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Student Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of School Climate

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Student Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of School Climate

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, concentration in Administrative Endorsement

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by

Misty D. Keller

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Dr. John Boyd

Dr. Donald Good

Dr. Philip Wright

Keywords: chronic absenteeism, school climate, engagement, environment, safety

ABSTRACT

Student Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of School Climate

by

Misty Keller

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if there were significant differences in student chronic absenteeism between schools with high positive scores for perceptions of central components school climate and schools with low positive scores for perceptions of central components of school climate. This study assessed the difference in student chronic absenteeism among elementary schools rated high positive or low positive as well as among high schools rated high positive or low positive for perceptions of school engagement, school safety, and school environment. A series of chi square analyses were used to analyze data to determine if there were significant differences in student chronic absenteeism among schools with high positive ratings for central components of climate and schools with low positive ratings for central components of climate. The data that were analyzed included the number of students who were chronically absent, the number of students who were not chronically absent, and responses concerning perceptions of school climate provided by licensed school personnel on annual state-wide educator surveys administered by the Tennessee Department of Education. The results of the quantitative study revealed, that for both elementary and high schools, there was a significant difference in student chronic absenteeism between schools rated high positive and schools rated low positive for perceptions of school engagement. In addition, the results revealed, that for both elementary and high schools, there was a significant difference in student chronic absenteeism between schools rated high positive and schools rated low positive for perceptions of school

safety. Finally, the results revealed, that for both elementary and high schools, there was a significant difference in student chronic absenteeism between schools rated high positive and schools rated low positive for perceptions of school environment. In general, students who attended elementary or high schools rated high positive for perceptions of engagement, safety, and-or environment were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended elementary or high schools rated low positive for perceptions of engagement, safety, and-or environment.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all who have supported and encouraged me throughout this journey. To Scott, your love, support, and encouragement have been unwavering. Thank you for all the ways you helped to lighten the load so I could keep going. To my parents, your shining examples of resilience, perseverance, integrity, work ethic, and devotion to family has shaped who I am today. You never allowed me to give up. I will be forever grateful for your unconditional love, support, encouragement, wisdom, and friendship.

To my mentor, Jim Nash, I greatly appreciate your leadership and perspective throughout this journey. Your support and words of wisdom inspired and encouraged me to continue onward. To the students and staff of Roosevelt Elementary, your hearts and dedication to making a difference in the lives of others have made a profound impact upon me. You have become my second family, and I am grateful and proud to know each of you.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Since the early 1900s, there has been growing interest in school climate and outcomes associated varying climate conditions (Cohen et al., 2013). The United States Department of Education's National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments described school climate as how members of the school community experience the school, including interpersonal relationships, teacher and other staff practices, and organizational arrangements and includes factors that serve as conditions for learning and that support safety, connection and support, and engagement (United States Department of Education, 2019). Similarly, the National School Climate Center (2020) defines school climate as the quality and character of school life based on patterns of students', parents', and school personnel's experiences of school life. School climate also reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. Positive school climate depends on the contributions of all members of the school community to create a safe and supportive environment where every child can learn, grow and experience success.

An increased focus on school climate emerged with increased demands for school accountability. Due to changes in state and federal policies as well as logistical and fiscal limitations, researchers must increasingly rely on teachers' reports of school climate dimensions in order to investigate the relationship of these dimensions to student outcomes and then address those impacts in subsequent school improvement planning efforts (Maxwell et al., 2017). Brand et al. (2008) found that teachers' climate ratings were associated significantly and consistently with various student academic and behavioral outcomes. The Tennessee Department of Education (TNDOE) (2020) has a center that focuses on school climate and provides schools with tools and resources for improving and supporting positive school climates. In addition, the

TNDOE created administered annually to each certified educator measuring their perceptions of various aspects of the climate of their particular school. Survey results are posted on the TNDOE website and are made available to district and school administrators.

While there is increasing consensus on the importance of a positive school climate, additional data concerning teacher perceptions of school climate and correlations with student data and other educational measures are needed in order to support and enhance school improvement planning, policy revision or development and resource allocation (United States Department of Education, 2019). School climate has been linked to a number of educational outcomes including student attendance and engagement, academic achievement and graduation rates. Research shows that when schools and districts focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to be engaged, to develop positive relationships with peers and adults, and to demonstrate positive behaviors (Balfanz et al., 2007). In addition, the benefits of a positive school climate include improvements in school attendance rates, higher student achievement and overall graduation rates while negative school climates adversely affect student well-being and achievement and can result in behaviors such as school avoidance and absenteeism.

An area of particular interest to educational leaders and policy makers alike is the rising rate of chronic absenteeism among students (Clark et al., 2008). Chronic absenteeism is a growing issue for public schools across the country. According to the United States Department of Education (2017), in the school year 2015-2016, over 7 million students, or 16% of the nation's student population missed 15 or more days of school. That translates to more than 100 million school days lost in a single year. Examining and determining factors that may correlate with rates of chronic absenteeism is important for school and districts leaders and public

policymakers. Perceptions and aspects of school climate may play an important role in influencing or impacting chronic absenteeism rates among students, yet relatively little research has evaluated how school climate constructs relate to chronic absenteeism.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the quantitative study was to determine if there was a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between schools rated high positive or low positive for perceptions of school climate. Positive school climate has been associated with various student outcomes and school effectiveness measures including high rates of school engagement, academic achievement and graduation (Berkowitz et al., 2017). In contrast, negative school climates have been associated with poor short and long term outcomes and have been linked to behaviors such as school avoidance and delinquency. Similarly, high rates of chronic absenteeism have been associated with outcomes such as poorer health, lower achievement, lower income and fewer career opportunities (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

The categories of school climate assessed in this study included engagement, safety, and environment. This study included 77 elementary schools and 25 high schools from the 17 school districts located within the First Congressional District of Tennessee. The data that were analyzed included the number of students chronically absent, the number of students not chronically absent, and percentages of responses to questions concerning perceptions of climate on Tennessee Educator Surveys. The numbers of students chronically absent and not chronically absent were analyzed to determine if a there was a significant difference in chronic absenteeism between schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of climate.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement?

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement?

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety?

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety?

Research Question 5: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment?

Research Question 6: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment?

Significance of the Study

In terms of effective interventions for chronic absenteeism, particularly at the elementary school level, the number of studies that have identified even marginally effective interventions are limited (Sugrue et al., 2012). In addition to the lack of clarity on the interventions being studied, much of the current literature on the effectiveness of interventions for school

absenteeism neglects to identify any of the factors that contribute to the poor attendance of students in their studies (Lawrence et al., 2011). However, previous research has suggested that an increased focus on the quality of school climate may be critical for reducing chronic absence rates (Van Eck et al., 2017).

This study adds quantitative data to the body of research of chronic absenteeism in elementary and high school. In addition, this study adds quantitative data on the difference in chronic absenteeism among high schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of school climate. Several stakeholders may benefit from this study on the differences in chronic absenteeism among schools rated low or high positive for perceptions of school climate. District and school leaders could use this research to develop new or refine existing strategies designed to target and improve climate and chronic absenteeism jointly rather than planning for and addressing each individually. This could have implications for the use and prioritization of various school resources.

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions are provided:

1. *Chronic Absenteeism* – A chronically absent student is defined as one who misses more than 15 days of school in one year for any reason, excused or otherwise (United States Department of Education, 2017).

2. *Elementary School* – The period of formal education before high school. For the purposes of this study, an elementary school will be defined as a school whose lowest grade is Kindergarten and whose highest grade could, but may not necessarily, extend to grade eight.

3. *High School* – The period of formal education after elementary or middle school. For the purposes of this study, a high school will be defined as a school whose ending grade is grade twelve.

4. *School Climate* – The quality and character of school life that is based on patterns of students' parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and that reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (The National School Climate Center, 2020).

5. *School Engagement* – School engagement is characterized by the existence of strong relationships among everyone who is part of the school including students, teachers, families and the larger community; respect for all individuals and opinions across race, culture, sexual orientation, and religions; and involvement and participation in school activities (United States Department of Education, 2020).

6. *School Environment* – School environment includes school size and the existence of learning communities, the physical design of the school, adequate facilities, a strong academic environment, accessible supports for school-based health and wellness, and a disciplinary policy that is fair, clear, understandable, and consistently enforced (United States Department of Education, 2020).

7. *School Safety* – School safety includes school and activities related to school where students can be assured they are safe, both physically and emotionally, from perceived and actual risk including victimization, bullying, harassment, access to and use of substances, and emergency plans that are in place that can be implemented when necessary (United States Department of Education, 2020).

8. *Tennessee Educator Survey* – An annual survey distributed by the Tennessee Department of Education to all teachers, administrators, and certified staff aimed at collecting information about teacher perceptions of school climate, leadership, rigor, time use, parental engagement, empowered teachers, support and policies and practices (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020).

Delimitations

Several delimitations are associated with this study:

1. This study included only public elementary and high schools in the First Congressional District of Tennessee and did not include middle or intermediate schools.

2. This study only included data from the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.

3. The Tennessee Educator Survey was only distributed to certified school personnel. Non-certified and support staff were not included.

4. The specific questions selected for analysis from the Tennessee Educator Survey include only those questions that directly align with the National School Climate Center's School Climate Model.

Limitations

There are several limitations with this study.

1. In order for school climate data to be published on the Tennessee Department of Education website, schools must have had a minimum return rate of 45%. Therefore, data were not available for schools with a survey return rate of less than 45%.

2. In order for a school to be included in this study, school climate data and chronic absenteeism data must have been available for both the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019

school years. If data were missing for either variable for either of the school years, the school was not included in this study.

3. While rates of chronic absence are listed by school each year, there is no way to know if a consistent and uniform process was used across schools to track and document student absenteeism.

4. The Tennessee Educator Survey is only distributed electronically. No paper copies were available for completion.

Overview of Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 contains an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study and definitions of key terms. In addition, Chapter 1 includes the guiding research questions, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 2 contains a review of literature that focuses on aspects of chronic absenteeism including factors related to chronic absence and outcomes associated with chronic absenteeism. The review of literature also focuses on aspects of school climate including the three overarching areas of school climate, school climate as a school improvement strategy and outcomes associated with positive and negative school climates. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and data collection process for this study. Chapter 4 includes the data, analysis, and results of obtained data. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary, discussion, and recommendations for future practice and research.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

The overall environment at the school-wide level, commonly referred to as school climate, and the relationship it has to various student outcomes has been of increased interest to educators, school and district leaders, researchers and policy-makers for decades (Maxwell et al., 2017). According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), school climate refers to aspects of the school environment that make students feel academically challenged, physically and emotionally safe, and valued and connected to their school settings. School climate involves ensuring students physical, social and emotional safety, promoting social acceptance and opportunities for participation for students and families, creating a teaching and learning environment with high expectations and support for learning and achievement for all students, and using fair and restorative disciplinary practices that are consistently implemented by all staff for all students. An increased focus on school climate has emerged in recent years given increased demands for school accountability.

There has been an increased focus on student chronic absenteeism in recent years as chronic absence is a growing issue for public schools across the country. According to the United States Department of Education (2017), in the school year 2015-2016, over 7 million students, or 16% of the nation's student population, missed 15 or more days of school. The issue of chronic absenteeism can have far reaching, long-term effects. Efforts aimed at improving attendance could have a substantial pay-off in students' eventual success in college and careers, but problems with attendance are often dismissed as being of low importance compared to progress on tests (Allensworth et al., 2014). Examining and determining factors that may correlate with rates of chronic absenteeism is of utmost importance for school and districts leaders and public policymakers. Perceptions and aspects of school climate may play an important role in

influencing or impacting chronic absenteeism rates among students, yet little research has evaluated how school climate constructs relate to chronic absenteeism.

This chapter begins with a discussion of Ecological Systems Theory, the theoretical framework for this study. Aspects of chronic absenteeism are then examined and include various statistics and studies concerning factors that contribute to chronic absence and associated student outcomes. School climate is defined and the measurement and use of aspects of school climate as a school improvement strategy is explored. In addition, the associations between school climate and various student outcomes is explored. Connections between chronic absenteeism and school climate are explored and supported through supporting literature and research.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory

The overarching theoretical framework for this study has drawn heavily upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory that focused on a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's model has provided a comprehensive conceptual rationale of how central social contexts in a child's life interact and influence key outcomes including social and emotional adjustment and school performance and engagement (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Bronfenbrenner's model consists of four environmental levels – the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem – with each level impacting differently the development of each person (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Fundamentally, development is the process of transacting with and adapting to the environment people experience as they change biologically (Shelton, 2018).

According to the bio-ecological model, a child's behavior is strongly influenced by the forces in the social environments they inhabit such as environments in classrooms, schools, home and the surrounding community (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Bronfenbrenner identified the need for researchers and practitioners to pay close attention to the individual developing in a complexity of interacting systems (Hayes et al., 2017). Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's theory specified that researchers should study the settings in which a developing individual spends time and their relations with others in the same settings, the personal characteristics of the individual and those with whom he or she typically interacts, development over time and within cultural context, and the mechanisms that drive development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner asserted that these environments or systems must first be understood independently and then according to how interactions in one environment may influence interactions in a different environment. Thus, what happens or fails to happen in any given environment could depend to a large extent on the nature of events and relationships in other related environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's Microsystem. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem, which represents level one in the model, is defined as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics. Settings that may be included in the microsystem include the child's classroom, school playground, home, religious institution or any neighborhood organization. Researchers have documented that for elementary school-age children, the most prominent microsystems are the family and home environment and the school (Sugrue et al., 2011). In addition to setting, any transaction between the child and any other person is a microsystem transaction; thus, interactions in well-running microsystems are

considered to be the provision of high quality, friendly, and diverse learning environments for all (Tahir et al., 2019). The microsystem areas that directly influence child and adolescent mental health, wellness, and engagement include the school and classroom climates, the home environment, and the student's relationships with their parents, peers, and teacher(s) (Burns, 2013).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory on child development informs the conceptualization of personalized learning environments by identifying important attributes in students, key social relationships, and primary social contexts that influence students' social, emotional, and physical well-being (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Personalized learning is one characteristic of a diverse learning environment and involves instruction that is differentiated, paced and shaped to the needs of the learner and by the learning preferences and interests of the learner. Important in constructing personalized learning environments is an understanding of the developmental needs and functioning of the learner and the environments and forces that shape the learners' experiences and adjustments. Personalized learning is intended to increase motivation and engagement by increasing students' autonomy and self-direction (Pane et al., 2015). Personalized learning includes teachers' awareness of students' needs and attributes in order to scaffold their learning to foster self-direction and self-efficacy and enhance social and emotional competencies (Taylor & Gebre, 2016).

