practices, research-based or responsive, and schools can enjoy a positive climate, yet if the student does not “show up” that student will not benefit from all of these potentially successful school components.

Background

Prior to becoming a special education teacher, I taught swimming lessons to students with water phobias and physical or sensory difficulties. This experience touched my heart and changed my life. That was when my love of teaching Special Education classes was born. During the past seven years of teaching special education, the most recent four years have been in a Special Day Class at a middle school. There are many challenges, needs and problematic situations at my low Academic Performance Index (API) site.

My students face obstacles from the moment they open their eyes in their crowded, sub-standard homes. They wake up with little to wear (which is likely not laundered or the proper size), not much to eat and lucky if they can take a shower, get their hands on a toothbrush or toothpaste. Then they must walk through a high-crime area or catch the bus at the park, avoiding daily hostility, to make it on campus. Last, there is the challenge of getting or borrowing
supplies, copying their homework from a friend or someone they threatened. All the while, they are watching the big clock ensuring that they are on time so they do not get assigned lunch detention for being tardy.

If they make it through all of that, they may end up in a desk staring blankly at me. They are not expecting to get an education from me, especially if it means they have to work harder than a general education student to get that education. My students want me to keep them safe, entertain them and help them get their minds off their current circumstances and bleak future. They want me to talk louder than that quiet voice inside them telling them that they will drop out in tenth grade regardless of what happens in beloved room 37, and that they are far more educated than anyone in their family currently. Among all of this, the greatest challenge I have, as a teacher of Special Education, is getting the student into the desk in my classroom. Miracles can be accomplished with daily, on-time attendance. This project addresses the causes of this absentee epidemic and possible solutions for the classroom teacher and me.

Statement of Problem

One of the widely accepted beliefs among government researchers, professional educators, and parents is that there is a strong and direct relationship between student attendance in school and achievement (Roby, 2004). High rates of absenteeism have been associated with high drop-out rates, low graduation statistics, less time to practice skills at school, and low academic performance (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Studies have shown that students with disabilities have higher absenteeism rates than that of their peers in general education (Spencer, 2009; Redmond & Hosp, 2008).

Several factors have been associated with increased absenteeism, including, neglect by care givers, lack of effective instruction, chronic pain, maltreatment of children with disabilities,
and lack of strong, supportive relationships (Glomb, Buckley, Minskoff & Rogers, 2006; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000, Williams & Riccomini, 2006). This project will attempt to provide a resource for educators, working in the classroom, to prevent absenteeism among students receiving special education services.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to identify key factors that lead to students with disabilities being absent, missing individual class periods, truant or dropping out of school all together. From a review of literature, key factors have been determined, best-practices or techniques proven to improve student attendance to school have been identified. Finally, a user-friendly, inexpensive, high quality handbook that is easy to implement was developed for classroom teachers. This handbook is a chronicle of the techniques recommended by current researchers and programs experiencing successes in improving attendance among students with disabilities. It is important to have a tool for the classroom teacher which is based on literature and best practices. The handbook is based on the key factors that lead to student with disabilities being absent, and best practices and techniques to improve student attendance.

**Project Questions**

It was important to study what current research revealed about students in Special Education, as opposed to those in general education, regarding absenteeism. Also, it was imperative to document and highlight research-based; effective methods schools have used to reduce absenteeism in a handbook. Following the inception, the handbook was reviewed by experts for content and the best delivery format as a resource on the prevention of absenteeism designed for educators. Therefore, the guiding question for this thesis was as follows: Can a
user-friendly handbook illustrating effective techniques for reducing absenteeism for students with disabilities be developed for classroom teachers?

**Definition of Terms**

**Absenteeism**: identifiers of persistent absence from work or some other place without good reason (www.cdph.ca.gov, 2010)

**Dropout**: students who leave regular high school before graduation (www2.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuides/dropout.html)

**Pain coping skills**: activities a student engages in that are an alternative to traditional, safe or medically accepted means of dealing with pain/discomfort. These are often illegal, dangerous and counter-productive to academic/school success.

**Positive Consequences**: encouraging behavior, that is considered morally good by responding to desired behavior with a result the student craves. (www.flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu)

**Health Issues**: the general condition of the body or mind, especially in terms of the presence or absence of illnesses, injuries, pain, discomfort or impairments (Hosp, 2008)

**High- Absenteeism**: non-attendance above 10% of school days (Hosp, 2008, www.cdph.ca.gov)

**High-risk**: a descriptor of a student who has an active Individual Education Plan, qualifies for Free or Reduced Lunch or an English Language Learner. These can be considered singly or magnifies the risk if multiple criterions apply. (Hosp, 2008)

**Social motivators**: to make somebody feel enthusiastic, interested, and committed to something relating to the way in which people in groups behave and interact with peers, teachers or parents

**Tardiness**: Later than expected or usual time or an instance of being late, especially for school or work, that is noted down as a misdemeanor (www.cdph.ca.gov)

**Truancy**: absence or non-attendance (www.cdph.ca.gov)
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Rates of Absenteeism

Student dropout rates in the United States, while gradually decreasing, continue to be a top concern for the educational community (Digest of Education Statistics (DES), Table 110, 2008, United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS), Table A-5, 2008-9, Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009). Currently, it is estimated that 30% of non-disabled and 50% with special needs dropout before finishing high school (Ahmed & Huppke, 2009).

According to a twenty seven year collection of data, the dropout rates for students from families falling in the lowest income quartile are regularly five times higher than the students from families in the highest income quartile (Digest of Education Statistics (DES), 2007). Researchers have suggested that the dropout rate for students with disabilities doubles that of students participating in general education (Williams & Riccomini, 2006). Additionally, only 50% of students with disabilities graduated with a diploma, while students without disabilities graduated at a rate of 70% (Ahmed & Huppke, 2009). According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS) for 2008-2009, adults who have not achieved employment status are much more likely to not have earned a diploma (USBLS, Table A-5, 2009).

