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A REVIEW OF TRUANCY PROGRAMS AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL IN WEST VIRGINIA: PERCEPTIONS OF ATTENDANCE DIRECTORS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT ATTENDANCE

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Approved by
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APPROVAL OF DISSERTATION

We, the faculty supervising the work of **Shellie Simpson**, affirm that the dissertation, *A Review of Truancy Programs at the Elementary Level in West Virginia: Perceptions of Attendance Directors on the Effectiveness of Strategies to Improve Student Attendance,* meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the EdD Program in **Leadership Studies** and the College of Education and Professional Development. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the sustainability of truancy programs used in all 55 counties of West Virginia since 2014. The study compared attendance rates at the elementary school level over the last five years and applied survey and interview data to determine whether changes to programs promoted changes to attendance rates. While there are numerous studies that review and discuss truancy programs, there were no studies found that measure the programs and perceptions in elementary programs in all 55 counties of West Virginia. In this study data were collected from the West Virginia Department of Education public site. Surveys were administered to attendance directors in all 55 counties. A sampling of county employees who work with truant youths were also interviewed to gather data on programs and perceptions. Interviews were conducted by phone to establish types of programs used, perceptions about the program's effectiveness and sustainability, and ideas about what might improve programs in the state. Statistical testing was performed on the data gathered from the West Virginia Department of Education and surveys gathered from Truancy Directors in all 55 counties. The data were analyzed to determine the effectiveness and sustainability of current programs in the state of West Virginia.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Compulsory school attendance laws were designed to promote individual success by requiring all children to attend school and obtain an education through high school which provides the foundation for success in the work force. Research shows that when children do not finish school, it affects the individual student, schools, and society (Gleich-Bope, 2014). Lack of education causes school failure and higher dropout rates, increased poverty and crime rates, higher risk of incarceration, and potential drug involvement (Comer, 2017). Poor attendance in school also sets poor work habits which affect businesses in the community who struggle to find quality employees. Schools are affected as attendance is directly related to overall school performance ratings, increased behavior problems, lower achievement scores, increased dropout rates, and diminished school culture. Individuals who are undereducated also experience lower per capita income over their lifespan (Comer, 2017). Primarily, truancy research has focused on secondary attendance and school dropout rates. New information reveals that addressing chronic absenteeism and truancy at the elementary level might create healthy school attendance habits that are sustained throughout a student's school career.

According to a study by the National Center for Children and Poverty (NCCP), data from nine school districts revealed that over 11% of kindergartners were chronically absent (Romero & Lee, 2011). Since school habits are created in the formative school years, unaddressed truancy during primary school can become chronic absenteeism and lead to student failure and increased dropout potential. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law under President Obama, notes that chronic absenteeism is a factor in academic difficulty and results in students being unable to master reading by third grade, failure to pass classes in middle school,

and dropping out of school in high school years. A five-year longitudinal study by the National Center for Children and Poverty found that nearly nine percent of first graders were chronically absent (Romero & Lee, 2011). Economically disadvantaged students in particular depend upon school to promote learning and opportunities which improve quality of life (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018). Research is needed to determine how to address truancy in the early grades and whether programs designed to mitigate their truancy are sustainable throughout a child's school career.

Truancy is a symptom of multiple underlying causes, and the key to successful truancy programs involves understanding chronic absenteeism, identifying the entire range of underlying causes, and developing timely interventions that utilize targeted resources. The National Center for Children in Poverty noted that 25% of kindergarteners were either at risk or chronically absent (Romero & Lee, 2011). Early absenteeism affects school achievement in developmental years, creating an achievement gap which has long term negative consequences for chronically absent students (Seeley, 2006). In their formative years, students need to be present to obtain the foundational skills that help them learn to read. When children do not acquire those skills because of absenteeism or learning difficulties, it sets the tone for the remainder of their school careers. Students who do not learn to read by third grade are more likely to be held back in school and many do not graduate (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

Romero and Lee (2011) discussed signs that include family factors, school factors, economic factors, and student factors, reporting that family and economic factors have the greatest effect on chronic absenteeism in early elementary school (Romero & Lee, 2011). Among them are divorce, single parent homes, grand families, incarcerated parents, poverty, lackadaisical attitudes about education, homelessness, transience, drug addiction, and

unemployment. At the elementary level, when a child is failing, it is most often a symptom of

much larger problems at home. Kearney (2008) noted these problems before Romero & Lee

(2011), citing race, inadequate parenting skills, single parent homes, kinship care, grand-

families, low expectations of school performance, poor parental involvement, family poverty,

and poor communication are family factors that promote truancy. Economic factors include

unemployment rates, percentage of families living on government assistance, generational

poverty, and lack of job opportunities.

School factors include grade retention, bullying, lack of connection to school and

programs, history of absenteeism, no relationship with a caring and consistent adult in school,

and underdeveloped social and academic skills (Romero & Lee, 2011; Kearney, 2008). Student

factors include low self-esteem, lack of appropriate social relationships with peers, academic

difficulty, trauma, physical or emotional illness, mental health problems, and other stressors that

prevent them from going to school (Romero & Lee, 2011). Without proper intervention,

vulnerable young children fall victim to generational struggles in life. Determining which

interventions are necessary and successful has become one of the greatest problems in correcting

the long history of truancy problems for children in schools. Uneducated and undereducated

youth become a societal issue as those children struggle to overcome the stressors in their life.

Addressing the issues much earlier in a child's school career can promote prevention

which improves academic achievement, behavior, health, and overall student success. School

officials look at general population numbers to address problems. Shifting focus to individual

student factors beginning in kindergarten could improve school-wide success. The need remains,

however, for research on the effectiveness of truancy reduction programs. According to Comer

(2017), truancy has been a problem since the inception of compulsory school attendance laws beginning in 1852. When it became a requirement to attend school, truancy was born.

Since there are few resources within the school building to truly meet the individual needs of chronically absent students, programs must be centered around a schoolwide system that works to connect each student with school. The focus must shift toward meeting student's basic needs within the classroom, so he or she may have a better opportunity to learn and grow. Students must feel safe, well fed, and cared for to ensure their opportunity for success. When human basic needs are met, individuals can move on to the next level of achievement according to Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. At the primitive level, the need of belonging is central in human development and this is the key to creating individual student success. When students are connected to school and peers, they are more likely to achieve academically and be successful. Teachers contend that job expectations continue to expand and the basic needs of students consume educational time, thus hindering learning and growth potential for all students. County truancy officers have noted that problems must be addressed at the classroom level where the adult to student ratio is smaller and more effective (Comer, 2017).

All West Virginia (WV) counties implement punitive programs for elementary students and middle/high school students along with sanctions for adult family members as defined through West Virginia State Code. Some counties also employ non-punitive programs to promote positive school attendance, others focus primarily on middle and high school students alone, and still others employ resources that implement measures to address the needs of students early in elementary school. The early intervention program could be critical in the development of a proactive approach, but lack of personnel and resources makes it difficult for truancy officers to meet the needs of those families early in a child's school career. A change in school

protocol might promote improvement that would increase attendance rates, improve academic success, and promote a happy and healthy school culture.

Problem Statement

The negative implications of truancy have plagued society for over a century. The consequences reach beyond individuals into society causing costly adverse effects including poverty, high incarceration rates, poor health, rising health care costs, an overloaded social service program, and other societal factors (Gleich-Bope, 2014). Most school districts struggle with meeting attendance guidelines. In the state of West Virginia, the goal is to have students in school all day every day (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018), but there remains much to learn about how school districts can meet this goal, particularly at the elementary level. Limited research is available on the topic of elementary truancy programs and general sustainability, although sustainability is a critical issue in developing successful truancy programs. Addressing chronic absenteeism at the elementary level is crucial to a child's success throughout his school career and should be explored. No research could be located on comparison of truancy programs at this level across the state of West Virginia to determine effectiveness and sustainability, although there is much research focused on middle and high school attendance rates and truancy across the United States. According to Comer (2017), there is a need for further research regarding programs used to reduce truancy and the effectiveness of those programs. She also stated a need for comparison of attendance rates, dropout rates, and graduation rates throughout the state. This proposal recognizes the lack of research available on elementary truancy programs and the need for further research in this area.

Research Questions

A review of current literature, data collection, and personal interviews with truancy directors in all 55 counties will be used to answer the following questions.

1. What type of truancy programs (i.e., punitive, nonpunitive and/or combination thereof) are used at the elementary level in each of the 55 counties in West Virginia?

2. To what extent have truancy programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing punitive corrective strategies?

3. To what extent have nonpunitive truancy programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy?

4. To what extent have combination (i.e., punitive with nonpunitive) programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy?

5. To what extent have attendance rates changed at the elementary school level over the last five years?

6. To what extent have attendance rates been sustainable at the elementary school level over the last five years?

7. What are the perceived problems with current programs used to reduce truancy at the elementary level in the state of West Virginia as held by attendance directors in all 55 counties?

8. What are the perceived strengths with current programs used to reduce truancy at the elementary level in the state of West Virginia as held by attendance directors in all 55 counties?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to add to the body of literature on elementary truancy programs and their sustainability in the state of West Virginia. More specifically, this study will determine whether truancy programs employed in the state affect attendance rates at the elementary levels with a comparison over the past five years. The study will also determine the continuity of punitive and non-punitive programs used in the state in order to determine whether those counties who do more than the law requires have higher attendance rates.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant as truancy remains a societal issue that creates an achievement gap which has long term negative consequences for chronically absent students (Seeley, 2006) and society (Romero & Lee, 2011). Very limited research is available on the effectiveness and sustainability of truancy programs at the elementary level. The information provided in this study can be valuable for state and local administrators, attendance directors, teachers, social workers, judges, and other social entities with an interest in how school attendance can be improved, thus affecting the future of our state. Finding keys to a successful program would be advantageous to school districts and communities as we are building our future workforce in today's classroom.

Limitations

The findings from the quantitative portion of this study will be limited to the response of attendance directors who reply to the survey rather than being generalizable to a larger

population of those practitioners. Those directors who respond may do so out of a particular bias either positive or negative, about the effectiveness of current truancy-improvement initiatives, and the potential for socially desirable responses to the survey items may be increased given the absence of anonymity (i.e., the researcher will know the identities of the attendance directors in the population). This is especially true if participants view the research subject as one of a sensitive nature or if participants feel their conduct or perspectives, etc., are under scrutiny. The researcher's own professional experience as an educator may constitute a source of empathy and provide an experiential background that enhances effectiveness in eliciting and understanding respondents' perceptions; it may also, however be viewed as a limitation in that it is a potential source of bias. The other limitation is the lack of representation, given the necessarily small sample size.

Summary

The implications of truancy affect the individual student, the school, and society. The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce truancy at the elementary level and determine whether attendance rates are sustainable as a result of the programs used in each county. Students who are chronically absent fall behind academically and that translates into failure not only in school but later in life through poverty, incarceration, and a legacy of public assistance.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Truancy is one of the most significant predictors of delinquent behavior and is defined as a student being absent from school without an excuse from a parent or guardian (Seeley, 2006). Students with the highest truancy rates have low achievement scores and higher dropout rates. Regardless of age or grade level, truancy has been linked to criminal activity, unemployment, substance abuse, mental health issues, and many other deviant behaviors (Gleich-Bope, 2014). This chapter examines background literature related to the underlying causes, various punitive and positive reinforcement programs, effectiveness of intervention programs at the elementary level and sustainability of interventions throughout the child's school years.

Research and programs most often focus on middle and high school interventions that are reactive and remedial, while addressing absenteeism at the elementary school level could provide a lasting intervention that promotes lasting school success (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Underlying causes at the elementary level begin with familial dysfunction and often incorporate additional issues that isolate the child from building lasting connections with school and peers. Small children are not typically at fault for missing school. Research supports both punitive and non-punitive systems to address chronic absenteeism, although the question continues as to which is more beneficial and how it should be addressed in elementary years. This raises the question of the effectiveness of specific interventions and the ability to sustain good attendance once interventions have ceased.

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2016), missing too much school is a national crisis that affects more than 6.5 million students. The primary focus of research over the years has focused mainly on high school students due to the effect that

attendance has on dropout/graduation rates. An emerging body of research is now addressing

chronic absenteeism in the early grades and indicates that some students miss up to a month or

more of school each year. The serious nature of early absenteeism undermines a child's

opportunity to learn during the pivotal years where students gain the foundation for their entire

academic career. Primary students who are chronically absent have higher grade-level retention

rates and weaker reading skills (Connolly, & Olson, 2012). Attendance habits developed in the

beginning years of a child's education will carry over into her life and career. Chronically absent

students present with negative outcomes in early elementary school which follow them

throughout their school careers, making it difficult to succeed. That difficulty creates a cyclical

effect as students are found to miss more school when they are struggling academically, and the

academic struggle grows with each day a student is absent.

Underlying Causes at the Elementary Level

The problems and underlying causes related to truancy have not changed much over the

past century and a half. Research by James and Davies (2017) indicated that truancy was a

problem as early as 1839 with similar factors to those which contribute to truancy today. Even

during the early 1800s, positive reinforcement was used to try to entice young children to attend

school. During this period, factors such as poverty, child labor, community composition,

minority groups, undereducated families, and unemployed households primarily characterized

truant students (James & Davies, 2017). Families fighting to meet their basic needs did not value

education and the role it might have in lifting the family out of poverty. Those factors continue

to play a major role for chronically absent students. Callahan (1986) observed that the common

factors that most often affected families included low incomes, the unemployed, the

undereducated, and minorities living in primarily rural settings. More current research continued

to identify the same contributing factors that have existed for centuries. Romero & Lee (2011) note that family, economic, school and student issues adequately categorize the risk factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism. The consequences of chronic school absenteeism affect not only the individual student but society as well. The National Center for School Engagement found that truant students have lower grades than non-truant peers, need to repeat grades more often, have higher rates of expulsion, and have lower rates of graduation (Heilbrunn, 2007). Society suffers when undereducated individuals are incapable of obtaining jobs that sustain their basic needs. Those individuals become part of public assistance and/or incarceration which creates a financial burden to taxpayers (Gandy & Schultz, 2007).

Students face challenges outside of the school setting which prevent them from attending school. Family attitudes toward school, differing degrees of parental care, lack of community and social support systems, cultural norms, drug abuse, domestic violence, and childhood trauma are some of the familial factors that contribute to truancy in youths (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). According to Garrison (2006), one of the most regularly reported reasons for absence in elementary school is missing the bus. This factor illustrates how many young children are responsible for getting themselves to and on the bus on time each day without an adult. Ford & Sutphen (1996) also noted that elementary students' absences could be directly contributed to limited and inconsistent parenting including no fixed homework or bedtime routines, no one waking them for school, lack of transportation, and adult family problems.

