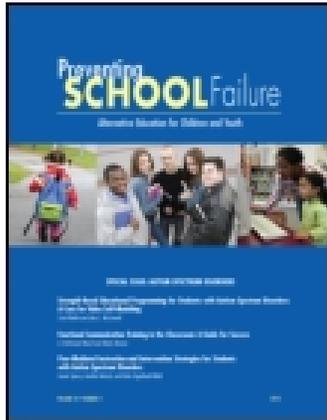


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Connecting With Families to Improve Students' School Attendance: A Review of the Literature

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School attendance is a rising issue in public schools. Students regularly absent from school can end up involved in destructive behaviors and dropout of school. Family characteristics are strong determining factors in students' school attendance. This presents the question, "Can family involvement improve public school students' attendance?" One way to do this is through phone calls from the school faculty to students' caregivers. Promoting attendance early in a student's life can encourage attendance and maintain this habit throughout his or her school career. The studies reviewed—using parent involvement—show promise to improving students' attendance. When parents or caregivers are regularly apprised of their child's attendance, they can provide appropriate feedback at home. Other findings and implications for phone call interventions and attendance are discussed.

Keywords: absenteeism, family communication, public school attendance rates

School attendance is critical for American students. When students are not in school, they are missing out on their education and potentially engaging in risky behaviors. On any given day, 10% of public school students are absent from school. In urban areas, absenteeism can be as high as 30% (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998). Longitudinal research on school dropouts has shown student absence started for most students as early as first grade (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Chronic nonattendance or absenteeism is the beginning of a slow process eventually leading to school dropout (Hibbett & Fogelman, 1990; Hibbett, Fogelman, & Manor, 1990; Kogan, Luo, Murry, & Brody, 2005; Tramontina et al., 2001). In a recent statistical analysis of students in public schools in the United States, only 55% of high school dropouts are employed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Absent students and students who drop out have been linked to many self-destructive behaviors ranging from vandalism to criminal violence (Chou, Ho, Chen, & Chen, 2006; Denny, Clark, & Watson 2003; Guttmacher, Weitzman, Kapadia, & Weinberg, 2002; Hallfors, Cho, Brodish, Flewelling, & Khatapoush, 2006; Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Also, absenteeism is associated with crime, alcoholism, and occupational difficulty (Spencer, 2009).

Researchers have identified predictors for students who are likely to be absent from school and possibly drop out. For example, weak teacher–student bonds have been linked to

absenteeism (Neilson & Gerber, 1979). Two studies supported the relation between students from low socioeconomic status and absenteeism (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Reid, 1984). In a study comparing influential factors contributing to absenteeism, results showed six variables determining whether students are regularly absent or present (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). In Corville-Smith and colleagues' (1998) survey, three of six factors accurately determined students' absences were family related (e.g., parents' discipline, parents' control, and family conflict). Students from minority backgrounds are considered a high risk for absenteeism (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). In addition, the U.S. Department of Education statistical data for the 2005–2006 school year, 26% of students (e.g., 100,000 students) with diagnosed disabilities dropped out of school. Dropout is a common trend in the field of special education, indicating another predictor of absenteeism (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012; Redmond & Hosp, 2008; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998).

Family involvement is predictive of student attendance rate, it is valuable to analyze what school districts are doing to incorporate family involvement when students are absent from school. Because of the many levels of absenteeism, family involvement is a logical starting point because of the high correlation with reasoning for student absences. Furthermore, with recent budget cuts, school administrators need to find ways to implement interventions with limited funds (Young & Fusarelli, 2001). Family involvement can be easily implemented with little monetary support. Recent research from Flannery and colleagues (2012) suggested that there are limited family interventions or preventions including when students are absent.

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Despite the urgency to examine absenteeism, there is very little comparability when looking at current attendance research (Kearney, 2008). Therefore, with multiple approaches to examining this topic, there is difficulty in understanding the varying causes and solutions to absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). With this review, there is a clear connection between interventions and outcomes by examining family mediation.