Reasons for Student Dropout

Researchers have identified many reasons to explain why the dropout rates of students with disabilities, are double that of students in general education (Digest of Education Statistics, 2006; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett & Willson, 2007). These include, but are not limited to: academic struggles (Redmond & Hosp, 2008, Roby, 2004, Spencer, 2009), low attendance (Roby, 2004, Spencer, 2009), and a lack of quality teaching (Gump, 2004, Williams & Riccomini, 2006, Spencer, 2009). These factors result in the long-term, chronic lack of overall
school engagement and high absenteeism by students with disabilities (Williams & Riccomini, 2006).

Unfortunately, the change that is required to correct the high dropout rates is vast, and not easy to implement (Williams & Riccomini, 2006). The change must include all factors of policy, administration, teachers and learning outcomes (Kortering & Braziel, 1999, Spencer, 2009). Researchers have concluded that since dropout rates continue to be a growing problem and concern, schools should utilize excellence in instruction (Kortering & Braziel, 1999, Bouck, 2007, Spencer, 2009) and a positive drop-out reduction program to keep students with disabilities in school and ultimately graduate more students with disabilities (Kortering & Braziel, 1999, Spencer, 2009). This research concludes that absenteeism leads to a larger more frequently talked about problem of high dropout rates among student with disabilities. Additionally, research shows that more than 50% of students with learning disabilities were held back one grade before being referred for a Special Education Evaluation (Spencer, 2009). Due to the high correlation between absenteeism and student dropout, understanding and ultimately preventing absenteeism is extremely important (Gump, 2004, Kortering & Braziel, 1999).

Students, who are exposed to maltreatment, including neglect, are more likely to have high rates of absenteeism (Sullivan & Knutson, 2006). Sullivan & Knutson (2006) found that children with disabilities have 3.4 times higher incidence of maltreatment than that of non-disabled peers. Maltreatment is linked to absenteeism through neglect, injury, untreated chronic pain, lack of proper clothing or supplies, and being victimized in general (Sullivan & Knutson, 2006). Given the relationship between absenteeism and students leaving school, intervening with students with high absenteeism rates is crucial (Graeff-Martins, Oswald et al, 2006). Students
Disabilities and Absenteeism

with difficulties in the areas of reading and writing have been shown to be at greater risk of dropping out of school (Fischbein & Folkander, 2000).

**Absenteeism**

Additionally, Spencer (2009) argues that truancy is a national problem and a clear indicator of delinquency, social isolation, teen pregnancy, substance abuse and educational failure. Spencer (2009) addresses both the unexcused absenteeism and forced absenteeism resulting from behavioral consequences like suspensions and expulsions. It was found that students in elementary and middle school settings with behavior and learning problems missed 15%-20% of total instructional time (Spencer, 2009). Researchers conclude those students who meet high-risk (a student who has an active Individual Education Plan, qualifies for Free or Reduced Lunch or an English Language Learner) criterion experience decreasing grades and increasing absenteeism (Spencer, 2009).

Samuels (2005) stated in his article that the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2010) reports that the number of graduating students with disabilities rose from 53.5% in 2002 to 70.3% in 2003. Students with disabilities have also experienced improved enrollments in higher education, increasing from 14.6% to 31.9% over the past five years (Samuels, 2005, USDE, 2010)). Yet, even with these gains, students with disabilities continue to be absent from school and dropout at much higher rates than their general education peers (USBL, Table A-5, 2008-9).

**Effects of Absenteeism on Dropout**

Roby (2004) highlights the relationship between absenteeism and instructional time lost. Using the Ohio Department of Education policy of 90% attendance as meeting state standards, a student meeting this standard would still miss 36,000 out of 360,000 instructional hours (Roby,
Absenteeism has been shown to be an even greater problem for students receiving services for Communication Disorders, Learning Disabilities and Emotional Disturbances, as well as for those with aggression, shyness and difficulties communicating (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Furthermore, research has shown that the more severe the disorder, the higher the level of absenteeism a student exhibits (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Also, the following have been shown to correlate with chronic absenteeism: grade retention, poor self-esteem, dropout, lowered standards of adult life and low achievement performance (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Correlations between days absent and low Grade Point Averages have also been demonstrated (Redmond and Hosp, 2008). A study conducted by the Consortium for Chicago School Research reported that students with mild cognitive disabilities missed school five more days per semester, and students with emotional disturbances averaged eleven more days missed, than their general education peers (Ahmed & Huppke, 2009).

**Strategies for Preventing Dropout and Absenteeism**

Fortunately, researchers have identified a number of strategies for keeping students with disabilities in school (Fischbein & Folkander, 2000). These strategies must address all factors of policy, administration; teachers and learning outcomes (Terry, 2006). Researchers recommend that incentive programs (motivators offered in exchange for improved behavior or academics) be initiated to address student absenteeism (Roby, 2004).

Glomb, Buckley, Minskoff & Rogers (2006) discuss the success experienced by students with disabilities in the areas of attendance and academic performance after being matched with an adult mentor. Mentorship programs, like the Learning Leaders Mentoring Program (LLMP) have been shown to result in moderate improvements of homework completion and school attitude as well (Glomb, et al, 2006, Converse et al, 2009). Many researchers have recommended
that incentive programs be initiated to address student absenteeism (Roby, 2004). The California Department of Education suggests that incentive programs be initiated to address student absenteeism and that this strategy has had a positive effect in encouraging students to attend regularly (CDE, “School Attendance Improvement Strategies”, 2009). A qualitative study conducted by Terry (2006) found that self-direction was reported as being crucial to reaching learning goals for those adults who had not been successful in earlier school experiences or settings. Terry (2006) recommends that programs for improving self-direction among students should include: 1) self-selected subject areas, 2) self-selected assignment topics, 3) self-driven learning pace, and 4) flexible attendance schedules.

