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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: APPLICATION OF A RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION
TIER 3 INTERVENTION IN A MIDWEST RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

The purpose of this quasi-experimental quantitative study was to examine the effectiveness of the Tier 3, Response to Intervention (RTI) intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings on school absenteeism rates and grade point average (GPA) for renewed progress toward graduation at a Midwestern high school. RTI is a systematic approach used by schools to apply an intervention to an identified deficit such as chronic absenteeism. Involved in the study were 61 students who received the Tier 3, RTI intervention during the 2013-14 school year who were control-matched with 61 students from the 2010-11 school year. Findings from the study revealed the Tier 3, RTI intervention was effective in reducing the rate of absenteeism for the experimental group. Likewise, although both the experimental and control groups' GPA decreased over the school year, only those in the control group decreased significantly. The researcher recommends continuing the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings to lower rates of absenteeism and renew progress toward graduation. The researcher provides two additional recommendations: defining absences to include suspensions and making school attendance data easily accessible to staff. Implications of the study point to improvement in the rates of absenteeism among already chronically absent students.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my sons, Rody and Nelson. Their love of life and school are an inspiration for me to keep learning and striving to make a high school diploma a reality for all my students. Their enthusiasm and encouragement gave me the strength and courage to persevere on finishing this 'book'. I would also like to dedicate this work to my husband Jess, who has encouraged and supported my academic journey without fail. Lastly, I want to dedicate this work to my parents, James and Nellie. They provided me a strong foundation of love, support, and education that supports all my achievements.

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To my late father James and mother Nellie, thank you for providing me a strong foundation of work ethic and perseverance. You blessed me with nine siblings that taught me to see the world through multiple perspectives. To my siblings, part of this goal to earn my doctorate may well be a result of not getting to be the first to accomplish something while growing up. Thank you for saving this one for me and all your love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background

The dropout rate of high school students in the United States is troublesome. Frazelle and Nagel (2015) stated, “Every 26 seconds in the United States a teenager drops out of high school” (p. 1). High school graduation matters. The impact of a student’s failure to graduate has negative ripple effects that span from the individual to the national economy (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010). As a result, it is imperative researchers and educators identify and implement quality interventions to improve high school graduation outcomes.

As school leaders grapple with how to improve graduation rates, research points them to one area for improvement, regular school attendance. Researchers across various fields of study have established a strong association between chronic absenteeism and school dropouts (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012). Specifically, Rumberger (2011) indicated poor attendance is a prominent indicator of eventually dropping out of high school. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation published *The Silent Epidemic, Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (2006) in which they asserted the decision to drop out is complex with individual circumstances that can be identified by attendance patterns that are early warning signs of the gradual process of student disengagement (Bridgeland, Diluli, & Burke-Morison, 2006). Additionally, *Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism* (2015) found that high school dropouts, on average, are better predicted by irregular attendance than test scores. The report continued to clarify that a student is seven times more likely to drop out of school if they demonstrate even one year of

chronic absenteeism between the eighth and twelfth grades. Consistent with national data, chronic absenteeism is the most common indicator of overall student disengagement and a significant indicator of dropping out (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Richtman, 2007). Regular school attendance is fundamental to a student's achievement in school and his or her future success in life (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Horning-Fox, 2013). Yet, the problem of truancy and chronic absenteeism has plagued students across the globe persistently and pervasively for decades (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Reid, 2004).

In 2002, the federal government authorized the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requiring all states to test students in reading and math in grades 3-8, and once in high school. NCLB also required states to report the graduation rate of school districts. The major focus of the NCLB act was to close the achievement gaps by providing all students with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). This focus brought attention to students' attendance rates.

Education policies are written with the foundational assumption that students attend school on a regular basis. Every absence from school results in students missing the opportunity to learn what is being taught, with the results evident in lower grades and standardized test results (Whitmore Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Mumford, 2016). When students miss the exposure to what is being taught the risk of dropping out of high school increases (Balfanz et al., 2013; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016). States responded to NCLB by requiring schools to follow specific protocols when students are chronically absent or habitually truant from school (Lochmiller, 2013). For example, in Indiana,

effective July 1, 2013, legislation “requires all schools to develop a chronic absence reduction plan as a component of their school improvement plan” (Lochmiller, 2013, p. 1). More recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) legislation was passed in 2015 to replace NCLB. ESSA requires local and state report cards to include publication of chronic absenteeism data (Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence, 2017). ESSA also requires states to choose a fifth indicator, of their choice, that is a high-stakes measure of school quality or student success to its school accountability system. Whitmore Schanzenbach et al. (2016) at the Brookings Institute, one of the nation’s oldest and respected nonpartisan think tanks, reported that schools’ chronic absenteeism rates fulfills ESSA’s demand for the fifth indicator to provide meaningful differentiation between schools, and also that it delivers valid and reliable data that can be drawn statewide across all schools and grade spans.

States may choose chronic absenteeism rate as their fifth indicator because they realize the key to benefitting from quality curriculum and instruction is that students are attending school on a regular basis (Balfanz et al., 2013; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016). The broadly shared American value is ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to learn. Reducing chronic absenteeism is the ticket to ensure all students have access to success in our global economy, where graduating from high school is more essential than ever (Portraits of Change, 2017).

As education leaders move to act on this key insight that regular school attendance increases high school graduation rates, they are faced with confusion on how to best quantify absenteeism. Multiple researchers have pointed out school non-attendance is a complex problem that is exacerbated by the lack of a common universal

definition of truancy (attendancesworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty, Karikari, Chen, Wilka, & Kim, 2015; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012). Maynard et al. (2012) and attendancesworks.org (n.d.) both explained truancy and chronic absenteeism are often used interchangeably in published research on this topic. Contributing to the interchangeable use of the two terms was the passage of NCLB as policy makers and school personnel relied heavily on the use of the legal definition of truancy in their efforts to respond to improving graduation rates (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). Reliance on using the legal definition of truancy has led to a myriad of definitions across the nation (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). For example, California schools record any student as truant if they have missed three unexcused days or were tardy to class three times by at least 30 minutes (attendancesworks.org, n.d.). However, in Maryland, schools monitor habitual truancy defined as missing (excused or unexcused) 20 percent of the school year (attendancesworks.org, n.d.). In short, each state's legal definition of truancy is unique to that state and as a result, research across state lines becomes complicated by the non-universally accepted definition of truancy.

Statement of the Problem

Regular school attendance is important for students to complete the academic requirements of a high school diploma (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Balfanz et al., 2013; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Portraits of Change, 2017; Maynard et al., 2012; Richtman, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). In order to improve graduation rates the researcher chose to focus on chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism was defined in this Dissertation in Practice by the existing Nebraska statute in which the school district is situated. The

district adhered to the Nebraska statute in writing the district policy on chronic absenteeism:

1. A student who has accumulated a total of five absences (excused or unexcused) per school quarter or the hourly equivalent of five absences, and/or
2. A student who is absent (excused or unexcused) more than 20 days per year, or the hourly equivalent (8312 –Excessive Absenteeism, n.d.).

As school leaders identify chronically absent students, they are in need of evidence-based practices that can effectively improve the attendance rates of their students. Thus, a careful review of the research on evidence-based interventions was necessary.

The prevalence of chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy and its indication of dropping out of school have spurred researchers in the fields of education, counseling, and health to identify the factors that predict absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012). The findings from these studies indicated students living in poverty, minority sub-groups, and those receiving special education services exhibit the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012). Researchers across the fields have also studied different types of interventions, settings and approaches employed to reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism.

Despite the fact efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism have increased significantly over the last 20 years, research on the effectiveness of specific interventions revealing a positive impact on school attendance is limited (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006; Maynard et al., 2012). The broad categories of interventions found in the research literature include systems-change programs, court-based programs, and school-based programs (Development Services Group, Inc., 2010). The interventions have the

immediate goal of improving attendance rates and many have included the longer term goals of raising grades and improving graduation rates (Development Services Group, Inc., 2010). Kearney and Graczyk (2013) noted that one such intervention, Response to Intervention (RTI), a multi-tiered approach to regular school attendance is showing promise through initial studies in reducing chronic absenteeism. The Chronic Absenteeism Report (2016) synopsis of the literature stated “it is clear...comprehensive interventions are best structured in tiers, starting with universal practices that focus on prevention through increasingly targeted interventions, ultimately ending with specific and focused attention on individuals families...as interventions become more targeted, more resources involving more of the student’s world, are engaged” (Curry-Stevens & Kim-Gervey, p. 21). Numerous forms of RTI have been established and are currently practiced in public schools to address academic and related problems in schools (Clark & Alvarez, 2010). Similar frameworks with the same premise used in the educational setting are Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) and Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS).

Conceptually, RTI is a multi-tiered service delivery model and typically involves three tiers. Tier 1 includes prevention strategies and core concepts directed at all students, Tier 2 includes targeted interventions for students demonstrating a deficit despite universal strategies, and Tier 3 includes intensive interventions directed at students with more complex problems and that have not benefited from Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

This proposed Dissertation in Practice study focused on the use of the RTI model, specifically, a Tier 3 intervention of social workers and school attendance hearings to

improve students' absenteeism rates and the positive school outcome of increased grade point average (GPA). The research is a quasi-experimental study of student records from a Midwestern high school that utilized two social workers and school attendance hearings as a Tier 3 intervention in the 2013-14 school year, as compared to a control matched group of students from the 2010-11 school year before the Tier 3 intervention was employed. This Dissertation in Practice study aimed to use the findings of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing social workers and school attendance hearings to inform school leaders through a set of evidence-based recommendations to reduce the rate of absenteeism in the high school setting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing social workers and school attendance hearings on school absenteeism rates and GPA for the renewed progress toward graduation at a Midwestern high school.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this Dissertation in Practice, the researcher used a quasi-experimental design to examine the effects of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings in reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism and increasing GPA in a high school setting. Three major research questions were posed:

1. Does a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings reduce the rate of absenteeism among chronically absent students?

2. Does a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings increase the GPA of chronically absent students?
3. What is the influence of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings while controlling for the relevant risk factors of race, gender, socio-economic status, and enrollment in special education on absenteeism rates?

The researcher used inferential statistical tests to explore a number of arguments. Thus, the hypotheses in this analysis are:

- H1: Students that participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have a lower absenteeism rate compared to the students in the control group.
- H2: Students that participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have an improved grade point average as measured at the end of the academic school year.
- H3: While controlling for relevant risk factors including race, low SES, gender and enrollment in special education, students who participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings will show a positive impact through lower rates of absenteeism.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this Dissertation in Practice was to use the findings of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings to inform school leaders through a set of evidence-based recommendations to reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism in the high school setting.

Methodology Overview

The quasi-experimental study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings for reducing the presence of chronic absenteeism in a high school. Evaluation included whether chronically absent students are on track for graduation through GPA and if improvement in GPA was realized with the Tier 3 intervention. This Dissertation in Practice Study is quasi-experimental because students were not randomly assigned as participants, rather they were selected because they received the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings.

Herr and Anderson (2015) stated this type of evaluation should be embraced as “inquiry in stance” research because it seeks to improve the practices and programs already in place. The quasi-experiment involved using pre-existing data from the school’s record management system to identify those who met the chronically absent threshold. This threshold was described as missing five or more days of school in a given quarter and/or more than 20 days in a given school year. Data included the rate of absenteeism, GPA, behavior, demographic variables, and other related information.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms were used operationally in this study:

Chronic absenteeism: A student who has accumulated a total of five absences per school quarter or the hourly equivalent of five absences, and or a student who is absent more than 20 days per year, or the hourly equivalent (8312 – Excessive Absenteeism, n.d.).

Grade point average (GPA): A number representing the average value of the accumulated grades earned in courses over time. The GPA in the school district is based on a 0 to 4.0 scale (A = 4.0, B = 3.0, C = 2.0, D = 1.0, F = 0).

High school: An educational institution housing students in grades 9-12.

Out-of-school suspension: Exclusion from attending school due to a disciplinary sanction by a school administrator.

Race and Ethnicity: Race refers to the concept of dividing people into populations or groups on the basis of various sets of physical characteristics and ethnicity refers to a group who identify with each other on the basis of a common nationality or shared cultural experience (Ethnicity v. Race, n.d.). The school district uses the standards for federal data on race and ethnicity. Each student is associated with exactly one of the seven aggregate reporting categories (Hispanic/Latino of any race, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, or two or more races ("The Nebraska Guide to Implementing New Federal Race and Ethnicity Categories for Students and Staff," 2009).

Rate of absenteeism: The proportion of days missed out of the possible number of days the student was to attend school.

Remote rural community: A population of less than 50,000 residents and the consensus-defined territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Rural Education in America, n.d.).

School attendance hearing: An informal attendance hearing presided over by the deputy county attorney, also known as the attendance hearing officer. The school attendance hearing is considered informal because there are no legal sanctions

administered. The school attendance hearing is held in the school district's board of education room.

Social worker: School district employed licensed social worker, with at least a Master's degree, serving as a liaison between school, home, and community agencies to facilitate increased social and academic success for at-risk students.

Socio-economic status (SES): A proxy measure used by schools to calculate whether a student is living in poverty based on their qualification in the federal school lunch program. Low SES indicates a student qualifies for the free/reduced lunch program (FRL) program based on a household income at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty income threshold. ("NCES Blog," 2015).

Tier 3, RTI intervention: Combination of support from school social worker and participation in the district's school attendance hearings.

Truancy: Student absence without parental consent.

The terms defined above provide context to this Dissertation in Practice. While they have broad meanings in the general public, there were some variances from that in this Dissertation in Practice.

Delimitations and Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses or problems with the design of the study as identified by the researcher (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Explicitly stating the limitations of this Dissertation in Practice allows the reader to "judge to what extent the findings can or cannot be generalized to other people and situations" (Creswell, 2005, p. 198). As in any research study, the Dissertation in Practice study was limited in its generalizability (Creswell, 2014). The first limitation of this research was only one high school

population was used. The high school is situated in a remote, rural community making the generalizability to other district classifications more difficult. The causes of chronic absenteeism may be different across the United States, as well as, the school and community resources available to students. Secondly, while the sample group was quite diverse, there remains the fact certain segments of teenagers were not included. The study was limited to those who participated in the Tier 3, RTI intervention, therefore only students who already met the threshold of chronic absenteeism were included.

Generalizability of the findings to students with less severe absenteeism would need to be explored in further studies. Finally, the Dissertation in Practice was limited to existing data within the school's record management system. The researcher relied on the accuracy of others who recorded the variables used within the study. It is always unclear about the generalizability of the findings of research. This research involved one high school and a group of students who exhibited chronic absenteeism. Additional studies will be needed to verify whether findings from this study would generalize elsewhere.

The delimitations of a study succinctly provide the boundaries and specify the scope of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings on school absenteeism rates and GPAs. Thus, a delimitation of the study was participants were limited to only 9th and 10th grade students, who participated in the Tier 3, RTI intervention during the 2013-14 school year. Generalizability to other grade levels may not be warranted. Another delimitation of the study was the use of only quantitative data. The researcher reasoned it would be best to evaluate the quantitative findings of the Tier 3, RTI intervention before considering designing a qualitative study.

Future research should consider perceptual data from both students and adults involved to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Their intimate perceptions would provide insight into the following: the process of the intervention, beliefs in why students respond or not, and beliefs in what could improve the process. The researcher chose not to explore this qualitative data for this study but would like to pursue it in the future.

Lastly, the researcher has significant experience in the secondary public school setting, while not a social worker or a district attorney, has developed some perceptions about the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings, in addressing chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy. In other words, the researcher may have a personal bias toward the use of the RTI model and specifically the Tier 3 intervention of the using of social workers and school attendance hearing. To control for this bias, the researcher chose to pursue a quantitative method.

Leader's Role and Responsibility in Relation to the Problem

The Dissertation in Practice study was designed to explore the effectiveness of using the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings in reducing chronic absenteeism in a Midwestern high school. The school district enacted transformational leadership when responding to chronic absenteeism. Rather than using a one-dimensional approach the school district formed a committee to raise the consciousness about the significance of chronic absenteeism, define specific outcomes and created new ways to achieve improved absenteeism rates (Burns, 1978). As such, the Dissertation in Practice will benefit school leaders in understanding the effectiveness of the intervention allowing them to make a prudent decision on how to improve this intervention in their school district.

