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A study and intervention of excessive absenteeism at Bridgeton High School

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A STUDY AND INTERVENTION OF EXCESSIVE ABSENTEEISM AT BRIDGETON HIGH SCHOOL

by
Sandra H. Myers

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree of The Graduate School at Rowan University May, 1999

Approved by

Date Approved
May 1999
ABSTRACT

Sandra H. Myers

A Study and Intervention of Excessive Absenteeism at Bridgeton High School
May, 1999
Dr. Ronald L. Capasso
Educational Leadership

The purpose of this study was to investigate reasons that students were absent and to study policies or programs that could help decrease absenteeism for students. The intern used an action research design by surveying students and interviewing teachers. The sample cluster in this study consisted of the students attending the Summer Credit Completion Program at Bridgeton High School. The population in which inferences were made was the student body at Bridgeton High School. The information, however, can be generalized to any special needs high school or one that is comparable in socio-economic status.

The intern looked at three areas in her conclusions. In the first area it was determined that the current Credit Completion Program did not deter absenteeism but instead only helped chronic absent students get promoted. In the next area it was determined that there was a need for a teacher-student mentoring program. Finally, it was determined that district leader and professional staff need to address the underlying reasons of student absenteeism in order to solve the problem of excessive absenteeism.
MINI-ABSTRACT

Sandra H. Myers

A Study and Intervention of Excessive Absenteeism at Bridgeton High School
May, 1999
Dr. Ronald L. Capasso
Educational Leadership

The purpose of this study was to investigate reasons for student absenteeism and to study programs that could help decrease student absenteeism. The study’s findings indicated that current district programs did not reduce student absenteeism.
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Bridgeton High School, like many other urban schools, is concerned with excessive student absenteeism. Test scores and graduation rates are low, while absentee rates and dropout rates are high. The intern focused on the attendance policies and the credit retrieval process at Bridgeton High School. She researched the topic, participated in the credit completion program, attended credit retrieval hearings, surveyed the students at risk of losing high school credits, and interviewed teachers. The intern believed that the existing policies and/or programs need improvement; evidenced by low test scores and high absentee rates. The intern believes that excessive absenteeism leads to students dropping out, which leads to long running adult failures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to find out reasons that students were absent and to study policies or programs that could help decrease absenteeism for students. The intern used an action research design by surveying students and interviewing teachers and local school officials from other districts. This study will result in a list of suggestions that the high school administration can use to help deter excessive student absenteeism. Student absenteeism at Bridgeton High School as with any urban high school, was defined generally as excessive which many times leads to student failures.

Students fail because those students returning from extended absences tend to
disrupt the classrooms to which they return and tend to earn low academic scores. Student disrupts not only diminish the educational process of the disrupter but also the individuals sharing the classroom with the disrupter. The ultimate result to student absenteeism leads to state standardized testing failures, low graduation rates and dropping out of school early (Praport, 1993).

The intern used effective research, observation, and surveying techniques to develop a list of recommendations. This list, submitted to the building administration, may be used to improve the student absentee rates. She assisted in the summer credit completion program, surveyed the students, and interviewed the teachers. The intern suggested the integration of policy or program ideas after reviewing policies and programs of other districts.

Definitions

**Excessive absenteeism** -- unexcused absences beyond 5% and 10% of the combined excused and unexcused absences for the school year. At Bridgeton High School a student that has reached eight unexcused absences must complete the credit completion program. A student that reaches 18 excused and/or unexcused absences has to appear before a panel hearing to determine whether he may attend the credit completion program or if they lose their credits for the school year.

**Credit Completion Program (CCP)** -- at Bridgeton High School is a program designed to reinstate a student’s credits after excessive absenteeism has occurred. The student can only be given credit reinstatement for those courses in which he received a passing grade during the school year. This program is offered during the summer for eight consecutive days for two and a half-hours a day. The students are given grade appropriate work that
must be completed with a 75% degree of accuracy by the end of the eight-day period. The student, at the end of the eight-day program, will have their credits reinstated to them.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations that could have effected the study. First, the intern only polled those students that attended the Summer Credit Completion Program. There were other excessively absent students that were ineligible to participate in the Summer Credit Completion Program. These students were not able to be questioned but could have valuable input into the study.

The intern also wished to point out that the students polled were a captive audience. Even though all surveys were anonymous, the students did not have a choice of whether to participate or not. All students were given the survey and expected to participate.

Another limitation of the study is that of written policy versus actual policy. The intern gathered data from other school districts. This data was in the form of written policies on attendance. Some of the policies and or programs were not actually run according to written policy. The intern questioned the validity of the written policy in these cases.

As with all studies, the amount of research available on a topic is always a concern. The intern could not find research on credit retrievable programs comparable to that of Bridgeton High School.
Setting of the Study

Quaker Richard Hancock founded Cohansey Bridge on the Cohansey River in 1686. When a bridge was erected at the present-day site of Commerce Street in 1716, Bridgeton broke away from Salem. Its location and its ambitious and talented population blessed Bridgeton. Bridgeton became among the most prosperous communities in New Jersey after the Civil War. Bridgeton’s importance also stems from the fact that between 1789 and 1913 it served as the Federal Port of Entry for most of South Jersey. The last customs house to be erected in Bridgeton is still used today as the City Annex building. Bridgeton is recognized as New Jersey’s largest historic district, nearly every corner of Bridgeton reflects its remarkable past (Chestnut, 1996).

