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Out of Sight Out of Mind: Collateral Damage in Chronic Absences

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Abstract

The focus issue addressed in this Capstone Project is students who are chronically absent due to medical reasons. This is an important issue for many students because it impacts not only their education, in addition to their future. An evidence based argument is offered that it is important to provide guidance, along with the work that is expected to be completed for students who are chronically absent. The primary stakeholder perspectives chosen were three parents with chronically absent children, because these parents have had experience working with both the school and the students through unforeseen circumstances. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the interview data and were explored as ways to address the issue presented. Independent study, in combination with a set time to meet with the teacher each week, along with peer interaction is argued to be the most effective way to help students who are chronically absent.

Out of Sight Out of Mind: Collateral Damage in Chronic Absences

For the past sixteen years of my life I have been a student. Additionally, for twelve of those sixteen years I was what is known as a student athlete. My involvement in sports has kept my living a rather healthy and active lifestyle. I spent my time on the soccer field or in the classroom. My spare time would be spent with family and friends. On the weekends we would often participate in tournaments in the Bay Area. The travel time would be spent doing homework in the car, then I was able to be with friends when we were not playing in a game. My life was a constant cycle on repeat week to week from the time I was six years old until I was eighteen. I would go to school Monday through Friday, frequently leaving after school on Friday for the weekend to participate in a soccer tournament until Sunday night and then drive home.

While participating in a soccer game as a high school student, I sustained a concussion for the first time. In the moment I was devastated because I was pulled from what I had loved most. Little did I know, I would also be unable to go to school or use any screens, thus leaving me with no way to communicate with friends. I was so eager to step back into my life before sustaining a concussion, that I had forced myself to return to normal activity, which left me with permanent damage. After healing I tried to return to normal life, but remained extremely behind in school and felt alone. I had been completely cut off from all social interactions for multiple weeks, in addition to being unable to complete any school work. I was able to jump back into the swing of things socially, however academically I was left with everlasting effects that I permanently have felt. Due to being behind academically I was struggling to remain motivated, with a lack of help from teachers I remained lost in the classroom and drowning in school outside of the classroom. Eventually, I was able to catch up with help from friends who were also in my classes.

Then, I sustained another concussion which ultimately resulted in my being pulled from everything again, this is because you are more susceptible to everything after the first concussion. This time however the end result was extremely different. I fell so far behind in school that I was unable to catch back up and failed multiple classes. This resulted in summer school, words no student wants to hear. Not only was summer school terrible, it also resulted in my being unable to get into many colleges. Any confidence I once had was completely diminished and left me completely lost and hopeless. As college became closer I watched all of my friends leave for school to pursue their dreams, while I felt stuck because I was made to go to the local community college.

Experiencing this made me want to see a change for other students, who are forced to miss class, but can't seem to get the help they need. There are students who don't work and simply give up. The students who are doing the work and can't catch up however, do need help. These students need resources which encourage and support them in order to be able to complete their courses in a timely manner and in a way they will be able to actually retain the information. Thai creates the conversation on how we can create an environment where students will be able to flourish no matter what the circumstances.

Literature Review

Why is it an Issue/Opportunity?

Chronic absences from school are an issue for the public as a whole, not only is it a problem for educators, but it also has become a problem for mental health professionals and physicians Keaney (2007).. Chronic absences are considered missing ten percent of school,

whether it is excused or unexcused throughout a school year California Attendance Works (n.d.).

Not only do chronic absences put individuals and their well-being at risk, but it also leads to

life-impacting issues such as; homelessness, poverty, teenage pregnancy, violence, and

victimization Kearney (2007). Students who are missing school, not only are creating issues for

themselves, but are also beginning to affect those who are attending class. While looking at a

variety of different categorized students it was found that overall students who are attending class

are negatively impacted by their absent classmates Gottfried (2015). This could be assumed

because teachers are frequently having to reteach specific sections that were already taught to the

larger group. It also may be seen as a distraction when some students are in and out of the

classroom. Something is also to be said about children being able to teach each other and are able

to explain things more simply, which is helpful for other children Gottfried (2015). The second

hand effects on students who have not been absent can be demonstrated through the study

completed. Students were tested over a six year time period. During this period students would

be either left in the exact same class for an entire year, or would have new incoming students

entering throughout the year. Time after time it was shown that the students who had the new

students would test lower than other classes. Ultimately finding that peer absences affect the

overall performance and achievement of the class as a whole Gottfried (2012).