Economic factors include single-parent households, lack of affordable transportation, lack of childcare, high transient rates, and parents working multiple jobs all of which affect student attendance rates (Comer, 2017). Families who struggle to meet basic needs will not place the educational needs of their children at the top of their priority list. School factors which

influence truancy include school size, attitudes of teachers and other students, bullying, class

size, safety at school, and poor connection between parents and schools (Comer, 2017). Having

a sense of community within the school is crucial to the success of every student, the school, and

the community. School must be a place where families and school personnel can work together

to help students succeed. Student factors that predominantly affect chronic absenteeism include

mental health issues, physical health problems, substance abuse, trauma, poor social skills,

cognitive disabilities, relationship problems, and other personal issues (Lawrence, Lawther,

Jennison, & Hightower, 2011). Other researchers have noted that parents are not comfortable in

the school setting, so they practice avoidance for themselves and their children (Heilbrunn,

2007). Teachers naturally intimidate parents if they had a bad experience at school. According

to Garrison (2006), students who are truant in elementary school are three times more likely to

be truant in high school. These poor habits place children, adolescents, and eventually adults at

high risk of educational, social, psychological, physical, and financial distress throughout their

lifetime (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Building the connection between school and home has been mentioned for years;

however, there is a disconnect in how to accomplish this task. According to Callahan (1986),

ideas for early interventions might include parenting classes, repairing the family structure,

linking young children to school for enjoyment, addressing mental health concerns, funding to

meet student needs, and the use of social workers to promote stronger family structures. Each of

these ideas would attempt to meet basic human needs that might hinder child and academic

development when left unfulfilled. The fact that ideas submitted over 30 years ago are still being

recommended today, however, might highlight a substantial reason why truancy still exists.

Research indicates a need for individual attention, but school systems do not always have the resources to develop and sustain a program that meets all needs for all students.

The primary focus in schools is the overall attendance rate, which may look good at 95%; however, this does not focus on the students who drive that rate down with more than 10% of their school year being missed. The average daily attendance rate masks chronic attendance problems and seriously harms the individual students that need intervention. In elementary school, parents know when their children are absent, and they send notes to document the occurrence. Even when absences are excused, however, they mount up and result in lower academic performance and decreased overall school attendance rates. Both excused and unexcused absences contribute to chronic absenteeism which affects student academic performance. Students in their early years of school are absent because of health factors, learning disabilities, family dysfunction, and mental health issues due to trauma (Chang, Russell-Tucker, & Sullivan, 2016). The elementary student is generally not at fault for missing school. That burden lies upon the parent. Problems arise when parents, who do not understand the effect that chronic absenteeism has on children, learn how to work around the existing system for their benefit. They are simply trying to beat the system by providing excuse notes for their children when they are absent.

Current attendance policy could also potentially contribute to chronic absenteeism by creating multiple attendance excuse codes which give parents reasons to keep their children home. It is commonly understood that students in pre-K and kindergarten miss more school than their older peers. Part of this discrepancy lies in their constant exposure to new germs and illnesses. The truancy problem is exacerbated when families build a habit of poor attendance in those formative years and it does not improve.

Truancy Programs

Numerous programs exist to address chronic absenteeism around the world. Educational leaders have recognized the effects of chronic absenteeism since the inception of compulsory school attendance and school officials continue to search for a program that will effectively get students to school with faithful attendance. While average daily attendance rates may be good, individual students are still being left behind.

There are two kinds of truancy programs which are currently in use. Some districts use a blend of non-punitive and punitive programs, while others strictly adhere to one form or the other. While there is no formal definition, punitive truancy programs may be defined as those that use civil and criminal penalties to impose punishment that may change the behavior. Non-punitive programs may be defined as those programs that treat absenteeism as a problem to be solved using youth services, mental health programs, social workers, and proactive reward programs to address the problems that keep students from attending school. Some research contends that non-punitive forms of interventions are more effective than punitive measures, while others suggest that punitive measures are needed to force the hand when non-punitive incentives are unsuccessful. Mallett (2015) contended that punitive programs trap millions of adolescents in the school-to-prison pipeline by criminalizing adolescent developmental behaviors rather than teaching children the proper behaviors. He further discussed that children pose little or no threat to schools and communities, and that research aligns with current West Virginia law that states that children cannot be removed from the home for status offenses. A status offense is defined by code as a "behavior that is harmful to a juvenile because of his or her age" (WV Code § 49-1-202). Incorrigibility constitutes a status offence and is not a crime under law or municipal ordinance if the individual is an adult.

Punitive Programs

According to a school-court program study by Comer (2017) in West Virginia, attendance rates the first two years of a punitive program did not change at a significant level, but the last two years studied indicate a significant decline in truancy rates. The researcher notes a possible reason for the decline could have been a result of change in state law (i.e., WV Code Chapter 18, Article 8) which allows parents to write unlimited numbers of excuses. Comer noted that a multi-disciplinary approach is needed to help truant youth become successful. The qualitative portion of the study highlighted keeping students in school and focused on young adults. The study noted a need for early intervention programs that work to create change in students' formative years. This punitive program has resulted in increased attendance rates but did not measure sustainability. Three of the eight counties stopped using the program over the span of the data studied. The study is discussed in detail in the effective intervention section.

Lawrence et al. (2011) used the Early Truancy Intervention (ETI) program to punitively address chronic absenteeism. The program closely modeled the West Virginia Judges' Truancy Program where a warning letter is sent at five days and a child study team is developed to assess the factors causing truancy and create interventions that help alleviate the symptoms. If the parent fails to follow the guidelines of the program, then the student is referred to the juvenile court system for further treatment. This six-year longitudinal study showed mixed results with the majority of schools being successful, three schools showing no improvement in attendance rates, and two schools leaving the program. The results will be discussed more in the next section on effective interventions.

Another punitive program in Southwest Idaho examined current court proceedings and individual student data to determine program effectiveness. Mueller, Giacomazzi and Stoddard

(2006) uncovered dramatic improvements in student attendance with court interventions including probation, fines, and improvement periods. This process cut the average number of absences per student in half according to the research. The long-term benefits of the court program were noted as a limitation to the study, however, with the researcher questioning its longevity because long-term interventions must compete with all the other influences in a student's life, including peer pressures and family practices. The human factor in truancy cannot be measured through research. While the study did not test sustainability, the researchers indicated there was a need for further longevity testing.

Non-Punitive Programs

One non-punitive program in Connecticut used data collection and an intervention system to meet the needs of individual students who were chronically absent before making a referral to the judicial system (Chang et al., 2016). The study reported that over 10,000 students in the district were chronically absent. That problem not only affects the individual student, but the school, and the community as these students will have a difficult time transitioning to adulthood because of factors tied to chronic absenteeism. The district found a non-punitive way to successfully meet the needs of truant youth beginning in kindergarten by implementing professional development, actionable data plans, school attendance teams, home visits, parent engagement and communication, and community partnerships to address chronic absenteeism at the elementary level. The data during that school year showed a seven percent decrease in absenteeism and a nine percent increase in primary level reading scores. The study did not assess the sustainability of interventions after they ceased.

A pilot program by Ford and Sutphen (1996) attempted intensive one-on-one interventions for students who missed more than three days in the first nine weeks of school.

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The program was designed to use social work college students to manage a schoolwide program and a focused program. Schoolwide incentives such as posters on the wall, names announced on the intercom each morning, and a nine-week reward party encompassed the schoolwide portion of the program for students with perfect attendance. The focused plan was very intensive and involved social workers meeting with absentee students daily to discuss their attendance, mark their attendance calendar, and provide intensive counseling for 15-60 minutes. The social workers were also responsible for developing targeted family-based interventions to address specific family problems that impeded students' attendance. After nine weeks of intensive interventions, the program was scaled back to a maintenance meeting weekly with each student. Schoolwide attendance, however, improved by only one half a percentage point at the end of the program. The students who participated in intensive interventions still had over 18 absences for the school year. Moreover, the program was very labor intensive and would not be possible without the volunteer assistance from social work students, so the program was not sustainable.

Callahan (1986) also developed a positive reinforcement program in 1986 to address chronically absent students in a predominantly white elementary school. His study had a small sample size (i.e., interventions were implemented for only 14 students identified as chronically absent), but involved individual counseling, weekly prizes, and one-on-one intervention tactics. The students in the study group demonstrated a more positive attitude toward themselves and school, and their grades and attendance improved. This study will be discussed more in the next section on effective interventions.

Baker and Jansen (2000) implemented a positive reinforcement program that included group therapy and rewards for selected chronically absent students to help them achieve school success. The program is similar to the one reported by Callahan (1986) in that the attention to

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students is individualized and rewards are offered for student success. The program achieved

desired results as attendance rates improved for 92% of the students involved. This positive

change promoted social and academic success for the students affected as well. It was not

continued, however, because it was performed during the second semester of the school year as

part of a short-term research study; therefore, longevity and sustainability were not measured.

Effective Interventions

Not all interventions, obviously, are successful. Many are geographically specific, so

what works in one location may not work in another. Once districts look at their data on a

deeper level and determine whether they have a chronic absenteeism problem, they can use that

information to develop effective interventions to meet the needs of every student. A variety of

studies show that forms of punitive and non-punitive programs have succeeded in increasing

school attendance rates.

According to Chang et al. (2016), a district in Connecticut discovered that 30% of

kindergarteners and 24% of first graders were chronically absent, which added up to over 10% of

school days missed. While the district had an overall average daily attendance rate of 95%, they

discovered a serious problem at the elementary level. Nearly half of the urban district's 10,000

K-5 students were chronically absent. The district employed the help of Attendance Works, a

national and state initiative that helps districts support positive school attendance through data,

forms, ideas, and interventions, to develop a plan to meet the needs of those chronically absent

students. The plan began with professional development sessions to train administrators to

understand the data, initiate change with new tools, and engage in collaborative learning

countywide. The district took charge and began to send useful data out to the schools every 10

days identifying chronically absent students and those with poor attendance who were on the

verge of becoming truant. Each school developed an attendance team to monitor the data and employ interventions. The district sought out funding to hire people to do home visits to families of young children who were chronically absent, schools implemented a campaign to communicate the importance of good school attendance with parents on a regular basis and attendance incentives were initiated. The district also developed partnerships within the community to develop a committee that worked to avoid juvenile court referrals for truant youth. Because of these efforts, the district saw a 7% decrease in districtwide truancy for the school year with a 12% decrease specifically in kindergarten. Reading test scores for kindergarten students that year increased by nine percentage points. Since the 2012-2013 school year, the district has worked to improve their program implementation and address specific needs with consistency, which was proven to be sustained through 2016. The model notes that the appropriate use of data is a powerful tool to identify problems and target resources to create improvement. The approach was comprehensive beginning with prevention and positive messaging. Personalized interventions, home visits to kindergarten students, and consistency were crucial to the success of the program. This non-punitive system sought out interventions to prevent juvenile court referrals and address problems with intensive case management.

In 1986, Callahan implemented a study in one elementary school using positive reinforcement to entice students to attend school. Callahan's program was developed to rely on positive reinforcement over a 10-week period for 14 identified chronically absent students. The students were informed that if they attended school each day, they would be rewarded every Friday with special activities including ice cream after lunch, pizza parties, swimming parties, lakefront picnics, and other costly prizes. Prior to the study students averaged 1.8 absences per week and 2.1 discipline referrals, and the researcher noted that the school consisted of a highly

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transient population with students coming from families of tourism, fishing, farming, and ranch workers. Callahan attempted to modify students' behavior using positive reinforcement. The researcher noted that economic feasibility of continuing the program would be a limitation of the study. As a result of the study, 13 of the 14 subjects improved their attendance rates to an average of .28 absences per week and grades improved for the students whose attendance improved. This non-punitive program proved successful in reducing absences for the affected students, but it is unknown whether the students maintained that attendance after the 10-week period. The study revealed that schools can improve attendance by rewarding students for attending school regularly. One fault with the program, however, might be the expense of weekly rewards and the lack of time needed to continue individual counseling sessions and close monitoring of students.

A study completed by Comer (2017) examined the Judges Truancy Program in several counties in West Virginia, which used a multi-disciplinary but punitive approach to address truant youth. The program included collaboration of a Multi-Disciplinary Educational Team (MDET) to meet the needs of the student, the family, and the school. Students in elementary school were referred to the juvenile program when they reached 10 unexcused absences. The referral went to the county truancy officer and was then passed on to the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) as an educational abuse and neglect case. A petition was filed in magistrate court and the process of correcting the chronic absenteeism began. The magistrate court process and the DHHR process simultaneously worked to rapidly address the absenteeism and begin corrective action, with the DHHR assigning a worker to begin an investigation. The court set a date for the initial hearing prior to the MDET meeting among the school, parents, attorneys, DHHR, and other family advocates. At the middle and high school levels the student

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was involved and could face juvenile charges for non-compliance. The MDET worked to identify the reasons for the chronic absenteeism, develop a plan to address the student's needs, and help the student attend school regularly. The team could address family needs, housing and economic factors, parenting skills, mental health problems, and any other factor that contributes to school absences. The DHHR, with assistance from the courts, could get psychological evaluations and medical evaluations to address the problems that contributed to much of elementary school absenteeism. The program showed significant improvement after the first two years. This multi-disciplinary punitive program has had ongoing success in decreasing the rate of chronic absenteeism.

Baker and Jansen (2000), completed a study of a non-punitive program which involved positive reinforcement for chronically absent students. The program hinged on a tag line that promoted a positive idea of students being cool because they are in school. They utilized school social workers to hold group therapy meetings with students who were chronically absent. The idea was to have the students assume a leadership role and take charge of helping each other become more successful at school attendance. The students checked in each morning and on Monday mornings had a group session to talk about the previous week. The group set weekly attendance goals, discussed what caused them to fail or succeed during the previous week, and students recorded their weekly attendance so that they had a concrete vision. This study improved attendance for 93% of the students involved, 100% had an improved attitude toward school and learning, and 100% had an improved level of self-esteem. The supportive nature of the group therapy enhanced students' feelings of connectedness to the school and the group therapy concept helped the social worker maximize effectiveness with the most children in a short amount of time. Home visits and more timely interventions were not used in this study but

were reserved for more severe cases. Longitudinal effects were not measured in this study and it is unknown whether the treated children maintained good attendance after interventions ceased.

A punitive program similar to the WV Judges' Truancy Program maintained a six-year success rate for 34 of 36 schools affected (Lawrence et al., 2011). The program was designed to intervene in truant behavior, decrease the number of habitual truants, and prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system. The program was successful because there was a threat of court referral for non-compliance. The Child Study Team (CST) was enacted at five unexcused absences to address the problems and make necessary social service referrals to get the family on the right track. If students' attendance did not improve after interventions, then they could be referred for criminal prosecution. While the program is punitive in nature, it houses a social work component to help meet the families' basic needs. The study highlighted the need for multi-disciplinary teams that can address the micro, meso, and macro causes of truancy treating the entire family system.