Studies on transition programs, such as the 2005 Postsecondary Academy (Kato, Nulty, Olsezewski, Doolittle & Flannery, 2006), have shown that instruction consisting of: 1) varied, hands-on, large and small group instruction, 2) group work, 3) tours of community college campuses, and 4) panel discussions and lectures on preparing for community college result in higher rates of community college attendance among students with disabilities (Kato et al., 2006). Effective approaches targeting transition to college utilize skills training focused on self-advocacy and awareness where students are 1) briefed on document requirements for college and 2) taken on tours of facilities (Kato et al., 2006). Thus, with support, students with disabilities may improve their academic experiences which may correlate to improved student attendance.

Conclusions

The result of this review of literature indicates that quality teaching and student connections to school can have a large affect on student attendance. There are some small scale studies (less than 500 participants) on programs which have denoted some successes. However, the data is often conveyed in large, loose and undefined terms. There seems to be a
disconnection, in the literature or studies reviewed, between the current levels of students with disabilities attendance and student access to programs aimed at addressing the overall low-performance of this population of students. This problem of students’ attendance leads to the constant questioning of, which comes first? Does the student disconnect (low attendance) from school because they are low-performing or is the student low-performing because they are disconnected (low-attendance) (Ahmed & Huppke, 2009)?

According to The California Department of Education, (2009) a grant named the Pupil Retention Block Grant (PRBG) allocated $76,684,000 to address the needs of students who "require additional assistance to succeed in school". This money was meant to address retention of students attending school in grades K-12. It is clear that a solution is necessary and thus far, has been very costly on a number of governmental agencies. Regardless of the seventy six billion dollars spent, absenteeism continues to be problem and an even more devastating setback for students with special needs (DES, Table 111, 2006). According to Zhang et al. (2007), students who practice truancy younger are at greater risk to repeat the behavior, and as young as first grade can predict delinquent behavior, violence, and dropout.

Therefore, there is a need for resources for special educators outlining strategies for preventing the absenteeism, and potential dropout, of students with disabilities. Such a resource should provide information on strategies, like those previously reviewed, that have been shown to be effective in reducing absenteeism and dropout. It should also, however, be easy to access and make use of on an as needed basis.
Chapter Three - Methodology

The purpose of this research project was to develop an inexpensive, accessible, useful, informative, concise handbook for Special Education Teachers to use to assist in prevention and reduction of truancy, absenteeism and dropouts. As stated in Chapter One, it is important for a classroom teacher to have a guide as they are the first line of defense and often the first to be aware that there is a problem with attendance. In addition, teachers have the maximum direct-access to students on a daily, long-term basis. More specifically, the purpose of this research project was to produce a handbook that would be inexpensive to distribute to interested parties, easy to implement and useful to teachers for reducing absenteeism among students of Special Education.

Procedures

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to identify research-based remedies for absenteeism. The content of the handbook were based upon proven effective practices referenced in the literature. Various strategies were reviewed for preventing absenteeism to identify which were most supported through research for inclusion in the handbook. The main databases used for research were peer reviewed journals. The search terms included absenteeism, school attendance, dropout, students with disabilities and truancy. The focus of the review was to determine the pervasive nature and document statistics on absenteeism among students with disabilities. Additionally, strategies that were research-based and proven, through study, to reduce absenteeism among students with learning difficulties were documented to include in the handbook.
Expert Panel

A draft of the handbook was submitted to a panel of professionals for evaluation. The panel consisted of the following:

1. Two parents-(with children attending Salinas Union High School District Schools (SUHSD)
2. Two general education teachers-a veteran with more than 10 years teaching experience
3. Four teachers of Special Education-all veterans with more than 10 years teaching experience
4. An administrator-currently working as a Middle School Principal at the Salinas Union High School District
5. A school counselor-with experience formulating academic, behavioral and attendance improvement plans
6. A school psychologist-with 20 years experience working with high need students and students with special needs
7. An attendance clerk-a 15 year veteran experienced in the legal procedures addressing attendance and SUHSD policy regarding attendance

Group Interview

The first round of the panel review began with the panel members each being given a draft version of the handbook to review for two weeks. Panel members were asked to provide written comments directly on the draft manual. During the two weeks of review the panel made notations on their copies of the draft and these copies were collected and reviewed by the author. Following this review, a group interview with the panel members was conducted (see Appendix B) to review any information, suggestions or feedback, and written comments were collected. These notes were discussed in detail during the group interview, which included five of the twelve panel members. The remaining seven panel members were interviewed individually. Panel members were asked questions such as:

- Was the content in the handbook easily understood?
- Do you agree that the content in the handbook will be helpful to classroom teachers to prevent absenteeism?
- Which strategies in the handbook do you think will be most effective for preventing absenteeism?
• Which strategies in the handbook do you think will be least effective for preventing absenteeism?
• What should be included in the final handbook that was not in the draft?
• Which format would be easiest to use for a classroom teacher? (e.g., Microsoft Word®, flip chart, color coded, CD, flash drive)

When significant revisions were made based on panel member feedback, follow-up interviews were conducted with the individual panel members who had made the suggestions, in order to ensure that revisions made would accurately reflect the panel member’s comments. These follow-up interviews were conducted with nine of the twelve panel members.

**Questionnaire**

At the end of the group interview a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was provided to each panel member to be completed and submitted. This was used to solicit feedback that panel members may have been uncomfortable sharing during the group interview. The questions focused on ease of use, usefulness of the information and any omissions that were made. Questionnaires were provided to five of the twelve panel members who were interviewed as a group, as the other seven were interviewed individually.

**Second Review**

After the revisions had been made to the handbook, based on the feedback obtained during the first round of review, a second review was conducted. A second review was conducted in order to ensure that the revisions made following the first round of reviews sufficiently addressed the suggestions provided by the panel members. Handbooks were distributed to the five expert panel members who requested major revisions to the draft handbook. After the review was conducted by the panel, the panel answered questions pertaining to usefulness and omissions in one on one interviews. This second review included interviews consisting of questions including but not limited to the following:
Was the handbook easy to use?
• If not, what changes should be made to the format to improve the ease of use?
• Was the information in the handbook useful to help you prevent absenteeism?
• If not, why?
• Were there strategies or other information that should be included in the final version of the handbook that was not in the draft version?
• If yes, what should be included?

