

**PARENT/GUARDIAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AND THE
FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE DECISIONS TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO
SCHOOL**

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Cynthia M. Wallace, EdD

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An estimated 10-15% of students miss an entire month of school each year. Past research on students who are chronically absent finds that, relative to their peers who consistently attend school, chronically absent students are more likely to experience negative academic outcomes (e.g., grade retention, dropping out), to be under- and unemployed, to be incarcerated, and even to die prematurely. Although there has been a significant amount of quantitative research on patterns of chronic school absenteeism and on the student, family, school, and community factors with which it is correlated, surprisingly little research has examined parents'/guardians' decisions to keep their children out of school.

In an effort to address this gap in the literature, the present study interviewed 22 parents/guardians of chronically absent elementary and middle school students to understand their perspectives on chronic absenteeism and to discover what support they felt they need to ensure that their children attended school each day.

The results of the study reveal that the primary reasons parents/guardians identified for their children's chronic absenteeism include challenges related to the child's mental health,

parent activities, interactions with other children at school, and transportation. Factors that parents/guardians identified that would help them to improve their students' attendance include increased communication about absenteeism and family issues, expressed compassion and interest in reasons why students are absent, and specific provisions to help children make up missed instruction and school assignments. The study concludes with recommendations for chronic absenteeism policy and practice, and directions for future research.

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PREFACE

This dissertation on parent/guardian perspectives on chronic absenteeism is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Cynthia M. Wallace. The research described herein was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Mary Margaret Kerr, EdD, Professor in Administrative and Policy Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

The journey to completion of this dissertation and doctoral degree was long. I stopped along the way to do many things personally and professionally that brought me great joy. I have no regrets, but I am so very thankful that when the time came for me to complete this journey that I had the love, prayer, and support of more people than I can name.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

School attendance is a critical prerequisite for academic success and a variety of other positive life outcomes. Children who miss school also miss opportunities to learn and are at elevated risk of falling behind academically. Attendance patterns and the reasons why some students do not attend school have been studied since the United States adopted compulsory attendance laws in the early 1930s (Heck, 1933). These laws support the importance of students attending school every day. Past research has found that attendance is correlated with key academic outcomes that include reading proficiency and graduation and dropout rates (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Poor school attendance that ultimately ends in students dropping out is associated with high rates of unemployment, reduced income, poor health, and elevated mortality (Braveman, Egerter & Williams, 2011; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). In addition, students who are chronically absent (i.e., miss more than 10% of school in a year) are more likely to use drugs, engage in criminal behavior, and experience incarceration (DeBaun & Roc, 2013; Garry, 1996). Students who finish school are more likely to be employed, earn higher incomes, have better mental and physical health, and even live longer (Yeide & Kobrin, 2009). In light of the strong relationship between school attendance and the various social, health, and economic outcomes described above, it is in the best interest of students, parents/guardians, schools, and society at large to determine the correlates and causes of chronic absenteeism, and to identify strategies to prevent

it. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine school absenteeism, with a particular focus on how parents/guardians decide whether or not to send their children to school.

1.1 GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

A variety of terms describes school attendance and nonattendance. Unfortunately, many of these terms are used interchangeably, a fact that can inadvertently mask the magnitude of the problem. Table 1 outlines the key terms used in this study.

Table 1. *School Attendance Terminology*

Term	Definition
Attendance	The number of days of school a student is present out of the total number of days school is in session
Average daily attendance	The total percentage of students present in a particular school on any given day (based on enrollment)
Chronically absent	Students who miss 18 or more days out of a 180 day school year (or 10% or more) or in the previous year missed more than a month for any reason
Mobility	Any non-promotional change from one school to another within a school year
School refusal behavior	Difficulty attending school or remaining in school for the entire day
Truancy	Students absent from school without school or parent permission
*Excused absence	Absences related to student illness or situations that parents/guardians deem important (parents/guardians typically notify the school)
*Unexcused absence	Absences may include a family crisis, vacation, appointments, or disciplinary exclusions from school (parents may notify the school, yet based on school policy, the absence may be deemed unexcused)

*Definitions vary widely by school

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

School absenteeism is a national problem. In fact, an estimated 10-15% of students miss an entire month of school each year. This means that roughly 5 to 7.5 million students are chronically absent each year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Despite the clearly negative relationship

between chronic absenteeism and student outcomes, national data on the prevalence of school absenteeism are limited. For example, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) found that chronic absenteeism is only reported by six states – Georgia, Florida, Nebraska, Maryland, Oregon, and Rhode Island. Several states, including California and New York, do not even collect the necessary data to report chronic absenteeism. Data from multiple schools, districts, and states show that consistently high, chronic absenteeism is the strongest predictor of dropping out of school – even stronger than course failures, suspensions, or test scores (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Although many students may miss school on occasion due to illnesses, appointments, or family emergencies, students who are regularly absent from school miss significant instructional time and thus are unlikely to master the material taught. Over the course of a school year, if a student misses fewer than 10 days, schools typically do not consider this an attendance problem. Chronic absenteeism, however, is a significant problem.

Chronic absenteeism is a complex societal problem with many factors. It has been described in recent research as a “wicked problem,” which, in essence, means that it cannot be easily defined, understood, or solved (Rittel & Webber as cited in Childs, 2015). Missing 10% or more of a school year greatly increases the probability that a student will experience significant academic problems (e.g., poor grades and test scores) in the short term and significant social (e.g., incarceration) and socioeconomic (e.g., educational attainment and employment) challenges in the longer term.

Beyond individual-level absenteeism, school-level absenteeism is also a serious problem, and one that may go unnoticed. Schools often calculate average daily attendance, which is the aggregate percentage of all of the days attended by all of the students enrolled in the school (i.e., on any given day we have this number of students coming to school). This number does not

identify specific students who are present or absent. In other words, high average attendance levels can mask high levels of absenteeism among specific students.

It is possible for a school to have average daily attendance above 90% yet still have a significant percentage of its students chronically absent. This is possible because on different days, different students may make up the 90% who are in school. Schools report their attendance in terms of students who are present, and unless this percentage dips significantly, many schools are not prompted to look closely at attendance issues as a whole.

Although school absenteeism is a national and, in fact, international problem, past research suggests that absenteeism is more prevalent among certain groups of students who are at higher risk for school failure. Specifically, absenteeism is concentrated disproportionately among minorities (i.e., African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians), students with disabilities, and in schools with high levels of student poverty. Absenteeism rates also differ by students' grade levels. In general, younger children typically miss school because of asthma, other chronic diseases, or choices made by their parents/guardians. Among older children, truancy is a leading reason why they are absent from school. Parents/guardians play a critical role in ensuring their younger children develop a habit of regular school attendance; a habit that continues as their children get older. In light of parents' and guardians' roles in younger students' absenteeism, the goal of this dissertation is to qualitatively understand better the perspectives of parents/guardians about the issue of chronic absenteeism. More specifically, the dissertation examines the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about school attendance among parents/guardians of elementary and middle school aged children who attend economically disadvantaged and high minority student schools in the city of Pittsburgh.

Below I present data on school absenteeism in Pittsburgh, selectively review the literature on international school absenteeism, and discuss the relationship between poverty, academic outcomes, school disengagement, and absenteeism. I then explore the literature related to factors that influence school attendance, including those at the student, family, school, and community level.

1.2.1 Research on the correlates and causes of absenteeism

Most children begin school eager to learn and optimistic about what their futures hold. However, early in the school experience, many factors ultimately shape their trajectory for success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). According to recent reviews of the literature, key correlates of chronic absenteeism occur at the individual, family, school, and community levels (Kearney, 2008; Sutphen et al., 2010). Individual level correlates include chronic illnesses (e.g., asthma), mental illness (e.g., anxiety), and bullying. Familial correlates of chronic absenteeism include housing instability and a parent with physical or mental health challenges. At the school level, chronic absenteeism is higher in schools with higher proportions of their student body that have Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), whose families live below the poverty level, and who are African American or Hispanic. Community level correlates of chronic absenteeism include high levels of poverty and violence.

1.3 SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM IN PITTSBURGH

Although school absenteeism is a national problem, it is also a local problem. To provide context for the issue of chronic absenteeism in Pittsburgh, it is helpful to look at rates of absenteeism for elementary and middle school students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. As highlighted later, the problem of chronic absenteeism has significant implications for children who are poor and African American. Recent research on absenteeism in Pittsburgh has looked at community-level attendance interventions including The United Way's *Be There* Campaign (see Childs, 2015), but has not delved specifically into the parental perspective on the problem. This study focuses specifically on parent/guardian perspectives on school absenteeism. The participants were parents/guardians with children enrolled in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, and the majority, based on the neighborhood from which interview participants were recruited, were also poor and African American.

In 2013, the Pittsburgh Public Schools reported that 24.5% of their students, or 6003 children, were chronically absent (Deitrick, Ye, Childs & Zhang, 2015). Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide information on rates of chronic absenteeism, poverty (as measured by eligibility for free or reduced priced lunch), and percentage of African American students in elementary and middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Table 2 includes data for elementary schools (K-5), Table 3 for middle schools (6-8), and Table 4 for combined elementary and middle schools (K-8). Several of the district schools are combined middle and high schools (6-12). Data for these schools were not included in the source from which the other data were drawn.

Table 2. *Chronic Absenteeism, Poverty, and Race in K-5 Elementary Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	Chronic absenteeism (%)	Free and reduced lunch (%)	African American (%)
Weil	29	85	95
Lincoln	25	88	94
Grandview	24	80	71
Spring Hill	24	84	43
Faison	23	86	95
Roosevelt	21	77	27
Westwood	20	85	43
Arsenal	19	88	72
Concord	19	84	15
Miller	19	88	96
Minadeo	19	70	51
Woolslair	16	92	65
Allegheny	15	87	71
Fulton	15	83	83
Whittier	15	68	20
Banksville	14	70	13
Beechwood	11	75	17
West Liberty	10	64	19
Phillips	9	66	33
Dilworth	6	75	61
Linden	6	70	65

Table 2 (continued)

Liberty	5	70	70
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Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism, poverty, and race in K-5 elementary schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community, retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/>.

Table 3. *Chronic Absenteeism, Poverty, and Race in 6-8 Middle Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	Chronic absenteeism (%)	Free and reduced lunch (%)	African American (%)
South Brook	27	73	18
Schiller	26	90	62
South Hills	25	80	37
Allegheny	21	88	72
Arsenal	21	93	77
Classical	17	73	45
Sterrett	12	77	77

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism, poverty, and race in 6-8 middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community, retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/>.

Table 4. *Chronic Absenteeism, Poverty, and Race in K-8 Combined Elementary and Middle Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	Chronic absenteeism (%)	Free and reduced lunch (%)	African American (%)
Arlington	36	83	64
Langley	32	86	70
King	30	88	88
Morrow	23	83	64
Manchester	19	88	89
Brookline	17	68	9
Mifflin	15	73	36
Carmalt	10	76	45
Greenfield	11	70	24
Montessori	10	63	51
Colfax	9	44	30
Sunnyside	9	84	75

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism, poverty, and race in K-8 combined elementary and middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community, retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/>.

Not only is chronic absenteeism a concern, but the percentages of students who are chronically absent increased from 2014 to 2015 for the majority of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, as reported in the A+ Schools Report to the Community for 2014 and 2015. Of the 41 K-5, 6-8, and K-8 schools in the district, 71% (29 schools) had chronic absenteeism rates that increased. Of these schools, three had rates that remained the same, and nine improved. Tables 5, 6, and 7 provide information on rates of chronic absenteeism for 2014 and 2015 in elementary and middle

schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Prior to 2014, attendance by school was reported as average daily attendance, not chronic absenteeism.

Table 5. *Chronic Absenteeism in 2014 and 2015 in K-5 Elementary Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	2014 Chronic absenteeism (%)	2015 Chronic absenteeism (%)	Difference (%)
Weil	29	33	4
Lincoln	25	22	-3
Grandview	24	25	1
Spring Hill	24	23	-1
Faison	23	31	8
Roosevelt	21	25	4
Westwood	20	23	3
Arsenal	19	20	1
Concord	19	20	1
Miller	19	18	-1
Minadeo	19	24	5
Woolslair	16	31	15
Allegheny	15	16	1
Fulton	15	15	0
Whittier	15	23	8
Banksville	14	18	4
Beechwood	11	12	1
West Liberty	10	11	1
Phillips	9	13	4
Dilworth	6	8	2
Linden	6	10	4

Table 5 (continued)

Liberty	5	6	1
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Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism in 2014 and 2015 in K-5 elementary schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community, retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/> and A+ Schools 2015 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2015-report/>.

Table 6. *Chronic Absenteeism in 2014 and 2015 in 6-8 Middle Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	2014 Chronic absenteeism (%)	2015 Chronic absenteeism (%)	Difference (%)
South Brook	27	37	10
Schiller	26	13	-13
South Hills	25	27	2
Allegheny	21	24	3
Arsenal	21	21	0
Classical	17	21	4
Sterrett	12	13	1

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism in 2014 and 2015 in 6-8 middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community, retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/> and A+ Schools 2015 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2015-report/>.

Table 7. *Chronic Absenteeism in 2014 and 2015 in K-8 Combined Elementary and Middle Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	2014 Chronic absenteeism (%)	2015 Chronic absenteeism (%)	Difference (%)
Arlington	36	38	2
Langley	32	30	-2
King	30	33	3
Morrow	23	25	2
Manchester	19	21	2
Brookline	17	17	0
Mifflin	15	13	-2
Greenfield	11	15	4
Carmalt	10	13	3
Montessori	10	9	-1
Colfax	9	8	-1
Sunnyside	9	8	-1

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism in 2014 and 2015 in combined K-8 elementary and middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community, retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/> and A+ Schools 2015 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2015-report/>.

The problem of school absenteeism extends beyond Pittsburgh and even beyond the United States. In fact, several studies have documented chronic absenteeism as a concern in countries around the world. Interestingly, many of the interventions being used in other countries are very similar to strategies that are being used to address absenteeism in Pittsburgh. The following section explores the problem of school absenteeism globally.

1.4 INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Chronic absenteeism is not just a problem for students in the United States; it is a global concern. Past research suggests that absenteeism is a problem in countries as varied as Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales), Ireland, Afghanistan, Romania, and Ethiopia. In England and Wales, rising rates of chronic absenteeism have been associated with numerous social problems. For example, increased daytime crime rates associated with truants led to a number of legal reforms focused on parent accountability and punishment for school absenteeism. These punishments included imprisonment of parents/guardians for up to three months for charges related to truancy and a proposal to withhold child welfare benefits from parents/guardians whose children do not attend school consistently (Donoghue, 2011). In Scotland and Northern Ireland, efforts to address truancy have focused on education of parents/guardians rather than punishment. The rationale for an education versus punishment approach was based, at least in part, upon the linkage between poverty and truancy: children would suffer significantly if they were separated from parents/guardians because of incarceration related to truancy charges or elimination of family benefits (Donoghue, 2011).

In Afghanistan, many children do not attend school due to cultural beliefs, economic barriers, and distance to schools. According to data cited in a 2015 research thesis, less than 25% of boys and 10% of girls in Afghanistan receive formal education (Totakhail, 2015). Of the students who enroll in school, absenteeism is a serious problem, especially for girls. Many of the girls enrolled in school do not attend school regularly or drop out prematurely due to the lack of female teachers, early forced marriages, and negative community attitudes about educating girls (Totakhail, 2015). Several additional factors are very similar to those that contribute to absenteeism in the United States.

School factors also stand out as a major reason of absenteeism that occurs when the school environment is not attractive for students, students feel bored doing homework, are bullied by peer students in schools, Teachers'[sic] relations to students are not friendly and the school curriculum is irrelevant to children[sic] interest[sic] and experiences. (Totakhail, 2015, p. 4)

From a societal perspective, absenteeism leads to a loss in potential and ultimately reduces the knowledge base of the country.

In Romania, an initiative very similar to The United Way's *Be There* campaign was implemented between 2010 and 2013. The School Attendance Initiative's *Come to School* campaign was an effort to increase awareness of the importance of school attendance for Romania's Roma people, with specific emphasis on education for children in rural areas. In Romania, barriers to attendance for students in rural areas center primarily on a culture that does not hold education in high regard. Early marriage, typically between ages 11 and 13, is also encouraged as a means to improve the economic situation of families, but this practice is often not compatible with children finishing school (Dinu, 2015).

A recent study conducted in Jimma zone, Ethiopia, highlighted the positive correlation between food insecurity and school absenteeism. The results of a school-based study revealed that children who lived in households where food insecurity was an issue were absent 50.2% of the time as compared to absentee rates of 37.8% for children who lived in food secure households (Tamiru et al., 2016). The study also referenced the connection between food insecurity and increased childhood illness, which contributes to school absenteeism. It is not surprising that food insecurity is often indicative of poverty and that we see a similar relationship

between poverty and absenteeism in the United States. The following section addresses this relationship.

1.5 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POVERTY AND ABSENTEEISM

Chronic absenteeism is related to negative educational outcomes for all students, but may be more detrimental to poor students as school attendance, school achievement, and school success (as defined by high school graduation, college admission, and graduation) can be seen as a path out of poverty (Chang & Romero, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Morrissey, Hutchison & Winsler, 2013; Spencer, 2009). Unfortunately, poor children are more likely than their more economically advantaged peers to be absent from school. In fact, kindergartners and first graders living in poverty have been shown to have absenteeism rates as high as four times that of their more affluent peers (Chang & Romero, 2008). Factors such as greater levels of physical, mental and behavioral health problems, poorer nutrition, exposure to neighborhood violence, more residential mobility, and parents who may work non-standard shifts all contribute to absences for poor children.

Poverty and school absenteeism are also directly linked to poor health. More specifically, illness is the primary reason why children miss school, and poor children are less healthy than those who are more affluent. The mechanisms that connect poverty to poor health include constrained access to health care, limited availability of nutritious foods, and the increased psychological stressors (e.g., violence) that are disproportionately present in economically distressed neighborhoods (Chang & Romero, 2008; Braveman et al., 2011).

In sum, just as students' socioeconomic status affects absenteeism, establishing poor attendance patterns in the early elementary years negatively affects long-term school success.

1.6 EARLY ABSENTEEISM AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Establishing good attendance habits early in a student's academic career is critical to his or her academic success in later years. For example, past research finds that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status (SES), do worse in 1st grade if they are chronically absent in kindergarten (Chang & Romero, 2008). Further, kindergarten absenteeism has been found to predict lower 5th grade performance in reading and math, even if attendance has improved by 3rd grade (Chang & Romero, 2008). Similarly, a study in California found that only 17% of children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and 1st grade were proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade compared to 64% of their peers who regularly attended (i.e., missed less than 5% of school) kindergarten (Bruner, Discher, & Chang, 2011). In short, patterns of frequent absenteeism established early in a child's school career can create barriers for school success for many years.

Students who attend school less often receive fewer hours of formal instruction and, as a result, often score lower than their regularly attending peers on achievement tests and other formal academic assessments (Gottfried, 2009; Lamdin, 1996). Poor school performance may, in turn, adversely impact how students feel about school and reduce their desire to attend. This cycle can be difficult to stop once it has started.

1.7 SCHOOL DISENGAGEMENT AND ABSENTEEISM

In addition to academic success, other factors may contribute to how students feel about school and influence their desire to attend. The following section explores school disengagement as a problem that may contribute to absenteeism. The directionality of the relationship between absenteeism and disengagement from school is unclear. Does frequent absenteeism lead to academic failure or weaken relationships with peers and teachers, which in turn decreases a student's level of engagement with school? Or do students who feel less connected to school feel less compelled to attend and therefore make excuses for staying out of school? Even though the direction is unclear, absenteeism in elementary school has been associated with complete disengagement (i.e., dropping out) from school in later years. According to a study of early warning signs for school dropouts in Philadelphia, students who dropped out of school in 9th or 10th grade had poor attendance in elementary school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

In a study of nearly 500 young adults (16-25 years old) who had dropped out of school, the primary reason, given by nearly half (47%) of the participants, was that classes were not interesting. And although most of these dropouts did not blame the school exclusively, 26% indicated that the responsibility was shared between them and the school; many felt that more could have been done to engage them in the academic process and support them when they struggled academically (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Forty-five percent of respondents indicated that they were not academically prepared for high school, a fact that suggests that struggling academically in elementary and middle school is a contributing factor to complete disengagement by high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Truancy is also an important type of absenteeism that increases as students get older. By the time many students reach middle and high school, they have disengaged with school, do not

prioritize attendance, and miss school frequently (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Based on this pattern, efforts to promote positive school attendance habits and a connectedness with school should probably begin when children are in elementary school.