Bridgeton is historically known as a manufacturer’s town. However, over the last fifty years many setbacks have been a continuous financial burden, characterized by failing industry and high rates of unemployment. The largest factory in Bridgeton, Owens-Illinois glass factory closed its doors in 1983, causing hundreds of citizens to lose their employment. Other companies to close their doors include Seabrook Farms food processing plant, Hunt Wesson canning factory, P.J. Ritter canning factory, Bridgeton Dye & Finishing, Coca-Cola, 7-up, and many sewing factories.

Recent efforts to restore industry to Bridgeton have proved unsuccessful. In 1986, the city opened an industrial park in which even today is only occupied by three very small businesses. The major employment opportunities for Bridgeton residents are South Woods State Prison and South Jersey Hospital. However, plans are underway for South Jersey Hospital to move their facility out of Bridgeton in the near future.

Bridgeton has one of the highest tax rates in the tri-county area and very few
ratables. Many families are on welfare. Many students do not complete high school, which in turn affects their potential to gain employment; it also affects the value they place upon education within their family.

Our schools are funded by a combination of state aid, local taxes, and other revenue, such as federal aid and local district surplus. Bridgeton is considered one of the "special needs districts" because it ranks near the bottom of all New Jersey districts in terms of community wealth, and because it is set in an urban area.

Many residents live in subsidized housing complexes. Single women head a large number of families. They live with high rates of crime, delinquency, drug abuse, teen pregnancy and school dropout. All of these are indicators of social dysfunction. Many children in Bridgeton encounter difficulties in school, which are the result of troubled family lives, lack of parental support, a dangerous environment, and other social and psychological factors that interfere with a child's success in school.

The Bridgeton school district serves about 3,900 students. The district reports that a total of 2,908 students are at-risk students, of which 683 attend Bridgeton High School. This total represents about 70% of the student population at Bridgeton High School.

Bridgeton represents a diversified population in terms of ethnic and cultural background, occupation and income levels. The 1990 census reported a population of 18,942, an increase of only 200 since 1980.

The racial makeup of Bridgeton Public Schools has changed considerably over the years due to several factors. One factor is the building of Cumberland Regional High School in 1975 that took the Bridgeton and the area sending districts and divided them.
This division significantly changed the racial and economic makeup of Bridgeton High School. A large influx of Hispanics in recent years has also changed the racial and economic makeup of Bridgeton Public Schools. Many Mexican migrants find employment on local farms. It is the fastest growing minority group in Bridgeton. Many Mexican migrant students and their families can not speak English. Usually these students attend English as a Second Language classes until they are able to function in the main streamed classroom.

School District

The intern researched absenteeism at Bridgeton High School during the Summer Credit Completion Program. This program consisted of students who have lost credits due to excessive absences. She conducted interviews of students and teachers. The intern created questionnaires that were used to survey the students while she gathered insight through her observances and experiences. The setting was appropriate because Bridgeton High School has an overwhelming number of students who would lose high school credits due to the state mandates. Urban districts are always looking for ways to improve student attendance rates.

The intern participated in the 1998 credit completion program. The intern created an expectation list for students that were distributed to them on the first day of attendance in the program (see appendix A). The intern discussed the expectation and consequence list with the program staff. The formal survey contained items such as: reasons for absences, program recommendations, and a rating of policies and practices to improve the process and to reduce the number of student absences. During the analysis of the data, the intern did phone interviews of the teachers involved in the program. The intern
contacted local high schools with students comparable in socioeconomic background, attaining information regarding procedures and policies concerning absenteeism.

The population includes all urban high school students. The sample the intern studied is those students that were enrolled in the 1998 summer credit completion program at Bridgeton High School. Thus making it a cluster sample, since this program was already grouped from the population. The study also included the data the intern collected from high schools, which were willing to provide information on comparable programs.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to the achievement of students. Students can only learn if they are present in the classroom (Beckerman, 1988). Student attendance correlates with student achievement; student achievement correlates with adult success. There is a greater chance of students being successful in life and being more productive citizens if they are in school (NJEA, 1989). Excessive school absenteeism leads to failure.

The intern's research made a contribution to the current practices of the high school, to the achievement of students, and to the achievement of those students as adults by proposing improvements to the administration. Students with excessive absences tend not to graduate. “Society’s technological demands are increasing, and individuals who don’t get at least a high school diploma have difficulty surviving--economically and socially” (NJEA, 1989). Even more startling are the statistics concerning welfare and prisoners. “Dropouts comprise nearly half of the heads of households on welfare, and similar percentage of the prison population” (Schwartz, 1995).
Organization of the Study

The focus of Chapter 2, The Review of Literature, was to present research on effective programs and policies that improve students' attendance rates. Some research presented programs and/or policies that are similar to current programs and/or policies at Bridgeton High School. Other research offered ideas that could lead to improved attendance rates for the students at Bridgeton High School. The research used in the review influenced the design of the study, the instrumentation, and the data analysis. The research along with the study conducted configured the list of recommendations and conclusions submitted to the district's administration.

