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AN INVESTIGATION INTO TRUANCY REDUCTION
WITHOUT INCREASING THE
DROP OUT RATE

by
Phillip C. Neff Jr.

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
04/15/04

Approved by

Date Approved April 14, 04

Abstract

Phillip C. Neff Jr.

An Investigation Into Truancy
Reduction Without Increasing the
Drop out Rate
2004
Dr. Ted Johnson
Educational Leadership

The purpose of this internship was to acquire and enhance through a supervisory experience, the leadership skills necessary for a school administrator. The intern's research project focused on decreasing truancy without increasing drop out rate.

The intern analyzed data collected through the use of a survey. The survey was given to a general population of students which consisted of two different sampling strategies. One sample was a convenience sample of students from the intern's classes, the other sample was judgmental coming from the newly developed Alternative Education Program at Paulsboro High School.

The intern found several interesting correlations associated with drop out rate, while simultaneously finding trends which discredited previously held perceptions. Two related findings are: students with after school jobs are more likely to have better attendance rates than students without jobs, and students involved in extra-curricular activities are significantly less likely to be truant.

One of the intern's conclusions is that school districts with below average attendance rates should enhance the offerings they make to students concerning extra-curricular activities

Mini-Abstract

Phillip C. Neff Jr.

An Investigation Into Truancy
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The problem associated with this study is that of truancy. Schools are required to provide a thorough and efficient education to all students. This difficult task cannot be undertaken if students do not come to school. This study focused on the problem of truancy, and how to decrease absence rate without increasing drop out rate.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my family for their support, understanding, and love. Without them the past several years of attendance at Rowan University would not have been possible.

Second, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my mentor, Mr. John Giovannitti, Assistant Principal of Paulsboro High School. Mr. Giovannitti has shown great patience and trust in allowing the intern “total access” during the internship. I greatly appreciate the experience provided by Mr. Giovannitti and the entire staff, both teaching and support, in helping the intern grow and learn. I thank the entire Paulsboro High School family for their patience, assistance, and dedication.

Third, I would like to thank my university mentor, Dr. Ted Johnson. I appreciate all of your guidance, feedback, and calming manner while supporting me in this endeavor.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Focus of the Study

Researchers in general can use the same educational statistics to prove several different points. For instance, an increase in the suspension rate could signal a school that is losing control; conversely, it could signal an administration that is cracking down on misbehavior. Statistics must be interpreted within the entire context of the educational community being studied. This being the case, statistics are still the primary measure of a school's overall success or failure. Government agencies depend on statistical data to pass laws, appropriate funding and punish school districts nationwide. However flawed this system may or may not be, it is still the accepted method for communicating the state of education nationwide.

This study will focus on two very important and interconnected statistics - attendance and drop out rates. This study will review current statistical data from Paulsboro High School and compare it to the state average for New Jersey. This study will then review literature to examine various techniques and plans for dealing with these statistics, while determining the best course of action for the local problem. Ultimately, this study will devise a multifaceted plan to address attendance and drop out rates, which is a combination of best practice and plans that have worked in other similar demographic settings

Specifically this study will focus on Paulsboro High School in the Paulsboro School District. This school is one of three buildings in the district. The three buildings

that comprise the district are: Billingsport School which houses grades K-4, Loudenslager School which houses grades 4-6, and Paulsboro High School which houses grades 7-12. Paulsboro, New Jersey is located in the western portion of Gloucester County.

The information generated from this study will come from grades 7-12; however, the literature review will have a broader scope. It is important to collect a wide range of information because each possible solution must be reviewed for the specific educational community and the context of the climate intended.

This study will focus on attendance and drop out rates for Paulsboro High School over the last nine years. The study will review plans that show promise of increasing attendance rates without increasing the drop out rates. Finally, this study will suggest an overall policy, which will be monitored to determine if it can produce the desired outcome in the established setting.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree in Educational Administration for Rowan University. Administrative internships have existed for many years and have become an integral part of Rowan University's Department of Educational Administration. Internships of this nature are designed to give the administrative candidate real world skills in a shoulder-to-shoulder setting. In this way interns are afforded an opportunity to develop and refine the knowledge and skills necessary to begin their administrative careers with the best possible preparation. The skills developed during this process are in a wide spectrum of areas of leadership and management. This internship provides for long-term action research, allowing time to put research into practice and time for evaluation, not just speculation.

This internship was conducted under the guidance of Mr. John Giovannitti, Vice-Principal of the Paulsboro High School. The internship adviser and university mentor was Dr. Ted Johnson. This internship was designed to allow for a wide array of administrative experiences under the expert guidance of these and other educational professionals.

This study allowed the intern an opportunity to engage in long-term educational research and evaluate that study in a living, breathing educational environment. This is a critical and often overlooked skill that an administrator must possess if they intend to be not only a manager, but also an educational leader. As a school leader, an administrator must be an active participant in the evolution of education. Gone are the days of simply managing a school's daily affairs. Modern leaders must be constantly evaluating the standard operating procedure and simultaneously looking over the horizon for the next initiative. This internship provided the intern with a foray into the world of school change with all the pitfalls and rewards.

This study owes its inception to the Paulsboro High School principal, Lucia Pollino. Mrs. Pollino has been the Paulsboro High School principal for two years. Mrs. Pollino is no stranger to the district; she had been a teacher in the high school for fourteen years prior to becoming principal. This experience along with growing up in the community one block from the high school makes her very aware of the challenges facing this community as well as the school district, and especially Paulsboro High School.

When the intern began to think about various possible projects, the intern asked for input from the superintendent and every administrator at Paulsboro High School. At this time, Mrs. Pollino had expressed a high level of concern in improving Paulsboro High School's attendance rate without simultaneously increasing the drop out rates. As per the ISLLC standards, the school administrator is an educational leader who promotes

the success of all students by developing a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. The educational leader must also nurture and sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and growth. Obviously then, it is essential for all students to be present in all classes. Students cannot be provided such an environment if they are absent. Likewise any policy or program that encourages or increases the likelihood that students will drop out of school is counterproductive all together. A thorough and efficient education cannot be remotely administered. Students must come to school to receive all that the learning community has to offer. A school leader must respond to the needs of all students in the specific context that they occur in, just as the students must come to school every day to gain all that the learning community has to offer.

This study has sought practical solutions to this serious problem. Excessive absence is no longer just a problem for the lower achieving students. All students will be required to be advanced proficient on the HSPA in the near future. Schools are taking this directive very seriously. In the school year 2003-2004 Paulsboro High School had 55 seniors re-taking the math sections of the HSPA. The senior class was made up of 134 students. It was obvious from these statistics that absent students present more than just a nuisance. Excessive absence is a serious problem, which eats away at the effectiveness of schools everywhere. Ultimately excessive absence will detract from the mammoth effort of becoming advanced proficient in math, English and science.

Paulsboro High School, under the efforts of Dr. Louis Giunta, Assistant Principal, has undertaken a truancy policy in the last three years. This policy enforces truancy laws that have been in place for years. As a result, any student with excessive un-excused absences was taken to court, and the judge fines the parents. However, while holding the parents accountable for the child's actions has several positive outcomes, it does increase

the drop out rates significantly. In one case during the 2003 summer, a parent was fined \$750.00. The parents were informed that if the student dropped out of school, the fine would not have to be paid. The parent's response was, "I will sign the papers right now." While this action may prevent otherwise unmotivated students from detracting from the environment, thus allowing the school to provide a better education for the remaining students, it still is contrary to the educator's responsibility to provide a free and appropriate education. This approach is in complete conflict with all that education and professional educators stand for. When a student is dropped from school, it may alleviate a nuisance to the learning environment, but it deprives the student of his or her right to an education, and it reflects negatively on the school and suggests failure on both the part of the student and the educational institution. Educators should not be so willing to give up on any student regardless of their disability, real or perceived, handicap or otherwise. Giving up on that student may be easier on the educator as it requires less effort and modifications on their part, but to do so signifies failure to provide that student with their constitutional right to education and serves as a living example of everything that contradicts the exact behavior we expect from our students. We expect hard work and effort, but by giving up on a "problem" student, we as educators are doing the exact same thing we try to prevent them from doing thus rendering us hypocrites. Regardless of the initiative, Thorough and Efficient, No Child Left Behind, etc., the purpose of a free and appropriate education in a democratic society is constitutional at its core. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in this modern information age go hand in hand with education. Gone are the days when a strong back and determination were the only essential ingredients to a productive life. Young people today need all of the advantages that an education can provide to become productive adults and to contribute to our democracy. If

we fail to assist our students in this effort, we directly contribute to the failure of a fundamental element of democracy.

Definitions

In order to understand the educational jargon presented in this thesis, the intern provided these definitions, explanations and references.

1. NCLB - No Child Left Behind. This is legislation H.R. 1 which President George W. Bush signed into law on January 23, 2001. It is a comprehensive reform initiative of Congress. The plan has four major areas of reform which include stronger accountability for results, expanded flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents and an emphasis on teaching methods that have proved to be successful. Government NCLB Fact Sheet (2001) This will result in national assessments of pupil progress, less bureaucratic red tape which will give the local school more control, options for parents whose children are in failing schools, an emphasis on a Reading First plan, strengthening teacher quality, and a promotion of English proficiency. Government NCLB Fact Sheet (2002) The federal government will provide funding to put these initiatives in place via grant monies.

2. Drop Out - A student who chooses not to attend school after they meet or exceed the compulsory education age limit of 16 years of age. Under the New Jersey Compulsory Education Age Limit Statute, "Every parent, guardian or other person having custody and control of a child between the ages of six and 16 years shall cause such child regularly to attend public schools of the district or a day school in which there is given instruction equivalent to that provided in the public schools for children of similar grades and attainments or to receive equivalent instruction elsewhere than at school. Compulsory Education Age Limit Statute (1968).

3. Attendance Rate - This is the percentage of students who attend school as calculated by the school or institution on a monthly basis.
4. T&E - Thorough and Efficient - New Jersey State Constitution (1948) requires that New Jersey Legislature provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools for the instruction of all children in the State between the ages of 5 and 18 years. Findings, Declarations Relative to School Funding (1996).
5. ISLLC- Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium - A set of model standards and assessments for school leaders nationwide to follow to insure stability and some form of uniformity throughout the public education system
<http://www.umsl.edu/~mtea/Pages/AboutISLLC/AboutISLLC.html>, (9/16/03).
6. HSPA- High School Proficiency Assessment -This test evaluates student proficiency in Math and Language Arts Literacy in accordance with the Core Curriculum Standards. This is a secure test administered to all 11th graders in the state of New Jersey. These are minimum standards a student must achieve in order to graduate high school. The test also evaluates higher-level thinking and writing skills by incorporating open-ended questions even in the area of mathematics. Students, who do not pass the exam, may retake it in the fall of their senior year. Students in jeopardy of failing again also work closely with designated staff who provide remedial assistance and testing that is submitted to the County Superintendent's Office as an alternative that will allow them to graduate if they do not receive a passing score on the regular HSPA exam.
<http://www.state.nj.us/education>, (9/16/03).
7. School Call - A computer software program connected to the software the district uses to take and record daily attendance. This program calls home to notify the parent of

the absent student and leaves them an automated message. This program is capable of making 3000 calls an hour.