Significance of the Study

Chronic absenteeism is a persistent problem and a major concern in schools across the United States. It has been linked to immediate serious and far-reaching consequences for students, schools, and communities, which has led to significant efforts put forth by researchers, school practitioners, and policy makers to try to understand and address the problem (Maynard et al., 2012). The task is complex because there are many known contributors as to why students exhibit chronic absenteeism and studies have found demographic variables correlated with chronic absenteeism. The research on how to intervene and reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism in students is fractured and sparse due to the use of both truancy and chronic absenteeism in published studies. NCLB legislation on improving graduation rates led to states passing a myriad of truancy laws that contributed to the interchangeable use of the terms truancy and chronic absenteeism. This has made the research on how to intervene and reduce the rate of absenteeism fractured due to the use of both truancy and chronic absenteeism used interchangeably in published studies.

Despite the significant efforts and millions of dollars spent there is little evidence on interventions that decrease the presence of school absenteeism as a whole, as well as, for individual students. In recent years, the application of a multi-tiered system of supports or RTI has been applied to address absenteeism. However, as each school is unique with respect to size, organizational structure, student demographics, and resources, the use of a multi-tiered system of support would also vary accordingly. This Dissertation in Practice study adds to the current literature on a Tier 3, RTI intervention of utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearing by providing the effects

on the rate of absenteeism and GPAs of those students who received the intervention. Consequently, the results of the study may help to improve the practice of applying the Tier 3, intervention in the high school setting and suggesting areas for improvement in the design and implementation of the Tier 3 intervention.

Summary

The Dissertation in Practice study is a quasi-experimental study that sought to explore the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings to positively impact school attendance and GPA. The Tier 3 intervention involved the use of school social workers and school attendance hearings to intervene on chronic absenteeism exhibited by some students. In this study, students who exhibited chronic absenteeism were analyzed through quantitative data analysis to determine if they responded to the intervention and re-entered the pursuit of a high school diploma. The changes in the rate of absenteeism were explored to determine if the portion of variance could be explained by relevant risk factors.

The case study was limited to a Midwestern high school who currently uses a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings. The researcher chose to use a quantitative design to combat the barrier of working with protected populations and to reduce bias the researcher may have had regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. The Dissertation in Practice study was highly impacted by the researcher's desire to fulfill the challenge of exploring a significant and complex real-world problem within her field of education. Through her leadership in her school district, she desires to use fiscal resources to their fullest potential by utilizing research-based interventions to solve the complex problem of school absenteeism.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review will provide a clear picture of the current research on school absenteeism exhibited by high school students in the United States. The first section will explore the terms of truancy and chronic absenteeism as measurable metrics used in the research. The second section provides a brief review of the consequences, causes, and correlates of chronic absenteeism on the student, school, and community. The researcher organized the third section into three intervention themes researchers and school personnel have used to address chronic absenteeism. The fourth section provides a brief description of transformational leadership theory that may be applicable to chronic absenteeism. The fifth section provides an overview of the study's site high school and variances in school settings for the reader to understand the context of the Dissertation in Practice study. Lastly, the final section provides an overview of the high school's development and implementation of a RTI, Tier 3 intervention utilizing social workers and school attendance hearings to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism as Metrics of Absenteeism

School absenteeism is a prevalent and debilitating problem for youth in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) reported in late 2016 6.5 million or 13 percent of our k-12 public school students miss at least three weeks of school, or more than 15 days each school year. Particular to this Dissertation in Practice, the OCR reported, almost 20 percent of students in high school miss at least three weeks of school, or more than 15 days each school year, compared to more than 12 percent of middle schoolers (2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look, 2016).

The numbers are alarming, thus, they have led researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to try to better understand and address the problem of absenteeism (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Maynard et al., 2012; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016).

Policy makers and educators rely on the foundational assumption regular school attendance is a critical component to students' academic achievement and particularly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Ready, 2010; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004) when devising policies and programs in the pursuit of a quality education for all (Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016). Over the last 20 years schools, communities, and the federal government have put substantial effort and fiscal resources towards reducing absenteeism, but the problem remains prevalent and pervasive (Atwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). A major problem in understanding absenteeism is the lack of consensus on a standard operational definition in the research (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012). The researcher found the terms truancy *and* chronic absenteeism have been used to analyze regular school attendance. Some studies used truancy (unexcused absences) as the independent variable while other studies used the more inclusive variable absenteeism (excused, unexcused) in order to examine school attendance. However, the literature review revealed the terms are often used interchangeably (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2012) making it difficult to use the evidence to guide policy development and intervention programs (Maynard et al., 2012). Therefore, a closer look at the two terms

was needed to fully understand the literature review and the entirety of the problem under study.

Truancy

Truancy is broadly known as any absence without parental consent or an unexcused absence (Kearney, 2008). However, the literature review revealed there is a lack of consensus on how to define truancy (Kearney, 2003; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2012). Maynard et al. (2012) noted researchers have long been discussing and recommending the need for a common, operational definition of truancy. A standardized operational definition of truancy would facilitate comparisons among schools and states, researchers and authors, and statistical reporting in understanding the scope of the problem as well as the effectiveness of interventions to combat the problem (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). Gentle-Genitty et al. synthesized the literature of 63 studies to determine an operational definition of truancy and also conducted a focus group of truancy experts. Specifically, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) found in their literature review many singular definitions of truancy. Definitions ranged from a student's self-declaration of any absence unacceptable to teachers, unexcused, without parental consent, to truancy defined as lateness to class and excused absences. Their findings reiterated there is no single or common, operational definition of truancy (Atwood & Croll, 2006; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015)

Next, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) contacted members of the International Truancy and Dropout Prevention Association to form an online focus group to review their findings, craft, and endorse a synthesized common, operational definition of truancy. Twenty-eight educators, government officials, judges and other truancy expert

stakeholders wrote and endorsed, “truancy is a non-home school student’s act of non-attendance as evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being authorized by medical practitioner or sanctioned by parent(s) and/or legitimately excused by school or per state law” (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015, p. 78). In concluding their study, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) explained every definition has strengths and weaknesses and they were not requesting endorsement of their specific definition. However, the authors did declare there is urgency in finding a common definition (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). The outcome of a common, operational definition would facilitate researchers’ ability to consistently measure the problem of truancy and study the effectiveness of interventions (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Sälzer, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Stramm, 2012).

The definition of truancy began to morph with the passage of the United States federal NCLB legislation (attendancesworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; "What's the Difference between Chronic Absence and Truancy?", 2016). The NCLB legislation required the individual states’ Departments of Education to track truancy but left it up to the states to define truancy (attendancesworks.org, n.d.). This led to a myriad of definitions and undoubtedly began to blur the definition of truancy. For example, in California truancy was defined as missing three days of school without parental consent or late three times by at least 30 minutes ("What's the Difference between Chronic Absence and Truancy?," 2016). In contrast, Maryland schools have monitored habitual truancy as defined as missing 20 percent of the school year ("What's the Difference between Chronic Absence and Truancy?", 2016). The reliance on truancy laws’ terminologies has blurred the broad truancy definition of an unexcused absence

sometimes to include all absences (unexcused and excused) due to the varying state laws (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015).

Truancy is also known to have local context depending on how it is defined by the local and court jurisdictions (Garcia-Garcia, 2008; Klima, Miller, Nunlist, 2009; Maynard et al., 2012; Sälzer et al., 2012). Garcia-Garcia (2008) indicated education attendance laws vary among states, and the number of unexcused absences needed for a student to be considered truant is defined differently across school districts, and even across schools within the same district. For example, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2015) found the state of Indiana to have “one official legal definition of truancy, considered “habitually truant” if he or she accumulated 10 or more excused absences in a single school year” (p. 63). However, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2009) found in a separate study conducted with 99 principals from Indiana evidence that each school also had and acted upon independent unofficial definitions of truancy. Due to the local context and legal definitions, researchers have used truancy and chronic absenteeism interchangeably in their study designs and intervention recommendations (attendancesworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; "What's the Difference between Chronic Absence and Truancy?," 2016) Attendancesworks.org (n.d) indicated the interchangeable use of the terms results from people believing chronic absenteeism is the politically correct term for truancy.

Sälzer et al. (2012) noted researchers of truancy are concerned the lack of consensus regarding how truancy is defined poses challenges. These challenges include accurately identifying truancy rates, as well as, evaluating intervention programs to improve attendance (Maynard et al., 2012). Therefore, a careful review of the research literature’s use of truancy definition needs to be adhered to when researching the topic

and interventions. The Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence (2016) report stated, researchers are beginning to suggest policy makers at the federal and state level need to have clearly articulated attendance and absence definitions that “capture missed instruction time as fully as possible” (p. 19). For example, out of school suspensions and parent excused absences are not captured under the broad term of truancy. Thus, the literature revealed study designs are shifting to include all absences (excused, unexcused, and suspensions) as independent variables. This shift captures what researchers describe as chronic absenteeism (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Chronic Absenteeism

Similar to truancy, chronic absenteeism lacks a common operational definition (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Whitmore Schanzenbach et al. (2016) stated the definition of chronic absenteeism should contain two factors: the definition of a daily absence and the number of days or share of days that a student must be absent to be considered chronically absent.

Regarding the first factor, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) recommended the definition of an absence include unexcused, excused, and suspensions as critical components. They went on to state “evidence indicates that it is how many days a student misses that matters most, not why they miss” (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 7). Stated another way, the negative impacts of missing school occur if a student is skipping, ill, on vacation, caring for a family member or any other reason (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016).

The second factor of chronic absenteeism is also without a standard definition. In other words, the number of days or percentage of days absent has no uniform industry standard. Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Absence (2016) recommended using an absenteeism rate of 10 percent to define chronic absenteeism for the following reasons:

1. It is based on research showing that missing that much school is associated with lower academic performance and dropping out.
2. Promotes early identification of students because schools can use the 10 percent absence rate as a trigger for intervention from the start of school throughout the year, rather than waiting for a student to miss 15 or more days before intervening.
3. It allows better detection of attendance problems among highly mobile students who often move too frequently to ever accumulate 15 to 20 days of absence in a single school or district.
4. It offers comparable data across districts that have school years of different lengths (p. 18).

Regardless of the definition chronic absenteeism should be widely understood across the United States so that schools and districts are recording data in a consistent manner (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence, 2016) .

Understanding the definition will also help interested stakeholders and researchers interpret the results of chronic absence analysis (Preventing Missed Opportunity Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence, 2016).

A common universal definition to track and act upon absenteeism is needed for schools to design early warning indicators and intervention to address chronic absenteeism (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Preventing Missed Opportunity: Taking Collective Action to Confront Chronic Absence, 2016). With 13 percent of our k-12 students nationwide missing at least 15 days of school work needs to be done because the consequences for our youth, families, and communities are shown in research to be detrimental (2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look, 2016).

As a standardized operational definition of chronic absenteeism continues to be debated, a body of literature on the consequences and correlates associated with poor school attendance has accumulated. The following section will provide a brief overview of the consequences and the causes and correlates of school absenteeism.

Consequences, Causes, and Correlates of Absenteeism

Over the past thirty years research from “various fields including social work, sociology, psychology, juvenile justice, nursing and psychiatry” (Maynard et al., 2012, p. 10) has accumulated. The research has demonstrated significant and far-reaching negative implications for youth who do not attend school regularly (DeSocio, VanCura, Nelson, Hewitt & Kitzman, 2007; Maynard et al., 2012; Vaugh et al., 2013). First, a review of the significant and far-reaching negative implications will be discussed. Followed by, the causes and correlates associated with truancy and chronic absenteeism.

Consequences of Absenteeism

The problems that stem from chronic absenteeism are complex and often limitless (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Skola & Williamson, 2012). Researchers categorize these immediate and far-reaching consequences as impacting the students, schools, and

communities (Desocio et al., 2007; Maynard et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2013). The negative outcomes associated with truancy and chronic absenteeism include poor academic achievement as evidenced in lower standardized test scores, grades, and school engagement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Jones, Lovrich & Lovrich, 2011; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012; Skola & Williamson, 2012). Research studies have shown this process of disengagement and missed instruction leads to dropping out of school (Curry-Stevens & Kim-Gervey, 2016; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Reid, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2013). Furthermore, the research indicated poor school attendance is associated with the following risk behaviors in adulthood: use of tobacco, alcohol, other drugs, and criminal behavior (Vaughn, et al., 2013). Maynard et al. (2012) indicated the impact of doing poorly in school and dropping out of school negatively impacts the earning potential over their lifetime. In 2016, 32 percent of high school dropouts were unemployed as compared to 13 percent of high school graduates (“U.S. High School Graduates and Dropouts: Unemployment Rate 2016 Statistics,” 2016). Even with employment, high school dropouts earn significantly less per year, 35,551 U.S. dollars, compared to 43,061 U.S. dollars among high school graduates (U.S. High School Graduates and Dropouts: Unemployment Rate 2016 Statistic,” 2016).

Beyond the immediate and long-lasting impact truancy and chronic absenteeism have on a student there are consequences for schools and communities (Baker, Simon, & Nugent, 2001; Goldstein, Little & Little-Akin, 2003; Maynard et al, 2012; Jones et al., 2011). Goldstein et al. (2003) noted NCLB legislation impacts school districts with high rates of truancy, low graduation rates, and failure to meet academic performance requirements results in less funding. Communities are impacted by higher rates of

criminal activity, a less-educated workforce, lower civic participation, and higher spending on social services (Baker et al., 2001; Goldstein et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2012).

Causes and Correlates of Absenteeism

The large body of literature on truancy and chronic absenteeism has also focused on identifying and describing the possible causes and correlates of school absenteeism (Maynard et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2013). Research indicates some principal causes which are known to be multiple and typically include individual, family, school, economic and contextual factors (Kearney, 2008; Jones et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2012; Strand & Lovrich, 2014). For example, Vaughn et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study using data from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health to examine the prevalence and correlates of truancy with this large, nationally representative sample. The findings of the study demonstrated truancy is a significant problem in the United States with 11 percent of youth between the ages of 12-17 years reporting skipping school within the last 30 days. Their research also indicated truant youth are likely older, less engaged in school, exhibit external and internal behavior problems, lower academic achievement, and less parental involvement than their non-truant peers (Vaughn et al., 2013). Furthermore, their research indicated chronic truancy is associated with the following risk behaviors: use of tobacco, alcohol, other drugs, and criminal behavior (Vaughn et al., 2013). Thus, begins the long-lasting impact of chronic truancy.

Individual risk factors predictive of truancy and chronic absenteeism include low academic self-concept, low self-esteem, phobia, anxiety, race/ethnicity, learning disabilities, substance abuse, and externalizing behaviors (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams,

& DaLincandro, 1998; Lounsberry, Steel, Loveland & Gibson, 2004; Maynard et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2013). Family contributors include a lack of parental supervision and guidance, parental substance abuse, lack of awareness and understanding of attendance laws and negative attitudes about schooling (Strand & Lovrich, 2014). Strand and Lovrich (2014) indicated family economic factors create a necessity for student employment, caring for family members (babysitting), and economic assistance. School factors include large school size, poor morale on the part of teachers and administrators, failure to engage minority and disadvantaged students in school-based activities and inconsistent and ineffective attendance policies (Maynard et al., 2012; Strand & Lovrich, 2014). Maynard et al. (2012) stated community and contextual factors have also been found to be associated with school absenteeism. These factors include race/ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, the necessity for student employment, neighborhood characteristics and organization, transportation system, levels of social support, community norms and community violence (Jones et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2012; Strand & Lovrich, 2014).

Truancy is recognized in the literature as a complex and diverse problem that can be affected by a number of factors (Kearney, 2008; Maynard et al., 2012). Thus, researchers in several disciplines including psychology, criminal justice law, social work, nursing, medicine, and sociology have studied truancy and chronic absenteeism (Maynard et al., 2012). The breadth of disciplines studying truancy and chronic absenteeism is positive because it allows the researcher to take an interdisciplinary perspective having reviewed the research studies through a variety of lenses. Conversely, the breadth of disciplines studying truancy and chronic absenteeism has also led to a fractured literature because each field has used various terms to describe problematic

absenteeism (Curry-Stevens & Kim-Gervey, 2016; Kearney, 2008; Maynard et al., 2012). Navigating the diverse literature and varying conceptualizations has led to three prominent themes of interventions used to address school absenteeism. The following will provide a brief overview of the existing research literature used to address problematic absenteeism.