Kearney (2008) claimed that there are different categories of absenteeism, and students are absent for many reasons. To help researchers study absenteeism, Kearney operationally defined a number of categories of nonattendees on the basis of a foundation of research. First, school phobia is when students avoid school because of a fear of a specific stimulus such as a class bully or school bells (Tyrell, 2005). Second, school refusal is a more general form of anxiety, which includes general emotional distress or worry while in school (Suveg, Aschenbrand, & Kendall, 2005). Third, separation anxiety is undue stress about being away from primary caregivers and therefore do not go to school (Hanna, Fischer, & Fluent, 2006); and fourth, school refusal behavior, not anxiety related, yet allows a student to avoid school for a part or entire day (Kearney & Silverman, 1996).

Kearney and Silverman (1993) used Skinner's (1953) operant theory of learning to explain why students do not attend school. The aforementioned types of absences fit within two categories of negative and/or positive reinforcement. Students who skip school receive negative reinforcement by avoiding fear and anxiety, or creating evaluative situations. Subsequently, students can receive positive reinforcement by not attending school, with parent attention or tangible rewards (e.g., video games, television).

Because of the aforementioned prevalence, predictors, legislation, and social implications, years of research with a variety of approaches have been completed to address the attendance crisis. Some interventions involved research teams communicating with families and communities (McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Reid & Bailey-Dempsey, 1995; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Volkman, 1996). Other studies focused on interventions with counseling support for students (Bry & George, 1980; Houlihan & Jones, 1989; Nagle, Gresham, & Johnson, 1979). Researchers implemented token systems (Hargreaves & McLaughlin, 1981) and even looked at paying students to attend school (Reid & Bailey-Dempsey, 1995). Although most of the aforementioned studies succeeded, their effectiveness is limited because of constraints on parents and teachers (Goldstein, Little, & Akin-Little, 2003). Furthermore, there are no significant improvements to absenteeism where it is not considered a problem in public schools.

Because family dynamics are important existing factors resulting in absenteeism, and because most times students are reinforced by activities in the home, family support could be a logically supportive system in improving attendance. Schools and families bonding together to meet needs of students proved to help students' achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2004), and family involvement as an initiative under the No Child Left Behind Act (Epstein, 2005). Therefore, previous studies and legislation show family involvement as a vital link to supporting student success. This presents the

question: How can family involvement improve public school students' attendance?

Method

Relevant studies used to answer the research question were identified through a series of steps as determined by a consensus of both authors. First, an electronic search was conducted with Educational Resources Information Center, Journal Storage, and PsycINFO databases. Keywords used in the electronic search were *truancy* or *absent* or *attendance* and *family* or *parent*. These searches yielded approximately 400 articles. Following the electronic search, the list of articles were refined to assure specific attendance outcomes, using the following criteria, the study: (a) used a quantitative experimental design; (b) appeared in a peer-reviewed journal; (c) described the extent to which parents were involved in the intervention; (d) focused on improving school attendance, as compared with multiple student outcomes; and (e) included data (e.g., number of days the student attended throughout the study) to describe the direct effect of the intervention on attendance rates. Five articles from the electronic search met criteria.

Next, a hand search was conducted of the Journal of Research Education because three journals had been selected from the publication. One additional article was selected from the hand search. An ancestral search of the reference sections of all articles collected from the database and hand searches meeting inclusion criteria were examined for other relevant articles. Seven more articles were examined, with only three additional articles meeting criteria for a total of nine studies. The results are reported and summarized through a narrative review (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). For this review, there is a summary of intervention details with statistical comparisons of attendance rates. This format provides detail of intervention implementation, yet there is some subjectivity with interpreting magnitude of difference for each intervention (Gall et al., 2007).