The focus of Chapter 3, The Design of the Study, encompassed five areas. It addressed five areas related to the research design used for the study. First, was a description of the research design, then a description of the development and design of the surveys. Third, a description of the sample and the sampling techniques, fourth a description of the data collection approaches and last descriptions of the data analysis plan. The focus of Chapter 4, The Presentation of the Research Findings, was to present the information that was found in a clear and concise manner along with an analysis of the findings. The research included library research, district data research, student and teacher surveys, student interviews, teacher interviews, and other local district data.

The focus of Chapter 5, The Conclusion, Implications and Further Study, was to describe the major conclusions after analyzing the research; even more important are the corresponding implications to the district. It also highlights the progress of the interns' leadership development and the changes in the organization as a result of the study. Finally, it addresses the need for further study.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

One of the more critical problems facing today’s schools is excessive student absenteeism. Test scores and graduation rates are low while absentee rates and dropout rates are high. Students are not learning the positive skills needed to function in society if they are not regularly attending school. As students are absent, they miss the continuity of their lessons, which leads to incomplete or fragmented learning. In most classes, students need to build upon previous skills to succeed in the class. When students are failing classes, usually negative behaviors follow; standardized test scores drop, self-esteem lowers, and dropout rates increase. There is a strong connection between high absenteeism and life long failure.

Existing attendance policies are not working at all schools; on the other hand, some urban schools do report success. Many of these schools are creating stricter rules and heavier consequences; others are creating programs that include incentives and positive reinforcements; still others believe personal programs such as group counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and involving parents are the answers. The most successful schools integrate the above ideas.

State attendance policies

New Jersey law states: every parent, guardian, or other person having custody and control of a child between the ages of six and sixteen years shall cause such child
regularly to attend the 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 (NJEA Review, 1989).

Attendance is so vital to a student’s success in life that the state saw it necessary to make it mandatory. Even though attendance is mandated, students continue to absent themselves from school.

**Reasons for Student Absences**

Absenteeism is a multi-faceted, multi-layered problem intensified by long-term individual experiences (Vaznaugh, 1995). Another researcher cites a number of reasons for student truancy and absenteeism:

* Poverty
* Boredom
* Peer group influence
* Poor academic background and daily preparation
* Apathy of parents, students, community, teachers, and administrators
* Poorly constructed policies on discipline and attendance
* Inconsistent enforcement of rules by administrators and teachers
* Lack of support from central administration and board
* Poor curriculum
* Poor parent-teacher communication
* Lack of pride and sense of responsibility on part of students and staff (Keefe, 1994).

Factors such as unstable employment, transiency, child-rearing issues, and the emotional neediness of the parents were also commonly identified as problems contributing to high absenteeism (Early Intervention to Improve Attendance, 1996).
Early Intervention

Once a student creates a pattern of absenteeism it is likely that the student will continue with this undesirable pattern. If intervention is to be successful, remedial action must be taken early before these patterns become too deeply entrenched (Praport, 1993).

Some common programs include after school programs, peer-tutoring, parenting classes, preschool, Head Start programs, and full day kindergarten. In these programs student progress and attendance should be closely monitored. Also these at-risk students should have the assistance of the social service agencies.

Penalties for absences

Some school districts believe that if they create stricter rules and heavier consequences for school absences that these deterrents will improve the absentee rate. Many schools have instituted attendance procedures and policies to “get kids in class.” In the Comsewogue (N.Y.) School District, a committee comprised of teachers from various disciplines, special education department teachers, the school psychologist, parents, students, guidance counselors, and administrators developed a procedure that within the first year saw an increase in the average daily attendance rate of more than 3.65 percent and a reduction in the high school dropout rate (Beckerman, 1988).

Another successful school was North Scott High School in Iowa. After reviewing the attendance policies of twenty area high schools, they adopted what they called “A No-Nonsense Policy for School Attendance.” This policy includes rules such as:

* Students can be absent a maximum of ten classes in a course per semester and still receive credit.
* If parents do not verify an absence, it is truancy.
* Perfect attendance in a class may exempt a student from its semester-end exam.
In the first year of this policy, student absences fell sixty-five percent (Kube & Ratigan, 1991).

In one school the consequence for absenteeism affects after school activities. For a student to remain eligible to participate in any cocurricular activity (i.e., varsity sports, newspaper, chorus, band, prom, field trips, or even a school dance), the student must attend school eighty-five percent of the time (Beckerman, 1988). No distinction is made between excused and unexcused absences. An absence is an absence.

The Holton School District in Michigan has a policy in which a student’s grades are reduced for absences. Unexcused absences were subject to grade reductions without giving the student the opportunity to makeup the work (Zirkel & Gluckman, 1993).

A problem with the last two programs mentioned is that excessively absent students usually are not concerned with after school activities or their grades. Thus making these policies ineffective. Most schools have greater success with positive incentives rather than negative consequences.

Parental Involvement

Some parents may not understand that attendance is compulsory especially in families where their parents do not speak English (At-Risk Youth in Crisis, 1992). Some schools have interpreters come in to aid immigrant parents in communicating with the school.

Schools need to involve parents. Some administrators cite that schools should inform parents of their child’s schedule and, as quickly as possible, of their absences. An automated phone system to report student absences to parents has been helpful in some
districts. School personnel, in a nonconfrontational and respectful way, has personally contacted parents of truants, visited their home if necessary, and worked with them to overcome problems that cause absenteeism. One school even gives away alarm clocks.