Student disengagement from school often precedes absenteeism, and an absence of student social and emotional well-being at school is a clear warning sign that disengagement may follow. For many students, it is important that they like and feel attached to school, so they will want to attend. Academic outcomes, behavior, and attendance are all positively correlated to students liking school (Hallinan, 2008). Liking school also increases the likelihood that students will complete school.

Students tend to like school more when they experience positive interactions with their teachers, perceive that their schools are good places to learn, and feel that teachers like them and care whether or not they are in school (Libbey, 2004). Schools often do not have clear policies about teachers following up with students when they miss school. If students do not perceive that their teachers miss them, or care whether or not they are in school, their motivation to attend may decrease (Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997).

Many schools, including Pittsburgh Public Schools, acknowledge the importance of student perceptions and collect data to measure them. The Tripod Student Survey is an instrument that has been used in the Pittsburgh Public Schools since 2011. The instrument measures student perceptions of the school and classroom culture and climate (Tripod Education Partners, 2016). Data from the Tripod Survey enable us to examine, at the school level, the relationship between students' perceptions of being cared for and chronic absenteeism.

Tables 8, 9, and 10 provide information on rates of chronic absenteeism and percentage of students who feel that their teachers care for them (a measure from the Tripod Student Survey)

at elementary and middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The Tripod percentages are the percentages of students who responded favorably (agree or strongly agree) to questions on the survey that are aligned to the “care” construct. The Tripod data is from the 2013-2014 school year. Table 8 includes data for elementary schools (K-5), Table 9 for middle schools (6-8), and Table 10 for combined elementary and middle schools (K-8). Several of the district schools are combined middle and high schools (6-12). Data for these schools were not available.

Table 8. *Chronic Absenteeism and Student Perception of Teachers' Care in K-5 Elementary Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	Chronic absenteeism (%)	Teachers' care (%)
Weil	29	70
Lincoln	25	69
Grandview	24	83
Spring Hill	24	75
Faison	23	76
Roosevelt	21	82
Westwood	20	87
Arsenal	19	78
Concord	19	81
Miller	19	79
Minadeo	19	89
Woolslair	16	77
Allegheny	15	83
Fulton	15	74
Whittier	15	84
Banksville	14	84
Beechwood	11	88
West Liberty	10	84
Phillips	9	82
Dilworth	6	83
Linden	6	83
Liberty	5	87

Table 8 (continued)

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism and student perception of teachers' care in K-5 elementary schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/> and A+ Schools 2015 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2015-report/>.

Table 9. *Chronic Absenteeism and Student Perception of Teachers' Care in 6-8 Middle Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	Chronic absenteeism (%)	Teachers' care (6th - 8th grade) (%)
South Brook	27	62
Schiller	26	56
South Hills	25	55
Allegheny	21	54
Arsenal	21	59
Classical	17	62
Sterrett	12	60

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism and student perception of teacher's care in 6-8 middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages from A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/> and A+ Schools 2015 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2015-report/>.

Table 10. *Chronic Absenteeism and Student Perception of Teachers' Care in K-8 Combined Elementary and Middle Schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by Percentages*

School name	Chronic absenteeism (%)	Teachers care (3rd - 5th grade) (%)	Teachers' care (6th - 8th grade) (%)
Arlington	36	81	71
Langley	32	75	56
King	30	80	61
Morrow	23	76	60
Manchester	19	78	54
Brookline	17	80	65
Mifflin	15	82	57
Greenfield	11	85	59
Carmalt	10	80	63
Montessori	10	78	50
Colfax	9	83	71
Sunnyside	9	83	55

Note. Data for Chronic absenteeism and student perception of teacher's care in K-8 combined elementary and middle schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by percentages A+ Schools 2014 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2014-report/> and A+ Schools 2015 Report to the Community retrieved from <http://www.aplusschools.org/2015-report/>.

If students are not comfortable at school, they may not communicate this directly with their parents/guardians but may instead adopt various school refusal behaviors (e.g. feigning illness, not getting ready for school in a timely manner, or intentionally missing the school bus) to increase the likelihood that they will be able to stay at home (Kearney, 2008). This may, over time, progress to chronic absenteeism and truancy. School refusal behavior is important to

understand because some students who miss school may do so as a result of social phobia, school phobia, anxiety, or depression. These students may need medical or psychological intervention to address their inability or lack of desire to attend school. Truancy also falls in the category of school refusal behavior, with the distinction that truancy is considered a willful absence (Williams, 2001). The progression is critical as it may ultimately result in students dropping out of school. Figure 1 provides a summary of these behaviors.

Aversion to attending			Absenteeism or chronic absenteeism			Dropout or truancy
→	→	→	→	→	→	
School attendance under duress and pleas for nonattendance	Repeated misbehaviors in the morning to avoid school	Repeated tardiness in the morning followed by attendance at school (student arrives late, but attends)	Periodic absences or skipping of classes	Repeated absences or skipping of classes mixed with attendance at school (the frequency of absenteeism has increased)	Complete absence from school during a certain period of the school year (students miss school for blocks of time and may not return without intervention)	Complete absence from school for an extended period of time (students have stopped attending school)

Figure 1. Continuum of School Refusal Behavior in Youth. Adapted from Kearney, C. A. (2008). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior in youth: A contemporary review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28(3), 451-471. Reprinted with permission.

Although high school students often decide for themselves whether or not they will attend school, among elementary and middle schoolers, this decision is usually made by their parents/guardians. More specifically, younger students' parents/guardians typically continue to arrange for their transportation to and from school and even wake them, feed them, and ensure

that they are dressed and ready for school. When younger students are ill or express a desire to miss school, their parents/guardians evaluate the seriousness of their health complaint or other verbalized reason for not wanting to attend and ultimately decide whether the child will attend school or not. What are not clear are the factors or information that parents use to decide to send their child to school or to keep them at home. It is also not clear whether parents/guardians connect school absenteeism at the elementary and middle school level with academic success in later years.

1.8 PURPOSE OF STUDY

The research reviewed above demonstrates that patterns of absenteeism are often established in elementary school and that it is parents/guardians, not children, who decide whether children will attend school or stay at home. Despite a relatively substantial literature on the topic of absenteeism, surprising little past research examines absenteeism from the perspective of parents/guardians. In fact, to our knowledge, no study has examined parents' reasons for their children's absences from school. Accordingly, the present study seeks to add knowledge in this under-investigated area.

The purpose of the present study was threefold. The first purpose is to examine the rationale and reasons that parents/guardians of elementary and middle school aged children give for decisions that cause their children to be absent from school. The second purpose of the study is to explore the extent to which parents/guardians connect early school absences with later academic performance and life outcomes. Finally, the study helped understand parents' perspectives on what schools can do to intervene.

Although school absenteeism is not limited to a particular student demographic, it is found disproportionately among poor and African American students. Accordingly, this study sought to gather the perspectives of parents/guardians whose children fit this description. In the next chapter, I describe the search methods that I used to identify the studies for the literature review, and I examine the factors that past research has identified as impediments to school attendance.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on school attendance is not new. In fact, a literature review published in 1933 highlighted compulsory attendance laws in the United States and cited average daily attendance at 71.3% (Heck, 1933). The review noted that, although student illness was reported as the main reason for absenteeism, further investigation revealed that work, specifically agricultural work for boys, and parent indifference were the actual reasons that students did not attend school (Heck, 1933). Over 80 years later, we still strive to identify the factors that influence parents'/guardians' decisions to send their children to school and how to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Many factors outside of the school affect whether or not children attend. These factors include student or parent illness, family crises, lack of childcare for younger siblings, or transportation problems (Chang & Romero, 2008; Morrissey et al., 2014). Students may also choose not to attend due to disengagement, bullying, or safety concerns at, or on the route to or from, school. Students also may not attend school for disciplinary reasons (e.g., out of school suspensions). Regardless of why students do not attend, absenteeism in general and chronic absenteeism in particular are detrimental to students' academic achievement.

Reasons for student absenteeism fall generally into four domains: student factors, family factors, school factors, and community factors. Below, I review the literature related to school attendance in each of these domains.

2.1 LITERATURE SEARCH METHOD

After consultation with a research librarian and a review of the University of Pittsburgh's Educational Research Guide, I identified five key databases where studies on student absenteeism were most commonly published: JSTOR, EBSCO, PsycINFO, ERIC, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. The key search terms included *school absenteeism*, *chronic absenteeism*, and *truancy*. These were paired with the following key words: *parents*, *interventions*, *elementary school*, *middle school*, *elementary students*, *middle school students*, *neighborhood safety*, and *children*. I also created an alert with the key search terms in Google Scholar to provide information on recently published reports and articles. In addition, I conducted a search in Google Scholar to locate any additional literature that may not have been captured by the alerts or in the scholarly databases.

Attendance Works is a national initiative focused on the importance of school attendance. Their goal is to build awareness about attendance issues and to be a clearinghouse for ideas and initiatives for schools and the community focused on improving attendance. Its website (www.attendanceworks.org) has a section that includes research reports and articles on attendance. I also used this as a source for locating current research for the literature review.

Research was selected for inclusion if it was a seminal work or if it was conducted after 1990. Articles were excluded if they did not address factors related to absenteeism focused on students, families or parents, schools, or the community. Research on high school students was included if the topic addressed was similar to that which contributes to absenteeism among elementary or middle school students.

2.2 FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

The literature on school absenteeism can be organized into five categories that may influence parents'/guardians' decisions to send their children to school. Two of these categories focus on students themselves and the others focus on families, schools, and neighborhoods. The specific categories revealed by the literature search are as follows:

- 1) student health, including chronic illness, childhood illnesses, access to health care, and mental health issues;
- 2) student disengagement from school, including academic difficulty and social difficulty (with peers or teachers);
- 3) family instability, including childcare, housing, transportation, and parent/guardian mental health issues;
- 4) school environment, including chaotic environment, safety concerns, and discipline issues; and
- 5) neighborhood environment, including unsafe routes to school, poor air quality, and neighborhood violence.

Below, I examine each of these categories, with a specific focus on barriers that keep students out of school and the extent to which barriers vary by important sociodemographic characteristics including race/ethnicity and SES. I conclude this section with a review of interventions that have reduced chronic absenteeism and truancy.

2.2.1 Student-level factors

We know that students who are most likely to be chronically absent share common characteristics. They have low grades in core subjects, experienced school failure as evidenced by repeating a grade, and are disengaged from school, which often manifests as frequent behavior problems (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Chronically absent students are more likely to have lower standardized test scores, engage in risky behavior, be involved in criminal activity prior to adulthood, and drop out of school (DeBaun & Roc, 2013; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). We also know that when students are not positively engaged in the educational process, the likelihood that they will drop out increases. Alexander et al. (1997) posited, “when children’s experience fails to foster a sense of attachment or commitment to the school’s agenda psychological barriers to dropout are weak” (p. 89). Students who eventually drop out of school may begin distancing themselves from the educational process in early elementary school as has been evidenced by their higher rates of absenteeism as early as first grade (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Table 11 highlights key research on student factors related to school absenteeism.

Table 11. *Sample of Key Studies on Student Factors Related to School Absenteeism*

Source	Aim of Study	Participants	Method	Findings	Limitations
Gottfried (2009)	Investigate the relationship between excused and unexcused absences and academic achievement	2 nd -4 th graders in the Philadelphia Public Schools between 1994 and 2000	Education production function analysis	A higher proportion of excused absences is positively correlated with reading and math achievement. A larger proportion of unexcused absences has negative implications for academic achievement.	The data did not allow for identification of what specifically constituted an absence in each category (e.g., suspension and family vacation might both be unexcused absences). No parental variables were included.
Hallinan (2008)	Identify the role of teachers in shaping students' feelings about school	6 th , 8 th , and 10 th graders in Chicago – Consortium on Chicago School Reform	Linear regression, longitudinal model analysis	Students who perceived that their teachers respected them, cared for them, and praised them were more likely to like school. Prior research established that students who like school attend more.	Participation in the study was based on principal decision. Within participating schools, students could decide whether or not to participate.

Table 11 (continued)

Rehn & Rohr (2002)	Examine perceptions of parents, nurses, and educators regarding school involvement for medically fragile children	Parents, nurses, and educators	Interviews and analysis of school records	There were clear benefits to sending medically fragile children to school – learning, socializing, and respite for caregivers. There were also risks – safety and negative social interactions.	Small sample size and broad focus of the study
Rush & Vitale (1994)	Identify factors that place elementary students at risk	Teachers of 5270 students in 1 st -5 th grade	Factor analysis	Eight specific factors identify elementary students as at-risk for dropping out of school. Early identification of students can ultimately increase the number of students who graduate.	The student population used for this study was not representative of many urban school districts – 13% minority, 35% free and reduced priced lunch. Risk factors for students in these categories are higher.
Spencer (2009)	Identify chronological patterns of attendance and academic performance	42 truant, urban 8 th graders	Case study analysis	Analysis of attendance patterns in early elementary school can help to identify students at risk for truancy in upper elementary and middle school.	Small sample size and over representation of Hispanic students in the sample

Table 11 (continued)

Utah Education Policy Center (2012)	Analyze data on chronically absent students in Utah	All Utah public school students in 2010-2011 and longitudinal data on the class of 2010 (data yearly from 2006)	Analysis of predictor variables (income, special education status, English proficiency, and race) to determine likelihood of chronic absenteeism and also chronic absenteeism and GPA as a predictor for dropping out	All variables correlated significantly with chronic absenteeism; chronic absenteeism correlated with dropping out at .4431; GPS correlated with dropping out at -.6216	This was an exploratory study. Additional research is needed to what can be done earlier in school to prevent chronic absenteeism.
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Student illness is the most common reason why school is missed, but there are many other reasons that students give for not attending. As students get older many begin to make decisions to attend school independent of their parents/guardians. For teenage students, substance abuse, pregnancy, and emotional/psychological problems all contribute to absenteeism (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). For all students, absences seem to fall into one of three categories: cannot attend, will not attend, or do not attend. Reasons why students cannot attend school include illness or unmet health needs, family responsibilities, housing instability, need to work, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Students often will not attend school because of bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment, or embarrassment. The reason that students do not attend school is because they do not ascribe value to school or they prefer another activity (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009).

Student disengagement from school has been highlighted in several studies as a reason for absenteeism. In fact, one study identified dissatisfaction with school was the most important distinguishing factor between attenders and non-attenders (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998). This may be particularly true for groups of students at higher risk for school failure.

A case study of African American high school dropouts highlighted the chasm between many students and their school. The study participants willingly shared that they felt no connections to school. They went to school because they were forced to do so by a parent or legal guardian. Comments such as “I hated school!” were shared in focus group sessions. All of the participants shared regret for not having completed their schooling; however, their lack of connection to school was a significant factor in their failure to complete their education (West, 2013).

Students with behavior problems in school and students with disabilities have higher rates of absenteeism than peers without these designations. Students with behavior problems are most likely to be absent from school and to have absences that are unexcused (Gottfried, 2009). It has also been documented, based on a study of 8th and 10th grade students with identified learning disabilities, that students with disabilities are more likely to miss school than their peers (Spencer, 2009).

Not only do behavior and disability status influence school absenteeism, but there is also a relationship between students missing school and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use. Students who are chronically absent are often disengaged from school and often very engaged with friends who participate in deviant behavior, including the use of the aforementioned substances (Hallfors et al., 2002).

Student illness creates a unique challenge for school attendance. Many students miss days of school due to typical childhood illness. Others face problems associated with chronic illness and may, as a result, miss numerous days of school. Parents/guardians of medically fragile children have a unique set of considerations that impact their decision to send their children to school. For many, school provides the benefit of socialization and can also provide a respite for family members who care for the child (Rehm & Rohr, 2002). School can also be seen as a challenge because parents are not confident in the school's ability to appropriately assess and address their child's academic and/or physical needs. One study found that because of concerns about exacerbating an illness, "some parents took the extreme steps of removing their children from school for weeks at a time, as a preventative measure during the winter months, when children were most likely to get sick at school" (Rehm & Rohr, 2002, p. 350).

There does not appear to be a relationship between gender and absences (excused or unexcused), but there are differences based on ethnicity. White students are more likely to have more excused absences than unexcused. Asian students tend to have fewer absences overall. African American students have a higher number of unexcused absences, and are less likely to have absences that are excused (Gottfried, 2009). Students who are bilingual are the group that are most likely to be truant and often are chronically absent early in their school career, which may contribute to their risk of dropping out of school later (Spencer, 2009).

2.2.2 Family-level factors

Several family factors contribute to students' school attendance. These factors include poverty, family disorganization, health insurance, and mobility (Kearney, 2008; Ready, 2010). It is also possible that families may not support their child's educational goals, may have culturally based attitudes about school that do not align with attending regularly, or may inadvertently reinforce school absenteeism.

Living in poverty has direct implications for attendance, academic achievement, and the likelihood that children will drop out of school. Attendance issues are also more pronounced in urban settings and among students from low-income families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Lamdin, 1996; Murdock, Zey, Cline, & Klineberg, 2010; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Spencer, 2009). The disparity in attendance between students based on SES is significant. Ready (2010) found that, "compared to more affluent students, children living in poverty are 25 percent more likely to miss three or more days of school per month" (p. 272). Absences for these students are more likely to be associated with illness, residential mobility, and challenges associated with childcare.

If families are struggling with basic necessities, they may be less likely to place importance on sending children to school (Cole, 2011).

Family disorganization and the unmet emotional needs of parents were also cited as a contributing factor for students missing school (Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Yeide, & Kobrin, 2009). Unfortunately when this is the case, children do not have the influence of an adult to assist with addressing challenges related to attending school or to help motivate the child to get up and get going on school days.

Parent neglect is a common cause of truancy. Many parents of truant students do not value education. Some children are kept at home to work or babysit pre-school siblings. Others are prevented from attending school because of problems at home, at school, or in their neighborhood. One truant officer described a student whose parents kept him home so that he would not have to walk past the neighborhood crack house. (Garry, 1996, p. 2)

Parents/guardians typically decide whether or not children can miss school in the early elementary years. By age 8, many students are actively negotiating with their parents to miss school (Sheppard, 2005).

Absences that are due to a student's discretion happen because the student and his or her parents don't understand how much attendance matters, the school lacks a strong culture of attendance, or the student simply wants to do something else. (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 29)

These absences are particularly difficult for schools to address because parents are in support of their children staying out of school.

Whether or not a family has health insurance has implications for school attendance. About 28% of children who do not have health insurance do not have a regular plan for

addressing health concerns (Yeung, Gunton, Kalbacher, Seltzer, & Wesolowski, 2011). This contributes to absenteeism because routine illness that could be treated early with a visit to a physician is allowed to run its course at home or is left untreated until becoming more serious which could lead to hospitalization, both resulting in days missed from school.

Mobility contributes to absenteeism because of days of school attendance lost during housing transitions. Families may change their place of residence or employment or be faced with a crisis that may result in students moving from one school to another. Families may also acquiesce to student requests to change schools mid-year. This movement is not without consequence as was noted in a 2012 study of all Utah Public School students; “students who moved in and out of schools were four times more likely than non-mobile students to be chronically absent” (Center, U. E. P., 2012, p. 4). Schools may also contribute to mobility through school choice or policies to reduce classroom or school overcrowding. While students are in the process of changing schools or being reassigned to a new classroom, regular attendance may not occur.

Mobility is more prevalent in large, urban, predominantly minority communities and can have serious consequences for students (Rumberger, 2003). Students who experience mobility must adjust academically and socially to a new environment. Research shows that students who experience mobility are more likely to struggle academically, possibly due to curricular incoherence (i.e., a mismatch between what was being taught at the former school and current school) (Rumberger, 2003). However, it is important to note that it is not clear whether other factors associated with mobility (e.g., family instability) are the predominant causes of these difficulties. In a California mobility study, moving a residence was the primary reason that students experience mobility. A second reason given was that parents moved students because

the student requested a move to a different school (Rumberger, 2003). Residential and educational mobility are both associated with higher dropout rates (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Mobility early in a child's school career (between 4 and 7 years of age) has an impact on the likelihood that students will drop out later (last two years of high school) (Alexander et al., 1997; Swanson & Schneider, 1999).

Student attendance in schools where mobility is high is considerably lower than in schools where the student population is more stable. Students who withdraw from school often lose a day of school simply going through the process, not to mention days missed for moving from one home to another. Also, students who do not properly withdraw from school often must be marked absent until they are accounted for or the school files a court petition saying they cannot be located. On top of these hurdles, making the transition in assignments and surroundings is also difficult for students and may make going to school more of a burden. (Branham, 2004, p. 1121)

Family members often support absenteeism by allowing students to pursue enjoyable activities when they miss school. Allowing students to watch television or play games can provide positive reinforcement to students who miss school. Family members may also send children the message that they condone school absences when they provide excuses for missing school when in reality there was no valid reason. Table 12 highlights key research done on family-level factors related to school absenteeism.

