

Perceptions of Administrators: Improving Student Attendance in Urban, Suburban, and  
Rural Public Schools

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Perceptions of Administrators: Improving Student Attendance in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Public Schools

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Abstract

Improving student attendance is an issue discussed nationwide. There are many policies and interventions that are used by public high school principals in order to help achieve increased attendance rates in their schools. This study was designed to compare the perceptions of public high school principals in Ohio concerning students' attendance. A questionnaire was administered to public high school principals in Ohio (N=110, 18% response rate). The responses were compared using the following demographic variables: location of high school, years of administrative experience, gender, and ethnicity. The results were compared for similarities and differences. Significant findings were discussed. Principals, regardless of the typology of their high schools, have similar perceptions about attendance and students' absences. The results show the top three factors that affect students' attendance are: academics, climate/environment, and parents/home life. Further research should address all high schools in Ohio.

*Keywords:* Principal, Rural School, Suburban School, Truancy, Urban School

## DEDICATIONS, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, AND IN MEMORY

I dedicate this work to my family. My daughter, Gabriella has been an inspiration since the day that she was born. She continues to grow and defy all odds every day. She is a true blessing and miracle from God. She is the focus of my life and I would not want it any other way. My love will be with you always. My wife Tiffany Neal, who is my rock and motivation, has encouraged me and supported me through every step in this process. You are amazing! I love you and could not have done this without your support!

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I write this dissertation in memory of loved ones that our family has lost along the way.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Statement of the Problem*

All across the United States and in other countries as well, public high schools are plagued with finding solutions for chronic absences among their student population. Many states, Ohio for example, have added attendance as an indicator on the state report card that grades the schools' success. State funding for schools in Ohio is also based on the attendance count. Therefore, the reason that attendance has gained higher interest among those who determine accountability in public education is the impact that student absences have on education itself. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 80 percent of students who drop out of school were truant from school the year before they left (US Department of Education, 2009). Daily attendance is just as large an issue. There are approximately 62,000 students who are absent from school each day in the Los Angeles Unified School District (US Department of Education, 2009). These large numbers of absences carry drastic consequences for educators and students alike.

Absenteeism causes several issues within education. Aside from the extreme negative consequence of dropping out there are a number of additional negative consequences that can occur. There is a direct correlation between students' grades and their attendance. One study also examined pregnancy and school attendance (high risk factor for minority girls) and found that racial identities lead to school performance (Hughes, Manns, and Ford, 2009). School attendance is linked with crime, substance abuse, low academic success, discipline issues, and the strain on educators to ensure that every student has the opportunity to make-up work and have individual success.

According to Lynn Olcott (2010), “About 59, 000 people are in prisons in New York State and about 40,000 of them are enrolled in prison school programs.” The state requirement is that inmates must be in the school program if they do not have a diploma or a GED (Olcott, 2010). This means 40,000 people did not finish high school for an undisclosed reason.

As educators, this leaves us one obvious option. Regardless of whether it is for the purpose of gaining funding, scoring higher on the state report card, ensuring student success, or because it is the morally the right thing to do, we must find a way to deal with student absenteeism and truancy. In order to accomplish this task, educators must look deeper into the issue to examine why absences occur, by whom, and what can be done. Harris (2008) makes a direct connection between the engagement of the student and the willingness of the student to attend school. A study by Kinder, Wakefield and Wilkin (1996) discovered that student absences can be influenced by peers, bullying, negative teacher relationships, curriculum, and issues at home.

The perceptions of students, parents, and administrators in relation to student absences are likely to be different. Students with high absence rates may have a negative perception of their parental involvement, or lack thereof, leaving them with preconceived thoughts that their parents do not care (Sheppard, 2009). Parents of students who are frequently absent may have a negative perception of education based upon their own experiences in school. They may influence their children by their example of behavior and learning (Sheppard, 2009). Sheppard (2007) notes that distinctions between “regular attenders” and “poor attenders” included students’ perceptions of school and perceptions

of parental discipline. This leads to the question, “What are administrators doing to promote positive change in these perceptions?”

There is literature that discusses the effects of student absences and why students are absent from school. There is also some limited literature on students’ perspectives of education and the relationship of “outside” influences. However, there is little research devoted to understanding the perceptions of public high school administrators and their approaches to influence student attendance. Studying the perceptions of administrators, in geographically different settings, can determine whether or not there are notable differences among them. Most research involving attendance has been done at the elementary and junior high levels. Attendance habits are formed in the early stages of education. This study is intended to compare the perceptions of administrators at the high school level in order to determine meaning differences in principals’ beliefs in relation to the issue of students’ absences at this level. The study is intended to discover whether or not there are meaningful differences in attendance issues, interventions used, and suggestions for the improvement of students’ attendance, in urban, suburban, and rural/small town public high schools.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

This is an exploratory study, qualitative in nature, of the perspectives of high school principals in urban, suburban, and rural settings, utilizing the questionnaire process. The purpose of this study is to show meaningful similarities and differences between the perceptions of school administrators in relation to the importance of attendance, affects of attendance, why students have poor attendance, what interventions are being utilized, and suggestions for the improvement of students’ attendance. This study will also show what

may need changed in practice, according to the principals, in order to improve students' attendance in school.

Current measures to help improve student attendance, such as attendance incentives, have been shown to be ineffective (Gneezy, et al., 2011, p. 195). These measures are focused on what school officials believe to be the reasons for poor attendance. This study will show that the perceptions of administrators, about why students have poor attendance, do not align with interventions to improve students' attendance. Measures to address attendance issues must focus on the reasons for student absenteeism and not speculation.

This study is important for school officials and students. Administratively, the study is important due to academic performance, school report card data, and school funding. For students, finding an answer to help improve attendance is critical. Poor attendance can lead to negative consequences for the rest of their lives.

#### *Significance of the Study*

The negative consequences of low attendance rates have been well documented. Students who frequently miss school are affected by lower test scores, less social development and weaker student learning (Wimmer, 2008). Absenteeism is also associated with an increased chance of student participation in risky behaviors. These behaviors include tobacco, drugs, alcohol, and sexual behaviors (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008). High absenteeism also leads to an increased rate of dropping out of school. Those students who drop out of school are more likely to alienate themselves, become gang members, use drugs and alcohol, participate in violent behaviors, and ultimately become incarcerated (Franklin et al., 2007).

The number of documented absences is staggering. Reid (2007) discovered that between eight and twelve percent of the student population was absent daily, dependent on the part of the country (England) that one lived in. According to Walls (2003), some urban districts have thousands of unexcused absences daily. The State of Ohio has implemented a benchmark for attendance of ninety-three percent. This was implemented with national concern growing in the United States about truancy. No Child Left Behind legislation added attendance as an indicator for adequate yearly progress (Spencer, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average daily attendance as percent of enrollment in Ohio secondary schools is 92.8 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This equates to 7.2 percent of the total secondary school population in Ohio absent each day. There are many reasons that are stated for the absences. These include sickness, vacation, family, personal matters, and many more. There are many absences that go unexcused as well.

There is no question that attendance is an ongoing issue that must be dealt with in education. In order to affect student absence rates, administrators need to understand the perceptions of students, parents, and even faculty, of why the absences are occurring. The ability to recognize that there may be differences in perceptions will allow educators to re-examine the current policies on attendance. It may also lead to the discovery of solutions for the negative attendance rates.

The ultimate goal of this study is to determine if an understanding of the different perspectives of administrators in varying geographical settings can help school administrators develop and revise policies that will decrease absenteeism.

### *Limitations and Delimitations*

This study will determine if there are meaningful similarities or differences between administrators' perceptions of attendance in varying public high school settings. This study will also determine if there are meaningful similarities and differences of administrators' perceptions based on location, gender, ethnicity, and length of career.