Field Test

Based upon the suggestions from the panel of professionals concerned with absenteeism, a new draft of the attendance handbook was developed and made available in Microsoft Word® to five classroom teachers. The five teachers were selected based upon responses to a “call for interest” flier posted in the collaborative workspace at a public middle school in a large Central Coast city in California. Interested teachers contacted me via email. Teachers wanting to use a tool in the classroom to improve attendance were given the Attendance Handbook printed in Microsoft Word® format. Teachers were able to view and use as needed over two weeks. The expert panel preferred the use of the Microsoft Word® format to publish and distribute the handbook materials.

Teachers were asked to implement the procedures listed in the handbook in their classrooms for two weeks. Teachers then returned the Attendance Handbook and related materials. Following the field test, the teachers were issued a survey (see Appendix B) for feedback on the format and usefulness of the handbook. The survey consisted of 5 point Likert-scale questions including, but not limited to, the following:

• How would you rate the Absenteeism Handbook as a useful tool?
• How would you rate the format for ease of use?
• How would you rate the frequency of times you referenced the Absenteeism Handbook over the two weeks it was field tested?
• How likely are you to recommend or pass along information you found in the Absenteeism Handbook?
• When strategies were used from the handbook, please rate how helpful those specific strategies were in reducing absenteeism.
• Please add any comments that you feel will be helpful in the review and revision of the handbook.

Based upon the feedback obtained from the survey data, the handbook was revised again. This final revision incorporated the feedback provided by the panel members as well as by the teachers who participated in the field testing of the handbook.
Chapter Four - Results

The purpose of this research project was to create an inexpensive, accessible, useful, informative, concise handbook for classroom teachers to use to assist in the prevention and reduction of truancy, absenteeism and dropouts for students with disabilities. As stated in Chapter One, it was deemed important to produce an attendance handbook for classroom teachers since they are not only the first line of defense but they have the greatest opportunity to impact student attendance. In addition, teachers have more direct access to students than other school personnel. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to produce a handbook that would be written in an accessible format, inexpensive to distribute to interested parties, easy to implement and useful for classroom teachers to prevent absenteeism among students with disabilities.

Results of the Literature Review.

Based upon the literature review, numerous strategies were identified as essential for helping classroom teachers reduce absenteeism among students with disabilities. The following areas were derived from the literature and selected for inclusion in the manual: 1) strategies for engaging in quality teaching, 2) strategies for creating students' connection to school, 3) strategies for achieving increased engagement, 4) strategies for implementing academic flexibility of student choice regarding subject, schedule and time on task, 5) strategies for providing peer and adult mentorship, 6) strategies for developing incentive programs for school attendance, and 7) strategies for providing recognition for improvement or for meeting desired attendance goals. Each of the above areas has been cited by research as having a positive effect upon attendance, and thus formed the basis for the initial version of the manual.

Results of the Expert Panel Review.
All respondents stated that they understood the content, but would prefer to have a scaled down version of the handbook. The following features or adjustments were recommended and incorporated:

- A detailed table of contents, and removal of tabs
- Placing more stress on personalizing the situation (e.g., getting to know the target student) at the beginning of the section on strategies.
- A heavy duty laminated version bound with a spiral
- Color coding of certain particularly “helpful” section of the handbook.- Edits to multiple grammatical errors
- Clarification on terms such as: “flat affect”

All panel members suggested that the sections should be: “shortened” or “tightened up”. One panel member asked that the organization include a table with the following headings:

- “What is the problem?”
- “Who does it affect?”
- “When should the teacher act?”
- “What is the approach?”

However, such a table was not included in the handbook because other panel members reported that a detailed table of contents would be equally effective. Additionally, the inclusion of tables would lengthen the handbook which would increase cost and the number of pages. The original goal of the handbook was that it be easily and inexpensively reproduced in order to make it available to as many teachers as possible. Furthermore, panel members stated that the less lengthy the handbook, the more likely it would be used by classroom teachers who have little time or interest in narrative formats for disseminating new information.

Results of the Panel Member Group Interview.

All panel members were asked to meet to participate in a group interview as the researcher asked more detailed questions and took notes on the discussion. During the group
interview a number of suggestions were provided. These suggestions, along with the corresponding revisions made by the researcher, are summarized below:

- Two panel members asked why a Migrant Students category was left out and felt it was very important to include this in the final draft. Therefore, a section on how classroom teachers can support students who migrate during the school year was added.

- One panel member asked that a section on homelessness be added. Therefore, a short section was added addressing students who are homeless. However, this topic was determined to be over-reaching for the purposes of this project. To address this concern, links and phone numbers were added to be used as additional and more detailed resources on homelessness for teachers, parents and/or students.

- Panel members recommended that all subheadings be in bold type. This change was incorporated in the subsequent revision of the manual.

- The School Psychologist suggested that the Conduct Disorder heading be changed to Conduct/Behavior. The heading was made bold and changed to reflect this term.

- Two panel members recommended that a section be added to address bullying. A section was added including bullying and a link for teachers to use to gather more information, as a full section on this topic was determined by the researcher to be beyond the scope and purpose of the Attendance Handbook.

- A panel member suggested that the heading “Chronic Pain” be changed to a sub heading under Health Issues. This is reflected in the subsequent revisions of the manual.

- A panel member advised including lice as a symptom of “Neglect”. In order to streamline the handbook and increase ease of use, the subheading “lice” was moved under the heading “Neglect”.

• All panel members asked that “Out of District Resources” appear at the end of the handbook. Therefore, the section was moved to the last page of the handbook.

• Two panel members asked that “Attendance Improvement Strategies” be moved down and that the information on defining Absenteeism should appear near the beginning of the handbook. The definition of Absenteeism was moved to the second page and the heading “Attendance Improvement Strategies” was changed to “Techniques for Classroom Teachers” which follows the descriptions of target students.