Results

Participants

Sample Size

Table 1 contains the studies and respective participants. Each article reported sample size, with a range of 5 to 150 participants. In two studies (Helm & Burkett, 1989; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005), data were collected among several schools within a district, and seven (Copeland, Brown, Axelrod, & Hall, 1972; Fiordaliso, Lordeman, Filipczak, & Friedman, 1977; Gregory, Allebon, & Gregory, 1984; Hayden, 2009; Licht, Gard, & Guardino, 1991; Parker & McCoy, 1977; Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979) occurred within the same school building. Six of the researchers (Copeland et al., 1972; Fiordaliso et al., 1977; Gregory et al., 1984; Hayden, 2009; Licht et al., 1991; Parker & McCoy, 1977) collected data over a period of two school

Table 1. Individual Characteristics of Attendance Studies

Source	No. of participants	School level	Race	Identified disability	Selection process	Interventions
Copeland, Brown, Axelrod, and Hall (1972)	9	Elementary school			Number of absences	Positive phone call by principal Informative phone call by principal
Fiordaliso, Lordeman, Filipczak, and Friedman (1977)	42	Junior high school			No criteria selected	Informative phone call by principal Positive letters and phone calls by secretary
Gregory, Allebon, and Gregory (1984)	80	Elementary school			Number of absences	No intervention Home visit No intervention
Hayden (2009)	78	Elementary school Junior high school			Number of absences Type of behavior problem Type of family problem	Home visit Family meeting
Helm and Burkett (1989)	150	Junior high school High school			No criteria selected	Informative message by machine No intervention
Licht, Gard, and Guardino (1991)	20	High school	13 Black 7 White	17 students with learning disabilities 3 students with emotional and behavioral disorders	Type of identified disability	Informative call plus point reinforcement No intervention
Parker and McCoy (1977)	5	Elementary school			Number of absences	Class visit by principal Positive phone call by principal Negative call by principal
Sheats and Dunkleberger (1979)	36	Elementary school			Number of absences	Positive call by secretary Positive phone call by principal
Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow (2005)	164	High school	106 Black 58 White	164 students with emotional and behavioral disorders	Type of identified disability	Informative call plus mentoring by monitor No intervention

semesters. Three longitudinal studies (Helm & Burkett, 1989; Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979; Sinclair et al., 2005) lasted from 1 to 3 school years.

Criteria

Selection criteria of student characteristics varied among studies. Four of the research teams (Fiordaliso et al., 1977; Helm & Burkett, 1989; Licht et al., 1991; Sinclair et al., 2005) had no attendance requirements for the student selection. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to look at measures to prevent future attendance problems. Five research teams

(Copeland et al., 1972; Gregory et al., 1984; Hayden, 2009; Parker & McCoy, 1977; Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979) had selection criteria based students' school attendance either from the previous year or from their attendance rate at the beginning of the new school year. Students were selected if they had 15 to 20 absences within one school year. These interventions were implemented to measure the differences in the attendance of students who already started a trend of nonattendance. In addition to school attendance criteria, Hayden (2009) included referrals for behavior or family problems. Socioeconomic status and school location were sometimes

documented, but not a part of selection criteria. For a specific summary of participant criteria see Table 1.

Only two research teams (Licht et al., 1991; Sinclair et al., 2005) reported on ethnicity. In both studies, 65% of the student participants ($n = 106$ and $n = 13$, respectively) were Black. Sinclair and colleagues (2005) indicated that 106 Black students was an overrepresentation of that particular school district. The same two studies only targeted students with identified disabilities. The larger study (Sinclair et al., 2005) included students identified with emotional disabilities. The smaller study (Licht et al., 1991) included 17 students with learning disabilities and 3 with emotional disabilities.

Interventions

The nine research teams had distinct procedures for schools to contact parents during the intervention. Six procedures included phone calls (Copeland et al., 1972; Fiordaliso et al., 1977; Helm & Burkett, 1989; Parker & McCoy, 1977; Sheats & Dunkleberger 1979; Sinclair et al., 2005) to the home, from the school faculty, which was used as the primary intervention to notify parents of their students' absences. Researchers had different faculty members responsible for calling parents, and with a message presented to the parents about their students' absences. The other three studies had more staff interactions with parents and students. Two studies (Gregory et al., 1984; Hayden, 2009) incorporated home visits or family meetings. The last study, from the Check & Connect model, followed a system of individual adults closely monitoring students and contacting families periodically.