Each of the 36 schools involved in the program had different success rates. In the first year, 34 of the 36 schools enrolled in the study showed a decrease in the number of truant students at a range from 16% to 44.5%. Some schools withdrew from the program, but later re-enrolled as their truancy numbers rose when the program was not in effect. Three schools did not show significant reduction in absenteeism throughout their enrollment in the program and there is no explanation provided. The study highlighted community factors that played a role in some schools being more successful than others which indicates outside factors can directly affect the success of the school. This could have been a contributor to the three unsuccessful schools' experiences. Those neighborhoods with lower crime rates, caring residents, and cohesive community nature housed schools with better success at improving chronic

absenteeism. The researchers noted that a limitation to the study was that it needed a positive

reinforcement component to empower students and their families, but the program was

sustainable and overall successful.

Another punitive system employed by McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin (2004), showed

improvement simply through the school principal warning parents of their child's truancy

through a letter which resulted in an immediate 5% decrease in attendance problems. The

second step was a visit by the county truancy officer which decreased absences by another 6%.

The researchers maintained that parents do not always realize how many days their child has

missed or even that anyone is paying attention. Step three involved a social services referral

which showed a 1% improvement, and the final step was contact with the family by the local

police department, which yielded another one percent decrease. While the program is very

impersonal, it gets students into school which is the desired outcome. A limitation to the study

noted that concentrating efforts on chronic truants not affected by steps one and two may have

obtained even greater success rates. The short-term findings of the program were encouraging

and did not constitute a considerable drain on school resources.

Level of Sustainability

According to Chang et al., (2016), truancy is not a one-time treatment but instead

involves using continuous data to promote student success. Various programs have been studied

to determine effectiveness. Although this is important in addressing truancy, sustainability is the

critical issue that needs further review. Temporarily masking the problem and not following up

with regular monitoring and interventions places vulnerable children at risk. Most studies related

to truancy recorded short term benefits and did not measure sustainability. The Early Truancy

Intervention Program, however, was successful over a six-year period (Lawrence et al., 2011),

while other short-term programs did not improve attendance at all (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Some non-punitive programs promote rewards and individual attention that may not be sustainable due to funding, personnel, intensive time requirements, and other school factors. Other programs lose their luster as people become immune to the interventions (Trujillo, 2006). This study will review five years of truancy data at the elementary level in comparison to the middle and high schools, investigate current programs used, and solicit attendance directors' perceptions to determine sustainability for all 55 counties in the state of West Virginia.

Current West Virginia Law

On April 2, 2015 the State of West Virginia enacted changes to WV Code §49-1-4 via Senate Bill 393. The reforms enacted were designed to reduce the number of youths in residential placements and reduce the cost to taxpayers, which at the time equaled $100,000 per child per year. The recommended changes were a result of a task force investigation to determine how state resources were being used and whether taxpayers were getting sufficient public safety return on their investment. According to the bill, a set of policies was designed to protect public safety; improve outcomes for youth and families; reduce culpability for juvenile offenders; and contain taxpayer costs by prioritizing resources for the most serious offenders. The new law states that students cannot be prosecuted and sent to placement for status offenses, therefore most Circuit Courts in the state no longer hear truancy cases. Families in the state can, however, potentially lose custody of their children for non-compliance of compulsory attendance laws.

Under Senate Bill 393, all counties were required to build Truancy Diversion Programs as a result of changes to the law. Diversion programs are designed to assist the student and family prior to legal action in a truancy case and the law requires that a portion of any savings

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that accrue as a result of the change in law shall be reinvested in evidence-based community programs that reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for youth and their families. Grant funds may be used to hire truancy diversions, school-based probation officers, and truancy social workers in the local education agencies (LEAs) (i.e., county boards of education) who apply for funding. The intent of the diversion program is to address the symptoms within the home or school that have caused the student to be truant. Each case is handled based on its specific underlying factors, and wrap-around services may be applied to meet the specific needs of the individual students.

While elementary programs vary, the focus has remained consistent and includes getting students to attend school on a regular basis to promote learning and future success. This study examined the perceptions of these programs related to strengths, weaknesses, effectiveness, sustainability, and five-year attendance data.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the sustainability of elementary truancy programs used in all 55 counties of West Virginia since 2010. The study compared attendance rates and applied interview data to determine whether changes to programs promoted changes to attendance rates. Truancy programs all vary in methods across the state, but individual programs must be aligned to specific populations and counties have used a variety of punitive and non-punitive methods to address chronic absenteeism. Attendance improvement in this study was defined by increases in attendance rate percentages over a five-year period. Eight research questions originated from the review of literature:

1. What type of truancy programs (i.e., punitive, nonpunitive and/or combination thereof) are used at the elementary level in each of the 55 counties in West Virginia?

2. To what extent have truancy programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing punitive corrective strategies?

3. To what extent have nonpunitive truancy programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy?

4. To what extent have combination (i.e., punitive with nonpunitive) programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy?

5. To what extent have attendance rates changed at the elementary school level over the last five years?

6. To what extent have attendance rates been sustainable at the elementary school level over the last five years?

7. What are the perceived problems with current programs used to reduce truancy at the elementary level in the state of West Virginia as held by attendance directors in all 55 counties?

8. What are the perceived strengths with current programs used to reduce truancy at the elementary level in the state of West Virginia as held by attendance directors in all 55 counties?

Research Design

This was a descriptive, non-experimental, mixed-methods study designed to measure the effectiveness and sustainability of elementary truancy programs across the state of West Virginia. A non-experimental design was appropriate because the independent variable (i.e., attendance) could not be manipulated, students could not be randomly assigned, and the research questions focused on relationships (i.e., between programmatic elements and subsequent attendance behaviors).

Population

The population surveyed included a minimum of one attendance director in each of the 55 counties in the state of West Virginia. In addition, data were collected from the West Virginia Department of Education over the past five years including demographics, attendance rates, and chronic absenteeism rates with a specific focus on the elementary level. The data for research questions two through five were gathered from the West Virginia Department of

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Education Zoom WV site and the survey. Research questions one and six through eight were answered with data collected through the online survey and from phone interviews with a sampling of attendance directors across the state. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the basic features of the data and provide simple summaries about the counties in West Virginia.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data gathered from the West Virginia Department of Education Zoom WV site included elementary school demographic information, attendance rates, and chronic absenteeism rates for each county. A survey was administered using Qualtrics online software, followed by phone interviews with a sample of attendance directors across West Virginia to determine types of programs used and perceptions of effectiveness and sustainability, as well as potential relationships or interactions between attendance rates and demographics (e.g., county location, student population, etc.) or types of programs. An emergent category analysis was conducted to determine directors' perceptions of effectiveness and sustainability of programs and SPSS 24 was used to examine potential statistical relationships, if any, between truancy-prevention programs and subsequent attendance rates.

Limitations

Survey responses were limited to attendance directors who responded rather than being generalizable to a larger portion of those practitioners. Respondents may have responded out of bias, either positive or negative, about the results of truancy reduction programs in general. The absence of anonymity may have resulted in respondents' giving socially desirable responses for survey items. This may have been especially true if the participants felt their conduct was under scrutiny or the research topic was of a sensitive nature. The researcher's professional experience in education may have been considered as a source of empirical knowledge that could promote

deeper understanding of the respondents' perceptions. As a source of potential bias, however,

this could be viewed as a limitation. The small sample size was also a limitation which could

have resulted in a lack of representation.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This study examined the effectiveness and sustainability of attendance programs at the elementary level in 55 West Virginia counties. Research findings and statistical data analyses are explored in this chapter. These data were collected from the West Virginia Department of Education Zoom WV website, a specific data request for elementary attendance data from the WVDE, a Qualtrics survey, and personal interviews with a select group of attendance directors. The survey collected information on perceptions of current programs and interviews were also conducted with a sample of truancy directors to gather information related to the types of programs used in each county, the perceptions of those individuals on the effectiveness of their current truancy programs, the perceived sustainability of programs and their programs' strengths and weaknesses.

The research conducted was a descriptive, non-experimental study of elementary truancy programs in West Virginia. Descriptive analyses were employed to compare Zoom WV attendance data in West Virginia schools over the past five years (i.e., 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, 2018-2019), as well as surveys and interviews from attendance directors in 36 West Virginia counties. Attendance rates and demographic data were statistically analyzed. The research was designed to answer the following questions.

1. What type of truancy programs (i.e., punitive, nonpunitive and/or combination thereof) are used at the elementary level in each of the 55 counties in West Virginia?

2. To what extent have truancy programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing punitive corrective strategies?

3. To what extent have nonpunitive truancy programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy?

4. To what extent have combination (i.e., punitive with nonpunitive) programs increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy?

5. To what extent have attendance rates changed at the elementary school level over the last five years?

6. To what extent have attendance rates been sustainable at the elementary school level over the last five years?

7. What are the perceived problems with current programs used to reduce truancy at the elementary level in the state of West Virginia as held by attendance directors in all 55 counties?

8. What are the perceived strengths with current programs used to reduce truancy at the elementary level in the state of West Virginia as held by attendance directors in all 55 counties?

Population and Sample

The target population included attendance directors in 55 county school districts in West Virginia. Thirty-six respondents consented to the survey and responded to some or all of the

questions. Of the 55 attendance directors, 19 (34%) did not respond to the survey. Seven (19%)

participants chose not to provide their county name in the survey. Attendance directors

participating who identified their counties included Barbour, Berkeley, Boone, Braxton, Brooke,

Calhoun, Doddridge, Gilmer, Grant, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Lincoln, Logan, Marion,

Mercer, Mingo, Morgan, McDowell, Ohio, Pleasants, Pocahontas, Raleigh, Ritchie, Tucker,

Webster, Wetzel, Wirt, and Wood.

The last three survey questions focused on demographic data about the attendance

directors and the counties they served. Respondents were asked to describe their county location

(i.e., urban, suburban, rural). Table 1 shows that rural counties were most represented with 25

(69.4%) of responding counties in that category. Six (16.7%) counties responding identified as

suburban. One (2.7%) reported in as urban, and four counties did not respond to this question.

Table 1

Responding County Demographics

Description	*N*	Percentage
Suburban	6	16.7%
Urban	1	2.7%
Rural	25	69.4%
Did Not Respond	4	11.2%
Total	36	100%

Another demographic question asked attendance directors to identify the approximate

number of students in their county. Table 2 shows that respondents were closely distributed

among all of the selection, with the majority of responding counties (22.2%) having between

2001-3000 students. Seven (19.4%) counties reported having greater than 5000 students; six

(16.7%) responding counties had 1001-2000 students; five (13.8%) counties reported having 1-1000 students; four (11.2%) counties have 4001-5000 students and two (5.5%) counties have 3001-4000 students. Four counties did not report their student numbers.

Table 2

Responding County Approximate Student Population

Description	N	Percentage
1-1000	5	13.8%
1001-2000	6	16.7%
2001-3000	8	22.2%
3001-4000	2	5.5%
4001-5000	4	11.2%
>5000	7	19.4%
Did Not Respond	4	11.2%
Total	36	100%

The final demographic question asked participants to select from a years of experience range with the following options: 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, or >20 years. Twelve (33.3%) participants had 1-5 years of experience; eight (22.3%) participants had 6-10 years of experience; five (13.9%) participants had 11-15 years of experience; three (8.3%) participants had 16-20 years of experience; three (8.3%) participants had >20 years of experience; five (13.9%) participants did not respond to this question.

Table 3

Attendance Director Years of Experience

Description	N	Percentage
1-5	12	33.3%
6-10	8	22.3%
11-15	5	13.9%
16-20	3	8.3%
>20	3	8.3%
Did Not Respond	5	13.9%
Total	36	100%

Zoom WV Data Collection: Research Questions 2, 3, 4, and 6

The West Virginia Department of Education provides county and state data on their Zoom WV website. This portal, however, does not specifically break down data to the elementary level. The researcher submitted a data request form to the Zoom WV portal administrator to obtain only elementary attendance and chronic absenteeism data for each county. Daily attendance rates over the past five years were averaged to determine a five-year rate which was then used to compare county programs and answer research questions two, three and four.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked to what extent truancy programs had increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing punitive corrective strategies. There is no evidence in the data collected to suggest that counties which have

implemented punitive corrective strategies to reduce truancy have increased the attendance rates in their elementary schools between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. Only four (7.8%) counties in the sample reported using punitive approaches. Among the four, only two showed any difference in attendance rates during the reporting period with one actually decreasing from 98% to 95% and the other increasing from 93% to 94%. The other two counties held steady at 94%.

While the research question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates, those rates were included in the data provided by the West Virginia Department of Education and may be more reflective of a school's actual attendance given that the wide number of excuses students are permitted to offer tends to inflate the annual attendance rates. Three of the four counties that reported the use of punitive corrective strategies showed increases in chronic absenteeism between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. One county showed an increase in chronic absenteeism from 14% to 18%, one showed an increase from 20% to 22%, and one county showed an astonishing increase from 4% to 15%. Only one showed a decrease from 23% to 22%. These figures can be seen in Appendix B.

Research Question 3

Research question three asked to what extent nonpunitive truancy programs had increased attendance rates at the elementary level in West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy. There is no evidence in the data collected to indicate that counties which have implemented non-punitive corrective strategies to reduce truancy have increased the attendance rates in their elementary schools between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. Among the four (7.8%) counties that reported using non-punitive approaches, only one showed an increase

in attendance rates during the reporting period, from 92% to 93%. Two others showed decreases in attendance rates from 93% to 92% while the other remained the same at 90%.

While the research question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates, those rates were included in the data provided by the West Virginia Department of Education and may be further reflective of a school's actual attendance given that the wide number of excuses students are permitted to offer tends to inflate the annual attendance rates. As was the case with counties using punitive approaches to truancy, three of four counties that reported the use of non-punitive corrective strategies showed increases in chronic absenteeism between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. One county showed an increase in chronic absenteeism from 21% to 29%, one showed an increase from 21% to 27%, and the third showed an increase from 37% to 38%. Only one showed a decrease, a rather substantial one, from 29% to 16%. These figures can be seen in Appendix B.

Research Question 4

Research question four asked to what extent combination (i.e., punitive with nonpunitive) programs had increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy. There is no evidence in the data collected to indicate that counties which have operated combination strategies (i.e., involving elements of both punitive and non-punitive methods) to reduce truancy have increased the attendance rates in their elementary schools between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. Among the 21 (39%) counties that reported using combination approaches, in fact, none showed either increases or decreases of more than a percentage point in their attendance rates over the five-year reporting period.

While the research question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates, those rates were included in the data provided by the West Virginia Department of Education and may be more reflective of a school's actual attendance given that the wide number of excuses students are permitted to offer tends to inflate the annual attendance rates. Fourteen of the 21 counties that reported the use of combination corrective strategies showed increases in chronic absenteeism between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years, one of which was dramatic from 10% to 27%. Three counties, however, showed decreases in their chronic absenteeism rates ranging from 3% to 6%. These figures can be seen in Appendix B.