In some school districts an attendance officer contacts parents because staff efforts have proven ineffective. Officers offer case management services to families, or initiate involvement with juvenile or family courts.

Some schools use parent workshops to provide information about the following: the consequences of truancy (for students, educationally and legally, and for families, who may be held legally liable and suffer economic sanctions); ways to communicate realistic expectations about school achievement and respect for school and educators; signs of children’s disengagement from school; and strategies for getting children to school. Involving families in adult basic education is a way to benefit those families while also helping them to develop a commitment to education (Urban Policies and Programs to Reduce Truancy, 1997).

**Incentives to improve attendance**

Many districts have chosen an alternate way to boost attendance -- incentives and positive reinforcements. An experiment in Red Bank High School gave cash to students who achieved certain standards. The students received twenty-five dollars a week for attending classes and achieving certain grades. School officials claim that the program resulted in gains for some students, but others maintained that the program corrupts young people and is an insult to students who get no financial reward (NJEA Review, 1989).
One school district decided that it would boost attendance by adding an element of surprise. At Robinson Challenge School in Largo, Florida, a student never knows when they might be treated to popsicles after physical education class, free time in the park, or a few hours to decorate the halls for the holidays. That is because they keep the “Surprise Day of the Month” a closely guarded secret until the students arrive at school on the designated morning. They state that attendance is improving because of this element of surprise (Boost Attendance with an Element of Surprise, 1996).

Another program includes group counseling for absentee students. A primary goal for school counselors should be to promote the self-confidence and self-worth of all students, but especially of potential dropouts. Larsen and Shertzer (1987) described a program designed to accomplish this goal. It included identifying potential dropouts as early as elementary school and starting support programs. They suggested working with these high-risk students in small groups of six to ten members with two or three non-potential dropouts mixed in. Through group participation, potential dropouts learn that other students also have adjustment problems, that not all students plan to drop out, and that they can provide each other with support and suggestions for resolving problems (Praport, 1993).

Another program included tutoring and counseling sessions that were held during the regular school day. Each group of at-risk students was assigned a tutor who met with them twice a week. Each individual was also assigned to a counselor once a week. Topics discussed in the counseling sessions included motivation, real world relevance of school and course assignments, academic problems, career goals, and study habits. As
was predicted, this dropout intervention program showed significant reduction of absenteeism and dropout rates (Praport, 1993).

A program at Pocomoke High School in Worcester County, Maryland, analyzed the differences in attendance patterns of two groups of sophomore students. The control group consisted of twenty randomly selected students who were sophomores during the 1983-84 school year that had demonstrated poor attendance in the ninth grade. The experimental group consisted of twenty students randomly selected from the tenth grade during the 1984-85 school year that also demonstrated poor attendance in the ninth grade. The entire sophomore class that attended school during the first two marking periods of the 1984-85 school year received the intervention that included the following:

- Letters sent home to parents explaining the program.
- Attendance awards for each student in the homeroom with the highest attendance.
- Names of students with perfect attendance announced on local radio stations and printed in local newspapers.
- Certificates awarded to each student that maintained perfect attendance the first two marking periods.
- A personal perfect attendance letter sent home to each student that had perfect attendance in a marking period.

This intervention resulted in improved attendance for the tenth-grade students in the experimental group. The data collected indicated that the improvements carried over into the third and fourth marking periods (VanSciver, 1990). Equally as important as the results of the study were the student responses to a survey conducted at the conclusion of the program. All tenth-grade students during the 1984-85 school year were given an evaluation form that solicited responses regarding several components of the program. Sixty of the eighty-seven students who replied said their attendance for the first two marking periods of the 1984-85 school year was higher than their attendance for the first
two marking periods of the previous school year. Fourteen students reported that they were asked by another student to come to school and twenty-three students reported that they had asked another student to come to school (so the homeroom would receive an attendance award). It is doubtful that any of the students would have been asked or would have asked another student to attend classes if the program had not been in place (VanSciver, 1990). The most revealing information collected in the survey concerned what the students felt most influenced them to attend school. Having their names included in the paper and on the radio at the end of the first and second marking periods was the component the group reported as most influential, followed by receiving a certificate, receiving a personal letter from the principal, having their names posted on the school bulletin board, receiving an award for highest-attendance homeroom, receiving a call from the principal at mid-term, and having positive statements read during first period each day (VanSciver, 1990).

A personal touch

Some programs go beyond that of the previously mentioned incentive programs; they become more personal. Much research states that if a student feels a bonding with someone at school that their absentee rate improves. One teacher in Mansfield, Pennsylvania, uses what she calls attendance cards. She hands out five by eight index cards to every student the first day of school. The students fill in their name, address, and answer a few personal questions on this card. The teacher then takes a photograph of each student that she affixes to each student’s card. As students enter class each day, they sign their cards and place them in an attendance folder. The teacher picks up the unclaimed cards, marks the students absent and attaches any worksheets that they may
Another program involving a personal touch is called PODS (Providing Opportunities for Developing Success). This program is based in Ontario, Canada. The main goal of PODS was to develop a sense of belonging in at-risk students, their identification, and their membership within the school community. There were two teachers assigned to a POD, which consisted of about 55 students. The PODs were involved in a variety of activities that would help meet its goal. Some of the activities included peer tutoring, peer counseling, peer mentorship, and many programs aimed at developing a support network for each student. The unique feature of the PODS project is its comprehensive nature. It provides services to students within the schools without separating at-risk students. A wide range of services that are needed by at-risk youth have been identified and blended together in regular integrated school settings. The PODS project reflects the belief in supporting diversity through unity. It embodies the belief that learning takes place within social relationships and a caring environment. Kids learn best in an environment that instills and promotes self-esteem and which provides more personal and caring contact with fewer teachers (Roberge, 1995).