Table 12. *Sample of Key Studies on Family Factors Related to School Absenteeism*

Source	Aim of Study	Participants	Method	Findings	Limitations
Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey (1997)	Examine the relationship between family circumstances in 1 st grade and dropping out of school in high school	790 first graders in the Baltimore public schools, part of the Beginning School Study	Logistic regression analysis used to identify predictors of drop out	Being from a lower SES family, being male, having a large number of siblings, being born to a young mother, residing in a single parent household, and changing schools in first grade all increased the risk of drop out.	The study provides no insight into what happens after first grade to support or modify the drop out predictions.
Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler (2014)	Determine the relationship between family income, income stability, school tardies and absences, and academic achievement	Kindergarten through 4 th grade students in the Miami School readiness Project. This study used data from 35,419 students in 259 public schools.	Regression analysis	There is a small but significant relationship between receiving free or reduced priced lunch and tardies and absences. There is also a relationship between the duration of receipt of free or reduced priced lunch and more absences. This relationship grew over time. There was also a relationship between free/reduced lunch status and academic performance.	The use of free/reduced lunch status as the intervening variable did not take into account other life factors that may have impacted attendance or tardiness. The study did not include data for students who may have repeated a grade or had identified special needs, both populations with greater tendency for absenteeism.

Table 12 (continued)

Ready (2010)	Examine the extent to which school absenteeism exacerbates social class differences in academic achievement	24 kindergartners in 1000 schools Early Childhood Longitudinal Study	Hierarchical linear modeling	School attendance is more critical for students with lower socioeconomic status (SES). Students with lower SES and good attendance in kindergarten and first grade make greater gains in literacy than their higher SES peers.	The study did not take into account quality of instruction. The study also did not look at the quality of school-based social and affective relationships and how these might be impacted by poor attendance.
Rumberger (2003)	Explore the literature on student mobility and school outcomes	N/A Literature Review	N/A Literature Review	Student mobility impacts students differently. The three most prominent reasons for mobility are family residential moves, student request, and school request. Adjustment may be difficult for students after changing schools, which may impact engagement and attendance. The review provided a list of policy and practice suggestions for schools, family, and states related to mobility.	The review did not provide a student or parent perspective on what would help make school transitions easier and less academically disruptive.

Table 12 (continued)

<p>Tamiru et al. (2016)</p>	<p>Determine the extent to which food insecurity in families impact school attendance for students in Jimma zone, Ethiopia</p>	<p>1000 randomly selected students in urban and rural schools</p>	<p>Multivariable logistic regression analysis</p>	<p>There was a strong relationship between food insecurity and school absenteeism. Food insecurity was linked to maternal education and family SES.</p>	<p>The study found that rural students, despite the level of food insecurity, were more likely to be absent than urban students. The study addressed possible reasons in the discussion but did not substantiate the assumptions.</p>
<p>Yeung et al. (2011)</p>	<p>Investigate the relationship between a family having health insurance and school attendance</p>	<p>Data from 48 states – State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and state data on average daily attendance</p>	<p>Regression design</p>	<p>Attendance rates were positively and significantly correlated with enrollment and eligibility for SCHIP at the 0.01 level. It was noted, however, that a small effect on average attendance rates may be due to the large number of variables affecting attendance.</p>	<p>The study did not differentiate between the types of SCHIP programs being offered and the varying SES requirements for enrollment by state.</p>

The extent to which parents feel connected to their child's school may influence their decisions to send their child to school and their willingness to work with the school proactively to address issues of truancy (Schwartz, 2015). Schools may be able to influence student attendance by creating environments that encourage students to attend, celebrate high levels of attendance, and provide support for students in need of attendance intervention.

2.2.3 School-level factors

This section addresses school-level factors related to absenteeism. Past research has accurately noted that, "the best teachers, the best principals, and the best administrators have absolutely no value in improving education if children do not come to school" (Branham, 2004, p. 1113).

Specific school related factors contribute to student absenteeism. These factors include relationships with teachers and other students, academic failure, behavior problems, and even the school's differential response to absences, excused or unexcused (Rumberger, 1995).

For many students, frequent absences can signal disengagement from school. Students who demonstrate a lack of connectedness to teachers, peers, or the school community as a whole are more likely to be chronically absent (Washington, 2015). Students may not attend school if their perceptions of their interactions with teachers or other school personnel are negative or strained, or their overall impressions of the school experience as a whole are negative (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Several school characteristics are predictors of student attendance rates. Absenteeism and truancy increased when students perceived that their teacher was uncaring or boring or that their classroom was chaotic (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). According to a study by Croninger and Lee (2001), where other factors were held constant, high schools that had teachers

who were perceived as being highly supportive of students, were able to reduce the probability of dropping out by half (Jerald, 2007).

It is not clear whether students disengage from school and then do poorly or whether they perform poorly and, as a result, disengage and begin missing school. Less attention has been given to examining the directionality of the relationship between achievement and school attendance; nevertheless, there is a relationship. Early disengagement has implications for later school success. Research at the middle school level has identified student disengagement as a predictive factor for dropping out of school (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007).

Students' grades, whether they have been retained, classroom climate, including the behavior of other students, and the degree to which students are engaged in the overall educational process are also factors that impact attendance (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Rumberger, 1995). Often students who struggle academically or behaviorally in school are in need of additional support to be successful and remain engaged in school. The inadequate and/or inappropriate identification of special education needs has also been cited as a contributing factor to school absenteeism (Yeide & Kobrin, 2009).

Chronic absenteeism is one of the earliest indicators that a student may be off track. There are also strong correlations between dropping out of school, early illiteracy, and chronic absenteeism. Students who regularly miss school fall behind and may have a hard time catching up. In addition to its impact on absent students, absenteeism has a negative impact on learning for classroom peers. The phrase classroom churn is used to describe the slowing of the instructional pace due to too many students missing too many days of school. This has implications for learning for all students in the class and can also negatively affect classroom and school climate (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ready, 2010).

Students with higher rates of attendance do better on achievement tests, and schools with better rates of student attendance tend to have higher levels of achievement on standardized achievement tests (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees, & Ehrenberg, 1991; Lamdin, 1996). Student absenteeism has a disproportionately negative impact on mathematics achievement, and, in general, it is not surprising that students who attend school more regularly do better (Gottfried, 2009).

The effects of absenteeism are both academic and behavioral. Students who miss class are not only more likely to fall behind, but are also more likely to become discipline problems. Schools often impose disciplinary measures, including detention and suspension, to address absenteeism. These interventions may unfortunately increase levels of disengagement for students who do not attend school regularly (DeBaun & Roc, 2013).

Recently there has been an increased focus on the impact of bullying, both in person and electronic, on student attendance. According to the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 16% of high school students indicated that they had missed school within the last 30 days due to bullying compared with 4% of students who had not been bullied (Steiner & Rasberry, 2015). Not all absences from school have the same impact. The type of absence, excused or unexcused, is related to academic achievement. Students with a higher ratio of excused to unexcused absences perform better academically than those with a larger fraction of unexcused absences (Gottfried, 2009). This may be because excused absences may not be associated with negative experiences such as a family crisis, illness, or lack of transportation, but may instead be an indicator that students are academically engaged in other ways (Gottfried, 2009).

The distinction between excused and unexcused absences is significant. The proportion of excused absences to total absences is positively correlated with academic achievement. The

opposite is also true; the proportion of unexcused absences to total absences is negatively correlated with academic achievement. There are distinct differences in the type of absence based on race. White students are more likely to have excused absences than unexcused; African American students are more likely to have unexcused absences than excused ones. This has significant implications for educational outcomes (Gottfried, 2009).

Cultural capital is defined as the knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that increase an individual's status in society (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital may factor into how parents' requests and decisions to have their children miss school are perceived and responded to by schools. More affluent parents may request that children miss school for travel or family vacations, whereas less affluent parents may request an excused absence because of a need for child care or transportation difficulties. It is not clear how schools differ in their response to these requests, but it is clear that all requests to miss school do not impact educational outcomes equally (Schwartz, 2015).

The experiences that students have at school impact their attendance. Research demonstrates that there are myriad reasons related to teachers, other students, school policies on excused and unexcused absences that not only impact whether children attend school but how their absences are categorized and the associated impact on their overall educational experience. Table 13 highlights key research done on school-level factors related to school absenteeism.

Table 13. *School-level Factors Related to School Absenteeism*

Source	Aim of Study	Participants	Method	Findings	Limitations
Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver (2007)	Explore school-level factors related to chronic absenteeism in high poverty middle schools	13,000 6 th grade students in Philadelphia Public Schools	Longitudinal analysis of data from 1996 to 2004	Study found that factors associated with attending under resourced schools, including high teacher turnover, contribute to student disengagement in middle school.	Researchers noted that additional focus is needed on early warning systems that are culturally relevant for African American and Hispanic students.
Steiner & Rasberry (2015)	Examine the relationship between electronic and in-person bullying and missing school because of safety concerns	Data from the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (9-12 grade students)	Logistic regression analysis	About 25% of students experienced bullying in the past 12 months, and of those, 16% missed school within the past month due to safety concerns.	The study was conducted with high school students and therefore results may not be generalizable to younger students.
Washington (2015)	Determine if student perceptions of adults as caring promoted school connectedness	4,000 high school students from urban schools in southern California, 25% either African American or Hispanic and 91% eligible for free lunch, 12 students participated in focus groups	Quantitative analysis using frequencies, crosstabs, ANOVA and multiple regression, qualitative analysis of focus group data	For both Hispanic and African American students, connectedness to school was positively correlated ($r=.46$) with students' perceptions of caring teachers.	For the focus groups, students were recruited by word of mouth through one class, and the researcher noted that only students who were 18 and older were used to expedite the IRB process.

Table 13
(continued)

Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro (1998)	Explore the unique and combined influence of the student, family, and school on student absenteeism	295 absentee students in two high schools in Ontario, Canada, and a corresponding classroom teacher	Multiple surveys were used to measure academic self-concept, mean, standard deviation, and <i>t</i> values of predictor variables were used	Absentee students had lower academic self-concept and scored lower on evaluations of school personnel and school characteristics.	The study did not provide follow up with students to gather perspectives on addressing the issue of absenteeism.
Rumberger (1995)	Identify the student and school related factors to dropping out of middle school	National Education Longitudinal Survey of 1988; data from 17,424 students who were either enrolled in school or had dropped out between 1988 – 1990	Hierarchical linear modeling	Students who repeated a grade were more than 11 times more likely to drop out of school than those who were not retained. Academic self-efficacy, teacher caring, and perceptions of school discipline being fair were cited as contributing factors to lowering the odds of dropping out.	The study did not include any follow up with participants to provide additional perspective on the disengagement from school.

2.2.4 Community-level factors

Neighborhood safety is a concern for many students and their families and may impact students attending school. Students who live in communities with higher levels of neighborhood danger and violence are more likely to cite these factors as contributors to school absenteeism, than students who live in less volatile neighborhoods (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Recent research on chronic absenteeism in Pittsburgh showed that the rate of violent crime in the child's home neighborhood was the variable that most predicted rates of absenteeism for first grade students (Deitrick et al., 2015). There is also a connection between neighborhood conditions including poverty, family structure, status of home ownership, and school attendance (Deitrick et al., 2015).

Students who live in areas with higher poverty typically have higher levels of walkability to school, as defined by the percentage of students living near the school. Unfortunately, they also have higher traffic crash and crime rates and lower levels of perceived safety (Zhu & Lee, 2008).

The physical appearance of the school building may also have an impact on school attendance.

If a school is damaged and left unrestored, the disrepair will create an atmosphere of instability that tends to strangle social order and the educational process. Students in such an environment perceive that they are not special, that school is not important, that no one really cares, and as a result will be more likely to stay home, giving education low priority in their lives. (Branham, 2004, p. 1113)

To address issues of overcrowding, many schools have erected temporary structures on their grounds. These buildings are often less structurally sound than the permanent school building and may not be as aesthetically appealing (Branham, 2004). A study done in Texas of school structures found that schools with temporary buildings, and permanent buildings in disrepair, had lower attendance rates than schools with only permanent buildings and those kept in good condition (Branham, 2004).

Ambient air pollution is a community factor that contributes to student absenteeism in many communities. The primary reason that students miss school is illness, and many of these illnesses are attributed to upper respiratory infections and diseases. Students with respiratory illness, who live in communities with large variations in the levels of air pollutants, are at greater risk for missing school due to being ill at home, visits to physicians or emergency rooms, or hospital stays (Gilliland et al., 2000). Asthma in urban communities is linked to poor housing conditions (e.g., mold, vermin) and air pollution (Claudio, Stingone, & Godbold, 2006). Students who suffer from asthma, often exacerbated by air pollutants, often wake during the night, which has also been reported as a reason for missing school (Moonie, Sterling, Figs, & Castro, 2006; Yeung et al., 2011). These conditions are also associated with high levels of school absenteeism. Table 14 highlights key research done on community-level factors related to school absenteeism.

Table 14. *Community-level Factors Related to School Absenteeism*

Source	Aim of Study	Participants	Method	Findings	Limitations
Branham (2004)	Determine whether a link exists between the quality of a school structure and school attendance	226 Houston Independent School District Schools	Physical school building was the unit of analysis (Tobit analysis)	Absenteeism and dropout rates are higher in schools that are in disrepair, use temporary buildings, or have understaffed janitorial services.	The study focused on one school district. It may be difficult to generalize results beyond this district.
Zhu & Lee (2008)	Explore increased mobility by walking to school as a way to address obesity and physical inactivity	Areas around 73 public elementary schools in Austin, Texas	Geographic Information Systems measures were used to determine neighborhood walkability and safety. Regression analyses and ANOVAs were used to examine the disparity in ethnicity and economic status in walkability and safety.	Poverty was associated with many adverse neighborhood conditions including higher crash and crime rates. Poor children may have fewer options, other than walking, for getting to school.	The study did not address challenges faced by children in rural areas. It also did not explore what, if any, options exist for getting children to school if their routes are perceived as unsafe.
Gilliland et al. (2001)	Investigate the relationship between air pollution and school absenteeism	Cohort of approximately 2000 4 th graders in 12 southern California communities who are part of the Children's Health Study (a 10-year longitudinal study).	Air pollution was measured hourly at sites in these communities over a six month period. The results were compared with absenteeism related to respiratory distress.	Short-term changes in ozone (O ₃) were associated with substantial increases in school absences related to upper and lower respiratory illness.	Despite the significance of the findings, there were no suggestions for how communities might address this issue.

Table 14
(continued)

Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro (2006)	Examine the relationship between asthma and school absenteeism in a predominantly African American urban school district	9014 K-12 students in an urban school district in the Greater St. Louis area.	A cross-sectional analysis of district wide data was done to determine students with asthma; additional analysis of identified students was done to determine severity and relationship to school absence.	Students with asthma were absent 1.5 times more than peers without asthma, and of the more than 1500 documented absences, 31% were asthma related.	Collection of data for the study was reliant on school nurses. It is unclear whether asthma was underreported as many students with symptoms are undiagnosed.
Bowen & Bowen (1999)	Examine student perceptions of their exposure to neighborhood and school danger and the effect on attendance, behavior, and grades	A nationally representative sample of 1828 middle and high school students	Data were collected using the School Success Profile, a self-administered survey instrument. Bivariate correlations were run to determine relationships between variables.	Analysis of student responses to the neighborhood danger index demonstrated that, as perceptions of neighborhood danger increased, school attendance decreased.	The study did not look at middle and high school students' perceptions separately, nor were elementary students included.

2.3 ATTENDANCE INTERVENTIONS

A critical factor in the student-school attendance equation is the student's relationship with the school and individual teacher. It appears that the decision to leave school is intricately connected with attendance, achievement, and engagement and begins in the early years of schooling. Studies indicate that for many dropouts, academic difficulty, behavioral problems, absenteeism, or a gradual withdrawal from school were early indicators, so it is in fact important that intervention begin early (Rush & Vitale, 1994).

Absence intervention typically takes one of two approaches: behavior modification or needs based approach (Yeung et al., 2011). The behavior modification approach attempts to use punishment or positive reinforcement as a way to address absenteeism. At the school level, this may include sanctions for absences imposed on either the student or parent, meetings with counselors or attendance officers, or rewards for coming to school daily. The needs based approach attempts to look at absenteeism more holistically to determine the reasons behind absences, whether at the child, family, school, or community level, and establish a plan to intervene where needed.

A variety of efforts to intervene on student absenteeism are generally school-based and focused on students, their parents/guardians, and schools. The majority of research on school absenteeism focuses on interventions to prevent students from dropping out before receiving a high school diploma (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Despite the fact that high schools have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than elementary schools, it is important to look closely at school attending behavior in elementary school, as it is often a precursor to patterns seen in high school

(Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Limited evidence exists on effective school programs or practices to improve student attendance at the elementary school level. Schools report various challenges related to monitoring and promoting attendance. Housing instability, parents/guardians pulling children from school for vacations, and limited staff to focus on attendance issues are all examples of challenges (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Patterns of attendance are established early in the school year. Research in the Baltimore Public Schools showed that of students who missed less than two days in September, only 13% were chronically absent by the end of the school year. This is contrasted with students who missed 2-4 days, of whom 50% were chronically absent by the end of the year. Of those students who missed more than 4 days in September, 88% were chronically absent by the end of the year (Olson, 2014). These data demonstrate the need for schools to intervene early to address patterns of absenteeism.

Ultimately, school attendance is a family responsibility, especially in the early years of school. There are, however, numerous things that schools can do to promote consistent attendance. Despite myriad reasons why students do not attend, schools may be able to impact student attendance by creating environments that encourage students to attend, that celebrate high levels of attendance, and that provide support for students in need of attendance intervention. Because so much of what happens in schools is centered within classrooms, it is important to determine if there is a relationship between student perceptions' of school climate and student attendance. Schools often invest resources to promote student attendance. To best utilize these resources we should know which practices effectively increase rates of attendance. According to Epstein and Sheldon (2002), the presence of afterschool programs in schools is related to attendance. Schools with an afterschool program showed an increase of 1.04% in

average daily attendance verses an increase of 0.3% for schools without a program. Schools with programs also showed a decline in chronic absenteeism (-4.2%) verses schools with no program that demonstrated an increase of 1.44% (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Enrollment in afterschool programs may help eliminate childcare issues that might otherwise result in students missing school. In Allegheny County, afterschool programs that receive funding from the Department of Human Services are required to include outcomes focused on attendance. This demonstrates at least a perceived connection, for those who provide funding, between these programs and attendance during the school day.

Many schools have begun to use technology to track and follow up on school absenteeism. Automated calls and letters can be generated when students miss as little as one day or when they are reaching a pre-determined threshold for a pattern of absenteeism (Williams, 2001).

In New York City, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism and School Engagement is piloting strategies in 50 schools to identify the best practices to reduce chronic absenteeism in schools across the five boroughs and especially in high schools where chronic absenteeism rates are higher. Students in pilot schools who were paired with success mentors gained an additional 11,820 more days of school in the pilot year than their counterparts at comparable schools (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Schools may be unaware of the magnitude of the absenteeism problem because excused and unexcused absences may be monitored differently. Most schools track truancy for students in older grades. Many schools do not track excused absences as closely, especially for children in younger grades, as parents/guardians are most often providing an excuse (Bruner et al., 2011). School, family, and community partnership practices can significantly decrease rates of

absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Communicating with families about attendance (e.g., phone calls and providing information on school attendance policies), celebrating good attendance, and connecting chronically absent students with mentors have been shown to reduce absenteeism from one year to the next (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

An intervention at the school level that successfully improved attendance rates for elementary school students involved bachelor level social work students meeting daily with students who were identified as at risk for chronic absenteeism and making home visits and calls when students were absent (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Check and Connect is a program that has showed promise in middle and high schools in reducing absenteeism. The program provides adults who monitor students' attendance and grades (i.e., check) and mentor students (i.e., connect) on a regular basis to discuss barriers to their school attendance (Cole, 2011; Jerald, 2007; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

The transition from middle to high school is a critical juncture where attendance interventions can reduce the number of students who eventually drop out after being chronically absent. Effective practices include close monitoring of attendance and behavior, tutoring, counseling to address social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing, and the establishment of learning communities focused on personalization and promoting engagement among students (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). It is important for students to know that someone recognizes when they are in school and that what they are learning is relevant. Accordingly, "schools can improve attendance by making students feel less anonymous and by showing them that being in class is important" (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 309).

Educating parents also has the potential to improve school attendance significantly. Parents/guardians may be under the impression that kindergarten attendance is not related to

overall school success or that missing school is not a big issue until middle or high school. Parents/guardians whose children demonstrate school refusal behaviors due to anxiety, bullying, or psychological problems may be at a loss for what to do to encourage their children to attend school while simultaneously addressing the reasons their child may not want to attend.