Phone Calls

Helm and Burkett (1989) examined the effects of a recorded phone message by the principal to homes of each absent student in the experimental group. Each day, secretaries or student workers were required to key in the names of absent students, then a device was activated at 6 p.m. to call the homes of those students. Whomever picked up the phone would hear the recorded message stating the student was absent on that particular day, and if they had further questions they could call the school for more information. Students in the experimental group had better attendance records than students in the control group. Mean absences for the control group almost doubled that of the experimental group who received recorded phone messages. This approach would be a quick method updating parents on their child's attendance status.

Another study, Sheats and Dunkleberger (1979) included staff members making phone calls to the parents. Calls from the principal and from the secretary when calling each home to report the students' absences were compared. Phone calls were scheduled individually based on each student's attendance. A phone call was made each time a student missed three days of school. Messages notified parents their student missed school, and conversations became more serious as the pattern continued. Results showed attendance rates improving significantly for both groups, as compared with the previous school year. Students missed an average of 25 days of

school during the year of baseline data collection, and missed an average of 14 days of school during the following year with the intervention. Students called by the principal missed an average of 14 days and the students called by the secretary missed an average of 16 days. Neither group called by the principal nor the secretary had a significant difference between attendance rates. This suggests any school personnel can be designated to call parents.

Again comparing the principal's influence in student attendance, Parker and McCoy (1977) examined three experimental groups all having different measures of communication by the principal. The principal visited one group in the classroom, and praised students for attending class. With classroom visits, the principal would stop in the classroom for two minutes to praise students individually for their good attendance. When perfect attendance was reached the principal then visited sporadically. The two other groups received phone calls. Within two experimental groups, one set of parents received positive phone calls for their students' attendance and one group of parents received negative phone calls when their student was absent. For the positive phone call group, parents were praised for making sure their student attended school. In the negative phone call group, the principal addressed the students' absence and stated she would like to see the student in school. Phone calls were more frequent in the beginning and were reduced as attendance improved. Initially, students who received a visit from the principal improved their attendance, but as the study continued students decreased their attendance rate. Nevertheless, both groups that received phone calls from the principal significantly improved their baseline attendance rate of 70% to an attendance rate of 95% that was maintained throughout the duration of the study.

In addition, two studies (Copeland et al., 1972; Fiordaliso et al., 1977) compared positive phone calls (e.g., praising parents for having their students attend school) and negative phone calls (e.g., simple statement addressing the student's absence and following up with a strong request for the student to come to school the next day) from the principal. Both studies had a praise message group and a negative phone call only group. Parents in the positive phone message group received calls when their students did not attend and received messages by phone conversation or written letters thanking them for making sure their student attended school. Parents in the negative phone messages group only received warning expressing concern when students did not attend school and notified parents of the school's attendance policy. Parents were not praised when their students attended school. As in other studies, calls were less frequent as attendance improved. In the Copeland and colleagues (1972) study, students only receiving phone calls urging them to attend school did increase initially, yet student attendance slowly diminished as the study continued. Students in the group receiving a positive message from the principal initially had an attendance rate of zero, and their attendance rate improved to 80%. After the second baseline was measured and the intervention was implemented for a second time, the mean level of attendance was 63%. Similarly, in the Fiordaliso and colleagues (1977) study, out of 62 students, in both of the experimental

groups, 43 students improved their attendance with the phone intervention and their attendance remained consistent with phone calls and letters of praise. In the control group, 15 out of 25 students had a decrease in attendance rate. Both of the outcomes showing positive feedback was encouraging for student attendance.

In another study with phone calls, Licht and colleagues (1991) examined a token system for affecting attendance. Members of school faculty were not directly responsible for implementing procedures in this experiment. Undergraduate students from a local university helped run the experiment. Research assistants were responsible for tallying attendance points and making phone calls to parents. Phone calls did not start until the fifth week of the study. Research assistants would contact parents within two days of the students' absence. For the token system, students earned points for attending class on time. Once a week, research assistants met with students to tally their earned points, then students cashed in their points for coupons (e.g., restaurants, clothing stores, movie theaters). Students in the experimental group had no decline in attendance rate as compared with students in the control group who had a significant decrease, lowering their attendance rate.