Themes of Interventions to Address School Absenteeism

The literature review revealed three themes of interventions used to address school absenteeism. First, the theme of discipline or zero tolerance policies emerged to reduce absenteeism. Secondly, a theme of using the RTI model emerges. Finally, recent literature discusses the theme of using an ecological perspective. The following will provide a brief review of the three themes and the research studies conducted to support their impact on improving regular school attendance among high school students.

Zero Tolerance

“Zero-tolerance policies are premised on the philosophy that removing students who engage in dangerous, threatening, or disruptive behavior will deter other students from misbehavior and create an improved learning environment” (Jones, 2013, p. 742). Sharkey and Fenning (2012) further explained zero tolerance policies are punitive with a menu of predetermined discipline actions covering mild infractions to serious violations of school rules. These policies originated out of federal drug and weapon regulations in the late 1980s and were further driven into the practices of schools with such incidents as the 1999 Columbine school shooting (Jones, 2013; Mallett, 2016). In 1994, the Gun-Free School Act signaled approval for schools to adopt zero tolerance policies through rewarding federal funds for schools who imposed a mandatory one-year expulsion for

weapons violations. The NCLB legislation later linked the adoption of zero-tolerance, other than firearms, with federal funding if schools adopted zero-tolerance policies for violent or persistently disruptive students under the premise of preserving the learning environment (Jones, 2013; Mallett, 2016). It was under this legislation schools began to implement safety mandates such as removing chronically truant students under the auspice of reducing classroom and school disruptions (“Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools?”, 2008; Jones, 2013; Mallett, 2016).

The zero tolerance policy philosophy is instituted in schools as a means to set clear behavior expectations for students. With many schools facing the challenge of high absenteeism and truancy rates it quickly became policy to institute punitive consequences for students with poor attendance (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012). Babcock (2009), a researcher in the field of economics, examined the relationship between discipline practices and student outcomes such as truancy rate, graduation rate, and post high school employment status. Babcock’s (2009) study took place from 1994 through 2002 and included data of 90,000 students and 20,000 administrators. Babcock’s main empirical findings include the following: students skip class less often under stricter discipline policies and graduation rates and post high school employment are higher for students who attended schools with stricter discipline policies. One limitation noted by Babcock, (2009) was the study could not speak directly to the zero tolerance debate because the zero tolerance policies were not implemented in the first wave of data collection. The Babcock (2009) study did not specifically delineate school attendance policies that would be labeled zero tolerance policies.

Other studies have looked more directly at the effects of zero tolerance policies on reducing truancy in secondary students. Zero tolerance policies apply predetermined consequences regardless of the seriousness of behavior, circumstances or context and the consequences are often severe and punitive (Gage, Sugai, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013). These consequences include such things as suspensions, threatening letters, and loss of opportunities including after school programs (“Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools?”, 2008; Gage et al., 2013). Gage et al. (2013) investigated the effects of a high school’s zero tolerance for unexcused absence policy in which a 1-point deduction from the semester grade and a zero for missing assignments was applied for each unexcused absence. Two years of comparison data from 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years from a predominantly Caucasian, non-poverty school was analyzed through descriptive statistics and hierarchical multiple regression with approximately 1,000 participants. Overall, their findings suggest, “although no causal relations should be inferred” (Gage et al., 2013, p. 133) this policy was associated with a disproportionate application of students who were already failing classes and those in general classes, not advanced classes (Gage et al., 2013). These general classes were categorized as other than advanced placement or honors classes. Additionally, findings indicated the recipients of the zero tolerance practice were more likely to have been already failing the class, have an individualized education plan (IEP) and meet the low socioeconomic standard (SES). The Task Force went on to state zero tolerance practices may not affect the intended behavior and result in undue consequences. (“Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools?”, 2008).

Flannery, Frank, and Kato (2012) examined the effect of disciplinary practices of preventing reoccurrence of truancy in 9th grade students. The study included 8,457 9th

grade students, from 193 schools, with the continuous independent variable defined as an unexcused absence. The findings indicated only the disciplinary responses of Saturday School (increase) and out-of-school suspension (decrease) had a significant relationship with the probability of future truancy in the same school year. However, Flannery et al. (2012) indicated growth modeling revealed, “that while out-of-school suspension may initially reduce the probability of recidivism repeated ongoing exposure to out-of-school suspension has a strong and significant effect on the growth of truancy over time” (p. 32). The researchers concluded the strict exclusionary policies, used frequently by schools, could have the unintended consequence of pushing the student out of school. In conclusion, Flannery et al. (2012) recommended as schools assign consequences it is critical they “examine why a student might be engaging in a repeated behavior as every behavior occurs for a reason. Behavior continues to reoccur because it is resulting in some desired outcome for the student” (p. 132).

Aside from quantitative analysis, there is qualitative research that has considered the effects of zero tolerance policies. Gleich-Bope’s (2014) study interviewed a Department of Health caseworker, school administrators and acting district attorneys in Omaha, Nebraska to understand their perspective of the truancy laws in the State of Nebraska. All three groups indicated they had experienced truancy laws affecting primarily students from lower SES status and single-family households (Gleich-Bope, 2014). The study’s participants reported they see both positive and negative effects of the truancy legislation. The fear of court proceedings is enough for some students and families to improve attendance and the law provides measures to hold school personnel accountable for monitoring and acting upon poor attendance patterns (Gleich-Bope,

2014). However, school officials are concerned the requirement of sending the mandated truancy letters filled with legalese language can cause tension between the school and their families. Additionally, school officials reported concern that a weakness of current truancy laws do not take into consideration the academic standing of the student (Gleich-Bope, 2014). These findings are similar to those of The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) findings that no evidence supporting the use of zero-tolerance policies to increase attendance or school performance.

The review of zero tolerance policies and other disciplinary measures to reduce attendance issues has produced little evidence of the effectiveness of these approaches for improving truancy rates (Muyskens, Marston, & Reschly, 2007). These practices are considered exclusionary policies that result in a loss of instructional opportunities, an outcome often associated with student and school-level achievement (Gage et al., 2013; Rausch & Skiba, 2004). Coupled with evidence zero-tolerance policies do not improve behaviors such as improved attendance (“Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools?”, 2008; Flannery et al., 2012; Gage et al., 2013; Muyskens et al., 2007; Sharkey & Fenning, 2012), the literature indicated there is variance in the application of discipline due to factors such as school characteristics, principal attitudes, and even teachers within the same school (Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Gage et al. (2013) stated, “research findings suggest that a zero tolerance approach may not address the problem but instead be associated with other negative outcomes especially for the population of students in need of the most help” (p. 134). The general ineffectiveness of this practice illustrates a need for a different approach to reduce truancy and put students back on track for high school graduation.

Response to Intervention (RTI) Model

Historically, truancy has been addressed through a reactive stance such as discipline and the use of zero tolerance policies, but literature indicates this has done little to improve attendance outcomes (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Flannery et al., 2012; Kim & Streeter, 2016; Sharkey & Fenning, 2012). In reviewing the literature on school absenteeism, researchers indicated the “use of policies with a single solution (zero-tolerance policies) ignores the heterogeneity and complexity of truancy” (Flannery et al., 2012) and instead recommend using a systems-based approach consistent with the Response to Intervention (RTI) model (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Kim & Streeter, 2016; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Muyskens et al., 2007; Richtman, 2007) or the School Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) model (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012). Both the RTI model and SWPBS model are considered to have the theoretical foundation and practices of prevention (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012) that focus on teaching skills and behaviors through intervention (Kim & Streeter, 2016; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Muyskens et al., 2007; Richtman, 2007). The literature review revealed the recommended practice of a system –based or prevention-oriented approach were most frequently referred to as the RTI model therefore the researcher has chosen to use this title in the remainder of the study.

The emergence of the RTI Model was “significantly influenced by public health models of disease prevention that differentiate primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of intervention that increase in cost and intensity depending on the patient’s response to treatment” (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009, p. 2). Although there are variations among RTI

models across school districts the unifying principles include: a systems-level approach with three tiers of support, proactive and preventative efforts, alignment of interventions to student needs, data-based decision-making and problem-solving, and evidence-based effective practices used to address the academic and behavioral needs of students (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Flannery et al., 2012; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

In the school setting, Tier 1 is based on the foundation of an accessible and viable curriculum for all students. This includes (a) the curriculum taught, (b) classroom routines that provide for differentiation, (c) accommodations needed by individuals to access the curriculum, and (d) problem-solving by the teacher and other school personnel concerning student motivation and engagement (Fuchs et al., 2012). When regular screening identifies a student who has lagged behind the typical acquisition of skills a team meets to discuss moving the student to a Tier 2 intervention (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2012). For example, on the academic side if a student's math performance falls below the established, acceptable level the student will receive a Tier 2 intervention (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Fuchs et al. (2012) indicated a Tier 2 intervention is research validated and provided on a daily basis in a small group setting for 20-30 minutes. During this timeframe, typically six weeks, the student is monitored for their response to the additional support (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Finally, the authors indicated the student's team determines if the intervention can be removed or if a student requires an increasingly intense intervention at Tier 3 to support their needs (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2012). Tier 3 is an even more intense empirically validated intervention and is chosen based on individual needs of the student (Fletcher &

Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2012). Figure 1 provides a generic visual description of the RTI model and allows the reader to see how schools can map out the RTI model's tiers of intervention supports.

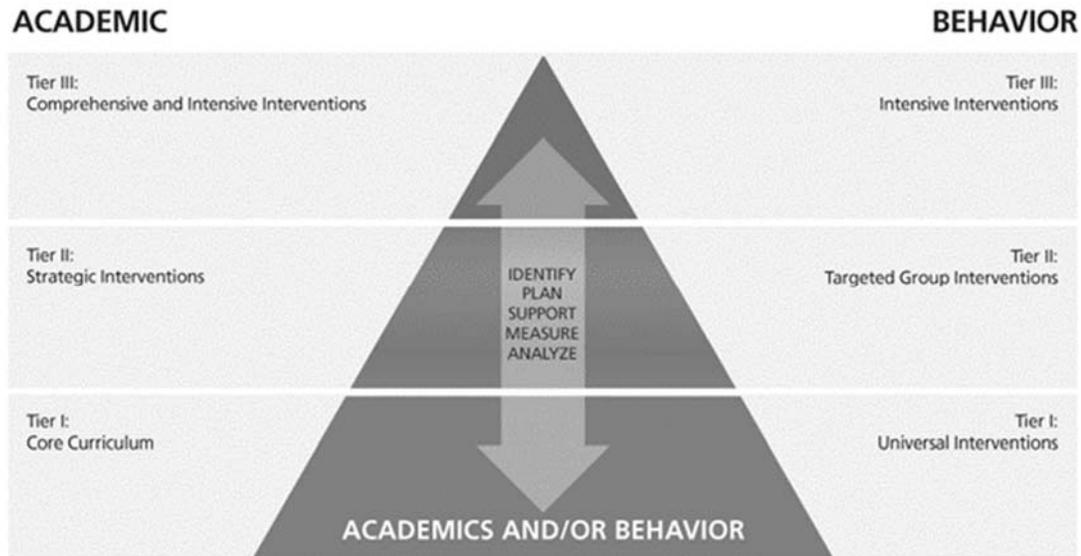


Figure 1. Generic RTI Model

Source: Public Consulting Group, n.d.

In support of using a system or prevention-based approach to address chronic absenteeism, Kearney and Graczyk (2013) stated, “the RTI model may be particularly compatible for promoting school attendance and for addressing school absenteeism because the RTI and absenteeism literature have emerged along key parallel paths over the past 25 years” (p. 3). The first parallel path among RTI and school absenteeism is the call for early identification and treatment (attendancesworks.com, n.d.; Jones et al., 2011; Sprick, Alabiaso, & Yore, 2015). The research on absenteeism reveals even a few missed school days are linked to more severe problems (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Muyskens et al., 2007; Richtman, 2007). Unfortunately, many schools have waited to intervene or failed to notice until a student

surpasses a legal limit such as ten absences in one semester (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). Sharkey and Fenning (2012) pointed out with continued absences students “are likely to feel increasingly more disconnected to school and are likely to engage with peers involved in delinquency” (p. 97) which is likely to lead to more absences. Researchers have recommended schools need to identify levels of attendance to identify students at the first signs of low attendance rates (attendanceworks.com, n.d.; Jones et al., 2011; Sprick et al., 2015). A proactive RTI model enacts an early warning system that doesn’t leave students wondering if anyone noticed their absence.

Secondly, RTI models a problem-solving approach to identify variables of problem behaviors causing poor school attendance and the design of interventions to address the individual’s needs (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2012). Kim and Streeter (2016) noted Tier 1 interventions are delivered to the entire school. For example, students falling below the 95 percent attendance rate should receive a postcard home notifying the parent of their student’s attendance rate (attendanceworks.org, n.d.). Tier 2 interventions are delivered to a classroom or small groups of students who are at risk for certain problems (Kim & Streeter, 2016). An example of a Tier 2 intervention may be for students exhibiting a lack of school engagement a small social group that facilitates peer connections (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012). Lastly, Streeter and Kim (2016) stated Tier 3 interventions are designed for students with more severe levels of chronic absenteeism. This is in alignment with Mac Iver and Mac Iver’s (2010) recommendation absenteeism interventions be designed to address the underlying cause of the absenteeism behavior. Research on absenteeism revealed youth miss school to avoid school-based social and stimuli that provoke negative feelings, mental health conditions or family mental health

problems, school disengagement, and feelings of an unsafe environment (DeSocio et al., 2007; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010). The RTI model provides a system approach to identify the factors impeding regular school attendance and the application of the appropriate intervention to best resolve the problem behavior (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; DeSocio et al., 2007; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2012; Kim & Streeter, 2016; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010).

Finally, the RTI model has an emphasis on prevention through a viable and accessible curriculum for all students (Lewis, Jones, Horner & Sugai, 2010). The literature on absenteeism calls for taking into account the many contextual variables that surround absenteeism and provide a foundation for all students to succeed (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). One prevention strategy recommended by attendanceworks.org (n.d) is to communicate the expected level of school attendance (i.e., 95 percent attendance rate for individuals) and why it is important (grades, graduation, post-secondary outcomes). Anti-bullying practices that improve feelings of school safety and school climate are also recommended prevention strategies (Jones et al., 2011). Jones et al. (2011) stated, “such efforts can prevent truancy behavior from ever developing” (p.13). An example of this would be bully prevention programs for all students because feelings of safety have been found to be a contextual factor in school absenteeism.

One such effort that resembles the RTI model’s application was New York City’s (NYC) efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). The mayor organized an interagency task force including members such as probation officers, homeless shelter managers, and school principals to develop strategies to improve chronic absenteeism rates. The strategies were piloted in 25 schools in 2010-11, 50

schools in 2011-12, and 100 schools in 2012-13 encompassing over 60,000 students (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). A mixed methodology provided extensive information. Descriptive statistics gathered through observations, interviews and document reviews provided descriptions of the strategies employed. Additionally, quantitative analysis was conducted “to examine the extent of chronic absenteeism, its relationship to academic outcomes and the impact of the task force’s efforts” (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013, p. i).

Although the NYC task force did not reference the RTI model, the strategies that were implemented can easily be categorized in the RTI model. Similar to Tier 1 practices the NYC task force developed a core foundation through the following strategies: a.) promoting public and student awareness about chronic absenteeism, b.) incentives for good and improved attendance and c.) universal screening of attendance data to target those who needed more intense support (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). Tier 2 provided principal led student success meetings that were data-driven and collaborative in nature and a process to connect the students and families to the needed community resources such as homeless shelters and mental health providers. Lastly, Tier 3 provided Success Mentors providing personalized support for students exhibiting chronic absenteeism.

The key findings from the three-year effort were extensive. Balfanz and Byrnes (2016) reported:

- Task force schools significantly and consistently outperformed comparison schools in reducing chronic absenteeism.
- Students in poverty at task force schools were 15 percent less likely to be chronically absent than students in comparison schools.