8. GED- General Equivalency Diploma - This is an alternative way for high school drop outs to obtain a diploma declaring that they have met the academic standards equivalent to those required by the public school system. Equivalency is defined by New Jersey Superior Court as academic equivalency, not equivalency of social development derived from group education. *State V. Massa*, 231 A.2d 252 (1967), 95 N.J. Super. 382.

9. ATOD - Alcohol, Tobacco or Drug Use. Use of, or being under the influence of any of the mentioned substances is a criminal offense in the state of New Jersey.

10. TCCP - Truancy Court Conference Program - Students who are not in compliance with the attendance required by New Jersey statute are subjected to truancy penalties. Parents of students between the ages of 6 and 16 are held liable and are taken to truancy court by the school district. The United States Supreme Court affirmed this New Jersey Statute holding that Compulsory Education Statutes are penal in nature and parents may be convicted as disorderly persons for violation thereof. *Everson v. Board of Ed. of Ewing Twp.*, 330 U.S. 1 (1945), 67 S.Ct. 504, 91 L.Ed. 711.

11. At Risk Children - "At-risk youth" is defined by New Jersey Labor and Workers Compensation statutes as a teenaged drop out, teenage parent or other teenager whose behavior is likely to result in becoming a high school drop out. New Jersey Labor and Workers Compensation Act (1989).

12. SPI - School Performance Index - An SPI index score of 100 indicates that on average a school is meeting the state's performance standards. For high schools, the SPI involves the drop out rate, attendance rate and the percent of students passing the functional tests by the end of grades 8 and 11.

13. Abbott District - Economically challenged districts that receive extra federal funding to be consistent with the state's thorough and efficient clause as per New Jersey Supreme Court holding in *Abbott v. Burke*. These districts must meet certain federal standards to receive funding. *Abbott v. Burke*, 693 A.2d 417 (1997), 149 N.J. 145.

Limitations of the Study

This study cannot be replicated anywhere else because it was unique to the problems associated with the Paulsboro School District. The intern found it very difficult to manage his time while teaching full-time and working several hours a day on administrative tasks. Time was definitely a limiting factor in this study. The study could have easily taken 2 to 5 years instead of 9 months. Also the amount of time that educators in general have to spend with students as compared to their entire day was a limiting factor as well. This study could have benefitted if it had been concurrently undertaken at multiple schools with similar demographics.

Setting of the Study

Today Paulsboro, New Jersey can best be described as a small industrial town on the Delaware River across from the city of Philadelphia. The town is geographically bounded by the Delaware River on the north, East Greenwich on the south, Greenwich Township on the west and Mantua Creek on the east. This is an economically challenged area; however, the district is not ruled an "Abbot District." The median household income as of the year 2000 was \$35,569. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Paulsboro-New-Jersey.html> (9/16/03) The median house value in 2000 was \$78,600. The area is composed of 61.7% White Non-Hispanic, 31.6% African-American, 4.4% Hispanic, two or more races 2.8%, other race 1.3% and Native American 1%. Thus, the area is obviously very racially diverse. The borough compared to the state average is above the unemployment percentage, significantly above the African-American population

percentage, significantly above the Hispanic population average, number of college students significantly lower than state average and percent of population with a Bachelor's Degree or higher significantly below the state average. The crime index in Paulsboro is 334.4 which signifies a rate higher than the national index of 312.3. Violent crimes in Paulsboro during the year 2001 included 1 murder, 6 rapes, 8 robberies, 20 assaults, 48 burglaries, 162 larceny counts and 12 auto thefts. This environment definitely presents a less than ideal learning environment with such crime literally occurring sometimes within view of the schools or a student's home. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Paulsboro-New-Jersey.html> (9/16/03)

While industrialization and economic decline hindered the progress of Paulsboro as a whole, it was at one time a very important part of our colonial system and Revolutionary War efforts. Prior to colonization, "The Lenape Indians were drawn to the area now known as Paulsboro by the abundance of game and fish along the Mantua Creek and the Delaware River. Deposits of blue clay for pottery along the Delaware River also drew the Lenape to the area." Paulsboro Bicentennial Committee Report (1976)

Soon after the first English settlements began to appear along the eastern coast of what is now the United States, settlers quickly recognized the value of Paulsboro's prime location, although it was not yet known as "Paulsboro". On September 22, 1677, settler Edward Byllings bought land from Lord Berkley. Byllingsport, now Billingsport a section of the Borough of Paulsboro, was formed as 237 settlers came and bought land from Byllings for a penny an acre. Samuel P. Paul bought 100 acres along the Delaware River and Mantua Creek in September 1685. This land was named in his honor, Paulsboro. In 1776, Margaret Paul and her son Benjamin sold 96 acres of Billingsport to the Council of Safety of Philadelphia. This land was deeded to the 13 united Colonies on July 5, 1776 and became the first plot of government ground purchased by the colonies.

This land was purchased to erect Fort Billings to prevent the British Fleet from reaching Philadelphia. In August 1777, Fort Billings was inspected by General Washington and Lafayette. Paulsboro Bicentennial Committee (1976)

Paulsboro High School was constructed in 1916 and consisted of 17 classrooms. Gloucester County Historical Society Report (1948) Since that time the building has had three additions; one in 1931, one in 1965 and the other in 2001. The building has three stories, with the first floor halfway underground level. The building houses 7th through 12th grades and contains an auditorium, a cafeteria, a media center and a gymnasium. Paulsboro High School was able to escape the wrecking ball; in fact, many renovations have kept the building in fine repair. In 2002-2003 a major Hollywood movie and two commercials were filmed at Paulsboro High School, which with its tin ceilings and enormous windows harkens back to a simpler time and place.

The current curriculum at Paulsboro High School is a comprehensive program containing academic, business and fine and practical arts classes. Grades 7 and 8 take cycle and full year courses, while grades 9 through 12 take full year and semester courses. Honors courses are available in English, history, math and science. Advanced placement courses are offered in English, calculus and biology. For the 2003-2004 year an alternative school program was created to help the most challenged students. This program operates as a school within a school in a self-contained separate area within the media center. An agreement with the Gloucester County Institute of Technology allows students from Paulsboro High School to attend for half days to pursue vocational training. All high school graduates are required to earn 130 credits. The high school also offers a wide range of athletic and extracurricular activities.

The Paulsboro School District's administration in 2003-2004 consisted of the superintendent of schools, three building principals, three assistant principals and a

supervisor of special services. Paulsboro High School had a building principal, Mrs. Lucia Pollino and three vice principals. The vice principals for grades 10 through 12 was Dr. Louis Giunta, the vice-principal for grades 7 through 9 was Mr. John Giovannitti and the vice-principal in charge of athletics was Mr. Paul Morina.

The teaching staff of the Paulsboro School District in 2003-2004 consisted of 120 professional staff. Paulsboro School District's Personnel Directory (2003) Twenty-seven percent of the professional staff held advanced degrees. The student to faculty ratio was 11.7% for the school year 2003-2004. New Jersey State Report Card (2003) Teacher salaries ranged from \$32,850 for a first year teacher with a Bachelor's Degree to \$65,400 for a teacher at the top of the scale with a Master's Degree plus 30 credits. PEA Contract (July 2001 through June 2004)

The district is made up of three schools; Loudenslager which houses grades K through 3, Billingsport which houses grades 4 through 6 and Paulsboro High School which houses grades 7 through 12. The Paulsboro Board of Education was a 9-member policy body that was elected in April. The board of education receives input from the superintendent, the board solicitor and the business administrator.

Paulsboro High School has consistently recorded a student suspension rate twice that of the state average. For the year 2002-2003 the student suspension rate was 35%. Average class size for 2002-2003 was 17. The student attendance rate was 91.2%, approximately 1 percent higher than the state average. New Jersey State Report Card (2003) The teachers' attendance rate was 97%, which was 3% higher than the state average. The percent of school revenues from local taxes were 21% for the year 2002-2003. Total cost per pupil for 2002-2003 was \$10,720. Paulsboro High School scored approximately 2% below the state average of 15.7% in students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Paulsboro High School graduated 94.9% of the senior class in 2002-

2003. In the 2002-2003 school year, 54.6 % of the 11th grade scored at or above proficient on the HSPA. In the same year 74% took the Scholastic Aptitude Test. The average combined SAT score was 932. NJ State Report Card (2003)

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this study is organized in the following way: Chapter 2 Review of Literature, Chapter 3 Design of Study, Chapter 4 Presentation of Research, Chapter 5 Conclusions, Implications and Further Study. References, appendices and biographical data follow the chapters.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Student Truancy

In a study by Jay De Kalb (2003), absentee rates have reached as high as 30% in some cities. This statistic was astonishing and leads many professionals to the belief that truancy is labeled as one of the top ten problems in American schools. Truancy is negatively affecting the quality of education our youth receives and puts them at risk to other dangers such as dropping out and increased drug use and other criminal activity. De Kalb points out that on average 150,000 students are absent every day in New York City. That number amounts to 15% of the total student population for that district. Los Angeles Unified School District also reports a similar problem with 10% of their students absent each day. Out of these large absent populations, it is virtually impossible to determine the number of absences that are legitimately excusable. The City of Detroit employs 40 full time public school attendance officers who handled 66,440 truant complaints during the 1994-1995 school year. Ingersoll and LeBoeuf (1997)

This study examines some of the ways truancy affects the students and society. This study also isolates factors that increase a student's likelihood of becoming truant. Finally De Kalb identifies guidelines for developing effective attendance policies.