There are several limitations within this study. All of the public high school principals in Ohio will have the opportunity to participate in the study. Administrators asked to participate in the questionnaire may turn down the request. Also, those who participate in the questionnaire may not always answer honestly.

There are also delimitations that have been set for this study. Only public high school principals in Ohio will be asked to participate in the questionnaire. The grade levels that the principals are responsible for will vary depending on geographic location and school district structure. All of the public high school principals in Ohio will be asked to participate in the questionnaire. There will be representatives from varying ethnic populations. There will also be participants from both genders within each ethnic population. There will be administrators from varying levels of years of experience. Last, administrators will be from urban, suburban, and rural geographic locations.

### *Definition of Terms*

**Truancy** – Typically described as an unexcused absence from school. Now with a focus on extensive days absent from school, the term truancy refers to this large number of absences whether they are excused or unexcused (US Department of Education, 2009).

**Urban School** – School that has a very large population and enrollment, high student minority population, and high student poverty (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

**Suburban School** – School that has large population and enrollment, average student minority population, and low student poverty (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

**Rural School** – School that has small to average population and enrollment, small to average minority population, and average student poverty (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

**Principal** – Most important, consequential, or influential; the person in charge of a public school (Merriam-Webster, 2015).



## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study will examine the perceptions about students' absences of those who have key roles within the educational process. They are the public high school principals. While there is abundant literature and research discussing the causes and consequences of students' absences, there is very little that discusses the perceptions of those who are involved in leading the initiatives and developing policy to promote positive change. Understanding these perspectives could be an integral aspect towards deciphering the solution for absenteeism.

In order to begin to understand the perspectives of absences, this study must first review the reasons for and consequences of absences. It is important to realize that there are three levels of absence. They are the typical daily absence, chronically absent (truant), and drop outs.

#### Student Absence

##### *Causes of Student Absence*

There are many causes of student absences that have been either been documented as the cause or researched. The most common documented cause of student absences is illness. According the U.S. Department of Education (2009), the San Juan Unified School System reduced its number of absences by limiting the number of allowable excused absences. As they looked further into the matter, they found that for some students and parents it was the simple ability to call in sick that afforded them the opportunity to avoid coming to school. It also brought to light the students who had

legitimately been sick with more extensive medical problems that had not received proper care (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

It has also been discovered that students miss school due to different forms of anxiety. This is typically found in the students who refuse to go to school. Wimmer (2008) found that approximately two to five percent of the student population misses school due to anxiety. There are three main areas of anxiety that she refers to, they are, separation anxiety, social and performance anxiety, and generalized anxiety disorder. Separation anxiety, most commonly found in younger students, is being overly dependent upon their parents and has thoughts of something harmful happening to a loved one. Social and performance anxieties refer to those students who worry about how they are perceived by others, fear humiliation, and may have extensive anxiety about tests and giving speeches. Generalized anxiety disorder refers to the student who has excessive anxiety in relation to any possible situation and occurrence. These students are unsure of themselves and perceive the world, possibly the school setting, as threatening (Wimmer, 2008).

The anxiety of attending school may not have any connection to a disorder, but rather the fear of being bullied. Although there are few studies of the effects of school bullying in the actual setting, Bennett (2009) states that it is feasible to believe victims of bullying have more difficulty engaging in learning than students who have not. She also notes that Reid (1985, 2005) “made a positive connection between bullying and school absenteeism or truancy” (Bennett, 2009, p. 278). Juvonen et al., 2000, found that school bullying led to school adjustment issues, which in turn led to student absences (Bennett, 2009). Reid (2007) found through interviews that middle managers and tutors believe that bullying has a meaningful role in students’ non-attendance.

It should be noted that some students skip school occasionally without cause. Parents also excuse their children from some days of school for family vacations or issues that at home. A study conducted by Reid (2002) concluded that there “were different types of parent-condoned absenteeism, related to parental personality, their own school experience and achievement, and the history of their relationship with their child” (Sheppard, 2007, p. 352).

The student’s ability in school can also lead to absences. Students who have low self-esteem often will be absent from school (Reid, 2007). Students who miss school to avoid class typically find that the material is too hard or that there is not sufficient help available, whether at home or at school, lacking confidence in the ability to complete their work (Sheppard, 2009). Levin (2010) found that there were a significant number of students who were in the categories of apprehensive (high challenge/low skill) and bored (low challenge/high skill). Students who are in a situation where they struggle or are not challenged at all are more likely to be absent from school. Student disengagement can be a cause of poor behavior, low academic achievement, as well as truancy (Harris, 2008).

#### *Consequence of Student Absence*

There is a plethora of research and information available about the consequence of student absences. Students who are chronically truant have much higher odds of becoming involved in risky behaviors. Eaton, Brener, and Kann (2008) discovered an interesting connection between students who participated in health risk behaviors and excused absences. They also found that students who were absent (excused or unexcused) were more likely to participate in risk behaviors (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008). There has been a direct connection established between missing school and

participating in risk behaviors such as using alcohol, tobacco, and other illegal drugs (Sheldon, 2007). He believes that given these data, if students can be kept in class it may help keep them from “engaging in delinquent activity” (Sheldon, 2007, p. 267).

Ultimately, chronic absences and risk behaviors may lead to the most devastating category in relation to attendance, drop outs. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, the number of high school students who dropped out for the combined 50 states in 2002-2003 was 550,000 students. The following year the number of dropouts reported by a combined 48 states was 545,000. These are huge numbers and raise the alarm about attendance and dropouts.

Those who drop out of high school face negative consequences as well. Like chronic absenteeism, drop outs face the same risk behaviors. They risk depression, alienation, the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs, participate in violent behavior and can end up incarcerated (Franklin et al., 2007). Those who drop out of school face higher unemployment rates and earn lower salaries when employed (Franklin et al., 2007; Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002). “Such a premature departure from high school has required policymakers to address the educational, economic, and civic impact of dropouts on society” (Bartholomew et al., 2008, p. 3).

There are consequences for schools when students drop out as well. Federal funding is based upon the number of students who are enrolled at the school. There are also indicators within the Adequate Yearly Progress benchmark in the No Child Left Behind Legislation that include the percentage of drop outs (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Failure to meet the designated number of indicators can result in lower school ratings and even legislative action.

## Gender, Race, and Cultural Diversity

Gender, race, and cultural diversity all have an impact upon student absences. “Early, high risk sexual activity; teenage pregnancy; and teen parenting present considerable challenges to a young, single woman” (Hughes, Manns, & Ford, 2009, p. 25). Outcomes from these high risk behaviors are low academic performance, dropping out of school, limited college and career options, as well as diminished earnings (Hughes, Manns, & Ford, 2009). Black teens are more likely to have sexual activity by the age of 13 and be more sexually active than White or Hispanic teens (Hughes, Manns, & Ford, 2009). African American boys have the highest percentage of dropping out of school in Texas, at over 50 percent (McNeil et al., 2008).

Hartnett (2007) studied the connection between absenteeism and social identity. She found a significant connection between the acceptance of peer groups and school attendance. Students that were part of peer groups that were not “accepted” were not comfortable coming to school and resulted in large numbers of absences (Hartnett, 2007, p.36). Research also showed that conflict with teachers, dysfunctional homes, and not fitting in were significant reasons, especially among minority groups, that students dropped out of high school (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

Norma Lloyd-Nesling (2006, p.28) found through her research that unemployment, low socioeconomic status, loss of “corporate spirit”, and truancy all had a part in disaffection and underachievement. This would appear to start a vicious cycle. Jantzen (2007) states that high levels of poverty and high crime rates cause an increase in the high school dropout rate.

Redmond and Hosp (2008) studied the effects of factories on medical related absences. One interesting result from the study was the connection between absenteeism and educational inequities. They found that risk-factors such as non-English language learners, eligibility for free or reduced lunch, and receiving special education services directly linked to patterns of high absences (Redmond & Hosp, 2008).