Meeting with Families

Gregory and colleagues (1984) studied direct efforts from school personnel, which included education welfare officers who visited homes of absent students. Education welfare officers met with families in the experimental group at least once a week. There were three different levels of notification based on the frequency of the students' absence. Initially parent messages were to inform them of their students' absences. The lowest level of notification arose 74% of the time. As absences became more frequent parents were warned they would be reported to the education authority, which occurred during 16% of the overall visits. Last, 6% of the visits were to inform parents they would be reported to the education authority because of the number of absences their child had from school. In the study, neither intervention increased or decreased student attendance.

In a study similar to that of Gregory and colleagues (1984), Hayden (2009) measured the effect of education welfare officer visits compared with family group counseling. Education welfare officers were scheduled to meet with families of absent students on a weekly basis, yet weekly visitations rarely happened. The objective was to let parents know their child's weekly attendance rate. In addition to attendance issues, the family discussed familial and behavior problems during group meetings. With the counseling group, the family met with a coordinator to share concerns, create private family time, plan for change, and have the coordinator review the plan of action. There was no significant improvement in attendance for either of groups.

School Monitor

Sinclair and colleagues (2005) completed a 4-year study to promote graduation for students with emotional and behavioral disorders using the Check & Connect model. School

staff members were not required to commit any additional time or effort to the project. All data collection and monitoring was completed by research staff. Monitors were required to meet with students weekly to go over student progress. They worked on relationship building and problem solving each time they met. Each monitor stayed with the students for the duration of study. For the family outreach component of the intervention, monitors were required to increase constructive communication between home and school. Contact was established through frequent phone calls, home visits, and attending organized meetings in the community. Although attendance appeared to improve in the treatment group as compared with the control group throughout the 4 years of data collection, there was no significant difference in dropout prevention between the two groups.

Discussion

Students' attendance rates have been, and continue to be, a severe problem in public school classrooms each year. To further look into the issues, more than 40 years of research has been completed, exclusively looking at parental involvement with the intention of improving school attendance. Nine studies measured parent involvement with improved student attendance as an outcome. There are several aspects of studies offering promising results. For instance, parental interventions are valued because they promote the No Child Left Behind initiative to involve parent to school linkage (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Also, school attendance research that is effective, needs to be natural and within the students' environment such as home support and peer relationships (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003). When examining the nine studies, although all methods of telephone contact did improve attendance, staff members praising parents when their student attended school appeared to improve attendance more than negative calls, family meetings, class visits, or home visits. Students who were praised maintained a 70% attendance rate as compared with their peers with a 30% attendance rate, while receiving negative calls.

Direct Versus Indirect Interventions

Phone calls, where members of the school directly made contact with families, appeared to be the most popular and effective strategy for contacting parents about student attendance. For a summary of each intervention, see Table 1. Phone calls were a direct way to contact parents so they could then give immediate and appropriate action on the basis of their student's attendance each day. Contact from various staff members of the school did not appear to have any less influence on improving school attendance. For example, when principal phone calls were compared with secretary phone calls there was no significant difference in the effect of attendance (Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979). Even recorded messages resulted in major improvements in school attendance (Helm & Burkett, 1989).

Studies with phone calls as a direct intervention (Copeland et al., 1972; Fiordaliso et al., 1977; Helm & Burkett, 1989; Licht et al., 1991; Parker & McCoy, 1977; Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979) had positive outcomes resulting in students who initially were not within the guidelines of the school attendance policy, improved their attendance to an acceptable rate according to each school's requirements. In another example, students missed an average of 25 days of school during the year of baseline data collection, and missed an average of only 14 days of school during the following year with the intervention (Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979). In another study (Parker & McCoy, 1977), both experimental groups receiving phone calls from the principal significantly improved their baseline attendance rate of 70% to an attendance rate of 95% that maintained throughout the duration of the study.

Other studies using indirect parent interventions, addressing other issues beyond attendance, appeared to have little to no effect on attendance outcomes. Hayden (2009) found experimental groups did not improve their attendance rate. First, in the education welfare officer group, education welfare officers were unable to meet with parents weekly, let alone update parents daily on their student's attendance. Second, the family counseling group addressed family problems and created a plan for change. Counseling did not positively impact attendance and dealt with the issue of attendance indirectly. Third, Sinclair and colleagues (2005) demonstrated monitors had more contact with the students on a weekly basis. Parents were only called when monitors felt there was a concern for parents to get involved. Monitors were then responsible for calling the parents. Fourth, in the Gregory and colleagues (1984) study, education welfare officers were able to meet with parents weekly. Nonetheless, parents were warned they would be reported to the education authority if they did not take their child to school. Although this study has a face-to-face intervention, like the other studies there are no personnel linking school faculty with parents.