Non-attendance negatively impacts the entire school and community, not just the individual student. The Los Angeles County Office of Education conducted a study that showed truancy to be the number one factor associated with delinquency. Students who do not attend school are often left unsupervised, during which time they are free to commit crimes ranging from graffiti to shoplifting. A three-week sweep for truant

students conducted by the Van Nuys Police Department yielded a 60% drop in shoplifting arrests. Garry (1996)

Truancy is also linked to failure to graduate. Students with a history of truant behavior are less likely to be promoted, keep a job' or graduate. This phenomenon is also closely related to the lack of self-esteem that is so often related to low achievement. This trend leads to a way of life that dramatically increases the possibility that a student will drop out of school entirely. As De Kalb points out, the end product of this cycle is often decreased earning potential and increased the possibility that the criminal justice system will be involved. Between 1990 and 1994, the juvenile violent crime index increased by 26% on the national level which was four times the increase for individuals over the age of 18. Bartollas and Hahn (1998) Juvenile arrests for murder increased by 14.6% compared to 5.6% for adults. In a 1995 interview, Alfred Blumstein claimed that between the years 1995 and 2010, this juvenile population will increase by roughly 30%, and many of that percentage will have grown up in poverty with single mothers. Bartollas and Hahn (1998)

Students inevitably claim that lack of interest in their studies plays a major role in their initial decision to be truant. Thus, teachers may inadvertently initiate the very cycle that causes student drop out. There is much controversy and disagreement in this school of thought. Teachers believe student problems are the main cause of truancy and drop out, while students feel teachers lose interest in them and neglect to make learning interesting.

De Kalb then states that attendance policies should clearly communicate consequences and expectations of both good and bad attendance. All absences should be followed by parent contact. The policies must be publicized in a student publication. Also the policies should be firm but fair and evenly enforced by all members of the school community.

Schools must take a pro-active approach to truancy. Truancy breeds truancy as peer pressure is a strong influence on children. Some schools try hard-line approaches that hold the parents responsible for the child's truancy. However, oftentimes, these parents are in the lower socioeconomic groups without the ability to pay fines. The fines become an incentive to drop out instead of an incentive to come to school.

Benefits of Small-Scale Schooling

In a study by Kathleen Cotton (2003), research shows that small schools compared to large schools have higher attendance rates and lower drop out rates. The study also states that smaller schools have higher rates of student participation in after school activities and fewer discipline infractions. Minorities tend to perform better in small school settings rather than larger inter-city schools. Unfortunately economically disadvantaged students usually attend large inter-city schools that lack small school benefits. Small schools offer personal service and afford the students an environment with positive adult role models that often last multiple years.

As schools consolidated into regional districts, the smaller neighborhood schools were pushed aside in favor of very large districts that bus all students. Schools resembled shopping malls instead of neighborhoods. Simultaneously, staff requirements grew and the likelihood of students maintaining active relationships with adults became less.

Cotton states that small schools allow students to take ownership of their environment more readily. This allows students to initiate a feeling of belonging. A benefit of belonging is an increase in students who are willing to participate in extracurricular activities. Also, students are less likely to engage in vandalism when they feel connected to a school. This phenomenon frequently produces school environments that have less behavior problems and decreased truancy and lower drop out rates. This is connected to some degree to the fact that small environments foster caring. Some may

argue that it takes a village to raise a child; Cotton would argue that a small school is a village.

Many factors could be attributed to a small school's ability to effectively educate students. Small schools can implement change and respond to student needs more rapidly. Also, small schools tend to be located in small communities, thus amplifying the effect.

Small school communities also tend to initiate and maintain parental contact more efficiently than do larger schools. Many factors associated with small school districts lead to their overall effectiveness. While it may be very difficult, if not impossible for larger districts to copy their plans, the success of small districts cannot be ignored.

Identifying Drop Outs

The Office of Educational Research and Improvement sponsored a study by Ascher and Schwartz (2003). This study focuses on drop outs and emphasizes that determining why they left is difficult. This knowledge along with how many students drop out is critical to developing a prevention program. This paper clearly defines a drop out as a student who leaves school, for any reason except death, before graduation without transferring to another school. This definition covers students who enter the military, prison or other programs that are not qualified as a secondary school.

Students who leave school before age 16 are considered truant, not officially drop outs. Drop out rates do not consider those students who eventually earn a GED. Counting drop outs is made even more difficult by the actual counting process itself. Schools vary widely in their drop out reporting techniques. Drop out rate is determined by calculating the difference in enrollment of the student body at two different points in time. This variance allows students to be erroneously added to the drop out list. These students may have transferred or moved in that time period just before the rates are determined.

Early intervention is cited as an important factor in lowering the overall drop out rate. Many students at risk began to have difficulties much earlier than drop out intervention programs are usually administered. Use of new early warning tests can detect weakness, which can manifest into truancy, which then precipitates dropping out. Ascher and Schwartz suggest that early intervention, student support groups and one on one teacher mentoring are the best solutions to the truancy issue.

Group Counseling At-Risk Students

This research by Chander and Page (1994) compares the effectiveness of two different types of counseling for ninth-grade at-risk students. It is Chandler and Page's assertion that there will be no significant difference between the effects of activity-oriented groups and discussion oriented groups on self-esteem and behavior.

This study was limited to 10 weeks. The authors of this study agreed that more time is necessary to assess the problem further. However, the researchers have shown through statistical analysis that activity based counseling consistently out performs discussion-based counseling. This data can be applied to students who are not "at risk". Interestingly, the one area that did not support the superiority of activity-based counseling was grade point average. Students in activity based counseling consistently scored better than students in discussion groups in the following areas: behavior, happiness, days absent, and discipline.

This poses interesting assumptions for the intern's study. If activity-based counseling increased attendance, then hands on activities incorporated into every class can improve drop out rates by improving student performance in all areas except student grade averages. This trend favoring activity-based learning as opposed to discussion-based learning could be attributed to the increased pressures placed on a middle to low income family that prevents them from having time to talk with and listen to their

children. The school must now fill this void in order that the students might respect themselves enough to come to school and be ready to learn.

Mentoring and Tutoring Help Truancy

In a study by Gary Reglin (1997), programs targeting habitual truants are examined. This program was conducted in Escambia County in northwest Florida. The Truancy Court Conference Program (TCCP) was established to monitor truants. This program receives referrals from the schools social worker. The agency then contacts the students so they can receive services. The referral was then forwarded to the state attorney's office that calls the family and the student before a judge. At this time, the judge determines the reasons for the truancy and establishes the underlying problems. The judge informs the family and the student of their legal obligations and explains what services are available. This was an attempt to circumvent the child from entering the juvenile justice system. Next, the student was assigned to the Mentoring and Tutoring Help Program.

Mentors are underutilized as agents of truancy prevention. Mentoring starts as a process by which the mentor helps the students. Reglin points out that many famous successful people credit mentors in their lives as positive encouraging role models. Mentors can provide students with trusted counselors who can be an advocate or friend. The trust bond between a mentor and student can help the child bond with the school and increase their sense of belonging. The lack of such relationship has been cited as a contributing factor in truancy cases. In this case the mentor can contribute social and personal resources to help the child succeed in difficult times. These difficult times will be less likely to go unnoticed if a trusting mentor-student relationship is established.

Mentors in this MATH (Mentoring And Tutoring Help) program are over 21 years old. These mentors are role models for students aged 5 to 14, these students are called

“prodigy.” The MATH mentors must undergo the same background checks a teacher in the district must pass. The mentors are interviewed and paired with the prodigy that they are most compatible with. The mentors receive special initial training and subsequent in-service training periodically. The mentors are encouraged to invite parents to tutoring sessions, visit homes of their prodigy, take them on cultured trips, sporting events, and one on one mentoring. Most important, mentors are nonjudgmental confidants who encouraging and promote positive actions. The mentor-prodigy match up is always male-to-male or female-to-female. Most of the students have no positive adult role models in their life other than the MATH mentor.

This program showed impressive results in decreasing truancy and increasing overall student well being. Eighty percent of the students involved had a thirty percent increase in school attendance. Eighty percent of the students involved measurably increased their self-esteem, and eighty percent of the students had a fifty percent decrease in discipline referrals following the program participation. The positive effects of the mentor-prodigy relationship cannot be overlooked as juvenile crime is on the rise, especially juvenile violent crime. The cycle of truancy leading to dropping out leading to the juvenile justice system must be broken.

Chapter 3

Design of the Study

General Description of the Research Design

The purpose of this research was to better understand the relationship between attendance and drop-out rates of students at Paulsboro High School. The assumption made was that some actions implemented in order to increase attendance rates may simultaneously increase the drop-out rate. This study explored student centered methods of increasing attendance in students grades 7-12 in Paulsboro, New Jersey.

Based on a review of the literature, a collection of strategies was examined for feasibility. These programs included small scale schooling, early identification of drop-outs, “at-risk” counseling, and various mentoring programs. All of these proactive programs seemed to offer much in the way of ideas, but some offered a comprehensive package.

Concurrent to the development of this thesis project, Paulsboro High School hired a new Director of Special Services, Tom Sullivan. Tom Sullivan developed, with the assistance of Central Office and the administration of Paulsboro High School, an Alternative Education Program (AEP). This program was offered Monday through Friday from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Alternative education was offered in place of regular education during the day. This program was targeted toward students who had already dropped out, students who were sent out of district, and students who did not or could not fit into traditional day time school. In addition to the night AEP, Paulsboro was also offering new in 2003 a daytime, half-day alternative program focusing on special needs and non-traditional students. Since the students in these two alternative programs had already been

classified as “at risk” they were a large part of the target population for this study. This “at risk” population was accessed directly since the intern was one of five teachers who was instructing students in the night school AEP. The daytime students were accessed during the intern’s free period during the regular school day. Also, another student population was sampled from the traditional day school. This sample population was taken from the eighty-six students the intern taught during his normal work day. The group consisted of students from two physics classes and students from three chemistry classes. From this population, students were chosen to be “at risk” if they had missed seven or more days of school by January 15, 2004.

The target population was given a survey designed to determine their over-all attitudes toward school and a survey designed to determine their over-all attitudes toward the alternative programs.

Development and Design of the Research Instrumentation

The intern used a questionnaire in order to obtain subject perceptions, attitudes, and perspectives. These collected perceptions were used to evaluate the success of the AEP and evaluate the attendance and drop-out rates of the subjects.

The research instrument used for this study had many influences, including but not limited to: personal experience, influence of certain graduate course work, student behavior, and the literature review. However, the single largest influence upon the creation of this questionnaire was a graduate course at Rowan University taught by Dr. Edith Rusch, *Leading the Learner Centered School*. This class taught the intern a whole new way of determining if a student feels connected to the school and to the learning. This course had at its cornerstone the idea that the learner is at least as important if not more so than the learning. The ideas put forth in this class were incorporated into the

survey. These questions sought to determine the extent to which the students felt as though they had made a connection with the entire school community. At its core this line of reasoning proposed that students who felt as though their basic needs had not been met, will not in turn be able to focus their energy and attention toward learning. In this age the education system is being asked to continually do more with less. Educators have no control over anything that happens outside of the school itself. This magnifies the importance of the time spent in school. The time in the school community must somehow compensate for elements lacking in the other areas of the students' lives. This implied that the teacher must be more than an educator of the mind, but must also consider each student individually and holistically. This concept has not evaded the special education community. All students classified into the special education program are entitled to an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The intern proposes that all students, regardless of ability in any area, needs an IEP after a holistic evaluation of the individual, not just pursuant to a learning evaluation. The intern suggests that this approach will in turn help the students feel more integrated within the school community and consequently be less likely to be truant and ultimately drop out.