In terms of the school microsystem, workers in one study identified the relationship between the child and his or her teacher, specifically in terms of how the child felt the teacher treated or felt about him or her, as being a major factor that influenced a child not coming to school (Sugrue et al., 2016). Lippard et al. (2017) conducted a study to test Bronfenbrenner's theory concerning relationships at the microsystem level by investigating teacher-child

relationships through teacher reports and classroom observations. Researchers found that the quality of teacher-student relationships was significantly related to school attendance, classroom behavior, and academic achievement suggesting that strong, supportive relationships were important for a child's development. Supportive relationships with adults at school may be particularly important for Black youth who must navigate divergent cultural and ecological terrain between school, home, and neighborhood and cope with experiences of prejudice and differential treatment at school (Bottiani et al., 2014). Indeed, research suggests not only that Black youth report lower ratings of support and connectedness relative to other marginalized groups, but also that lower levels of support among Black youth may contribute to racial disparities in school engagement (Furlong et al., 2011).

In a similar study (Allen et al., 2013), researchers used multilevel modeling techniques with a sample of students enrolled in secondary classrooms in order to test prediction of future student achievement from observed teacher interactions with students in the classroom. The researchers found that after accounting for baseline achievement and prior test performance, qualities of teacher interactions with students predicted student performance on end of year tests. In addition, they found that classrooms characterized by a positive emotional climate, with sensitivity to adolescent needs and perspectives and use of diverse and personalized instructional learning formats were associated with higher levels of student engagement and student achievement. A similar study (Spilt et al., 2012) focusing on teacher-student relationships in elementary classrooms found that chronic conflict in the classroom was strongly associated with underachievement, and the probability of school disengagement and failure increased as a function of the timing and length of time that children were exposed to relational adversity.

Bronfenbrenner's Mesosystem. Level two of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model is the mesosystem. The mesosystem is defined as the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates; in other words, the mesosystem refers to relations among microsystems or connections among contexts such as the relationship between family experiences and school experiences, between neighborhood and school experiences, and between family and peer experiences (Onwuebuzie et al., 2013). Understanding how mesosystems operate may be the most important application of the bio-ecological model to the creation of personalized and engaging environments for students (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Bronfenbrenner sees the instability and unpredictability of modern family life as a destructive force in a child's life, and if relationships in the immediate family break down, the child will not have the tools necessary to explore and engage with other parts of his mesosystem (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). Students' engagement and performance in school is in part a reflection of their experiences in the home, and knowing more about children's home lives and experiences may provide teachers direction in building family and school connections and in shaping environments and learning contexts that fit the particular needs of their students (Taylor & Gebre, 2016).

A growing body of literature has suggested that parental engagement and the degree of positive connection with the school critically contributes to the improvement of outcomes such as student attendance, learning, healthy development and success in school (Bunting et al., 2013). Community caseworkers identified the most problematic mesosystem factor contributing to chronic absence as communication difficulties between school staff and families, which resulted in parents' lack of understanding of critical school attendance policies and procedures and contributed to parents' negative feelings regarding the school or school system (Sugrue et

al., 2016). In addition to a lack of communication between the school and families regarding important information about student attendance and academic expectations, workers discussed families in which the parents had negative associations with schools based on their experience as students, in general, or families who felt as if school personnel had some sort of vendetta against their child. The strained family-school relationships noted in this study may have contributed to parents not prioritizing their child's regular school attendance.

Research has shown that active partnerships between schools and families has consistently led to better learning outcomes for students of all ages and demographics (Burns, 2013). The disproportionate impact of chronic absence on children from communities of color and those living in poverty makes the strategy of creating warm and engaging school climates and collaborating with families and community partners even more essential (Attendance Works, 2020). Research on parent involvement in education has shown that feeling respected and valued by school staff is a pre-requisite to parents' involvement in their child's education, suggesting that the strained tenor of some of the family-school relationships has contributed to parents not prioritizing their child's regular attendance at school (Sugrue et al., 2016).

Taylor and Gebre (2016) suggested that supportive school environments may buffer against the negative effects of adverse home experiences. O'Malley et al. (2015) examined the moderating effects of school climate on the relation between family structure and academic performance. The authors found that, regardless of family structure (i.e., two-parent, single-parent, foster care, etc.) students with more positive school climate perceptions reported lower rates of school absenteeism and higher grade point averages. Similar results were found in a Georgia state-wide study examining important factors related to middle school students' academic achievement (Huang et al., 2017). Results indicated that student perceptions of

disciplinary structure, academic demandingness, and quality of teacher-student relationships and support all had positive associations with school attendance and student grade point averages.

        Bronfenbrenner's Exosystem. The exosystem, which represents level three, refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect or are affected by what happens in the setting containing the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, the exosystem characterizes links between a social setting in which the person does not have an active role and the person's immediate context (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). These contexts include the parents' workplace, neighborhood or community contexts, and family social network, and in the same manner that relations at home may be reflected in the classroom, events and interactions in social contexts students do not inhabit may have implications for their schooling (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Taylor and Gebre further note that parents' stressful or unstable work experiences appear to negatively impact family life, and children's experiences at home may transfer to the classroom and manifest in the form of poor conduct and disengagement. Neighborhoods characterized by high crime rates and low perceptions of safety may also impact a child or family's level of engagement with that neighborhood school.

        Bronfenbrenner's Macrosystem. Level four, the highest level of Bronfenbrenner's model, is the macrosystem. The macrosystem involves the larger cultural context surrounding the person that includes societal belief systems, cultural and subcultural norms, ideologies, policies or laws that directly influence the person (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). A primary context of the macrosystem for families consists of their socioeconomic status and financial resources (Taylor & Gebre, 2016). Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that to the degree that families have significant financial and material resources, they tend to function well; however, the opposite

tends to be true as access to resources and materials declines. The increase of family stress and economic distress has underscored the importance of strong, supportive teacher-student and school-family relationships so schools may adopt practices aimed at addressing the needs of the most vulnerable. From the perspective of teacher-student and school-family relationships, the Ecological Systems Model provides a conceptual framework from which schools can organize and rationalize information in order to structure optimal environments for the students they serve. A model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is shown below in Figure 1 and illustrates the impact of each system upon a child's development.

Figure 1

Ecological Systems Theory – Bio-ecological Model
Photo credit: http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Bioecological_model
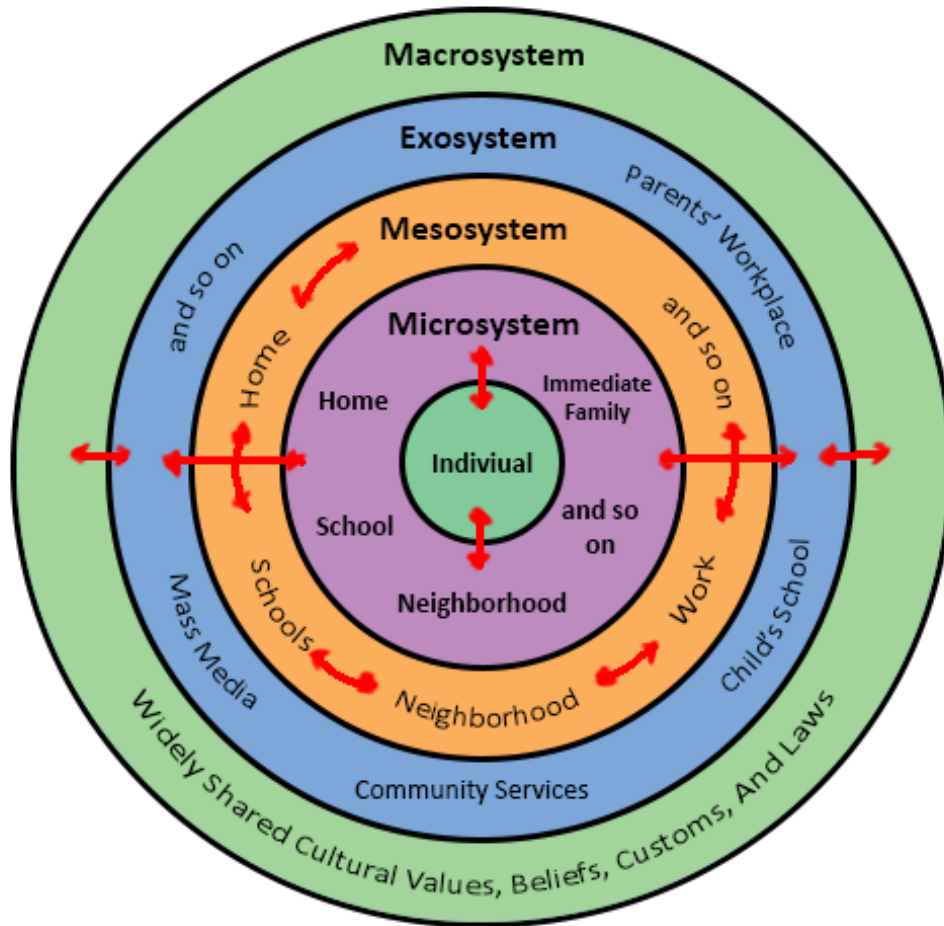
Self-Determination Theory

Though Ecological Systems Theory is the major overarching framework for this study, other theories have relevance and connect with Bronfenbrenner's model. Self-Determination Theory and school refusal should be taken into account when examining chronic absenteeism. In accordance with self-determination theory, the individual's effective functioning depends upon the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs – autonomy, relatedness, and competence – and self-determination theory contends that the interpersonal context plays a

fundamental role in satisfying these needs (Filippello et al., 2019). This theory, similar to the Ecological Systems Theory, posits that factors such as positive student-teacher relationships, engaging instructional strategies and supportive and inclusive classroom environments can motivate students to engage in school and decrease the likelihood of avoidance behaviors.

Chronic Absenteeism Defined

Over the past decade, chronic absenteeism has gone from being a virtually unknown concept to a national education metric that provides every school with critical data revealing how many students miss school so excessively that their academic success is jeopardized (Chang et al., 2018). The United States Department of Education (2017) defined a chronically absent student as one who misses more than 15 days of school in 1 year for any reason, excused or otherwise. Similarly, the Tennessee Department of Education (2020) defined a chronically absent student as one who misses 10% or more of the days the student is enrolled and for any reason including excused absences and out of school suspension. In conjunction with the definition of chronic absenteeism used by the Tennessee Department of Education, Attendance Works (2020), a national initiative focused on reducing chronic absenteeism, also defined a chronically absent student as one who misses 10% or more of enrolled school days for any reason. Several State Departments of Education, including the Tennessee Department of Education, consult or partner with Attendance Works to help address chronic absenteeism among students in their state. For the purposes of this study, a chronically absent student will be defined as one who missed 10% or more of the days in which he or she was enrolled in school.

Demographics Associated with Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism has been called a public health issue and is considered a hidden educational crisis (Allen et al., 2018). The problem of chronic absence is not isolated to certain

geographic regions or among certain subgroups of students; rather, it has affected nearly all school districts with 89% of districts across the country having reported at least some level of chronic absence among students (Attendance Works, 2020). In 59% of schools nationwide in 2014, at least one in 10 students was chronically absent; in addition, an estimated 7.5 million students miss a month of school each year (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

School Size

While most districts experienced some level of chronic absenteeism among students, large urban school districts and schools with high populations of students that meet criteria for low socio-economic status generally experienced higher rates of chronic absence (Garcia & Weiss, 2018; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Maynard et al., 2012). In Detroit, for example, about one third of students reported missing 3 or more days of school in an average month, compared to the 20% national average; Cleveland, the District of Columbia, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, for example, also had higher rates of student absenteeism compared to the national average (Ginsburg et al., 2014). In 2017, Detroit had the highest rate of chronically absent students in the country with 57.3% of students being categorized as chronically absent (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

Socioeconomic Status

In terms of chronic absenteeism and socioeconomic status, national data indicated that higher levels of chronic absence were much more likely in schools with a very high proportion (75% or greater) of students living in poverty than those with a low proportion (25% or less) (Chang et al., 2018). One study found that 23.2% of students eligible for free lunch and 17.9% of students eligible for reduced-price lunch missed three school days or more in a given month, compared to 15.4% of students who were not free or reduced-price lunch eligible (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). The study also found that among students missing more than 10 days of school

over the course of the academic year, the percentage of free or reduced-price lunch eligible students was more than twice as large as the percentage of non-free or reduced-price lunch eligible students. Similarly, a national study of kindergarten students found that 21% of socioeconomically disadvantaged students were chronically absent compared to only 8% of their non-socioeconomically disadvantaged peers (Romero & Lee, 2008). Low levels of chronic absence were most common where a minority of students live in poverty, regardless of locale (Chang et al., 2018; Jordan & Miller, 2017).

Students with Disabilities

According to researchers, students with disabilities were 1.5 times more likely than their non-disabled peers to be chronically absent, and black students were 36 percent more likely to be chronically absent than white students (Allen et al. 2018; Jacob & Lovett, 2017). In a study that examined student absences in the month prior to a scheduled administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, researchers found that 26% of students who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) missed 3 school days or more, compared with 18.3% of non-IEP students (Garcia & Weiss, 2018). National data also indicated that high school students with disabilities were 1.4 times as likely to be chronically absent as high school students without disabilities. In addition, chronic absence among students with disabilities typically peaked in high school where nearly 25% of special education students were chronically absent (Cortiella & Boundy, 2018). According to a report from Attendance Works (2018) on preventing chronic absenteeism among students with disabilities, improving outcomes for students with disabilities will require schools to provide engaging, welcoming and supportive environments and to use proactive problem-solving approaches with families when absences first occur.

Grade Level

Chronic absenteeism has been documented in every level of school from elementary to high school, even though chronic absence has traditionally been viewed as a problem only at the high school level. Studies consistently showed that after initial high rates of absenteeism in kindergarten, rates of chronic absenteeism decreased through the third and fourth grades before rising again in the middle grades and continuing to increase during each grade of high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). According to research from the University of Chicago, on average, unexcused absences among students quadrupled from eighth grade to high school (Allensworth et al., 2014). In analyzing national absenteeism data, researchers found that 45% of high schools had high or extreme chronic absence rates compared to approximately 21% of middle schools and 16% of schools serving elementary students (Chang et al., 2018). For example, in Baltimore's high-poverty neighborhoods of Clifton-Berea, Greenmount, Madison, Midway, and Park Heights, the percentage of students who missed more than a month of school jumped from 15% in the elementary grades to 55% in secondary grades (Balfanz et al., 2007). While rates of chronic absenteeism were often high in the high school grades, nearly one-half of chronically absent students were enrolled in elementary and middle schools, and nationally, 10% of kindergarten and first grade students were chronically absent each year (Allen et al., 2018; Sugrue et al., 2016).