Teachers reported that PODS participants in the peer tutoring program "are some of the best tutors: the most compassionate and most dependable." Students reported that involvement in PODS had a positive effect on self-esteem and social skills, in the words of one student, "I learned people skills, how to communicate better and how to work with others" (Roberge, 1995).
A rather new concept in improving attendance and student achievement is students having a teacher assigned to them to be their mentor. Teachers getting to know students better or providing a personal touch take this program farther. Every student should be well known by at least one adult in the school. Currently, guidance counselors in middle or high schools may be responsible for up to five hundred students. Such caseloads spread the talents and training of guidance counselors impossibly thin. Through small group advisories, homerooms, or other arrangements, teachers and other staff can become mentors to and advocates for students, as well as primary contact for parents. Advisors should remain with the students throughout their middle or high school experience (Turning Points, 1990).

Since absenteeism is such a large problem in all of our schools regardless of socio-economic background, it is a concern for all. Each school district with its own culture must combat the problem uniquely. Though the research is very important, open-mindedness together with determination remain a district’s best weapon.
Chapter three will address the five areas related to the research design used for this study. The first area addressed will be a general description of the research design used for this thesis. The second area addressed is a description of the development and design of the research instruments used in the study. The third area is a description of the sample and sampling technique used in the study. The fourth area is a description of the data collection approach used and the fifth area is a description of the data analysis plan used in the study.

General Description of the Research Design

The research design used in this study was qualitative research. As in qualitative research, the intern operated in a natural setting while maintaining an open mind about what was being observed. The intern did not manipulate or intervene in the research activities, except by her presence in the situation. This research design required flexibility and a tolerance for adjustment as the research progressed. It was the perceptions of those being observed that was important to the study, therefore these perceptions were observed and recorded in order to obtain an accurate measure of reality.

Qualitative research uses inductive inquiry, which means it commences without any preconceived theories or hypothesis. However, a researcher’s own background usually influences him/her so some information is likely to be available regarding the
research problems. The intern’s background influenced her perception of the students in this program. The intern’s own experience working with these students may have influenced how the intern questioned the students and worded the questionnaires.

Development and Design of the Research Instruments

Data collection in qualitative research deals with a host of issues, especially when the data collection is done in a present situation such as the Summer Credit Completion Program at Bridgeton High School. There are two methods of data collection in qualitative research, interactive and noninteractive. Both methods were used in this study. The intern actually interacted with the subjects who were being studied in the Credit Completion Program and the intern studied other school’s attendance policies.

Data collection techniques used were interviews and questionnaires given to the students in the program. Other data gathering was in the form of gathering other area schools’ attendance policies and interviewing the attendance officer at these sites.

The development and design of the collection techniques were driven by the design of the study. The interviews with the students helped determine which questions were used on the questionnaire (see Appendix B). The questionnaire given to the teachers drove the questions that were asked in the telephone interviews (see Appendix D).

Sample and Sampling Technique

Sampling is an example of the need for specific detail. The sampling plan used must consider terms of both external and internal validity of the research project being studied. This study involved Bridgeton High School students in grades nine through
twelve (the population). The actual sample is the students that were given the questionnaire during the Summer Credit Completion Program at Bridgeton High School.

The selection of students to participate in the study was not selected at random from the population, but rather a specific group, in that these students signed up for this program to reinstate their credits. These credits were lost due to the students having accumulated at least eight unexcused absences in the previous school year. Thus making it a cluster sample, since this program was already grouped from the population. The sample of students had special insight into the problem of absenteeism in that all in the cluster sample experienced excessive absenteeism.

Data Collection Approach

Data collection in qualitative research must deal with many issues, especially if the data collection is done in a current situation. The researcher must have access to the situation, which in some cases may require special arrangements. However, for this study the intern conducted the study while working as a teacher in the program. Access was automatic and data collection was unobtrusive.

The intern assumed the role as instructor and tutor. This role offered basic instruction on an individual as needed basis. The intern distributed the questionnaire to the subjects as well as personally interviewed several students. The questionnaires were answered anonymously and without intern interference so as not to taint the study or the data being collected. The data collection instruments were collected and reviewed. The information from the questionnaires were tallied and recorded for later use in the study.
Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis in qualitative research begins soon after collection of data begins. One major complication of qualitative research is that it produces large quantities of information in the form of field notes, questionnaires and interviews. All of these examples were present in this study. Organizing the information was important in order to determine what was necessary for the purpose of this study. Information was categorized into several headings as follows: reasons for student absences, suggestions for improved attendance by students, suggestions for improved attendance by teachers, and an evaluation of policies and/or programs of area schools.