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students face many obstacles that lead to school failure. They are more likely than their peers to drop out of school early. Low socioeconomic students as well as Hispanic and African American students are more likely to become drop outs from school (Kaylor & Flores, 2007).

In a study to determine the effect of truancy-related notices (citations) in the UK, Zhang learned an interesting fact about the absences themselves. It was found that “poverty and irrelevant curriculum” were the underlying factors for the majority of student absences (Zhang, 2007, p. 25).

Students who are at-risk with little or no social support were found to move more frequently in their neighborhoods and have to work more hours for pay. This resulted in lower attendance and less ability to overcome school problems (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998). Students who have to provide support for their family often become exhausted and miss school. Some students have to provide child care or care for their grandparents on a moment’s notice. These students may not be able to provide notes due to language barriers, parents working, or the parents’ inability to write, leaving the absence as unexcused (McNeil et al., 2008). When a doctor’s note is needed, these students may be too poor to go see a doctor (McNeil et al., 2008). In relation to their families, these students shared less of their feelings and their parents or guardians showed

little interest in their schooling or their monitored school activities (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998). Likewise, when school personnel were asked to identify issues about why managing school attendance is difficult, all four groups (head teachers, deputy heads, middle managers, and forms tutors) all had “overcoming the culture/history/catchment area of the school (socioeconomic factors)” near the top of each of their lists (Reid, 2007, p. 31).

Strand and Winston (2008) studied the educational aspirations of students within an inner urban area. The results were surprising. They found that minority students had much higher educational aspirations than white students. The conclusion tends to lean towards the idea that the minority groups were inspired by their parents to reach “middle-class values and norms” (Strand & Winston, 2008, p. 264). Students with a goal of graduating and a positive caring relationship with at least one teacher were more likely to make positive choices that enabled them to continue in school (Kaylor & Flores, 2007).

#### Accountability

Accountability for attendance goes far beyond the school simply being accountable for its students. The Ohio Department of Education has included attendance as one of the indicators on the district report card. In order to satisfy this indicator, schools (and school districts) must average 93% attendance or better. The federal legislation, No Child Left Behind has accountability built into it in the form of an indicator for adequate yearly progress in relation to elementary and middle school accountability (Spencer, 2009). Although there is a moral obligation to ensure that students are attending school, this accountability from the state and federal government drives school administrators to take every measure possible in the quest to increase their attendance rates.

The pressure of accountability has drawn some negative measures from school administrators. One example is the Columbus City Schools District. A number of administrators in the district have been charged with altering public records for withdrawing students in order to delete students' absences (Bush, 2015).

### Policy

Policy often dictates the requirements, or standards, that administrators must meet in their daily routine as a building leader. In public education there are typically two forms of policy that are passed down to the building level. One is state law and the other is school board policy. There is a significant connection between them.

The state of Ohio requires the following as stated in the Ohio Revised Code:

Section 3321.01 – All Children, ages 6 through 18, must attend school every day that school is in session unless excused with a state accepted reason. Excusable absences are: personal illness, illness in the students' family, death in the students' family, quarantine for a medical reason, religious reasons, and emergency (as judged acceptable by the superintendent or his/her designee to be of good and sufficient cause for absence from school.)

Section 3321.04 – Any absence for which a student fails to present a written excuse (parent/medical) will be counted as unexcused.

Section 3321.13 – Driver's license privilege: a temporary instruction permit or driver's license will be suspended, or the opportunity to obtain a temporary permit or driver's license will be denied, if a student has an unexcused absence of more than ten consecutive school days or at least fifteen total school days (truant).

The Ohio compulsory attendance laws set the baseline standards for attendance.

While these compulsory attendance laws focus on the secondary education level, research shows that the relationship between attendance and dropouts exists as early as kindergarten (Hickman, Bartholomew, & Mathwig, 2008). Local school boards then have the option of adding school specific requirements within their policies.



In England, a similar court process has been put in place. However, instead of the student being cited, it was the parents. The parents faced fines and even possible jail time in the worst attendance scenarios. According to Reid (2007, p. 38), “The Government claimed that this fast-track initiative resulted in 3,500 of the supposed 13,000 regular truants being returned to class.”

### Improving Attendance

#### *Policy and Communication*

Most schools implement policies that are punitive to students’ credits and grades. Students will usually not receive a grade for homework or be allowed to make up tests if they have an unexcused absence. These policies become “counterproductive” and in the end do little to encourage student attendance (Reeves, 2008). The attendance policy in Texas mandates that students be present for 90 percent of the classes in a semester or else they will not receive credit for the class (McNeil et al., 2008). While this policy may look good on paper, it can be counterproductive for students who have been truant to return to school. Students with even a few full days of unexcused absences will fail all of their courses (McNeil et al., 2008). Revisiting policies like these can lead to more productive policies that are not detrimental to the overall educational goals. A high school in Minnesota decided to “uncouple” grades from their attendance policy. They did not take away consequences for missing class or absences. They just needed to find the “right consequences” (Reeves, 2008). Students who miss class have their parents called within a few hours, and within a couple days the staff member meets with the student and tries to find out the reason for the absence. Every unexcused absence results

in an after-school detention (Reeves, 2008). The students take these consequences seriously as they realize that now people care that they are not in class.

Another way that educators can begin to improve attendance is communication. Villano (2008) discusses multiple ways of communicating with parents and their positives and negatives. Villano's article discusses the use of technology (mass calling, text messaging, etc.) to communicate with parents. He discovers that there is still a barrier with those who do not have or cannot afford such technology (Villano, 2008). One of the most important aspects of communication discussed by Villano (2008) is that all communications must be multilingual in order to ensure that all parents have the ability to understand. Many urban schools have students whose families speak English as a second language (Villano, 2008). Regardless of how the communication is done, in order to be successful in decreasing absenteeism, it must be immediate and frequent.

#### *Alternative Schools*

One way that public schools have tried to limit the number of students who drop out is by providing alternative schools that focus on academics and good educational choices for those students who are at-risk (Franklin et al., 2007). Wilkins (2008) found that students are more successful in alternative settings when they have had academic difficulties, feelings of isolation, and "negative affectivity" in their traditional school setting.

These schools are effective by focusing on education and not discipline. Alternative schools have lower teacher-student ratios, allowing more individual time between the teacher and the students. This helps nurture the "students' desire to graduate" (Franklin et al., 2007, p. 134). High quality alternative programs help to decrease truancy, deter

poor behavior in traditional school environments, increase academic achievement, and decrease suspensions and expulsions. Low class sizes develop stable learning environments (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The Iowa Association of Alternative Education (2002) reported that 66 percent of the students who attended alternative school graduated. Thirty-seven percent of the graduates went on to some form of a postsecondary school (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

One example of an alternative school is the Twilight Academy in southeastern Pennsylvania. At-risk students who were not successful in the traditional school setting were given the opportunity to attend the Twilight Academy. These students were required to work 20 hours a week in the morning and early afternoon, before classes began. Their work time was converted into elective credits (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

### *Community Partnerships*

One of the most important methods for improving attendance is making positive connections with parents and the community. Personal and social dimensions have an impact on the aspirations of students (Strand & Winston, 2008). Parents may be the most important personal connection in building aspirations in students, due to their traditional role of support and encouragement (Strand & Winston, 2008). Unfortunately, not all students will have the same support from their personal and social connections.

There are some families that have more positive relationships between home and school than others. Factors that influence this relationship can be the parents' initiative or the individual teachers that teach the student (Sheldon, 2007). Parents' involvement in their child's education can be affected by many variables. Socioeconomic status,

language barriers, school support, and their own support systems can all influence a student's parents' involvement in their education. Neighborhood characteristics have a large impact on the families of students as well (Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002).