Dropout prevention often focuses on high school students, despite the fact that most chronic absenteeism issues begin early in a child's school career. Several strategies that have shown promise with high school students include using a database to identify students who are at risk for chronic absenteeism or school disengagement and provide supports early. Support might include advocates or mentors who may work with students in a case manager approach to address barriers to school attendance. This approach, although proactive in nature, may be untenable due to the human resources required to implement the model effectively (Dynarski et al., 2008).

A clear relationship exists between academic failure, school disengagement, and chronic absenteeism. Therefore, interventions that focus specifically on academic support and remediation are not only forwarding the purpose of schooling to increase learning, but are also indirectly addressing a major contributing factor to chronic absenteeism and dropping out. In a similar vein, there is also a relationship between behavior, school connectedness, and chronic absenteeism. Just as interventions focused on learning impact attendance, interventions that focus on social skills and improved classroom and school behavior also indirectly address attendance (Dynarski et al., 2008).

Overall, schools that focus on attendance related interventions see results. Schools that conduct a greater total number of attendance focused activities were more likely to decrease the total number of students who were chronically absent (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Addressing

chronic absenteeism with the family and providing effective interventions is critical, as the most significant predictor of a child being chronically absent in a current school year is his or her chronic absenteeism the previous year. For every year that a child is chronically absent, his or her likelihood of dropping out increases significantly (Center, U. E. P., 2012).

Historically, most family attendance interventions were punitive and occurred after students were chronically absent (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Recently there has been a shift to seeing families as an important factor in proactively combating chronic absenteeism. There is evidence that family structure influences absenteeism. Being from a family with lower socioeconomic status, being male, having a large number of siblings, being born to a young mother, residing in a single parent household, and changing residence early in a school career all impact school attendance negatively (Alexander et al., 1997). We also know that a focus on parenting practices and involvement in specific school related activities can have a positive impact on school attendance (Rumberger, 2003).

School, family, and community partnerships have demonstrated promise in reducing chronic absenteeism (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Despite the inclusion of family in this equation, past research has paid little attention to parents'/guardians' perspectives on the barriers that interfere with sending their children to school and which interventions are most effective, from their perspective. Table 15 provides a sample of research on interventions focused on improving school attendance.

Table 15. *Sample of Research on Attendance Interventions*

Source	Aim of Study	Participants	Method	Findings	Limitations
Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson (2004)	Examine the effects of an elementary intervention (creation of a caring community of learners) on middle school students' connectedness and social adjustment	1246 middle school students from the elementary participation and control group	Student questionnaires, teacher ratings, school records, and analysis of covariance	Students who participated in the high implementation groups in elementary school and middle school liked school more, were more connected, and had fewer delinquent behaviors.	Data was missing from the study – attributed to the longitudinal nature of the study and teachers not completing reports. Although liking school and connectedness are related to absenteeism, absenteeism was not measured specifically.
Cole (2011)	Review the effectiveness of Check and Connect at the elementary school level	Kindergarten and 2 nd grade students with 7-14 absences in the 2010-2011 school year	Analysis of school records and teacher surveys	Attendance improved after a six-week intervention; teachers reported that the program was effective, especially check-in cards and incentives.	Small sample size (only one school used for the study)
Epstein & Sheldon (2002)	Investigate school and community partnerships to increase attendance	18 schools who are part of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University	Surveys administered 3 times during the 1996-1997 school year	School, family, and community partnerships were at least “a little helpful” (p.310) in improving attendance – correlations between .081 and .822 for various strategies.	Small sample size, inability to account for the effects of other school factors outside of partnerships

Table 15 (continued)

Ford & Sutphen (1996)	Describe the development and evaluation of an incentive-based attendance intervention program at an elementary school	23 first-third graders who were chronically absent in the previous school year	School- and home-based interventions with a social work intern, teacher surveys, analysis of attendance records for students	Overall results were positive for students who had the interventions, but results were mixed for individual students.	Small sample size and limited scope of study
Sheldon & Epstein (2004)	Identify effective family and school partnerships to reduce chronic absenteeism	39 schools who are part of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University	Multiple regression analysis of school records and reported interventions through surveys	Communicating with families about attendance, recognizing good attendance, and providing mentors for chronically absent students reduced chronic absenteeism from one year to the next.	Small sample size; schools volunteered to participate in study, and most had previously established improving attendance as a goal.

The magnitude of chronic absenteeism and the seriousness of the long-term negative implications for students in the United States has recently garnered national attention. In December of 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act became federal law and included chronic absenteeism as a measure of school success. This law is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and is a revision of No Child Left Behind. This legislation is unique in that it includes specific components aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism and requires every state to report rates of chronic absenteeism by student subgroups, including data on race, ethnicity, disability, housing, and parent/guardian status (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965). Another recent federal initiative, Every Student, Every Day, challenges states to implement strategies aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism by 10% each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Substantial research has been done on interventions to improve student attendance. School, community agencies, and court systems have all developed programs aimed at improving attendance through education, rewards, and sanctions. Also, a number of studies examine what schools provide to parents/guardians (e.g., newsletters, calls home, home visits, invitations to workshops, and attendance assemblies) and measure their effectiveness based on changes in attendance; there is a paucity of research that includes parents'/guardians' voices on the topic of attendance (including chronic absenteeism and truancy). As a result, there are substantial gaps in our knowledge about the thinking, perceptions, expectations, attitudes, and behavior of parents/guardians around the topic of school attendance and what would be most valuable from their perspective in increasing their child's attendance. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

3.0 METHODS

3.1 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The body of research on school absenteeism is missing the perspective of parents/guardians on what influences their decisions to send their children to school. The present study sought to begin to address this gap in the literature. This section outlines the methods for the research study including the conceptual framework for the study and the research questions that emerged from the review of literature on school absenteeism. The interview protocol and procedure for analysis are also described.

3.2 STUDY AIMS

The specific aims of the research were:

- 1) To understand chronic absenteeism at the elementary and middle school level from parents' perspectives;
- 2) To understand the factors that influence parents' decisions not to send a child to school;
- 3) To understand parents' perspectives on the connection between school attendance and academic and life outcomes; and

- 4) To understand parents' perspectives on interventions that could potentially increase their children's school attendance.

3.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Consistent with the findings of past research on school absenteeism, the conceptual framework that guided the study presumed that there were macro- (e.g., neighborhood), meso- (e.g., school), and micro-level (e.g., parental and student) factors that influence why students do not attend school (see Table 16). The specific focus of this study was on the process by which parents decide whether or not their children will attend school. To understand this process, I interviewed parents with chronically absent students to examine the factors, other than illness, that mediate their decisions to keep their children home from school (see Table 16).

The study was an exploratory interpretive descriptive study with three primary tasks. The first was to establish what is known about the topic. The second was to extend this knowledge through empirical exploration (Thorne, 2008). The third was to provide insight and direction for practice. The study was exploratory as it sought to learn, directly from parents, the factors that influence their decisions to keep their children home from school and the interventions that might influence these decisions.

Table 16. *Factors that Influence Parent/Guardian Decisions to Keep Children Home from School*

Reason for missing school	Description	Reference
Student health, including chronic illness, childhood illnesses, access to health care, and mental health issues	Parents may keep children out of school due to typical childhood illness or chronic illness.	Rehm & Rohr (2002)
Student disengagement from school, including academic difficulty and social difficulty (with peers or teachers)	Students may ask their parents/guardians if they can remain at home, or they may refuse to go to school.	Kearney (2008)
Family instability, including childcare, housing, transportation, and parent/guardian mental health issues	Parents/guardians may have activities that conflict with the school schedule (may include work or appointments), or they may be ill (this may include physical or mental illness) and unable to get their children ready for school or transported to school.	Lipstein, Perrin, & Kuhlthau (2009)
School environment, including chaotic environment, safety concerns, and discipline issues	Parents/guardians may keep their child at home if they feel the school climate is not conducive to learning.	Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie (1997)
Neighborhood environment, including unsafe routes to school, poor air quality, and neighborhood violence	Parents/guardians may not send their children to school if passage seems unsafe due to neighborhood violence or other community factors.	Ramirez et al. (2012)

3.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The selection of research questions for this study was based on the absence of parent/guardian voice in the research on chronic absenteeism.

The research questions were:

RQ 1: What are the reasons that students are chronically absent?

RQ 2: What mediating factors influence parents'/guardians' decisions regarding school attendance?

RQ 3: From the perspective of parents/guardians, what impact does missing school have on a child's academic and life outcomes?

RQ 4: From the perspective of parents/guardians, what interventions can be implemented to reduce chronic absenteeism?

3.5 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL AND ETHICAL SAFEGUARDS

The study was approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board in May of 2016 (PRO15120100). Data collection began in December of 2016. The initial phase included the distribution of flyers describing the study and enrollment of participants. I conducted an initial telephone interview with potential participants to determine eligibility for the study. The telephone script appears in Appendix A.

A waiver of the requirement to obtain informed consent for the telephone screening portion of the study was approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, as the

telephone screen presented no more than minimal risk of harm to the research subjects because no identifying information was collected during the telephone screen. It was acceptable to defer written informed consent because potential participants contacted me based on their desire to learn more about the study. I did not call or recruit participants directly—they self-selected after reading the study flyer and contacted me by telephone for more information.

Based on the questions asked (i.e., child's grade, school, and number of absences), the participant and I determined eligibility for participation in the study. I explained the purpose of the study, consent process, research procedures, risks and benefits, and the rights of the research subject. Face to face interviews were scheduled for those who wished to participate. The participant was given a copy of the consent form to sign at the interview. The consent form appears in Appendix B. To minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality, no identifying information was used in the study. Interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. No names were included in the transcripts. Once transcribed, the tapes were locked. The transcripts are stored electronically and are password protected.

3.6 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

My experience with education in a professional capacity began as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago. My career began as an educational assistant at the Chicago Clinic for Child Development in 1985. My position involved mainly skill-based tutoring in reading and mathematics, but more important than my day-to-day work, this position nurtured my love for education and the power of intervention to help students succeed academically. Since this initial

position, I have served in various capacities in schools. My experience spans more than 30 years and includes work in a student advocacy center, as a teacher, a home-school liaison, a principal, adjunct professor of education, director of afterschool programs, and now researcher.

I grew up in a household where education was valued. Both of my parents and one grandparent had graduate degrees and educational attainment was an expectation. As a child, I probably missed less than 10 days of school in my entire K-12 education and distinctly remember that vacations and doctor appointments were scheduled for times when school was not in session. It was clear that there was a connection between being present in school and learning.

In my last few years as a principal, I began to notice a shift in the emphasis that some parents placed on the relationship between school attendance and learning. Despite the importance of education and the necessity for children to be in school to receive instruction, at least from my perspective, students seemed to be missing more school. Anecdotally, students would share that they had an hour-long dental appointment, or possibly a hair appointment, and would therefore be out of school for the entire day. Parents might have a change in work schedule or a need for childcare for younger siblings and therefore children could miss several days of school while these issues were resolved. Both parents and students expressed the need for “mental health” days and, as a result, felt justified in missing school.

The school’s response to absenteeism was recognition of students who had perfect or near perfect attendance or threatening letters, including a reference to a citation being issued by the local magistrate, to parents who did not comply with attendance requirements for their children. In severe cases, the school social worker might do a home visit to encourage attendance and to offer the student an alarm clock. Rarely was time spent talking with students or their parents about what led to their decisions not to attend school and what, if anything, the

school could do to change their thinking (and most importantly, behavior) related to the importance of being in school each day.

The specific goal for the study was to understand why parents of chronically absent students keep their children out of school. Through this study, I wanted to understand better what contributes to parent/guardian decisions—cultural norms, social interactions, economic challenges, health concerns, etc.—to keep their children home from school and the associated thought process for the decision.

As a researcher, I was uniquely positioned to conduct this type of study. I am currently completing a graduate degree in counseling and have taken several counseling skills courses that were an asset to the interview process. To increase the quality of responses I focused on demonstrating empathy, compassion and a willingness to collaborate on solutions. All were quite helpful in eliciting rich participant responses.

In addition to my previous work as an elementary school principal, I had spent the past two years working with various non-profits who serve children and families in the Homewood area. Despite my time in the community, there is no presumption that I am an insider. I instead maintained the premise that I am gathering, holding, and ultimately disseminating the perspectives of those interviewed with the ultimate goal to identify strategies to bring about change, to be responsive to the community's perceived needs, and to work to find realistic ways to implement those strategies.

3.7 SETTING

The focal area for the study was the schools in the Westinghouse Feeder Pattern (i.e., Faison, Lincoln, and Westinghouse grades 6-8) in the Homewood community of Pittsburgh. I selected this feeder pattern was selected because of the alignment between characteristics of children most affected by school absenteeism and the characteristics of the children living in Homewood. According to a 2015 A+ Schools report, in 2015, chronic absenteeism was 31% at Faison, 22% at Lincoln and 63% at Westinghouse (A+ Schools, 2015).

According to *Homewood: A Community Profile*, a report prepared by the Allegheny Department of Human Services (2010), more than 60% of the children in Homewood live in poverty, 72% are being raised by a single parent, and nearly 90% of the students who attend public school in Homewood are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In Homewood, the rates for receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance (10%) and food stamps (21%) are more than double those for the City of Pittsburgh (Allegheny Department of Human Services, 2010).

Based on school-level Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test scores, educational performance in Homewood is among the lowest in the state of Pennsylvania. In fact, according to 2016 data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, test scores in 90% of the state's elementary schools were higher than those in Homewood. Table 17 shows proficiency levels for 3rd, 5th, and 8th grades at the elementary schools in Homewood and at Westinghouse 6-8.

Table 17. *Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient/Advanced on the 2016 PSSA*

	3 rd Grade			5 th Grade			8 th Grade	
	Faison	Lincoln	State	Faison	Lincoln	State	Westinghouse	State
English Language Arts	21.3	23.5	60.9	16.1	32.5	61.5	9.4	58.4
Math	13.3	5.9	54.4	6.9	10	44.4	3.1	31.2

Note. Data for 2016 PSSA from the Pennsylvania Department of Education retrieved from <http://www.education.pa.gov/data-and-statistics/PSSA/Pages/default.aspx>.

3.8 PARTICIPANTS

Participants for the study were recruited in several ways. The primary recruitment technique was distributing study flyers to community and school leaders in Homewood. I also posted flyers in community locations including the public library, neighborhood non-profit organizations, and businesses. The recruitment flyer appears in Appendix C.

I used snowball sampling to recruit participants beyond the initial contacts. Snowball sampling is a qualitative technique for recruiting respondents. It relies on social interaction, which is a primary reason I selected it for use in this study. Based on a study done by Perez, Nie, Ardern, Radhu, and Ritvo (2013), participant incentives, direct, and snowball recruitment have been effective in recruiting participants in low SES, high minority communities that have been historically reluctant to participate in research.

Reasons include residents' lack of time and interest, economic disadvantages, lack of adequate (and literacy appropriate) study information, communication barriers,

urbanicity, and a distrust of researchers. Recruitment can be improved through snowball sampling, face-to-face contact, establishing rapport and building trust with individuals and the community by prioritizing participants' concerns and convenience, and effectively conveying study purpose, task and potential benefits to individuals and the community. These strategies can be supplemented with meaningful incentives, conveyed through culturally sensitive methods. Evidence suggests that snowball sampling is an efficient strategy increasingly used with hard to reach, ethnically diverse populations. Snowball sampling refers to a recruitment technique wherein existing participants are encouraged in turn to refer members of their social networks to the study. (Perez et al., 2013, p. 208)

Despite the recruitment efforts and reliance on snowball sampling for the word to spread about the study, getting participants was very difficult and time consuming. Several parents contacted me to get more information, met the criteria for the interview, but then did not keep their scheduled appointment. When I had the opportunity to follow up with these parents it appeared that some of the same challenges that may interfere with getting their children to school each day, may also interfere with keeping interview appointments. The fact that this study had not been done might be linked to the difficulty of recruitment and interviewing.

Chronic absenteeism is prevalent in Homewood, but there is no research or documentation that indicates that parents or guardians have been asked their perspectives on how to address this issue. In appreciation for participation, I gave parents/guardians \$25 for completion of the interview.

Participants for the study were parents/guardians with elementary or middle school students who were chronically absent. The recruitment criteria stated that parents could have

children who were chronically absent during the 2015-2016 school year or in the first semester of the 2016-2017 school year. All the parents interviewed had students who were currently chronically absent, meaning they had missed more than nine days during the first four months of the 2016-2017 school year. A total of 22 parents/guardians were interviewed for the study. Their children's absences ranged from 10-65 days. In cases where the parent/guardian had more than one child, I asked the parent to talk about the experience of their oldest child. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, parents often shared experiences of each of their children throughout the interview. In these cases, I asked parents to provide a grade level for the child and the number of absences for the specific child they were referencing. This resulted in the total number of children (35) being higher than the number of parent/guardians being interviewed. This total number is reflected in the table below. Table 18 highlights the characteristics of participants.

Table 18. Characteristics of Parents/Guardians

Characteristic	Number (%)
Gender	
Male	3 (13.6)
Female	19 (86.4)
Race	
African American	19 (86.4)
White	3 (13.6)
Parental Status	
Biological Parent	18 (81.8)
*Guardian	4 (18.2)
Grade of Child	
Kindergarten	4 (11.4)
Elementary (1 st – 5 th Grade)	22 (62.9)
Middle School (6 th – 8 th Grade)	9 (25.7)
*Number of Absences	
10 - 19	28 (80)
20 - 29	2 (5.7)
30 – 39	3 (8.6)
>40	2 (5.7)

*All of the guardians interviewed were biological grandparents.

**Interviews were conducted at the mid-point of the year. Chronic absenteeism is 9 or more absences.

The participants in the study had children that ranged from kindergarten through 8th grade. The interview responses provided insight into reasons for their absenteeism, but there were no obvious reasons linked to age. The role of the participants was also varied (i.e., mother, father, grandparent). There was also no linkage in reasons related to the parental role. I did not

ask participants about marital status. If it was mentioned in the interview, it is included in parenthesis after the role. Table 19 shows the variation in grade and the role of the participant.

Table 19. *Parental Role and Grade Level of Child(ren)*

Participant #	Parental Role	Grade Level of Child(ren)
1	Mother (single parent)	3 rd , 5 th , 8 th
2	Father (single parent)	1 st
3	Mother	4 th
4	Grandmother	1 st
5	Mother (single parent)	K, 4 th , 5 th
6	Grandmother (single parent)	1 st , 3 rd , 7 th
7	Mother (single parent)	7 th
8	Mother	K, 2 nd , 3 rd , 5 th
9	Mother (single parent)	6 th
10	Father (single parent)	4 th , 7 th
11	Mother (single parent)	4 th , 8 th
12	Father (single parent)	3 rd
13	Grandmother (single parent)	4 th , 6 th
14	Grandmother (single parent)	5 th
15	Mother (married)	7 th
16	Mother	3 rd
17	Mother (single)	K
18	Mother (single)	3 rd , 3 rd
19	Mother	3 rd
20	Mother (married)	7 th
21	Mother (widow)	4 th
22	Mother	1 st

3.9 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

I used a face-to-face, semi-structured approach to interviewing. The technique was specifically selected due to the sensitive nature of the topic being explored. Parents with children who are chronically absent are in violation of the law. They have often been subjected to school sanctions and magistrate fines. Exploring their experience requires attention to rapport and an ability to approach the topic in a non-threatening and non-judgmental manner. A semi-structured interview protocol was used as it provided a framework for the research (i.e., addressed the research questions) and allowed participants to focus on the issues that they felt were most germane to their child's experience with absenteeism. Follow up questions such as "What do you mean by..." and "Can you give me a bit more detail about..." were used to clarify responses and to encourage participant elaboration. Probes such as "Then what happened?" and "Can you give me an example?" were used to get additional details about experiences.

I reframed questions if the participant did not seem to understand or did not appear to have thought about a particular question before (e.g., What are the long-term consequences of a child being chronically absent?). If a participant introduced a new concept or made statements that were unclear, I took brief notes during the interview and reviewed these with the participant at the end of the interview to ensure proper understanding of what was shared. If a parent shared something that had emerged in a previous interview, I used a phrase such as "Other parents have mentioned that. I'd really like to better understand what you're saying. Can you tell me more?"