These viewpoints held by the intern had influenced the direction of the questionnaire. The questions were geared toward the perceptions of the students regarding their ability to feel as though they were a partner in learning that was directed by someone who knew them not only as a learner but as a person.

The questionnaire that the intern designed began with a disclosure statement regarding the student's ability to maintain their anonymity and proceeded with 50 questions. The first 12 questions were related to demographics. These questions were designed with rating scales. The last 38 questions were designed with a Likert Scale that had a range of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. The

demographic questions provided general background information such as grade level, gender, extra-curricular involvement, employment, academic performance, behavioral history, attendance history, and computer availability. The Likert questions can be divided into three major categories: the student, the school, and the learning experience.

The student related Likert questions were geared toward what perceptions the student had toward his or her experience. These questions asked for feelings and needs. The questions related to the school were designed to rate the students' general feelings and attitudes about the school. These questions also gave the student a chance to evaluate the school and comment on their over-all feeling of belonging. The questions regarding the general learning experience allowed the students to rate the over-all educational experience. This section took on a greater importance with the advent of No Child Left Behind legislation. This legislation will eventually allow students who feel ineffectual at a certain institution a choice in their educational future.

Description of the Sample and Sampling Technique

The intern used two sampling techniques to obtain data for this study. The target population was students who were chronically truant or absent. The intern's study focused on decreasing truancy without increasing the drop-out rate. A review of the literature had implied that students with above average truancy were more likely to drop out. This target population was sampled by focusing the questionnaires on the students in the AEP and the students in the intern's own classes. The AEP students were a non-probability sample, while the students in the intern's classes were a convenience sample.

The purposive sampling of the students in the AEP was due to the fact that a high absence rate was one factor in admittance to the program. Therefore, this sample provided a judgmental sampling of students who had already displayed the researched behavior and turned out to provide a wealth of information.

The convenience sampling of the intern's chemistry and physics classes was performed because of availability. These students were given a type of written cover letter that explained that volunteering to fill out the survey would in no way affect their class grades, and that the research was being conducted solely for the purpose of completion of the intern's Master's Degree thesis. This entire population was given the survey; however, only the students who indicated they were absent 6 times or more were further analyzed for comparison.

Description of the Data Collection Approach

The instrument was used in a survey format. Due to the relatively short time frame this study encompassed, many alternative interpretations of the data could have been made. The surveys were completely anonymous and students were given as much time as they needed to complete it.

Description of the Data Analysis Plan

The students' absence rates for the school year 2002-2003 were accessed through SASI, the school's administrative and student information computer software. This data was compared to the statistics of 2003-2004 up to and including the month of April. These statistics were then pro-rated as to the month of the school year so that equal comparisons could be made. It is important to keep in mind the significant assumption that was necessitated by the short duration of time available to the intern for data collection. At the completion of the study, the data was coded, graphed, and analyzed, comparing general population and target population responses as well as attendance rates of the 2002-2003 school year in relation to the 2003-2004 school year subsequent to the advent of the AEP, and finally 2002-2003 school year drop out numbers in relation to the 2003-2004 school year's numbers.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

Data is power. Information collected from students leads to improved student learning. With new initiatives like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) educators are facing an ever increasing need to respond to the public in proactive instead of reactive ways. Schools are constantly being statistically scrutinized on each and every level. Highly effective schools must learn to adapt quickly through action research techniques. A negative feedback system will no longer suffice; schools must predict problems and proactively seek solutions in order to meet school level accountability.

All data have weaknesses. Data should be used as a tool, not a weapon. In this manner, if flawed data is used, it will do less damage. Definitions of statistics change from year to year, and cut off dates for graduation rates change. Different institutions have different definitions for graduation rates. Some track students only through part of their senior year, while others take grades 9 through 12 into consideration. These variations in recording and reporting statistics create confusion for those in and out of the education community. These laws cause some to doubt statistical information all together; however, interpreted correctly and used wisely, data can ultimately increase student achievement. This chapter answers two major questions, “What information was found?” and “What did it mean?”

Statisticians advise that data should not be used to assign blame, focus on the negative and most importantly never look at a single year in isolation from the larger picture. Unfortunately, in a study limited by time and scope such as this one, certain

liberties must be taken when interpreting the data. The intern's survey focused on student perceptions about themselves, the school, and the learning experience as a whole.

The intern surveyed seventy-one students from Paulsboro High School during the time period from January 12, 2004 to January 23, 2004 using an opinion survey (see appendix A). Surveys were collected on a voluntary basis and in an anonymous fashion. The survey population was a convenience sample of the intern's students and a judgmental sample of students who were placed in the Alternative Education Program (AEP). The data was then analyzed using each response to compile a general overview of the entire surveyed population. Next, the surveys were separated according to number of absences from the 2003-2004 school year. All students who missed 6 days or more of school up to January 23, 2004 were again analyzed as this better represented the target population. This sample of selected students was also compared to the general sample of students analyzed. This grouping did not represent a control attempt, instead it represents a target population/general population relationship. More specifically, it compared students who had missed 6 or fewer days of school with students who had missed more than 6 days of school from September 9, 2003 to January 23, 2004.

The first 12 questions of the intern's survey contained student demographic information. From the general population (the initial 71 surveys), it was found that 3% were in 8th grade, 9% were in 9th grade, 41% were in 10th grade, 41% were in 11th grade and 6% were in 12th grade. Paulsboro High School houses grades 7 to 12, however, no 7th graders were represented in the survey. The survey sample showed responses from 41% male and 59% female students. When asked how many years they had attended Paulsboro High School the results showed 6% for one year, 45% for 2 years, 24% for 3 years, 18% for 4 years and 18% for more than 4 years. The majority of students who participated in this survey had attended the school for 2 years indicating a possible high

transfer rate; however, the New Jersey State Report Card indicated a below average mobility rate for the last four years. Students were asked how many extra-curricular activities they participate in every year. The response was 21% participate in none, 15% participate in one, 25% participate in two, 11% participate in three and 28% participate in four or more.

The statistics showed that 64% of the students surveyed participated in extra-curricular activities. This majority of students was involved in activities which promoted a sense of self and a sense of belonging to the school community as a whole. Students engaged in these activities often participate in a level of practice for improvement that demonstrated a good work ethic.

Next students were asked how many high school activities or functions they attended per year. The survey showed 15% attended none, 10% attended one, 21% attended two, 13% attended three, and 41% attended four or more school events or functions. Once again, as part of the general population survey, the majority, 75% of students attended two or more school events or functions. The data suggested that students who felt integrated within the school attended more events. In addition by attending more events, students increased their level of integration within the school. This cycle of involvement versus integration is an important cornerstone of student-centered beliefs. This educational method focuses more on the learner than the learning. Thus, as educators, we should promote all types of extra-curricular activities which help develop a sense of belonging for all students. Ultimately, students who are involved with school on levels other than just the classroom build networks and connections which carry over into the classroom.

Many Paulsboro High School students work after school. These students work for a variety of reasons, spending money, clothes, a car and insurance, or to help support their

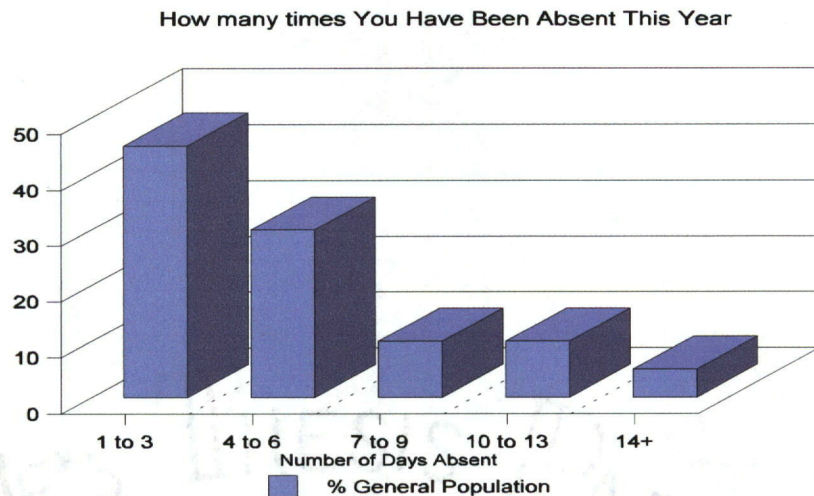
family. The data showed 58% of the students surveyed did not work at all, 4% worked 1 to 10 hours per week, 27% worked 11 to 20 hours per week, and 11% worked from 31 to 40 hours per week. Working 31 to 40 hours per week for 11% of the population surveyed showed that a significant population of students basically work full time while attending school full time. This is a very stressful proposition; such a demanding schedule leaves very little time for anything else in those students' lives except the basics, eating and sleeping. In many cases homework becomes a nonissue and school is often viewed as a place to rest.

Next, students were surveyed on their grades. The data showed 37% receiving A's, 36% receiving B's, 20% receiving C's, 6% receiving D's, and 1% receiving F's. The intern felt students may have reported grades higher than actually received, however, grade reporting proved to be of secondary importance. It is generally acknowledged that students give lack of achievement as a reason for truancy or dropping out. The intern chose to focus on a student centered approach, where the learner is more important than the learner's grades.

Students were also asked to report on their behavior. The intern believed this statistic also to be an area of false reporting. When given a choice, the majority of people will typically consider themselves to be "average". This data proved that presumption, 38% cited above average behavior, 53% cited average behavior, and 8% cited below average behavior. Behavior is a key ingredient in education and in life; however, many learner centered activists believe that the majority of behavior problems in classroom settings stem from students who are not understood or properly motivated. Learner centered teaching focuses on understanding each student as an individual, who deserves to have input in not only the material that is taught but also in how it is taught. In this fashion it is believed that many behavior problems could be alleviated.

This study focused on truancy, as such, attendance statistics were very important. Students were asked how many times they were absent from school per year. This question was a general one, this question did not focus on a specific year, just the perceptions of the students on their general number of absences per year. The data showed 52% absent 1 to 5 times, 25% absent 6 to 10 times, 15% absent 11 to 15 times, and 8% absent 20 or more times. This showed 48% of the students surveyed missed 6 or more days of school per year. This statistic may not seem alarming, especially when compared to the New Jersey State Report Card which indicates that Paulsboro High School was above the state average for 5 out of the last 10 years. Nonetheless, this survey targeted that 48% of students who missed 6 or more days of school per year and explored ways to help them achieve higher attendance rates.