“Neighborhood social disorganization” can inhibit parents from being able to support their child's needs, especially when the neighborhood has negative peer influence, crime, and violence (Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002, p. 470).

In these circumstances, the role of the school becomes even more vital. It is clear that schools can and should take responsibility for making the connection to increase family and community involvement (Sheldon, 2007). The school must become more active in community involvement. Programs and policies that are created to address neighborhood social disorganization have positive impact by nurturing parent-child relationships, better parenting practices, increased support for the school, and strengthening the child's educational behavior (Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002). Students who are successful stated that they had high expectations from educators and positive student-teacher relationships. School and family factors that contribute to the success of students included physical and emotional safety as well as acceptance and unconditional love respectively (Kaylor & Flores, 2007).

This leaves educators with the task of initiating and building positive connections with parents and the community. Schools must evaluate policies, develop plans, and take action if they are going to have a positive impact on attendance rates. One school district in Stockton, California, has made an aggressive effort to identify and locate students who have left the district in order to try to convince them to return to school (Maxwell, 2010). Some of the data had to be corrected, but once the district was on the right path they were

able to identify drop outs, establish a charter school for students who are behind in credits, and even created a campaign to increase SAT and PSAT participation (Maxwell, 2010). One of the key elements to the survival of the dropout campaign is the connection and support that the district maintains with the mayor, local clergy, and business leaders (Maxwell, 2010). This is an example of the importance of having positive community partnerships.

It is important for educational administrators to support public resources in developing a plan to decrease absenteeism. Educational leaders and local authorities need to coordinate to address students' personal family contexts, school and faculty, and district interventions (Garcia-Gracia, 2008). Schools need to build community connectedness in order to coordinate local resources in an effort to promote an understanding of the attendance issue, partnerships between schools and social services, and developing projects and programs that prevent student absenteeism (Garcia-Gracia, 2008). Ensuring parental involvement is important as well. According to the National Center for School Engagement, "a 2002 National Education Service study indicates that when parents are involved, students tend to achieve more, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background or parents' education level" (National Center for School Engagement, 2015).

### Student Perspectives

Student perceptions on attendance and their own educational expectations impact educational aspirations and overall attendance. One specific perception of students that affect their attendance is the perceived response of their parents or guardians. Students' perceptions of school attendance varied with the perception of parental discipline

(Sheppard, 2007). Students who knew they were not going to be in trouble were more inclined to miss school. Attendance is often linked with socioeconomic status of parents, neglect, and criminal history. This study shows that while they play a part in a student's attendance patterns, they are not "straightforward." Students were most likely to request an absence based upon how they perceived their parents to respond (Sheppard, 2007).

Educational expectations vary among students based upon cultural diversity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Students perceive education on a level of importance as they determine how high they set their educational expectations (Lowman & Elliot, 2009). The ability of the student to integrate into the school environment and even the dominant culture affects educational expectations. Parental education and socioeconomic status affect how high students will set their educational expectations (Lowman & Elliot, 2009). How students perceive the importance of high school will impact their postsecondary aspirations. Students who perceive that they do not have to be successful in high school fail to turn their ambitions of going to college into a reality (Lowman & Elliot, 2009).

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Design of the Study*

This is an exploratory study, qualitative in nature, utilizing online questionnaires allowing all public high school principals in Ohio to have the opportunity to participate. The study examined the perspectives of the participants about their perceptions regarding student attendance, ranging from a general appraisal to specific strategies to bolster attendance. It was imperative to allow the participants to express their perspectives through the questionnaire in order to determine if there are meaningful similarities and differences between the administrators who participated in the study. Geographic location of the schools where principal respondents were was central throughout the analysis.

#### *Population and Sample*

There are 231 rural public school districts, 200 small town public school districts, 123 suburban public school districts, and 55 urban public school districts in Ohio (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). The Ohio Department of Education has listed 744 public high schools. They provided a database with the contact information for 612 of the public high school principals, after the exclusion of the researcher. There are 132 principals listed that do not have contact information listed in the database. The database was provided on the Ohio Department of Education website, <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Data/Ohio-Educational-Directory-System-OEDS>, available to the public. The principals in this study were emailed and asked to respond to a questionnaire that self-classified them into rural/small town, suburban, or urban public

high schools. Private schools, non-public alternative schools, and non-public charter schools were not included in this study.

### *Data Collection*

The researcher was given approval for the study after submitting an application, a copy of the questionnaire, and the informed consent letter, by Youngstown State University's Institutional Review Board.

Questionnaires were conducted during the summer of 2015. The data were collected utilizing online questionnaires, Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) utilizing email addresses that were gathered from the Ohio Department of Education's website. The principals were invited to participate by use of an emailed cover page that stated the questionnaire was anonymous and no individual results or responses would be provided to anyone.

The questionnaire was emailed to the 612 prospective participants. Six days later, a reminder to participate was emailed. It was followed by a second reminder 3 days later and then a final reminder 4 days after that, all via email. The questionnaire was available for responses for a total of 15 days. This resulted in a final response of 110 participants. There were 14 of the 612 principal email addresses (2.3%) that bounced back creating a possible questionnaire size of 598. The final response rate for the questionnaire was 18.9% (110/598).

The cover page informed the participants that by continuing to participate in this questionnaire, they were verifying that they were 18 years of age or older and agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaires were completed by the administrators in an environment of their choice utilizing an online link provided through email via Survey



Monkey. The administrators participated in the online questionnaire, on their own, by a given deadline. The data were stored securely on a password protected flash drive that was kept in a secure location.

#### *Analytic Plan*

The data were collected and compiled using Survey Monkey and Excel. The online tools within Survey Monkey allowed for the data to be cleaned. It also provided descriptive graphs to illustrate the initial results. The data were then exported into Excel in order to arrange the responses of the open-ended questions for thematic analysis and cross-tabulation comparison.

The data were compared by geographic location to determine if there were meaningful similarities or differences among the participants' responses. The researcher analyzed the response data into categories based upon the type of school setting, rural/small town, suburban, and urban. The response data were compared and contrasted, utilizing cross-tabulations, in order to provide an explanation of the principals' perceptions of students' attendance, policies, causes of students' absences, interventions used, and suggestions for improving students' attendance, among public high school administrators in Ohio.

#### *Hypotheses*

The expectations of this exploratory study are finding meaningful differences in the perceptions of public high school principals based upon their location. There are questions the researcher believes will be answered unanimously. It is expected that all of the principals participating view the importance of attendance the same. The researcher believes that there will be meaningful differences between rural/small town, suburban, and urban principals' beliefs about why students attend, why students are absent, and

factors that affect attendance. It is also the belief of the researcher that there are meaningful differences between rural/small town, suburban, and urban principals in relation to the interventions that are in place and the suggestions to improve student attendance.

Measures (See Appendix 2 for all the items on the emailed questionnaire)

Dependent Variables: rating of attendance, perception of: student attendance, relevance of high school, encouragement of students, student participation, student behavior and discipline, and board policy.

Independent Variables: location of high school, years of administrative experience, gender, and ethnicity.

## Chapter 4

### RESULTS

In this chapter, the data collected from the public high school principals are compared, utilizing cross-tabulation, to determine similarities and differences in their perceptions about students' attendance. The primary comparison is by the location of the public high schools (rural, suburban, and urban). Cross-tabulations mainly are used to present the results of these comparisons. Interpretations and implications of these comparisons are discussed.

The importance of this study is to examine the perceptions of student attendance among public high school principals. Principals are the building leaders in a high school. They are instrumental in establishing building policies and procedures to help improve attendance. Overall, the results of this study shows high school principals the perceived reasons for students' absences and reasons students attend. It also defines what factors affect students' attendance. These data should be used to determine revisions of policy and interventions in concern with students' attendance.