Not only do chronic absences affect students who are in attendance, but it also affects the

academic achievement levels of the absent students. After a research study done in Wisconsin it

was determined that the most common place to find harm done to students' education is the Math

and English categories. It was found that a student who is absent for approximately a total of

fourteen days will score an average of six points lower on exams, than a student who was present

for class Coelho, Fischer, McKnight, Matteson, & Schwartz (2015). This makes falling behind an issue for students, which turns into the domino effect, as students will earn poor grades as they fall further behind, which in turn decreases the likelihood of graduating on time. The possibility of not graduating on time will then push students to attain no diploma as they are more likely to drop out of school Kearney (2007). Even the students who continue to push through in efforts to continue to further their education are affected because of the difficulty and struggle of continuing to pursue their coursework because there is so much Kearney (2007). Many of these students are capable of doing the work however, it piles up because they have the work from the time they were absent, but are also being given the classwork they are currently expected to be doing. This means the students are doing multiple weeks' worth of work in two or three days, leaving students to struggle and often feel hopeless on their abilities to complete their work Hamed, Kauer, & Stevens (2015).

Being absent for a long period of time also makes students in higher grades feel like they have to catch up for what they are missing out on during their absences. This encourages these students to turn to behaviors that will negatively impact their health and overall wellbeing Kearney (2007). A link was found between drug use and delinquency correlating with students who had been absent from multiple classes Kearney (2007). This is an immediate impact of missing out on social interactions. Students who are chronically absent show signs of lacking social skills. One of the most critical parts of schooling is the social aspect. Students who are absent are unable to learn social skills and therefore grow up lacking coping mechanisms, in addition to experiencing a feeling of social isolation. These issues can also be shown once

students return to the classroom and demonstrate signs of social isolation Santibañez & Guarino (2021).

A common issue with students being absent falls back to mental health. Missing school has been correlated with mental health issues in a variety of ways DeSocio & Hootman (2004). It is important for teachers to intervene early before students miss long stretches of school because this will allow for a chance for students to not be as affected by DeSocio & Hootman (2004). These same students may also begin to feel left out which can lead to more issues like anxiety and depression. Both of these can lead to a multitude of different feelings for individuals. Some students have a sense of hopelessness, while other students may begin to have a lower self-esteem than before Garey (2016).

What Has and/or Should Be Done?

There have been multiple different resources provided including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This requires schools to hold individual accountability for each individual school's actions in response to chronically absent students, depending upon the state, in addition to the school quality and the rate of student success Department of Education (2015). Another helpful resource for teachers and administrators to be able to keep in mind absent students and the ways it affects the overall school performance, information can be seen as to each individual grade level in correlation with students who continue to miss school, this dashboard also provides information on how student learning can be improved California School Dashboard (n.d.). The California School Dashboard is an extremely valuable source as it provides both parents and educators information and statistics on schools and school districts in order to

support students in making the best possible decision. The Learning Communities for School

Success Program works to improve and support programs to support and improve the overall

student outcome by reducing truancy rates and students who are at risk of dropping out

California Department of Education (n.d.). The overall California absence policy states students

only have ten excused absences throughout the entirety of a singular school year. In addition to

this the truancy policy is also in place. This law states that if a student is missing from class for

more than thirty minutes without an excuse they will be reported to the proper authoritative

figure as truant California Department of Education (2013).

An assorted list of recommendations on how to improve attendance rates in California has

been made, however some suggestions have been left up to the discretion of each individual

school or school district. This list extends from ways to communicate absence issues with

parents, multiple phone calls with aids on hand if there is a communication barrier, in addition to

taking trips to students homes in severe cases. Other improvements include having a reward

system in the classroom for good attendance, or instilling the buddy system to help students

encourage each other. Another suggestion is to hold make-up classes hosted during weekend

days, encouraging students to be there during the week and also providing additional support in

the classroom for the students who could not make it to class throughout the week California

Department of Education (2023).

Conclusion

Concerns about chronically absent students have led to an abundance of strategies being

put into place by schools. These concerns involve mental health issues, social issues, and

academic success problems. Students missing class may also begin to affect other students who are actually attending class. In order to work against these absence issues there have even been laws put into place. Many are working to help limit the number of days students are absent or in worse cases truant. There have been a variety of different programs instilled in efforts to solve the problems revolving around absences. More resources should be made in order for educators to be able to support chronically absent students as best as they can.