- Previously chronically absent high school students with Success Mentors were 52 percent more likely to remain in school the following year than equivalent comparison students who did not receive mentors, suggesting that this is a useful dropout prevention strategy.
- Students who stop being chronically absent see academic improvements –an open question until now. Students who exited chronic absenteeism in 2009-10 were 20 percentage points more likely to remain in school three years later (80%) than students who became chronically absent that year (60%).
- Students who become chronically absent see a decline in average GPA (from 72% to 67%, dropping from a C to a D) while those who exit chronic absenteeism see improvement (from 72% to 73%), a statistically significant difference given that these are cumulative GPAs which are harder to move. GPAs of students who continue to not be chronically absent continue to improve in the second year after exiting chronic absenteeism (p. 4).

Similar to the NYC task force, Sprick et al. (2015) studied a suburban elementary school in the northeastern part of the U.S. and found the use of a multi-tiered system of supports or RTI model improved absenteeism rates. The population consisted of 350 elementary students enrolled during the 2013-14 school year (Sprick et al., 2015). The only demographics reported were 70 percent of the population was white and 19.8 percent were Latino (Sprick et al., 2015).

Sprick et al. (2015) indicated the first step in developing a multi-tiered system of supports called for defining chronic absenteeism and regular school attendance to gather baseline data. Chronic absenteeism was defined as missing 10 percent or more (excused,

unexcused, or suspensions) of school. Regular school attendance –absent no more than 5 percent of school days was defined as the goal for every student. Baseline data indicated 26 percent were chronically absent and 46 percent of the student population had regular school attendance (Sprick et al., 2015).

The second step involves developing a system to quickly and effectively mine the data. Sprick et al. (2015) indicated the following items were incorporated in their data mining system:

- Percentage of students with regular school attendance.
- Percentage of students with chronic absenteeism.
- List of individuals who have regular attendance but are at risk of entering the chronically absent category, or are chronically absent.
- Attendance rates by month and day of the week.
- Attendance rates by grade level.

Next, the school developed a multi-tiered approach to effectively allocate resources and personnel. An attendance task force was developed to monitor absenteeism data on a regular basis, develop school-wide prevention strategies for Tier 1 and monitor Tier 2 and Tier 3 support systems for implementation and effectiveness.

Finally, the school defined the strategies to be used at each Tier. For example, in Tier 1 strategies included communicating the importance of regular school attendance through schoolwide assemblies, letters home, classroom presentations and various media outlets (Sprick et al., 2015). Tier 1 also included motivational strategies that recognized regular school attendance and improvements. These included schoolwide attendance goals, classroom goals, and individual goals and recognitions.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 involved identifying and ameliorating the cause of students' chronic absenteeism (Sprick et al., 2015). Examples included academic interventions for those students found to be avoiding school because it is too difficult or in the case of chronic illness collaborating with health care providers to ensure the student has adequate care. Sprick et al. (2015) indicated the key to Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies is an assessment of why the student is chronically absent and providing interventions specific to those causes.

Implementation of this multi-tiered system of support, or RTI model, resulted in a decrease of chronic absenteeism by 10 percent and improvement of regular attendance by 16 percent in one year (Sprick et al., 2015). These findings along with those of other researchers such as the literature found on the attendancesworks.org website provide evidence that effective strategies are within school districts' means to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve the academic outcomes for even the students exhibiting severe chronic absenteeism.

The literature research revealed that although truancy and chronic absenteeism have been studied for decades (Atwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2013) and recommendations for collaborative or multi-modal interventions are abundant (attendancesworks.org, n.d.; Jones et al., 2011) caution is warranted by Maynard et al. and Currey-Stevens and Kim-Gervey. Curry-Stevens and Kim-Gervey (2016) stated, "experiential knowledge about chronic absenteeism, extant in reports produced by non-profits, summaries of interventions, and academic articles exist, although very few absenteeism programs have been rigorously evaluated" (p. 21). A meta-analysis was conducted by Maynard et al.

(2012) to understand the effects of indicated (Tier 3) interventions on attendance outcomes for chronically absent students. The researchers identified 64 studies from 1990 through 2009 conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia involving primary and secondary students who met the broader term of chronic absenteeism. A comprehensive review yielded only five experimental designed studies and 11 quasi-experimental design studies that met the inclusion criteria. Maynard et al. (2012) shared there is an adequate number of research studies involving a general consensus of truancy and absenteeism outcomes, but finding only 16 experimental or quasi-experimental studies designed to examine the outcomes of indicated (Tier 3) interventions is a concern. In reporting their findings, Maynard et al. (2012) cautioned the small number of studies and heterogeneity warrants care in interpreting and applying the overall mean-effect size. Court-based, school-based, and community-based interventions demonstrated similar effects on attendance outcomes therefore, it was suggested one might choose from various settings and types of programs for Tier 3 interventions. Maynard et al. (2012) reported, "A key finding of this review and meta-analysis was the lack of available evidence to support the general belief that collaborative and multi-modal interventions are more effective than simple, non-collaborative interventions" (p. 49). Lastly, the authors reported the effects of truancy interventions were positive and moderate but not clinically significant. The comprehensive review of truancy interventions found evidence those students receiving interventions had improved attendance than their control-group peers. However, the truancy interventions are not delivering acceptable attendance rates of 90 percent or above. (Maynard et al., 2012).

Use of the proactive, public health theory based RTI model to improve the attendance rates at secondary schools has shown promise in the literature. The RTI model allows absenteeism interventions to be targeted at individuals as well as to those systemic in nature (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). Additionally, the RTI model can account for the varied contextual variables that surround chronic absenteeism. Finally, a particular advantage of using this model is educational professionals are familiar with it because it has been used to address academic deficits for many years (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). However, caution is warranted due to the lack of evidence to support collaborative and multi-modal interventions (Curry-Stevens & Kim-Gervey, 2016; Maynard et al., 2012) that are often associated with the RTI model.

Ecological Perspective

Although the RTI model demonstrated promise in providing a system of interventions that positively impacted attendance rates there remains another intriguing body of literature that discusses a separate approach known as the ecological perspective. Similar to the RTI Model and Public Health Model, the ecological perspective has been used in community and school counseling over the past 40 years (Trickett & Rowe, 2012). A closer look at the ecological perspective may provide further enhancement to the body of knowledge pertaining to chronic absenteeism.

The ecological perspective is a framework to evaluate the ecology of an environment such as a school. Cook (2012) stated, “human life is fundamentally connected with the world around us” (p. 6) and the ecological perspective provides a framework for understanding human behavior within a system. There are three key principles to the ecological perspective: 1.) behavior is influenced by both the individual

and life context; therefore, it is personal, 2.) behavior is the result of an individual interacting with the environment; therefore it is interactional, and 3.) behavior is shaped by continual meaning making, therefore it is evolving (Cook, 2012).

Historically, individuals were viewed as the sole bearer of responsibility for their problems (Cook, 2012). This line of thought fits with the previously discussed zero tolerance practices found in schools. However, “behavior is interactional. Individuals are not passive placeholders within these environments but actually interact with them. Individuals are influenced by, and in turn influence, the contexts of their lives” (Cook, 2012, p. 7). Applying this knowledge to the school environment suggests an alternative worldview based on the acknowledgment that individual behavior change is affected by multiple levels of the ecological environment (Trickett & Rowe, 2012). Succinctly, the ecological perspective supports increasing evidence that individual behavior change is difficult to sustain in the absence of environmental change supportive of individual efforts (Cook, 2012; Trickett & Rowe, 2012).

Trickett and Rowe (2012) argued that the ecological perspective of understanding the ecology of schools in which interventions are implemented has largely been ignored thus far. They do go on to state the fields of psychology and school counseling have recently begun to show evidence that the movement toward ecological thinking is spreading (Trickett & Rowe, 2012). A defining factor of the ecological perspective is it is systematic or embodies a “synergy or interdependence among intervention components occurring at different ecological levels or involving different components of the school context as they affect individual behavior” (Trickett & Rowe, 2012, p. 130).

Considering the ecological perspective while developing and evaluating the RTI model's impact on school absenteeism may be the key to cracking the long-standing absenteeism problem that has plagued schools. Rather than merely applying interventions and looking for results, the RTI model and ecological perspective could be used together. For example, in designing Tier 1 universal prevention strategies one might use a survey to find the students' perceptions of absences, reasons for absences, and ideas for improving attendance (Brundage, Castillo, & Batsche, 2017) prior to developing their system of interventions in the RTI model. As Trickett and Rowe (2012) recommended, it is important to understand different levels of ecology or different components of the school context as they affect individual behavior. Brundage et al. (2017) developed the Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism (RCA) Survey to "provide information about common barriers to attendance experienced by secondary students that may be used to inform a data-based, problem-solving process that includes the development of evidence-based interventions" (p. 5).

The survey was administered to 5,790 secondary students across eight states who missed more than 10 percent of school days in the 2015-16 school year (Brundage et al., 2017). The findings reported the reasons for missing school with 92 responding health-related issues followed by: transportation (53 percent); personal stress (42 percent); preferred activity outside of school (41 percent); value of school (39 percent) and school climate (32 percent). Also useful in understanding the needed prevention strategies was the student perceptions portion of the survey. It was reported 43 percent of students accurately recalled and reported absences with their previous year's attendance rates (Brundage et al., 2017). A finding such as this in a school survey would suggest a Tier 1

intervention to increase student awareness and implications associated with chronic absenteeism is needed. To further understand the individuals and ecology of the school the survey requires respondents to identify why they come to school. Lastly, the survey gathers ideas from students what they believe would help them attend school more regularly (Brundage et al., 2017).

Merging the RTI model and the ecological perspective can be utilized in the following way. First, conducting a survey, such as the RCA survey, will provide the school personnel with information about student behavior within the system (Brundage et al., 2017). In developing a system of interventions in the RTI model one should keep in mind behavior is personal, interactive, and ever evolving (Cook, 2012; Trickett & Rowe, 2012). It is also important for the school to remember individual behavior change is difficult to sustain in the absence of environmental change supportive of individual efforts (Cook, 2012, Trickett & Rowe, 2012). Therefore, Brundage et al. (2017) recommend using the survey results to “address the academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs of all students” (p. 20) through evaluating what needs to change in the school environment.

The literature review revealed chronic absenteeism is a complex problem with both individual and contextual (environmental) components that have consistently plagued schools for decades (Atwood & Croll, 2006; Davies & Lee, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2013). There are several interventions or frameworks such as the RTI model, recommended to address chronic absenteeism yet there needs to be consideration of the leadership style best suited for implementing an intervention or RTI model to address chronic absenteeism.

Transformational Leadership Theory

In our ever-changing, increasingly complex world there is a need for more sophisticated leadership (Fullan, 2014). Viewed in the school setting, the principals' leadership has been identified as the single most important factor in school effectiveness (King Rice, 2010; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Existing research indicated effective principals influence a variety of school outcomes, including student achievement, through their recruitment and motivation of quality teachers, their ability to identify and articulate school vision and goals, their effective allocation of resources, and their development of organizational structures to support instruction and learning (Horng, Klasik, and Loeb, 2010). School leaders are aware that regardless of the challenge change can occur for short periods of time (Denmark, 2012) such as with students' attendance rates in school. However, transformational leaders recognize that to make lasting improvements to a challenge, such as chronic absenteeism, they need to employ systems-thinking by developing a process that ensures all parts of the school are connected and share a common purpose (Denmark, 2012).

The Dissertation in Practice study does not specifically look at the leadership style utilized during the development and implementation of the RTI, Tier 3 intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings, yet the importance of leadership needs to be explored. The literature review revealed the persistence and pervasiveness of chronic absenteeism in school settings calls for a leadership style that causes changes in individuals and school setting. Smith (2016) stated, "the goal of all school leaders should be to lead in a manner that enables students, teachers, parents, and the community to truly feel they are an essential part of the school culture" (p. 66). In order to achieve the goal

of changing behavior (individual and school setting) and creating a collaborative school culture, administrators could utilize transformational leadership.

James McGregor Burns (1978) first introduced the concept of transformational leadership in his descriptive research on political leaders, and since then this term has been applied across many fields including educational leadership. Avolio and Bass (1994) and Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins (2005) went on to develop the transformational leadership model for school leaders. Leithwood and et al. (2005) defined transformational leadership as leadership that “implies major changes in the form, nature, function and or potential of some phenomenon” (p. 7). Transformational leadership is comprised of several key components in the school setting. First, the leader is willing to change or alter the existing systems and practices of the school (Smith, 2016). Secondly, the leader aims to motivate followers and create a supportive school culture (Smith, 2016). Finally, transformational leaders share a vision and shared goals that facilitate openness and trust within the school culture allowing members to set aside self-interest for the sake of the students and school (Smith, 2016).

Transformational leadership in essence is a leadership approach that causes a change in individuals and school systems (Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2007). This style matches with the prevalence and persistence of chronic absenteeism. Not only will there be an individual change among the staff but also the students who receive the intervention(s) (Cook, 2012; Trickett & Rowe, 2012). It will also undoubtedly need to transform the school system as well (Cook, 2012; Trickett & Rowe, 2012). Additionally, research indicates schools cannot solve the absenteeism problem on their own (attendanceworks.org, n.d). The prominent nonprofit organization, attendanceworks.org

(n.d.), as well as the evidence from the NYC task force recommended schools and communities to come together to combat chronic absenteeism. A transformative leadership style provides a broad perspective a school principal may utilize in combatting chronic absenteeism. Northouse (2016) summarized transformational leadership as the creation of a vision and strategies to transform systems change in the school.

Several criticisms were noted by Northouse (2016) that counter balance positive features of transformational leadership. One such weakness is the lack of conceptual clarity (Northouse, 2016) in guiding the leader. Another criticism of transformational leadership is it implies a charismatic trait-like quality is needed. Finally, transformational leadership can be viewed as elitist or solely dependent on the single leader (Northouse, 2016). However, Northouse (2016) stated transformational leadership is widely used and seems to hold value. The following will provide the reader with an overview of the study's site high school and the leadership's process of designing and implementing the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings.

Research Setting: Study's Site High School

The high school setting is a complex system because of the many different variables found in individual schools. These range from the student demographics, course schedules and offerings, personnel, support programs to available funding. For example, student demographics vary across a continuum in regards to the percentage of students living in poverty, ethnic diversity and English language acquisition status. Additionally, the personnel in leadership positions responsible for making decisions regarding staff, programs, and resource allocation vary across schools. Of particular interest to this study was one high school's response to chronic absenteeism.

This Dissertation in Practice is situated in one Midwestern high school and examines the leadership's response to NCLB legislation's call to improve attendance rates (Jones et al., 2011; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016). Historically, the school's leadership, like many other high schools, had utilized one-dimensional interventions such as zero-tolerance policies to address absenteeism. In 2008, the school's leaders began to evolve from one-dimensional interventions to a systems-based approach. In designing a system of interventions they mimicked what is commonly known within schools as the RTI model, with three tiers of support, in their efforts to address absenteeism. It is important to note the high school had already implemented the RTI model to provide three tiers of interventions to address the academic needs of students. The following will describe how the high school developed the system of supports, and loosely organized it within the RTI model's three tiers, to address chronic absenteeism.

In 2008, the district began a joint effort with the deputy county attorney to address absenteeism at the elementary level. With initial success at the elementary level, although lacking research evaluation, the district decided to apply the system of interventions to the middle and high school students. Their efforts began with the the formation of the committee and identifications of interventions to improve attendance rates.

The district committee included the associative superintendent, the school social workers, and the deputy county attorney responsible for juvenile status offenses. Their first task was defining chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more days the school was in session. With the definition of chronic absenteeism in place they developed a system of interventions to address signs of chronic absenteeism.

The first step, also considered a Tier 1 intervention was for the school social workers to review the school attendance records to identify patterns or potential concerns in student attendance. Once patterns of concerns were identified, the social workers along with the student's principal and counselor decided whether an initial letter would be sent to the student's parent/guardian(s) declaring the school's concern. Secondly, after six weeks the student's attendance was evaluated for stabilization or improvement and/or whether the student's absenteeism rate met the chronic absenteeism threshold of being absent for 10 percent of the possible attendance days (i.e., five absences with 50 days in the attendance calendar). If the absenteeism rate met the chronic absenteeism threshold or had not improved the student was moved to the Tier 2 intervention in the RTI model where a second letter was sent.