#### *Research Questions*

Because no prior published studies exist on the geographic location and principals' perception of student attendance, this study is exploratory. Furthermore, rather than hypotheses, this dissertation is driven by the following questions:

1. How does the geographic location of the principals' respective high school influence their perceptions of the reasons for students' absences?
2. How does the geographic location of the principals' respective high school influence their perceptions of the factors that affect students' attendance?

3. How does the geographic location of the principals' respective high school influence their perceptions of factors that would help increase students' attendance in high school?

### *Demographics*

The participants in the study were asked demographic questions to define the population in the sample for this study. The data from the responses were compiled and used for comparison groups. The demographic information requested from the respondents included: location of high school, years of experience as an administrator, gender, and ethnicity.

A total of 110 public high school principals in Ohio completed the questionnaire. The possible questionnaire size was 598. The final response rate for the questionnaire was 18.9% (110/598). The data were not screened and no responses were omitted. Their compiled demographic information for each area requested is profiled in tables 1 through 4.

As displayed in Table 1, the participants in the questionnaire were asked to self-identify their high school typography by choosing from three options: rural/small town, suburban, or urban. These are the main typology categories that are used to identify school districts in Ohio (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

Table 1

*Locations of high schools*

Location	n	%
Rural/Small Town	66	60.00
Suburban	29	26.36
Urban	15	13.64

Most (i.e. 66/110 or 60%) of the principals are in rural/small town high schools, 29/110 (or 26%) are in suburban high schools, and 15/110 (or 14%) are in urban high schools. The data in Table 1 indicate that the breakdown of responses by the location of the high school is similar to the overall percentages of the total school districts in Ohio. According to the Ohio Department of Education (2015), there are 609 school districts in Ohio. There are 431 rural/small town districts (71%), 123 suburban districts (20%), and 55 urban districts (9%).

The next question the participants answered was to identify their total number of years experience as an administrator. The principals were given five ranges in years experience to choose from. They were: 0-3, 4-7, 8-10, 11-15, and 16 or more years. The data in Table 2 represent the breakdown of the years experience in administration of the total principals participating in the study.

Table 2

*Years of experience in administration*

Experience	n	%
0-3	5	4.55
4-7	25	22.73
8-10	30	27.27
11-15	22	20.00
16+	28	25.45

The responses indicate that the years of experience of the 110 principals participating in the study are relatively evenly spread out between four of the ranges. They are: 4-7 years experience (22.73%), 8-10 years experience (27.27%), 11-15 years experience (20%), and 16+ years experience (25.45%). The range of 0-3 years of experience (4.55%) was low, but was an expected result. Although the questionnaire was sent to only principals, the question identified the total years of experience in administration. Most high school principals gain experience in other administrative roles prior to becoming principals. The median range for years of experience was 8-10 years.

Next, the participating principals answered the demographic question of gender. The data in Table 3 represent the total responses of the principals by gender where 80% of the 110 principals participating were male and 20% of the principals participating were female.

Table 3

*Total number of principals by gender*

Gender	n	%
Male	88	80
Female	22	20

This is in comparison to the overall percentage of male administrators and female administrators in public high schools according to a national survey by the U.S.

Department of Education (2013). The national average reflects 69.9% males and 30.1% females as principals in public high schools. Women are underrepresented nationwide in the roles of public high school principals.

The last demographic question asked the participants to identify their ethnicity. They were given the option to choose one of the following ethnicities: African American, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Other. Table 4 gender data represent the breakdown of the total participants in the study.

Table 4

*Ethnicity of total principals*

Ethnicity	n	%
African American	4	3.67
Asian	0	0.00
Caucasian	103	94.50
Hispanic	0	0.00
Other	2	1.83
Did not answer	1	1.00

The data in Table 4 indicate the majority of the participants in this study, 103 (94.50%), are Caucasian. Only 6 principals (5.5%) are of a minority ethnic group. Of these, 4 (3.7%) are African American, and 2 (1.8%) are other. Although the numbers of minority participants in this study are minimal, in comparison, these data are similar to nationwide statistics. For example, a study of the 2011-2012 school year by the Department of Education (2013) revealed that public high school principals' ethnicities were: African American (8.8%), Caucasian (82.6%), Hispanic (6%), and other (2.6%). Ethnic minority groups are underrepresented nationwide in the roles of public high school principals.

The demographic data that were collected in the first four questions of the questionnaire were then compared to location of school in order to provide a demographic definition of each of the locations. The following tables are the



explanations of the results when comparing the demographic data of the participating principals with the location of the high schools.

Tables 5, 6, and 7 are a profile of the demographic data comparing the three locations of public high schools: rural/small town, suburban, and rural.

Table 5

*Location of high school compared with years of experience*

Location	n	0-3	4-7	8-10	11-15	16+
Rural/Small Town	66	5	20	17	9	15
Suburban	29	0	2	10	10	7
Urban	15	0	3	3	3	6

The data in Table 5 indicate the location of the high school compared to the years of administrative experience of the principal. The data show that rural/small town high schools have the only principals with 0-3 years of administrative experience. One possible contributing factor is that many rural/small town schools do not have assistant principal positions. Most suburban school principals have between 8-15 years of administrative experience. The data reflect that 20 (68.96%) suburban principals are within this range. Urban school principals are evenly divided between the ranges 4-7, 8-10, and 11-15 with 3 (20%) principals in each range. Six (40%) principals in urban schools have 16 or more years of administrative experience.

Table 6

*Location of high school compared with gender*

Location	N	Female	Male
Rural/Small Town	66	8	58
Suburban	29	7	22
Rural	15	7	8

The data in Table 6 reflect the location of the high school compared with the gender of the principal. According to the participating principals, the data show that rural/small town high schools have the most disparity between female and male principals. Out of 66 total principals, 8 (12.12%) are female and 58 (87.88%) are male. The data for suburban districts show that 7 (24.14%) principals are female and 22 (75.86%) principals are male. Urban districts showed the least disparity between female principals and male principals. A total of 15 urban principals participated comprised of 7 (46.67%) female principals and 8 (53.33%) male principals.

Table 7

*Location of high school compared with ethnicity*

Location	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Other
Rural/Small Town	0	0	64	0	1
Suburban	1	0	27	0	1
Urban	3	0	12	0	0

Table 7 reflects the data comparing the location of the high school with the ethnicity of the participating principal. The majority of the principals, regardless of the location of the high school, who participated in the study are Caucasian. The most diversity among principals is found in the urban high schools comprising of 3 (20%) African American principals and 12 (80%) Caucasian principals.

#### *Perceptions of Attendance*

The next section of the questionnaire was focused on the principals' perceptions of student attendance. The questions were structured to determine principals' views about attendance in their own building, their personal beliefs concerning student attendance, and whether current school policies are effective in the promotion of good student attendance. The response data were compared using cross-tabulation by the demographic data that were provided by the respondents. The questions were structured as dichotomous variable "Yes" or "No" responses.

"On average, how would you rate student attendance in your school?"

The first question on the questionnaire focused on the perceptions of the principals about attendance in their own buildings. The participants (n=110) were given five categories to rate their own high school on student attendance. The categories were: excellent, good, average, poor, and bad. The excellent rating was marked by 38 (34.55%) of the principals followed by 51 (46.36%) good, 15 (13.64%) average, 6 (5.45%) poor, and 0 (0%) bad.

Tables 8, 9, 10, and 11 reflect the response data and compare the responses from the four demographic categories.

Table 8

*Attendance rating by location of school*

Rating	Rural/Small Town	Suburban	Urban	%
Excellent	24	13	1	34.55
Good	32	12	7	46.36
Average	8	2	5	13.64
Poor	2	2	2	5.45
Bad	0	0	0	0.00

The data in Table 8 reflect the ratings by principals based upon the location of their high schools. It shows that 56 (84.84%) of rural/small town principals rated their high schools in either the excellent or good category. The majority of suburban principals, 25 (86.21%), rated their schools in either the excellent or good category also. In contrast, the majority of urban school principals, 12 (80%), rated their schools in either the good or average category.