Early Absences

According to research, poor attendance in the first month of school predicted chronic absence for the entire year (Ginsburg et al., 2014; Olson, 2014). A study of Baltimore City Public Schools found that half of the students who missed 2 to 4 days of school in September went on to be chronically absent for the year, missing an average of 25 days by the end of the

school year (Olson, 2014). In addition, nine out of 10 students who missed at least 5 days in September were chronically absent, averaging 70 absences for the school year. Students who missed fewer than 2 days in September, on average, had good attendance rates for the entire school year. A similar study examining student attendance in Washington, DC early education programs found that students who were chronically absent in the previous school year or who were chronically absent in the first month of school were very likely to be chronically absent for the whole school year (Dubay & Holla, 2015). In addition, data showed that students who had attendance problems in prior years were likely to continue to have problems with regular attendance in multiple subsequent years unless intervention occurred.

Tennessee Chronic Absenteeism Data

According to Attendance Works (2018) report on state attendance policies, an analysis of Tennessee's school attendance data showed that chronic absenteeism correlated with lower test scores and higher school dropout rates. The analysis also showed that chronic absence rates were highest in the early grades and again in high school, mirroring findings from prior research by Belfanz and Byrnes (2012). In addition, the analysis showed that chronic absenteeism disproportionately affected some student populations and was highest among Black students, students who were economically disadvantaged and among students with disabilities. Economically disadvantaged students in Tennessee were chronically absent at a rate of two and a half times higher than other students, and black students and students with disabilities also had disproportionately high rates of chronic absence compared to other peers. The report also showed that about half of chronically absent students in the third and ninth grades had been chronically absent for several consecutive school years.

Data from the Tennessee Department of Education (2020) indicated similar trends across recent consecutive years among Tennessee students. Chronic absenteeism data indicated that the rate of chronic absenteeism among all students in kindergarten through 12th grade was 13.1% for the 2018-2019 school year. By grade bands, the rate of chronic absenteeism for students in kindergarten through eighth grade was 10.4% whereas the rate for students in grades nine through twelve was 19.3%. When categorized by other descriptors, the rate of chronic absenteeism among all economically disadvantaged students in 2018-2019 was 19.8%; by grades bands, the rate of chronic absenteeism for economically disadvantaged students in kindergarten through grade eight was 16.6% while the rate for students in grades nine through twelve was 30.4%. Additionally, the overall rate of chronic absenteeism for African American students in 2018-2019 was 17.2% compared to 10.9% for white students. The rate of chronic absenteeism for African American students in kindergarten through grade eight was 13.8% compared to 9.2% for white students, and the rate for African American students in grades nine through twelve was 25.7% compared to 14.8% for white students. Data indicated that in Tennessee, rates of chronic absenteeism are highest among students who are economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities and students who are African American. Additionally, there were higher rates of chronic absenteeism in grades nine through 12 for all students state-wide as well as for all subgroups.

Outcomes Associated with Chronic Absenteeism

Research has documented multiple issues and negative outcomes associated with chronic absenteeism. Chronic absence has been a significant risk factor for school dropout and has been closely associated with academic underachievement, delinquent behaviors, poorer health, and limited economic opportunities (Van Eck et al., 2016). In addition to individual outcomes,

research has found that classrooms with high rates of absenteeism have spillover effects with lower test scores observed for all students in the classroom, even students with good attendance (Gottfried, 2014).

Achievement

A recent report found that the association between poor school attendance and lower scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress was robust and held true for every state and for each of the 21 urban school districts included in the report regardless of size, region or composition of the student population (Ginsburg et al., 2014). In addition to lower test scores, proficiency rates in math and literacy were also lower for students who missed more school. High levels of absenteeism as early as kindergarten have been associated with long-term consequences including low reading proficiency in third grade and low academic achievement in fifth grade, which correlated with lower rates of high school graduation and college enrollment (Allen et al., 2018; Ginsburg et al., 2014). In addition, poor attendance contributed to the achievement gap for students struggling with poverty and from communities of color (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

Gottfried (2014) examined a national dataset of kindergarten students and found the negative impact of chronic absenteeism among kindergarteners on both academic performance and social-emotional skills needed to persist and engage in learning. Chronically absent kindergarten students consistently performed below their better-attending peers on math and reading skills assessments. The differences were wider in math than in reading, and were particularly pronounced among students who missed four or more weeks of school. Similarly, a longitudinal study examining the possible link between kindergarten readiness and later achievement found that well-being, a factor including regular school attendance, in kindergarten

was significantly related to attendance in third grade (Applied Survey Research, 2018). In addition, regular attendance in third grade was significantly associated with higher literacy and math scores. A separate but related study found that 64% of students with good attendance in kindergarten and first grade scored proficient on California's third grade literacy test compared to only 41% of students who were chronically absent for at least one of those years (Research, A., 2011). With 14 states linking third grade promotion to reading performance, chronic absence could undermine the broader efforts to improve literacy in school across the country (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Harmful consequences of chronic absenteeism could also extend to other students at school since chronically absent students may require additional attention from teachers when they are present at school to address their learning and social needs (Van Eck et al., 2016). Thus, classrooms may becoming less engaging if they move at a slower pace.

Research showed that students' attendance and grade point averages in the middle grades provided the best indication of how they would perform in their high school classes compared to other potential indicators such as test scores (Allensworth et al., 2014). Students who were chronically absent or failing courses in the middle grades were very likely to be off track in ninth grade before they even began high school. In fact, research has shown that the best predictors of passing classes and earning high grades in high school has come from a combination of just two indicators - grades and attendance. Statistical models showed that almost all of the gap in GPA between eighth and ninth grade could be explained by students' attendance and study habits, and although grades provided a good indicator of on-track performance, attendance provided a much better indication than test scores of who was likely to struggle (Allensworth et al., 2014; Stempel et al., 2017). Figure 2 shows the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics scale scores of eighth grade students in 2017, by race/ethnicity and the number of

days absent from school in the month prior (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017). A score of 262 reflected basic math skill; a score of 299 reflected proficiency. Across all races/ethnicities, mathematics scores declined as the number of absences increased. No student who missed 5-10 days or more achieved proficiency.

Figure 2

2017 NAEP Mathematics Scale Scores of Eighth Grade Students and Number of Days Absent
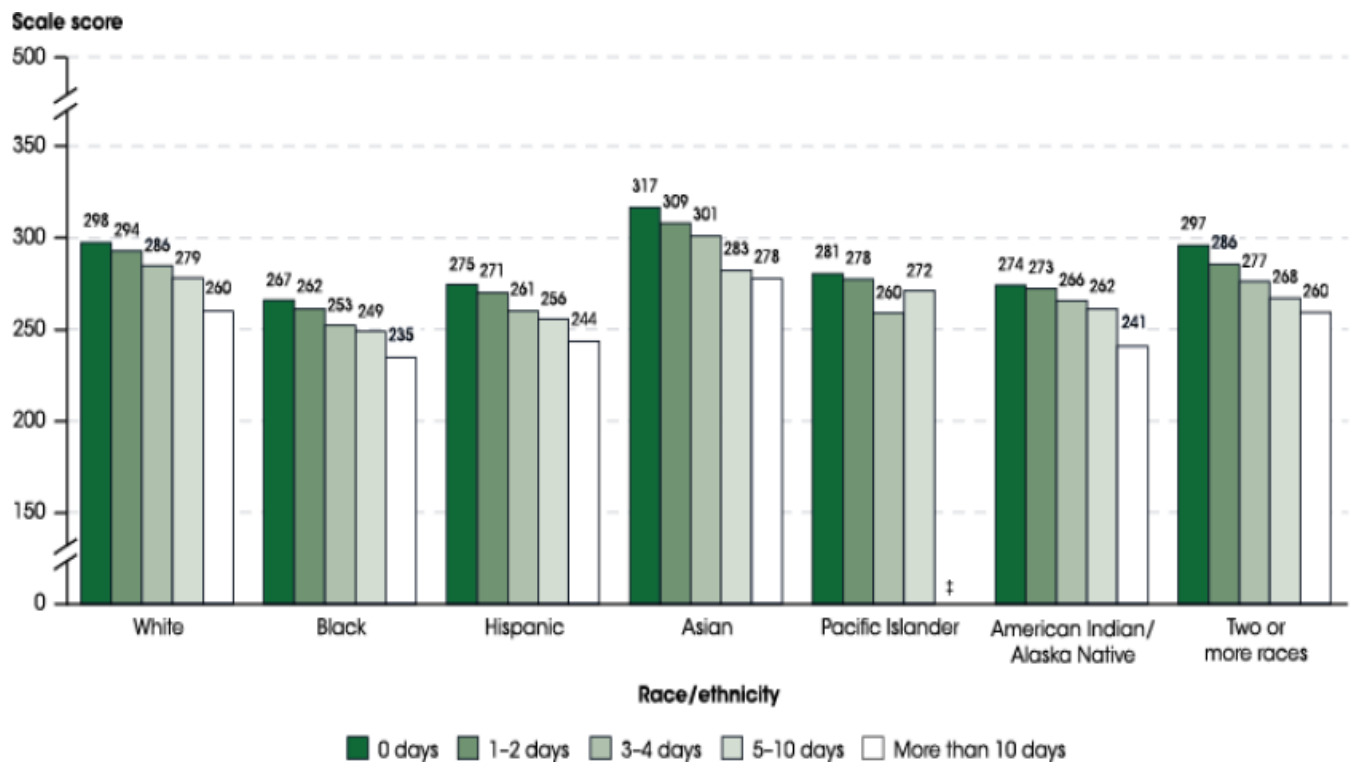
Promotion

Students who were chronically absent in high school have had a much lower likelihood of graduating high school or completing a college program (Rogers et al., 2017). A study of Philadelphia public school data found that attendance was the strongest predictor of high school

dropout; specifically, students who attended school less than 80% of the time had a 10 – 20% percent chance of graduating on time from high school. Additional studies have shown that students who were chronically absent were as much 68% less likely to graduate than their regularly attending peers (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Statistics from a Rhode Island Department of Education study that tracked a cohort of students throughout their academic careers showed that 85% of students who dropped out of high school were or had been chronically absent for at least 1 year during high school (RI DataHUB, 2019). In addition, study results indicated that only 39% of students who were chronically absent in high school persisted into a second year of post-secondary education as compared to the 68% of students who persisted who were not chronically absent in high school. A longitudinal study by the Utah Education Policy Center followed all public school students in the state who entered eighth grade in 2006 until their graduation (The University of Utah, 2012). Researchers found that students who were chronically absent in any year, beginning in the eighth grade, were 7.4 times more likely to drop out of school than students who were not chronically absent during any of those years. In addition, as shown in Table 1, it was noted that successive years of chronic absence resulted in dramatic increases in graduation failure.

Table 1

High School Dropout Rate by Years of Chronic Absence

Number of Years Chronically Absent	Percent Who Dropped Out
0	10
1	36
2	52
3	59
4	61

Other Outcomes

Regardless of whether absences were excused or unexcused, chronic absenteeism typically resulted in poor academic outcomes and has been linked to multiple poor health outcomes (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Several studies documented specific concerns associated with chronic absence including serious social, mental and physical health problems among chronically absent students (Maynard et al., 2012; Kearney, 2008)). For example, chronic absence has been strongly related to mental health concerns such as increased risk for suicidal behavior, anxiety and depression as well as higher levels of chronic disease, substance abuse and even early death (DeWit et al., 2011; Stempel et al., 2017).

Frequent absences were associated with negative outcomes for children of all socioeconomic groups; however, chronic absenteeism perpetuated economic and social disadvantages in children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). For example, studies showed that children who frequently missed school were also at risk of related adult sequelae later in life such as unemployment, lower income, frequent work absences, and poorer health (Sugrue et al., 2016). Literature revealed that adults who had poor school attendance and lower educational attainment were less likely to report having a fulfilling job, having feelings of control over their own lives and feelings of having high levels of social support (Rogers et al., 2014). In addition, chronic absenteeism has been associated with engagement in risky behaviors including tobacco or marijuana usage, alcohol and/or drug use or abuse, and risky sexual behaviors (Robertson & Walker, 2018).

Factors Related to Chronic Absenteeism

Frequent school absences have been associated with a variety of negative outcomes, therefore it has been crucial for school leaders and stakeholders to examine factors related to

chronic absenteeism. Current literature on chronic absenteeism in young children has identified

multiple contributing factors including family mobility, living with single parent, poverty, mental

health issues, parental employment, lack of parental understanding about school policies and

priorities, and lack of connection with school personnel (Reid, 2012). These factors have been

indicators of families with fewer opportunities and higher levels of instability and stress.

Socioeconomic Status

In examining the relationship between socioeconomic status and school attendance, state

and national data showed that students from low income families are far more likely to be

chronically absent than their more affluent peers (Ginsburg et al., 2014). At the school and

community level, national data suggested that higher rates of chronic absenteeism were much

more likely in schools with a very high proportion of students living in poverty than those with a

low proportion living in poverty (Chang et al., 2018). At the individual student level, students

who received assistance from Free and Reduced Meals programs were three times more likely to

be chronically absent from school than their more affluent peers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

A number of contributing factors for particularly high rates of chronic absenteeism

among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been identified and included issues

such as challenges with reliable transportation to and from school, lack of access to health care,

constraints associated with single parenting, community safety issues or neighborhood violence,

and unstable housing (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Stempel et al., 2017). A

nationally representative study suggested that students who experienced multiple adverse

childhood experiences, especially neighborhood violence or family substance abuse, were

significantly more likely to be chronically absent (Allison & Attisha, 2019; Stempel et al., 2017).

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who were chronically absent may have also

faced other barriers including being involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice system, having an undiagnosed or untreated disability, or they may not have found the school or school environment to be a welcoming or inclusive place (Chang et al., 2018). In addition, children from low income families and children of color may have experienced lower rates of school engagement and higher rates of school absenteeism as a result of economic inequality and educational inequities, neighborhood and school segregation which resulted in different schooling experiences for children of different races/ethnicities, the assignment of less experienced teachers to classrooms and schools with high concentrations of low income students and students of color, and structural racism and implicit bias leading to differential treatment at school according to the child's race (Ginsburg et al., 2014).