Research Question 5

Research question five asked to what extent attendance rates changed at the elementary school level over the last five years. There is no evidence in the data collected to indicate that attendance rates have changed much from the 2014-15 to 2018-19 school years. Among all 55 counties in the state, 32 (58%) counties had the exact same attendance rate in 2014-15 and 2018-19 with small incremental changes over the five-year reporting period. Seventeen (31%) counties had a 1% change from 2014-15 to 2018-19, with only small changes up and down over the five-year reporting period. Four (7%) counties had a 2% change from 2014-15 to 2018-19, with minimal changes over the five-year period. Two other counties had a 3% decline in attendance rates over the five-year period. These data would indicate that treatments did not work in those counties.

While the research question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates, those rates were included in the data provided by the West Virginia Department of Education and may be more reflective of a school's actual attendance given that the wide number of excuses students are permitted to offer tends to inflate the annual attendance rates. While the

majority of counties had little change in chronic absenteeism rates, there were notable

differences in 26 of the 55 counties in the state. Four counties had 3% increases, while four only

showed 3% decreases in chronic absenteeism rates. Three counties had 4% increases in chronic

absenteeism rates, while another had a 5% decrease in chronic absenteeism rates. One county

showed a 6% decrease, while three other counties had 6% increases. Two counties had 7%

increases in chronic absenteeism rates, two others had 8% increases, and one county had an 8%

decrease in chronic absenteeism rates. One county had an 11% increase over the five-year

reporting period, while another posted a 13% decrease. One county, however, had a 17%

increase in chronic absenteeism over the five-year period. Obviously, those eight counties

reporting decreases in chronic absenteeism suggest that treatments are working and more

students are in school every day. Of the reporting counties, only one showed a significant

decrease in their chronic absenteeism rate 13% using a nonpunitive program. Four counties

reporting a decrease were using a combination program. All other responding counties had an

increase in their rates. These figures can be seen in Appendix B.

Research Question 6

Research question six asked to what extent attendance rates had been sustainable at the

elementary school level over the last five years. Based on the annual attendance numbers, it

would appear that attendance rates have been stable. There is no substantial difference between

the 2014-15 and 2018-19 rates. When one includes the chronic absenteeism rates in the analysis,

however, it becomes apparent that the attendance rates do not tell the whole story. Nearly all

counties have shown increases in their chronic absenteeism rates (see Appendix B). Collecting

these data has become a new initiative for the West Virginia Department of Education over the

last two school years. School districts are now focused on total absences (i.e., excused or unexcused) and ask attendance directors to work on improving these numbers.

Survey Responses: Research Questions 1, 5, 7 and 8

A survey was also part of the data collection for the study. The researcher sent out a Qualtrics survey to attendance directors in all 55 counties of West Virginia. The survey sought to obtain perceptions of current programs and their relative strengths and weaknesses. The survey asked Likert-type, short answer, and demographic questions.

The survey had a return rate of 65% with 36 of 55 attendance directors responding. Consent was obtained with the first question of the survey for all 36 participants. The survey attempted to obtain data about the programs used at the elementary level as this is critical to building good school attendance habits that might improve attendance at the middle and high school level. According to a question on the survey, respondents stated that specific elementary programs are used in 25% of the reporting counties. Those nine respondents indicated that they use resources such as Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), incentives, social workers, rewards and competitions, wrap around services, and marketing slogans.

Research Question 1

Research question one asked to identify the types of programs used in each county as there is a standard defined by code; however, counties can use other program aspects to improve attendance numbers. Survey data included the types of programs that counties currently use and indicated that 4 (11.1%) West Virginia counties use a punitive program, 4 (11.1%) use a nonpunitive program, and 21 (58.3%) use a combination of punitive and nonpunitive programs, and 7 (19.4%) respondents did not make a selection.

Research Question 5

Research question five asked to what extent attendance rates have changed at the elementary school level over the last five years. While there was no evidence in the Zoom WV data collected to indicate that treatments affected attendance numbers, respondents were asked on the survey to rate their perceptions of the degree to which their programs were satisfactory in motivating attendance in the district on a range of 1 (not at all satisfactory) to 6 (highly satisfactory). The responses show that 83.86% of the respondents rated their programs satisfactory to highly satisfactory. Figure 1 shows that 3.23% of the respondents selected 1 for this question, indicating their programs had little or no motivation on attendance in the district; 9.68% of respondents selected 2; 3.23% of respondents selected 3; 32.26% of respondents selected 4; 35.48% of respondents selected 5; and 16.12% of respondents selected 6 indicating a high level of motivation. These perceptions are important to note as the Zoom WV data suggest there is little to no changes in attendance rates for all but two counties.

Figure 1

Degree of Attendance Motivation
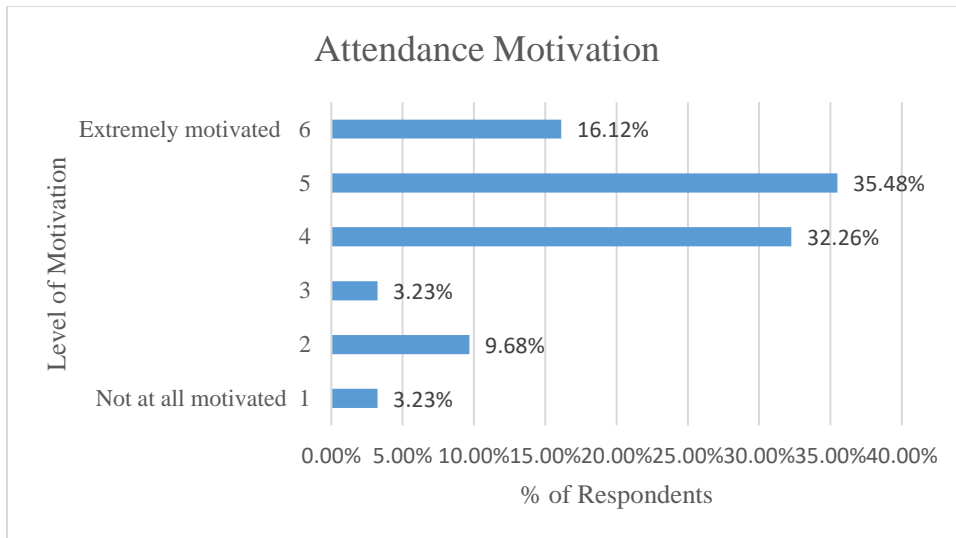
Another question asked participants to rank their satisfaction with the attendance program used in their county. While attendance rates have barely changed over the five-year reporting period, 58.07% of attendance directors expressed relatively high levels of satisfaction with their programs. Figure 2 shows that 3.23% selected 1, indicating they felt extremely dissatisfied with the program; 6.45% of respondents selected 2; 32.25% of respondents selected 3; 41.94% of respondents selected 4; 12.9% of respondents selected 5; and 3.23% of respondents selected 6, indicating that the participants felt extremely high satisfaction with their current program.

Figure 2

Degree of Program Satisfaction

Degree of Program Satisfaction
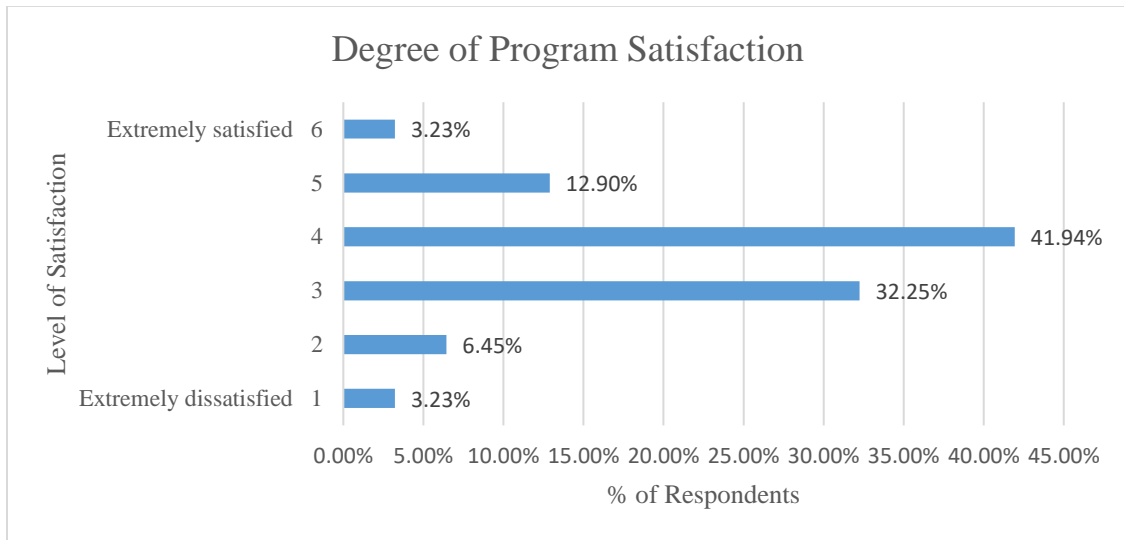
The survey data indicated that 53.3% of the respondents felt the program used in their counties ranged from average to above average in effectiveness. Overall, more attendance directors were satisfied with their programs than unsatisfied. Figure 3 reflects these responses showing that 6.67% of the respondents for this question selected 1, indicating their program was not at all effective; 6.67% of the respondents selected 2; 33.3% of respondents selected 3; 40.0% of the respondents selected 4; 13.33% of the respondents selected 5; and no respondents selecting 6.

Figure 3

Degree of Program Effectiveness
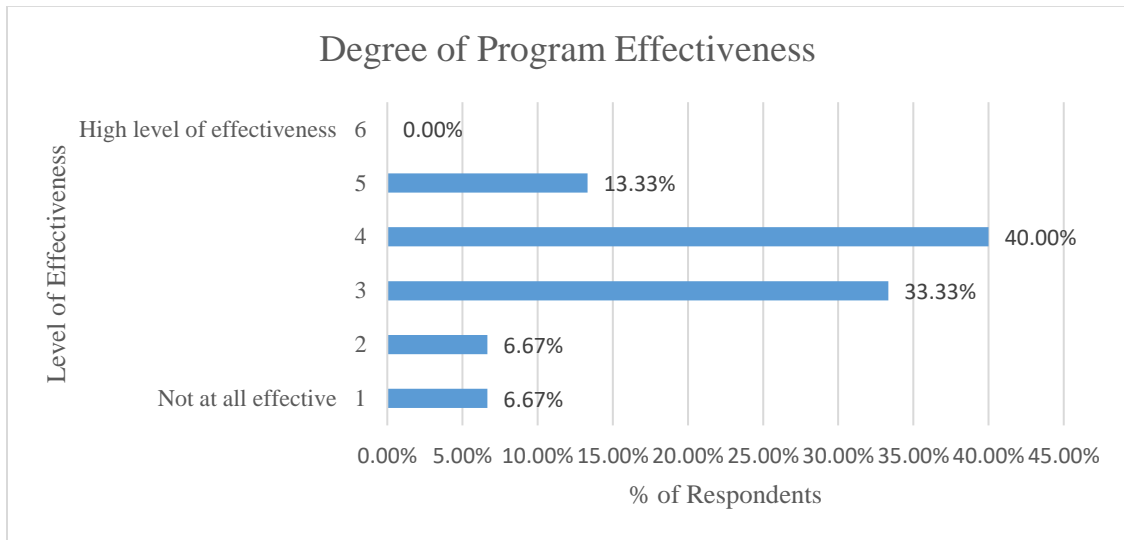
Participants were asked to provide their perceptions of the potential effectiveness of the WVDE chronic absenteeism initiative increasing attendance rates in their county. The data shows that nearly half of the respondents felt the WVDE initiative would likely be an above-average means of increasing attendance. Figure 4 shows that 18.75% of the respondents for this question selected 1, indicating the initiative would be not at all effective; 12.50% of the respondents selected 2; 21.88% of respondents selected 3; 15.63% of respondents selected 4; 28.12% of respondents selected 5; and 3.12% of respondents selected 6.

Figure 4

Perceptions of Chronic Absenteeism Initiative
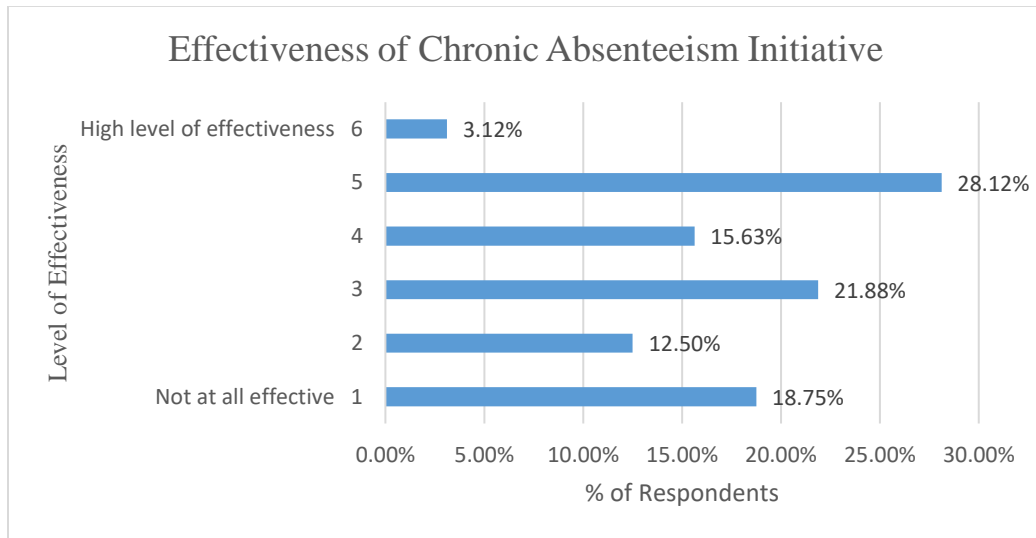
While chronic absenteeism was not part of the research questions, the data are reflective

of a need to address these rates as they are direct indicators of how many students are missing

school each day regardless of the reason. According to the Zoom WV data, the lowest average

chronic absenteeism rate was 10% and the highest was 36%. The West Virginia Department of

Education (2018) has set a goal for all schools to achieve 90% of their students in school, 90% of

the time. Only one of the 55 counties reached this goal on average over the five-year reporting

period and achieved a Meets Standard Performance Level designation. Individual schools within

counties may have met or exceeded standard, but data were analyzed on overall county

elementary attendance percentages. Figure 5 indicates the West Virginia Department of

Education's Performance Level Measures used to assess school attendance performance.

Figure 5

WVDE Performance Level Indicators

Performance Points Earned	Performance Level
>/= 95% of Points	Exceeds Standard
90 to 95% of Points	Meets Standard
80 to 90% of Points	Partially Meets Standard
< 80% of Points	Does not Meet Standard

"This measure is operationalized as actual attendance, that is, the percentage of students present or exposed to relevant instruction for at least 90% of available instructional days" (Paine, 2018).