This second letter informed parent/guardians of the continued attendance issues exhibited by their child. The letter also informed the parent/guardian(s) the school attendance officer, also known as the deputy county attorney, had been notified of the child's chronic absenteeism and the school intent to meet with the parent/guardian(s) and said student to develop an attendance improvement plan (See Appendix A). In the development of this plan, the school social worker and parent/guardian(s) considered barriers to regular school attendance specific to the student and remedies specific to the barriers were written into the attendance plan. The social workers aimed to identify and remove barriers to attendance such as transportation, housing, and health care services. The attendance hearing officer was notified of the completion of this meeting and attendance plan and could receive a copy upon request.

The RTI, Tier 3 intervention specific to this study began if after four weeks on the Tier 2 attendance plan did not result in improved attendance. The first step in the intervention was the attendance hearing officer and school social worker scheduling the family for an appearance at a school attendance hearing held at the school district's board of education room. The informal hearing was overseen by the attendance hearing officer, also known as the deputy county attorney, and required attendance of the parent/guardian(s), the student, and a school social worker. The school attendance hearing was considered an informal hearing because no legal sanctions could be administered.

The RTI Tier 3 intervention was an ongoing process that entailed the following expectations. The parent/guardian(s) would carry out the directive(s) delivered by the attendance hearing officer with assistance from the school social worker as needed. Regular appearance at school attendance hearings continued as required at approximately a four-week interval. Failure to comply with the directive(s) would result in a sooner appearance before the attendance hearing officer. Continued violations of the attendance directive(s) resulted in a referral to the County's Attorney Office for potential prosecution of the truancy status offense.

There were a few notable decision rules for a referral to the school attendance hearing. First and foremost, only students at the high school in the 9th and 10th grades could be referred. This decision was for two reasons. The organizing committee believed including chronically absent students from the 11th and 12th grades would overwhelm the system and resources. Secondly, the attendance hearing officer would not be able to refer students age 17 or older to the legal system for a truancy status offense.

Students were also not referred if they had a documented illness, or had other extenuating circumstances documented with the school or are currently on probation by the court.

Additionally, the court system requested students exhibiting chronic absenteeism but still performing well academically not be referred for a truancy status offense. Judges wanted cases that involved truancy coupled with failing classes or not on track for graduation due to being credit deficient. It is important to note the researcher did not find any students in the study in the Tier 3, RTI intervention of school social workers and attendance hearings that were not also failing classes or could not be classified as credit deficient.

Summary

Chapter 2 provided a review of the current literature on the ever persistent and problematic chronic absenteeism plaguing our schools. The review showed an interchangeable use of the terms truancy and chronic absenteeism took place in response to federal legislation. Many are now calling for the use of a universal, standardized definition of chronic absenteeism as we move forward. The review also showed the historical approach of responding to absenteeism through zero tolerance policies or punitive consequences is giving way to the application of systems-based models such as the RTI model. And, that an ecological perspective has been discussed as having the potential to enhance the RTI model by using an iterative approach in the development and evaluation of the model's system of interventions. The literature review also explored transformational leadership, a possible leadership approach that may aid school leaders aiming to address chronic absenteeism. Lastly, the review provided a brief description of the study's site high school, variances in school settings, and an overview

of the high school's development and implementation of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings.

Chapter 3 will orient the reader to the quasi-experimental design used by the researcher to explore the high school's Tier 3, RTI intervention. The methodology used intended to find if there was a reduction in absenteeism, an affect participants' GPA, and the influence of relevant risk factors found in the literature review.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings on school absenteeism rates and GPA for renewed progress toward graduation at a Midwestern high school.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this Dissertation in Practice was to use the findings of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings to inform school leaders through a set of evidence-based recommendations to reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism in the high school setting.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this Dissertation in Practice, the researcher used a quasi-experimental design to examine the effects of implementing a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings in reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism and increasing grade point average in a high school setting. Three major research questions were posed:

1. Does a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings reduce the rate of absenteeism among chronically absent students?
2. Does a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings increase the GPA of chronically absent students?

3. What is the influence of the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings while controlling for the relevant risk factors of race, gender, socio-economic status, and enrollment in special education have on absenteeism rate?

The hypotheses of the study are:

- H1: Students that participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have an improved absenteeism rate compared to the students in the control group.
- H2: Students who participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have an improved grade point average as measured at the end of the academic school year.
- H3: While controlling for relevant risk factors including race, low SES, gender and enrollment in special education, that students who participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings will show a positive impact through lower rates of absenteeism.

Research Design

The researcher chose to use a quasi-experimental research design to explore the relationship between a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings and rates of chronic absenteeism and GPA. “Quasi-experiments are a form of experimental research in which individuals are not randomly assigned to groups” (Creswell, 2014, p. 247). Quasi-experiments have long been used by researchers in the education field for two primary reasons. First, a quasi-experiment’s requirements fit within a school administrator’s ethical and funding restraints (Shades, Cook, &

Campbell, 2002). Traditional experimental research design calls for random selection and assignment of participants. In schools this can create ethical challenges for students in need of the intervention but not randomly selected for the study. Secondly, it allows the researcher to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention after the intervention has already been implemented in the school setting (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Thus, funding restraints are not created rather the quasi-experimental design can provide evidence to continue or improve the intervention to justify the cost of implementation.

The quasi-experimental design approach was appropriate for the nature of this study because the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings began before the study was initiated. The data needed for the study was all contained in the school's existing student records management system and no human subject research was conducted for the purpose of this study. Specifically, the study was initiated in 2015, whereas the 2013-14 school year data was used for the experimental group and data from the 2010-11 school year was used for the control group. The two-level independent variable was the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings (experimental group v. control group) and the continuous dependent variables were students' absenteeism rate and GPA.

One of the most commonly used quasi-experimental designs in education research is the non-equivalent control group design (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). For this Dissertation in Practice, the non-equivalent control design group was most appropriate because it allowed the researcher to utilize a matched control group from the 2010-11 school year before the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings was available in the 2013-14 school year for chronically absent

students. A matched control group required the researcher to match the experiment and control group participants on as many characteristics as possible to ensure the groups were as similar as possible before the intervention was introduced (Shadish et al., 2002). In educational research non-equivalent designs can be strengthened by using a historical cohort control group (Walser, 2014). Shadish, et al. (2002) defined cohort controls as “groups that move through an institution (e.g., schools) in cycles (e.g., a new third-grade class each year) as more comparable to each other than most other non-equivalent comparison groups” (p. 159).

It was important to consider three factors when planning the data collection for this non-equivalent control design. The first was how the independent variable was defined. Secondly, how the dependent variable(s) of absenteeism rate and GPA were defined. And lastly, how the control group would be matched to increase internal validity (Shadish et al., 2002).

Independent Variable A Tier 3, RTI Intervention

The Dissertation in Practice had an overarching independent variable of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings with two levels: experimental v. control group. The experimental group was exposed to the Tier 3, RTI intervention and was created using data from the 2013-14 school year of 9th and 10th grade students who met the criteria of the experimental level of the independent variable. The independent variable of Tier 3, RTI intervention was defined as:

1. A student who has accumulated a total of five absences per school quarter or the hourly equivalent of five absences, and/or

2. A student who is absent more than 20 days per year, or the hourly equivalent (Excessive Absenteeism, Policy 8312 –Grand Island Public Schools, n.d.).
3. The student received support from a school social worker and participated in the school attendance hearing process.

The control group was next created by case matching students from the 2010-11 school year. The control group met the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria for chronic absenteeism but were not exposed to the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings.

Dependent Variable One: Absenteeism Rate

This section describes the process used to calculate the dependent variable of absenteeism rate. As noted in Chapter 2, there are a variety of approaches to studying school attendance including truancy (unexcused absences) and chronic absenteeism (excused, unexcused and suspension absences) (attendanceworks.org, n.d.). Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes, and Vlosky, (2011) indicated no matter the definition of an absence the use of a raw number of absences before and after an intervention calculates a biased measure of absenteeism. For example, students who began receiving the Tier 3, RTI intervention at the start of the school year had an opportunity to miss more days of school post-intervention than those referred later in the school year. To study an unbiased measure of absenteeism, the researcher used absenteeism rate as one of the dependent variables in this Dissertation in Practice.

The absenteeism rate, the proportion of days missed, was calculated for the study participants according to the following process. The district had 174.5 student enrollment days for both the 2010-11 (See Appendix B for school calendar) and 2013-14 (See

Appendix C for school calendar) school years. Starting on the first day of the school the researcher assigned student enrollment days from 1-174.5 (i.e., August 14 = Day 1, August 15 = Day 2, etc.). This process was applied to both the 2010-11 and 2013-14 school calendars.

The pre-intervention absenteeism rate was calculated by dividing the number of absences at the time the intervention was assigned by the number of student enrollment days. For example, if the student was referred to the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings on Day 50 and had 5 absences, then the number of absences at the time of referral (5) was divided by the number of days that could have been potentially missed that point in the school year (50), resulting in an absenteeism rate of 10 percent before referral to the intervention ($5/50$). Likewise, steps were taken to calculate the proportion of days missed after the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings was applied. This was calculated by counting the number of days missed after the intervention divided by the number of days remaining in the school year. Extending the example, the student referred on Day 50, there were 124.5 days remaining in the academic calendar the student could potentially miss ($174.5 - 50 = 124.5$). If the student's attendance records indicated they had missed four additional days after the referral to the intervention, then the number of absences after the referral was divided by the number of days remaining in the academic calendar from the time of referral (124.5), resulting in an absenteeism rate of three percent ($4/124.5$) after the intervention. Therefore, the rate of absenteeism before the intervention can be compared to the rate of absenteeism rate after the intervention was implemented.

Dependent Variable Two: GPA

The dependent variable of grade point average was already contained in the district's student management system and needed no further manipulation by the researcher. The school district calculates grade point average on a four-point scale.

- A = 4.0 (90-100%)
- B = 3.0 (80-89%)
- C = 2.0 (70-79%)
- D = 1.0 (60-69%)
- F = 0 (below 60%)

It is important to note, the school district's website reported "student letter grades are based on academic achievement, not behavior. The grades are based on assessment scores (tests and performance projects) carrying 80 percent weight, with 20 percent weight on daily practice or homework" ("High School Grading Information", n.d.).

Therefore, the researcher believed a student's absenteeism rate negatively impacted the students' GPAs through the students' loss of direct instruction during absences. The district does not withhold grades on assignments or deduct points for absences.

Population and Sampling Strategy

The overall student population of high schools in the United States can vary from school to school. Individual schools may vary in their demographic data but if an absenteeism problem exists the methodology in this study could be applied to explore the effects of an intervention. The researcher chose this particular Midwestern high school because a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance

hearings had been implemented in the 2013-14 school year. Additionally, the high school had no formal evaluation to determine the impact of the Tier 3, RTI intervention.

The Midwestern high school in this study had an overall population of 2440 students in 9th through 12th grades. The researcher examined the overall demographic characteristics of the high school, as seen in Table 1, to provide an orientation to the reader of this particular Midwestern high school.

Table 1

Population Characteristics by Group

Characteristics	2013-14
Grade	
9 th	27%
10 th	26%
11 th	23%
12 th	24%
Gender	
Male	51%
Female	49%
Race	
White	40%
Hispanic	54%
Non-White/Non- Hispanic	6%
Socioeconomic Status	
Low-SES	69%
Special Education Status	
Students with an IEP	14%
Graduation Status	
Graduates	93%
Dropouts	3%
Total population	<i>N</i> = 2440

With the total high school population revealed the following will describe how the researcher used control group matching to determine the study's sample population and participants.

Control Group Case Matching

Lastly, the researcher used cohort matching to create the non-equivalent control group as closely as possible to increase the internal validity of the study. The Tier 3, RTI intervention was available to 9th and 10th grade students only. Data collected from the 2010-11 school year was chosen for the control group for this Dissertation in Practice for three reasons. First, the researcher chose to exclude the 2011-12 school year because initial attempts were made during this year to implement the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings. Secondly, the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings was not in existence in 2010-11 therefore temporally the researcher was assured no students in the control group would have received the Tier 3, RTI intervention. Lastly, the 2010-11 school year was similar to the 2013-14 school year regarding both student demographics and programs and practices. For example, there were no major changes or differences in instructional model used and programs aimed at supporting student achievement.

The high school, in the 2010-11 school year had the same number of staff (minus the social workers), the same support programs and extracurricular offerings (minus the school attendance hearings), and all of the same course offerings as compared to the 2013-14 school year. Similarly, as seen in Table 2 the demographic characteristics of the sample student body populations in the control and experiment years were similar. Thus, the researcher believes the 2010-11 school year data serves as a sufficient cohort comparison group. It is important to note the graduation status does not add up to 100 percent because in the State of Nebraska three groups of students can continue to attend school. First, some special education students continue to attend school through the age

of 21. Secondly, students who have not met their credit requirements but have not turned 19 years old before the beginning of the school year may continue to pursue their high school diploma and are not considered dropouts. And lastly, students with immigration status who have not yet earned their credits but are under 21 years of age may continue to pursue their high school diploma.

Table 2

Sample Population Characteristics by Group

Characteristics	2010-11	2013-14	Change
Grade			
9 th	26%	27%	1%
10 th	25%	26%	1%
Gender			
Male	53%	54%	1%
Female	47%	46%	-1%
Race			
White	47%	40%	-7%
Hispanic	48%	54%	+6%
Non-White/Non- Hispanic	5%	6%	+1%
Socioeconomic Status			
Low-SES	49%	69%	+20%
Special Education Status			
Students with an IEP	14%	14%	0
Graduation Status			
Graduates	91%	93%	+2%
Dropouts	4%	3%	-1%
Total 9 th and 10 th grade population	<i>n</i> = 1088	<i>n</i> = 1184	+96

Data Collection Procedures and Participants

The researcher used a quasi-experimental design to conduct a study of the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings in a Midwestern high school. The population was composed of 9th and 10th-grade students from the 2010-11 (control group) and 2013-14 (experimental group) school years. The experimental group participants were identified by meeting the independent variable

criteria of participating in the Tier 3, RTI intervention. The control group was cohort matched according to the pre-absenteeism rate (at the time of intervention) followed by grade, gender, socioeconomic status, and special education status. The data for all variables came from the school's record management system.

With the establishment of the populations from the 2013-14 and 2010-11 cohorts and defined study variables the researcher identified the study's participants. The following will provide an overview of this process.

First, the researcher identified 9th and 10th-grade students from the 2013-14 school year who participated in the RTI, Tier 3 intervention from the district's student management system. The resulting list was cross-referenced with an Excel spreadsheet of students in the school attendance hearing process. This document was shared and maintained by both the District Attorney and the school social workers. The resulting list of experimental group participants included 86 students.

Next, the researcher began the process of collecting the necessary variable information for each experimental group participant. An ad-hoc extraction process in the district's student management system allowed the researcher to extract the experimental students' grade, gender, race, socio-economic status, special education status, graduation status and the number of disciplinary events. Socio-economic status was based on the student's eligibility for Free or Reduced Lunch status according to the federal guidelines. The number of disciplinary events collected for each participant included in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and referral to the attendance hearing. Finally, graduation refers to whether the student completed the requirements to earn a high school diploma from the school.

To this spreadsheet, the researcher added the date of the RTI intervention for each student. The rate of absenteeism at the time of the intervention was also calculated and documented. This took careful inspection of each student's attendance record and daily schedule.