Table 9

*Attendance rating by years of administrative experience*

Rating	0-3	4-7	8-10	11-15	16+
Excellent	1	5	9	12	11
Good	2	16	14	7	12
Average	2	2	6	2	3
Poor	0	2	1	1	2
Bad	0	0	0	0	0

Table 9 reflects data comparing attendance rating with years of administrative experience. The highest percentage of principals in all five years of administrative experience ranges rated their schools in either the excellent or good categories. The combined categories of excellent and good ratings are as follows: 0-3 (60%), 4-7 (84%), 8-10 (76.67%), 11-15 (86.37%), and 16 or more years experience (82.15%).

Table 10

*Attendance rating by gender*

Rating	Female	Male
Excellent	5	33
Good	9	42
Average	5	10
Poor	3	3
Bad	0	0

The data in Table 10 reflect the comparison of the attendance rating with the gender of the principal. It is interesting to note that the female principals' combined ratings of excellent and good (63.64%) are the same as the female principals' combined ratings of good and average (63.64%). The male principals' combined ratings of excellent and good are 85.23%.

Table 11

*Attendance rating by ethnicity*

Rating	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Other
Excellent	1	0	35	0	2
Good	1	0	49	0	0
Average	2	0	13	0	0
Poor	0	0	6	0	0
Bad	0	0	0	0	0

The data in Table 11 reflect the comparison of attendance rating and the final demographic category, ethnicity. The combined ratings of excellent and good for Caucasian principals are 81.55%. The data are limited due to the number of minority principals who participated. However, the percentages of participants are similar to the nationwide percentage of ethnic minority principals.

“Do you believe that good attendance to school is important?”

All of the principals who answered this question (n=109) answered unanimously with “Yes.” There are many negative factors that have been associated with poor school

attendance. They include, but are not limited to: high dropout rates, risk behaviors, and incarceration (Franklin et al., 2007).

“Do you believe that good attendance is directly related to academic success?”

Once again, regardless of demographic data, all principals that responded (n=108) answered “Yes.” In order to achieve academically, it is important for students to be in school and receive content instruction. Students who frequently miss school are affected by lower test scores, less social development and weaker student learning (Wimmer, 2008).

“Do you believe that high school is relevant to the rest of your students' lives?”

Interestingly, 109 principals answered “Yes,” while 1 principal answered “No.” Students who are frequently absent from school are more likely to participate in risk behaviors, including, drugs, alcohol, and sexual behaviors (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008). These risk behaviors can have a negative impact on the rest of a student’s life.

The participating principals then answered the question, “Do you encourage students to further their education beyond high school?” Again, all (n=108) but 1 responding principal answered “Yes.”

“Do you believe that student attendance affects whether a student is active in school / participates in extracurricular activities?”

Out of the total number of principals (n=109) that answered this question, 103 (94.5%) said “Yes.” Six principals (5.5%) said “No.” Four (6.06%) rural/small town principals answered “No,” as well as 2 (7.14%) suburban principals. The breakdown of the 6 principals who answered “No” by years of administrative experience are as follows: 4-7 years, 1 (4%); 8-10 years, 1 (3.33%); 11-15 years, 2 (9.52%); and 16+ years, 2

(7.14%). There was 1 (4.55%) female principal who answered “No” in comparison to 5 (5.75%) male principals who answered “No.” Although there is limited data for ethnicity, it is interesting to note that all of the “No” responses are Caucasian.

“Do you believe that attendance has an effect on a student's behavior and discipline?”

Ninety-nine (90.83%) of the responding principals (n=109) answered “Yes,” while 10 (9.17%) answered “No.” The comparisons of the principals who answered “No” with location of high school are as follows: 6 (9.09%) rural/small town, 2 (7.14%) suburban, and 2 (13.33%) urban. The comparison by years of administrative experience is: 4-7 years, 3 (12%); 8-10 years, 4 (13.33%); and 11-15 years, 3 (14.29%). The gender comparison of the 10 principals who answered “No” shows that all 10 (11.49%) principals are male. The data show that all 10 (9.80%) principals who answered “No” are Caucasian.

“Do you believe students feel safe at school?”

Out of all the principals who answered (n=110), 109 (99.09%) said “Yes.”

“Do you encourage your students to be at school?”

This question was answered unanimously by the participants (n=110), regardless of demographics, “Yes.” This was an expected response by the researcher. It would be counterproductive to the educational process if the principal of the high school did not encourage the students to attend regularly.

“Does your current board policy help improve attendance?”

There is a meaningful difference when comparing the answers. Out of the total number of participating principals (n=110), 80 (72.73%) said “Yes,” while 30 (27.27%) said “No.” The data for principals in rural/small town high schools show 54 (81.81%)



said “Yes,” and 12 (18.18%) said “No.” This compares with principals in suburban schools. In suburban school locations, 20 (68.97%) said “Yes” and 9 (31.03%) said “No.” In contrast, 6 (40%) of urban school principals stated that board policy improves attendance, while 9 (60%) of urban school principals believe that board policy does not help improve students’ attendance.

Tables 12, 13, 14, and 15 show the comparison of the data when broken down into the four demographic categories used in this study.

Table 12

*Location of high school compared with effective board policy*

Location	Rural/Small Town	Suburban	Urban
Yes	54	20	6
No	12	9	9
% No	18.18	31.03	60.00

The data reflected in Table 12 show that there is a meaningful percentage (27.27%) of principals in all three locations that believe the current school board policy does not improve attendance. The percentages by location are: 18.18% rural/small town, 31.03% suburban, and 60% urban.

Table 13

*Years of administrative experience compared with effective board policy*

Experience	0-3	4-7	8-10	11-15	16+
Yes	4	17	23	17	19
No	1	8	7	5	9
% No	20.00	32.00	23.33	22.73	32.14

The data in Table 13 represent the comparison of years of administrative experience with effective board policy. There are a meaningful percentage of principals in each experience range who believe that board policy does not improve student attendance. However, there is not a meaningful difference between each of the ranges in years of administrative experience. They are similar by percentage. The percentages in each range are: 0-3 years, 20%; 4-7 years, 32%; 8-10 years, 23.33%; 11-15 years, 22.73%; and 16+ years, 32.14%.

Table 14

*Gender compared with effective board policy*

Gender	Female	Male
Yes	11	69
No	11	19
% No	50.00	21.59

The data in Table 14 represent gender of participating principals in comparison with the principals' beliefs about effective board policy improving student attendance. Female

principals are divided exactly by those who believe “Yes” (50%) and those who believe “No” (50%). There are 19 (21.59%) male principals that do not believe the board policy improves attendance in comparison to 69 (78.41%) male principals that believe the board policy is effective.

Table 15

*Ethnicity compared with effective board policy*

Ethnicity	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Hispanic	Other
Yes	2	0	75	0	2
No	2	0	28	0	0
% No	50.00	0.00	27.18	0.00	0.00

Table 15 reflects the data comparing ethnicity of the participating principals with their belief of the board policy improving student attendance. The data are limited due to the underrepresentation of minority principals. It is noted, however, that the African American principals are divided 2 (50%) “Yes” and 2 (50%) “No.” There is also a meaningful difference in Caucasian principals who believe “Yes” (72.82%) and “No” (27.18%).

*Improving Student Attendance*

The last five questions in the questionnaire are open-ended questions designed to research the perceptions of administrators in relation to why students are absent, interventions that are currently in place, and what could be done to help improve student attendance.

“Generally, what do you believe are the top three reasons students attend school?”