Attendance directors were asked if they feel that the WVDE expectations for chronic absenteeism are realistic. Twenty-three (79%) respondents said no. Among the reasons were these:

- more parental accountability is needed;

- medical professionals need to be more accountable in regard to excusing absences for no medical reason;

- students who have legitimate reasons for absences should not be counted against the school's attendance numbers;

- generational family problems cannot be fixed by schools alone;

- families who do not value education will not comply anyway;

- excused absences by state definition are counted in chronic absenteeism numbers;

- the chronic absenteeism policy contradicts health policy that states a parent should keep their children home if they are sick; and

- this is a punitive measure from the state down to each county with events that schools have little control over.

Six (20.6%) respondents said yes, the initiative is realistic. Those respondents said they agree with the initiative because

- we must do better and the expectations seem reasonable, but it will take a long time;

- we need a goal and it is realistic for a student to miss less than 18 days of school;

- excuse codes are excessive and create inflated absenteeism and this initiative will help get that problem under control; and

- since schools are now being graded on this number they will begin to look for solutions to the problems.

Research Question 7

Research question seven was explored through open-ended questions on the survey as participants were asked to provide their perception of the weaknesses in their elementary programs. Their responses can be clustered into three categories: those related to parents' roles, those related to the truancy mitigation programs themselves, and those related to agencies or issues outside of the school system. Reported weaknesses related to parents' roles in contributing to the truancy problem included parents who are not held accountable; parental apathy and lack of concern regarding punitive measures such as jail or fines; children who get punished for adult actions; no accountability for those who are tardy; students who are not at fault as they are reliant on parents to get them to school; poverty; lack of motivation and parent support; parents' failure to recognize the importance of education; parents have too many chances and know that punitive measures will not result in true penalties; the opioid addiction of parents; parents who do not care about attendance and who will not do their part to get children

to school; PK and kindergarten parents who do not think attendance rules apply to them, thus starting bad attendance habits.

Weaknesses regarding truancy reduction programs themselves included lack of a multidisciplinary approach where all parties are on board; programs that are brand new; the program is the same at the elementary, middle and high school levels; programs that do not address the root cause (i.e., poor attendance is a symptom of a larger cause, which is the corrosive effects of poverty). Reported weaknesses related to issues or agencies outside of the school system were communication breakdowns among DHHR, schools, magistrates, and other court systems; open Child Protective Services (CPS) cases that make parents more guarded and less open to interventions; funding to support incentives and initiatives is difficult to obtain; the legal system does not value truancy cases and they are often pushed off the docket for criminal cases; inability of involved agencies and schools to assist parents with drug addiction; and magistrate court is ineffective.

Suggested elementary level improvements related to parents' roles in contributing to positive school attendance include education for parents with added resources that help them understand how education affects a child's life; teaching expectations from the first day of preschool; frequent communication between school and home; and promoting societal improvements to enhance the lives of West Virginia families. Suggested improvements regarding truancy reduction programs themselves include positive statewide social media marketing to promote the importance of school attendance; school counselors who can work to address barriers; a combination of punitive and nonpunitive measures to promote a successful program; incentives and possible recognition for students on a weekly basis; and a statewide campaign to encourage school attendance. Suggested improvements related to issues or agencies

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outside of the school system were better working relationships with DHHR, magistrates, and circuit courts; linking tax credits or social service benefits to school attendance so the parent or guardian is held accountable; interventions/punitive measures taking effect immediately at the tenth unexcused day; and social workers to help address the basic needs of families.

The researcher continued to assess attendance director opinions by asking them to rank their perceptions of the effectiveness of their current programs in changing student attitudes about attending school. The responses show that 80.64% of the respondents felt the program used in their respective counties ranged from average to highly effective in changing student attitudes. Figure 6 shows that 6.45% of the respondents for this question selected 1, indicating their program was not at all effective; 9.68% of the respondents selected 2; 3.23% of respondents selected 3; 29.03% of respondents selected 4; 48.38% of respondents selected 5; and 3.23% of participants selected 6 which indicated their program was highly effective in changing student attitudes.

Figure 6

Changing Student Attitudes About Attending School
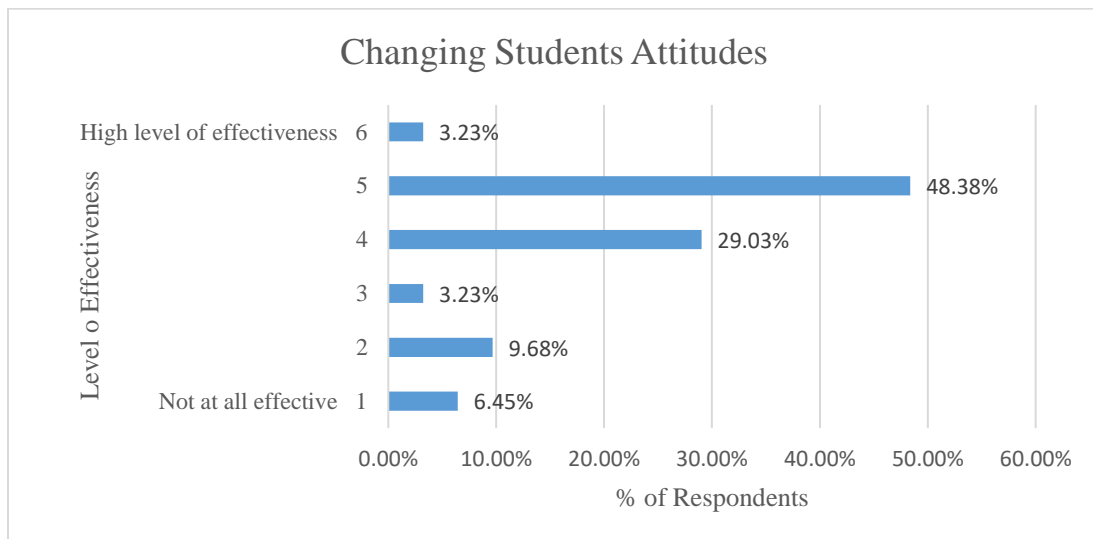
To further explore opinions about current programs, participants were asked to rank their perceptions of the effectiveness of their programs in changing family attitudes about attending school. The data show that 64.52% of the respondents felt the program used in their county was average to highly effective in changing family attitudes. Figure 7 shows that 6.45% of the respondents for this question selected 1, indicating their program was not at all effective; 9.68% of the respondents selected 2; 19.35% of respondents selected 3; 29.03% of respondents selected 4; 25.81% of respondents selected 5; and 9.68% of respondents selected 6 indicating a high level of effectiveness in their current elementary program.

Figure 7

Changing Family Attitudes About Attending School
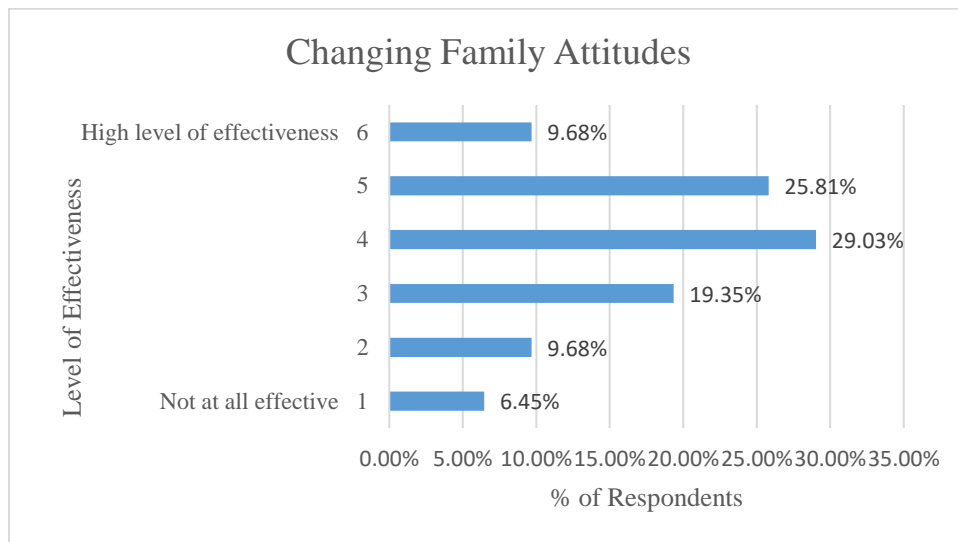
The researcher asked participants to rank their satisfaction with the magistrate process(es) used in their counties. The data show that the majority of the respondents were satisfied to extremely satisfied with the magistrate process(es) in their counties. Figure 8 shows that 20% of the respondents selected 1, indicating extreme dissatisfaction with the program; 6.67% of the respondents selected 2; 13.32% of respondents selected 3; 16.67% of respondents selected 4;

26.67% of respondents selected 5; and 16.67% of respondents selected 6, indicating they felt extremely high satisfaction with the magistrate process.

Figure 8

Satisfaction with the Magistrate Process
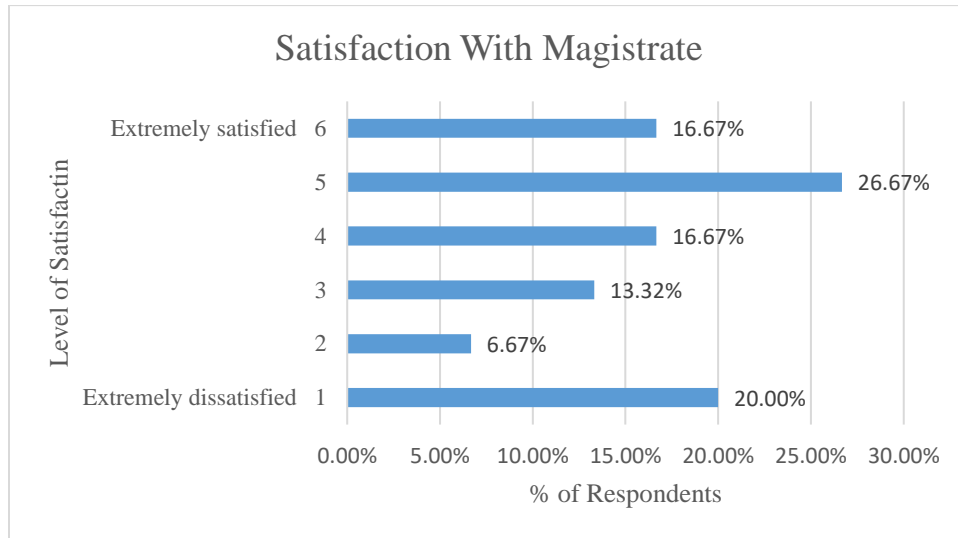
Participants were then asked to rank their satisfaction with circuit court interventions used in their counties. The responses indicate that 53.13% of the respondents felt average to extreme satisfaction with the circuit court interventions in their counties. Figure 9 shows that 18.75% of the respondents for this question selected 1, indicating they are extremely dissatisfied with the interventions; 12.50% of the respondents selected 2; 15.62% of respondents selected 3; 12.50% of respondents selected 4; 25.00% of respondents selected 5; and 15.63% of respondents selected 6, indicating they felt extremely high satisfaction with circuit court interventions.

Figure 9

Satisfaction with Circuit Court interventions

Figure showing a horizontal bar chart titled "Satisfaction With Circuit Court." The y-axis is labeled "Level of Satisfaction" with values from 1 (Extremely dissatisfied) to 6 (Extremely satisfied). The x-axis is labeled "% of Respondents" ranging from 0.00% to 30.00%.

- Extremely satisfied 6: 15.63%
- 5: 25.00%
- 4: 12.50%
- 3: 15.62%
- 2: 12.50%
- Extremely dissatisfied 1: 18.75%
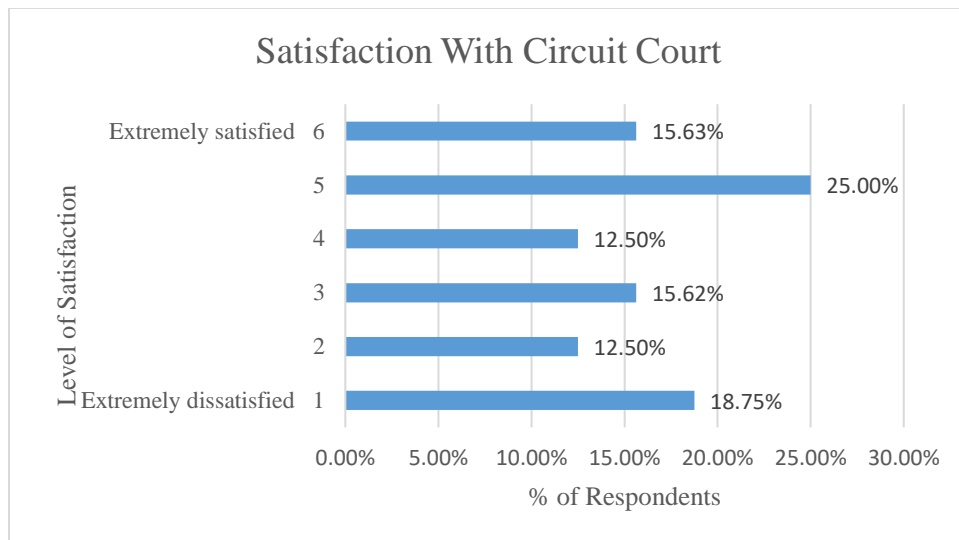
Research Question 8

Research question eight was answered by attendance directors describing what they viewed as the strengths of their programs at the elementary level in open-ended survey questions and in follow-up interviews. Reported strengths were related to a focus on parents' roles contributing to positive school attendance; elementary students setting good school habits that will carry into middle and high school; encouraging parents' being proactive; approaching truancy early; and using provided supports to change the behavior.

Reported strengths regarding counties' truancy reduction programs themselves include student assistance team SAT meetings and incentive programs; face to face contact; programs designed at the school level to meet specific needs and goals; countywide programs that promote and market attendance; recognizing positive attendance; rewards and incentives for students and classrooms; flexibility for schools to do what works for them without specific defined constraints; and using a three tiered approach (Tier I incentives and whole data tracking, Tier II attendance groups, parent calls, home visits, Tier III referral to outside agencies, programs, or

court). Reported strengths related to issues or agencies outside of the school system included implementing a holistic approach including agencies such as DHHR and family assistance programs; using a committee approach to support parents and students; attaching health clinics to schools; using social worker and truancy diversion programs to provide wrap-around services; and positive working relationships with DHHR, magistrates, and circuit court judges.

Attendance rates obtained from Zoom WV indicate that attendance rates have not fluctuated much in the last five years in any county. Some show gradual increases, but truancy mitigation programs do not appear to be heavily influencing attendance. The survey responses indicate a wide variety of perceptions on these issues, with the majority feeling their programs are average at best in influencing attendance factors. Interview questions elicited more detailed information in regard to particular parts of the programs that are effective and not effective. Those are discussed in the next section.