• One panel member suggested that the author include a belief statement and a section on questioning assumptions in the beginning of the handbook. This was not incorporated into the handbook as it would have lengthened the handbook considerably. It was determined by the author that adding this section of beliefs and assumptions would not further the handbook readers’ ability to reduce absenteeism among students with disabilities, and would negatively impact the teacher’s desire to continue to read the rest of the material contained in the handbook.

• A concluding comment from the panel members was to, “keep it short and sweet”. The author kept the handbook as short as possible while attempting to avoid the loss of valuable content and strategies.

• The seven members who were interviewed individually also requested that categories and topics such as, engaging teaching, bullying and migrant students be added. They also requested that two disclaimers be added to cover liability and inform teachers about mandates for reporting child abuse.

The author made changes to the Attendance Handbook based upon expert panel suggestions. The decisions were made in the interest of furthering the original purpose and questions of the
project. As stated in chapter one, the goal was to create a user-friendly handbook illustrating effective techniques for reducing absenteeism for students with disabilities for classroom teachers. All panel members agreed that a "user friendly" handbook must be short.

The suggestions made by the panel members assisted to further the purposes of the handbook. However, there were two instances where the recommendations by three panel members were at direct odds with the remaining nine panel member’s recommendations. These included: 1) to add visuals and tables to the handbook, 2) to include a “belief statement” in the beginning of the handbook. These two additions would conflict with the panel member’s request that the handbook be made as concise as possible. These were the only changes that were recommended, but not included in the latter versions of the handbook.

The handbook was edited to be as short and direct as possible without sacrificing valuable content. The subsequent version of the handbook was ten (51/2 by 11 inch) pages. Topics were added and grammatical errors were revised. Also, terms were clarified and additional resources such as, Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) and toll free numbers were included to provide further information. Headings were consolidated and determined, based on panel feedback, to be better represented and presented under larger (umbrella) headings.

Results from the Panel Member Questionnaire.

Six of the eight panel members responded to the questionnaire provided at the end of the group interview (see Appendix C). Each of the panel members who responded agreed that the handbook was useful, but that the format could be improved with a sturdy cover and laminated pages. Thus, the revised format of the manual consisted of a sturdy, laminated and bound flip chart which included the same content as the paper version. This revised handbook was produced and distributed for the field test portion of this project. In all thematic questions, the
responders/raters gave the handbook a four or five on the Likert-scale. These indicated an overall favorable evaluation of the product by the panel members.

**Results of the Field Test**

Two classroom teachers volunteered to field test the Absenteeism Handbook for a period of two weeks. The focus of inquiry was on usefulness and format preference. The teachers agreed that the Attendance Handbook was useful and easy to read. Both teachers preferred the handbook laminated, bound and arranged in a flip chart. They also stated that having the themes color coded for quick and easy reference added to the usefulness of the handbook. In all thematic questions the average response ratings ranged from 4.3-4.5 on the 5 point Likert scale. There were no individual ratings falling below a four. Results of the field test also included written feedback from the participants. For example one teacher wrote, “This handbook has techniques and strategies that even an old teacher like me could learn from”. Another teacher stated, “…this would be a great resource to give to new teachers.” The teachers also agreed that the handbook was a tool they would use in the future to address absenteeism among students. The results of the field test confirmed that the handbook was a useful tool for classroom teachers for the prevention of absenteeism. It was inexpensive and the strategies contained therein were found to be useful by both teachers. Overall, the two teachers expressed appreciation for the format, brevity and usefulness of the content in the handbook.

Following the information obtained from the literature review, the expert panel review, and the field test, a final draft of the handbook was developed. It was made available in Microsoft Word®. Based on the feedback obtained from both the panel members and the teachers who field tested the manual, it appears that the manual was perceived to be a valuable resource for classroom teachers for the prevention of student absenteeism. The final version of
the handbook also was inexpensive to reproduce and distribute, and the strategies contained therein were found to be useful by both teachers who participated in the field test.
Chapter Five - Summary and Discussion

Summary

The aim of this study was to produce an Attendance Handbook for the classroom teacher. The expert panel made many recommendations. The researcher was able to revise the handbook to address all of the suggestions made by the panel, with the exception of a flow chart or table and a belief and assumptions statement. However, a detailed table of contents was added to increase the ease of the user to reference specific topics of the handbook. After several revisions and various forms of feedback, the handbook was produced containing useful, research based strategies for teachers to reduce absenteeism among students with disabilities. The format of the handbook was developed, based on feedback from an expert panel, questionnaire, field test and Likert-scale survey (see Appendix C), to be easy to use and brief. The desire of the panel was that the handbook be sturdy and bound. Thus, the final product was designed to withstand years of use in the classroom without defect.

Based upon the literature review, definitions of absenteeism, degrees of absenteeism, legal implications of absenteeism, and research based strategies to address these, were included in the Attendance Handbook. Therefore, the first draft of the handbook was designed to include all information found to be useful and effective to the classroom teacher. The initial draft was edited after an expert panel was consulted and a group interview was conducted with panel members. The results of the panel (written and oral) were arranged in themes and degrees of repeated critiques. The resulting revisions made based upon suggestions from the expert panel were as follows: grammatical errors were corrected, formatting was changed, the order of topics was changed, categories addressing bullying and migrants were added, a letter to the teacher was omitted and the delivery of the handbook was changed to a bound flip chart. Changes were made
to the initial draft and a second draft was created. A secondary questionnaire was given to specific panel members who made suggestions. The questionnaire revealed that the panel was agreeable to the changes. A field test was conducted and teachers were given a survey on usefulness and format. It was suggested that the final version of the handbook be sturdier. Based upon the review process, this handbook can be viewed as a useful tool for classroom teachers to use to address absenteeism.