I looked for various phrases and words that kept recurring in the interview responses. Finding meaning in these words was a critical part of the analysis, as it was important to understand the attitudes and beliefs conveyed. Because it was important to keep the interviews as close as possible to the actual conversation, no attempt was made to correct grammar in

transcripts or to make written clarification of phrases that may have been difficult to understand (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003). If clarification was needed, I asked during the interview and the respondent provided the clarification as part of the conversation. During the interview and transcription process, I made note of unexpected turns in the conversation where unanticipated information was shared. On several occasions, new themes emerged from these turns.

Data were obtained from 22 face-to-face interviews with parents/guardians. My intent was to conduct interviews in a public location. Most respondents, 18 of the 22, however requested that the interview be conducted in their home. This was beneficial in that participants were in an environment that was comfortable for them. On two occasions, school age children were also home during the interview (during a time when school was in session). This presented a unique opportunity to talk specifically about what was going on on the actual day of the interview that precluded these children from attending school.

Interviews were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017. I used an 8-question, open-ended interview guide that asked participants to discuss their perspectives on school attendance. The Interview Protocol is shown in Table 19.

Table 20. *Research and Interview Questions*

Research Question	Interview Questions
What are the reasons that students are chronically absent?	There are a variety of reasons why children miss school. Can you talk to me about the reasons why your child has missed school?
What mediating factors influence parents'/guardians' decisions regarding school attendance?	<p>I realize that it can be very difficult to get children to school every day. Parents/guardians often decide not to send their children to school for many reasons. These might include things going on with your child, your family, the school, or the neighborhood. Can you talk about some specific examples of situations that might keep your child from attending school?</p> <p>Can you walk me through the decision-making process you use when these issues arise and how you decide whether or not your child will go to school that day?</p> <p>In addition to the things that you have named, are there other things that would influence your decision to send your child to school?</p>
From the perspective of parents/guardians, what impact does missing school have on a child's academic and life outcomes?	<p>Missing school seems to affect children in different ways. Can you talk specifically about the ways, if any, that missing school has affected your child? (If academics are not mentioned, a probe will be asked – Has missing school affected your child's learning or grades in any way?)</p> <p>In what ways, if any, do you think missing school might impact your child's future?</p>
What interventions can be implemented to reduce chronic absenteeism?	<p>Schools do a variety of things to encourage attendance every day. What, if anything, could be done to increase your child's attendance? (If a probe is necessary I will ask – Is there something that the school (or someone at the school) or maybe someone in your family (or your social network) could do to help you with improving your child's attendance?</p> <p>Is there anything that I did not ask, or that you feel is important for me to understand about chronic absenteeism or school attendance?</p>

Although scheduled for 30 minutes, most interviews extended to nearly an hour. Participants answered the research questions but also talked openly about specific situations with their child and the school. Many parents provided in depth explanations about the challenges they face at home or work when deciding to keep their child out of school. My race, gender and age (African American, female and early 50's) may have contributed to the rapport experienced during the interview as there was cultural alignment with many of the participants. I may have been viewed as someone who could be trusted (i.e., a mother or grandmother figure), and as a result the dialogue flowed naturally. I have also conducted previous research on sensitive topics, including challenges faced by ex-offenders after release from prison and currently am being trained as a professional counselor. As a result, I have experience in building rapport with individuals at the onset of an interview and can solicit responses to questions on the interview protocol while simultaneously allowing for respondents to turn the conversation as needed to share their specific experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. The flexibility in time frame also allowed for participant stories and researcher probing related to the emergence of new themes.

To a large degree, the quality of any qualitative research project is tied to the relationship that the researcher builds with the participants (Gunzenhauser, 2006). The richness of the data collected for this study was primarily due to the time I spent developing a relationship with participants during the interview.

I was deliberate in not referring to previous experiences as a school administrator or community leader, as the idea was not to approach the research from the standpoint of a known relationship, but from that of two knowing participants attempting to understand chronic absenteeism from multiple perspectives (Gunzenhauser, 2006). I took on the role of someone who did not know and was therefore entering the participant's world in an attempt to understand

their lived experience, (Thorne, 2008). My process of “undoing,” as it relates to professional expertise or communication skills positioned her as a listener and allowed the participants to tell their story and to be heard (Thorne, 2008, p. 110). I shared that I was attempting to understand the problem of chronic absenteeism, but specifically emphasized that the parent/guardian was the expert; the aim of the study was to give voice to the parent perspective. The participants were therefore the keepers of the knowledge and had willingly chosen to share their day-to-day experiences with getting their children to school. In the context of the interview, I was charged first with listening to the stories, and second with compiling the experiences in a way that conveyed meaning.

The purpose of the interviews was to allow the authentic voice of parents to contribute to the understanding of school absenteeism. Questions explored parents’ thoughts about the connection between attendance and school success. Parents discussed factors that influenced their decisions at the student-, family-, school-, and community-levels, as well as their thoughts about what supports would help to increase their children’s attendance. The interviews were retrospective in nature, as discussion focused on past behavior related to decisions to send children to school.

Throughout the recruitment and interview phase of the study, I kept a field diary to note opinions or unique characteristics or experiences of participants. Charmaz (2014) writes about the use of research memos, much like the my diary entries, with a specific emphasis on including a great deal of verbatim material as a way to substantiate claims, define patterns, and make connections in the world. “Making constant comparisons through memo-writing can lead to defining and developing a core category that otherwise may have eluded you” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 182). The diary was used to track questions and to note possible areas for further study.

When an interesting thought emerged, the participants' use of a phrase, or a statement or pause that implied something unspoken, the research took note of these instances. This process was used to encourage early interaction with the data and to create placeholders for possible thematic categories that might be substantiated in future interviews (Charmaz, 2014). I also used the research diary as a way to understand underlying threads that might not only tie participants' stories together but also be a root cause for absenteeism at the societal or institutional level.

Diary entries were made within 12 hours of each interview to ensure that any insights, preliminary conclusions, or unique circumstances related to the interview were recorded accurately. These entries also aided in the creation of codes and the subsequent analysis.

3.10 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist. Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program for coding and were analyzed to determine whether there were distinct patterns or trends expressed in the interviews. Specific steps for analysis included reading the transcripts several times and noting relevant phrases (i.e., coding data). I looked for repeating phrases, patterns, distinct statements, or statements that aligned with or supported what was found in the literature on chronic absenteeism. This approach was combined with *in vivo* coding, an approach that captured the specific words and phrases of participants. In doing so, this approach honored and preserved participants' unique voices in the process of analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

The creation of codes was both concept and data driven. Some codes and categories were

developed in advance based on a review of literature on school absenteeism. After an initial review of the data and the my field diary, additional codes and categories were added to capture reasons not found in the literature but based on actual parent experience (e.g., absence was a reaction to something that happened in school or based on a child's request).

Codes were also added to capture data from specific interview questions. Subcategories were created, if needed, to further define responses. A general miscellaneous code was created to capture tangents or unrelated comments that upon initial review did not seem to fit in an established category.

The coded phrases were grouped into themes. I attempted to bridge what was expressed in the interviews and the established categories with other relevant research or theories on school absenteeism, while simultaneously looking for the emergence of theory. I made note of specific statements that the participant indicated were important or areas where the participant noted that something was specifically a problem. After several readings and a thorough assignment of codes, the codes were combined when appropriate and organized into larger categories. I then examined the extent to which the reasons that parents gave fit into the reasons described in the literature; the latter appear in Table 16.

I used both a deductive and inductive approach to analyze the interview data. Deductive analysis began with a predetermined set of themes based on the literature on chronic absenteeism. Because chronic absenteeism has been researched from many perspectives, this approach comprised a stage one framework for analysis. Codes were created based on the frequency of representation of themes in the literature. Because this study focused uniquely on the perspective of parents with chronically absent children, it was also necessary to approach analysis from an inductive, or data-driven, perspective. I followed both the interview protocol

and lead of the participants to understand fully the perspective shared. This, coupled with empathetic questioning, allowed for the creation of codes based specifically on what emerged from the interviews (Gunzenhauser, 2006). The data determined the structure of the codes based on patterns and themes. Hypotheses emerged through this process.

I coded all transcripts, which ideally led to a high level of consistency in coding. Data were initially categorized into four broad categories. These categories were created based on the findings of past research on school absenteeism and from what emerged from the actual interviews – student reasons, family reasons, school reasons, community/neighborhood reasons. These categories were then further subdivided after a first round of coding to provide more specific units of analysis. The third round of coding involved identifying underlying themes. For example, issues with school bus transportation were cited on numerous occasions. An underlying theme was that it was not just that the child had missed the bus or the bus did not come, but that the parents did not have an alternate way to get their child to school, which could represent a lack of financial resources or limited social networks. Several categories related to interventions were created to capture responses to the research questions related to parents' thoughts about the impact of absenteeism and what they felt the school could do to address the problem.

Transcripts were read and coded at the utterance level; each time a codeable statement was made, a code was applied. I captured major themes (i.e., statements related specifically to the study's research questions) by highlighting verbatim utterances (i.e., quotations) and categorizing them accordingly. A table was created to determine the codes that were consistent across interviews. Frequent monitoring of statements coded as miscellaneous also made it easy to determine if a specific code should be created based on the frequency a topic arose across

multiple interviews. The text, codes, and themes in the data were reviewed several times before the analysis moved to the interpretive phases. The codes were then connected to an explanatory framework. Phrases were then identified as examples of the underlying meaning ascribed to a theme. Table 20 is an example of the framework used for the analysis of each theme.

Table 21. *Thematic Analysis of School-related Reasons for Absenteeism*

Initial Theme	Clustered Themes	Underlying Theme
Chronic absenteeism is related to things that happen within the school	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Children do not attend school because of negative interactions with other children 2) Children do not attend school because of the curriculum (rigor of assignments, tests, etc.) 3) Children do not attend school because the climate is chaotic 4) Children do not attend school due to negative interactions with staff 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Fear 2) Anxiety 3) Negative academic self-efficacy 4) Powerlessness

I created a codebook that included a specific example from an interview transcript to provide additional clarity on how a statement related to a particular code might appear in text. The creation of a codebook prior to the data analysis phase is defined as a template approach to analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). I used a draft of a codebook that was based on research for the study and an initial scanning of the data. The codebook was finalized after transcripts were read and coded multiple times. The codebook appears in Appendix D.

3.11 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

The purpose of the study was to examine parent/guardian perspectives on absenteeism. The interview questions, derived from past empirical and theoretical research, examined absenteeism with a specific focus: parents' perspectives. Accordingly, the questions appeared to have a high level of face validity. The interview questions and interview technique were purposefully designed to elicit rich detail from participants, and interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain authenticity. The inclusion of participants' verbatim responses in the results strengthens the face validity and credibility of the research (Patton, 2002).

Prior to conducting the research for this study, I conducted a pilot study that included validity tests for the interpretation and coding of data with several doctoral level graduate students. The process included multiple people coding the same interview to check for consistency with assignment to categories and codes. Findings were supported by participants' direct quotations, which strengthened the validity and credibility of the research. This also helped to ensure that interpretation of the data was tied directly to the participant's verbatim responses (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To promote inter-rater reliability, the course work group independently coded selected sections of the transcripts to test the reliability of the codes and themes. If there were differences in coding, the group reviewed the section of text and provided suggestions for the refinement of code descriptions. This process was repeated with different sections of text until there was 100% agreement on code assignment from all members of the work group. The work group also helped refine code definitions and the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Although only I coded the data for the present study, the knowledge gained and procedures refined through the pilot

study were applied. I also conducted an intra-coder reliability test by re-coding 20% of the interview transcripts.

During the process of coding the data, I not only focused phrases that exemplified identified themes but also looked at statements that seemed to be negative examples of a theme. I considered the utterances outliers (Miles et al., 2014). I examined these carefully as they provided significant insight on why an experience with absenteeism may have been different in a particular case.

3.12 LIMITATIONS

One key limitation of the study was the small sample size ($N = 22$). The small sample size and the absence of longitudinal data or comparison data from other studies make it impossible to generalize the findings beyond the respondents, or to make any claims about causality (Miles et al., 2014). Although 22 interviews were conducted yielding hundreds of pages of transcripts, the experiences with chronic absenteeism were varied. It was therefore difficult to determine if the participants' responses reflected the entire scope of the problem.

The study was focused on one neighborhood, which was a strength and limitation. Focusing on the attendance area for a high school with 63% chronic absenteeism may make it more likely that the recommendations shared will be implemented. The limited geographical scope of the study makes it harder to determine if the results are generalizable to other parts of the city, or beyond, which is a limitation.

4.0 FINDINGS

A qualitative descriptive approach was used to collect, code, and analyze the interview data. The goal of this approach was to provide a rich description of a phenomenon, in this case chronic absenteeism, and to explore practical options, from the perspective of parents, for schools and community agencies to address the problem (Thorne, 2008). The interpretive descriptive approach to qualitative research was selected for this study due to the nature of the problem being studied. Interpretive description is appropriate when an actual practice goal exists and there is a clear understanding of what is known and what remains unknown about a problem (Thorne, 2008). Understanding parent/guardian perspectives on chronic absenteeism fit this criterion. The goal of the study was not to advance theorizing about the topic but instead to understand the issue more deeply so that we could propose interventions to positively change children's lives.

The researcher conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with parents of children who were chronically absent. Interviews took place over a 10-week period near the end of the 1st semester (December 2016-February 2017) of the 2016-2017 school year. Chronically absent students ranged in grades from kindergarten through 8th grade, with a fairly equal gender distribution of chronically absent children (54% males, 46% females). The number of absences ranged from 10 to 65 days.

Table 21 summarizes the data from the study. The data include the factors that parents/guardians said influence absences, their responses to specific questions on the implications of school absenteeism and school interventions, the number of parents who mentioned the category, the number of unique utterances, or instances when the code for the category was used. An example quotation is also included as an illustration of parent voice.

Table 22. *Parent/Guardian Description of Factors that Influence Absenteeism*

Major Influence on Absenteeism	Number (%) of Participants Referencing Category	Number of Unique Utterances in Reference to Category	Example Quotation
Student Reason			
Student illness	9 (41%)	11	“He was ran over with an SUV so he has a liver condition so that’s why he misses a lot of days.” (Participant 1)
Student medication	4 (18%)	4	“She does have a backup inhaler that she has to use um just in case it’s like a just in case inhaler but um sometimes if she doesn’t get it in the morning at a certain time she can automatically get sick and um it will cause her not to come to school.” (Participant 16)
Student request	3 (14%)	4	“I think it’s just he’s too busy being up late like hanging with his friends and so he don’t want to get up but at first I did think there was something else going on... I don’t think that now, but he was literally like “Mom I don’t want to go to school.”” (Participant 7)
Student stress	3 (14%)	3	“Sometimes when I have to go to court about their parents or when the outcome is not what the child wanted um, um the outcome does not result in them getting to see their parent they are very sad and they need some time to recuperate and recover.” (Participant 12)

Table 22 (continued)

Student mental health	9 (41%)	14	“They not built for special education so that was a bit much too on why he didn’t want to go he didn’t feel comfortable, there wasn’t no one-on-one, everybody was everywhere, you just came from one room to all these people and he’d have no one to sit with him and help him one-on-one cuz everyone’s going crazy but he’s already crazy but they don’t see it, it’s documented, it’s on paper, I got an IEP.” (Participant 11)
Family Reason			
Parent activity	7 (32%)	10	“Due to my work schedule you know I like (pause) at that time I really didn’t have nobody to watch him do I called off a lot and um wasn’t you know able to get him where I needed to get him.” (Participant 2)
Siblings	2 (9%)	2	“If the hospital says we have an 11:00 appointment to you no I’m not going to send my kid to school that day we’re going to all stay home not only that child but because I won’t have someone to pick up the other children after school.” (Participant 12)
School Environment			
School climate	5 (23%)	7	“I switched her from that classroom to the other classroom and then the teacher is telling my child which is only in kindergarten, your mom shouldn’t have kids because she’s not married... she’s teaching my daughter about her belly ring, she teaching my daughter about every little thing that she didn’t need to know about so I took her out of the school all together.” (Participant 5)

Table 22 (continued)

Other students	7 (32%)	10	“I just let her stay because she would be bawling crying so I would let her stay and just kinda like jot it down in my phone so in case something did happen and I had to go to court I would let them know like and that just what made me start calling the parent hotline so it could be on record my daughter is being bullied I keep sending her and she would just be like I don’t even care I don’t even want to live no more it was getting bad.” (Participant 1)
Schoolwork	2 (9%)	2	“He was like just nervous because he couldn’t keep his work together, he was getting like sidetracked, he wasn’t getting his work done and it just all became like snowballed.” (Participant 19)
Transportation			
Transportation	9 (41%)	11	“Like I said at first it was because of her school bus and her school bus is still late so I refuse to put her on it because it’s too cold.” (Participant 3)
Neighborhood			
Neighborhood	5 (23%)	7	“So I had to keep her home because you know to go to (pause) I have to walk down Washington boulevard and I tried to walk down with her before and almost got hit by a car coming on the sidewalk you know and so then I came you know trying to get back and forth... on the sidewalk... so I had to keep her home a couple of times.” (Participant 6)

Table 22 (continued)

Interventions			
Help	12 (55%)	23	“I mean they send out the 2-hour delay phone calls and all that maybe they should start with those phone calls and make sure parents... hey your kid they missed this day can you make sure they do this or make sure they’re in school today there’s a call today that your child needs to be in school maybe that phone call that they give us for the 2 hour delays could work for everything else far as them contacting them and getting those kids in school.” (Participant 5)
Hinder	5 (23%)	8	“She never called me back once that day at all cuz I tried to nip this in the bud before it happened, she never once returned my phone call, nothing until after it happened then she returned my call, I’m like we could’ve avoided this if somebody would’ve just gotten back to me when I came into the office but instead I had to deal with him all school year being sick like he did miss a lot.” (Participant 19)
Consequences			
Short-term – yes	22 (100%)	39	“If they don’t go, they miss something, they might be caught up in a subject, um whereas like math or something and learning how to do as new problem or something, then they don’t go to school that day and they go to school and the next day or a couple days later and the kids that progress in the class from that point on in doing the problem after they done learned how to do the problem and then my kid, if they don’t know about how to do it, it’s like a setback for the teacher to go double back to try to pull them forward. Some teachers are willing to do it, some teachers are not. So that leaves them lost, so when it comes down to testing and the kid don’t know cuz they haven’t caught up, cuz they don’t know how to do it, they fail so that pulls them back behind.” (Participant 10)

Table 22 (continued)

Long-term – yes	5 (23%)	5	“You can’t do nothing but a low-income job without an education so yeah.” (Participant 15)
Short-term – no	1 (5%)	1	“I’m not worried about them being able to catch up on the work because they always can.” (Participant 12 - participant responded yes and no)
Miscellaneous			
Miscellaneous – bereavement or death	4 (18%)	4	“Um well this year we had a lot of deaths in our family so they missed school a lot and then their grandmother died so they missed 8 days.” Participant 6

4.1 INFLUENCES ON SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

4.1.1 Student illness

The parents in the study provided significant insight into why their children missed school. The literature on school absenteeism suggests that the major influence on school absenteeism is student illness, a factor that many parents in the present study mentioned.

“If he’s like feeling warm or I feel like he’s running a fever I will keep him home.”

(Participant 1)

“Sometimes like she um might wake up and might have maybe a mini fever, she might throw up, breathing, may have diarrhea sometimes so it’s like um I wouldn’t send her to school like that.” (Participant 16)

A factor that was not emphasized as prominently in the literature was the impact of mental health on absenteeism at the elementary school level.

“To my kids, it’s a big deal they don’t like to miss school, they actually like school but at the same time I don’t think that emotionally they know how to deal with all of the trauma they have went through so avoidance is become someway an acceptable behavior to them where I just can’t do it today, I’ll get myself together for tomorrow.” (Participant 12)

“Like this morning I mean I might have spent an hour chasing him and then sometimes he says he’s going to poop his pants and these are all things that he knows will stall his going to school like we’ll be walking out the door and he just goes to the bathroom, knowing that that school bus is right there um and thinks it’s funny.” (Participant 21)

Challenges associated with mental illness are daunting. Individuals with mental illness are often not able to maintain employment and therefore experience a lack of meaningful daily

routines, have increased social isolation, and may be on a downward spiral to permanent disability due to their lack of occupational experience (Stuart, 2006). Based on what surfaced in the study it appears that not only do students miss school related to symptoms associated with their mental health, but also that absenteeism may be an early indicator of mental health concerns.

“I just kinda felt like she was acting out so I was kinda pushy on her like I would force her to go to school but that turned into her being like aggressive she started fighting, she started like really acting out in ways that I couldn’t understand until I took her to see a therapist and then other doctors, that’s when they were like she’s really suffering from depression being as though that’s why she acting out like this all of a sudden, and her grades dropped and everything.” (Participant 1)

Several parents described battles that happen with their children in the morning. Despite the parents’ desire to get their child to school, they may literally be fighting with their child to get them up, dressed, and prepared to leave. In many cases, these difficulties lead to a missed bus or the parent deciding that the child will not do well in school if they go with this mindset.