The previous question on attendance led into the following question: students were asked how many times they were absent so far this year (the 2003-2004 school year) from September 9, 2003 to January 23, 2004. The data was as follows, 45% were absent 1 to 3 times, 30% were absent 4 to 6 times, 10% were absent 7 to 9 times, 10% were absent 10 to 13 times, and 5% were absent 14 or more times. The following graph displays the absentee data for the general population from the time period September 9, 2003 to January 23, 2004.



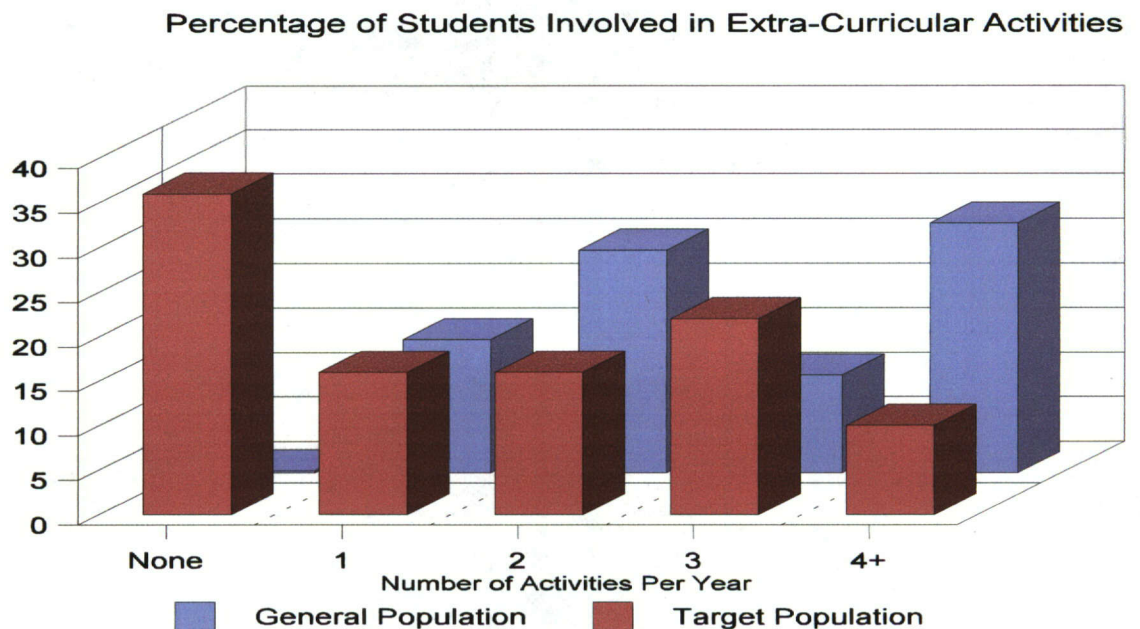
Once again this information was not surprising, instead this information was the starting point for further inquiry. The data shows that 25% of the students surveyed were absent 7 or more times from September 9, 2003 to January 23, 2004. This was then considered the target population, this target population consisted of 18 students from the initial general population of 71 students. The intern labeled these two populations for comparison, first being the “target population” of 18 students who missed 7 or more days by January 23, 2004 and the second being the “general population” of the original 71 students.

The general population contained more 10th grade students. Of the general population, 41% were in tenth grade and 41% eleventh grade. In comparison, the target population contained 35% tenth grade and 50% eleventh grade. This statistic is relatable to the fact that older student tend to be truant more often, and are more likely to drop out since the legal drop out age is 16. Most students start the 11th grade as 16 year olds, pointing to the fact that students are beginning to show the early warning signs of chronic absence and eventual drop out.

The male verses female ratio between the general population and the target population was almost statistically equivalent. The general population consisted of 41% male and 59% female. In comparison, the target population consisted of 45% male and 55% female. These comparisons led the intern to conclude that truancy is not a gender specific problem, it effects both male students and female students equally.

The number of years attending Paulsboro High School for the target population also closely mimicked the general population statistics. The majority of students, 45% for the general and 43% for the target, had attended Paulsboro High School for two years. This pointed to the fact that the number of years attending the school had no detectable effect on truancy.

Next, extra-curricular activities were analyzed for the target and general populations. The data showed a correlation between increase in absence with a decrease in extra-curricular activities. The general population displayed 21% of the students were involved in no extra-curricular activities, as compared to 36% of the students in the target population were involved in no extra-curricular activities. This is a significant difference, which points to the conclusion that students who were less involved in the school culture were more likely to be absent. The following graph displays the collected data on extra-curricular activities.

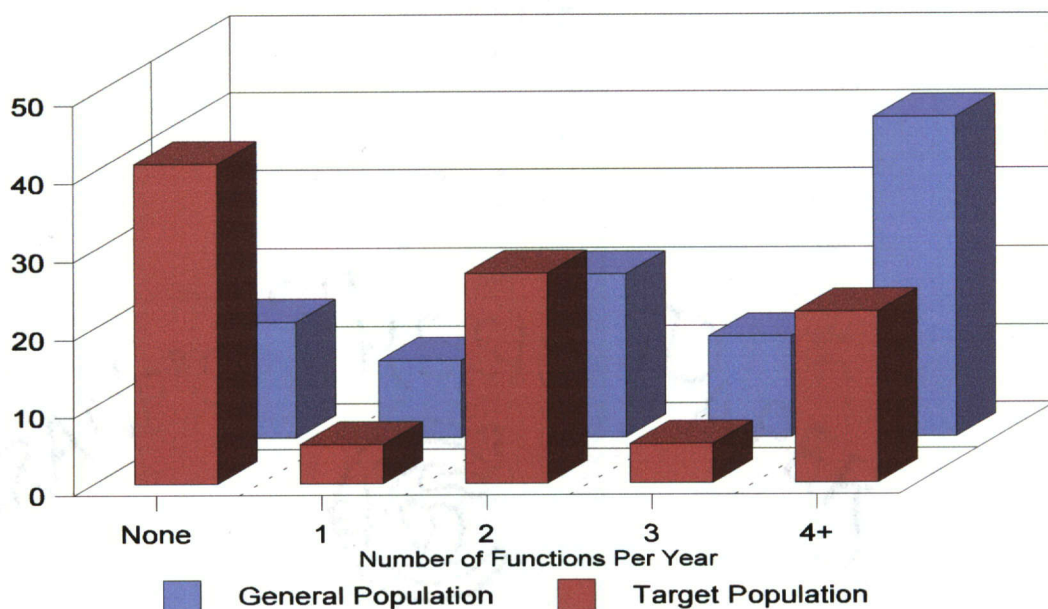


Students who were absent 7 or more times up to January 23, 2004 were less involved in extra-curricular activities, almost across the board. The intern found a slight increase in the target population for 3 extra-curricular activities per year, here 22% of the target population as opposed to 11% of the general population. This slight deviance from the predicted can be attributed to many factors not the least of which are, the short time

period of the study, and the limited survey population. Another possible reason for the inconsistency was the simple fact that often times very active high achieving students become ill and consequently miss increased amounts of school time. Also family vacations were frequently scheduled for the school year, thus causing the student to miss blocks of school time.

Another similar and interesting statistic involved school functions or activities attended per year. Examples of school functions or activities are dances, plays, sporting events, etc. The data showed a dramatic decrease in the number of events attended as the absence rate increased. See following table for a comparison of general population and target population.

Percentage of Students Involved in School Functions



The data reported percentage of school events attended per year. The general student population data was as follows, 15% attended none, 10% attended one, 21%

attended two, 13% attended three, and 41% attended four or more. The majority of students attended at least three events per school year. Conversely, the data for the target population was as follows, 41% attended none, 5% attended one, 27% attended two, 5% attended three, and 22% attended four or more school events per year. The data showed that 73% of the target population attended two or less school events per year. Once again the intern acknowledged a slight increase in percentages in the target population over the general population for the statistic of two events attended per year. The general population recorded 21% and the target population recorded 27%. The intern concluded that since the majority of students in the target population were 11th and 12th grades, the homecoming dance and the prom were the two major milestone events in their school year, and the two events attended by the target population may have been those events. This area of concern is a topic for future investigation.

Majorities of both populations recognized that participation in extra curricular activities afforded them the opportunity to get to know teachers and school staff better. Both extra-curricular activities and school related functions serve to develop a well rounded student aside from the academics. They provide opportunities for the students to socialize and interact with students (often like-minded) outside of the classroom setting. This socialization leads to an increased sense of belonging, which in turn increases the likelihood that students will be present in school. Students who are highly active in the school culture often feel as though they are missing a great deal more than just academics when they are absent.

The intern was unable to solidly relate after school work with truancy. The percentages of students working in the general population and the target population were almost, but not quite identical. In fact, the percentage of students not working at all was higher in students with more than 7 absences per year. With this limited research, the

intern dispelled the notion that students who work after school jobs are more likely to be truant. The intern learned through student and parental contact that most parents entered into an agreement with the working student which stated, if the after school work interfered with school then the job would be given up. Many proponents of students working through their high school years point to the fact that development of a strong work ethic is very beneficial to the student. This study supports this notion however cursory.

As discussed earlier in this study, behavior is a key ingredient in any successful classroom; however, views on how to achieve such are varied. This study attempted to relate behavior as an end product of successful instruction not the mandatory starting point of instruction. Students who felt involved in the instruction and who saw value in it were actively involved in the instruction and therefore were well behaved. This oversimplification is further complicated by over crowded classrooms and frustrated teachers. The data showed students who were absent 7 or more times up to January 23, 2004 reported 15% below average behavior as compared to the general population's 8% below average behavior. Students falsely report bad behavior as good, but rarely report good behavior as bad. This statistic is accurate. The intern relates the increased bad behavior among the target population as a result of the target population not being fully served by the school. Taking a student centered approach, these students should be further analyzed for their future plans and goals. This involves taking into account their interests and learning styles, and providing them individual education plans, regardless of academic achievement.

The demographic data obtained from this survey also analyzed availability of technology in the home. Students were asked if they had a computer at home. This statistic revealed a significant difference between the general population and the target

population. The data showed that 80% of the general population indicated that they had a computer in their home, while 67% of the target population indicated they had a computer in their home. The 13% difference in home computer ownership may be a strictly financial one. Paulsboro is a financially depressed area, this fact may preclude many families from purchasing a home computer as this could be viewed as a luxury. This statistic may also point to the assumption that parents with more financial resources automatically value education more than parents with limited resources. These sociological implications while very important, were outside of the scope of this research.