Limitations

These results may be limited for the following reasons: the study was conducted in one school, in one city, in the state of California, with a specific population that may not represent the population present in schools located elsewhere in the region, state or nation. The school in which the study was conducted consists of student who primarily are from families with low-income, who are immigrants and who are of Hispanic decent. Additionally, students who already display chronic attendance problems may not respond to the techniques and strategies contained in the Attendance Handbook, as the handbook was designed as a resource for the prevention rather than the remediation, of absenteeism.

Furthermore, there may be situations that would require the classroom teacher to seek help beyond that provided in this handbook. While field tested, the Attendance Handbook was not utilized by the classroom teachers for a significant period of time in order to verify its potential to actually reduce absenteeism rates among students with disabilities. Additionally, some of the techniques proven effective in the research literature (e.g., School-wide Positive Behavior Support, Wraparound services, etc.) were beyond the scope of this handbook and would not be feasible for the classroom teacher to implement without significant systemic support.
Implications

The implications are that a handbook was developed based upon research-based techniques and practitioner feedback. It may be useful to distribute the handbook to every school and every teacher. Additionally, it may be incorporated into school policy, in a staff manual, and incorporated into school procedures. The school administration could recommend that the faculty refer to the handbook to use as a resource for classroom strategies.

This handbook may also prove to be useful for classroom teachers interested in trying new techniques and investing additional time with students with attendance issues. Also, the handbook would ideally be distributed widely, and its use encouraged by school personnel and administrators. The handbook may be useful for providing information on how to support a student whose absenteeism is an issue. The manual was perceived by the expert panel members and the participants in the field test as useful and user-friendly for the classroom teacher. Therefore, implications are such that a manual like this can be used in schools to target and prevent absenteeism.

Next Steps

As a result of the receipt of a Capstone Grant from the Associated Student Body, several bound and laminated copies of the Attendance Handbook will be disseminated among the staff libraries throughout the Salinas Union High School District and the Monterey County Office of Education. A copy of the handbook will also be supplied to the Monterey County Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELP A), and several departments at the middle school where the manual was developed. The final product will be shared with participants of the expert panel. An in-service training on the use of the handbook will be conducted by the author, as directed by the school administration for faculty and staff at the school where the manual was developed.
Conclusion

In conclusion, through my personal teaching experiences and a review of literature, it was decided that a tool was needed to address the problem of low attendance rates among students with disabilities. Students with disabilities often have great difficulty getting to the classroom in a consistent and timely fashion, yet these students are in great need of quality instruction. Research indicates that a need exists for addressing this discrepancy between students with disabilities and their general education peers (Roby, 2004). Therefore, a handbook on preventing absenteeism among students with disabilities was designed for use by special educators. The handbook that was developed for this project appears to have the potential to be a preferred resource for all teachers who have students with disabilities in their classrooms.
References


Samuels, C. (2005). Disability less likely to hold back youths following high school. Education Week, 24(44), 1-19.


* = articles referenced in the handbook only
Appendix A

First Review Questions for Expert Panel

- Was the content in the handbook easily understood?
- Do you agree that the content in the handbook will be helpful to classroom teachers to prevent absenteeism?
- Which strategies in the handbook do you think will be most effective for preventing absenteeism?
- Which strategies in the handbook do you think will be least effective for preventing absenteeism?
- What should be included in the final handbook that was not in the draft?
- Which format would be easiest to use for a classroom teacher? (I.e. Microsoft Word®, flip chart, color coded, CD, flash or drive)
Appendix B

Second Review Questionnaire

• Was the handbook easy to use?
• If not, what changes should be made to the format to improve the ease of use?
• Was the information in the handbook useful to help you prevent absenteeism?
• If not, why?
• Were there strategies or other information that should be included in the final version of the handbook that was not in the draft version?
• If yes, what should be included?
Appendix C

Survey for Field Test Participants

• On a scale of one to five (one being the least and five being the most) how would you rate the Absenteeism Handbook as a useful tool?

• On a scale of one to five (one being the least and five being the most) how would you rate the format for ease of use?

• On a scale of one to five (one being the least and five being the most) how would you rate the frequency of times you referenced the Absenteeism Handbook over the two weeks it was field tested?

• On a scale of one to five (one being the least and five being the most) how likely are you to recommend or pass along information you found in the Absenteeism Handbook?

• On a scale of one to five (one being the least and five being the most) when strategies were used from the handbook, please rate how helpful those specific strategies were in reducing absenteeism.

• Please add any comments that you feel will be helpful in the review and revision of the handbook.
Appendix D

Attendance Handbook

Prevention of Absenteeism among Students Receiving Special Education Services: A Handbook

Author:
Cynthia Charfauros
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Introduction:

This handbook is addressed to the classroom teacher who is often left to their own creativity to solve the everyday problem of absenteeism. It is important that teachers know that they have the maximum effect upon student attendance. Also, it is vital that teachers take the first step in addressing student absenteeism. This empowers and gives authority to the classroom teacher in the eye of the student with attendance difficulties. Teachers may feel that they have little control over their students’ attendance in the classroom. However, it will be surprising to learn how much a teacher can do to improve student attendance in their class.

What is Absenteeism?

- Any unexcused absence of more than 30 minutes or 6 tardies equate to an unexcused absence
- Three unexcused absences of more than 30 minutes makes the student truant
- Once a student is deemed truant, they should be notified they are subject to suspension, restriction or delay of driving privileges, in accordance with the California Vehicle Codes of Enforcement for Police Officers (Section 13202.7 Vehicle Code)
- After three reports of truancy the student is deemed as an “habitual truant” according to the California Education Code 48262
- When normal avenues of school interventions have been exhausted, refer student to the school attendance review board, probation officer mediation program or district attorney (Education sections 48263 and 48263.5)

Why is absenteeism a significant problem?

- Attendance rates equate to a significant loss of learning time per school year
- Research proves a strong positive relationship between student achievement as measured by attendance averages
- Students who attend school 90% of the time miss 36,000 instructional hours (Roby, 2004)

Root Causes

Meet the student who has attendance issues: This student may have one or many of the following characteristics. Each student’s attendance has a direct and significant impact on their school achievement.