Direct parent contact on a daily basis appears to have the most promising results. When parents are updated on their student's performance on a daily basis parents are able to provide appropriate feedback. Although the child may not attend school because of other problems the he or she may be facing, and school faculty members could provide the student with support counseling or mentoring. However, when improving student attendance, it needs to be addressed by the school along with parental support. It is important for schools not only to inform parents when their child does not come to school but also to praise parents when their students do come to school.

Age to Intervene

Attendance studies occurring in the high school (Fiordaliso et al., 1977; Gregory et al., 1984; Hayden, 2009; Helm & Burkett, 1989; Licht et al., 1991; Sinclair et al., 2005) most commonly measure students who drop out of high school. See education levels in Table 1. But intervening, in the middle school, let alone high school, is not early enough to make differences in completion of high school (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). Therefore, it would be

more valuable to examine interventions that improved attendance during the Elementary school years and continue to collect longitudinal data throughout the students' school career (e.g., Copeland et al., 1972; Parker et al., 1977; Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979).

Implications for Practice

With support of research and legislation family involvement is an essential component refining students' outcomes (Epstein, 2005). Students improve attendance from direct interventions such as phone calls from faculty members to parents or caregivers. Schools profit because direct phone call interventions do not require additional duties or time for the teachers plus these interventions do not require additional funding. As summarized by Flannery and colleagues (2012), parent interventions are not common practice for addressing attendance issues. By providing parents or caregivers with immediate updates, regardless if the student is absent or present, a more preventative approach can be taken to confront the students. In addition, a positive phone call to praise parents for sending their students to school is an added improvement to support the home-to-school connection (Copeland et al., 1972; Fiordaliso et al., 1977; Parker & McCoy, 1977; Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979). This contact does not have to be from the principal or teacher (Copeland et al., 1972). Schools can implement this communication through collaborative partnerships with parents volunteers or school social workers. See Table 2 for a list of websites that provide additional resources supported by research.

Implications for Research

Because increasing parent and teacher contact was useful in increasing student attendance further parental involvement research can be supported with updated strategies to continue to foster school attendance. It would be important to consider new technology as a method for schools to contact parents. Plus, standard messaging (e.g., texting, electronic mail) could be more efficient in contacting additional family members (Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fuhler, 2006). In addition, it is important to start early. Research suggests school attendance habits begin at an early age therefore interventions that promote student attendance would impress the importance in the Elementary years (Spencer, 2009). Also, this

Table 2. Web-Based Attendance Sites

Name	URL
Truancy Prevention	http://www.truancyprevention.org
National Center for School Engagement	http://www.schoolengagement.org
What Works Clearinghouse	http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc
National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	http://www.dropoutprevention.org
National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention	http://www.promoteprevent.org

research needs to be expanded to different groups such as the special education and minority populations, which are at risk for low attendance rates leading to drop out (Flannery et al., 2012; Licht et al., 1991; Sinclair et al., 1998).

Conclusion

The average attendance rate of students is considered one of the most important problems in American schools today (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Students, who skip school or drop out, lead into lives with negative outcomes (e.g., delinquency, unemployment, and incarceration). Increasing direct parent and teacher contact has been a beneficial strategy in improving student attendance. By securing parent involvement in student attendance at an early age will help the family to promote good attendance throughout a student's school career.

Author notes

Bethany M. McConnell is an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. Her research interests include working with parents to increase outcomes for students with special needs. In addition, Bethany works with preservice teachers to build an understanding for teaching students with special needs in the general education classroom.

Richard M. Kubina, Jr. is a professor in the special education program at The Pennsylvania State University. His current research interests include measurably effective curricula and the effects of behavioral fluency within educational and social settings.

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