Grades are one measure of a student's performance. The target population showed a marked difference in grades over the general population. The majority of the general population indicated they earned A's and B's each at 37%. The majority of the target population indicated they earned C's at 49%. The intern recognized the cause and effect relationship between increased truancy and low grades as proved by the data. Additionally the relationship is negative feedback in nature, the lower the grades, the less likely a student is to be present in school. This cycle of failure and truancy must be broken in order to positively impact the target population.

Following the student demographic information in the survey was the section which focused on the student's perceptions about the school, the learning, and the learning environment. Following with the student centered theme, the first question in this section asked if the students felt their teachers really knew them as individuals. The data was contrary to the intern's theory. The intern had expected that the students who missed more school did so because in part their teachers knew them less. The data from this small sampling showed the opposite; 70% of the target population somewhat agreed that their teachers really knew them as individuals. To the contrary, 58% of the general population of the surveyed students felt as though their teachers really knew them as

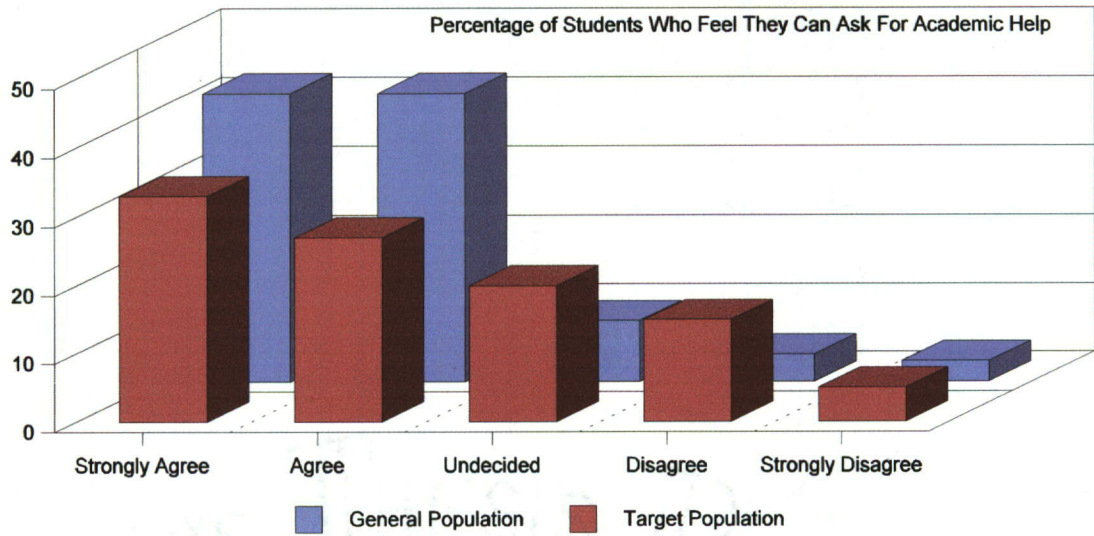
individuals. The intern believed that students may confuse notoriety with understanding a student as an individual. For instance, the target population was more likely to be disciplined due to behavior problems; this trend increases the likelihood that the teachers would have more dealings, good and bad, with students who were continually being disciplined. Students may consider negative attention as a means for further understanding of them by the teacher.

Next, students were asked if they felt students in this school knew each other well. This statistic did not offer any significant insight for the intern, as the percentages were comparable between the general population and the target population. The next statistic, also proved similar but not exactly between general and target population. This was a generally disappointing statistic. Students were asked if they felt students in this school really cared about each other. The data showed 10% of the general population agreed with that statement while only 5% of the target population agreed. This very low number reflected a vast majority of the student population feeling as though their class mates do not care about them. Obviously this statistic needs further investigation and may prove to be central to many school student body issues. This statistic offered other possible insights to the intern, especially in the areas of bullying, acceptance of diversity, and general student morale.

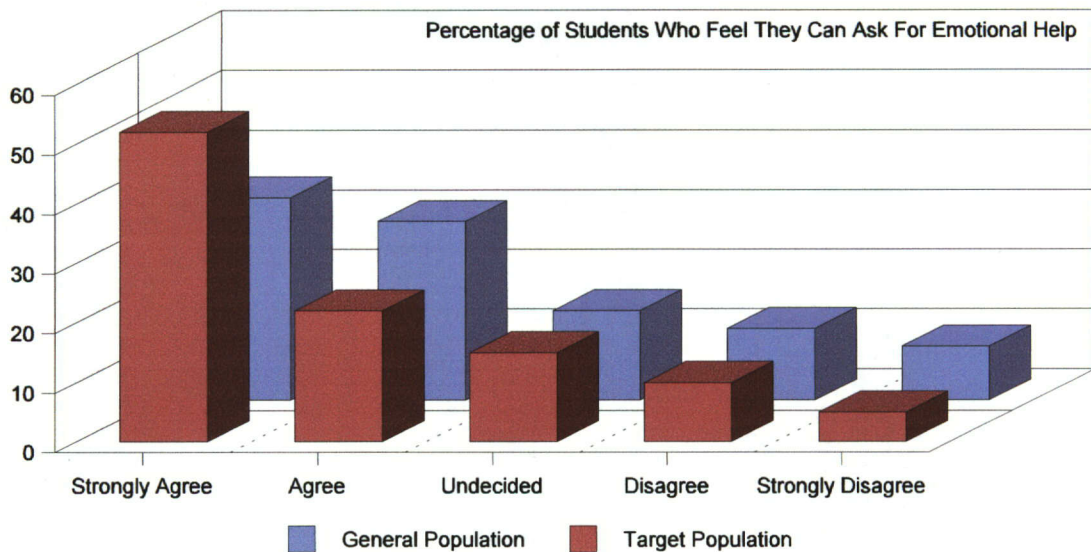
Next students were asked to rate the school climate (positive or negative). The data showed that overall the general population felt the climate to be more positive than the target population. The general population showed 56% of the students feeling positive about the school climate, while only 41% of the target population felt Paulsboro High School offered a positive school climate. The next related question asked the students how they felt the climate was for students other than themselves. The data showed 28% of the general population felt the climate was positive for other students,

while 20% of the target population felt the school offered a positive climate for others. Another related question asked students if they felt good about Paulsboro High School. The general population showed that 42% agreed that they felt good, while only 37% of the target population responded that they felt good about the school. Student perceptions about their feelings on the climate of the school and their overall feeling on the school would seem to be important. It would stand to reason as a student makes up his or her mind in the early morning, that student who feels good about the school in general would be more likely to attend. In each case regarding feelings about the school, the target population scored lower than the general population. The intern believed students became unsure about their feelings for their school as a result of not attempting to acclimate to the school culture, causing them not to participate in extra-curricular activities and school functions.

Next, the students were asked a series of questions on communication with faculty and staff. The questions focused on the level of comfort students felt in asking for specific types of help. Students were asked to rate their comfort level on asking for help with problems involving academics and emotional issues. The majority of all students surveyed were comfortable asking for help with various problems. One area of interest in the data was asking for academic help. Here the general population was significantly more comfortable asking for help. Then the data reversed, the target population was significantly more comfortable asking for help in situations involving emotional issues. The graphs on page 39 represent a comparison of the general and target population responses on academic versus emotional problems. The first graph represents the data collected when students were asked to respond to this statement: If I am experiencing academic problems, there are teachers or other staff members in the school that I can go to for help.



The next graph represents the data collected when students were asked to respond to the following question: If I was experiencing emotional problems, there are teachers or other staff members in this school that I could go to for help.



The two previous graphs supported the theory that students who missed an above average amount of school were less likely to discuss academic issues with their teachers. These students are precisely the students who should be carrying on meaningful discussions about learning with their teachers, but they are not. This disturbing discovery was balanced by the data on emotional issues. The target population was significantly more likely to discuss personal type issues with their teachers. This cause and effect relationship may have arisen from the fact that students who miss more school time had more personal problems to discuss, and that those were the very problems keeping them from attending school in the first place.

Another topic addressed in the survey was the students' perception of challenges offered in the Paulsboro High School curriculum. The positive effects of a rigorous curriculum are generally accepted. Students who felt challenged often rose to those expectations to achieve their potential. Certainly, students who were constantly under stimulated will learn mediocrity. The intern's data showed that the majority of the general population did not agree that most of their classes were challenging. Further, the majority of students in the target population felt most of their classes were challenging for them. The results of this data were confusing. Perhaps in an attempt to help all students succeed, teachers are lowering their standards across the board. The end result of this possible trend was a general population of unchallenged students and a target population of students who felt as though they were over challenged, during which time they were missing increased instructional time. With an ever increasing number of students being mainstreamed into regular education classes, teachers must deal with a widening gap in student achievement within a class. Often times frustrated non-special education teachers make up for the widening gap in ability by decreasing the level of rigor. This technique allows all students to achieve, but hinders each student from reaching their potential.

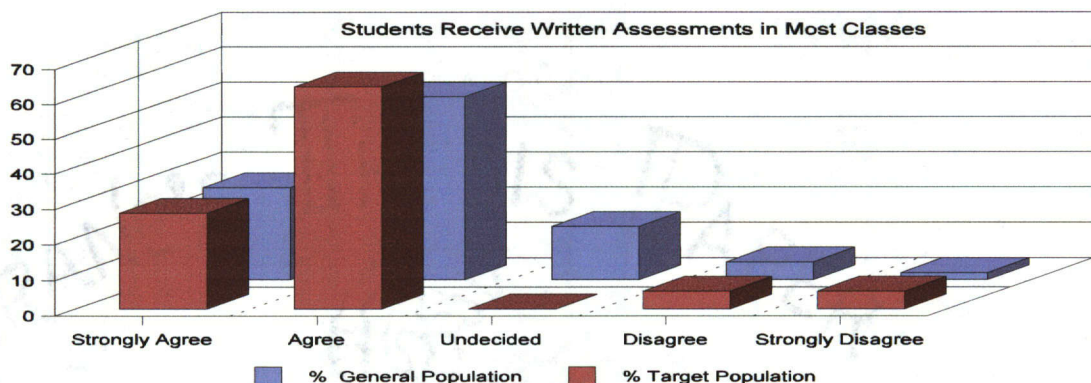
This frustrating cycle is disheartening at very least, and can only be curtailed through further education and training, possibly in the areas of layered curriculum and team teaching. This interesting side topic provides another area for future study.

The next very interesting statistic compared the extra curricular activities offered by the school to the specific interests of the students. The survey question asked, "The school offers extra-curricular activities and clubs that match my interests." The following data showed the student responses. The intern had anticipated a significantly high number of the target population students to disagree with this question. However, the data did not prove this to be true. In the general population 54% of the students agreed with this statement, while a staggering 66% of the target population agreed. This finding was in direct contradiction with the intern's initial beliefs. This anomaly was difficult to explain. The majority of the target population felt as though the school offers them interesting activities; however, they participated in these activities in smaller numbers. The students may have perceived these activities as interesting simply because they were not involved with them. This "grass is always greener" mentality is the only explanation the intern was able to offer.