Conduct disorder- the way a student behaves or conducts themselves in the school and classroom. Actions or language that is likely to break school rules and offend others. This is evidenced through a pattern of:

- Time outs
- Verbal reminders by teacher
Office referrals written
Days suspended
Days of detention
Classroom disruptions

Learning Disability- any student who has an active Individualized Education Plan and receives services from the Special Education Providers. For questions or more information call: 1(888) 248-0822 toll free

More than half of students with learning disabilities were retained before they were referred for a special education evaluation (Spencer, 2009)
A majority of students retained once by ninth grade will not graduate from high school
Research shows that students with learning disabilities want to be successful in school, yet their failures are attributed to a lack of effort not skills

Health Issues/Chronic Pain- a student who has a medical, health or other physical impairment that causes long-term pain. May include:

Lice or other parasite infestation
Poor hygiene
Boils, cysts, staphylococcus (staph) infection
Diabetes
Injury
Other disease

Emotionally Disturbed- a student who has been affected or displays symptoms of psychological trauma or psychiatric disorder

Destruction of paper
Phobias
anxiety

Communication Disorder- a student who has inability or difficulty, for any reason, to communicate through expressive language or verbal exchanges with teachers or peers

Lack of eye contact
Shakes or nods head in place of verbal responses
**Suffers from Neglect** - a student whose primary caregiver has failed to give them the proper or required care and attention. This is often evidenced by:

- Unkempt appearance
- Foul smell due to lack of hygienic practices
- Dirty clothes
- Wearing of the same clothes daily
- Dirty nails
- Dirty, unwashed, greasy hair
- Lice infested
- Unusually hungry or thirsty
- Unusually sleepy

**Suffers from some other form of abuse** - a student who has or is currently enduring physical, psychological, sexual or other forms of maltreatment. Some of the characteristics observed may be:

- Lack of eye contact
- Fear of touch or proximity
- Lack of normal peer relationships
- Failure to thrive socially or academically
- Secretive about home life
- High anxiety
- Lack of trust of adults or peers
- Flat or low affect (flat or lack of appropriate voice, tone or animation) - does not exhibit appropriate responses or behaviors to various settings (i.e. does not dress out for gym, attend lunch, dances, sports, or hides during passing etc.)
- May engage in conversations of inappropriate subject matter or maturity level for current age
- May joke about abuses suffered
- May create an imaginative alter ego or fantasy world
- Over sexualized
- Fearful or avoidant of same or opposite gendered peers or staff
- Knowledge beyond what is appropriate for age/peer group

**Migrant Student** - migratory children may qualify as homeless for the purposes of subtitles because the children are living in circumstances described as:

- individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence
- children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE])
• are included and covered under McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001—Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act—Sec 725

Homelessness—student may have challenges with regularity of residence

• living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

• children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...

• children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE])

* Additional resources are available at: The Virginia Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program. Teachers, students and parents can be referred to Project HOPE Virginia http://www.wm.edu/hope, http://www.serve.org/nche, or National Center for Homeless Education 1-800-308-2145 (Toll-free Helpline) for additional information.

Cultural/Socioeconomic challenges—student may be responsible for economic support

• work out of the home
• babysitting or care of younger siblings so parents can go to work
• other family needs
• medical needs of elderly parents or grandparents
• student may be source of income (drug sales/stealing/extortion)

* All teachers are mandated reporters for suspicions of abuse. You must contact your local Child Protective Services Office immediately if you suspect any form of child abuse. See school counselor or administrative designee. For more information contact:

   Monterey County CWS Agency
   1000 South Main Street, Suite 112
   Salinas, CA 93901
   831-755-4661
   800-606-6618
   www.co.monterey.ca.us or go to: www.dss.cahwnet.gov/cdssweb/pg93.htm
• On the average, students with the above classifications will miss school with a ratio of (5:1) five days absent compared to a one day absence of their General Education Peers. Additionally, Emotionally Disturbed (ED) students will be absent from school with a ratio of (11:1) eleven days absent compared to a one day absence to their General Education Peers. (Redmond & Hosp, 2008)

Positive Attendance Improvement Strategies:

First, clarify school standards of attendance with student and parent. Some positive techniques include:

- Telephone guardians in the evening to verify absences
- Either make home visits or ask community liaison to make a home visit
- Post the names of perfect attendees and reward in a highly visible place
- Hold a drawing for prizes for improved or perfect attendance
- Send letters of commendation to parents and students for perfect or improved attendance
- Seek help from the parent organization to award improved students
- Don’t give up
- Be consistent
- If one strategy doesn’t work try another
- Let the target student know that you want them there
- Send the message that you care and want to help
- Most important: personalize your relationships with your students and ask others to make individual contact with high-risk students daily

Parent Involvement: It is imperative to inform parents about the importance of consistent school attendance. Parents should be informed about the expectations of student attendance. The law and Educational Code statutes should be explained, along with the benefits that their child can reap with regular attendance. There should be open and frequent contact between teacher and parent. According to Senate Bill 65 Dropout Prevention and Recovery Act:

A growing body of research has shown conclusively that the involvement of parents and community members in their schools strengthens relationships among school personnel, families, and the community, thereby improving students' achievement and attitudes toward school. Support for parental involvement is critical at the school level, where the attitudes of teachers, staff members, and administrators either encourage or deter opportunities to build trusting relationships with families.

Parents can be referred to the following websites for more assistance and ideas about how they can help their child.
• Connect with a Parent Training and Information Center. Contact information is at: http://www.taalliance.org/centers/index.htm or (888) 248-0822 (toll-free).

• The group Parents Helping Parents has a free outline on the web that can help parents prepare for meetings with teachers or school staff; visit: http://www.php.com/include/blurb.php?item=iepprep.