“It’s usually a struggle to get him out of the house, it’s a struggle to get him out of the bed. I mean there’s days that I brush his teeth in bed because he won’t get up for nothing.” (Participant 21)

Past research does not indicate that student mental health is a major factor influencing student absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). Results from this study differ in that parents cite symptoms of anxiety, depression, and conduct problems as reasons why their children frequently miss school. A possible explanation is that symptoms of mental illness surface while children

are young and are manifested in school refusal behavior before an actual diagnosis is made, thus masking the connection between student mental health and absenteeism.

Parents indicated that when their children are dealing with mental illness, stress, or anxiety related to what they may face at school, it can be challenging to get their children up and out of the house in the morning. Behavior may range from pretending they are asleep, to not getting dressed in a timely manner, to physical aggression toward the parent. This behavior is referred to as school refusal behavior and can be difficult to address (Kearney, 2008).

“I take out his stuff at night we’ll take out two outfits. He’ll still get up, the one with autism and ADHD, he’ll still get up and once he’s fully dressed and sometimes he’ll whine about what he has on and his bus could be out there beeping and I’m like in here going crazy cuz I’m like you have to get on your bus. I cannot get you to school where it’s at. I need you to get on your bus and he’s like I’m not going to school. You have to go to school like no matter how calm you are how nice you try to talk to the child, to really, you know convince them to get out the door, sometimes it just doesn’t, it doesn’t work. The kids have emotion. They go through things and I really don’t think the schools take that into consideration.” (Participant 1)

4.1.2 Won’t make it through the day

Parents are often in the position of having to decide if they get their children to school, will they be able to remain in school for the entire day. For many parents this creates a hardship because they may not be able to leave work without a penalty. Parents cited reasons including weather, medication management, bullying, and challenging moods as reasons why they were unsure if

their child would be able to stay in school for a full day. This resulted either in children staying home altogether or with a caregiver for the day.

“They’re like grumpy they’re like sluggish, you know it’s hard to get em dressed, they’re just not in the mood. No one really wants to send their kid to school in that condition because you’re going to get phone calls.” (Participant 1)

Schools are in fact often not equipped to deal with student illness (e.g., many only have a nurse one or two days per week) or moods that may spiral downward and result in behavior that may lead to mid-day suspensions. As a result, there may be times when parents will need to come and get their child. For parents who may have transportation challenges, less flexible schedules, or work hourly versus salaried positions (often the case in poor neighborhoods), the option to retrieve a child in the middle of the day is not possible. Staying out of school becomes the alternative.

“He’s missed school because he has a concussion and he gets migraines daily um and he was hospitalized twice for, from the concussions so (pause) he has a hard time maintaining throughout the school day focusing um just being able to maintain and manage his headaches when he’s in school so he’s often sent home or I keep him home.” (Participant 9)

4.1.3 It’s not going to be a good day

An unexpected relationship emerged related to school climate and student absenteeism. Several parents indicated that they made deliberate decisions to keep their children home in an effort to contribute to a positive school climate. Parents indicated that if they sent their child to school in

a particular state of mind, that they knew it was not going to be a good day, not only for their child but for the school overall.

Parents seem to define a good school day in multiple ways. The first is related to their child's potential for productivity. If there are impediments to their full engagement, parents may choose to keep their child at home.

"It's hard on a parent as well sometimes at least for me to make the decision okay do I send you to school and you not be productive throughout the day just so you're there, just be a body in a seat or do I just you stay home and try to rest." (Participant 9)

"They're sad um sometimes they're depressed and when they are not in a good space where I feel they would be productive in school I don't force them to go." (Participant 12)

The second definition of good day is related to the impact that their child could have on the overall school climate. Parents seemed quite cognizant of their child's mood or physical appearance in the morning and determined from this information whether to send them to school.

"My child he has a behavior problem so most of the time he's not in school it's because he got suspended or he's just having one of them little days where he can't focus and it's like I'm not going to send you to school and let you take it out on them people, I'm not going to do that so you stay home you take your medicine here, and then you'll try again tomorrow." (Participant 17)

There were also parents who indicated that based on information about what might be going on at school that they would keep their children home because it was not going to be a good day for others. This was most often related to beliefs that there might be fights or other negative activities at school.

“I talk to a lot of parents so if I get a parent that say well this person is supposed to be going to the school to fight this person, I won’t send my kids.” (Participant 17)

“Because it becomes a safety involved, you know, kids know what’s going to happen before it happens, because they in the midst of the commotion of everything and everything is being hidden from the teachers and the school until the outburst occurs and like some kids will say I’m not going to school today because they know that un John Brown and Hoot the Flute is going to fight today.” (Participant 10)

4.1.4 Transportation

Student transportation, and specifically problems with busing, has been cited as a major contributor to school absenteeism, and for parents in this study, this was no exception (Deitrick et al., 2015). Transportation as a barrier to school attendance was mentioned numerous times by parents and in various contexts including when children change schools mid-year and it takes well over a week for a new bus route to be established. For parents without transportation this meant that their children did not attend school. In these instances, it appears that a lack of resources (i.e., an alternate means of transportation to get their child to school) or a lack of agency (i.e., this issue was outside of their control and as a result their child will miss school) contributed to the absence.

“Because if her van doesn’t get, pick her up then that means I have to take the boys to school late or either not take them at all and so I’m either choosing between what kids to take to school.” (Participant 16)

The following quotation is from a parent whose child was suspended from the bus for behavior. This suspension for him meant multiple days out of school.

“She said well Ms. [parent name], you know we love you but he is keep cutting up, he won’t keep his head out the window, he won’t keep his hand out the window, he’s always fighting on the bus, you always putting your hands on another child, this that and the third, gave him one more chance, she said this is your last chance and he’ll be off the bus, how you going to get to school? Then he’ll be out of school for all them days.”
(Participant 11)

4.1.5 Student interactions

Interaction with other students was a prominent factor for parents in this study. Several of the parents interviewed, 7 of 22, indicated that they had kept their children home due to a negative interaction with another student. Some described absences as one or two days while two parents shared how their children had missed more than two full months of school while waiting for an issue related to another student to be resolved by the school.

Subject (S): The second incident of him coming home saying they’re bullying him, which was probably started the second week, started getting worse the third week, that’s when the second incident happened of the fighting . . . we had calls in to [name], we would play phone tag and

Interviewer (I): Okay so back up for me so there was, there was the fight, and then after the first fight did he indicate he doesn’t want to go to school?

S: It wasn’t that he was indicating that he wasn’t going to school it was the anxiety so he’s in therapy now as of the fight he’s in therapy, he’s talking to the therapist and the therapist is like oh my god his anxiety is so bad I think you need to pull him from [school

name] so I'm playing phone tag for 2 months, month and a half 2 months with [name], we cannot catch each other so that we can get the names of the boys and stuff so now . . .

I: Okay so walk me through it, he was in the fight, so then the day after the fight, did he go to school?

S: Yes, yes, he only went to school probably about 3 days after that fight and every day he went to school, they were calling because he had threw up on himself or he was just shaking so much in school the anxiety level was so high they were having me come get him . . .

I: And so did you at that point, I know you were saying you were playing phone tag with the counselor, is that when you started calling kinda what's going on here?

S: I had told her that there was an issue, there was a fight in her voicemail, I said this is [child's name] mother I said we have a problem to where my son's anxiety is so high that I have him in therapy that this boy has been bullying my son so much that he, I can't get him to even go to school and even when we're walking him to the bus stop, I mean he gets up, he gets dressed we're on the way to school and then right before we get to the bus stop it starts, the shaking the sweating and then of course you end up bringing him back home. The one day my fiancée put him on the bus, he had threw up, he put him on the bus, halfway through the school had called telling me to come get him, he had thrown up all over his shirt. So he had only went to school about 3 days after the incident and he was home almost 65 days." (Participant 14)

4.1.6 Parents getting it together: “I’m really man enough to say that I haven’t been doing what I need to do” (Participant 2)

The interviews helped shape an understanding of the challenges faced by parents when trying to get their children to school. They also provided insight on a possible disconnect between parents’ understanding of the importance of daily school attendance and how their behavior is a critical factor.

Although only a few parents provided responses related to their perceptions of how chronic absenteeism would impact their children in the long-term, all parents interviewed were clear on the negative consequences of school absenteeism. Interestingly though one of the most significant findings of the study was that many parents simultaneously indicated that they understood the detrimental effects of their child missing school but also made decisions that resulted in them being absent frequently. Interviews revealed themes including lack of social support, lack of agency or problem solving skills, and not prioritizing getting their children to school. Several parents indicated that their children would miss school if they, the parent, were ill or did not have a way to get their child to school. This seemed to reveal a lack of social supports, or a network that faced similar challenges (e.g., maybe friends are without cars as well). Three parents, 14% of the participants, mentioned problems that their children had at school and, because they were not able to communicate with someone at the school, their children missed significant amounts of days. Table 22 provides specific quotations from parents, who in the same interview, indicated that they realized the significant consequences of absenteeism, yet made decisions that attributed to their child missing school frequently.

Table 23. *Consequences of Absenteeism and Parent Behavior*

Participant	Impact of Absenteeism	Parent Action	Hypothesized Theme
Participant 2	“You know he’s falling behind, you know he’s missing a lot of classes, so he missing a lot of important things.”	“On a Thursday I can’t go out partying you know cuz he still gotta be at school Friday and you know that really play a part on me cutting down my partying and enjoying myself.”	Not Prioritizing Responsibilities
Participant 5	“Cuz my daughter she basically when she flunked 2 nd grade she didn’t know... she didn’t know nothing; she only did maybe a month and a half of kindergarten.”	Subject (S): She teaching my daughter about every little thing that she didn’t need to know about so I took her out of the school all together.” Interviewer (I): Okay so then she didn’t finish kindergarten... S: She didn’t finish kindergarten	Lack of Agency
Participant 8	“They’re not learning, they’re not getting their you know, nourishment for their brains that day.”	“I usually don’t get up and walk him down there because I have a one year old also so I usually don’t walk him down there if it’s cold outside I will not walk him down there.”	Narrow Social Network or Not Prioritizing Responsibilities
Participant 11	“They feel left behind when they be out of school a lot of time, for a lot, that makes them not interested no more they feel like they so far behind, they can’t catch up.”	“One is here right now he got an appointment at 3:00, he don’t get out school till 3:00 but I have no way to go get him so he’s upstairs. . . cuz I don’t have a ride to go get him. I’m not walking up there so he just be out for the whole day and he’s excused for the whole day with a note, they ain’t going to put no time on there, it’s for social security it ain’t for no doctor’s appointment, this is, this is needed, I have to go or they’re going to cut him off, so he ain’t going.”	Narrow Social Network

Table 23 (continued)

Participant 20	“Um I think that they won’t have the right education to... they might know the life style that I teach them but not the educational lifestyle that they need to survive out you know in this world today.”	<p>Subject (S): They missed quite a few school days due to my operation I just got my knee operated on so they’re missing a lot of school.</p> <p>Interviewer (I): Alright so talk to me about reasons why, so I know you said you had knee surgery. Right, okay so tell me you know how that kinda connects with them missing school?</p> <p>S: Because I can’t, I’m not able to get get them up and get them off to school and everything like that so you know my knee problems been a real big thing and then especially the help that I need, I can’t be in the house too long by myself cuz my knee surgery so that’s another reason why they been missing.</p>	Narrow Social Network
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Most parents did not talk about long-term implications of chronic absenteeism. One parent however reflected on her experience with being chronically absent and made a connection to how absenteeism may affect her children.

“Long term if they keep missing school, it’s going to be a pattern like how I was like it’s going to go from missing to skipping to you just don’t care no more, like you don’t have to feel that you have to get up to go to school, you’re just like “f” school, I don’t care for school no more, cuz I was like that. Like I missed so much of school because I had other stuff to do like I was sitting at home taking care of my sister and my brother so it was like once I did get the chance to go to school and be in school it was like what am I here for like I don’t need none of this like so it was like I got used to being home. And when it was time for me to go out on my own it was like I don’t care for this, I don’t care about school I don’t need school, what do I need school for, so I think that that would play a part in my kids if they keep missing school like the short term goal is they’re not learning, they’re not getting their grades up . . .like my son he brought home his report card, he had 2 Ds like from reading and math, how do you get a D in reading. I don’t understand but, and then she said it’s because of the absences. So we gotta bring his absences up and make sure he’s in school in order for him to get the grades.” (Participant 17)

This parent had a clear understanding of how her personal absenteeism had shifted her level of engagement with school. She had missed school to provide childcare for siblings but when she returned did not see the relevance of what she was learning. Her child is chronically absent and she has connected this with his poor academic performance. She indicates that they

need to address his attendance but there is a clear lack of agency on her part. She decides when her kindergartner misses school.

4.1.7 Social consequences

Social consequences for being chronically absent was an unexpected finding. When children missed numerous days of school, they often either missed important interactions with peers or were questioned by peers about their absences.

Interviewer (I): So what impact do you feel like the absences from school have had?

Subject (S): I think socially cuz he miss out on interacting with the other kids and participating in class and that's you know mostly the big thing I think it impacts. His grade wise he's on top of thing but I think on the missing out on interacting with other people it it it hurts him you know cuz you know you gotta interact with people for you're your skill can get better you know... it takes practice on that too ya know to for a child to be able to speak up for themselves and tryna put him into shyness. (Participant 2)

"His grades are, have dropped um it's stressful for him to know that he's missing so much school um and has so much work to catch up on um he, and I think it's stressful socially because the kids are always like why aren't you ever here?" (Participant 9)

4.1.8 Death in the family

Bereavement was a theme that was captured under the miscellaneous category. It was specifically coded as a reason associated with absenteeism by four participants.

“This year we had a lot of deaths in our family so they missed school a lot when their grandmother died so they missed 8 days.” (Participant 6)

“The last time he missed school my grandson, like last week, my oldest grandson got killed.” (Participant 13)

4.2 THE SCHOOL’S RESPONSE

Chronic absenteeism is a problem. When children are not in school, they may not be learning, which has implications for many areas of their lives, now and in the future. In conducting interviews, the researcher was careful not to blame parents, rather to focus the dialogue in the direction of joint problem solving. Of the parents interviewed, 12 (55%) had specific suggestions for ways that schools could address the problem of absenteeism.

In this section, I will address parents’ perspectives on what happens to their child when they are chronically absent. Parents shared insight on how teachers respond, how their child is treated and the presence or absence of any allowances made for them.

Many parents indicated that their children were absent due to unfortunate life events. In several instances, parents expressed a desire for the school personnel to be more compassionate.

“I don’t you know feel the need to keep telling the teachers you know the problem and the issues my um children are having because frankly I don’t see any compassion here I don’t see any trying to help I don’t see them offering any services to us so why pull additional people into your personal life when there’s, there’s no reason for it, it’s not going to change anything.” (Participant 12)

“A lot of times when they missing school you know the teachers they ain’t acknowledging it, they know that the child was suspended or been absent and I think they just try to go head and bypass that anyway and they try to take it out on the student and like that’s your fault or you know that’s your problem, I see it happen a lot, you know, I think they need to uh probably find a better way to deal with the students.” (Participant 22)

Helping teachers understand the context of many of their students’ lives may help to create a more compassionate culture. It may be helpful to remind teachers that most often, when elementary students are absent from school, it was not their decision to stay home. Childs (2015) discussed the United Way’s *Be There* Campaign as a tool to help educate teachers about the problems of chronic absenteeism. In addition to these efforts, compassion would mean understanding many of the barriers that children face when trying to get to school and working to address these barriers proactively.

Several parents shared that they felt that the school generally, and teachers specifically, should take more responsibility in getting children caught up when they return from an absence.

Subject (S): I just feel like the teacher, knowing that she has a medical condition, um should take the time to explain the work to her because she missed it instead of just sticking her in a group, I think he should make sure she understands the material first that he went over with her and then stick her in a group; like I’m not asking for special treatment, but I am in a way because it’s not her fault she diabetic and I feel like she’s being punished for that; I feel like she should get some extra time because she has a medical condition so (pause)

Interviewer (I): And have you asked that? I mean what has been the response?

S: I have asked that and he told me that she never stressed that she needed help. But she's a 10-year-old um who's already having a hard time dealing with the fact that she is diabetic, feeling different and this is a new school, so she's probably not comfortable going to the teacher telling him you know I need help. Although I've spoken to her about it, I just feel like as an educator he should automatically realize that you know she needs a little extra attention. (Participant 3)

Despite education being the common goal of parents, students, and teachers, there were parents who did not feel that teachers were proactive in providing make up work. The onus was on the student to make the request for work.

“Her grades is like, they was going down because she didn't ask for the work and she did miss days, you know or I guess she thought like her said her grade was just going to stay the same, she didn't ask well can you help me with my, do I have any make up work or do we have homework yesterday or what was what you know... she's kinda shy in a way you know so I told her you got to ask your teacher, you know, they're not going to volunteer to you, that's not their job, you know, it's on you to ask them, you know, I wasn't here yesterday do we have any homework or you know the lesson or whatever you got to ask them cuz if you don't ask them, they're not going to tell you.” (Participant 6)

In addition to examining the reasons parents gave for why their children missed school, another goal of the study was to determine unexpected influences and most importantly unique interventions that parents/guardians identify that have improved or could improve their child's school attendance.

Parents had very distinct thoughts about the interventions that they thought would be helpful in promoting attendance and those that were viewed as negative or a hindrance. Increasing or instituting systems for communication were mentioned specifically. Table 23 is a summary of parent-suggested interventions.

Table 24. *Parent Recommendations for Absenteeism Interventions*

Participant	Parent Suggestion	Intervention
Participant 1	“I would say if anything like maybe once a report period send memos home as far as to like surveys to like get a feel of what goes on in households because sometimes like I said things happen that are not in our control. Some parents wake up and their lights is just off you know and you’re really not thinking on top like oh my god let me hurry up and get my baby to school you’re like thinking oh my god I gotta get these lights back on you know. I look a lot of times especially in single parent homes I feel like there’s so much other things that’s overwhelming that you kinda lose track of really some of the things that’s best for your kids.”	Home/family condition survey
Participant 5	“Call, oh your child isn’t in school today, do you have your child with you, what’s going on, why aren’t they here?”	Calls on the day of absence
Participant 7	“I know the school’s busy, there’s too many kids to call every single parent when they’re not in school but maybe for the one like [child’s name] doesn’t go and its problems... call me and I know he’s not there and then even if I go and try to find him, cus I know where he’s at, I know where he could be, go get his ass and bring him to school even that day.”	Calls on the day of absence
Participant 9	“When he is there you know that he’s behind, get him at lunch time, bring him to you, you know she he can finish, you can make sure he understands what he’s missing um or just help him to catch up on something or just give him the quiet space to work, just accommodating him and his sickness at this current time I guess would be something that they could do a little bit more of.”	Tutoring/provision for extra assistance with schoolwork

Table 24 (continued)

Participant 22	“Okay for instance like when they miss school and stuff like that I think that they should um take a few kids and kinda tutor them for them and speed them up you know to where they need to be on the days they miss I think that I think that I think that, that’ll help out a lot.”	Tutoring/provision for extra assistance with schoolwork
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Parents stressed the need for immediacy of calls, especially if students have missed many days. A parent of a middle school student said she wished that the school had called on the days her son was absent (see Table 23). Parents are responsible for their child's attendance at school. If the parent sends their child to school yet they do not arrive, it is important for many reasons to contact the parent immediately. Many parents have work schedules that preclude them from being home when their children leave for school. And as many parents, send their children to catch a bus or walk to school, and unless notified would have no way of knowing that their child did not arrive at school safely. For children who are exhibiting early school refusal behavior this is a significant gap (the lack of immediate communication between the school and home), where children can slip, virtually unnoticed until absenteeism has reached chronic proportions.

Parents mentioned a desire to have additional services available in schools, both to reduce the time that children miss school for medical and mental health appointments but also to provide services on an as needed basis so that time in school can be maximized.

“Maybe as soon as they got in the door go straight to talk to a therapist or the counselor inside the school so that way she's not missing school, she's still there as far as her attendance and also she's in the building so that way once they get done talking to her, she can go right into maybe them starting to catch her up on her work instead of her just missing like a whole day at home.” (Participant 1)

“I think counseling services should be brought into school more. They um, and even set up you know set up an evening program where parents and kids can come in and get counseling so they won't have to be pulled out of class or miss school.” (Participant 12)

A parent whose daughter had a medical condition that caused physical disfigurement was adamant that schools needed to do more to educate teachers and students about medical

conditions that children face. He indicated that his daughter missed 30 days of school, not because of her illness but because other students teased her.