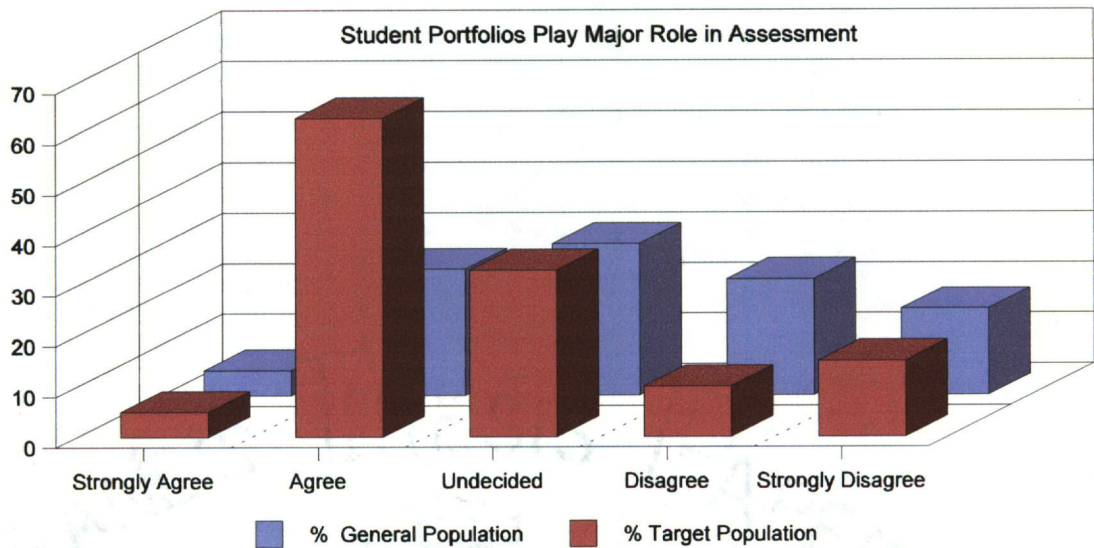
Research in general, educational research especially, can be a real eye opener. Often times however, your eyes are opened to the exact opposite of what was anticipated. This next statistic shows another of these eye opening reversals in perception over obtained data. Students were asked the following survey question, "I have the opportunity to take courses that match my needs." The data showed that 66% of the general population agreed that they had the opportunity, while 70% of the target population agreed they had the opportunity to take classes that match their needs. The students that were missing the most school were more agreeable that the classes they were offered were meeting their needs. Previous to this research, the intern would have

presumed the exact opposite response. Obviously this research was hindered by the duration of the data collection period; however, this study needs to be continued to determine if these trends are valid or just the exception to the rule which would be eliminated by a study conducted over more time.

Another area of interest that was contrary to the intern’s previous perceptions was types of assessments. Prior to the study the intern felt that the target population would had been asked to participate in mostly traditional forms of assessments such as multiple choice tests and quizzes. The data did not support this presumption; instead it supported the opposite. Students were asked to respond to the following statement, “In most of my classes, multiple choice, true/false, and short answer tests and quizzes play a major role in determining my grade.” The data showed 83% of the general population agreed, while 80% of the target population agreed. The difference was small, but when compared to the following two questions it made a broader statement. Next the students were asked to rate their assessment history with written assignments. Students responded to the following, “In most of my classes essays, papers and other types of written assignments play a major role in determining my grade.” The general population showed 78% in agreement with that statement, while the target population showed a staggering 90% agreement with the statement. See the following table for the comparison between general population and target population for use of written assessments.



Next, students were asked if portfolios played a major role in determining their grade. The data showed that 30% of the general population agreed with this statement, while 63% of the target population agreed that portfolios played a major role in determining their grade. The following graph displays the portfolio assessment data for both the general and target populations.



The preceding data concerning assessments showed that the target population was offered a variety of assessments by their teachers. The target students were more likely than the general population to be asked to write reports, maintain a portfolio, give speeches and do projects. Offering varied forms of assessment is one of the ideas embraced by advocates for student centered learning. In the area of assessment the target population was being offered a learning centered environment on a level not offered to the general population.

After conducting the study and analyzing the data the intern was able to support some of the initial ideas held at the inception of the research project. At the same time the intern was unable to make other connections due to the short duration of the study and the limited scope of the survey. The intern made the following conclusions as a result of development and implementation of this study.

The intern noted that comparing the target population versus the general population in terms of grade level revealed the students with higher absence rates were in higher grades. This allowed the intern to conclude the solution to this issue should have a component which focuses on the upper grade levels, since they are more likely to be truant.

Extra-curricular activities proved to be an area in agreement with the intern's initial perceptions. The intern felt the students who were less involved with school based activities and functions would be more likely to be truant. The data strongly supported this assumption. The cause and effect relationship offered by the intern is quite simple. Students who are involved with school in other areas besides the academic, will be more likely to build relationships and networks which develop a sense of belonging. This sense is enough in many cases to push the balance in favor of attending school instead of becoming truant. Increased extra-curricular contact gives the participants the answer to the question, "Why should I go to school today?" Unfortunately, many students ask themselves that question every morning without coming up with any answer at all.

Prior to the study the intern felt that students with high absence rates would be more likely to have a job. This was not the case. The data supported the fact that students with better attendance were more likely to have an after school job. The intern suggested this trend was directly related to the positive attributes of having a job. Young people learn many things from after-school jobs, not the least of which is a strong work

ethic. This work ethic translates into a sense of pride in a job well done, and showing up ready and on time for work and school. Another explanation for this trend is that students usually enter into an agreement with their parents which states, "I can keep my after-school job as long as my grades don't suffer."

Students are required to do more than just show up if they are expected to learn. Students need to be actively engaged in the learning in order to receive the full benefit from the instruction. Students must therefore maintain a certain level of discipline so the learning exchange may exist back and forth between teacher and student. Respondents who were absent 7 or more times up to January 23, 2004 were twice as likely to report below average behavior. These students must take responsibility for their own actions, however they may misbehave due to boredom or a feeling of disconnectedness with the curriculum.

The target population of students were twice as likely to feel that students in Paulsboro High School did not care about each other. The target population was also more likely to feel that the overall climate of Paulsboro High School was negative. These two statistics combined support the intern's conclusion that students who are more involved with the school through non-academic activities develop networks and connections which makes them feel as though they belong.

The intern clearly noted that students from the general population were more at ease asking faculty and staff for academic help. At the same time students from the target population were more at ease asking faculty and staff for emotional help. Here the intern could only speculate that since the target population achieved lower grades than the general population that made them more comfortable discussing them. On the other hand the target population may have had more emotional problems in the first place making it easier or more urgent to discuss their problems.

The intern believed that a challenging curriculum would keep the interest of the students. The data showed the majority of the general population did not feel challenged enough, while the target population felt over challenged. The intern believed a general dumbing down of the curriculum was responsible for this trend. In this manner both groups of students were prevented from achieving their highest potential.

In contradiction to the initial views of the intern, students from the target population were more likely to feel as though the school offered extra-curricular activities that fit their needs. This statement is ironic considering that the target population was significantly less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities at all.

Finally the intern concluded that the target population was significantly more likely to be given multiple forms of assessment. These assessments included papers, projects, and portfolios along with the traditional tests and quizzes. These data were contradictory to what the intern initially theorized. The intern felt that students missed more school as a result of being subjected to teaching strategies which were the opposite of learner centered. Instead the intern realized through data analysis that the students who missed 7 or more days as of January 23, 2004 were actually more likely to receive various means of assessments which catered to different learning styles.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the conclusions of this study and to relate the implications both on the students of Paulsboro High School and on the intern's own leadership development.

This study analyzed data obtained from the students at Paulsboro High School during the school year 2003-2004. The data was collected through a survey of student perceptions. The intern then interpreted the student perceptions into an action plan which if followed may decrease the truancy rate. The intern realized that the school community is only one of a large number of factors which mold and influence children as they grow and learn. Therefore the school plays a major role in influencing students to "do the right thing." Unfortunately, however, the school plays only one role in an ensemble of influences which impact children through to adulthood. Often times in this age students come to school with problems so immense that no amount of school based initiatives can increase their attendance rate; for these children the intern recognizes extra services above and beyond the norm are required and hopefully received.

Conclusions and Implications

The intern felt that all teachers must not view students as sponges to soak up knowledge. Instead teachers must view students as individual learners who need a certain level of understanding before they can achieve their potential. This understanding must focus on the learner first, not the learning first. Educators must gain an understanding of individual learning styles, and recognize that students who feel a part of the school as a

whole will be more likely to come to school and stay in school. Here the education community must offer different and varying activities both in the classroom through layered curriculum and learner-centered activities, and enhanced after school programs. Students must be offered these activities from early grades so as to develop a life long positive relationship with the students and the school on both an academic and non-academic level. These activities offer pure enjoyment, comradery, ethics, sportsmanship, and examples of success through hard work. These traits make the difference between a student in crisis choosing to go on or giving up. Students without this “informal education” too often choose the easy way out. In this case the easy way out is truancy which leads to dropping out. This is basically a “pay me now pay me later” approach. Investing in the adults of tomorrow by offering more and varied activities, or pay me later with increased poverty, crime, or just plain wasted potential. In a time when government is exercising more power over education through the purse strings, these officials need to recognize that education does not end at the classroom door. This thorough and efficient education needs to continue with highly effective after school activities which gain student interest and is the bridge between activities and learning.

Another important component of this study’s overall plan focused on student perceptions about going to school in a caring environment. Overall students at Paulsboro High School reported that students there did not care about each other. Once again offering more and varied activities would foster an environment where students could feel as though they are on the same team. These activities would also allow relationship building between students who may never normally come in contact throughout their academic day. Away from academic pressures and stereotypes diverse populations of students can learn to respect and appreciate each other.

Paulsboro High School currently offers several clubs which help promote respect and understanding. One club is SURE (Students United for Respect and Equality). Another program is the annual brotherhood assembly. This month long program promotes brotherhood and recognizes students for their achievements in that area. More activities of this nature are needed, along with activities which have no underlying agenda other than having fun. Additional activities will promote attendance, without any possibility of negative side effects other than costing additional money.

The intern also noted the positive effects on attendance from having an after school job. The intern did not suggest that all students be given a job. However, this school year Paulsboro High School did initiate a new program in this area. The new program was called "School to Work." This program allowed students with enough credits to attend school part time and work the other half of the day. This program has been successful at Paulsboro High School and has shown growth. This program combined the best of both worlds for some students, allowing them to receive the basics while entering the work force slightly earlier than usual. Attendance is stressed as a condition for enrollment into this program. This program works as an incentive to students who may have traditionally considered dropping out.