**Peer Mentor:** Research has shown that the more connections a student can make with the school, teachers, peers, other personnel and activity involvement, the more likely that regular attendance will result. It may be important to interview potential peers and offer incentives to both the peer and the target student. The peer mentor should be a student who exhibits a high level of character, maturity, willingness to help, patience and encouragement. The match of the target and peer mentor is imperative to the success of the relationship. The peer mentor should make regular positive contact with the target student and offer support and set a good example (model desirable behavior). For instance, the peer mentor is rarely late or absent from school.

**Adult Mentor:** Adult mentors can have a positive impact on the behavior, attendance and academic performance of the target student (Glomb, et al, 2006, Converse et al, 2009)

**Techniques for Classroom Teachers**

**Classroom Techniques:** Allow students to have a choice about their curriculum. Ask the student if they are having difficulties in any of the following areas:

**Transportation**-Student may have issues with the method of arriving at school site on time or at all. Work collaboratively with school resources like: community liaison, school resource officer, administration, counselor, parent to resolve difficulties in school transportation. Some possible solutions may be:

- Carpool
- City bus (may request a free or reduced cost of bus pass for student)
- Friend, neighbor, older sibling
- Parent

**School supplies**-Student may not attend class because of a lack of preparedness. Some of these solutions may solve this issue:

- Ask parent to give bulk supplies to you to store in your classroom and allow student to retrieve supplies without reprimand
- Ask student to pay a discounted rate for supplies from you and you will purchase them for the student
- Refer student to community liaison to acquire free or reduced cost supplies
- Refer student to the school book store to purchase supplies on site
Donate supplies to the student: to avoid abuse, collect supplies before student is excused

**Homework completion** - Student may not be attending school or specific classes due to an inability or failure to complete homework assignments. Some possible strategies to address this concern are:

- Give student an extension to complete assignments (may be for reduced credit)
- Offer or assign a specific time during the school day for the student to complete homework with a mentor or in a quiet place designated for academic use
- Allow student to turn in a scaled down version of the assignment
- Allow student to begin homework during regular class time
- Allow student to work collaboratively with another student for a shared grade
- Give student a schedule or agenda of homework assignments before the week starts
- Offer rewards for prompt homework completion (may need to survey student to identify desirable rewards)
- If parent involvement is evident, send home email or written notification of assignments
- Ask parent to reward or withhold reward based upon timely homework completion for the week

**Social difficulties** - Student may avoid school or specific classes in order to avoid dangerous, uncomfortable or awkward social situations. Strategies that may work to improve social ties to school are:

- Involvement in sports
- Involvement in clubs or other activities
- Place student in a cluster of role model students or good social role models
- Ask a student who shows a willingness to be helpful to act as a peer mentor to target student (may offer both students extra credit or other incentives to facilitate involvement)
- Remind student that the class is a family and they are missed when not present
- Give the student a special job/task that they are responsible for in the classroom
- Address student by name and praise student five times per class period
- Specifically greet student, “Hello Sue, glad to see you today”

**Personal safety or a victim of bullying** - Work with parents, administration, school supervisors, school resource officer, local police, child protective services and teachers to address the threat to the student. This may involve a personal escort to and from troubled locations or a parent driving and walking the student to school until the threat is neutralized.
Deprivation of Sleep- Encourage students and remind parents that students need a minimum of eight to ten hours of uninterrupted sleep. Routine is the key to a restful night. Ask older students to be responsible and go to bed by ten pm nightly. If there is a sleep disorder or medical issue, encourage parent or school nurse to refer student to the appropriate doctor or specialist.

Lack of Appropriate clothing- Allow student to have a clothing exchange either through the community liaison, bookstore personnel, school counselor, school nurse or the classroom teacher. The clothing exchange would consist of these steps:

- Student arrives to school with inappropriate or substandard clothing
- Student reports to designated area for exchange of clothing
- Student is offered a choice of clean and appropriate clothes of correct size
- Student changes into “school clothes” before the school day begins or during announcements first period
- Student returns clothes at the end of the day for their original clothes

Health/pain- Encourage parents to make doctor’s appointments afterschool or late afternoon and seek long-term solutions to pain or chronic health concerns.

Stress, anxiety or fear- Refer student to school counselor, school psychologist for a diagnoses of causes of stress or fear.

- Work collaboratively with the parents and appropriate staff to reach a solution to either help student overcome the fear or become comfortable avoiding the stressor during the school day.
- Offer or designate a “safe place” that the student can go to at anytime he/she feels threatened or afraid
- The key to this strategy is flexibility and offering the student options/solutions to real concerns or perceived fears.
- Once the student experiences safety and success the fear will likely be less of an issue in the future.

Homelessness-

Many groups and websites can help parents and students. Some helpful groups are:

- This site has a list of lawyers and advocates in every state, at [http://www.copaa.org/find/index.php]
• National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY): Information about the education of children and youth in homeless situations [http://www.naehcy.org]

• National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE): Information about the education of children and youth in homeless situations [http://www.serve.org/nche]

• National Disability Rights Network (NDRN): Information about IDEA [http://www.napas.org]


• National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty: Information about the education of children and youth in homeless situations [http://www.nlchp.org]

• Parent Training and Information Centers: Centers for information and help for parents of children with disabilities [http://www.taalliance.org/centers/index.htm], (888) 248-0822


If the students should offer explanations for their absenteeism do your best to address the need or inform a responsible party about the need. There are many situations in which the Community Liaison can assist with needs.

School Resources: The classroom teacher is encouraged to contact home when a student misses 2 days. If the attendance does not improve or worsens, the teacher should notify the attendance clerk and inform the administration that he/she suspects a problem.

District Resources: Confer with attendance clerk and begin legal processes for truancy.

Out of District Resources: You may consult the following for state resources including Medicaid or Medicare: [http://www.dhcs.ca.gov]

What you can expect if you implement these techniques suggested: You can expect to see a marked improvement in the student’s attendance.

Conclusion: Addressing these concerns is often out of your daily realm of duties. However, doing good investigative/interviewing work at the beginning of an attendance problem may lead to an immediate solution. This is an investment that leads to long term rewards for the student, the community and your class.