Method

For this Capstone Project, the researcher investigates how students and parents view low attendance rates due to medical issues and suggestions on how to improve involving students who are unable to physically be in the classroom for an extended period of time. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher uses what they have learned to formulate an action that responds to the focus issue in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular attendance.

Context

The research takes place in Flocktown, California (all names and locations discussed throughout are pseudonyms for the purpose of privacy protection). This city is about 30 minutes north of Sacramento and has a population of about 88,786 people. The population is 70% white, 18% asian, 4% african american, and 8% fall into miscellaneous categories (2022 SARC). Cattle Elementary School is kindergarten through 5th grade and is a part of the Flocktown Unified School District. Cattle Elementary has an overall facility rate of exemplary (2022 SARC). In addition, when comparing CAASPP scores 73% of students met or exceeded ELA standards, and for math 76% of students met or exceeded expectations. The school has 477 students currently

enrolled, and a count of 48 students who are chronically absent. 9.5% of students are

socioeconomically disadvantaged, 11.5% are students with disabilities, 3.1% are English

language learners, and 2% of students are homeless (2022 SARC).

Participants and Participant Selection

Cattle Elementary School was chosen because of the number of chronic absences for

previous years, in addition to connections between the participants and researcher. All

participants were parents at Cattle Elementary School and were residents of Flocktown

California. These participants were all asked to be involved because they have had children who

were affected by absences.

Parent 1: This parent was chosen because their child had a chronic heart disease.

Parent 2: This parent was invited to participate because their child was diagnosed with

diabetes in the middle of the school year.

Parent 3: This mother was chosen because her child was affected by an urgent medical

issue resulting in missing about a month of instruction.

Researcher

I am a fourth year Liberal Studies major at California State University. I grew up playing

sports in a competitive town called Flocktown, California. Due to my involvement in competitive

sports, injuries were also involved which ultimately began affecting my schooling. For years I

watched people miss school for days at a time and questioned why they were gone. Until I began

missing school for weeks at a time due to injury. This led me to the discovery of students with

chronic absenteeism, and how big of an issue it has become. Through collecting research data

and conducting interviews amongst parents, it has been found that this topic needs to both be

addressed and discovery of more research.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

For this project, a group of parents served as participants. The following questions were asked to

three different parents of Cattle Elementary School.

1. What have been your experiences with children missing long periods of school for medical

reasons?

2. What is currently being done to improve the experiences of students who miss long

periods of school for medical reasons? What is being done to help them return to school- by

whom - and do you think this is good, bad, or indifferent? Why?

3. What do you think should be done for the students who are unable to attend school due to

a medical problem?

4. What do you think are the obstacles/drawbacks/disadvantages to providing the necessary

support for children who have missed school for medical reasons?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about children missing school due to

medical issues and/or the necessary support that should be provided for children who are

unable to physically be in the classroom?

6. Is there anything else you would like to say about you or your child's experience or support that could be provided to kids in this situation?

Procedure

All participants were interviewed individually. If it was not possible to complete and interview in person it was completed via Zoom. In person interviews were completed in about 45 minutes, however the Zoom interviews were completed in about 25 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted while being audio recorded (with given consent), in a relaxed environment, with minimal interruptions and distractions.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, parents of school-aged children were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve students who are chronically absent due to illness. This is important because children are missing key portions of their education and it affects multiple aspects of their life. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: sustainability; reach; and effectiveness. All three of the criteria are important because it will impact the students' learning ability for the entirety of the school year, due to being able to participate in the classroom. Based on the

evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Sustainability	Reach	Effectiveness
Teachers create an opportunity to remain on track with the class through online video classes.	Medium	Medium	Medium
Connect students with their peers, therefore students can help each other, in addition to time set aside by teachers to meet with students online at the beginning of each	High	Medium	Medium

week, in combination with independent study.			
Teachers can create a guide, similar to sub plans to allow parents to reinforce information students are missing in the classroom.	Low	Low	Medium

Recommendation 1:

Parent 1 was interviewed because their child was diagnosed with Diabetes during their elementary school experience. During their experience the student was given little help outside the materials provided. During the time of chronic absence the student was given their work through an independent study packet. Participating in independent study just gives the student all of the course work at one time. The student is then encouraged to complete the entire packet by the time established. Parent 1 suggests allowing for students to log in via zoom, in order to remain involved with the classroom environment. This would affect the entire class as classroom peer movement affects the overall performance and achievement of the class as a whole Gottfried

(2012). Parent 1 argues that students being able to attend class live, as those who are physically in the classroom would allow for students to continue to ask questions as they are relevant, allowing for students to be more likely to succeed. This potentially could be a solution for studies completed claiming, students who are absent for more than fourteen days will score an average of six points lower than a student who is present in class Coelho, Fischer, McKnight, Matteson, & Schwartz (2015).