“She didn’t want to go back cuz people was constantly teasing her, you know cuz she completely went bald at one time like all of her hair fell out her head, her eyebrows, her eyelashes, she had no hair at all so she was going through a lot.” (Participant 22)

He also indicated that it was difficult to get leniency from the school related to the uniform policy, so this exacerbated the problem of absenteeism.

“When we was actually going out to school snapping out or whatever they was just like well what do you want us to do? Like what would you do if it was your child? You know [school name] was giving her problems about wearing head scarfs and this and that because of the dress code we went through the ringer about that too, . . . they started letting us wear the knitted hats . . . to cover her head all the way up and it was just, it was just a lot.” (Participant 22)

This parent suggested that schools increase their capacity to address student differences. This is salient because of his daughter’s experience but also because there are many students in schools who are treated poorly because of differences in innumerable characteristics. If schools do not address behaviors that ostracize, children who are victims of bullying or teasing will quite often refuse to attend school, disengage while they are there or engage in negative behavior in an attempt to protect themselves physically or emotionally.

“I think the school should definitely um they should come up with different ways to deal with these kids deal with these kids in schools that is different cuz you got all these kids that are different no matter if it’s a sickness or mental illness or... they all going to get something different, I think they all want a fair shot.” (Participant 22)

Neighborhood safety is likely one of the most difficult factors to address related to school absenteeism. The location of schools and the district's policies about busing may mean that students face challenges with getting to school safely. Two parents noted specifically that the start time for Westinghouse as a concern because their children have to walk a distance in the dark.

“She had to wake up early but it would be dark outside; she was walking, there was nobody, no other kids around her, the closest kid would be meeting here like right here on East Liberty Boulevard that's still a distance from her walking from here to there in this type of neighborhood. Like early in the morning there are guys standing out on the corner already and all the time you see on the news where kids is just popping up missing so if you hear a kids missing up Lincoln how comfortable can I be letting my 12 year old walk when she's already built kinda like she's 15, 16. That's nervousness for a mom so no I don't feel comfortable with saying oh okay I'm not trying to get into trouble with the law so you gotta be out my house at 6 o'clock while its dark to be at school on time versus saving my daughter's life and at that moment I can't just go to school every day, there was times I did try to fight it to get her a bus or a bus pass and I kept explaining to them, they kept denying me they kept denying me.” (Participant 1)

“I feel though when a child is young, if they are where they got them started at the 7th grade at Westinghouse, they should give them a bus pass, you know, and, till maybe they get to the age when they can, you know and when they that young, you know cuz a lot of you know a lot of the young girls they be walking by their self and you never know what might happen, too many things happen today out there you know and that's my main concern.” (Participant 6)

Several parents also shared that neighborhood violence may influence their decision to send their child to school on certain days. Interestingly the barrier may be actual neighborhood violence or the aftermath or things associated with living in a community impacted by violence.

“We got a lot of parents beefing outside of school and they bring it to the school so it’s like I’m not sending my kid and I know that this is going to happen or... and then we got parents that be like I’m not sending my kid to the school because you know they emergency broadcast and you know how they do the lockdown, we be having a lot of them lately like I say for the last past 2 weeks at least 4 times. I got 4 different calls because there is shooting around and I like how they shut the school down but I feel that though if it’s not in the school or if it don’t got nothing to do with the school ya’ll shouldn’t shut the school down cuz it’s discouraging parents like when they get that phone call saying there has been an emergency and the school’s on lockdown. The first thing they’re thinking is go get my kid out of that school and don’t send them back. Like I’ve been having a lot of parents telling me that like I’m not sending my kid back to school because of the emergency thing that they had. It’s too many shootings going on. (Participant 17)

“I think that it’s become part of the culture really that um we have a high absentee rate because we’re in a neighborhood that has a lot of problems. The neighborhood we’re in has a lot of violence issues, they um the children talk among themselves um my children have shared with me that other children have had court dates with their parents um other children have had to miss school because someone got killed or got shot or just died in their family. (Participant 12)

The study provided considerable new insight on the factors that influence parent decisions to send their children to school and their perspectives on what could be done to help address the problem of chronic absenteeism. The final chapter will provide recommendations for next steps.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chronic absenteeism is a national problem. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 7 million students miss more than a month of school each year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Given that students chronically absent are also more likely to drop out of school, to engage in criminal behavior, to have limited options for employment and higher education, and even to have poorer health outcomes, the high prevalence of chronic absenteeism has critical implications for our nation (DeBaun & Roc, 2013; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Problems related to absenteeism are also felt locally. With chronic absenteeism rates hovering around 30% for several local elementary schools and more than 60% for a few local high schools, addressing this issue is of critical importance for our nation and the city of Pittsburgh (A+ Schools, 2016).

Research on school absenteeism is clear on the connection between absences and school performance, regardless of whether students miss school due to illness, appointments, mental health issues, family emergencies, or lack of transportation. Missing one or two days of school may not be a major concern, but all the parents interviewed for this study had children who, in the first semester of the 2016-2017 school year, had missed more than nine days of school.

The purpose of this study was to examine parent perspectives on chronic absenteeism and to investigate their recommendations for addressing this issue. Specifically, I examined the reasons that parents/guardians of elementary and middle school aged children gave for decisions that cause their children to be absent from school. Additionally, through in-depth face-to-face

interviews, I explored the extent to which parent/guardians connected early school absences with later academic performance and life outcomes. Finally, I sought to understand parents' perspectives on what schools can do to intervene.

The study focused on chronic absenteeism in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood. Homewood is predominately African American (96%) and more than 80% of the children in the three schools that comprise the Westinghouse 6-12 feeder pattern are poor, as indicated by their eligibility to receive free/reduced price lunch. The chronic absenteeism rates in this community are high: Faison 27%, Lincoln 28%, and Westinghouse 63%. The study also focused on elementary and middle school parents, as it is important to attempt to discover the factors that contribute to absenteeism early in a child's school career; once patterns of absenteeism are established, they can be very difficult to remediate when students get older. Student absenteeism has significant academic and social implications; if students are not feeling successful and connected to school during the formative years of their school experience they may be more likely to disengage completely when they get older.

The 22 participants in this study all had children who were chronically absent. They represent a unique perspective, so it was therefore important to present the findings and recommendations in a manner that is congruent with the cultural context of the community and in a manner that will best serve its parents and children.

This study answered four questions related to chronic absenteeism from the parent/guardian perspective. First, the reasons why students are chronically absent. The parents/guardians in this study echoed much of what was found in the literature. Student illness, negative interactions with other students, neighborhood violence, and many other more obvious factors contribute to student absenteeism. Participants in this study also revealed several unique

factors that may be specifically linked to socioeconomic status, having a limited social network or experiencing the realities of living with a child prior to a mental health diagnosis or early intervention.

Most participants were low income single parents. This may have contributed to the challenges that these parents experienced when attempting to get their children to school daily. Parents who had a limited social network seemed to have more barriers related to problem solving to get their children to school. If their children missed the bus, there were no alternatives; the children miss school. If they were ill, there was no one to help get children ready or to attend to their (the parent's physical needs); the children miss school. Given the strong relationship between early school chronic absenteeism and later academic and life outcomes this is a critically important issue.

The second question that was answered related to the mediating factors that influence parents'/guardians' decisions regarding school attendance. This study was novel in that it asked parents how they make the decision to keep their child at home, as opposed to taking the perspective that student absenteeism just happens. Parents revealed that they made decisions to send their child to school based on factors including whether they felt their child would have a productive day, would the school environment be safe or would their child contribute positively to the overall school climate.

Parents were very deliberate in their analysis of whether to send their child or not. If children went to school, but could not stay, what implications would this have for the parent's employment if they had to leave work early. If siblings had an appointment during the day that may result in the parent not being home to meet the child after school, missing school to attend the appointment was a solution when alternative childcare provisions were not available.

Transportation as a mediating factor was also explored deeply in the study. Previous research cited transportation as a factor contributing to school absenteeism in the sense that there were challenges with school buses or parents lacking transportation to get their children to school. Parents in this study provided additional insight as they talked about not sending their children to school because if something happened at school (physical violence or their child became ill) that they would not be able to retrieve their child. One parent mentioned that weather forecasts influenced his decision to send his children to school because he did not want them to be stranded. Exploration of alternative modes of transportation may be worthwhile in helping parents see that missing a day of school need not be the only solution when problems such as these arise.

Several parents stated that they were unable to solve a problem at the school, due to either failed communication efforts or the issue not being resolved in a manner that satisfied the parent, and therefore refused to send their child to school. They were trying to protect their child from a problem, most often a threat to their physical or emotional safety, but instead created another problem, chronic absenteeism and often academic failure. This approach to problem solving may be unique to low-income minorities. Due to the power differential that exists between the school and the parent, the parent may adopt a 'wait for' response to addressing a problem as opposed to a more proactive stance. This response highlights the fact that there are groups of people that may feel disempowered when interacting with institutions or those in authority. Parents talked about the need for schools to understand their perspectives and situations. A step beyond this might be to have schools teach parents how to advocate on behalf of their child. Helping parents understand that their child is a customer of the school and that

schools exists to serve them (the service of learning, knowledge and values transmission) may shift the perspective that parents must wait passively for schools to respond to their concerns.

The third question explored was whether parents/guardians understand the impact that missing school has on their child's academic and life outcomes. Without a doubt, parents expressed an understanding that there is a connection between absenteeism and current school performance. What was less clear was whether parents/guardians could translate poor test performance or low grades to disengagement with school later and long-term academic failure. Whether their child was in kindergarten or 8th grade, parents seemed optimistic that they could turn their child's pattern of chronic absenteeism around so that there would be no long-term negative consequences.

Parent education on the connection between absenteeism and school success should be emphasized in multiple venues. Most learning that occurs in schools is cumulative. What children miss today, will determine what they are prepared to master tomorrow. If children do not feel successful academically they are more likely to disengage from school later. Absenteeism contributes to this problem.

The final question explored was about the interventions that parents felt would be most effective in reducing chronic absenteeism. Interestingly, parents responded to this question in one of three ways. Some parents/guardians interpreted the question as what should be done in response to chronic absenteeism. They talked about schools having a more compassionate response when children are absent, putting systems in place to help address missed opportunities for learning and increasing communication between the school and home when students are absent to help understand the root cause for the absence and ideally working with the family to solve the barrier to daily attendance.

A second interpretation of the question was that the responsibility to address absenteeism belongs with the parent. Primarily parents are the ones who decide to keep their children at home at the elementary and middle school level. Parents must take their parental responsibilities seriously. Even though it may be cold outside, fatigue or illness are present, or other things such as appointments, are important, school attendance must be a priority. Schools are responsible for learning when children arrive. It is the parents' responsibility to make sure their children get to school.

The third interpretation was what interventions, positive or negative, can be implemented to reduce chronic absenteeism. Students' mental health was mentioned numerous times as being a barrier to school attendance. Several parents mentioned the need to have additional mental health services available at school to help provide as needed or ongoing support to students. For parents who indicated that they assessed their child's mental state daily and used this as a factor to determine whether or not they would send them to school, having an onsite mental health provider seemed like a viable solution. If parents were confident that their child would receive services that would enable them to have a positive day, parents would be more likely to send their child to school.

Parents mentioned communication as an intervention. If schools intervened immediately with questions about why students were absent and what can be done to help, parents seemed to feel that daily absences would not become chronic.

According to the participants, the most prevalent intervention used is letters from the school threatening referral to a truancy office or magistrate intervention. Parents who mentioned these interventions, indicated that they did not like them, but that they were somewhat effective. Parents talked about not wanting to be fined and attempting to address attendance issues before

another court hearing was scheduled. Although parents did not seem to like being on the receiving end of these letters, those who mentioned them were able to talk about specific things they were doing to prevent having to appear in court again.

School attendance is linked to school performance. This study helped identify connections that may be valuable from the school's perspective and may inform decisions about professional development, school communication policies, and personnel allocation.

In addition to garnering details about the barriers that parents face when deciding whether their child will attend school for the day, the interview protocol included a question that asked parents to indicate specifically what would be most effective in helping them get their child to school each day. These responses are summarized below to create a set of recommendations aimed at improving current school and community based strategies to reduce absenteeism.

5.1 LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the study design were addressed specifically in chapter 3. Briefly, the most important limitations include the following: first, given the small and nonrandomly selected sample used in this study, the results are not generalizable beyond the parents who participated in the study; second, because the data were collected at a single point in time, it is not possible to definitively establish causality. In addition to these limitations, the results suggest that a more comprehensive approach to addressing the problem of chronic absenteeism is needed if change is to occur. The problems faced by parents were multifaceted and could not be explored fully in one interview nor could they be addressed by a simple change in school policy, additional school personnel, or more significant magistrate fines. Addressing the issues presented will require

parent education, family intervention, teacher professional development, and a thorough examination of school policies that may inadvertently contribute to students missing school. An in-depth investigation of these issues was beyond the scope of the present study.

5.2 INTERVENTIONS

Participants in the study were aware that chronic absenteeism is a problem. Moreover, in many cases they could identify how they contribute to the issue and could suggest interventions that might help them to increase their child's attendance. One suggested intervention that multiple parents expressed was for schools to communicate with them about absences to determine why their students were out of school.

Parents also mentioned the need for *immediate* communication with their child's school about attendance. This might be an automated connection between school attendance software and parent cell phones or email. When students are absent, a message would be sent to parents immediately with a follow up request – “Do you need someone from the school to contact you?” “Will your child be in school tomorrow?” This might help to identify illness, bereavement, or family problems that might or might not be addressed in a day. This approach would also alert parents unaware that their children are absent.

Schools often push the critical attendance period (i.e., the time in the day when attendance reporting occurs) back to later in the day so that students who are tardy will not be reported as absent. Unfortunately, this means that parent communication is also delayed if it occurs on the day of the absence. Parents and students also know that they are marked absent if they arrive after this time. This policy was interpreted by several parents in the study as

conveying a belief that attendances did not matter if their child arrived after that time, as they were already officially absent.

A few years ago, the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development began some targeted efforts to address chronic absenteeism in a few schools in Pittsburgh (Childs, 2015). These strategies included attendance related phone calls and automated calls (similar to those that go out for 2-hour delays) and text messages. It is possible that efforts such as these could be replicated in Homewood.

A desire for schools to understand what was going on in the lives of the family and with their child was mentioned by multiple parents, with the word compassion being used specifically. To understand more about compassion, further study is required. It would seem that teachers would be concerned about their students' attendance, as it has direct implications for academic success, a measure for which they are professionally accountable. It is not clear how this should be communicated and how catching students up and providing additional time for instruction can occur when the problem of absenteeism is so pronounced.

An area worth further study is effective communication with parents, from the parent perspective. If all school assignments were posted on a website, this may help parents access them and contribute to the task of getting their child caught up when they miss school. Parents would need to indicate if they have immediate access to the Internet and if they would actively partner with the school in this instructional task. It is not clear who would be responsible for addressing missed assignments when parents may be struggling with life issues such as getting their electricity turned on.

Although several parents mentioned the school taking additional responsibility for getting children caught up when they miss school, it is not clear logistically how this would work, as there is the question of student supervision by someone who would be familiar enough with the curriculum in all areas to provide instruction to students. This would also have to take place outside of the regular school day; otherwise, students would be missing additional instruction while catching up on what they had missed.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The United Way is currently engaged in a local campaign to address chronic absenteeism. Community billboards share messages about the implications of missing school and community partners are helping to raise awareness through school attendance challenges. A strategy for communicating the issue of chronic absenteeism with all institutions who serve children should be explored. Students miss school because health and social service appointments may only be available during school hours. The educational and societal implications of missing school should be shared with those who provide services to children to encourage more flexible scheduling. Even those who are intervening on behalf of children who are absent should be reminded of the importance of timely intervention. A parent whose child was absent due to a school issue, and was hoping that magistrate intervention would help bring resolution to the issue had her attendance hearing continued due to an administrative issue at the court. As a result, her child continued to miss school while she was waiting for the new hearing date.

Bullying is an issue that was mentioned by several parents in this study as a factor that impacted their children's attendance. It would be valuable to increase teacher and counselor

awareness of the connection between bullying and school attendance, and to follow up with students who miss school frequently with specific questions about interactions with other students. School or district campaigns to raise awareness about the negative impact of bullying may be helpful in giving bullied students a voice and tools to use to address conflict with peers. If students feel empowered, they may be less likely to avoid school.

Counseling interventions that may be helpful include, not only those that target working with chronically absent students and their families, but also those that help students to reduce stress and anxiety and that provide strategies for problem solving. These interventions may include approaches such as mindfulness training and solution-focused techniques. If students learn to reduce these symptoms and address issues proactively, they may be less likely to request days home from school.

Children who exhibited school refusal behaviors made the task of getting to school very difficult for parents. Some of these behaviors may have been associated with mental health issues that were yet to be diagnosed. It is therefore imperative that root causes of this type of behavior (e.g., refusing to get dressed, having a tantrum, deliberately missing the bus, etc.) are addressed at an early age and necessary supports are provided to parents.

Transportation was mentioned repeatedly. Although it may not be economically feasible for schools to offer a second round of transportation when children have missed a bus, making sure that buses arrive at the scheduled time (measures of increased accountability for private transportation companies since the district has outsourced its transportation contracts), or expeditiously establishing new routes when children move would help. It might also be worthwhile to explore options such as providing parents with a limited number of vouchers to transport their children to school using services such as ACCESS.

ACCESS is door-to-door, advance reservation, shared-ride transportation provided throughout Allegheny County and to destinations in adjoining counties within 1.5 miles of the Allegheny County line. As a coordinator of paratransit service throughout Allegheny County, ACCESS offers several special discount programs for individual riders, as well as providing service for groups, human service agencies and other organizations that purchase transportation for their clients (Retrieved from <http://www.portauthority.org/paac/RiderServices/ACCESSParatransit.aspx>).

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The school administrators of the three schools whose parents were included in this study were aware that this research was being conducted and expressed interest in receiving the results. The results will be shared and, ideally, a plan for follow up will be designed. This may include focus groups with parents or working with a community agency to develop or implement attendance interventions for children and their families.

Homewood Children Village (HCV) is in the formative stages of a Circles USA program. Circles is a program that uses a team approach to help move families out of poverty. Families are supported to address employment and educational challenges as well as to learn to address emergencies that so often derail efforts to get out of poverty. These efforts may be equally successful at helping parents prioritize getting their children to school.

Baby Promise is a HCV parenting program focused on teaching positive parenting skills to parents of children under two. Working with parents proactively may be very effective in

helping them build habits and a lifestyle that is conducive to promoting education within the home.

5.5 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The interviews revealed interesting perspectives on the perceived value of daily attendance. Follow-up interviews would have enhanced understanding of some responses, as well as provided detail and further clarification. I asked questions at the end of each interview if clarity was needed, but the design of the study was based on one interview with each participant. A two interview study, or an in depth case study might provide additional insight.

Beyond race, gender, and parent status (parent or guardian), I did not collect demographic information on participants. In retrospect, it would have provided additional insight to know the marital status, level of education, employment status, and income level of participants.

Conducting a pilot study prior to this study allowed me to incorporate several components that added strength to the study, such as official school documentation of the actual number of absences. Data on students' academic outcomes (e.g., grades) were not collected. Including such data may help establish a link between absenteeism and academic standing.

Parents shared that children often miss school due to death in the family. It is unclear whether absenteeism related to bereavement is more prevalent in neighborhoods characterized by violence. The aftermath of violence and its relationship to school attendance is a topic that warrants further study.

The question of parental mental health recurred in my field diary on several occasions. Further research related to the connection between the presence of mental health issues in a

family, whether parents or children themselves, and school attendance may provide additional insight on the need for early diagnosis and the inclusion of attendance goals in mental health treatment plans.

Even though all the participants in the study indicated that there were negative short-term implications to their child missing school, it was not clear that the long-term implications were taken as seriously. Although not a part of this study, it would be valuable to explore the connection between school absenteeism and overall attitudes about learning. Past research showed that children disengage from school when they are feeling academically disenfranchised (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This may lead to absenteeism.

Students' access to knowledge via technology and social media is instantaneous and is increasingly divorced from a school setting. Cyber school and online learning platforms have introduced the idea of school enrollment without being at a traditional school building. Although not explored in this study, the question of whether and how schools are adapting to this change is worth exploration as it will undoubtedly impact school attendance. Research on parent attitudes about physical school attendance and its connection to knowledge may be extremely valuable at the institutional level as decisions about planning for the delivery of educational services are made.

Tardiness and early dismissals may not be recorded as absences, as students were present for a portion of the school day, but missing school either at the beginning of the day or at the end impacts student learning. Parents may have work, transportation, or childcare challenges that affect the time their child arrives or leaves school daily. This may mean that the effects of absenteeism are underrepresented because partial day absences (i.e. late arrival and early dismissal) may not be considered.