Academically, low income students may have been at a greater disadvantage when they were absent as their families may have lacked the resources or support to make up for lost instructional time (Fantuzzo et al., 2013). Schools with higher concentrations of students from any of these family dynamic situations may have had overall school climates that reflect this disadvantage, stress, and instability. While research has shown that greater poverty could be predictive of higher levels of absenteeism, it is equally important to note that some high poverty schools have had low rates of chronic absenteeism because they have adopted effective, prevention-oriented approaches to motivate daily attendance and help students and families overcome challenges and barriers to regularly attending school (Chang et al., 2018). When schools have had high or extreme levels of chronic absenteeism, those rates could have indicated that multiple causes of chronic absence existed for large numbers of students and could have been a warning sign that there were inadequate tier one level supports for engagement and prevention of absenteeism.

Health Needs

Students who have struggled academically, socially, and behaviorally may have also became increasingly absent from school if schools were unable to meet their needs (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Lipkin and Okamoto (2015) indicated that providing health care or additional health supports can lessen student absenteeism. Students have traditionally had a wide array of physical health needs, and not having access to a school nurse or health clinic may have resulted in being sent home or being absent from school altogether. School nurses have had the expertise to identify and intervene on health issues that may have affected the learning environment or the student's ability to function adequately in the classroom and have helped to ensure supports such as 504 plans or other student health care plans were appropriately designed and implemented.

In addition to physical health needs, school absenteeism has been associated with mental and social health needs as well. Students who experienced victimization at school, including various types of bullying, harassment, violence, or exclusion, were more likely to miss school or drop out altogether without adequate social and mental health supports (Kosciw et al., 2017). Studies revealed that conduct disorder and depressive symptoms could lead to chronic absence, and conversely, chronic absence could be a contributor to conduct disorder and depressive symptoms (Gase et al., 2014). Other studies have shown that children's mental health issues were viewed as impeding a child's ability to follow morning routines necessary to get to school consistently and contributing to negative feelings about school, increasing the likelihood of school refusal behavior (Sugrue et al., 2011). Evidence has shown that having mental and social health supports, such as school and community-based counselors and positive behavior programs, in place at schools could have a positive effect on student attendance and engagement (Stripling, 2019).

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Student Support

Ineffective discipline, lack of appropriate or engaging instruction and lack of meaningful relationships has been shown to perpetuate chronic absence (Van Eck et al., 2016). As students transitioned from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school, the level of support declined while expectations for autonomy increased as youth moved from a single classroom structure to switching classes for each subject; the number of students each teacher interacted with also increased (Sugrue et al., 2016). For youth who were not ready to assume a new level of responsibility, this shift may have led to chronic absence in middle school with social and academic vulnerabilities and escalating increases in chronic absence during high school. In fact, research has shown that absences increased dramatically from eighth to ninth grade, driving course failure and low grades in high school, even among students with strong test scores (Allensworth et al., 2014). It is important to note at this point that some high school students, especially those who provide their own transportation to school, may become chronically absent through their own refusal to attend school unrelated to other causes listed above.

While a number of factors related to chronic absenteeism are widely documented, much less attention has been given to the issue of student disengagement. Students were more likely to be chronically absent from and drop out of larger schools, highlighting the importance of connectedness to teachers and peers (DeWit et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Researchers who worked with urban schools on student engagement suggested that a middle or high school student's decision to not attend school regularly, to misbehave, or to expend low effort were all consequential behavioral indicators of a student's growing disengagement from school and thus might be strongly predictive of chronic absenteeism or dropping out (Balfanz et

al., 2007). Students demonstrated engagement behaviorally by attending school regularly and participating in school activities, affectively by feelings of pride and attachment to their school, and cognitively by engaging in studying and learning (Konold et al., 2018). High engagement was consistently related to outcomes such as high attendance rates, high course grades and high achievement test scores (Fredricks et al., 2016). During adolescence, students who became disengaged from school were more likely to exhibit problem behaviors such as substance use and delinquency, chronic absenteeism, and were more likely to eventually drop out of school (Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

Research has shown that students who feel more connected to teachers and peers show better attendance and lower rates of dropout (Hawkrigg & Payne, 2014; Kidger et al., 2012). Teachers have traditionally served as mentors, role models, sources of encouragement and support, and representatives of the educational system. Research has shown that as students' perceptions of student-teacher relationships improved, the likelihood of chronic absenteeism and dropping out decreased (Peguero & Bracy, 2014). Students' relationships with teachers have also shaped students' motivation and behavior in school as well as influenced their educational progress and success. Research consistently revealed that adolescents who reported healthy and strong relationships with their teachers showed improved school attendance, educational achievement, motivation, cognitive, emotional, and social development, prosocial behavior, and self-esteem (Hawkrigg & Payne, 2014; Peguero & Brady, 2014). Likewise, adolescents who perceived their relationships with teachers as poor demonstrated diminished social, emotional, and behavioral responses to their education (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Research on early teacher-child relationships and the trajectory of children's outcomes revealed that relational negativity in kindergarten, marked by conflict and dependency, was related to academic and

behavioral outcomes through eighth grade, particularly for boy and children with high levels of behavior struggles in kindergarten (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The associations remained significant even after controlling for gender, ethnicity, and cognitive ability.

The presence of positive and respectful relationships, emotional safety, physical safety, high academic standards, and positive school discipline are key components of most school climate models, and each has been positively associated with various student outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Positive school climate has been shown to foster higher attendance and greater student engagement in school while other studies have found that engagement has led to greater learning and academic success (Konold et al., 2018). In essence, school climate could serve as a valuable link between school attendance, student engagement and student achievement.

Family Engagement

A growing body of literature suggests that parental engagement and the degree of positive connection with the school has critically contributed to the improvement of multiple outcomes including school attendance, learning and achievement, healthy development, and overall success in school (Bunting et al., 2013). In a study identifying determinants of chronic absenteeism, positive parent-school connections were found to be associated with lowered odds of absenteeism (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). A similar study found that when teachers engaged with parents through home visits, subsequent student absences dropped by 20% (Waterford, 2018).

Engaging with parents and guardians has been shown to strengthen the connection between school and home and could help keep parents informed of crucial information such as student attendance and academic progress (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Rogers and Feller (2018) found that parents may be unaware of school attendance policies or how their student's

attendance compared with class or school averages. A survey conducted in the school district of Philadelphia in 2014 found that 61% of guardians of students in the bottom fifth in terms of attendance believed that their child's attendance rate was the same as that of classmates, believed that it was better than that of classmates, or did not know how it compare (School District of Philadelphia, 2015).

Two recent small-scale randomized experiments designed to deliver a range of information to guardians of high school students, including information about the importance of regular school attendance, showed surprisingly large increases in subsequent student attendance. Along with a host of other organizations, The National Center on Educational Outcomes, has recommended that school systems design policies and procedures that initiate early and frequent communication with parents about student absences (Cortiella & Boundy, 2018). In addition, multiple studies have shown that policies that promote parent and community engagement and positive school climate have significantly impacted student attendance (Thapa et al., 2013).

School Climate Defined

School climate is a broad term encompassing various aspects of perceptions of the schooling experience. While there has not been a single widely accepted, widely used definition of school climate, most definitions have contained similar elements that relate to how members of the school community perceive aspects of school environment and overall operations. According to the National School Climate Center (2020), school climate refers to the quality and character of school life and is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. The National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, an organization formed by the U.S. Department of

Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, has defined a positive school climate as one that fosters safety, promotes a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment, and encourages and maintains respectful, caring, and trusting relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). According to the Safe and Supportive Schools Model shown in Figure 3, which was developed by a national panel of researchers and other experts, positive school climate involves three key areas: engagement, safety and environment.

Figure 3

Safe and Supportive Schools Model
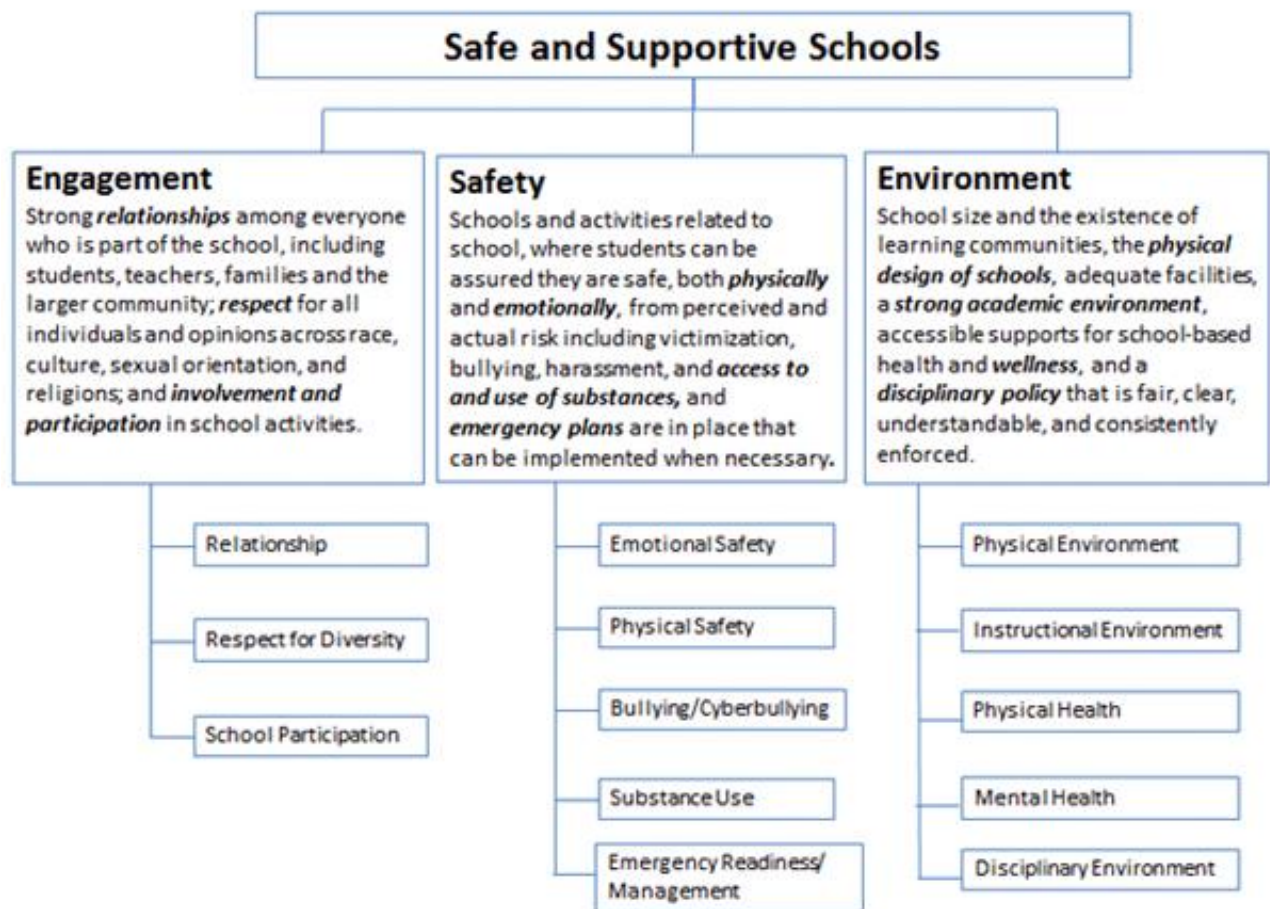
The Tennessee Department of Education's definition and framework for school climate has aligned with those provided by national guiding organizations. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), school climate refers to aspects of the school environment that make students feel academically challenged, physically and emotionally safe, and valued and connected to their school settings. The Department further stated that school climate involves ensuring students' physical and emotional safety, promoting social acceptance and opportunities for participation for students and families, creating a teaching and learning environment with high expectations and support for learning achievement for all students, and using fair and restorative disciplinary practices that are consistently implemented by all staff for students. In order to assist schools in improving academic outcomes through enhanced conditions for learning, the Tennessee Department of Education created a school climate model that outlines aspects of a positive school climate aligned with the model above and includes the same three main areas of climate including school engagement, school safety and school environment.

Measuring School Climate

School climate has been studied at the group level by aggregating the data collection of the different actors (students, teachers, administrators, parents) involved in the school context (Cornell et al., 2016). Despite agreement among researchers on the importance of evaluating school climate based on different perspectives in the school community, findings have revealed a tendency to dismiss climate reports of teachers and school staff as the vast majority of studies have been based solely on student climate reports (Berkowitz et al., 2017). However, due to changes in state and federal policies as well as logistical and fiscal limitations, researchers have increasingly relied upon teachers' reports of school climate dimensions in order to investigate the

developmental impact of these dimensions and to evaluate efforts to enhance the impact of school environments on the development of youth (Brand et al., 2008).

Climate survey results have shown stakeholders whether students and teachers feel socially, emotionally and physical safe and supported at school and whether issues such as bullying, harassment or lack of meaningful connections contribute to student chronic absenteeism (Chang et al., 2018). Recently, Fatou and Kubiszewski (2018) found that the quality of the school climate perceived by students and teachers explained a high proportion of variance in the level of engagement in school activities, showing a direct impact of school environment on the interest students develop in learning and in participating to educational proposals. Correlating teacher and student perceptions of school climate has been a recent topic of discussion and study due to the limited amount of perception data available to schools and districts. Brand et al. (2008) found that teachers' climate ratings exhibited a robust dimensional structure, high levels of internal consistency, and moderate levels of stability of two-year time spans; additionally, teachers' climate ratings were also found to be related consistently with students' ratings and various outcomes. For example, Brand et al. noted that in three large-scale samples of schools, teachers' climate ratings were associated significantly and consistently with students' performance on standardized tests of academic achievement, and with indices of their academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional adjustment.

School Climate as a School Improvement Strategy

Attention to the issue of equitable school climate has emerged as educators endeavor to improve school climate for all students (Ross, 2013). In the United States and around the world, there has been a growing interest in school climate reform and a recognition of school climate as a viable, data-driven area for school improvement that can promote safer, more equitable, and

more supportive and engaging schools. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Institute for Educational Sciences, a growing number of State Departments of Education, foreign educational ministries, and UNICEF have focused on school climate reform as an evidence-based school improvement strategy that supports students, parents/guardians, and school personnel learning and working together to create safer, more supportive and engaging K-12 schools (Cohen et al., 2013).