The questionnaires and interviews gave insight into the reasons that students were absent. The questionnaire given out during the program asked the students questions about what suggestions they had that could improve student attendance, their opinion of what the school could do to encourage better student attendance, and their opinion of the effectiveness of the current credit completion program. After the completion of the program, the intern interviewed the teachers that participated in the program. These teachers drew from their knowledge and the experiences they had from teaching in a district where attendance is a major concern. They gave their suggestions of how to improve student attendance.

The intern used the information gathered from the interviews, questionnaires and current research to suggest ways to the administration that could help student attendance rates at Bridgeton High School.
CHAPTER 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

Introduction

Chapter four will present the research findings and answer the two major questions, “What information was found?” and “What did it mean?” The intern used several different methods of research. The intern gathered data through formal research, observations, interviews, and surveys.

Observations

The first thing the intern did was to observe the situation. The intern taught in the Summer Credit Completion Program the previous summer. By observation a researcher can gather much insight about a program or situation. The intern assessed a need for a written policy on the rules of credit completion. With the permission of the building principal, the intern generated a form that all students that attended the Summer Credit Completion Program had to sign. (See Appendix A) Rules in written form serve the teachers and students in that there was little that was to be left to one’s discretion.

Student Interviews

The next step in the process was to interview students. The intern desired to know reasons why students were absent. The information gathered from the Initial Attendance Interview Sheet (See Appendix B) was later used to make a questionnaire that was distributed to the sample of the study. The intern used the interview sheet as a
worksheet as she interviewed many students. The intern asked two questions, “Tell me
the top five reasons students do not attend school” and “What would make you come to
school more?” The responses to the first question varied from illness, missed the bus, to
fear of the student being put in In-School Suspension for being late. The responses to the
second question varied from have better lunches to improve the teachers and
administrators. The responses to these two questions were used to generate the
questionnaire that was used to survey the sample population.

**Student Questionnaires**

The Student Credit Completion Questionnaire (See Appendix C) was distributed
to 71 students in attendance of the Summer Credit Completion Program. The intern
desired not only to find out common reasons that students were absent, but also to
explore ideas that would encourage better attendance during the regular school year. The
intern wished to point out at this time that the questionnaire was self-reported by the
students and that the validity of the responses are questioned by the intern. The intern
hoped that by the questionnaire being anonymous that the students answered the
questions openly and honestly.

The following are the results from the survey:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Absences</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5 times</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 times</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 15 times</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 20 times</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 20 times</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unsure</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reasons for absences | Percentages
---|---
Illness | 77%
Suspension | 49%
Family obligations | 61%
Missed bus/lateness | 49%
Fear of In-School or Suspension | 24%
Other | 37%

More than fifty percent of the students responded that they missed school more than eleven days. Almost fifty percent of the students surveyed have missed more than ten percent of the previous school year. The intern finds these figures to be alarming. Students can not learn if they are not in school.

The reasons the students reported for their absences are also of great concern to the intern. More than three quarters of the students reported that illness was a reason that they were absent. The intern would like to point out at this time that none of the students in the credit completion program had a chronic illness that was excused by a doctor for absence from school. This means a doctor did not treat the absences reported. Student absences, with a doctor’s note, are excused absences and do not count toward the loss of credit for the student.

Almost two-thirds of the students reported that family obligations such as babysitting, funeral, court dates, or vacations were a reason for their absence. Many of the female students had children that caused them to be absent from school because of having no babysitter or the child was sick. The intern does not wish to delve into the area of teenage pregnancy at this time; but would like to mention the fact that teenage pregnancy has a negative impact on many students’ attendance rates.

Half of the students reported that they were absent due to the fact that they missed the bus or got up late. A student that is late without a parent’s signature is assigned an
In-school Suspension for that day. In-school Suspension is held in a room where the student may not talk or move about the whole day. The student completes his normal work in this room. The student is served lunch in this room and does not have the luxury of his usual activity of communicating with friends and teachers. Most students detest this type of suspension and will avoid it at all cost. Many students choose to be absent a day from school rather than to be late and have In-school for the day.

The questionnaire had two open-ended response questions. Only fourteen students responded to the first open-ended response, “What program could the school offer to save your credits?” However, some of their responses showed their sincerity in wanting to help students improve their attendance. Several students suggested tutoring and extra classes after school that the students could receive credit for. Eight of the fourteen responded that they would prefer to have a credit completion program after school in the evenings instead of in the summer. Two of the respondents stated that they would like to attend night school.

The second open-ended response was “What could the school do differently that would encourage more students to attend?” Fifty-four of the seventy-one students responded to this question. Almost half of those that responded stated that the schools should improve the teachers and the administration. Many of these responded that they would like school to be more interesting to them. Some students even mentioned teacher’s names that made school fun and interesting. Eighteen of those that responded stated that the rules were too strict. They felt that the lateness rule in particular was of great concern to them. Many of the students felt that teachers and administrators did not care about them as a people. Some of the students’ responses were for teachers to care
more or for teachers and principals to get more involved with the students and the activities of the school. Some of the less popular student responses were better lunches, shorter classes, more assemblies and field trips.