The researcher sought to capture absences (excused, unexcused, but excluding absences due to disciplinary sanctions) as fully as possible by calculating missed class periods. This process ensured students who skip classes but not full days were captured in the data set. In order to determine the number of absences, the researcher determined the number of periods (classes) the individual had in their daily schedule. The majority of students had an eight period day, but a few did have a shortened schedule. An absence in this study equates to a student's full day (i.e., eight absent periods) in order to capture students who skip classes. If a student had a six period day, then six periods resulted in an absence. To calculate this value, the number of periods missed from the beginning of the school year was counted through the date of the intervention. It is important to note absences were defined as excused or unexcused but the researcher excluded absences due to suspensions, expulsion or student activities. This number was divided by the number of periods in the student's schedule resulting in the number of full-day absences. To complete the calculations for the pre-absenteeism rate the researcher divided the student's number of full day absences by the number of days from the start of the academic year and the date of the intervention. The result of this calculation provided the students pre-intervention rate of absenteeism. Similarly, the post-intervention absenteeism rate was computed by counting the number of class periods missed from the day after the intervention was applied until the end of the school year.

A separate ad hoc extraction from the district's student management system provided the GPA for experimental students at 6-week intervals. The GPA nearest to the time of intervention was used for the pre-GPA variable. The post-GPA interval was taken for all students at the end of the academic school year.

Finally, the spreadsheet containing the experimental students was updated with a column capturing if the student graduated, dropped out, or transferred before the expected graduation date.

Upon further analysis of the participants in the experimental group, nine students were excluded because their attendance improved with the initial referral to the Tier 3, RTI intervention. Therefore, the students did not fully participate in at least 6 weeks of support from the school social workers and school attendance hearings. Six students were excluded from the study because they transferred out of the school district during the 2013-14 school year. An additional eight students were dropped from the study because they were transferred to alternative programs serving adjudicated youth; four within the district, two went to State of Nebraska juvenile placements, and two were transferred to out-of-State juvenile facilities. One student was dropped due to placement in the RTI, Tier 3 intervention because of parent request and did not meet the study's criteria. Lastly, one student was dropped because the student attended school less than 10 percent of the school year. The researcher was left with 61 students who met the school's criteria of chronically absent and participated in the RTI, Tier 3 intervention.

After the experimental group was established the researcher used a similar process to identify students in the control group. Again, the district's student management system was used to extract variables. The system allowed the researcher to

choose the 2010-11 school year and use a feature that identified all students who had a particular number of absences (periods) on a given date. This allowed the researcher to enter the number of missed class periods of each student in the experimental group. The result was a short list of students from the 9th and 10th-grade students in the 2010-11 school year that matched the pre-absenteeism rate of the student from the experimental group. From this list, the best match was chosen based on matching for the following variables in the given order: grade, gender, race, socio-economic status, and special education status. This process was used to find a match for each participant in the experimental group. Table 3 reveals how closely the participants were matched on the five demographic variables. Of the 61 participants, 23 had a complete match across the five demographic variables. 26 were a perfect match on 4 out of the 5 demographic variables, and 23 were matched on 3 of the 5 variables.

Table 3

Percent of Pairs Matched Across Variables

Demographic Variable	Percent Matched
Grade	100%
Gender	100%
Race	80%
SES status	69%
SPED status	69%

Table 4 expresses the demographics of the participants in the study. The experimental and control groups were comprised of 72 percent ninth graders with the majority of participants being female (62 percent). The experimental group participants were comprised of 59 percent Hispanic students which was higher than the 54 percent representation in Hispanic students in the overall student population (Table 2). Similarly, the experimental group had a higher rate of students meeting the low SES criteria (85

percent) as compared to the overall student population (69 percent). Eighteen percent of the experimental group qualified for special education as compared to special education students representing 14 percent of the total student body population.

Table 4

Participant Demographics

Demographics	Experiment Group (<i>n</i> =61)	Control Group (<i>n</i> =61)	Difference
Grade			
9 th	44	44	0
10 th	17	17	0
Gender			
Male	23	23	0
Female	38	38	0
Race/Ethnicity			
White	23	22	1
Hispanic	36	38	2
Non-White/Non-Hispanic	2	1	1
Socioeconomic Status			
SES (low)	52	49	3
Special Education Status			
Special Education	11	14	3
Total	<i>n</i> = 61	<i>n</i> = 61	

There were 61 participants in the experimental group and 61 participants in the control group for a total of 122 participants. Students' individual demographics were matched as closely as possible to create a cohort control group in the following order: grade, gender, race, SES, and special education status.

Ethical Considerations

The Dissertation in Practice was conducted in compliance with the standards and regulations for ethical academic research. A key aspect of this was no human subject research was needed to conduct this quasi-experimental design study. The researcher secured permission to use the high school's student record management system for the needed data from the 2010-11 (control group) and 2013-14 (experimental group) school

years from the Associate Superintendent as designated by the Superintendent (Appendix D). IRB approval was also obtained (Appendix E). The researcher protected the identity of the study's individuals by extracting a unique student identification code rather than individual names. The data remains housed on a computer that only be used by typing the researcher's name and passcode. The data will be stored for five years after completion of the Dissertation in Practice. After this date, the researcher will permanently delete all electronic files related to this study.

Summary

The researcher used a quasi-experimental design to explore the relationship between a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings. The sample population consisted of 9th and 10th grade students from the 2013-14 school year (experiment group) and the 2010-11 school year (control group). The independent variable was participation in the Tier 3, RTI intervention with 61 participants meeting the criteria. Two dependent variables were used: absenteeism and GPA. Control group matching was used to find 61 control group participants from the 2010-11 school year. The research described this process in detail for others to replicate this study and for the study's site high school to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the Tier 3, RTI intervention.

The following will describe the data analyses and report both mean scores and effect sizes to evaluate the practical significance of the intervention. The researcher designed the Dissertation in Practice to fit with the intent of Creighton's Interdisciplinary Leadership program in that school leaders will benefit from understanding the study's results and the researcher's recommendations for future application or studies.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This Dissertation in Practice examined the impact of participation in the RTI, Tier 3 intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings on the change in the rate of absenteeism and renewed progress toward graduation in a Midwestern high school. As the researcher analyzed the data, the following hypotheses formed the structure of analysis to answer the research questions.

Hypotheses

In this Dissertation in Practice, the researcher used quantitative data analysis to examine the effects of implementing the RTI, Tier 3 intervention of using school social workers and school attendance hearings in reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism and increasing grade point average in a high school setting. Three hypotheses were tested:

- H1: Students that participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have an improved absenteeism rate compared to the students in the control group.
- H2: Students that participate in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have an improved grade point average as measured at the end of the academic school year.
- H3: While controlling for relevant risk factors including race, low SES, gender and enrollment in special education, students who participate in the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings will show a positive impact through lower rates of absenteeism.

Presentation of the Findings

The Dissertation in Practice was conducted to answer three research questions. The researcher used two computer programs to conduct her analysis. Microsoft Excel was used to organize and calculate participants' variables. SPSS was used to conduct the statistical analysis. The following sections evaluate the three research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

Research question 1 asked whether the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism among chronically absent students. Specifically, the researcher hypothesized that students who participated in a Tier 3, RTI intervention would have an improved attendance rate compared to students in the control group. The researcher conducted an independent samples t-test to measure the differences between the experimental group and cohort matched control group.

To establish statistical similarity between the two groups and to ensure that any post-intervention differences were not due to pre-existing differences between the two groups, an independent-samples t-test was run to determine whether there were differences in pre-absenteeism rates between the experiment and control group. The pre-absenteeism rate of the experiment group ($M = 15.03$, $SD = 9.38$) was not statistically different from the control group's pre-absenteeism rate ($M = 14.95$, $SD = 10.45$), $t(120) = -.045$, $p = .964$. These results assured the researcher the experiment and control group's pre-absenteeism rates were not statistically different. Therefore, an independent-samples t-test was conducted on the post-absenteeism rates.

An independent-samples t-test was run to directly test the research hypothesis that students who participated in the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have a lower attendance rate compared to students in the control group. The independent-samples t-test determined if there were differences in the post-absenteeism rates between the experiment and control group (Table 5). In support of the research hypothesis, the post-absenteeism rate of the experiment group ($M = 12.46, SD = 11.03$) was significantly lower than the control group's post absenteeism rate ($M = 19.26, SD = 14.07$) $t(120) = 2.97, p = .004$.

Table 5

H1: Independent Samples t-test Absenteeism Rate

	Experiment Group ($n = 61$)		Control Group ($n = 61$)		<i>p-value</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Pre Absenteeism Rate	15.03	9.38	14.95	10.46	.96
Post Absenteeism Rate	12.46	11.03	19.26	14.07	.00
p-value	.09		.00		

To further tease out the significant post-absenteeism rate between the experimental and control groups, the researcher conducted two within samples t-tests to examine differences within the experiment and control groups' absenteeism rates. Individual differences in attendance rates can be large, therefore, conducting a within samples t-test will eliminate variation due to individual differences. First, a test was run to determine if there were differences in the experiment group's pre and post-absenteeism rates. The post-absenteeism rate for the experiment group ($M = 12.46, SD = 11.03$) was not significantly different than the pre-absenteeism rate ($M = 15.03, SD = 9.38$), $t(60) = 1.73, p = .09$. The same within samples t-test was run to determine if there were

differences in the control group's absenteeism rates. The post-absenteeism rate for the control group ($M = 19.26$, $SD = 14.07$) was significantly higher than the pre-absenteeism rate ($M = 14.95$, $SD = 10.46$), $t(60) = -3.25$, $p = .002$.

Hypothesis 2

Research question 2 asked whether the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings increased the grade point average among chronically absent students. Specifically, it was hypothesized that students who participate in the Tier 3, RTI intervention would have an improved grade point average as measured at the end of the academic school year.

To establish statistical similarity between the two groups and to ensure any post-intervention differences were not due to pre-existing differences between the two groups, an independent-samples t-test was run to determine if there were differences in the pre-GPA scores between the experiment and control group. The experiment group had a mean score 1.87 ($SD = .86$) that was .46 lower than the control group's pre-GPA ($M = 2.33$, $SD = .92$). The researcher realized the statistical difference $p = .005$ revealed the two groups are non-equivalent in regards to GPAs and therefore between group comparisons could not be made.

However, the researcher went on to conduct a within samples t-test to further examine differences within the experiment and control groups' GPAs. The within samples t-test allowed the researcher to analyze the data having each subject within the group to serve as his or her own comparison. First, a test was run to determine if there were differences in the experiment group's pre-GPA and post-GPA. The experiment group had a mean pre-GPA score of 1.87 ($SD = .87$) and a mean post-GPA of 1.71 ($SD =$

.87), not a statistically significant difference, $t(60) = 1.83, p = .07$. The same within samples t-test (Table 6) was run to determine if there were differences in the control group’s GPAs. The control group had a mean pre-GPA score of 2.33 ($SD = .92$) and a mean post-GPA score of 2.13 ($SD = 1.04$) a statistically significant difference $t(60) = 2.11, p = .04$.

Table 6

H2: GPA Within Samples t-test

	Experiment Group ($n = 61$)		Control Group ($n = 61$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pre GPA	1.87	.87	2.33	.92
Post GPA	1.71	.87	2.13	1.04
p-value	.07		.00	

Hypothesis 3

Research question 3 asked what is the influence of the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings while controlling for the relevant risk factors of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and enrollment in special education have on absenteeism rate?

To test this research question the researcher conducted an ordinary least squares regression analysis predicting students’ absenteeism rate and included the following independent variables: experimental condition (control v. experimental), grade in school (9th v. 10th grade), race, whether the student received free or reduced lunch (a proxy for socioeconomic status), and whether the student was enrolled in special education services. The results of the multiple regression model were significant, $R^2 = .14, F(5, 116) = 3.78, p = .003$. Table 7 summarizes the analysis.

Table 7.

Ordinary Least Squares Regression: Attendance Rate Post

	β	Std. Error	Sig.
Group	-6.45	2.25	.01
Grade	4.43	2.54	.08
Race	1.50	1.86	.42
SES	1.00	2.91	.73
SPED	7.53	2.85	.01

As you can see in Table 7, race and socioeconomic status were not statistically significant to the regression model. However, those in the Tier 3, RTI intervention saw a 6.45% decrease in absenteeism rate compared to those in the control group. Indicating the Tier3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings improved attendance on average by 11.9 days per student. Likewise, those enrolled in special education saw a 7.53% greater absenteeism rate than those who were not enrolled in special education. Although not significant at the traditionally agreed upon $p = .05$ level, grade level contributes to the model at $p = .08$. Specifically, those in 10th grade had a 4.43% higher absenteeism rate than those in 9th grade. These finding indicate that although the Tier 3, RTI intervention improved the attendance rate across participants in the experiment group student in special education may need additional supports beyond what was offered. Additionally, chronically absent students in 9th grade may be more responsive to the Tier 3, RTI intervention.

Analysis and Synthesis of Findings

Analysis of the independent-samples t-test satisfied Hypothesis 1 that students who participated in the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings would have an improved absenteeism rate compared to students in the control group. The experiment group had a mean absenteeism rate of 12.96 ($SD = 11.03$) which was significantly less than the control group's mean absenteeism rate ($M = 19.26$, $SD = 14.07$). The absenteeism rate is the proportion of days missed in the 174.5 school day calendar. Students in the experiment group missed an average of 21.7 days during the school year ($174.5 \times .1246 = 21.7$) as compared to the control group who on average missed 33.06 days ($174.5 \times .1926 = 33.06$). The Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings improved attendance on average by 11.9 days per student.

It was also hypothesized that students who participate in the Tier 3, RTI intervention would realize an improved GPA as measured at the end of the academic school year. The researcher failed to cohort match the participants on the GPA variable. Statistical analysis revealed the pre-GPA scores for the experiment and control group were too disparate to conduct the independent-samples t-test, therefore, the research question was not answered. However, the researcher did conduct a within samples t-test for both the experiment and control groups. The experiment group's mean pre-GPA of 1.87 ($SD = .87$) decreased by .16 points for a post-GPA mean of 1.71 ($SD = .87$) while the control group's mean pre-GPA 2.33 ($SD = .92$) decreased by .20 points for a post-GPA mean of 2.13 ($SD = 1.04$). Although both groups' GPA decreased, without the intervention only those in the control group ($p = .07$) decreased significantly as compared

to the experiment group ($p = .04$). This is not surprising given that numerous studies indicated chronic absenteeism negatively impacts students' academic performance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Jones et al., 2011; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012; Skola & Williamson, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2013). Despite the fact the difference between the two groups' GPAs was not significant, the experiment group's loss in GPA was significantly less. In practice, the Tier 3, RTI intervention did significantly reduce the loss in GPA for chronically absent students. It may be that to study the effects on a student's GPA score studies should be conducted with longer time intervals.

Finally, the researcher conducted an ordinary least squares regression analysis to explore Hypothesis 3, specifically to answer what influence the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings had while controlling for relevant risk factors. The results found in Table 7 indicated overall students participating in the Tier 3, RTI intervention decreased their absenteeism rate by 6.45 percent compared to the control group participants. The results also indicated race and low SES did not contribute to the regression model. This may indicate the Tier 3, RTI intervention is applied with equity across these risk factors. Additionally, this may indicate exposure to school social workers and school attendance hearings in the Tier 3, RTI intervention removed barriers to attendance such as transportation, health care services, etc. Furthermore, the regression model revealed special education students exposed to the Tier 3, RTI intervention experienced a greater absenteeism rate (7.53%) than those not in special education. This may suggest special education students may need additional supports within the Tier 3, RTI intervention in order to improve absenteeism rates. Finally, the regression model indicated ninth grade students respond to the Tier 3, RTI

intervention better than those in 10th grade students with a 4.43% higher absenteeism rate. In practice, the high school may find focusing their efforts on 9th grade students may reap the largest gains in improved attendance rates. Additionally, rather than excluding 10th grade students from the Tier 3, RTI intervention additional supports for this group of students may be warranted.

Summary

The findings in this Dissertation in Practice examined the impact of participation in a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and renewed progress toward graduation in a Midwestern high school. The independent samples t-test revealed the experiment group's post absenteeism rate was significantly improved as compared to the control group's post absenteeism rate. In practical terms, the experiment group's attendance rate improved on average by 11.9 days per student. Additionally, the researcher found no support for the hypothesized increase in GPA scores. The independent samples t-test revealed the two groups were non-equivalent in pre GPA scores, therefore between-group comparisons could not be made. However, partial support was found when the within samples t-test revealed the experiment group's loss in GPA was significantly less than the control group's loss in GPA. Finally, the ordinary least squares regression provided support for the influence of the Tier 3, RTI intervention while controlling for relevant risk factors. In practical terms, race and socioeconomic status did not contribute to the regression model. However, the analysis revealed students enrolled in special education and 10th grade may need the Tier 3, RTI intervention as well as additional supports.