School level constructs such as school climate have been especially relevant since almost all accountability systems have focused mainly on the aggregated school level and decisions and improvement planning have been based on assessing schools as individual units (Benbenishty et al., 2016). This recognition of school climate as an essential component of school improvement has been timely given the rise of initiatives to increase school climate accountability through federal grant opportunities and statewide efforts to measure this construct (La Salle et al., 2016). For example, in 2014, the United States Department of Education issued guidelines for improving school climate and awarded $70 million in school climate transformation grants to districts in 38 states (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In addition, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 encouraged schools to measure school climate and safety as nonacademic indicators of school quality or student success (U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

A school's climate has been shown to influence the implementation and efficacy of all other improvement efforts (La Salle et al., 2016). Several national guides for school improvement planning have recommend assessing school climate and developing specific and measurable goals to improve school climate since this component of a school has heavily influenced student learning and outcomes and should be made a high priority for school improvement planning and initiatives (Brickmore et al., 2020; Caskey at al., 2016; Hanover

Research, 2014). In addition, whole school climate improvement efforts have powerfully

influenced the prevention of socioemotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties and have

supported successful student development and outcomes (Mehta et al., 2013; Thapa et al., 2013).

In addition to student development and outcomes, an unhealthy school climate can lead to

ineffectiveness among school staff (Vos et al., 2012). Given that the overall climate of an

organization can have a significant effect on the job satisfaction levels of employees, it is crucial

to evaluate organizational health in order maintain positive work performance.

Hanover (2014) identified several concrete variables that have allowed school districts to

include school climate in their improvement plans including student/teacher climate surveys,

student attendance and chronic absenteeism rates, rates of misconduct and violence,

infrastructure improvement, parent engagement and satisfactions metrics, and teacher and staff

member attendance and retention rates. Stakeholders at multiple levels have played critical roles

in reviewing and analyzing school data, helping to understand the scale and size of challenges or

barriers to student success, and planning and developing solutions based on a clear understanding

of those barriers (Chang et al., 2018). School leaders who have exhibited collaborative decision-

making when developing strategies for the management and improvement of climate and

organizational health have been shown to positively impact teacher perceptions of school climate

(Allen et al., 2015).

The state of Georgia represents one example of statewide efforts to integrate school

climate as part of an accountability and school improvement tool (Thapa, 2013). Georgia was the

first state in the nation to include school climate as an early indicator in its academic

accountability system (Georgia Department of Education, 2014). Georgia state law has required

the use of a "star rating" system and diagnostic tool to address school climate. The School

Climate Star Rating was developed to provide feedback to schools on a number of school-climate related variables including school environment, school safety, and school attendance in order to inform school improvement planning processes (Thapa, 2013). Under the rating system, each schools has received a 1-5 star rating, with five stars representing an excellent school climate, and one star representing a school climate most in need of improvement (Georgia Department of Education, 2014). Schools had access to a comprehensive report which allowed them to identify specific areas in need of improvement and subsequently plan targeted interventions to improve outcomes for all students.

California has also been a leader in this shift. The California Office to Reform Education and the California Department of Education has included measures of school climate in their accountability systems since 2013 (Voight et al., 2013). As part of the California Department of Education's funding stipulations, districts in the state have been required to work with parents, students, staff, and community members to identify needs related to improving school climate, create an action plan to address the needs, and indicate how progress was measured.

A recent analysis of two school climate studies from New York City indicated associations between school climate and student attendance rates (Hamlin, 2020). The degree of student absenteeism signaled the need for investigation of attributing factors, including school climate. Attendance Works has supported a model for systemic change around chronic absenteeism that includes five action areas for schools to evaluate and improve:

1. Family engagement
2. Actionable data collection and use by school staff
3. Capacity building to engage in effective problem solving
4. Shared accountability for addressing issues

5. The development of strong relationships and strategic partnerships with the community

   (North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, 2019).

Interestingly, each of the five areas identified for systemic change around chronic absenteeism

correspond to at least one of the three main components of the Safe and Supportive Schools

School Climate model: engagement, safety, and environment.

The School Environment and Attendance Tool is an evaluation tool developed by

Attendance Works and has helped school leaders engage students, parents, school staff and

community members in assessing the strengths and opportunities related to the underlying issues

that correspond to student attendance, including climate, culture and the physical environment

(Chang et al., 2018). When these areas of school climate were consistently assessed and

analyzed, leaders and the school community as a whole have better identified barriers to success

and have developed plans for improvement in the areas where barriers exist. Allocating resources

for tier one and tier two supports such as school nurses, counselors and mental health providers,

bullying or anti-violence education programs, mentoring programs, trauma-sensitive professional

development opportunities for staff, and improvement of school infrastructure have been critical

components of school improvement planning related to student attendance and school climate

(Allison & Attisha, 2019; Gee et al., 2020; Lawson & Masyn, 2015; Stempel et al., 2017).

According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), data from school climate measures

have allowed the entire education community to better understand the relationships between

conditions for learning and academic outcomes and to better plan and utilize available time and

resources.

Connecting School Climate and Student Outcomes

School climate may play a critical role in chronic absenteeism, yet little research on the association between these constructs exists (Van Eck et al., 2016). Researchers have found that a positive and caring social and emotional school climate has been found to influence a wide array of adolescent outcomes (Cohen et al., 2013; Thapa, 2013). This includes outcomes such as attendance, motivation, cooperative learning, and test scores; risky behaviors such as bullying and victimization, aggression, risky sexual behavior, alcohol and drug use; and psychological outcomes including psychiatric disorders, depression, anxiety, and well-being (DePedro et al., 2016). Additionally, scholars have found that school climate has mitigated the effects of poverty, war and trauma, community violence, and family stress on schooling, mental health, and social development (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2014; Thapa, 2013). Studies have also demonstrated the protective effect of school climate on youth development in various geographic locales (Thapa, 2013).

Achievement

At the elementary level, researchers have found school and classroom climate to relate positively with school achievement above and beyond student demographic variables (La Salle et al., 2016). In fact, after removing the effect of school climate, researchers found that school composition variables such as socioeconomic status and racial composition explained little variance in mean school achievement. These positive academic outcomes associated with school climate persisted over time and related to future academic success. Researchers in a similar study found that observed emotional support within elementary school classrooms predicted future academic success, even after controlling for current achievement level (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

In a study that analyzed key aspects of school climate and the relationships therein to academic achievement, researchers found that of the individual-level school climate measures, perceptions of student safety and student learning environments were statistically significant (Davis & Kwong, 2015). For each point increase in positive perception of learning environment, the analytic model found an increase in math score by 2.06 points and an increase in reading score by 1.9 points. In addition, the model showed that each point of increase in student perception of school safety correlated with an increase in math score by 1.81 points and in increase in reading score by .85 points. The model also showed students to perform worse in schools with stricter safety enforcement and worse facilities.

Retention and Promotion

Researchers have also shown that school climate has been linked to teacher commitment, motivation to learn, student identity development, student attendance and dropout rates, sense of school community, school satisfaction, school violence, academic achievement, and higher scores on standardized tests (Davis & Kwong, 2015; Schweig et al., 2019). Indices of students' adjustment have been found to be related significantly to teachers' perceptions of students' achievement orientation and the quality of teacher-student relationships, to students' school attendance, disruptiveness, rule cognizance and involvement, and to students' experience of safety and support for cultural pluralism and diversity (Brand et al., 2008). According to United States Department of Education's National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments (2020), a positive school climate was critically related to school success and has improved student attendance, achievement, retention, and even rates of high school graduation. Additionally, research has supported the relationship between several school climate constructs and both student attendance and dropout rates (Van Eck et al., 2016). The Institute for

Educational Sciences included improvement of school climate as a sound strategy for the prevention of chronic absence and school dropout (Clarke et al., 2008).

Chronic absence has been considered a good candidate for an indicator of school quality and climate precisely because multiple studies have found variations in levels of chronic absence across schools facing similar levels of poverty and serving similar ethnic populations (Attendance Works, 2020). In a multilevel latent profile analysis that compared perceptions of school climate with rates of chronic absence, chronic absence was significantly lower in schools with positive climate profiles than in schools with moderate or negative climate profiles (Van Eck et al., 2016). It was also noted that schools labeled as "climate challenged" had significantly higher chronic absence rates than schools that were labeled with a "marginal climate." This study also noted that higher grade level in school was a significant factor in predicting membership in the poor school climate class. In other words, high schools have typically had poorer climate ratings than have elementary schools. These findings align with findings from past studies, which have indicated that students in high school feel more disengaged from school, report few caring adults, and feel less connected to peers (Thapa 2013).

Safety and Order

As schools are formative institutions where youth spend a significant portion of their day, it is reasonable to expect that schools are safe, welcoming places for students and families. The perception of disorderly schools has been shown to negatively affect students' school experiences, behaviors and interactions (Peguero & Bracy, 2014). Dimensions of disorder, such as not feeling safe, learning disruptions, the presence of gangs in school, and racial and ethnic group tensions, have been found to be associated with increased school misbehavior, delinquent behavior, depression, poor cognitive functioning, poor test scores, disengagement and

detachment from school, and diminished overall motivation (Lo et al., 2011; Wang & Dishon, 2013).

A lack of safety can lead to students missing school, which can result in a student being pushed out of school by school disciplinary or criminal sanctions for truancy, dropping out of school as a result of poor academic achievement, or disengaging with school due to the number of days missed. A national survey of high school students found that among students who completed the survey, missing school due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable was related to increased likelihood of not planning to complete high school (Kosciw et al., 2017). In addition, a nationally representative U.S. study found that 8.7% of high school students missed school in the 30 day period prior to survey administration out of fear of a risk for their safety either at school or traveling to school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The same survey found that 19.5% of high school students reported being bullied on school property, and 8% of respondents reported being in a physical fight on school property. Additional survey results revealed that 36.7% of respondents reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness every day for 2 or more weeks in a row during the 12 month period prior to survey administration. The ability and willingness to both recognize and meet the needs of all students has been an important aspect of creating and maintaining a positive school climate.

School Discipline

Another component that may have contributed to chronic absenteeism is the climate created by a school's disciplinary practices (Bottiano et al., 2014). School discipline refers to the rules and strategies applied in school to manage student behavior and practices used to encourage self-discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Approaches to school discipline have ranged from positive and restorative to punitive and exclusionary, and how school discipline has

been addressed has impacted the learning environments of schools. Ineffective or exclusionary disciplinary practices may have contributed to higher rates of chronic absenteeism and more negative perceptions of school climate. Bottiano et al. (2014) suggested that perceptions of differential treatment in areas such as school discipline and discrimination by school staff among youth may have contributed to poor academic outcomes and behavioral outcomes including the determent of school engagement. Historically, Black students and students with disabilities have been disproportionately removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons or suspended from school all together (Hoffman, 2014).

A negative racial climate has also been significantly related to higher rates of discipline and lower grades among racial minority students, which in turn, has adversely impacted college preparation (Thapa, 2013). A recent study found that non-white middle and high school students were significantly more likely than their white counterparts to be members of a negative climate class, which is defined by low levels of caring relationships, school connectedness, safety, and meaningful participation (DePedro et al., 2016). One reason for racial differences in perceptions of school climate may be connected to the context of school communities serving racial minority students. Communities surrounding schools with predominately low socioeconomic status, Black and Latino communities, often have had high levels of poverty and violence, which has adversely affected a school's social and emotional climate. In addition, predominately low socioeconomic status, Black and Latino school communities on average have had significantly higher rates of teacher and principal turnover, suspension and expulsion rates, truancy, and gang membership, which are all factors known to affect a school's climate (Gregory & Skiba, 2010).

An American Psychological Association Task Force concluded that overly-punitive or exclusionary disciplinary measures consistently contributed to worse school climate ratings

(Bottiani et al., 2014). In addition, consistently punitive approaches to discipline have been shown to create a more negative environment for all students, including those without discipline issues (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Adolescents who perceived school rules and discipline practices as just and fair had improved interpersonal relationships with teachers and administrators, strong bonds to their school and education, increased perceptions of school safety and educational achievement, and decreased school misbehavior (Hong & Eamon, 2012). Conversely, students who perceived the school rules and discipline practices as unjust or unfair had weakened bonds to school and their own education, poorer educational progress, and more school misbehavior (Portillos et al., 2012).

Researchers have found that a positive school climate has been associated with a reduction in a student's likelihood of receiving a suspension, no matter their race, economic status, or behavior record in school (Haung & Cornell, 2018). Specifically, researchers found that when educators and administrators focus on creating a positive school climate, the likelihood of a student being suspended decreases by approximately 10%. These findings suggest that a positive school climate can be beneficial for all students, regardless of background.

Engagement

School personnel have been instrumental in establishing learning climates that foster academic excellence and shape the school's cultural attitude toward learning, and in order for students and families to commit to these philosophies, they must trust, respect, and feel respected by teachers and school administrators (Peguero & Bracy, 2014). Schools affected by high poverty and crime, low socioeconomic status, and additional risk-related social issues have often failed to establish a safe and supportive school climate due to the multiplicity of inflowing family and community related stressors placed on the school setting and staff (McCoy et al.,

2013). Researchers have shown, however, that school climate has mediated the relationship between socioeconomic background and academic achievement through strong student and family connectedness and engagement with the school (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Students who feel connected to school were more likely to succeed, have better school attendance, higher grades, and are more likely to graduate high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The impact of school climate may be more important for students from families with low socioeconomic status because it is the accumulation of risk and protective factors that is important in predicting school success (Hopson & Lee, 2011). A school climate marked by supportive relationships among students, teachers, and administrators is likely to help develop and support resilience because it is within the context of these trusting and supportive relationships that students learn essential skills such as coping and problem-solving that are associated with resilience. In a study of an urban middle school sample characterized by low socioeconomic status, Wang and Eccles (2013) observed that several features of school climate were related to higher engagement. Notably, they emphasized the need for schools to be structured by clear expectations for student behavior and to provide an emotionally supportive and caring school environment characterized by strong, trusting relationships among students, teachers, and administrators.

A similar review of high schools concluded that positive school climate led to higher academic achievement when climate was characterized by high academic expectations and high-quality student-teacher relationships (Wang & Degol, 2016). Longitudinal studies have shown that student engagement in high school has been associated with educational and occupational outcomes in adulthood, as it not only predicted academic attainment but also influenced learner's self-concept along with adult educational and occupational achievement regardless of

socioeconomic factors and personality traits (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2014). Such findings indicate that classrooms and schools characterized by strong, trusting relationships, high academic expectations, and positive perceptions of climate have successfully leveled the playing field for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and thus have the potential to narrow achievement gaps between among these students and other groups.