The participating principals typed in up to three responses addressing why students come to school. The top three answers among all principals are socialization (29.73%), to get an education/diploma (28.38%), and mandatory/legal requirements (13.85%). There are many other answers provided that offer perspective about student attendance that need to be discussed. Participation (13.18%) in clubs, sports, and activities help foster a sense of belonging. Principals also answered with parental support, student self motivation, and future goals. A positive school climate that is safe and enjoyable was mentioned several times. According to Harnett (2007), students who did not feel “accepted” had high rates of absences. There were some notable answers, although few respondents offered them as their answers. They are: meals, positive/caring teacher relationships, society norms, and effective school policy.

Rural/small town principals stated that the top three reasons students attend school are: social (29.38%), academics (25.99%), and required (15.25%). Participation (12.43%) was ranked closely in fourth. In comparison, suburban principals listed their top three reasons as: social (32.50%), academics (32.50%), and participation (16.25%). Required (10.00%) ranked as the fourth most common response. Urban school principals ranked their top three responses: academics (30.77%), social (25.64%), and required (15.38%). Participation (10.26%) ranked closely as the fourth most common response.

Table 16

Reasons students attend school (N=296)

Reasons	Rural/Small Town	Suburban	Urban
Social	29.38%	32.50%	25.64%
Academic	25.99%	32.50%	30.77%
Required	15.25%	10.00%	15.38%
Participation	12.43%	16.25%	10.26%

The data in Table 16 reflects the comparison of the top four reasons students attend school by location of the principals’ high schools. Four reasons were compared in order to reflect the top three reasons for each location.

“Generally, what do you believe are the top three reasons students are absent from school?”

The participating principals offered up to three responses addressing why students are absent. The top three responses are: lack of parental support/value of education (31.54%), lack of motivation (19.23%), and illness (15.38%). Academic challenges (10.38%) and lack of social relationships (10.38%) were also common answers among all participating principals. Sheppard (2007) notes that students often have poor attendance when they know that there are no consequences from their parents. Students are more likely to be absent when they know the response will be favorable from their parents. Home issues such as poverty and disruptions in the home were also among the top responses of principals. It is interesting that principals recognize and list disengagement,

relevance, and belonging as reasons for student absences. These are areas that principals can have a direct effect on by their leadership. Other notable responses included: lack of involvement, fear/bullying, drugs/alcohol, safety, vacation, and transportation.

Table 17

Reasons students are absent (N=260)

Reasons	Rural/Small Town	Suburban	Urban
Parents	32.24%	28.99%	33.33%
Self-Motivation	20.39%	13.04%	25.64%
Illness	13.16%	21.74%	12.82%
Non-Social	9.21%	15.94%	5.13%

The data in Table 17 indicate the top reasons students are absent as perceived by principals in rural/small town, suburban, and urban high schools. A total of four reasons are listed to ensure the top three reasons for each location are represented in the table. The table compares the reasons for students' absences by location.

“What are the top three factors, specific to your school, that you feel affect students' attendance?”

This question was specifically asked to determine if there were similarities or differences in the responses when a principal reflected on his or her own building. The question is also to determine if there are similarities or differences based upon the location of the school.

The top three factors that were listed by the rural/small town principals are: parents/home life (27.10%), climate/environment (13.55%), and academics (11.61%). It should be noted that parents/home life is recurring throughout the responses. It is also interesting that while staff relationships was mentioned overall by principals as a reason students attend school, it is in the top three factors for rural/small town principals when reflecting upon their own building. Rural/small town principals also noted: accountability, positive environment, student motivation, poverty, illness, weather/transportation, and drugs/alcohol. The researcher found it interesting that, for the first time, social media, incentive programs, and the number of IEP students also were noted by the principals.

The top three factors that were listed by the suburban school principals have differences in order from those of the rural/small town principals. The top three factors, according to the principals, that influence attendance are: parents/home life (17.81%), academics (16.44%), and climate/environment (13.70%). In the suburban school setting, academics and school climate appear to have a greater influence on student attendance than staff relationships as determined by rural/small town principals. However, staff relationship is a factor mentioned by suburban school principals. It should be noted that, once again, the top factor noted is the influence of parents/home life. Other factors noted by suburban principals are: illness, belonging/involvement, accountability, poverty, transportation, and drugs/alcohol.

The top three factors that influence student attendance, according to urban school principals, are: parents/home life (23.81%), climate/environment (11.90%), and academics (11.90%). The researcher would like to note that, according to the principals

in this study, the influence of parents/home life is a meaningful factor. Other factors noted by urban school principals are: accountability, involvement, motivation, weather/transportation, illness, incentives, and drugs/alcohol. Additional factors that were mentioned are: student transiency and gang activity.

Although not in the same order, rural/small town, suburban, and urban principals listed the same top three factors that are specific to their schools. The data are reflected in Table 18.

Table 18

Factors affecting attendance specific to principals' schools

Rank	Rural/Small Town	Suburban	Urban
1 <sup>st</sup>	Parents/Home	Parents/Home	Parents/Home
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Climate/Environment	Academics	Climate/Environment
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Academics	Climate/Environment	Academics

The last two open-ended questions were included in the research to help determine what is currently in place and what could be done in order to improve student attendance in public high schools.

“What interventions to you have in place to help improve students' attendance?”

The principals responded with interventions that they currently use. The most frequently mentioned interventions are: court/attendance policy (43.43%), rewards/incentives (21.21%), and communication with students and parents (20.20%). Other interventions used by principals are: loss of credits, positive school climate, early release, make-up time, alternative pathways, open campus, exam exemptions, individual



attendance plans, and opportunities for adults to obtain mental health services. While the most frequently mentioned interventions are often used in high schools, the additional interventions mentioned could be suggestions for principals who are trying to implement changes in student attendance, depending on their setting and specific needs.

“What do you believe would help increase students' attendance?”

This question is specifically designed to offer suggestions to principals, by their peers, to implement positive changes in student attendance. It is not surprising that the most frequently suggested factors that would help increase students' attendance have connections with parents and home life (31.52%). Parenting classes, incentives, and parent punitive measures were among the answers about what would increase students' attendance. Changes to the structure of the school day were also suggested by principals. Later start times, shorter school day, and flex time were among the suggested changes. Academic connections, building better relationships with teachers, and individualized academic tracks were suggested to help increase students' motivation to be in school. Although many principals mentioned the utilization of incentives as interventions, the suggestions for improvement include more attractive incentives such as cash/scholarship benefits. Additional suggestions include: addressing attendance issues at an earlier age, cultural diversity, additional staffing (truancy officer), and the continued focus on improvement of students' attendance.

### *Summary*

Improving student attendance is a challenge that many high school principals have to face. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), 7.2 percent of students in Ohio are absent each day. According to the Ohio Department of Education (2015), there

are 582,695 high school students. This translates to 41,954 high school students absent daily in Ohio. This study examined the perceptions of high school principals in Ohio. Comparisons were made by location of high school, years of administrative experience, gender, and ethnicity. There are some areas of interest that have been noted. One of those areas was the female principals' perspective on the effectiveness of current board policy on improving attendance. The female principals were divided exactly in half with 50% agreeing, and 50% who disagreed. One meaningful similarity between principals, regardless of location, is the perception of the impact of parents and home life.

In summary, the data in this study show that while there are meaningful perceptions, including but not limited to the effectiveness of board policy, reasons for students' absences, and factors which affect attendance, there is no indication that there are meaningful differences between the perceptions of principals based on location. The data indicate that, as a whole, high school principals in Ohio recognize the issues with students' poor attendance. The principals continue to implement interventions and collaborate on suggestions to help improve students' attendance in public high schools.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

#### *Summary*

Approximately 7% of secondary students in Ohio are absent on a daily basis (US Department of Education, 2015). This translates to approximately 41,954 high school students absent each day. The most common reason for students' absences are: illness, anxiety, lack of parental value, lack of social connections, and academic challenges. This study was an attempt to examine high school principals' perceptions of student absences from its causes to its remedies.