Interview Responses

Phone interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 attendance directors who responded to the Qualtrics survey to ascertain further details in relationship to elementary truancy programs in use and perceptions of their effectiveness. The purpose of the interviews was to allow the authentic voice of attendance directors to contribute to the understanding of elementary truancy programs in West Virginia. Participants answered inquiries based on the research questions, but also talked openly about specific situations and concerns related to truancy in their respective counties. Questions explored thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of current programs as well as what supports would help improve programs. The subjects interviewed had broad perspectives on the subject and years of experience in combatting the age-old issue. The researcher categorized data from interviews using an emergent category

analysis to classify data, describe common themes, and provide a narrative of interviews regarding programs in West Virginia. The data were analyzed and divided into four categories based on research questions: program descriptions, sustainability issues, perceptions of effectiveness/strengths, and perceptions of ineffectiveness/weaknesses.

Program Descriptions

An emergent analysis was employed to define what West Virginia counties currently use to address student attendance and further define the types of programs as asked in research question one. All 15 counties interviewed reported using guidelines defined by West Virginia Code Chapter 18 Article 8, and nine of the interviewed counties reported having some type of program in place to address elementary attendance. Six of the county attendance directors interviewed reported they do not have specific elementary programs but use aspects that address elementary attendance.

One West Virginia county attendance director interviewed stated that, "the programs used in the county have proven ineffective so this year they started with a program like the Judges Truancy Program used in other counties in West Virginia." This county began filing with the magistrate again this school year and implemented a 60-90-day improvement period. If there is no improvement after treatment plans have been completed, the county files a charge of educational neglect with DHHR. The director is hopeful that the changes in the process will instigate positive change in attendance percentages.

The next county interviewed made changes to their program five years ago when the laws changed. The county sends a warning letter at three days of unexcused absences. The next step is a five-day attendance letter and a scheduled meeting with the parents. At 10 days the attendance director decides whether other interventions will work or a petition should be filed.

Another county attendance director interviewed discussed a program that closely follows the legal requirements in West Virginia Code. First, a five-day letter is sent as a warning. At seven days, the school-based probation officer and attendance director work together to ensure that the proper services are put in place to help the child be successful. They use a variety of community agencies such as DHHR, Safe at Home, and many other providers to promote family success depending on their individual needs and what developments have caused the child to be truant. If interventions are not successful, a petition is filed at 10 days with the court system. The county attendance team holds monthly Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) meetings to discuss what works and what needs to be changed in the process, so it is constantly improving. The attendance director feels the program works well and said, "although there are some repeat offenders, most students who enter the program show promising change in attendance and behaviors."

A rural attendance director said, "We follow the law and go beyond that." They do a three-day letter which is no longer required by law, then do a meeting at five days instead of a letter with the attendance director, principal, truancy diversion officer, and parent. The attendance director does a home visit prior to the tenth unexcused absence, although he stated he does not like doing that because he feels it is not safe. The attendance director said, "Good families are not the ones keeping their kids' home." After the home visit the director contacts the family again by phone if the student misses. Families are given every opportunity to get better. If they reach 10 days of unexcused absences, then a petition is filed with the magistrate.

Another small, rural county reported,

We do not have a diversion program. We do a three-day letter, a five-day letter and meeting, and a 10-day meeting. The families get fined or sentenced to jail. The court

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system works with me well and will do whatever I want. It is just hard to fix people. The schools do incentive programs and that works for the people who value education. But it does not work for the kids who need it. They are not at school to get the rewards and they don't even know what they are missing when they are absent.

Another county attendance director reports they use truancy diversion workers. The director noted they see a slight decline in the number of referrals made to court. Their primary program follows the state guidelines, which include a five-day letter and meeting, ten-day letter, and a court filing at 10 days. At the five-day meeting, the attendance director tries to help the parents understand the law and the process to prevent future absences. They also link the family to services for basic needs that might improve attendance. This county uses the pre-referral time to try to help families improve their structure.

A rural county with over 5000 students reported the county does not use a specific program for elementary students, but follows WV Code with letters, meetings, and referrals to court at 10 days. The attendance director stated,

Schools can do their own things to promote incentives and rewards to get more kids in school. They have the freedom to develop what works for them. This is a good aspect since it is hard to determine what works for every school. They are all very different demographically and the people who know the kids best are the ones with the power to promote positive attendance.

A very small, rural county reports they do not use a specific program for elementary students. They do, however, follow West Virginia Code and send letters and file truancy after a student has 10 unexcused absences. He reported this is flexible and not always consistent, as there is some time between letters going home and excuse notes coming in. The county urges

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competitions and incentives in elementary school and they focus on relationship building and knowing all of the students and families. "It helps, but this is difficult to fund."

Another small, rural county director reported they use the state code guidelines which include a five-day letter, meeting, and filing at 10 days for all students in their county. The participant said,

> We try a number of incentives and reward programs to initiate good attendance. Small kids are not responsible for their attendance according to this director. The students enjoy competitions and incentives at this age. Simple things can work to increase attendance. The cost of incentives and competitions and the time required to manage them is a problem in a small county.

Every county is required to follow state code 18-8 for elementary, middle, and high school attendance. Counties with elementary programs follow state code (i.e., five-day letter, meeting, court filing at 10 days) while also using supports such as social workers to meet family needs; rewards and incentives in schools to promote positive attendance; team meetings to address the root cause of absenteeism; and building relationships with families to promote success.

Sustainability

An emergent analysis was employed to analyze the strengths of programs as identified in attendance director interviews to answer research question eight. The data collected through the interviews showed that 11 attendance directors felt their programs were not fully sustainable. Only three attendance directors interviewed felt their programs were sustainable, while one director noted they do the best they can with what they have.

When asked about sustainability, one interviewee stated,

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Not in its current state. It does not work at all. This year I filed 45 cases and none of them made it to court and attendance did not improve for those students. The attendance director was in court three times this year and those were for cases from the previous school year. Interventions happen way too late, and when nothing happens after a petition is filed then the parents continue negative behavior because of the lack of consequences.

This director felt that correcting truancy must occur at the state and federal levels by re-aligning absence codes and shortening the list of available reasons for absence, ensuring that diversion happens immediately by requiring the justice system to participate, and having court ordered mandates for families to work with DHHR and other support systems. This director said, "Without court support the programs will never be effective." Attendance rates in this county have been up and down over the past five years with a low of 91% and a high of 94%.

Another county director asked about sustainability said, "It is managing an ever-growing situation. Not sure if it is sustainable, but I am always open to other options and programs to make things better for our students and our schools." This participant felt the program works, but it is "a mediocre attempt at addressing a problem much larger than one attendance director can tackle." The director is hopeful the changes implemented this year will promote improvement in attendance rates in their program. Attendance rate in this county have been at the high end of the 93rd percentile to a maximum of 94% over the past five school years.

When asked about sustainability one county attendance director said, "It takes a community to raise a child and building trust and communication with families is the key to successful programs. The current program gets us a score of 94-95% which is partial mastery by the state's rubric, but it feels like a good process and we are out there helping families succeed

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every day." Attendance data for the past five years show this county fluctuating from 91% to 93.5% at the elementary level.

One attendance director reported no program is truly sustainable. She indicated programs must always be "evolving and changing to keep up with the times." She indicated their numbers stay pretty consistent from year to year, but the county does not meet mastery according to WVDE standards. She noted she feels the things they do in the county keep the numbers where they are, but it is really hard to show growth. "It is like an uphill battle and every year it gets a little more difficult to fight with all of the problems we face in our homes and communities."

Another county attendance director stated "no program is fully sustainable and must be constantly reevaluated and adapted to meet the current needs of students." The director stated they are constantly changing incentives and parts of the program that are flexible, jumping through hoops to get kids in school. As long as they are fluid, programs will sustain current rates. This director stated he is uncertain if anything other than systemic change can truly help schools meet mastery according to the WVDE standards. Elementary attendance rates in this county minimally fluctuated between 93.5% and 94.5% over the past five years.

Another county director felt that nothing works or is sustainable. He said, "They keep numbers consistent where they are, but battle ever day to get the same kids in school over and over." He reported "problems outside the control of school districts keep kids from getting to school. When we are better able to equip West Virginia families with supports and resources, we may see numbers that meet defined state standards."

One county director reported as long as they meet partial mastery and numbers are consistent, then they are sustaining attendance. She stated,

I feel like we are all sustaining what we are doing, I mean, our numbers are not great, but they stay consistent. As long as we are holding steady with no massive decline, then we are ok. The chronic absenteeism numbers are painting a much clearer picture of where we are as far as kids being in school. We are going to have to find ways to reverse the damage that old policy created with our send-a-note-and-you-are-not-in-trouble mentality.

Another stated, "Sustainability has been tough because of personnel changes, lack of efficacy, and lack of buy-in. It seems that it goes well for a short time and then as the year goes on and more students become truant, the system begins to crumble as people get overloaded and overwhelmed at every level."

Interviewed attendance directors reported sustainability as a problem for truancy programs. While the numbers stay consistent from year to year, the directors felt there is a constant battle to maintain those rates. Most directors felt their programs are not sustainable, but they constantly evolve to meet the needs of students.

Effective Approaches/Strengths

An emergent category analysis was employed to analyze the strengths of programs as identified in attendance director interviews to answer research question eight. Four themes were evident throughout participant's responses: use of a multidisciplinary team approach to maintain successful programs; using rewards, incentives and marketing programs to improve attendance; school autonomy in developing programs at the elementary level as a critical success factor; and communication with families and team members as an important success measure.

One county is doing something new at the elementary level with a marketing program, student incentives and rewards, and a punitive program when a student reaches 15 unexcused

absences. The county has a large population and the attendance director must consider the negative consequences of absenteeism for students and how the punitive process burdens the already overloaded court system, in addition to all of the consequences attached to students missing school. The interviewee noted that attendance directors "see court interventions as a proactive approach that could potentially lighten court dockets for crime in the future if we can proactively get students to school, prepare them for the work force, and guide them to a future outside of the grips of poverty through education."

Another county focuses primarily on middle and high school interventions, but five years ago implemented the use of social workers at the elementary level to address the barriers that prevent young children from being in school. The director noted, "Family factors heavily influence elementary school attendance and this service piece serves as the intervention tool that focuses on every obstacle that the parents face and provides them with the support they need to get the children in school." This participant also noted some families are receptive to the support while others are resistant, and no interventions are successful in those latter cases. The county uses social workers to address barriers such as healthcare, transportation, jobs, poverty, housing, and other basic needs for families with the expectation that eliminating these barriers will improve attendance. The county uses punitive efforts as a last resort, but the director felt "the punitive leverage in a lot of cases is the only way to get some kids to school, which is why court support is imperative."

The director in another small, rural county stated they use the same punitive system at the elementary, middle and high school levels. The process begins at five days with a letter and a petition is filed at 10 days. In this county, the prosecutor holds weekly multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings with the school, family, providers, and the school district to address the

problems and attempt to prevent charges from being filed. The team works on a plan to place

necessary services in the home to provide the family with support. The director stated,

> We had a judge in the county take a special interest in the program and cases are no
>
> longer heard in magistrate court, but in this judge's courtroom. The judge in the county
>
> is heavily involved with the youth. He will intervene with harsh punishment or scare
>
> tactics by sending them to the local juvenile detention center for a few days to scare them
>
> into attending school.

The respondent felt when courts are involved, programs improve.

Another director said, "I do feel that the program works, but I would be interested to see

numbers on how many are repeat offenders, and how many just become chronically absent with

doctor notes or other excuse notes. Our numbers are consistent from year to year despite

growing social problems in our communities." This county's attendance rates began at 92.5%

and have declined over the last five school years to 91%.

One county reported they have a good relationship with the judges, which is critical to the

success of the program. The director said, "The judges used to get irritated with cases because

kids would be on A/B honor roll and miss 40 days of school, and this should be impossible."

This attendance director talked about the importance of being cognizant of external systems, and

he uses caution in filing cases so he does not overload the court system. He stated he looks at

grades, discipline, and other school and home factors now before filing a petition. The county

has social workers in elementary schools to address family problems because they understand

when little kids miss, it is not their fault. The participant noted at a recent conference, the focus

was placed on building relationships with kids and families to make a difference. The county

uses incentives for good attendance, but this attendance director noted "you can't hand out awards and expect the problem to go away."

The director in a suburban county reported he believes the only way to truly meet the needs of students and families is to build relationships and help them become better. He communicates the process with families up front so they can make informed decisions about their participation. He stated he lets them know he is there to work with them and not to cause them problems, and he genuinely cares about each case. He communicates with them every step of the way and always follows through with what he says. He felt most families want the help, but don't know how to ask or go about getting it. The director said, "We use court as a very last resort in this county." He said he has a very good relationship with the magistrate and the magistrate is on board with the truancy program. Counselors and the truancy diversion specialist do monthly MDT meetings. The attendance director knocks on doors and builds relationships with families. He is firm but understanding and works to help them get better. Referrals go to DHHR first, then to the probation officer. There is a mental health team and social worker component to help meet the basic needs of families. Their county philosophy is to strengthen families. They hosted a pilot program last year that taught parenting classes. If families chose to attend, there was dinner and free childcare. They would not be referred to magistrate court if they successfully completed the program. The system involves a lot of people and supports for the family.

Another small suburban county uses parent-teacher-administrator conferences to initiate an attendance concern and they put the child in a student assistance team (SAT) process. If it does not improve, then an educational abuse and neglect case is filed with DHHR. They also file a criminal complaint with the magistrate. The attendance director said,

In 12 years, I have only had three moms go to jail, so I feel that is a success. The circuit

court judge is on board and follows the letter of the law in this county, which helps the

program be successful. The attendance director and prosecutor meet every three months

to go over cases and see what needs to happen for improvement. We also do an MDT for

noncompliance and place in-home services to support families further before making a

legal petition. All schools contract with outside mental health agencies. Elementary

schools have an on-site mental health worker. We do not have social workers. We use

incentive programs to address chronic absenteeism and entice students to come to school.

Attendance directors work on attendance issues in a variety of ways, over time, learning

from experiences, and learning from the results of their own efforts. These directors noted

strengths of programs to include continuous change, building relationships, and working with

families to promote the positive factors of good school attendance. As students, families,

communities, and schools change, so must strategies aimed at improving attendance.