5.6 CONCLUSION

Chronic absenteeism is a challenging problem to address because, not only are there short-term implications such as low grades, but this issue also leads to long term problems such as dropping out of school, incarceration, difficulty finding employment, and even poor health as adults. Chronic absenteeism also not only impacts the child missing school but, in schools with high absenteeism rates, the school's overall academic performance also may be affected because of the time spent reviewing content when children return to school. This makes the problem more serious because the education of children who do attend school is negatively affected even though they may be in school every day.

Through interviews with 22 parents/guardians whose children were chronically absent, this study increased our understanding about how parents make decisions to keep their children home from school based on student, family, school, and community factors and how these decisions ultimately affect their children.

Although several interventions such as The United Way's *Be There* Campaign have focused on reducing absenteeism, there has not been a targeted study of parents in Homewood and most importantly not one that seeks to understand their perspectives. This study was also unique in that it focused specifically on the parents of chronically absent children in elementary and middle school. Prior research on absenteeism has shown that patterns of absenteeism are often established in elementary school, while parents are the primary decision makers about whether their children will attend school. Therefore, intervening at this level is critical if new attendance patterns are to be established prior to children experiencing school failure or a lack of desire to attend school.

Several parents specifically noted that they did not feel the problem of absenteeism was a school issue. They shared that parents need to be held accountable for parenting responsibilities, which include getting children to school each day. Related to this, many parents were aware of how their behavior contributed to their child missing school, yet, other than magistrate fines, they did not seem to have thoughts about ways to encourage a change in their behavior.

At the school district level, one of the policies is to provide social workers, counselors, and other support staff on a per building basis. Based on the large number of concerns that arose related to mental health issues, I am hopeful that this study will at least in part help to inform the conversation about how to staff based on the mental health needs of students, including the need for early diagnosis and intervention.

Homewood has several community organizations that are actively engaged in efforts that may address issues of social support, agency or lack of prioritizing parenting responsibilities. Working with schools to refer the families of children who meet the criteria for participation and are chronically absent may be a way to address some of problems with absenteeism that may be exacerbated by a limited social network.

For parents who lack problem solving skills it might be valuable to build into some of these programs an advocacy component. Teaching parents how to contact the school, make an appointment with a teacher, counselor, or principal, and how to use systems such as a Parent Hotline may be beneficial. If parents are successful in resolving issues or at least feel as if their concerns are being addressed, they may be less likely to remove their child from school while waiting for communication or resolution.

Chronic absenteeism is an important and challenging problem. This study provided parents' unique perspectives to understanding the problem; these critical insights have been

overlooked too long. The challenge now is for schools, organizations, and institutions concerned with children's well-being and education to work collaboratively *with* parents to address chronic school absenteeism.

APPENDIX A

PARENT/GUARDIAN PERSPECTIVES ON CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AND THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE DECISIONS TO SEND THEIR CHILD TO SCHOOL

Telephone Script for Screening Possible Interview Participants

Thank you for calling to find out more about my research study.

Or, if a message was left - I am returning your call to provide more information about my research study.

My name is Cynthia Wallace, and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. The purpose of my research study, Parent/Guardian Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism and the Factors that Influence Decisions to Send their Child to School, is to learn more about chronic absenteeism from the parent/guardian perspective, understand the barriers that make daily attendance a challenge and to hear what supports would be beneficial.

Do I have your permission to tell you a bit more about the study and to ask you a few questions to determine your eligibility?

If No - Thank you very much for calling. (end call)

If Yes - I am conducting a short interview with questions about attendance patterns, reasons for absences and the impact of missing school. The interview will last about 30 minutes.

Do you have any questions or concerns? Now that you have a basic understanding of the study, do you think you might be interested in participating?

If No - Thank you very much for calling. (end call)

If Yes - Before enrolling people in this study, I need to determine if you may be eligible to participate. I need to ask you a few questions about your child's school enrollment, whether or not, he or she was absent 18 or more days this past school year and if you can provide verification of his or her attendance through a school report card or an official attendance record. It will take approximately 5 minutes of your time.

I will keep all the information I receive from you by phone, including your name and any other identifying information confidential.

The purpose of these questions is to determine whether you may be eligible to participate in the study. Remember, your participation is voluntary; you do not have to complete these questions. Please feel free to stop me at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

Do I have your permission to ask you these questions?

If No – Thank you very much for calling. (end)

If Yes – ask the following

Do you have a child enrolled in kindergarten, elementary school or middle school?

Has your child been absent 18 or more days in the current school year?

Are you able to provide documentation of your child's absences through a report card or other school document?

Based on your answers to the questions, it appears you may eligible to participate in the research study

Or if any responses were no, it appears that you are not eligible for participation in the study. Thank you for your time. (end)

Would you like to schedule a time to be interviewed for the research study?

In addition, would you like me to send you information to review before the interview?

Obtain the potential subject's contact information

Or if participant is not eligible - Unfortunately, based on your responses, you are not eligible to participate in the research study.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. My name is Cynthia Wallace and I can be reached at 412-206-5992 and/or cmw35@pitt.edu.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Paragraph Title of Research: Parent/Guardian Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism

Investigator Name and Affiliation: Cynthia M. Wallace, Doctoral Student, Administrative and Policy Studies, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, 412-206-5992, cmw35@pitt.edu

Consenting for the Research Study: This is an important document. If you sign it, you will be giving the researcher permission to include you in a research study. You should take your time and carefully read it. You can ask any questions you might have and also take a copy of this consent form to discuss with anyone you would like. Do not sign it unless you are comfortable participating in this study.

Introduction: The purpose of this research study is to investigate parent/guardian perspectives on chronic absenteeism. You are the parent/guardian of a child who has documented chronic absenteeism and will be one of approximately 20 participants in this study. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 18 or more days during a full school year or 9 or more days during half the school year.

Procedure and Duration: You will be asked to participate in a one on one interview with the researcher and to provide documentation of your child's attendance (report card or progress report). The interview is approximately 30 minutes and includes 8 questions.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no physical risks to participating in this study. However, some of the things you talk about may cause you to be uncomfortable because you might consider them personal or private matters. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you may request that we conclude the interview at any time. To minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality, no identifying information will be used in the study.

Benefits: There may be no direct benefits to you. The overall study may help to further inform how school and community agencies work with parents/guardians to encourage daily school attendance.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study early. Also, you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to.

If a participant chooses to withdraw from the study at the interview or transcription phase, the audiotape and associated transcript will be destroyed. Because all data in the research report will be de-identified, it is impossible to remove data after it has been de-identified, analyzed and included in the final report.

Stipend/Reimbursement: Participants have the opportunity to receive \$25 for participation in the study.

Confidentiality: In unusual cases, the investigator may be required to release identifiable information related to your participation in this research study in response to an order from a court of law. If the investigators learn that you or someone with whom you are involved is in serious danger or potential harm, they will need to inform, as required by Pennsylvania law, the appropriate agencies. The University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance office may also have access to the records. Otherwise, the information that identifies you will not be given out to people who are not working on the study, unless you give permission. Interviews will be tape recorded and then transcribed. No names will go into the transcripts. Once transcribed, the tapes will be stored in a locked office. The transcripts will be stored electronically, and will be password protected.

Your research data may be shared with investigators conducting similar research; however, this information will be shared in a de-identified manner (without identifiers).

Other considerations: If you wish further information regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate at the University of Pittsburgh IRB Office by telephoning (866) 212-2668.

Consent: The above information has been explained to me and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions, voice concerns or complaints about any aspect of this research study during the course of this study, and that such future questions, concerns or complaints will be answered by a qualified individual or by the investigator(s) listed on the first page of this consent document at the telephone number(s) given.

I understand that I may always request that my questions, concerns or complaints be addressed by a listed investigator. I understand that I may contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate of the IRB Office, University of Pittsburgh (1-866-212-2668) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; offer input; or discuss situations that occurred during my participation. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research study. A copy of this consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Name (Printed)

Participant's Signature Date

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study to the above-named individual(s), and I have discussed the potential benefits and possible risks of study participation. Any questions the individual(s) have about this study have been answered, and we will always be available to address future questions, concerns or complaints as they arise. I further certify that no research component of this protocol was begun until after this consent form was signed.

Signature of Investigator Date

Individuals Authorized to Obtain Consent:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Phone #</u>
Cynthia M. Wallace, MA	Principal Investigator	412-206-5992

APPENDIX C

Parent/Guardian Perspectives on Why Children Miss School and How to Help

Are you willing to discuss your perspectives on school attendance?



This research study seeks to understand the reasons why children miss school and the support that parents/guardians need to increase their child's attendance.

Participants must be:

- The parent or guardian of a child who missed 18 or more days in the last school year or 9 or more days this year
- Speak English
- Live in Homewood, East Hills, Lincoln Larimar or other east end neighborhood served by Lincoln Elementary, Faison Elementary or Westinghouse 6-12.

Participants will be asked to:

- Answer 8 questions, which will take approximately 30 minutes
- To document their child's attendance (either with report cards or progress reports)

Interviews will be held at a public location mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher.

Risks/Benefits:

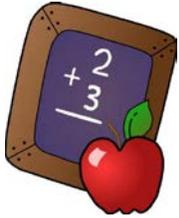
There are no risks to participation in the study. There is no direct benefit to the participant for participation. The information gathered will be used to increase what we know about school attendance and about how to help parents/guardians whose children miss a lot of school.

Participants will be compensated \$25 for their time.

For more information, please contact:

Cynthia M. Wallace, University of Pittsburgh

For questions or to enroll dial 412-206-5992 or email cmw35@pitt.edu



APPENDIX D

CODEBOOK FOR DATA ON PARENT/GUARDIAN PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

Table 25. *Codebook for Data on Parent/Guardian Perspectives on School Absenteeism*

Category 1: Student Reason

Code: Student illness

Brief Definition: Absence attributed to student illness

Full Definition: The most frequent reason that students miss school is illness. This code should be used if the term illness or sickness is used in general terms as a reason for absenteeism.

Inclusion Criteria: Apply this code if phrases such as cold, flu, sore throat, stomachache, etc. are used to describe an illness.

Exclusion Criteria: Do not apply this code if a reference to a doctor's appointment is made or if there is a chronic illness such as asthma.

Example: "She has a lot of absences and tardies because of a medical condition, she's diabetic so a lot of times like oh she, her blood sugars are high or low in the morning" (Participant 3, female parent)

Code: Student medication management

Brief Definition: Absence attributed to student adjusting to medication

Full Definition: Students miss school because they either have not taken or are taking days off to adjust to medication. This code should be used if medication is given as a reason for absenteeism.

Inclusion Criteria: Apply this code if phrases such as taking medication, adjusting to medication or not on medication are used related to an absence.

Exclusion Criteria: Do not apply this code if it is a reference to a doctor's appointment to get medication.

Example: "Sometimes because of the medication change and adjustments but also we just started a new medication today, it was a day off school" (Participant 9, female parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Code:	Student request
Brief Definition:	Student did not attend school based on their request to the parent
Full Definition:	Students may not attend school because they do not want to. Parent sometimes acquiesce to these requests.
Inclusion Criteria:	Do include references to requests made by students to not attend school
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code if the student gives any reasons related to other codes such as difficulty with another student
Example:	“He used to say he don't like school, he'd say that he didn't want to go”(Participant 7, female parent)
Code:	Student stress
Brief Definition:	Student did not attend school due to stress
Full Definition:	Students may not attend school because they are stressed or upset
Inclusion Criteria:	Do include references to undiagnosed mental health concerns, stress, or being upset Do include references to students needing a “mental health day” if there is no diagnosed disorder referenced
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code if the absence is related to a diagnosed mental health condition or if the source of the stress is related directly to another coded category, i.e., difficulty with another student
Example:	“She gets in moods when she's not up to it” (Participant 8, female parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Code:	Student mental health
Brief Definition:	Student did not attend school due to a mental health issue
Full Definition:	Students may not attend school because they have a diagnosed mental health issue
Inclusion Criteria:	Do include references to anxiety or depression or mental health if the issue appears to be related to a diagnosed issue
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code if the absence is related to an appointment or if the parent states that they are giving the child a break from school, i.e. they need a ‘mental health’ day
Example:	“She pretty much has been either late or missed days due to um she is suffering from severe depression” (Participant 1, female parent)
Category 2: Family Reason	
Code:	Parent activity or illness
Brief Definition:	Absence due to parent needing to do something or being ill
Full Definition:	Students may not attend school because their parents have another activity that interferes with getting them to or from school or they are ill and therefore cannot get their children to school
Inclusion Criteria:	Do include parent job responsibilities, parent illness, parent or sibling doctor appointments or other references to parents scheduling things during school hours
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code if the reason is related to the student, for example, the child has a doctor or dentist appointment
Example:	“They missed quite a few days due to my operation. I just got my knee operated on so they’re missing a lot of school” (Participant 20, female parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Code:	Siblings
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Brief Definition:	In-home challenges with siblings may be a reason given for missing school
Full Definition:	Siblings should be used as a code if statements are made that attribute an absence to something going on with another child in the family in the home
Inclusion Criteria:	Include references to sibling illness and needing to provide childcare for siblings
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code as 'siblings' if the child had the same issue as a sibling, i.e., no childcare available for the child and his or her siblings Do not code if the reference is to the parent scheduling an appointment for a sibling
Example:	"She had to stay home to watch the other baby and by the time he did come in, it was too late for her to go to school" (Participant 6, female guardian/grandparent)

Table 25 (continued)

Category 3: School Environment
(includes other students, staff,
school climate, academic
references)

Code: School climate

Brief Definition: Student did not attend school due to an issue related to the overall school climate

Full Definition: Students may not attend school because they do not feel safe at school or there is something negative going on in the environment

Inclusion Criteria: Do include references to school safety, the overall school environment or references to school personnel, including teachers

Exclusion Criteria: Do not code if the reference is to something that happened on the way to or from school
Do not code if the reference is to another student

Example: “Because it becomes a safety involved, you know, kids know what’s going to happen before it happens, because they in the midst of the commotion of everything and everything is being hidden from the teachers and the school until the outburst occurs and like some kids will say I’m not going to school today because they know that un John Brown and Hoot the Flute is going to fight today” (Participant 10, male parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Code:	Other students
Brief Definition:	Absence attributed to an issue at school with another student
Full Definition:	Students may miss school because there is a problem with another student at the school.
Inclusion Criteria:	The code should be used if the words or phrases such as ‘issue with another student,’ ‘problem with another student’ or “bullying” is stated.
Exclusion Criteria:	This code should not be applied if the student is absent for a disciplinary consequence related to an incident with another child at school.
Example:	“He missed a lot from being bullied, he was scared to go to school” (Participant 19, female parent)
Code:	Schoolwork
Brief Definition:	Schoolwork, either being too challenging or not challenging enough can be a reason students miss school
Full Definition:	Schoolwork should be assigned as a code
Inclusion Criteria:	If the phrase schoolwork, assignments or classwork is used specifically as a reason for a student to miss school.
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code as schoolwork if the reference is to work being missed or if the statement is related to consequences of missing school.
Example:	“They just don’t want to go that day or something cuz like they might be caught up or like they know they going to have a test or something and they might be kinda leery about taking that test” (Participant 10, male parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Category 4: Transportation

Code: Transportation

Brief Definition: Student did not attend school due to a problem with transportation

Full Definition: Students may not attend school because they do not have transportation to or from school, or they missed a bus or scheduled ride to school.

Inclusion Criteria: Do include parental transportation problems such as unreliable vehicles

Exclusion Criteria: Do not code if the mode of transportation is walking and neighborhood safety is mentioned as a factor.
Do not code if issues related to other students on buses (i.e. bullying) are stated as a reason for a school absence.

Example: “Well she has a problem cuz her van hasn’t been picking her up like we’re, we had just moved so we’re in the process of trying to get the bus company to pick her up at a new stop so it’s been crazy, it still is crazy but hopefully it will get fixed and you know that’s the reason why she misses school” (Participant 16, female parent)

Category 5: Neighborhood

Code: Neighborhood Safety

Brief Definition: Student did not attend school due to a neighborhood concern

Full Definition: Students may not attend school because it is not safe for them to walk to school or if there is a recent neighborhood concern such as violence

Inclusion Criteria: Do include references to distance to school and neighborhood safety

Exclusion Criteria: Do not code if the reference is to an issue with transportation (school bus or parent/guardian car)

Example: “It’s so much stuff that goes on in the morning like you got the Bakers where you see crack heads just hanging out there 4, 5 in the morning, 7, 9 o’clock come you don’t want your kids walking past them by themselves so you’re not walking by yourself, you’ll stay home” (Participant 17, female parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Category 6: Interventions

Code: Help

Brief Definition: Help is defined as things that parents/guardians say will help them get their child to school

Full Definition: This code is used to specifically capture the interventions that parents feel would be most beneficial in supporting their efforts to get their child to school.

Inclusion Criteria: Include all references to things the school could or has done related to attendance as stated by parents/guardians

Exclusion Criteria: Do not code if a specific barrier is stated that can be coded under another category

Example: “I think counseling services should be brought into school more. They um, and even set up you know set up and evening program where parents and kids can come in and get counseling so they won’t have to be pulled out of class or miss school.” (Participant 12, female guardian/grandparent)

Code: Hinder

Brief Definition: Hinder is defined as things that parents/guardians say may be ineffective in supporting their efforts to get their child to school

Full Definition: This code is used to specifically capture the interventions that parents feel are of least benefit in supporting their efforts to get their child to school.

Inclusion Criteria: Include all references to things the school could or has done related to attendance as stated by parents/guardians

Exclusion Criteria: Do not code if a specific barrier is stated that can be coded under another category

Example: “I think if the schools are able to reach out sometimes and just show some concern even if they really couldn’t just help it’s not like they can have a power switch to just cut on somebody’s power or something went off sometimes just for a parent or a person be able to just express what they’re going through can make a difference it’s like when they think someone is listening to what they have to say about what they’re going through with their kids I feel like if they schools really showed that it was more concerning instead of so much of seeming like they’re trying to just you know attack the parents.” (Participant 1, female parent)

Table 25 (continued)

Category 7: Consequences

Code: Consequences: yes, short term

Brief Definition: Short-term consequences related to missing school

Full Definition: Students may be impacted somewhat immediately if they miss school. This code should capture the perceived implications of missing school.

Inclusion Criteria: Include responses related to how the child is impacted if they miss school. Include both negative or if the parent/guardian indicates that they feel there are no negative implications.

Exclusion Criteria: Do not code if the reference is to a long term consequence

Example: “Cuz, my daughter she basically, when she flunked 2nd grade, she didn’t know (pause), she didn’t know nothing; she only did maybe a month and a half of kindergarten.” (Participant 5, female parent)

Code: Consequences: yes, long-term

Brief Definition: School attendance may have long term implications for children

Full Definition: The consequences associated with missing school have long-term implications for academic achievement and other positive life outcomes. This code is designed to capture parent/guardian understanding of how missing school may impact their child in the future.

Inclusion Criteria: Code if the reference is to a future implication for missing school.

Exclusion Criteria: No not code if the reference is to current implications such as missing school assignments.

Example: “They end up getting sent away and stuff. All locked up, the one that didn’t want to go to school or do what they was supposed to do.” (Participant 13, female guardian/grandparent)

Table 25 (continued)

Code:	Consequences: no, short term
Brief Definition:	Denies any short-term consequences related to missing school
Full Definition:	This code should capture any statements that deny short-term consequences of missing school or state that missing school is positive
Inclusion Criteria:	Include responses that indicate the child has not been impacted by school absences or in some way benefits from missing school
Exclusion Criteria:	Do not code if the parent/guardian states this in relation to the absence of long-term consequences
Example:	“I’m not worried about them being able to catch up on the work because they always can.” (Participant 12, female guardian/grandparent)
Category 8: Miscellaneous	
Code:	Miscellaneous
Brief Definition:	Miscellaneous is used to capture utterances that do not fit into other categories
Full Definition:	The miscellaneous code should be used if there are quotations that do not fit in other predefined categories but appear specifically related to absenteeism.
Inclusion Criteria:	Any statements that are specifically related to absenteeism, but not to another defined category.
Exclusion Criteria:	Anything that would fit in a predefined category or a statement that is too vague or incomplete.
Example:	“If it’s too bad or too cold you know like I mean like below zero or something like that like we get like that sometimes, I won’t let the go. I’ll keep them in until I feel that it’s more safer and feasible for them to go out there because my theory with that is if I allow them to go to school like that and something happened and I had to go out to get them I won’t be able to go out to get them cuz I’m handicapped.” (Participant 10, male parent)

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