Recommendation 2:

Parent 2 was asked to participate because their child was absent due to heart related appointments. It was at times unsafe for the child to attend school, however they were unable to attend due to the great risk factor. The student began to feel mental health impacts as they were not able to see their friends , as most students would nearly every day. Parent 2 recommended creating a time for students with similar circumstances to be able to connect with their peers, along with having a set time for the student to meet with their teacher each week. This would allow for the students to discuss questions that occur from their independent study packets. An article suggests students who are chronically absent lack or lose social skills they once had, they are unable to learn social skills and grow up lacking coping mechanisms Santibañez & Guarino (2021). Allowing students to be able to see each other through the screen may maintain a bond for the individual. Giving students the work for a week at a time will also help the student maintain the same pace as the rest of the class. This resolves an issue discussed of students feeling hopeless and unable to complete their work in a timely manner Hamed, Kauer, & Stevens (2015).

Recommendation 3:

Parent 3 was asked to participate due to their child missing over a month of school from an urgent medical issue. This participant felt that there should be a solution which is more individualized and requires less involvement from the school as it was difficult for the student to be able to connect with their teacher during the time. There was no social concern; it was simply about completing and retaining the necessary schooling. Parent 3 recommended teachers create a sub plan, however for parents at home. Rather than just giving the work, the plan would allow for parents to help and be more reliable than just reading the work the student is given.Similar to the other recommendations this also would help with the students falling behind on their work. Parent involvement would eliminate the students falling behind on their work. This would discourage procrastination and would not pile up leaving students to feel like they are falling behind Hamed, Kauer, & Stevens (2015).

Recommendation

The main goal of the education system is for students to enjoy and find a love for learning. This should begin at the earliest experience in an Elementary school. Students who are able to find this love for learning are less likely to miss school, throughout their educational journey. With this being said, students who are forced to miss school at such a young age need different opportunities to be able to make up for what is missed during their absence. Providing students with the chance to remain involved in the class in some way while still being involved will make the students more likely to remain engaged in the future. This can not be fixed by doing one thing for all students. Different types of learners will require different types of adaptations and learning opportunities in order to be as successful as possible. I would recommend teachers creating an environment where students are comfortable with each other at the beginning of the year, allowing for connecting with each other if an issue arises. This would

be in addition to teachers being available during a specific time each week to meet with students who are unable to attend class.

Concessions.

Creating the opportunity for students to do the exact same work from home with support from their parents would keep students on track academically. This option would be the best in regards to convenience, as students owls are able to do the work on their own time, it would not matter as long as all work is completed by the end of the week. The teachers creating a plan for students would also help parental involvement in their child's education. Having classes online would be similar to zoom, students would have the same check in schedule and remain synchronous with the entire class. This option would be the most similar to in person learning, it would just be from home.

Limitations.

This project had a limited number of participants, all of which have experienced their child being chronically absent due to some sort of medical reason. This makes the research limited in terms of the variety of participants. The information collected remains truthful for those with students impacted by chronic absences. In order to be more inclusive to all learners, interviewing more participants with different experiences would be highly effective for future purposes.

Potential negative outcomes.

Making an option available where students are able to connect with their peers, while continuing to stay on track with their education through meeting with their teacher weekly to discuss their school work, may be difficult for the teachers. Teachers already don't have enough time in a day for their current work. Adding another task to their list can make this harder than it

needs to be. In addition it may encourage students to think it is acceptable to not go to school because there are other solutions available to their peers.

Conclusion.

Opportunity for education is one of the most important aspects of a child's life. It is important for discovery and awareness in children. It creates the ability to observe and make inferences about information. Teachers who give students an educational experience where they thrive will encourage students to want to learn more.

Despite the limitations of the project, the participants were able to provide valuable information and suggestions on ways to improve the education system for chronically absent children due to their experiences. This all starts with creating a safe space where students are allowed to make connections with their classmates from the beginning. This will allow for the social interactions children need, before the child begins to miss out on different social activities. Additionally, dedicating a time at the beginning of each week for the student to meet with children and go through their work for the week will keep engagement levels with the teacher and also allow for the student to feel like they are still involved with their class. This time will also allow for students to be able to ask questions about the work from the previous week.