Ineffective Approaches/Weaknesses

An emergent category analysis was employed to analyze the strengths of programs as

identified in attendance director interviews to answer research question seven. One director

stated magistrates do not work well with attendance directors because truancy is the least of their

concerns with current criminal problems in West Virginia communities. The director further

noted, "We struggle in the same way that other counties do. There must be effective

communication and teamwork between county schools and the court system. Without punitive

damages, we do not have the power to just get kids in school. Apathy and lack of concern for

education are a huge problem across the US." While this county is using a Strive for Five

marketing slogan, intensive advertisements pushing the importance of good attendance, rewards

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and incentives at the school level, mentor programs, community in schools, volunteers, and other

nonpunitive processes, the director felt they "struggle to keep their heads above water." The

director also noted,

> We have a community attendance team with about 15 outside agencies to address the
> problem from a different level. We meet with doctors, local businesses, Chamber of
> Commerce, DHHR and Rotary Club to name a few. This is helping us put more
> perspective on the problem. We struggle with staff attendance, as do local business
> owners. They are noting a 20% turnover rate each year due to poor attendance of
> employees. We must address the problem at school and societal levels to try to change
> bad habits and reshape communities. These business owners have follow up meetings
> with magistrates (elected positions) and circuit court judges and can apply pressure for
> them to be more proactive in the truancy process and use their power to repair broken
> community connections. It serves a much bigger picture than just kids missing out on
> school and education.

This county's five-year attendance rates remained consistent in the 94th percentile with a change

of a few tenths up or down over the time frame.

Another director noted a large increase in the number of truancy cases in the past year,

but has not been able to assess the reason for the increase. The speculation, however, is the

number is related to an influx of drug abuse in the county and rising child neglect cases. The

participant also noted the rise could be due to inconsistency in the program with frequent staff

changes. The director felt while the current program has been in use for five or six years, it does

not seem to change the 92-93% attendance rate over that time period. Attendance rates are being

sustained at a mediocre level under the current program, but the director is unsure what other

interventions might work. This county's attendance data were consistent at 93% with a slight change of tenths of a percentage over the five-year reporting period.

The director in another county listed numerous problems, including "a disconnect in the understanding and importance of truancy programs; prosecutors and case dockets are overloaded with murder, robbery, and other serious crimes, and truancy for children is not at the top of their priority list. It is difficult to move to a proactive approach on crime when we do not have the manpower to help address current criminal cases." The director felt the program suffers every time personnel changes and said, "The sustainability of the program waivered as a result of the change in directors and then an eight-month hiring period for another truancy officer." Another problem is with the court system, as the director said,

> The prosecutor pushes for parents to get a chronic illness form completed to prevent them from being in court for truancy. However, the point of the program is to get kids' butts in the seat and get them educated, hence the chronic absenteeism initiative. Furthermore, physicians do not understand the importance of school attendance, nor are they going to turn down business. When they write excuse notes for children who are not sick, they are being a detriment to a child's education and inflated attendance rates making West Virginia percentages seem better than they actually are. This burdens the state Medicaid system and creates financial problems for the state of West Virginia. It is very easy for families to keep their child home and run to the emergency room and get an excuse note even when there is not an illness to avoid truancy. The West Virginia code five years ago stated that a note from a physician would prevent a child from getting into trouble for truancy and a student could have unlimited doctors' notes in a school year. This policy created the chronic absenteeism problem that is at the forefront of all discussion in the

state today. Get a note and you are not in trouble trained parents that it is ok to fraudulently keep children home.

Another county in the state is struggling with the process and feels it is not effective for several reasons. The county uses a basic program that is defined by WV State Code, which consists of a five-day letter, subsequent meeting, and filing a juvenile petition after 10 days of unexcused absences. It goes to the prosecutor and then to the juvenile probation officer. The probation officer makes a referral to DHHR, and the multidisciplinary team meets to devise a student success plan for each child. The director noted,

> The current system does not work. The files move through the process and stall at each department for several weeks or months, and by then a child has accrued 50-plus absences. Most of these cases never make it to court. If they do get that far, there is no buy-in from the court system, parents know how to work the system, they know that most do not end up in court, so the threat does not work. They have also learned how to apply for chronic medical condition forms to prevent truancy even if they are not chronically ill. The data going into WVEIS is [*sic*] not accurate and makes it hard to file (teachers incorrectly report or there is a breakdown during the data entry process). The number of excuse codes at the state level allow people to miss for too many reasons and create chronic absenteeism. Kids drop public education and go to homeschool if there is a DHHR referral. There should be laws preventing kids from going to homeschool if they have school attendance problems. Doctor notes are obtained even when kids are not sick, and this burdens the state Medicaid system. Policy created a chronic absenteeism problem all over the state as we have too many excuse codes and reasons for students to miss.

Another county director said the program could potentially be improved with more social workers and more school-based probation officers. According to this attendance director, "Most truancy cases are from drug affected families and systemic community problems that are pervasively worse each year." The director said,

A lot of these families are used to court and face more serious charges on a regular basis with limited consequences, so they are not afraid of the idle threats that come from a truancy case. They know how to get around the system and avoid arrest. If DHHR removes the kids, there is no place to put them. Then if they are removed and are reunified with the family later, they go right back to the same behavior. Generational problems and lack of parenting are the root cause along with the drug epidemic and the cyclical problem has no end in sight.

According to another county attendance director, much larger systemic problems contribute to the success and failure of attendance initiatives. He stated,

The drug epidemic is at the forefront of most major issues in our state. The county has a lot of transience with the oil and gas industry; families disappear, and it can take weeks or months to find them and those absences add up. Homeschool regulations promote lack of education for truant youth, doctor notes are rampant since the state policy taught parents that you would not get in trouble if you brought a note from a physician, and problems with physicians just writing notes when a child is not sick because the child was present in their office are just a handful of the problems.

When asked about improvements to the system the attendance director stated,

The county plans to continue to work with judges and outside agencies to keep the program working. If we can solve this problem it helps with employee work attendance

in the future, less juvenile delinquency, less Medicaid burden for unnecessary doctor visits, and less students who drop out or end up in jail due to lack of education. A connection with DHHR would be a huge step in creating change. It is hard to get them to buy-in and realize that truancy is a symptom of something much larger. Especially for the little kids. They are overwhelmed and do not have time to deal with truancy cases. We must have the punitive measure to be effective. Without it, parents and students will continue to take advantage of the system.

Attendance rates in this county have fluctuated from 92% to 94.8% over a five-year period with the higher percentage being in the 15-16 school year.

Another county attendance director felt "the biggest problem is buy-in at the school level due to lack of training, information and time on administrators. Once they see the supports that are provided for the family and the child and they see a difference in attendance, they want to use the program." She noted elementary schools in their county have been the toughest to gain buy-in. They are addressing those issues through communication. Improving attendance in students' early elementary years can turn a child around and promote success in life.

When asked about problems with the current program, another county attendance director stated,

> You cannot change anything until you change the families, and you cannot change the families until we teach them self-value, self-worth, self-reliance. We need to give our citizens sense of purpose. The system is not meant to live on forever. It is too easy to homeschool and there are no regulations or guidelines to ensure that those kids are really getting an education. Societal change is all that will help the situation. Until we improve

the living conditions in our state, we will not improve truancy, education, or any other aspect of life.

Like most other counties, the attendance director said they "struggle and feel that they just do the best with what they have, and they try very hard every day." The attendance director also noted "they are firm, consistent, and loving. They do all that they can to give people a chance to get better." He said "there is a huge absenteeism problem with kids and staff. It is a different generation. It is a way of life. People do not feel responsible for going to school or to work. We are always trying new things, but we still sit at 92-93% attendance rates." Those rates have been consistent over the past five years.

When asked about problems with the current program, another attendance director indicated,

> We see the same kids over and over. There is no relationship between DHHR and the schools and meetings are held without anyone from the school system present. When DHHR shows up, they are limited in what they can do and don't have time to really address these needs and dig deep to find out what is happening in the family to cause the truancy. It is an endless problem. There will always be truancy. Education is not valued. We have generations of families on the system and there is no incentive to work. Drugs are directly related and at least half of my truancy cases are due to drug-affected families. Truancy is the least of the worries for most families. Housing, drugs, food insecurity, domestic violence, poverty, and many other societal and personal issues keep kids from coming to school. We have no foster homes, no place to put kids once they are removed from the hell they live. Some kids' punishment is being born. They do not deserve what they are dealt and there is no one working to help them. It is so unfair.

Attendance rates in this county fluctuated up and down between 93.3% and 94.2% over the past five years.

Another county attendance director reported that "90% of their open cases get to 10 days. The parents are not responsive, they do not value education and they do not care about being in trouble." The county does diversion at the elementary level, but the director feels the program struggles because of the lack of support from the court system. The attendance director said,

> When there is nothing punitive to hang over the parent's head, it just does not work. The problems with the program are much larger than kids just not coming to school. There is a lack of support from circuit court and the magistrate, no connection with DHHR, the MDT process breaks down when services are set up for families and they never receive them, excessive repeat offenses, low effectiveness rates with no punitive measures." The attendance director stated that he, "exhausts all resources and then asks for help from DHHR or the courts and nothing happens. Chronic absenteeism is also a huge problem. We have one clinic that writes note and they do not even have to see the child. There is no recourse for doctors, and this is a huge burden to the state Medicaid system. Our chronic absenteeism rate is 24-25%. Chronic absenteeism rates came from state policy which taught parents that they would not get in trouble for truancy if they just sent a note from a doctor.

The attendance rates in this county have held steady around 93% with little change over the past five years.

This director felt everyone in the state does what they can, but there is not enough support in place for communities and residents to meet basic needs, so the truancy battle will

never improve. When asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the program, the director

stated,

> Statewide there is [*sic*] not enough punitive measures to make a difference and there is no
>
> consistency in what can be done to try to intervene and change a child's truant behavior.
>
> If they are fined, they have no money to pay, they spend a lot of time in jail already, so
>
> that threat does not matter. If the kids are removed there is no place to put them. We see
>
> a lot of criminal activity in juvenile kids. We have an uphill battle daily. We jump
>
> through the hoops and really make a difference for about half of the kids. But then a
>
> number of those end up re-offending.
>
> One attendance director said,
>
> The drug problem here on the outskirts of the city is rampant. Kids are on drugs and
>
> committing serious crimes like murder. There is a lack of parenting and an inability of
>
> those who are parents to do it right. They don't understand what they need to do to be
>
> good parents. The courts don't force school. Society rewards people for doing nothing.
>
> When parents are backed in a corner, they pull kids to home school. Laws don't prevent
>
> that. We have coddled kids as juveniles and the courts did nothing when they did things
>
> that were really wrong. So now they push the limits and boundaries even more and
>
> commit serious crimes. We have created a dangerous generation.

Attendance rates in this county have minimally fluctuated at 94% over the past five years.

> Another attendance director reported,
>
> Fifteen of 26 cases filed last year ended up re-offending, so the plan is to analyze the
>
> process and see what failed these students. The county struggles with chronic health
>
> forms being abused, physicians writing notes for students when they are not ill, and

repeat offenders. Excuse notes are rampant and have created a chronic absenteeism problem. Attendance numbers are inflated as that [*sic*] data does [*sic*] not represent excused absences. We have so many excuse codes, almost every absence can be classified excused. Policy trained parents and their representation to just get a note from a doctor and truancy would go away. So, the entire state is now seeking new ideas to reverse that damage.

The attendance director also said, "We have never really promoted butts in the seat until the last two years. Before that, the focus was on unexcused absences and a doctor's note would suffice."

A small, rural county attendance director said "expecting 90% of students to attend 90% of the time to meet chronic absenteeism guidelines defined by the WVDE is not realistic." The director also said, "Truancy at this age is always the parents fault." When asked about weaknesses in the county, the attendance director said, "Families struggle with transportation issues, living in hollers where there is no easy access, chronic health problems of family members, poverty, low access to resources, and a lack of other basic needs that take precedence over school." The attendance rates in this county have fluctuated between 93.5% and 94.5% with minimal change over the past five years.

Another interview was with a very small, rural county that experiences significant poverty, kinship care, rampant drug addiction, and a lack of resources to meet the basic needs of their families. This director also noted,

Family dynamics are a huge problem in the county, parents are not parenting in the homes. Grandparents and great grandparents are raising children. Schools are parenting and caring for basic needs of food, clothing, baths, medical, and the mental health needs

of a lot of these kids. Drugs are rampant in the county. This generation has no parenting

skills. It is a change in lifestyle, and it is difficult to overcome.

Attendance rates in this county began at 94% and have steadily declined to 92% over the past

five years.

Attendance directors had a long list of weaknesses to discuss related to parents' roles in

contributing to truancy; the structure of individual programs; and issues related to agencies

outside the school system. Improving student attendance is a challenge and attendance directors

focus on prevention, intervention, and recovery.

Summary

The study reviewed truancy mitigation programs in 36 counties of West Virginia.

Attendance directors openly discussed concerns about programs, sustainability, program

strengths and program problems, revealing that counties use a variety of methods and programs

to get and keep kids in school. The WVDE is shifting focus to a more positive, nonpunitive

approach with primary attention on chronic absenteeism and getting students to school.

Attendance directors who were surveyed and interviewed felt a combination of punitive and

nonpunitive factors must be used to reach all west Virginia students and families. Interviews

indicated some parents are receptive only to serious court interventions and when that system

fails, counties cannot get students to school. Based on the findings of this study, truancy at the

elementary level is a symptom of larger systemic problems, among them generational poverty,

substance abuse in families, parental joblessness, kinship families, medical and mental health

problems in both students and families, and truancy reduction programs that too often hurt as

much as they help. Family dynamics, socioeconomic issues, and weaknesses in existing truancy

programs must be addressed to improve attendance rates and get kids in school.   Keeping

students in school could decrease poverty and crime rates in our state over time and help relieve the burdens that bog down the systems that are designed to create strong, healthy communities. A proactive approach is needed to meet the needs of West Virginia families.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Truancy is not just a school or district problem. It is a societal issue that requires a multi-disciplinary approach across communities. Attendance directors in the state have recognized the need to reach outside the walls of the school system to find tools and resources to help West Virginia families. A rising drug epidemic, problems with Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), magistrates, and circuit court, broken family systems, poverty, joblessness, homelessness, transience, and a lack of resources for West Virginia families are but a few of the root causes believed to exacerbate poor school attendance in West Virginia. Recognition that truancy cannot be resolved within the confines of school buildings and districts alone could be a powerful tool in not only getting kids to school, but also improving quality of life in all 55 counties. The growing epidemic in West Virginia communities sends children to school lacking the basic needs required to survive. This study revealed a growing concern among attendance directors that education is simply not a priority among too many families and that school absences are symptoms of much larger problems. Sharing perceptions, ideas, and expert knowledge directly from attendance directors can perhaps raise awareness and spark a critical interest in the need for programs that ultimately promote healthier West Virginia communities.

These systemic problems were the primary focus of attendance directors' conversations in the interview process and on the surveys. Limited responses on strengths of existing programs make it difficult to ascertain what, if anything, works to mitigate truancy and chronic absenteeism. Attendance rates in each county range from 90.4% to 97.9%. While a 90.4% attendance rate seems good, it indicates a serious problem for thousands of West Virginia elementary students. The societal implications attached to this number can be detrimental to life

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outcomes. Research proves lack of education causes school failure and higher dropout rates, increased poverty and crime rates, higher risk of incarceration, and potential drug involvement (Comer, 2017). A proactive approach that gets more children in school and keeps them there could potentially alleviate problems with overloaded court dockets, poverty rates, drug addiction, and other societal problems that plague our state.