Chapter Summary

Chronic absenteeism is a growing issue in public school across the county. Factors associated with high rates of chronic absenteeism include low socioeconomic status, unstable family structure, lack of supportive relationships between student and teacher and/or family and school, school or community safety issues, lack of communication, disengaging instructional practices, exclusionary or unfair disciplinary practices and perceived negative school environments. Outcomes for students who are consistently chronically absent are unfavorable and include a greater likelihood of declines in physical and mental health, poorer job prospects, lower income, lower levels of educational attainment and increased likelihood of delinquent or risky behavior.

Schools can take steps to mitigate the factors associated with chronic absenteeism by focusing on aspects of school climate. Key areas for focus include establishing supportive relationships with students and families, creating nurturing and personalized learning environments for students, examining disciplinary policies and practices to ensure fairness, and providing access to resources and supports that meet the physical, mental and social needs of all students. By promoting a positive climate, schools can position themselves to offer more equitable educational opportunities, decreased socioeconomic inequalities, and enable more social mobility (Berkowitz et al., 2017). School climate has presented itself as a multi-faceted

component relevant to several risk factors for chronic absence and may have significant

implications for developing interventions to address this public health concern while meeting

requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act, a federal initiative aimed at reducing chronic

absence (Van Eck et al., 2016). In light of current educational policies calling on schools to

decrease chronic absenteeism, investing efforts and resources in improving school climate is a

goal worthy of consideration.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

This study was an examination of the relationship between teacher perceptions of school climate and rates of student chronic absenteeism in public elementary located within the First Congressional District of Tennessee for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a difference in chronic absenteeism among schools rated low positive or high positive for teacher perceptions of school climate. The dependent variable in this study was teacher perception of an identified aspect of school climate, and the independent variable was the rate of student chronic absenteeism. A quantitative framework was used to determine if there were significant differences in chronic absenteeism in schools rated low positive or high positive perceptions of aspects of school climate. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to calculate results of the relationship between teacher perceptions of school climate and overall chronic absenteeism rates. A quasi-experimental design was used in this study because public data already existed and collecting additional data was not necessary.

Research Questions and Null Hypotheses

The following research questions and corresponding null hypotheses guided this study.

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement?

H_01: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement?

H_02: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement.

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety?

H_03: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety.

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety?

H_04: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety.

Research Question 5: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment?

H₀5: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment.

Research Question 6: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment?

H₀6: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment.

Instrumentation

Since 2011, the Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee Education Research Alliance, a research-policy-practice partnership at Vanderbilt's Peabody College of Education and Human Development, have partnered to produce the Tennessee Educator Survey (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). The Tennessee Educator Survey, an annual survey provided to all teachers, administrators, and certified staff aimed at collecting input about what is working and what needs improvement in Tennessee's schools, gathers responses about teacher perceptions of school climate. The Tennessee Educator Survey includes questions on teacher perceptions of the following eight topics:

1. School Climate

2. Leadership

3. Rigor

4. Time Use

5. Parental Engagement

6. Empowered Teachers

7. Support

8. Policies and Practices.

Return rates for the survey have increased each year with 2019 yielding the highest return yet with 62% of all Tennessee educators having completed the survey (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). Results of the Tennessee Educator Survey are posted on the Department of Education's website each year for public inspection and are listed by the individual school level, district level and state-level. Results have yielded similar findings in each category each year with few significant differences noted in overall perceptions from year to year at the state-level. The data on school climate for this study were collected from the Tennessee Educator Survey that was conducted during the spring semester of each school year by the Tennessee Department of Education. The survey was open to all teachers, administrators, and certified staff in Tennessee public schools. Schools and districts with a response rate of at least 45% received aggregate data. 45% was also the minimum response rate necessary for data to be placed on the Tennessee Department of Education website for public view.

For the purposes of this study, public elementary and high schools located in the First Congressional District of Tennessee with data listed on the Department website for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years were included in the sample. This study analyzed data from Tennessee Educator Surveys conducted in spring of 2018 and 2019. Certified personnel who participated in the study answered each question by selecting one of four categories: strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree. Survey responses were confidential; answers and results could not be traced back to the individual survey taker.

For Research Questions 1 and 2 concerning school environment, data were compiled from three questions on the Tennessee Educator Survey that aligned to the School Engagement component of the National Safe and Supportive Schools School Climate Model. For each item on the survey, respondents selected one of four options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree or Strongly Agree. The percentage of respondents in each school that selected each category (strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree) was provided on the Tennessee Department of Education website.

The three questions that were used to measure school engagement were:

1. Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.

2. Parents respond to my suggestions for helping their child.

3. There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within this school.

For Research Questions 3 and 4 concerning school safety, data were compiled from three questions on the Tennessee Educator Survey that aligned to the School Safety component of the National Safe and Supportive Schools School Climate Model. For each item, respondents selected one of four options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree or Strongly Agree. The percentage of respondents in each school who selected each category (strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree) was provided on the Tennessee Department of Education website.

The three items that were used to measure school safety were:

1. Students treat adults with respect at this school.

2. The staff feels comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them with school leaders.

3. School leadership proactively seeks to understand the needs of teachers and staff.

For Research Questions 5 and 6 concerning school engagement, data were compiled from three questions on the Tennessee Educator Survey that aligned to the School Environment component of the National Safe and Supportive Schools School Climate Model. For each item, respondents selected one of four options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree or Strongly Agree. The percentage of respondents in each school that selected each category (strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree) was provided on the Tennessee Department of Education website.

The three items that were used to measure school engagement were:

1. This school effectively handled student discipline and behavioral problems.

2. Teachers in my school are allowed to focus on teaching students with minimal disruptions.

3. I feel pulled in many directions in terms of what to teach and how to teach it.

Tennessee Educator Survey questions have been drawn with explicit permission from other large-scale validated educator surveys including the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Survey, and the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research's 5 Essential Survey Questions (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). All participants received a core survey differentiated by role, and participants received one special topic survey module that was randomly assigned. Survey questions have remained consistent over multiple school years. In addition, participation has been voluntary and individual results have remained confidential. The survey window remained open for a period of at least two weeks each spring in order to allow all educators ample time for completion. In order to encourage a higher return rate, a variety of individual and school-level rewards have been offered for survey completion.

Sample

This study included data from public school systems in the First Congressional District of Tennessee. The First Congressional District is located within the southern Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee and includes the counties of Carter, Cocke, Greene, Hamblen, Hancock, Hawkins, Jefferson, Johnson, Sevier, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington (Tennessee's 1st Congressional District, 2020). In 2018, the First Congressional District had a population of 720,000 people with a median household income of $46,606 (Data USA, 2020). The 3 largest ethnic groups were White (non-Hispanic) 91%, White (Hispanic) 2.75%, and Black or African American (Non-Hispanic) 1.95%. 18% of the population for whom poverty status was determined lived below the poverty line, a number that was higher than the national average of 13.1%.

Each county school system is included in the sample. In addition to the 12 county school systems, six city school systems located within these counties are included in the sample. Specifically, Bristol City Schools and Kingsport City Schools are within Sullivan County. Johnson City Schools are within Washington County. Elizabethton City Schools are within Carter County. Greeneville City Schools are within Greene County, and Newport City Schools are within Cocke County.

The sample consists of 77 elementary schools and 25 high schools. Only public elementary and high schools within the First Congressional District that had climate and chronic absenteeism data available for both the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years were included in the sample. The sample included in the climate portion of this research involved certified school-based personnel employed in the 77 elementary schools and 25 high school in the First Congressional District of Tennessee. The sample for the chronic absenteeism portion of this

research included chronic absenteeism data from the 77 elementary schools and 25 high schools within the First Congressional District.

Data Collection

The climate data collected for this study was obtained from the Tennessee Educator Survey results posted on the Tennessee Department of Education's website. Survey data were compiled for each of the nine questions corresponding with the three main categories of school climate – engagement, safety, and environment. Data were collected for each school in the population for each of the three school years included in the study. School total enrollment number and number of students chronically absent were also collected from the Tennessee Department of Education's website for each school in the population for each of the three school years included in the study.

Data Analysis

All schools in the sample had a majority of responses in the agree and strongly agree categories. Therefore, it was necessary to differentiate between strong positive climates and weak positive climates. For the three questions that comprised each overarching category, percentages for negative responses (strongly disagree, disagree) were added together to produce an overall percentage for each school for strong disagreement and disagreement. Individual school totals for each category were added together to and averaged to produce the median negative score. Schools were then divided into high positive or low positive categories based upon a comparison between their score and the median score for the category. Schools with scores above the median score were coded low positive (higher percentage of negative responses), and schools with scores below the median were coded high positive (lower percentage of negative responses. The process was repeated for each of the three overarching

categories resulting in each school being coded as low positive or high positive for each category of climate.

For chronic absenteeism, the total number of students enrolled in each school was collected along with the total number of students who were chronically absent. The total number of students who were chronically absent was subtracted from the total number of students enrolled in order to obtain the total number of students who were not chronically absent. This process was repeated for each school in the sample.

A two-way contingency table was constructed for each of the overarching categories. This resulted in three contingency tables for high school data and three contingency tables for elementary school data. Column headings on each table included "Low Positive" and "High Positive", and rows were labeled "Chronically Absent" and "Not Chronically Absent." For each category, the total number of students who were chronically absent from schools rated high positive was placed in the cell corresponding to "High Positive, Chronically Absent". The total number of students who were not chronically absent from schools rated high positive was placed in the cell corresponding to "High Positive, Not Chronically Absent". The same process was followed for schools rated low positive. A series of Chi Square analyses were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in chronic absenteeism between schools rated high positive and low positive for each category of school climate. Independent variables were School Environment, School Safety, and School Engagement. The dependent variable was Number of Students Chronically Absent. All data were analyzed at the .05 level of significance.

Chapter 4. Findings

Data were analyzed to identify any significant differences in the number of students who were chronically absent among elementary and high schools rated low positive or high positive for teacher perceptions of school engagement, school 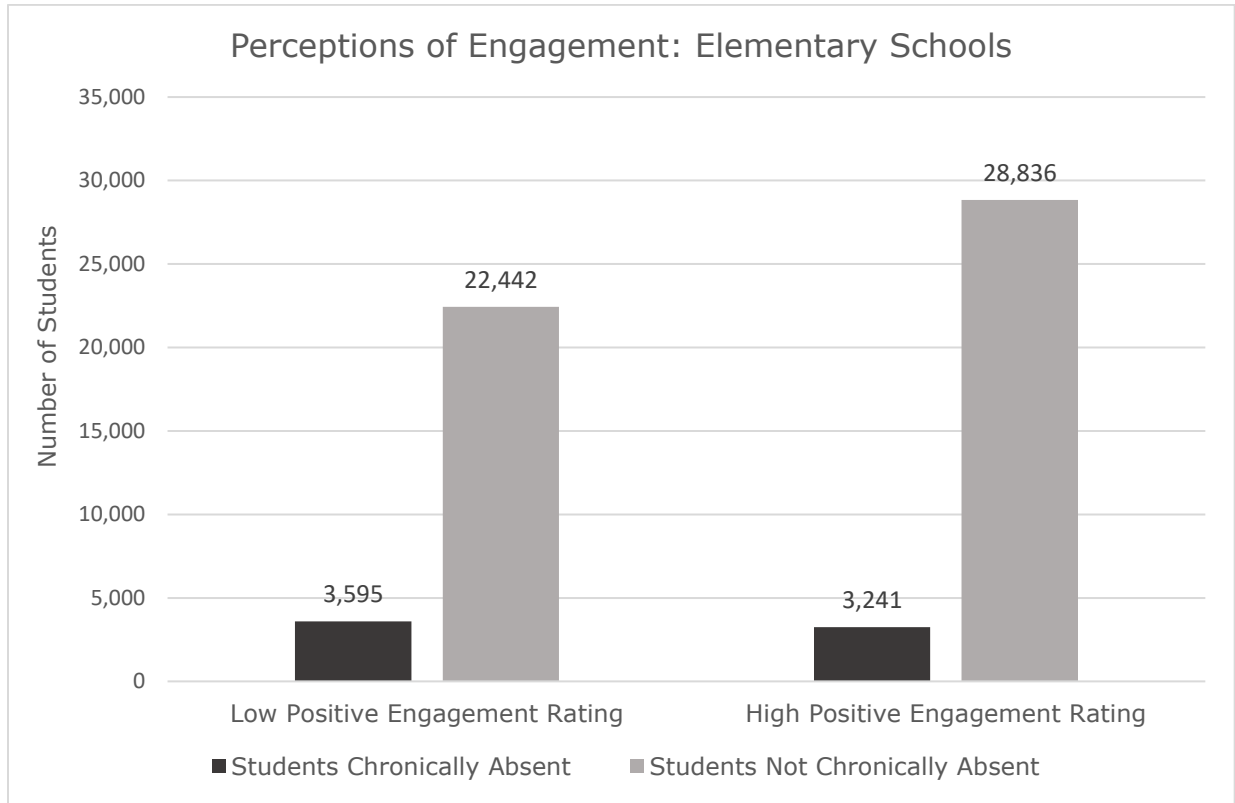safety and school environment. Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement?

$H_0$1: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive or low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement. The two variables were school engagement and chronic absenteeism. A significant difference was found between the rating of school engagement and the number of students who were chronically absent, Pearson χ^2 (1, N =58,114) = 189.91, p ≤ .001, Cramer's V = .057. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. In general, students who attended elementary schools rated high positive for school engagement were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended elementary schools rated low positive for school engagement. Figure 4 displays the number of students who were chronically absent and the number not chronically absent among elementary schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of school engagement.

Figure 4

Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of Engagement among Elementary Schools

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement?