Giving chronically absent children a positive learning environment, when they are both in and out of the classroom will encourage students to want to return. If teachers were to remain ignorant and unwilling to work through the situation, the student will be less likely to want to return to the classroom. Creating a positive learning experience for different circumstances will reflect positive life long learning habits.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

        The focus issue of this project is students who are chronically absent due to a medical diagnosis. In order to uncover more information on the topic I met with and interviewed three different parents of students who were chronically absent. These interviews helped uncover three emergent themes, the first is to do school online, the second was through independent study, and lastly a combination of both the first two options, meaning a student would complete the work at home alone and then meet with their teacher once a week to help answer any questions that have occurred. In order to spread more information on this topic I placed a flier throughout different teacher lounges. This option was the best decision because I was able to spread more information about the topic to a wider variety of teachers, bringing awareness to the issue and providing information on the best possible solutions.

Out of Sight Out of Mind: Collateral Damage in Chronic Absences

Amaya Menezes

CHRONIC ABSENCES

Chronic absences occur when a student is absent for 10% of the school year, whether it is excused or unexcused. These absences begin to affect all children involved, as the whole class has to back track in order to support those who are absent.

IMPORTANCE

- Negatively affects academics
- Poorly impacts mental health
- Takes a toll on social capabilities
- Harms possibilities in the future

SOLUTIONS

- Students could participate in independent study, while meeting with their teacher weekly.
- Allow for students to utilize independent study.
- Make it possible for students to attend online.

HOW TO HELP

Parents at home can be as supportive as possible. Teachers can create an environment where students feel safe and want to be & find ways to support students who physically can't be in the classroom.

Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection

The action for my project was to create a flier, in order to inform teachers and administrators, about the chronic absence problem that could be occurring at their school. To do this I completed research to determine the best possible solution, in addition to multiple other solutions that would be acceptable to utilize. One thing that I was shocked to hear was feedback from the people I interviewed, many of them had the same experiences, even though the circumstances were much different. Something I had to change was the interview questions because some of them were too young for the age group my project appeals to. Thus far parents seem excited about the project, especially those with children who have been affected by chronic absenteeism, I haven't heard any feedback from teachers. Looking back now, I wish I would've interviewed more people, including students who were affected themselves, and also a wide range of teachers, to gain their perspective on the topic. I learned to be on top of what is going on with the topic, and always be prepared for the next steps. I also learned more about the importance of making connections with new people and resources.

Critical Reflection

This project has taught me that I have a voice, and it is something that should be shared. It has taught me the importance of voicing what matters to myself as I am most likely not the only one who has been affected by something, for example chronic absenteeism due to health circumstances. I was able to discover the way I will handle chronically absent students in my own classroom, as I have empathy, in addition to a surplus of knowledge on the subject. Additionally, the project showed me how to work toward change and how to utilize my voice in an effective manner.

Synthesis and Integration

The Major Learning Outcomes and required coursework for Liberal Studies work hand-in-hand to build effective teachers. We have taken classes to further our knowledge in terms of social injustices. We also were given a variety of different methods to effectively work with students and be able to explain math concepts in multiple different ways. Additionally the opportunity was given to be able to take classes working with technology in education. This enabled us to learn about new ways to work with students and help them be engaged. It also gave us the tools to help our classrooms be able to adjust and find new ways of working collaboratively when students are unable to be at school or in the classroom. It also allows students to make work easier when they have access to the tools needed at home. The classes allowed us to deepen our knowledge on a variety of subjects, all while also learning how to introduce them to future students of our own. Finally we were given the opportunity to take service learning classes. Through these classes we were given hands-on experience in the classroom. We were able to go in and help the teachers wherever they saw best fit. This experience was one of the best opportunities from the Liberal Studies major courses.

This action project allowed me to see how I could make a change in the future. Creating this research project has helped me discover my voice and the different ways my voice can be heard. It has helped me professionally discover the type of qualities I will look for in a school that I could potentially work with. In addition to the ways my own work could impact a school and how it could completely change schooling.

In order to become the professional I strive to be, the next step would be to further my

education. To continue on and complete my teaching credential, hopefully while substitute

teaching with classes in the area. After that it would be to eventually have my own classroom.

Then in the future hopefully earn my masters, in something related to teaching. Then hopefully

move into the administrative side where I would be able to have more of an impact in the long

run. As long as I'm continuing to work with children professionally I will be fulfilled.

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