The intern was impressed with the responses to these questions. The students in this program gave much insight into the reasons that students are absent. The intern hopes that the students that responded openly and honestly will think about their responses to these questions before they make the choice to be absent again.

Teacher Interviews

The Teacher Credit Completion Program Questionnaire (see Appendix D) was used as a worksheet to record the responses of the teachers interviewed. The intern interviewed the teachers over the telephone upon completion of the Summer Credit Completion Program. Six of the eight teachers involved in the program were interviewed. Two teachers were unable to be reached for an interview. The responses that the teachers gave were surprisingly similar. All of the teachers interviewed responded the same to the question, “if there were no state mandates, what would you elect to do with excessively absent students?” They responded that they would drop the student from the rolls for the current school year and allow the student to come back the following school year or enroll in alternative or adult high school. The teachers felt that the school was being too lenient by allowing a student that has missed ten, fifteen, or even twenty or more days to come to school for two and a half hours a day for eight days in the summer and make up all of their credits. Teachers felt that more stringent rules were necessary for the good of all students, those in regular attendance and those with excessive absences alike.
All of the teachers responded to the question, “How does absenteeism effect your classroom?” relatively the same. One teacher stated that students that are frequently absent breaks up the continuity of lessons. Another teacher stated that the excessively absent student is usually the biggest discipline problem in her classroom. She stated that frequent absenteeism is destructive and disruptive to her classroom. At least four teachers stated that excessive absenteeism effected group work and that they hesitated doing lessons involving group work because of frequent absenteeism.

All of the teachers surveyed felt that the Credit Completion Program was effective in that it reinstated the credits to students that lost them; but the teachers also felt that this program was in no way a deterrent for absenteeism. One teacher even felt that the students knew they could fall back on this program to reinstate their credits so the students wouldn’t bother to come to school during the school year. All teachers felt that we need to search for better ways to deter absenteeism.

One teacher mentioned that there should be an adult in the school that each and every student is accountable to everyday. The adult could be the homeroom teacher, a principal, secretary, guidance counselor, or any other adult that is in the school. The intern thought this was a new idea for this school. As a result of the teacher interviews, the intern decided to pilot a program that involved an excessively absent student being mentored by a teacher.

Absenteeism is a multifaceted complex problem that faces today’s schools. The intern seeks to understand the reasons why students are absent. The intern believes that in order for schools to improve student attendance rates that the schools need to seek the root of the problem. The intern found new insight into the reasons of excessive
absenteeism as a result of the student surveys and interviews. As a result of the teacher interviews, the intern was posed with new ideas about mentoring excessively absent students. There is still much more work and research that need to be done. If only one student benefits from the results of this study, then it has all been worth the time and effort that has been rendered into this study.
CHAPTER 5
Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Introduction

The last chapter of this thesis describes the study’s major conclusions and their corresponding implications. It also highlights the conclusions and implications of the study on the intern’s leadership development. Finally, it addresses how the organization changed as a result of the study and the need for further research and study.

Credit Completion Program

The first major concern of the intern was whether the Credit Completion Program at Bridgeton High School attained the outcome that the administration had hoped. As of March of this year, there are 170 students that need to complete Credit Completion before they are allowed to go on to the next grade. This number represents about 20% of the student population. One out of every five students attending Bridgeton High School needed to complete Credit Completion. The intern drew the conclusion that that the Credit Completion Program did not deter absenteeism but only helped chronic absent students move on to the next grade. Educators need to seek other methods of dealing with excessively absent students. We need to intervene before students reach the point where they are in danger of loosing their credits.
Teacher-Student Mentoring

The sample of students that responded to the open-ended question, "What could the school do differently that would encourage more students to attend?" had some good ideas. Many of the students felt that teachers and administrators did not care about them as people. Some students wrote that they wanted administrators and teachers to get involved more with school activities and with them as students.

After reviewing the response to this open-ended question, the intern sought out teachers to mentor chronically absent students. Four teachers agreed to mentor students. After consulting with the vice-principal in charge of attendance, the intern had the teachers choose a student from the credit completion list from the previous year. Personal and educational information about the students was gathered by the intern and shared with the cooperating teachers. The information was organized on a form (see Appendix E) and given to each teacher. The teachers were also given a form to keep a record of contact with their student (see Appendix F).

As of early November, these students had already started the dangerous pattern of absenteeism. The teachers had daily contact with their student. They took extra time to help the student and tried to address any problems that they had. By the end of the school year, two of the four students had improved attendance. One student was expelled from day school due to his being involved in violent situations. The last student was on the list for having to complete Credit Completion again this year.

The intern desires that this type of Teacher-Student Mentoring Program be tested on a much larger scale. She believes that giving students more personal attention will improve not only their attendance but also the students' grades and conduct. She
suggested to the administration that each student that enters Bridgeton High School be assigned to a caring adult in the school. The adult would not have to be a teacher; guidance counselors, administrators, social workers, coaches, or even custodial staff can provide a caring environment for the students.

A Teacher-Student Mentoring Program needs to be studied in more depth here at Bridgeton High School. Training would need to take place for the adults and it could cost the school district money. The results of this type of program would far outweigh the cost of implementing it. If only one child is reached through this intervention, then all the time and effort expended would be all worth it; for a child is priceless.