H$_0$2: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement.
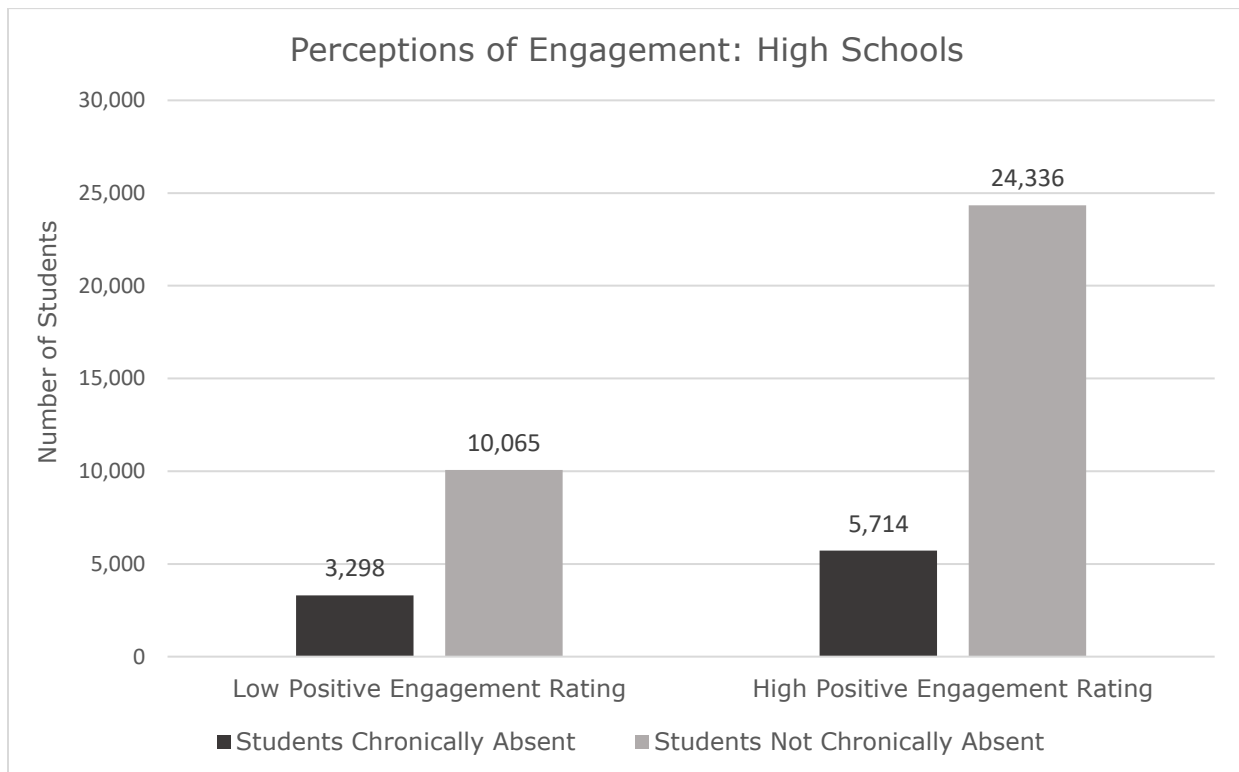
A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high

schools rated high positive or low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school engagement. The two variables were school engagement and chronic absenteeism. A significant difference was found between the level of school engagement and the number of students who were chronically absent, Pearson χ^2 (1, N =43,413) = 180.465, p $\leq$ .001, Cramer's V = .064. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. In general, students who attended high schools rated high positive for school engagement were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended high schools rated low positive for school engagement. Figure 5 displays the number of students who were chronically absent and the number of students who were not chronically absent among high schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of school engagement.

Figure 5

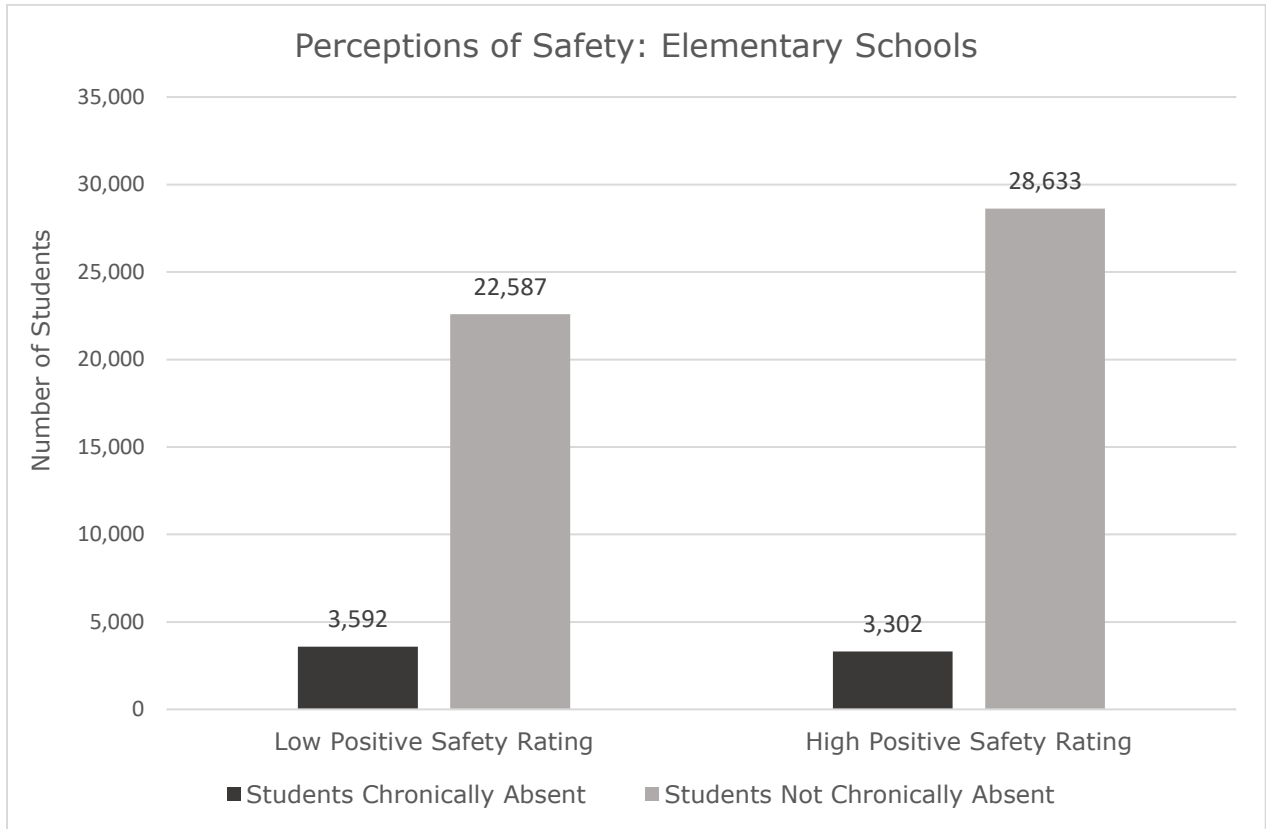*Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of Engagement among High Schools*

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety?

H$_0$3: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive or low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety. The two variables were school safety and chronic absenteeism. A significant difference was found between the level of school safety and the number of students who were chronically absent, Pearson χ^2 (1, N =58,114) = 157.298, p ≤ .001, Cramer's V = .052. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. In general, students who attended elementary schools rated high positive for school safety were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended elementary schools rated low positive for school safety. Figure 6 displays the number of students who were chronically absent and the number of students not chronically absent among elementary schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of school safety.

Figure 6

Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of Safety among Elementary Schools

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety?

H_04: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety.
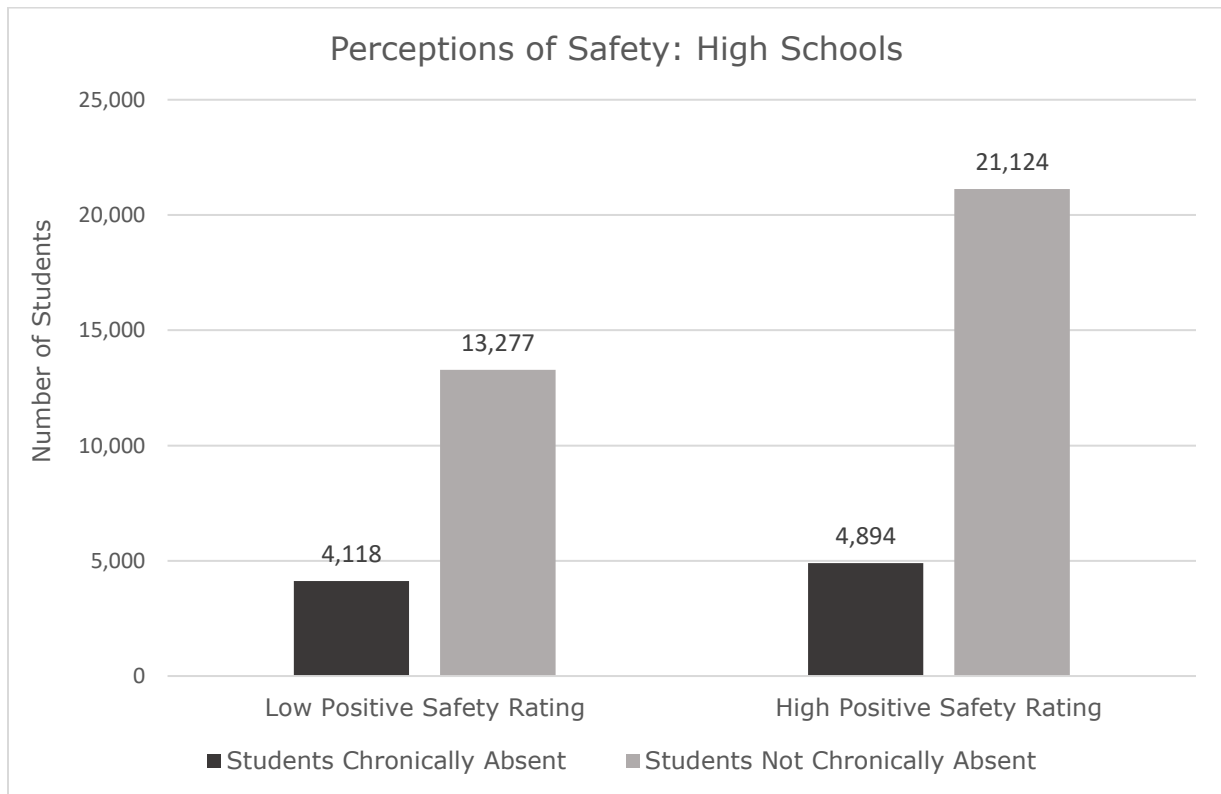
A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high

schools rated high positive or low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school safety. The

two variables were school safety and chronic absenteeism. A significant difference was found

between the level of school safety and the number of students who were chronically absent,

Pearson χ^2 (1, N =43,413) = 149.902, p ≤ .001, Cramer's V = .059. Therefore, the null hypothesis

is rejected. In general, students who attended schools rated high positive for school safety were

significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended schools rated low

positive for school safety. Figure 7 displays the numbers of students who were chronically absent

and the number of students not chronically absent among high schools rated low positive or high

positive for perceptions of school safety.

Figure 7

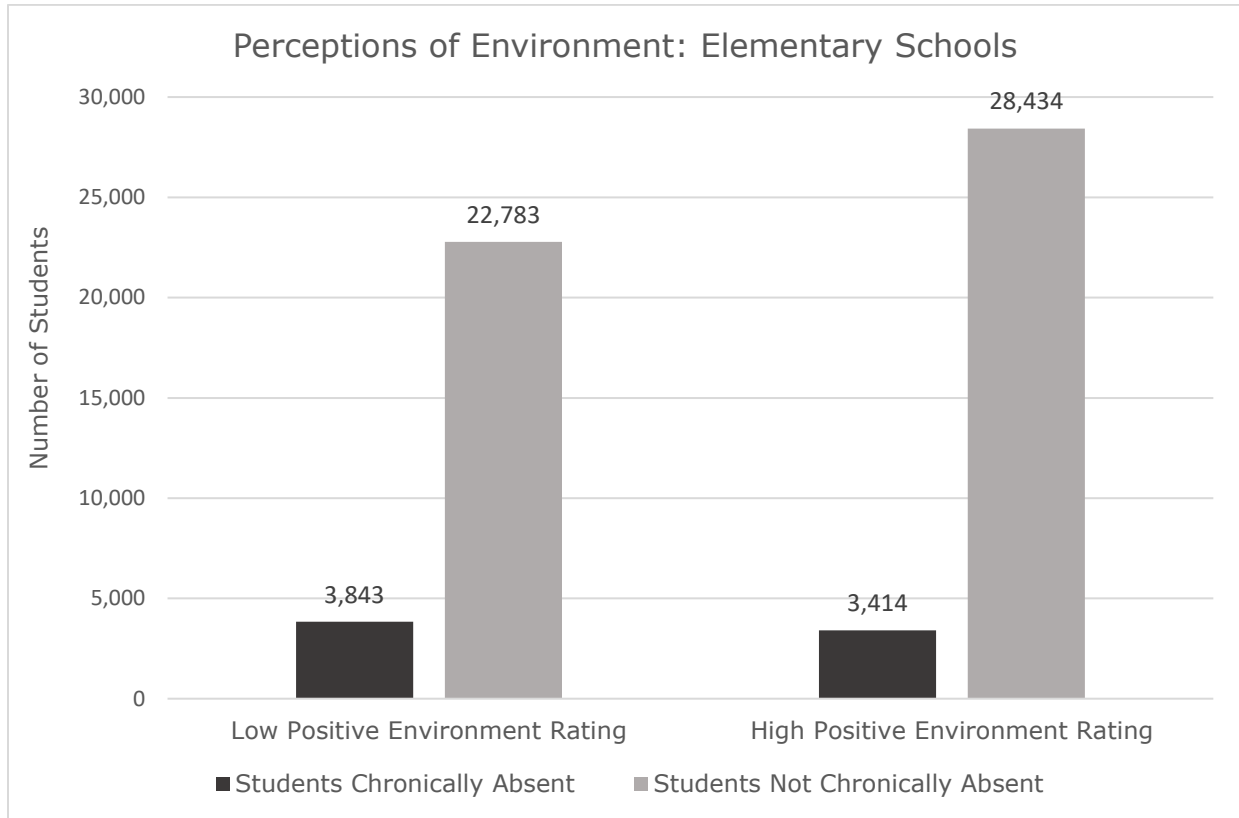*Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of Safety among High Schools*

Research Question 5: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were

chronically absent between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated

low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment?

H$_0$5: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent

between elementary schools rated high positive and elementary schools rated low positive for

teacher perceptions of overall school environment.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a

significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent among elementary

schools rated high positive or low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment.

The two variables were school safety and chronic absenteeism. A significant difference was

found between the level of school environment and the number of students who were chronically

absent, Pearson χ^2 (1, N =58,114) = 88.844, p $\leq$ .001, Cramer's V = .039. Therefore, the null

hypothesis is rejected. In general, students who attended elementary schools rated high positive

for perceptions of school environment were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than

students who attended schools rated low positive for perceptions of school environment. Figure 8

displays the number of students chronically absent and the number of students not chronically

absent among elementary schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of school

environment.

Figure 8

Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of School Environment among Elementary Schools

Research Question 6: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment?