This research scratched the surface of issues that prevent elementary students from attending school. Some attendance directors did identify as a strength of their programs the value of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in meeting the needs of the whole child. Further discussion with these directors, however, revealed MDTs are prone to breakdowns in many counties where education, state agency and judicial systems do not work well together. The lack of communication and teamwork among all sources is detrimental to the success of thousands of West Virginia children each year. These systems designed to protect our children need to be tightly linked, cooperative, and supportive of each other. The communication breakdown with wrap-around services contributes to the largest perceived problems which are drugs in communities, parental apathy, and a breakdown in meeting the basic needs of children and families. If the systems designed to protect children have a collaborative relationship, then the children in West Virginia have a better chance to be safe, happy, healthy, and educated. Their future depends on this connection.

The primary inference can be drawn from this study is that while attendance directors cited numerous weaknesses with their elementary truancy reduction programs, their expression of overall satisfaction indicates that they feel the problems that truant/chronically absent students face cannot be resolved by schools alone. In other words, they feel their attendance programs are doing as well as can be expected in solving a problem that has multiple sources.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this descriptive, non-experimental research was to add to the body of literature on truancy programs and their sustainability by investigating their operation in the state of West Virginia. More specifically, this study examined truancy programs employed in the state and their effect(s) on attendance rates at the elementary level with a comparison of attendance rates and truancy mitigation programs over the past five years. The study also explored the outcomes of punitive and non-punitive programs used in the state to determine whether those counties who do more than the law requires have higher attendance rates.

Data were collected from the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) Zoom WV website, a specific data request for elementary attendance data from the WVDE, a Qualtrics survey, and personal interviews with a select group of attendance directors. The survey collected information on perceptions of current programs and interviews were also conducted with a sample of truancy directors to gather information related to the types of programs used in each county, the perceptions of those individuals on the effectiveness of their current truancy programs, the perceived sustainability of programs, and their programs' strengths and weaknesses.

Descriptive analyses were employed to examine changes in attendance data in West Virginia schools over the past five academic years (i.e., 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-2019), as well as survey and interview responses from attendance directors in 36 West Virginia counties. Attendance rates and demographic data were statistically analyzed using SPSS Statistics 24 software. The study was designed to answer eight questions focusing on types of truancy reduction programs; whether program type (i.e., punitive, non-punitive, or a combination thereof) affected attendance rates; whether attendance rates had changed over the

most recent five-year period for which data were available; whether attendance rates had been stable; what attendance directors viewed as problems or weaknesses of existing programs; and what attendance directors viewed as strengths of existing programs. Thirty-six of 55 county attendance directors accepted the invitation to participate in the research.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1 asked what types of truancy reduction programs are in use at the elementary level in West Virginia. The data collected revealed 22% of West Virginia counties use punitive programs to address truancy, nonpunitive programs are used by 25% of the counties surveyed, and combination programs (i.e., both punitive and nonpunitive) are used by 56% of the counties surveyed. There is a discrepancy in the percentage totals as two counties selected both punitive and nonpunitive rather than selecting a combination program.

Research Question 2 explored the extent to which truancy programs had increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing punitive corrective strategies. There was no evidence in the data collected to suggest counties which had implemented punitive corrective strategies to reduce truancy had increased attendance rates between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. Among the four counties reporting the use of punitive approaches, only two showed any difference in attendance rates during the reporting period, with one decreasing by 3% and the other increasing by 1%. The other two counties held steady. This question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates.

Research Question 3 examined the extent to which nonpunitive truancy programs had increased attendance rates at the elementary level in West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy. There was no evidence in the data collected to indicate counties which had

implemented nonpunitive corrective strategies to reduce truancy had increased the attendance rates in their elementary schools between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. Among the four counties that reported using nonpunitive approaches, one showed an increase in attendance of 1%, two showed decreases of 1%, while the other remained the same. This question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates.

Research Question 4 examined the extent to which combination programs (i.e., programs with both punitive and nonpunitive elements) had increased attendance rates at the elementary level in the West Virginia counties implementing this type of strategy. There was no evidence in the data collected to indicate counties which have operated combination strategies to reduce truancy had increased the attendance rates in their elementary schools between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years. Among the 39% of counties that reported using combination approaches, none showed either increases or decreases of more than a percentage point in their attendance rates over the five-year reporting period. Again, the question did not include an examination of chronic absenteeism rates.

Research Question 5 asked about the extent to which attendance rates had changed in the counties represented over the last five years for which data were available and whether attendance directors were satisfied with their truancy reduction programs. While there was no evidence in the Zoom WV data collected to indicate truancy reduction programs had affected attendance numbers, a majority of respondents nonetheless felt satisfied their programs had, in fact, contributed to an increase.

Research Question 6 asked to what extent attendance rates had been stable at the elementary school level over the last five years. Based on the annual attendance numbers, there is no substantial difference between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 rates. When one includes the

chronic absenteeism rates in the analysis, however, it becomes apparent the attendance rates are only part of the story. Nearly all counties have shown increases in their chronic absenteeism rates, which counts both excused and unexcused absences in the attendance calculation and is a more accurate reflection of how many students are in school how often (see Appendix B). The WVDE has begun to collect these data only in the last two school years.

Research Question 7, focusing on perceived weaknesses in current truancy mitigation programs, was answered by attendance directors' responses in phone interviews. Those responses were categorized into three thematic areas: parents' roles, truancy reduction programs themselves, and agencies or issues outside the school system.

In general, parents' contributions to their children's truancy were identified as apathy, a lack of accountability, refusal to value education, an inclination to not take penalties seriously, and broader social problems such as unemployment or substance abuse. Regarding programs themselves, identified problems included the absence of a multidisciplinary approach to truancy, a failure to recognize programs at the various levels (i.e., elementary, middle and secondary) should be gauged to the developmental needs of students, and a failure to address the broader systemic issues that contribute to truancy. In terms of issues or agencies outside the education system, attendance directors mentioned communication breakdowns, approaches by state agencies that make parents more guarded and less open to interventions, the ineffectiveness of the court system in some counties, and, again, the failure of external agencies to address such issues as poverty, unemployment, or substance abuse.

Research Question 8 asked attendance directors to discuss what they viewed as strengths in their existing truancy reduction programs. Responses included support personnel, incentives and positive behavior supports, multidisciplinary teams (MDT) with regular meetings in some

counties, autonomy of programs at the school level, and communication. The most often

mentioned strength, with 65.4% of respondents identifying it, is the MDT process which

addresses all of the symptoms of truancy through a team approach. Sixty-one percent reported

communication with parents, attendance team members, schools, and students as a strength,

while 50% reported autonomy of programs at the school level as a strength.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

What can be concluded from these findings? On the one hand, it can be observed that a

majority of the attendance directors surveyed expressed satisfaction with their counties' truancy

reduction programs. Even those respondents, however, reported in open-ended survey responses

and in interviews there are substantial problems with truancy programs in West Virginia that

reach beyond the confines of county school systems and into the homes of families. Broader

systemic problems – such as widespread poverty, unemployment, and substance abuse – affect

the academic and eventually life outcomes for West Virginia children. Addressing these issues

in a meaningful way may contribute to higher attendance rates and stronger West Virginia

families.

Absent such an intervention by local, state or federal governments, county school systems

will have to continue to rely on themselves and their partners to improve attendance. Among the

barriers that need to be removed to make that happen, according to respondents to this study, are

communication breakdowns among the agencies involved, approaches by state agencies that

make parents more guarded and less open to interventions, and the ineffectiveness of the court

system in some counties. Attendance directors were clear, however, on the importance of

continuing such multidisciplinary approaches to meeting the needs of students and families.

Limitations

One key limitation of the study was a small sample size with 36 respondents out of 55

The small sample size makes it impossible to generalize the findings beyond these respondents

or to make any claims about causality. Interviews were limited to 15 survey respondents,

making it difficult to determine whether the participants' responses reflected the entire scope of

the problem. One key limitation of the study reflected the entire scope of the problem(s); that is,

the long-form responses, while providing a more expansive look at the participants' perceptions,

may not be representative of the perceptions of the entire sample.

Recommendations for Further study

The knowledge gained through this study provides an abundance of opportunities for

further research. This study could be replicated using a broader population of elementary

schools, perhaps in a regional, multistate model or even a national model that would offer a more

expansive look at programs in use, their relative strengths or weaknesses, and their effectiveness

in mitigating the problem of student attendance.

One of the weaknesses of this study is while the WVDE data do include preliminary

figures for chronic absenteeism, chronic absenteeism was not explicitly addressed in either the

survey or the interviews. The data examined were limited to attendance rates. Since West

Virginia is moving away from attendance rates, which have been inflated by using only

unexcused absences in their calculation, and toward chronic absenteeism, which uses both

unexcused and excused absences, as a measure of school effectiveness, an exploration of chronic

absenteeism as a potentially more reliable indicator of student attendance could be executed.

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APPENDIX A: OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL LETTER

MARSHALL UNIVERSITY
www.marshall.edu

Office of Research Integrity   FWA 00002704
Institutional Review Board
One John Marshall Drive   IRB1 #00002205
Huntington, WV 25755   IRB2 #00003206

February 14, 2020

Barbara Nicholson, Ed.D.
Ed. Department

RE: IRBNet ID# 1431485-1
At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Nicholson:

Protocol Title: [1431485-1] Shellie Simpson, Review of Truancy Programs in West Virginia

Site Location: MU
Submission Type: New Project   APPROVED
Review Type: Exempt Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.104(d)(2), the above study was granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Chair/Designee. No further submission (or closure) is required for an Exempt study **unless** there is an amendment to the study. All amendments must be submitted and approved by the IRB Chair/Designee.

This study is for student Shellie Simpson.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Anna Robinson at (304) 696-2477 or robinsonn1@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director, Office of Research Integrity

APPENDIX B: 5-YEAR ELEMENTARY ATTENDANCE RATES

Dis. Co.	Prg. Type	Annual Attendance Rate					Approx. Rate of Chronic Absenteeism					% Chg.	Avg. Att. Rates
		14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19		
1	C	93%	94%	94%	94%	93%	20%	18%	16%	17%	21%		94%
2	C	94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	18%	16%	18%	18%	20%		94%
3	C	93%	92%	92%	91%	91%	23%	27%	28%	36%	35%	12	92%
4	C	92%	93%	93%	93%	93%	28%	22%	24%	26%	24%		93%
5	C	93%	94%	95%	95%	93%	18%	17%	14%	14%	20%		94%
6		94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	17%	18%	17%	20%	17%		94%
7	NP	93%	93%	92%	91%	92%	21%	22%	28%	32%	29%	8	92%
8		97%	94%	93%	94%	94%	5%	17%	19%	17%	13%	8	95%
9	NP	92%	93%	93%	93%	93%	29%	23%	31%	21%	16%	-13	93%
10		94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	16%	18%	16%	17%	17%		94%
11	C	94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	19%	13%	15%	13%	13%	6	94%
12	P	94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	14%	17%	15%	17%	18%	4	94%
13		93%	94%	94%	94%	94%	21%	21%	21%	16%	18%	3	94%
14		93%	94%	94%	94%	94%	20%	18%	17%	16%	20%		94%
15	C	94%	95%	93%	94%	94%	19%	15%	21%	15%	21%		94%
16		94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	17%	17%	17%	19%	18%		94%
17	C	93%	93%	93%	93%	93%	20%	21%	21%	21%	23%	3	93%
18	C	93%	94%	94%	94%	93%	20%	16%	19%	19%	22%		94%
19		95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	10%	9%	10%	11%	13%	3	95%
20		94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	16%	18%	18%	18%	22%	6	94%
21		92%	93%	93%	93%	93%	28%	24%	26%	20%	20%	8	93%
22	C	91%	92%	92%	91%	91%	33%	30%	32%	34%	33%		91%
23	C	91%	91%	91%	90%	91%	29%	31%	37%	42%	35%		91%
24	C	94%	95%	95%	95%	94%	19%	15%	15%	14%	16%	3	94%
25		94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	15%	16%	16%	17%	19%	4	94%
26		93%	94%	93%	94%	93%	18%	19%	19%	18%	24%	6	93%
27	P	94%	94%	94%	93%	94%	20%	18%	19%	22%	22%		94%
28		94%	94%	95%	94%	94%	15%	14%	14%	15%	15%		94%
29	NP	93%	94%	93%	92%	92%	21%	20%	21%	30%	27%	6	93%
30		94%	95%	95%	94%	94%	14%	11%	15%	16%	16%		95%
31		91%	92%	93%	93%	93%	27%	25%	22%	19%	24%	3	93%
32	P	98%	97%	96%	95%	95%	4%	5%	12%	14%	15%	11	96%
33	NP	90%	91%	92%	92%	91%	37%	37%	34%	36%	38%		91%
34		93%	94%	94%	95%	93%	21%	17%	19%	15%	20%		94%
35	C	95%	95%	96%	95%	96%	10%	10%	12%	10%	10%		95%
36		95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	13%	11%	14%	13%	14%		95%
37	C	93%	93%	93%	93%	94%	19%	24%	24%	21%	20%		93%
38	C	93%	93%	93%	93%	94%	19%	24%	24%	21%	20%		93%
39		93%	94%	94%	94%	94%	21%	16%	18%	16%	18%	3	94%
40		94%	95%	95%	93%	94%	14%	13%	16%	22%	17%	3	94%
41	P	93%	94%	94%	94%	94%	23%	20%	22%	21%	22%		93%

42		95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	14%	15%	13%	13%	12%		95%
43	C	93%	94%	93%	94%	93%	18%	19%	22%	18%	20%		93%
44		94%	94%	93%	93%	94%	17%	19%	24%	22%	20%	3	94%
45		92%	93%	93%	93%	92%	28%	20%	21%	19%	26%		93%
46		95%	94%	94%	94%	93%	13%	20%	19%	19%	20%	7	94%
47	C	95%	93%	94%	94%	93%	10%	17%	13%	17%	27%	17	94%
48		94%	94%	93%	94%	93%	17%	16%	20%	16%	20%	3	94%
49		94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	16%	16%	18%	18%	20%	4	94%
50		93%	94%	93%	93%	92%	21%	21%	24%	26%	28%	7	93%
51	C	93%	95%	95%	95%	94%	19%	13%	14%	13%	23%	4	94%
52	C	93%	95%	93%	93%	93%	23%	15%	20%	21%	21%		93%
53	C	93%	93%	93%	93%	93%	23%	19%	24%	22%	18%	5	93%
54	C	94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	18%	19%	20%	19%	19%		94%
55		91%	91%	92%	92%	92%	34%	30%	30%	29%	33%		92%

C= Combination Program (Punitive and Non Punitive)
P= Punitive
NP= Non Punitive