The following will provide the researcher's proposed solution that is supported by the study's findings and the literature review. Additionally, the researcher provides three recommendations to reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism in the high school setting. Lastly, the researcher provides implications for implementation of the recommendations and final conclusions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Graduation matters. “Every 26 seconds in the United States a teenager drops out of school” (Frazelle & Nagel, 2015, p. 1). The impact of the decision to drop out of school affects the individual, the community, and the national economy. Research indicated regular school attendance is a strong predictor of graduation. Specifically, a student is seven times more likely to drop out if they demonstrate even one year of chronic absenteeism between eighth and twelfth grades (Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address Chronic Absenteeism, 2015). This Dissertation in Practice aimed to use the findings of the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings to inform school leaders through a set of recommendations to reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism in the high school setting. The study contributes to the growing body of research through analysis of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings and provides recommendations for future implementation of interventions addressing chronic absenteeism and renewed progress toward graduation through GPA. The following discussion will address the study’s findings, proposed recommendations, implications for implementation, and the researcher’s conclusions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings on school absenteeism rates and GPA for renewed progress toward graduation at a Midwestern high school.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this Dissertation in Practice was to use the findings of a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings to inform school leaders through a set of evidence-based recommendations to reduce the rate of chronic absenteeism in the high school setting.

Proposed Solution

The findings from the Dissertation in Practice and the literature review form the basis for the following set of evidence-based recommendations aimed at reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism in the high school setting. The Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings showed positive results in reducing the rate of absenteeism with the experimental group exhibiting a post intervention absenteeism rate of 12.46 percent that was significantly lower than the control group's post absenteeism rate of 19.26 percent. Thus, the researcher recommends continuing this intervention for students exhibiting chronic absenteeism at the study's site high school. However, the researcher presents two additional recommendations in the school's quest to reduce chronic absenteeism and renew students' progress to graduation. Specifically, the researcher presents three recommendations: define absenteeism, define levels of school attendance with data readily available to school personnel, and continue the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings.

Recommendation 1: Define Absenteeism

It is the researcher's recommendation the study's site high school define absenteeism to include exclusion from school due to disciplinary sanctions. Specifically, the high school did not include absences due to suspensions from school for disciplinary

sanctions in calculating participants' rates of absenteeism. Therefore, many students with high rates of absenteeism were excluded from receiving the intervention or they were delayed in receiving the Tier 3 intervention until their other absences accumulated to meet the inclusion criteria.

This recommendation is supported through the evidence that exposure to the Tier 3 intervention improved attendance by 11.9 days as compared to the control group. There was also partial evidence the loss in GPA was significantly less for those receiving the intervention. This evidence coupled with a growing body of research that indicates missing school for any reason –excused, unexcused, or suspension has a negative impact on a student's success in and outside of school (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016; Sprick et al., 2015; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016) supports the recommendation. The literature revealed researchers are shifting their study designs to include all absences (excused, unexcused, and suspensions) as independent variables (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes 2012; Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016). The researcher recommends the high school define absenteeism to include exclusion from school for disciplinary sanctions (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016) because the consequences of missing school lead to likely non-graduation. The researcher believes the supporting evidence from this study and the literature indicate exploring the use of the Tier 3, RTI intervention may support students with suspensions.

Recommendation 2: Examine Attendance Data

The researcher recommends the high school adopt defined levels of attendance and create a data dashboard to easily access student attendance data because even a few

missed days may be linked to more severe problems for students (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Muyskens et al., 2007; Richtman, 2007; Sharkey & Fenning, 2012). This recommendation is supported by the findings of this study and the literature review.

The study provides evidence students receiving the intervention realize improved absenteeism rates. In order to apply the intervention, school personnel need to identify students' absenteeism rates. However, in conducting the Dissertation in Practice the researcher discovered calculating students' absenteeism rates was a time-consuming process. This involved examination of individual student schedules and the absences by class period in order to calculate the rate of absenteeism. A data system should be utilized to write a script to apply the high school's definition of absenteeism in calculating individuals' rate of absenteeism for it to be available to school personnel with little effort. This would allow school personnel to have timely and accurate attendance rates thus freeing up their time to work with students rather than hand calculating absenteeism rates.

It is important for the high schools to have a data system that allows for easy access to attendance data and have defined levels of school attendance. In conducting the study the researcher also discovered student attendance was viewed at two levels: meeting the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria of chronic absenteeism or not. Evidence was found in the literature review that perhaps having more nuanced, defined levels of attendance benefit school personnel in designing and delivering interventions to improve absenteeism rates (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Jones et al., 2011; Sprick et al., 2015). The literature review revealed school personnel benefit from a common understanding of attendance levels to design and apply interventions to improve attendance rates

(attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Jones et al., 2011; Sprick et al., 2015). It is the researcher's recommendation the high school adopt attendanceworks.org's levels of attendance:

- Satisfactory 100 -95% attendance
- At Risk 90-94% attendance
- Moderate Chronic 80-89% attendance
- Severe Chronic < 80% attendance

With the attendance data readily available and viewed with a common understanding the high school personnel can identify trends at many different levels. Sprick et al., (2015) indicated by monitoring data as a whole inspires staff to take ownership that attendance can be influenced by the school rather than merely thinking about is as mostly controlled by parents or students. Therefore, attendance should be disaggregated to be viewed in various forms. For example, the percentage of students attending in the various levels of attendance, list of individuals who are in the at-risk range, attendance rates by month and day of the week, and attendance rates by grade levels. By examining attendance data in various views the school will be able to identify groups of students who are in need of intervention (Sprick et al., 2015). It may also reveal groups of students, and possibly programs, which contain a higher percentage of students in need of intervention. Reviewing the attendance data in this way allows the high school to understand their unique needs and interventions that need to be employed.

In this study, school attendance was viewed at two levels: meeting the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria of chronic absenteeism or not. Having defined levels of attendance would have allowed the researcher to explore the students' attendance patterns prior to meeting the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria. Equally, important is having a data

dashboard available to school personnel in order for them to view these levels of attendance without having to spend time calculating individuals' rates of absenteeism.

Recommendation 3: Study's Site High School Continued Use of the Tier 3, RTI Intervention to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

The Dissertation in Practice studied the impact of the Midwestern high school's Tier 3, RTI intervention on chronic absenteeism and renewed progress toward graduation through GPA. The intervention was the application of attendance hearings and support of a school social worker for students meeting the chronically absent threshold. Findings from the quantitative study revealed this intervention was effective in reducing the absenteeism rate for the experimental group participants. Likewise, analyses revealed that both the experimental and control groups' GPA decreased over the course of the school year though only those in the control group decreased significantly. Lower standardized test scores, GPA, and school engagement have all been attributed to school absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Jones, Lovrich & Lovrich, 2011; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012; Skola & Williamson, 2012). Therefore, the researcher recommends the study site high school, and those similarly situated high schools, employ the Tier 3, RTI intervention of school social workers and attendance hearings to reduce the absenteeism rate for students exhibiting chronic absenteeism (< 90 percent attendance).

Additionally, the researcher suggests the high school continue to investigate the findings of the ordinary least squares regression analysis of the predicted variables contributing to chronic absenteeism. Race and socioeconomic status were not found to contribute in this particular high school. However, students enrolled in special education

had a 7.53 percent greater absenteeism rate. Exploration of this category of students, their specific needs, and additional supports is warranted. Likewise, exploration of why the 10th grade students had a higher absenteeism rate is warranted. Additionally, the researcher recommends investigating what supports may support 10th grade students.

Support for the Solution

This Dissertation in Practice was centered on chronic absenteeism and progress toward high school graduation—a topic that impacts the lives of students, the school, and the community. The following discussion provides support for the proposed recommendations through findings from this study and from the literature review.

Recommendation 1 called for the high school to define absenteeism to include excused, unexcused, and exclusion from school for discipline sanctions. The literature review unveiled the problem of understanding and therefore preventing chronic absenteeism starts with the lack of a standard, operational definition of chronic absenteeism (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Kearney & Gracyzk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2015). Without a standard, operational definition it is difficult to identify absenteeism rates, as well as, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. The literature review revealed several researchers recommending attendance and absenteeism definitions that “capture missed instructional time as fully as possible” (Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016, p. 19). Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) and attendanceworks.org (n.d.) recommended the standard operational definition of chronic absenteeism include excused, unexcused, and suspensions. At the time of the study the high school did not calculate absences due to suspensions in students’ absenteeism rates. By following this

recommendation students with behavior infractions will be supported by the Tier 3 intervention.

Recommendation 2 called for defining levels of attendance and creating a data dashboard to enable school personnel to easily access attendance data. The literature review revealed researchers found a 10 percent absenteeism rate is associated with lower academic performance and dropping out of high school therefore interventions should begin when students fall below the 95 percent attendance rate (attendancesworks.org, n.d.; Kearney & Gracyzk, 2013; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2010; Muyskens et al., 2007; Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016; Richtman, 2007). It is imperative to have accurate and easily accessible data to identify students before they enter more chronic levels of absenteeism. The researcher realized in conducting study the Midwestern high school had not ever looked at the attendance data in order to pinpoint if a particular group of students exhibited high levels of absenteeism. Several researchers in the literature review revealed disaggregating the attendance data can assist a school in developing appropriate interventions based on the local needs (attendancesworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Sprick et al., 2015). This act of developing and providing intervention prior to meeting the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria may be the answer to reversing the trend of decreasing GPAs. Supporting students with a variety of interventions such as academic supports may assist students in maintaining or improving their GPAs.

Finally, Recommendation 3 calls for the Midwestern high school to continue the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings. The findings from the study revealed the Tier 3, RTI intervention demonstrated a significant decrease in the rate of absenteeism for students in the experimental group as compared to

the control group. On average, students receiving the Tier 3 intervention attended school 11.9 more days during the school year as compared to similar students in the control group. Partial support was also found in that although GPA decreased for both groups only those in the control group had a significant loss in GPA. Based on the findings in the literature demonstrating significant and far reaching consequences for chronically absent students (DeSocio et al., 2007; Maynard et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2013) it is imperative the high school continue their Tier 3 intervention. Likewise, the literature indicated chronically absent students have lower standardized test scores, GPA, and school engagement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Jones et al, 2011; Kearney & Graczyk, 2013; Maynard et al., 2012; Skola & Williamson, 2012). The Tier 3 intervention improved absenteeism rates thus keeping students in their seats where they benefit from instruction and engagement in their pursuit of a high school diploma (Curry-Stevens & Kim-Gervey, 2016; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Reid, 2010; Vaughn et al., 2013). The researcher also recommends the Tier 3, RTI intervention for similarly situated high schools in regards to student populations.

The literature review revealed chronic absenteeism is a prevalent and complex problem across the nation. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights reported almost 20 percent of students of high school students during the 2013-14 school year missed more the 15 days of school (2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection, A First Look, 2016). The Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings used by the high school in this Dissertation in Practice was found to reduce the rate of absenteeism as compared to the control group. The researcher has proposed three recommendations for the study's site high school. Several factors related to these

recommendations need to be considered by the high school as well as others who may be considering implementing the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings in reducing the rate of absenteeism and renewed progress toward graduation.

Factors Related to the Proposed Recommendations

The researcher reasons two factors need consideration in support of the proposed solution: the attendance policy and the allocation of resources. Every school has a policy regarding chronic absenteeism according to their respective state law. For example, the Midwestern high school in this study has the following excessive absenteeism policy:

- A student who has accumulated a total of five absences per school quarter or the hourly equivalent of five absences, and or a student who is absent more than 20 days per year, or the hourly equivalent (8312 –Excessive Absenteeism, n.d.).

Schools write these policies based on their current state laws addressing school absenteeism. In this particular school this indicates students are referred to the county attorney for excessive absenteeism when they have missed 20 school days or 11 percent of the days in session. Currently the Midwestern high school does not include absences due to suspension in the rate of absenteeism. The literature review revealed all absences regardless of the reason should be included (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016). The proposed solution indicates a need to change this excessive absenteeism policy to specify all absences regardless of the reason be used in calculating students' absenteeism rates.

The proposed solution may impose minimal pressure for the Midwestern high school through the creation of a data dashboard that makes attendance data accessible to

school personnel, but no additional costs will likely occur. The proposed recommendation also calls for maintaining the current Tier 3, RTI intervention of a social worker and county attorney overseeing the attendance hearing process. Other districts may not have social workers on their current staff. This is an integral piece of the proposed solution in that social workers have training and expertise that can assist students and their families with the barriers to attendance that happen outside the school setting. For example, they have access to agencies that can assist families with stable housing and transportation. Districts should consider adding this position to their staff which is equivalent to adding a full-time teacher. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported United States public school teachers in the 2015-16 school year earned on average 58,064 dollars.

The county attorney is also an integral position in the proposed solution. This individual oversees the attendance hearing process which has been shown to improve the rate of absenteeism of students in this study. The school district in this study has entered into an agreement with the county to pay half of the county attorney's salary. The improvement to the rate of chronic absenteeism in this study as well as the intention to prevent students from entering the juvenile justice system for attendance makes it a worthwhile expense. Individual districts will have to determine the need and justification for this additional expense.

Implementation of the Proposed Solution

This Dissertation in Practice evaluated a Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings for evidence of improved absenteeism rates and renewed progress toward graduation as measured by GPA. The researcher

found results of lower absenteeism rates and partial support of renewed progress toward graduation through GPA scores. The researcher recommends continuing the Tier 3 intervention, as well as, defining absenteeism to include all absences (excused, unexcused, and suspensions). Moreover, the researcher proposes to adopt attendanceworks.org's (n.d.) recommended defined levels of attendance to enhance the Tier 3 intervention. The following sections address the needed leadership, planning and implications of the proposed recommendations.

Leadership Related to the Implementation of the Proposed Solution

The proposed recommendations of redefining an absence to include suspensions and adopting levels of attendance may benefit from a transformational leadership style. This style of leadership is often employed when a change in a system or process is needed (Smith, 2016). The first recommendation calls for including absences due to suspensions in calculating the rate of absenteeism. This change will require the leader to communicate the 'why' and also to gain support from stakeholders. The change will affect school personnel because it will undoubtedly increase the number of students eligible for the Tier 3 intervention. School personnel can also believe suspensions are sanctioned by administrators therefore out of the students' control. Additionally, the parent and students may pushback with their belief suspensions are school controlled. It will be important to for the leader to build the rationale that no matter the reason (excused, unexcused, or suspension) the goal is for students to be in school in order to benefit from education (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016; Sprick et al., 2015; Whitmore Schanzenbach et al., 2016).

The second recommendation calls for defining levels of attendance and having that data readily available for review by school personnel. A transformational leadership style may support the breaking from the status quo practice of viewing attendance at only the individual student level. This recommendation calls for the school personnel to look at attendance from multiple perspectives possibly uncovering groups of students, programs, and practices that contribute to the number of students meeting the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria of chronic absenteeism. It may also promote the development and implementation of Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions.

Finally, recommendation 3 calls for continuation of the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and the attendance hearing process. The resources available to school districts are limited thus justification of continuing the Tier 3, RTI intervention must be communicated to all stakeholders. The results of this Dissertation in Practice showing lowered rates of absenteeism for students participating in the intervention as compared to the control group is solid justification to continue using resources to support the intervention. Leadership can also justify the importance of continuance through ESSA's school accountability system. Chronic absenteeism is now required to be reported at the local and state level under ESSA.

Building Support for the Proposed Solution

Support for creating a RTI model will be created from the research on the negative impacts chronic absenteeism has on the individual student, the school, and the community. The ESSA requirements, and former NCLB requirements call for schools to annually report the academic achievement of all their students. The school improvement initiatives developed to improve these academic outcomes require students be present in

school in order to benefit from them. By analyzing the number and percentage of students in each attendance category the school will have a better understanding that chronic absenteeism can have a negative impact on all the school improvement initiatives taking place. The data may reveal levels of chronic absenteeism within the school are preventing students from benefiting from the school improvement initiatives.