H_06: There is no significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high schools rated high positive and high schools rated low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in the number of students who were chronically absent between high

schools rated high positive or low positive for teacher perceptions of overall school environment. The two variables were school safety and student attendance. A significant difference was found between the level of school environment and the number of students who were chronically absent, Pearson χ^2 (1, N =58,114) = 88.844, p $\leq$ .001, Cramer's V = .039. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. In general, students who attended schools rated high positive for perceptions of school environment were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended schools rated low positive for perceptions of school environment. Figure 9 displays the number of students who were chronically absent and the number of students not chronically absent among high schools rated low positive or high positive for perceptions of school environment.

Figure 9

Chronic Absenteeism and Perceptions of School Environment among High Schools
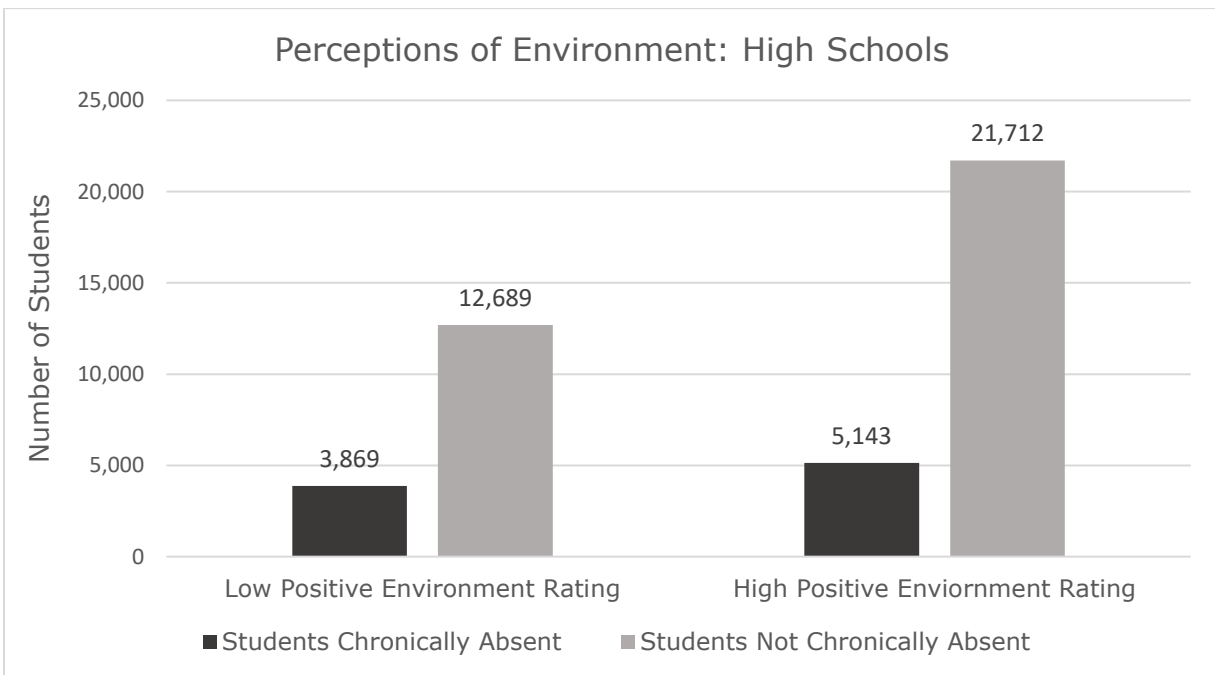
Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 presents the analysis of data obtained from the Tennessee Department of Education. Student chronic absenteeism data and school personnel climate survey data were obtained for the 77 elementary schools and 25 high schools included in the sample for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. The sample was taken from schools located within the First Congressional District of Tennessee.

The researcher observed that overall, schools with high positive ratings for climate experienced significantly less student chronic absenteeism than schools with low positive ratings for climate. In all three categories of climate – engagement, safety, and environment - significant differences were found in the number of students who were chronically absent between schools rated low positive and high positive for climate. Significant differences in the number of students who were chronically absent between schools rated high positive and schools rated low positive for were found in all climate categories for elementary schools and high schools.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter contains a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research. Each year, millions of students across the United States miss the equivalent of a month or more of school (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Chronic absenteeism has been a significant risk factor for school dropout and has been associated with academic underachievement, juvenile delinquency, increased mental and physical health issues, substance use and abuse, and limited employment and economic opportunities later in life (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Federal and state initiatives aimed at improving school attendance have included the development of toolkits for schools, convening national and state meetings around chronic absenteeism, launching mentoring programs, tightening attendance policies, and funding major attendance awareness campaigns such as *Every Student, Every Day* (2015) (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). The most recent federal initiative, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), required state education agencies to include chronic absenteeism as an indicator in their state report cards. Still, millions of students are chronically absent from school each year (Attendance Works, 2020).

There has been an increasing emphasis on school climate in recent years as educators, lawmakers, and other stakeholders have recognized school climate as a viable, data-driven area for school improvement (Ross, 2013). School climate improvement efforts have been associated with the prevention of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional difficulties (Mehta et al., 2013; Thapa et al., 2013). In addition, school climate has been linked to teacher commitment, motivation to learn, student identity development, dropout rates, sense of school community, school satisfaction, school violence, academic achievement, and higher scores on standardized tests (Davis & Kwong, 2015; Schweig et al., 2019). When schools have had high or extreme levels of chronic absenteeism, those rates could have indicated that multiple causes of chronic

absence existed for large numbers of students and could have been a warning sign that there were inadequate supports in place for school engagement, safety, and-or environment. Thus, this study served to determine if there was a significant difference in chronic absenteeism among schools that were rated low positive or high positive for the three main areas of school climate: school engagement, school safety, and school environment.

Discussion and Conclusions

Research Questions 1 and 2 focused on the difference in chronic absenteeism among elementary schools and high schools that were rated either low positive or high positive for perceptions of school engagement. The researcher found that students who attended elementary schools or high schools with a high positive rating for engagement were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than those who attended elementary or high schools rated low positive for school engagement. This finding supports previous studies that found that chronic absenteeism was lower in schools where engagement among staff and with students and families was prominent and prioritized (Bunting et al., 2013; Burns, 2013; Attendance Works, 2020; Sugrue et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2018; Fredricks et al., 2016; Thapa et al., 2013; Van Eck et al., 2013). This suggests that schools that prioritize family engagement, particularly frequent and meaningful communication between school personnel and students' parent(s)/guardian(s), can remove barriers to consistent school attendance. This also suggests that schools that work to foster environments of trust and mutual respect experience less chronic absenteeism among students than schools where trusting and respectful environments may not be present.

Research Questions 2 and 3 focused on the difference in chronic absenteeism among elementary schools and high schools that were rated either low positive or high positive for perceptions of school safety. The researcher found that students who attended elementary

schools or high schools with a high positive rating for safety were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than those who attended elementary or high schools rated low positive for school safety. This finding supports previous studies that found that chronic absenteeism was lower in schools where there were high perceptions of safety (Taylor & Gebre, 2016; Allison & Attisha, 2019; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Stempel et al., 2015; Van Eck et al., 2013). This suggests that chronic absenteeism is lower in schools where respectful behavior among students is prominent and where staff feel comfortable discussing issues concerns with administrators. In addition, this suggests that perceptions of safety are higher in schools where administrators are consistently visible and seek to understand the needs of students and staff.

Research Questions 5 and 6 focused on the difference in chronic absenteeism among elementary and high schools that were rated either low positive or high positive for perceptions of school environment. The researcher found that students who attended elementary schools and high schools with a high positive rating for environment were significantly less likely to be chronically absent than students who attended elementary or high schools rated low positive for perceptions of school environment. This finding supports previous studies that found that chronic absenteeism was higher in schools where environments were characterized by the perception of unfair or ineffective disciplinary practices (Lo et al., 2011; Wang & Dishon, 2013; Bottiano et al., 2014; DePedro et al., 2016; Hong & Eamon, 2012; Portillos et al., 2012). In addition, these findings suggest that perceptions of school environments are lower and rates of chronic absenteeism are higher in schools where disruptions to learning occur frequently or when teachers feel pulled in many directions concerning curriculum and instruction (Pane et al., 2015; Taylor & Gebre, 2016; Tahir et al., 2019).

Implications for Practice

In order for students to be successful in school, they must first attend school. For many students and families, however, there may be preventable barriers to consistent school attendance. These barriers may include limited or inconsistent communication with school personnel, absence of meaningful relationships with school personnel, unfair or exclusionary disciplinary practices at school, concerns about safety, or lack of opportunities to consistently engage in high-quality, personalized learning experiences. The quantitative data analysis in this study revealed there are significant differences in rates of chronic absenteeism among schools with low positive versus high positive ratings for the three main categories of school climate where schools rated high positive were significantly less likely to experience high rates of chronic absenteeism among students. The following implications for practice emerged as a result of the current study:

1. District and educational leaders should implement annual school climate surveys to measure perceptions about key aspects of school climate. In addition to surveying teachers, school and district leaders should adopt climate surveys for students and guardians. Survey data should be analyzed by district and school-based teams and used by district and school leaders to inform the allocation of resources and to help guide improvement planning.

2. In addition to the analysis of climate data, district and school teams should track and analyze student absenteeism data. In schools, data should be analyzed at the student level in order to assist in discovering the underlying reasons for absenteeism. Subsequently, to the extent possible, interventions should be planned based on the particular needs of individual students and families.

3. District and school leaders should prioritize building and strengthening school-student-family relationships where consistent, positive, meaningful opportunities for partnership and support are the norm. Shared expectations should be clear for consistent communication with and outreach to school families. A growing body of literature has suggested that parental engagement and the degree of positive connection between school and family critically contributes to the improvement of outcomes such as student attendance, learning, healthy development and success in school (Bunting et al., 2013).

4. To the extent possible, schools should serve resource hubs in order to meet the diverse needs of the students they serve. This includes providing access to safe transportation to and from school, counseling and mental health services, medical care or access to a school nurse, food, clothing and other items that may prevent students from consistently attending school. Lack of access to basic resources can create barriers to success, so access to these resources may be especially important in schools that serve under resourced communities or in schools that serve high numbers of families who are living below the poverty line.

5. School leaders should focus on building an atmosphere of trust and respect among school staff and between staff and administration. Examples of how school leaders can build trust and respect include building relationships with school staff, building in and protecting time for collaboration among teachers, upholding a shared vision, leading with integrity, consistency, and fairness, celebrating successes and supporting growth, listening to and working with teachers and school staff to refine processes and plan for improvement, engaging key stakeholders, and by being visible and available to assist in

meeting the needs of the school community (Brand et al., 2008; Chang et al., 2018; Davis & Kwong, 2015; Schweig et al., 2019).

6. District and school leaders should review existing policies, procedures, and data concerning student discipline to ensure that disciplinary policies and practices are fair, consistent, and to the extent possible, are not exclusionary. Previous research has shown that ineffective, inconsistent or exclusionary disciplinary practices may contribute to higher rates of chronic absenteeism and are associated with negative perceptions of school climate (Bottiano et al., 2014).

7. District and school leaders should ensure that teachers have access to engaging, high-quality instructional materials that are designed to meet the needs of diverse learners and are used with fidelity. In addition, school leaders should work to ensure that teachers are allowed to focus on instruction with minimal interruptions.

8. School accountability systems should be expanded or revised to include and explicitly address school climate.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this study and the literature reviewed for this study, further research on the relationship between chronic absenteeism and school climate is needed. This study was not intended to determine the causation of the relationship; the intent to determine if a relationship existed. Based on the resulting significant relationships between school climate constructs and chronic absenteeism, the recommendations for future research include:

1. Future studies on school climate should frame school climate as a multi-layered construct and identify which specific components or aspects of school climate are associated with specific outcomes. For example, school leaders and policymakers could likely benefit

from studies that identify which specific component of school climate is most closely associated with academic achievement. In addition, further research is needed to examine the factors that lead or have led to associations between particular components of school climate and specific student outcomes.

2. Additional research that includes multiple informants on perceptions school climate is needed. In addition to teacher perceptions of school climate, additional dimensions of input should be included in order to construct a broader and more complete view of school climate. Therefore, additional studies including key stakeholders such as guardians, students, and school personnel should be conducted to examine the multi-dimensional relationship between chronic absenteeism and school climate.

3. Qualitative research should be conducted to examine the reasons families provide for student chronic absenteeism as well as for perceptions of school climate. Much of the existing research on school climate and chronic absenteeism has been conducted through the use of non-personal data or demographic information. While the analysis of this quantitative data has yielded critical information for the field of education, qualitative research examining the reasons students and families provide for chronic absenteeism or for perceptions of school climate is limited. This research could provide key stakeholders with essential information on barriers to success.

4. A large majority of school climate measures are quantitative in nature and rely solely upon demographic data or single informant survey responses from a specific population. While this quantitative data have yielded critical and useful information on perceptions of school climate, qualitative research is needed to examine the underlying reasons for why respondents select the answers they do on climate surveys. For example, if a large

majority of school personnel indicated that a climate of trust and mutual respect did not exist within their school, determining the reasons for this response could provide needed insight and actionable information for school and district leaders. In addition, gleaning this information from schools with high climate ratings could provide other school leaders examples of best practices for improving school climate.

5. While this study focused on student chronic absenteeism among schools with high positive and low positive ratings for aspects of school climate, research on the relationship between school climate and school personnel absenteeism is limited. Further research should be conducted to determine the relationship between school climate and absenteeism among school personnel. This research could be expanded to include the relationship between school climate and teacher retention.

6. This study showed a significant difference in student chronic absenteeism between schools with high positive and low positive climate ratings. Further research should be conducted to examine characteristics, practices, and policies of schools with consistently high positive ratings for climate and low rates of chronic absenteeism. This research could provide district and school leaders with valuable information and best practices for building and maintaining positive school climates.

Summary

The researcher found that overall, perceptions of school engagement, safety, and environment were all significantly related to rates of chronic absenteeism among students at both the elementary and high school levels. Schools with high positive ratings for climate were significantly less likely to have high rates of chronic absenteeism.

Several implications for practice were derived from this study including consideration by district and school leaders to implement climate surveys that capture perceptions from students, guardians, and school personnel. Data derived from these surveys should be considered actionable and used to drive improvement efforts. Additionally, district and school leaders along with community stakeholders should be aware of outcomes associated with negative school climates along with outcomes associated with student chronic absenteeism.

While the results of this study were significant and support much previous research, several recommendations for additional research were presented. Further research is needed to examine the reasons and motivations for teachers' responses on climate surveys. Additional research that examines reasons students and families provide for chronic absenteeism is also needed. In addition, further research is needed to examine the policies and practices of schools with consistently high climate ratings and consistently low rates of chronic absenteeism.

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