Reasons for Absences

The sample that was questioned in this study stated that reasons such as illness, suspension, family obligations and missed bus or getting up late was the major reasons they were absent. Much more research needs to be done to investigate the reasons of why so many students are absent from school. Once these reasons are identified, the intern feels that a task force needs to be formed that will address these problems. Without addressing the underlying reasons of student absenteeism, the problem of excessive absenteeism will continue.
References


APPENDIX A

DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES FOR
SUMMER CREDIT COMPLETION PROGRAM
1998 Summer Credit Completion Program

**Reasons for Dismissal from program:**

Dismissal = being sent home for the remainder of the program with loss of credits

1. Being late (not in room) at 12:15 PM
2. Insubordinate (failure to follow directions when asked)
3. Leaving program without permission
4. Refusal to work on assigned tasks
5. Sleeping
6. Eating or Drinking
7. Inappropriate talking
8. Cursing or profanity of any kind
9. Disrespectful behavior towards teachers

**Reasons to be detained for an additional session beyond the eight days already assigned for credit completion:**

1. Prolonged lavatory use
2. Failure to successfully complete assigned work
3. Extenuating circumstances
   For Extenuating Circumstances see Ms. Neuhaus

I read and understood the above rules. ________________________________

Student Signature

*****Keep this Form in the front of your Folder*****
APPENDIX B

INITIAL ATTENDANCE INTERVIEW SHEET
Initial Attendance Interview Sheet
(Later to be used in writing the Questionnaire for Credit Completion Students)

1. Please tell me the top 5 reasons students do not attend school.

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

2. What would make you come to school more?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

STUDENT CREDIT COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRE
Student Credit Completion Questionnaire

1. How many days were you absent during the 97/98 school year? _______

2. Normally is the number of absences around the same each year you have been in school?
   a) _____ yes, about the same
   b) _____ no, previous years were lower
   c) _____ no, previous years were higher

3. Please check off all the reasons you were absent the past school year.
   (check all which apply)
   _____ illness / doctor / pregnancy
   _____ suspension
   _____ family obligation: babysitting, funeral, court date, vacation, etc.
   _____ woke up late / missed bus
   _____ to avoid In-school Suspension / Suspension from lateness
   _____ other

4. Does the current credit completion program work? Yes or No
   Please explain.

5. Besides excusing all your absences, what program could the school offer to save your credits?

6. What could the school do differently that would encourage more students to attend?
Teacher Credit Completion Program Questionnaire

1. Give your opinion on the effectiveness of the Credit Completion Program at BHS.

2. What do you feel the district/administration and/or teachers can do to improve student attendance?

3. How does absenteeism effect your classroom?

4. Pretend there are no state mandates, what would you elect to do with excessively absent students.

5. Would you be interested in being a mentor to an attendance at-risk student?
APPENDIX E

STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM INFORMATION FORMS
## Discipline & Consequences Update
### September 1998

**Student:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Infraction</th>
<th>Infraction</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9/18/98</td>
<td>Fighting at Millville Football Game; Arrested at Game</td>
<td>Suspended Readmit on Sept 30, 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/18/98</td>
<td>Late to school without permission</td>
<td>ISS on 9/22/98</td>
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</table>
# 98-99 Schedule

**Student:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Room #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chem Com I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Academic World History</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Advanced Foods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Intro to Woods/Drafting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Health &amp; PE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lunch East Cafe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Academic English 10</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>HSPT 9 English</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Absences for September 1998**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reason for Absence / Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept 15</td>
<td>(1) absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 18</td>
<td>(2) Tardy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 21</td>
<td>(4) Suspension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 22</td>
<td>(4) Suspension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 23</td>
<td>(4) Suspension</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Sept 25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 29</td>
<td>(4) Suspension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 30</td>
<td>(1) Absence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To: Ms.
At-Risk Attendance Mentor

From: Sandra Myers & Lauren Neuhaus

Re: Some more Student Information for you

I hope this information is helpful. Let me know if there is any other information that could be helpful. Thanks again for your time and efforts.

Student: Grade: 10

Age: 17 Birthdate: 11/26/80

Parent's Name:

Bridgeton, NJ 08302

Attached please find a copy of grades from last year.
### Journal For Attendance Mentors

**Student Name:**

**& Address**

**Phone #:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Ab</th>
<th>Pr</th>
<th>Reason for Absence</th>
<th>Phone Contact (person you spoke with)</th>
<th>Teacher Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</table>
September 12, 1998

Dear Attendance Mentor,

Thank you for volunteering to be an Attendance Mentor to an at-risk student. We have selected only students who were excessively absent during the 97-98 school year. We appreciate, in advance, all the time and effort you will spend with this student. We have asked key members of the staff because it is our belief that if a teacher takes a special interest in the student, the extra attention will improve the student’s attendance rate. Here are some suggestions we believe will help in your pursuit to success with this student.

* Contact the student two times a week

* Check the attendance bulletin daily

* Phone home when he/she is absent

* Provide incentives for improved attendance

* Meet with us periodically to discuss the progress of student

We have enclosed tracking sheets for you to document your progress. Contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Sandra H. Myers
Lauren J. Neuhaus
Biographical Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sandra H. Myers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Bridgeton High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Psychology/Math</td>
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<td>Glassboro State College</td>
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