Additional Consideration for Implementation and Assessment

In order to address chronic absenteeism the data needs to be available for all to see. Publishing attendance data may cause negative feedback from the community at first. It is important the committee works through this ‘vulnerable’ phase with communication of how important regular school attendance is and the supports that will be put in place to address it. Ultimately by appealing to the benefits of regular attendance community stakeholders will accept the current reality and mobilize to support regular school attendance for all students. Parents want the best for their children, employers are dependent on the school system to prepare students for employment, and communities want a safe and vibrant community.

Evaluation and Timeline for Implementation and Assessment

The Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings is already in place in the study’s site high school. Schools wanting to implement this Tier 3, RTI intervention may need to take up to a year to prepare for implementation. If the school needs to hire a social worker, it may take time to secure the needed funding through the Board of Education. Additionally, it may take many months to enter into an agreement with the county attorney to conduct attendance hearings. The recommendation of defining absenteeism to include suspensions along with excused and

unexcused absences will likely take a few months. Finally, adopting levels of attendance and creating a data dashboard for easy access to student absenteeism rates can take place with a few months as well.

Implications

Chronic absenteeism is a persistent problem that has plagued many students, schools, and communities across the United States. The research on how to reduce chronic absenteeism has been fractured and sparse due to the lack of a common standardized operational definition of chronic absenteeism (attendanceworks.org, n.d.; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2012). The results of this Dissertation in Practice reveal the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings had a significant impact on lowering the rate of absenteeism among chronically absent 9th and 10th graders in a Midwestern high school. The researcher presents practical implications of the proposed solution, along with, implications for future research and leadership practice.

Practical Implications

The proposed solution recommends continuing the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings because evidence was found it is indeed improving the rate of absenteeism among chronically absent students. Partial support was also found in that while the GPA scores decreased for both the experiment and control groups only the control groups' GPA scores decreased significantly. Additionally, the researcher offers two more recommendations.

First, the proposed solution recommends including suspensions in the calculation of the absenteeism rate. This could cause the school to potentially offer the intervention

to more students. Two potential increases include students who have excused and unexcused absences (and suspensions) that would meet the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria sooner. Secondly, it may uncover students with few excused and unexcused absences but many suspensions. This may be a unique subset of chronically absent students worthy of targeted interventions.

Lastly, the proposed solution calls for adopting levels of attendance and review of the attendance data from multiple perspectives. This recommendation may uncover potential groups of students that the school could intervene with other interventions before they reach the Tier 3, RTI intervention criteria of chronic absenteeism. Having the defined levels of attendance also provides the ability to examine the attendance of the known variables (race, socioeconomic status, special education and grade) that contribute to chronic absenteeism. School personnel will be able to view students with these known variables and intervene sooner and perhaps design interventions at Tier 1 and Tier 2 that address their unique needs.

Implications for Future Research

This Dissertation in Practice had three limitations within its quasi-experimental methodology. First, the generalizability is limited because only one high school's population was used in the study. Second, there is a temporal limitation because the population only consisted of students from the 9th and 10th grades who were already exhibiting chronic absenteeism. Finally, the study's experimental and control group may have been qualitatively different despite the fact great care was taken in the cohort matching process.

The specific scope of the study is also bound by quantitative data. Based on these limitations of the study, the researcher recommends the following studies be conducted in the future:

1. Consider conducting a mixed-methods study combining both quantitative and qualitative data. The perspectives of the students receiving the intervention may reveal what aspects of the Tier 3, RTI intervention were most beneficial in supporting their attendance. The perspectives of the social workers and county attorney may also reveal a more nuanced description about the Tier 3, RTI intervention.
2. Consider conducting this same study with students at all grade levels (K-8) that also received the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and attendance hearings. It is important to determine the effectiveness at the different grade levels.
3. Conduct a replication of the study after the high school adopts the proposed recommendations. It will be important to evaluate the impact of the Tier 3 intervention when suspensions are included in the calculation of absenteeism rate.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

This study along with the literature review indicated the persistence and prevalence of chronic absenteeism that has been well established in the United States (Preventing Missed Opportunity, 2016) may benefit from a transformational leadership style that causes changes in individuals and the school setting (Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2005). The leadership within the school implementing the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings will need

to build the vision and shared goal that chronic absenteeism can be prevented through examining and acting upon students' level of school attendance. School leaders cannot solve the absenteeism problem on their own. By bringing together staff to view attendance data from multiple perspectives multiple and varied circumstances contributing to absenteeism may be revealed and acted upon.

Summary of the Study

In conclusion, the researcher addressed the purpose of the study in examining the effectiveness of a Tier 3, RTI intervention on chronic absenteeism and GPA for a renewed focus toward graduation at a Midwestern high school. The quasi-experimental, quantitative methodology revealed a statistically significant reduction in the post-absenteeism rate of students receiving the intervention (12.46 percent) compared to the control group (19.26 percent). The renewed progress toward graduation through increased GPA was partially supported through the finding that although both the experiment and control groups' GPA decreased only the control group realized a significant decrease in GPA. This indicates the Tier 3, intervention may indeed contribute to renewed progress toward graduation. Lastly, the Tier 3, RTI intervention was found to have a stronger positive influence at the 9th grade as compared to the 10th grade. Conversely, the Tier 3, RTI intervention revealed a negative influence for student's receiving special education services.

Based on the positive results of this Dissertation in Practice the researcher recommends continuing the Tier 3, RTI intervention. However, based on the researcher's analysis of the intervention and research contained in the literature review the proposed solution calls for two additional recommendations:

1. Define absenteeism to include all absences (excused, unexcused, and suspensions).
2. Define levels of attendance and examine the data from multiple perspectives.

In order to implement the proposed solution, the school will need to continue the Tier 3, RTI intervention utilizing school social workers and school attendance hearings. The school leader will also need to inform others of the importance of including suspension in the calculation of attendance rates. No matter the reason for the absence what matters to the student's success in meeting graduation requirements is the number of days of instruction missed. Lastly, the leader needs to ensure the attendance data is easily accessible to staff and is viewed from multiple perspectives. By viewing the data throughout the year and over the course of a few years will allow the leader to look for how these interventions affect the school ecology.

This Dissertation in Practice contributes to the growing body of research through the discovery the Tier 3, RTI intervention improves the attendance rate of chronically absent students. The proposed solution created from these findings and research-based practices found in the literature serve as a framework for schools to promote regular school attendance and intervene with those who reach a chronic level of absenteeism. Our students, schools, and communities may benefit from transformational leadership in implementing the recommendations recommended presented in this Dissertation in Practice.

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Appendix A

Excessive Absenteeism Policy

If any student has accumulated absences of a total of more than 10% of the days, or hourly, of the current required attendance days or the hourly equivalent, the school shall render all services in its power to compel the student's attendance. These services include but are not limited to the following:

1. Verbal or written communication by school officials with the person or persons who have legal or actual charge or control of any child; and
2. A meeting or meetings between the school attendance officer, school social worker (or school principal or a member of the school administrative staff, if the school has no social worker), the student's parent/guardian and the student (if necessary) to develop a plan to solve the excessive absenteeism problem

The plan shall consider but not be limited to:

- a. Determine if illness is related to physical or behavioral health of the child (verified by appropriate documentation);
- b. Educational counseling to explore curriculum changes such as alternative educational programs to solve the excessive absenteeism problem;
- c. Educational evaluation to assist in determining the specific condition(s) contributing to the excessive absenteeism problem, supplemented by specific efforts by the school to help remedy any condition diagnosed.
- d. Investigation of the problem by a school social worker (or principal or administrative staff member) to identify conditions contributing to the excessive absenteeism problem. If services for the student and student's family are determined to be needed, the investigator shall meet with the parent/guardian and child to discuss any referral to appropriate agencies to remedy the conditions.

If the parent/guardian refuses to participate in such meeting, the refusal will be documented in the child's attendance records.

Students are subject to disciplinary action for excessive absenteeism. Disciplinary action for students receiving special education services will be assigned in accordance with the goals and objectives of the student's Individualized Education Program.

The school may report to the county attorney of the county in which the person resides when the school has documented the efforts to address excessive absences, the collaborative plan to reduce barriers identified to improve regular attendance has not been successful, and the student has accumulated more than twenty (20) absences per school year. The school shall notify the child's family in writing prior to referring the child to the county attorney. Illness that makes attendance impossible or impracticable shall not be the basis for referral to the county attorney. A report to the county attorney may also be made when a student otherwise accrues excessive absences as herein defined.

Appendix B

2010-11 School Calendar

**Grand Island Public Schools
2010-2011 District Calendar**



Distribution of School Calendar Days

	K-5	6-12
Student Learning Days	170.5 days	174.5 days
No School - Professional Development, SP or CBA	6.5 days	6.5 days
No School - District and Staff Organization	1.0 days	1.0 days
No School - Teacher Preparation	6.8 days	3.3 days
Parent-Teacher Conferences	3.8 days	3.8 days
Total Teacher Contract Days	187.8 days	187.8 days
Vacation Days		

Inherent Weather days are assigned on April 25 and May 27

2010-2011 School Hours
All Elementary Schools 8:00 a.m. - 3:05 p.m.
 (K-5 students dismissed at 2:00 p.m. on Wednesday)

All Middle Schools 8:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
GISH 8:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.
 (GSH students dismissed at 2:00 p.m. on the first Wednesday monthly)

NOTE: All early dismissal in grade K-12 will be at 2:00 p.m.

Appendix C

2013-14 School Calendar

2013-2014 DRAFT Traditional Calendar



Registration

May 6, 7 & 8 All Schools
7? High School (9-12)

2013-2014 School Hours

Early Learning Center
PK AM 7:30-11:20
JK PM 12:05-3:25

Elementary 8:00 a.m. - 3:05 p.m.
(K-5 students dismissed at 2:00 p.m. on Wednesdays)

Middle 8:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

GISH 8:00 a.m. - 3:20 p.m.
(GISH students dismissed at 2:00 p.m. on the first Wednesday monthly)

CALENDAR LEGEND

- No School
- Quarter
- Conferences
- Half Day

Inclement Weather Days

April 18 and/or 21st

Distribution of Days

	K-5	6-8	9-12
Conferences	3	3	2
Teacher Prep	6	3	3
PD/IN/CA	5.5	6.5	6.5
Distich Day	1	1	1
Student	171.5	173.5	174.5
Teacher	187	187	187

Senior High	385-5060
Barr	385-5875
Walnut	385-5890
Westridge	385-5886
Dodge	385-6889
Engleman	385-5902
Gates	385-6992
Howard	385-6916
Jefferson	385-5922
Krickelheim	385-6927
Lincoln	385-6924
Newell	385-6905
Seedling Mile	385-6910
Shoemaker	385-6936
Starr	385-6862
Stolley Park	385-6913
Wasmer	385-5920
West Lawn	385-5650
Early Learning Center	385-5655

(888.625.07)

M	T	W	Th	F
August				
			1	2
5	6	7	8	9
12	13	14	15	16
19	20	21	22	23
26	27	28	29	30
September				
2	3	4	5	6
9	10	11	12	13
16	17	18	19	20
23	24	25	26	27
30				
October				
	1	2	3	4
7	8	9	10	11
14	15	16	17	18
21	22	23	24	25
28	29	30	31	
November				
				1
4	5	6	7	8
11	12	13	14	15
18	19	20	21	22
25	26	27	28	29
December				
2	3	4	5	6
9	10	11	12	13
16	17	18	19	20
23	24	25	26	27
30	31			
January				
		1	2	3
6	7	8	9	10
13	14	15	16	17
20	21	22	23	24
27	28	29	30	31
February				
3	4	5	6	7
10	11	12	13	14
17	18	19	20	21
24	25	26	27	28
March				
3	4	5	6	7
10	11	12	13	14
17	18	19	20	21
24	25	26	27	28
31				
April				
	1	2	3	4
7	8	9	10	11
14	15	16	17	18
21	22	23	24	25
28	29	30		
May				
			1	2
5	6	7	8	9
12	13	14	15	16
19	20	21	22	23
26	27	28	29	30
June				
2	3	4	5	6
9	10	11	12	13
18	17	18	19	20
23	24	25	26	27

Date Events

- Aug 5-7 New Teacher Training
- Aug 8-12 Staff Returns
- Aug. 13
 - K-5 & 9th (2pm Dismissal)
 - 6th 8AM-11:30
 - 7th-8th 12:30-3:30
 - 10th-12th No School
- Aug 14-16 *PK-12 (2pm Dismissal)
- Sept. 2 Labor Day-No School
- Sept. 23-25 Conferences
- Sept. 26 *PK-8 No School
 - PK-5 AM Conferences/ PM Work Day
 - 6-8 AM Conferences/ PM SIP
- Sept. 27 *PK-12 No School
- K-8 Teach Comp Day, 9-12 Prof Dev/SIP
- Sept 30 *PK-5 No School-Prof Dev, 6-12 in school
- Oct 18 *PK-12 No School
 - PK-5 Teacher Prep
 - 6-8 Prof Dev
- Nov 14
 - PK-8 No School-Prof Dev
 - 9-12 No School-Comp Day
- Nov 15 *PK-12 No School State Volleyball
- Nov 27-29 *PK-12 No School Thanksgiving Break
- Dec 19 Midterm Graduation,
- Dec 20 End 1st Semester (82 days)
- Dec 24-Jan 4 *PK-12 No School Winter Break
- Jan 1-3 *PK-12 No School-Winter Break
- Jan 2 *PK-12 No School-Teacher Prep
- Jan 3 *PK-12 No School-SIP
- Jan 6 Begin 2nd Semester
- Feb. 10-12 Conferences PK-12
- Feb. 13 *PK-12-No School
 - PK-5 AM Conferences/ PM Work Day
 - 6-8 AM Conferences/SIP
 - 9-12 SIP Day/Prof Dev Day
- Feb 14 *PK-12 No School-Teacher Comp
- Feb 17 *PK-12 No School-Prof Dev
- Mar 10-14 *PK-12 No School-Spring Break
- Mar 7 *PK-5 No School-Teacher Prep
- April 18-21 *PK-12 No School-Easter Break
- May 18 GISH Graduation, 2 p.m.
- May 22 Last Day (dismiss at 11:30 a.m.)
 - PM SIP
- May 23 No School *PK-12 Teacher Prep

Appendix D

Letter of Agreement

Kneale Administration Building

Dr. Robin Dexter
Associate Superintendent



RE: Letter of Agreement

December 18, 2015

To the Creighton University IRB:

We are familiar with Maggie E. Mintken's research project entitled *Chronic Absenteeism: Application of a Response to Intervention Tier Three Intervention*. I understand Grand Island Public School's involvement to be allowing access to the data of students who meet the study's criteria.

We understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles, that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary, and that confidentiality of participants' research data is ensured, as described in the protocol.

Grand Island Senior High is supported by the Department of Education and is compliant with the Pupil Rights Amendment as defined in Grand Island Public Schools *Policy 8420 Student Due Process Rights*.

Therefore, as a representative of Grand Island Public Schools, I agree that Maggie E. Mintken's research project may be conducted at our agency/organization.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robin R. Dexter".

Robin R. Dexter, EdD

Appendix E

IRB Approval Letter

**Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza • Omaha, Nebraska 68178

phone: 402.280.2126 • fax: 402.280.4766 • email: irb@creighton.edu

DATE: February 1, 2016

TO: Maggie Mintken
FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [845817-1] Chronic Absenteeism: Application of a Response to Intervention Tier Three Intervention

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS (APPROVED)

DECISION DATE: February 1, 2016

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #4

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Application Form - Determination of Exempt Status for review of existing data (UPDATED: 01/31/2016)
- Creighton - IRB Application Form - Creighton - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 02/1/2016)
- Data Collection - Spreadsheet raw and SPSS (UPDATED: 01/30/2016)
- Letter - Letter of Agreement (UPDATED: 12/18/2015)
- Proposal - Study Proposal (UPDATED: 01/30/2016)

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- Data Collection - Spreadsheet raw and SPSS (UPDATED: 01/30/2016)
- Letter - Letter of Agreement (UPDATED: 12/18/2015)
- Proposal - Study Proposal (UPDATED: 01/30/2016)

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 4.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact Patsy Nowatzke at 402-280-3586 or nowatzke@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral's records.