The intern showed through the collected data that students from the target population were less likely to ask teachers and staff for academic help. Educators need to realize this and develop programs which ask the students if they need help before they even realize it. One possible solution is automatic enrollment into a academic support group after a repeated pattern of absentee behavior is noted. This support group could take the form of a homework clinic or one on one mentoring, either adult or peer. In this manner the institution is taking a proactive instead of a reactive approach.

The intern recognized the increased reporting of below average behavior by the target population. The intern felt that this is a part of a negative feed back system. In other words, students become bored with the curriculum approach and in turn act out. If a student centered approach was taken students would be more actively engaged in the learning process and less likely to exhibit bad behavior. In a student centered classroom the teacher is constantly taking feedback from the students as to the desired path which would stimulate the most interest. In the educational field much more is known and practiced about discipline than learner centered activities. All schools have policy on discipline, however, few if any have policy on creating a learner centered environment in the classroom which fosters interest in the curriculum. The intern suggested that this be a area where Paulsboro High School and all schools should investigate further through professional development opportunities.

Another component to the learner centered approach is implementing varied assessments. The learner centered philosophy promotes varying assessment strategies in order to not cater to just one learning style. By using a multi-faceted approach to assessment, teachers can make instruction more interesting and benefit students with non-traditional learning styles. The intern's research supported the fact that the target population at Paulsboro High School was more likely to receive alternate assessments than the general population. This finding was contradictory to the intern's initial hypothesis. The intern suggested that teachers may have been experimenting with student centered activities, especially with students who were chronically absent.

Implication of Study on Leadership Skills

The entire internship experience has greatly influenced the intern. The experience has given many valuable lessons which now will not have to be learned during the very difficult task of acclimating to a possible administrative position. The greatest lesson

learned from this entire experience is not a particular wisdom or technique. Rather, the intern was made constantly aware of how much is still to learn. The vast body of knowledge required to make the many decisions day in and day out required of an administrator is mind boggling. As a result of this realization the intern now fully understands the absolute necessity of having a network of people and resources to draw upon. This resource must be readily available for feedback if the need arises. Administrators must be careful not to rush to judgement on issues which can be deliberated on. Likewise, administrators must act immediately on certain situations, such as in the case of student safety. The delicate balance between act immediately and stop to consult with the team presents a conundrum. A successful administrator is just one member of a very large team that makes up an educational community. No one member of this team is more important than the other; without a full squad the game cannot be played. In this respect the intern has learned that being a successful administrator is directly related to the ability to establish and maintain relationships. As a school administrator, many hats must be worn simultaneously, the most important of which is customer service representative. The customers we as educators service are the community, the parents, the teachers, and the students.

Implications of Study on Organizational Change

As of January 5, 2004 Paulsboro High School instituted an Alternative Education Program (AEP). This is a five day a week program which runs from 3:00p.m. to 7:00p.m. The initial rationale for the program was to offer an alternative to regular day school to non traditional students. The non traditional students took two forms, one form was any student currently sent out of district who was chronically absent from that program, and second it was open to students who were enrolled in the traditional day program who were unsuccessful or had dropped from the roll. The impetus behind bringing back into

district students who were sent out but did not attend their out of district assignments was financial. The district could save significant money in re-enrolling these students into the home district. The in district students targeted for the AEP program were students who dropped for various reasons, such as having a small child and being unable to find daycare, not being successful in day school, and dropping out of day school due to excessive absences.

The intern took a special interest in this program because it was directly related to the intern's study. As a result of the intern making the subject of this study known early in the school year, the intern was asked to teach science for the after school AEP program. The intern, although extremely involved already in the internship program, with administrative duties 2-3 hours per day, and a full teaching schedule, was unable to turn down this opportunity to actively participate in the action plan. The intern taught science Monday and Wednesday from 3:00p.m. to 5:00p.m. from January 5, 2004 until the end of the school year. The intern was able to see first hand the benefits of this program as it re-enrolled two of the intern's students who had earlier in the year dropped out. This allowed the intern to work very closely with these students to provide the science education they had originally given up.

The intern was able to compare the percent present statistic for the student population at Paulsboro High School for the school years 2002-2003 with those of 2003-2004. The intern focused on the statistics for the months of January, February, and March, since the AEP program started in January 2004 and the intern analyzed the data in March 2004. This data showed that the percent present rate rose 1.895% for the month of January, rose 1.08% for February, and fell only .10% for March. The data showed an increase in students present over the three month period during which the AEP program was in operation. Much more data would be required to make a direct correlation;

however, the statistics show promise. The increase may not be directly relatable to the program; however, the intern took great pride in the fact that 2 of his own students who had already dropped out, were re-enrolled thorough this program and continued to make improvements in their educational futures.

Further Study

As the intern collected data for this study, it was made evident that the data collection period needed to be lengthened significantly. This study was limited in scope by the necessary time constraints due to the one year length of the internship component of the program. The intern felt this study would greatly benefit from a 3 to 5 year span. In this manner the data collected would better represent the trends and a stronger correlation fo the effects could be made.

Along with expanding the time frame of the study, the intern was interested in expanding the scope of the study as several interesting side topics arose during the data analysis stage of the study. One of these areas of future study is the relationship between having an after school job and truancy. The data showed a decrease in truancy in the student population with after school jobs. This trend offers an interesting solution to the truancy issue. Another area for future study was the relationship between absence and the inability to ask teachers for academic help. The very students who need to ask for this type of help are less likely to do so. This puzzling manifestation of truancy, once understood, may help teachers be proactive with these students. Students at Paulsboro High School showed that the vast majority feel as though students there do not care about one another. This statistic although disturbing, may hold the key to many other problems which plague schools, such as bullying, fighting, drop out rate, truancy, and teen suicide. Lastly, the intern wished to investigate how Paulsboro High School could involve more students in extra-curricular activities and school functions. The intern was able to link

truancy with lack of participation in extra-curricular activities, as such this topic would shed light and prove useful in creating a multi-faceted plan to reduce truancy.

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Appendix A
Research Instrument

Opinion Survey

Directions: Please respond as honestly as possible to each of the questions circling one response. Your responses are anonymous. Please do not put your name anywhere on this paper.

1. What grade are you currently in?
7 8 9 10 11 12
2. What is your gender?
Male Female
3. How many years have you attended this school?
1 yr. 2 yrs. 3 yrs. 4 yrs. More than 4 yrs.
4. How many extra-curricular activities (sports, clubs, band, etc.) do you participate in every year?
none 1 2 3 4 or more
5. How many high school activities or functions do you attend each year?
none 1 2 3 4 or more
6. How many hours do you work at paid employment per week?
0 1-10 11-20 31-40
7. My grades are mostly
A's B's C's D's F's
8. My behavior is
above average average below average
9. How many times are you absent from school per year?
1-5 6-10 11-15 20 or more
10. How many times have you been absent so far this school year?
1-3 4-6 7-9 10-13 14 or more
11. I have a computer at home
yes no

12. My plans after high school include

- 2 year college
- 4 year college
- trade/technical school
- full-time work
- part-time school
- military
- undecided

Directions: Please read each statement carefully. Then circle the letters that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the following:

SA=Strongly Agree A=Agree U=Undecided D=Disagree

SD=Strongly Disagree

Example:

I think pizza with pepperoni is the best. SA A U D SD

If you are **really positive** that pepperoni pizza is best, circle SA (Strongly Agree).

If you **think** it is good but maybe not great, circle A (Agree).

If you **can't decide** whether or not it is best, circle U (Undecided).

If you think that pepperoni pizza is **not at all** good, circle D (Disagree).

If you are **really positive** that pepperoni pizza is **not very good**, circle SD (Strongly Disagree).

NOTE: In completing this survey, consider all the courses you have taken.

13. My teachers really know me as an individual. SA A U D SD
14. Students in this school know each other well. SA A U D SD
15. Students in this school really care about each other. SA A U D SD
16. Extra-curricular activities give me the opportunity to
get to know teachers and other staff members well. SA A U D SD
17. The overall climate of the school is positive for me. SA A U D SD
18. The overall climate of this school is positive for most
students. SA A U D SD

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 19. | I feel that this high school is a place where I really belong. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 20. | In general, I feel good about this school. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 21. | If I am experiencing academic problems, there are teachers or other staff members in the school that I could go to for help. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 22. | If I was experiencing emotional problems, there are teachers or other staff members in the school that I could go to for help. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 23. | If I am experiencing health problems, there are teachers or other staff members in the school that I could go to for help. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 24. | If I am experiencing social problems, there are teachers or other staff members in the school that I could go to for help. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 25. | I have some say over how I am taught certain subjects. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

26.	If I am experiencing family problems, there are teachers or other staff members in the school that I could go to for help.	SA	A	U	D	SD
27.	I am generally successful in my school work.	SA	A	U	D	SD
28.	In most of my courses, we cover a lot of topics, spending a short amount of time on each one.	SA	A	U	D	SD
29.	In most of my classes, what I learn is connected to the world outside of school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
30.	I believe that this high school is doing a good job of preparing me for my future.	SA	A	U	D	SD
31.	In general, for EACH subject, I spend about 30 minutes or more doing homework every night.	SA	A	U	D	SD
32.	In most of my classes, I am assigned homework every day.	SA	A	U	D	SD
33.	Classes in this school are structured so that students go to work with other students frequently.	SA	A	U	D	SD
34.	Most of my classes are challenging for me.	SA	A	U	D	SD

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 35. | My overall feelings about this high school are positive | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 36. | The numbers of students in my classes are appropriate for learning. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 37. | The school offers extra-curricular activities and clubs that matched my interests. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 38. | I have the opportunity to take courses that match my needs. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 39. | I am assisted by teachers and counselors in selecting courses that match my interests/needs. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 40. | In most of my classes, multiple choice, true/false, and short answer tests and quizzes play a major role in determining my grade. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 41. | In most of my classes, essays, papers, and other types of writing assignments play a major role in determining my grade. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 42. | In most of my classes, student portfolios play a major role in determining my grade. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 43. | In most of my classes projects, speeches, and other kinds of performances play an important role in determining my grade. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 44. | In my classes, I feel comfortable expressing myself. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 45. | Most of my classes emphasize memorizing information. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 46. | Most of my classes emphasize applying what I learn to new situations. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 47. | Most of my classes emphasize developing my own opinions and being able to support them. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 48. | Most of my classes require me to demonstrate creativity. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 49. | Most of my classes emphasize thinking, reasoning, and analyzing ideas. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 50. | Most of my teachers use a variety of learning activities during each class period. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

Feel free to add comments on a separate sheet of paper.

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