#### *Sample Description*

This study compared the responses of high school principals in Ohio in relation to their perceptions about students' attendance in school. The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of rural/small town, suburban, and urban public high school principals in relation to students' attendance. The study indicates that the perceptions of attendance issues have similarities regardless of the principals' school location, years of administrative experience, gender, and ethnicity.

The participants in the questionnaire are all from the population of public high school principals in Ohio. Participants were representative of ethnic backgrounds including: African American (4 participants), Caucasian (104 participants), and other (2 participants). They were representative of both female (22 participants) and male (88 participants) genders for high school principals. The participants also represented a range between just beginning their administrative careers and retired administrators who have been rehired. All participants were selected based upon their position of principal during

the 2014-2015 school year according to the database retrieved from the Ohio Department of Education.

### *Perceptions of Attendance*

This study compared the perceptions of principals based on the location of the high school. The principals self-categorized their schools. There were three possible selections. They were: rural/small town, suburban, and urban. The first question the principals were asked was, “How would you rate student attendance in your school?” The responses show that 56 (85%) of rural/small town principals rated their high schools in either the excellent or good category. The majority of suburban principals, 25 (86%), rated their schools in either the excellent or good category also. In contrast, the majority of urban school principals, 12 (80%), rated their schools in either the good or average category.

All of the participating principals (N=110) responded that they believed good attendance to school is important. There are many risk factors for students with poor attendance. They include: poor academic performance (Wimmer, 2008), dropping out (Franklin et al., 2007), incarceration (Olcott, 2010), and sexual behaviors (Hughes, Manns, & Ford, 2009).

All of the respondents stated that they believed good attendance is directly related to academic success. According to Wimmer (2008), students who frequently miss school are affected by lower test scores, less social development and weaker student learning.

The principals were then asked if they believe that high school is relevant to the rest of their students’ lives. Nearly all (109/110) of the principals believed high school is

relevant to their students' lives. Students with high absences are more susceptible to risk behaviors that can affect them for the rest of their lives (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008).

Principals were asked whether they encourage students to further their education beyond high school. All (n=108) but one principal who provided a response stated that they encouraged students to further their education.

Next, principals were asked if they believe that student attendance affects whether a student is active in school/participates in extracurricular activities. Out of the total number of principals (n=109) that answered this question, 103 (94.5%) said "Yes." Six principals (5%) said "No." Four (6.06%) rural/small town principals answered "No," as well as 2 (7%) suburban principals. Harnett (2007) found a significant connection between the acceptance of peer groups and school attendance.

When asked if attendance has an effect on a student's behavior and discipline, 109 (91%) principals answered "Yes" while 10 (9%) answered "No." Out of the 10 principals who answered "No," 6 were rural/small town principals, 2 were suburban principals, and 2 were urban principals.

Principals, regardless of location of their high schools, believe that students feel safe at school. Out of 110 principals, 109 (99%) believe their students feel safe. As expected by the researcher, all of the principals (110) encouraged their students to attend school regularly.

The last question that principals answered, in relation to perceptions of attendance in general, was to determine if the principals believed that their school policy helped improve student attendance. Rural/small town principals, 54 (82%), and suburban principals, 20 (69%), believe that school policy helps improve attendance. In contrast,

urban principals, 9 (60%), believe that school policy does not help improve student attendance. The data represent meaningful differences that indicate to principals they should review their board policies.

### *Perceptions of Students' Attendance*

The principals responded to five open-ended questions. These questions were used to determine if there were meaningful differences between the principals perceptions of students' attendance based on the location of their high schools.

“What do you believe are the top three reasons students attend school?”

The top three answers among all of the principals were: socialization (30%), to get an education/academics (28%), and mandatory/legal requirements (14%). Location was compared to determine if there were meaningful similarities and differences. Rural/small town principals' top three answers were: social (29%), academics (26%), and legal requirements (15%). Suburban principals top three answers were: social (33%), academics (33%), and participation (16%). In comparison, urban principals listed the top three reasons as: academics (31%), social (26%), and legal requirements (15%). It should be noted that participation was a close fourth for both rural/small town principals and urban principals.

There are meaningful similarities that can be concluded from this data. Regardless of location, principals all believe that students attend school for social interaction, academic achievement, legal requirements, and opportunities for participation encourage students to attend school.

“What do you believe are the top three reasons students are absent from school?”

The top three responses among all principals were: lack of parental support (32%), lack of motivation (19%), and illness (15%). The rural principals’ top three answers were: lack of parental support (32%), lack of motivation (20%), and illness (13%). Suburban principals’ responses were similar. They were: lack of parental support (29%), lack of social connections (16%), and illness (22%). In comparison, urban principals’ responses were also similar. They were: lack of parental support (33%), lack of motivation (26%), and illness (13%).

The data show meaningful similarities among the location of principals. All of the principals in the study have similar beliefs about why students are absent from school. These beliefs also align with the most common reasons for absence that were researched in the literature. They include: illness, lack of parental values/support, and lack of social connections.

“What are the top three factors, specific to your school, that you feel affect students’ attendance?”

Principals were asked about factors specific to their school in order to determine if there are meaningful similarities and differences between the locations. The top three factors listed by rural/small town principals were: parents/home life (27%), environment (14%), and academics (12%). Suburban principals listed the top three factors as: parents/home life (18%), academics (16%), and environment (14%). In comparison, urban principals listed the top three factors as: parents/home life (24%), environment (12%), and academics (12%).

Once again, the data show meaningful similarities between the principals' locations. Regardless of location, the principals in the study believe that parents/home life, environment, and academics are the top three factors that affect students' attendance. These factors could be positive or negative. It is important to note that the top factor for all locations is the affect of parents on students' attendance.

“What interventions do you have in place to help improve students' attendance?”

The most common responses among all of the principals were: court/attendance policy (43%), rewards/incentives (21%), and communication with students and parents (20%). It is interesting that 27% of the principals believe board policy does not help improve students' attendance, yet 43% of the principals have policy interventions in place to help improve students' attendance. It is also interesting that parent communication (20%) ranks as the third intervention when consistently the data show parents as the top factor in students' attendance.

“What do you believe would help increase students' attendance?”

This question was designed to help principals discover suggestions about improving student attendance. The most common suggestion, as expected, was to increase connections with parents and home life (32%). The connections included: parenting classes, incentives, and punitive measures. Changes to the school day, including shorter day, later start times, and flex time were all common answers. Increased academic connections for students, such as better relationships with teachers and individualized academic tracks, were also suggested.



### *Changes in Practice*

All of the high school principals face the same challenges of improving students' attendance. Many of the high schools in this study utilize similar interventions and suggest similar changes in order to increase the attendance rates of their students. While this study does not offer the answer, it is apparent that the current policies and interventions, as a whole, are not effective.

One focus that principals should address, according to the results of this study, is the evaluation of current school board policies in relation to students' attendance. The policies should promote school attendance and help principals with this challenge. However, a meaningful percentage (27%) of the participants in this study perceives that their current policies do not help increase students' attendance.

The main focus that should be utilized in practice as a result of this study is increased communications and positive relationships with parents. There were a meaningful number of responses in the improving student attendance portion of this study. Principals agreed that parents and home life were major factors on students' attendance, absences, positive and negative influences, interventions, and the suggestions for improvement. This meaningful similarity advises principals that in order to effect change in students' attendance, involvement of parents is paramount.

Principals are encouraged to note the interventions that have been listed by their peers, as well as the suggestions identifying what they believe would have a positive impact on improving students' attendance in Ohio public high schools.

### *Limitations*

There are a number of limitations in any study and there are five that are described below from this study. First, the study was conducted by use of a brief online self-administered questionnaire. There were a limited number of responses that were collected. The data collection period was for fifteen days. After six days, a follow up email was sent to remind administrators to participate in the study. No detailed personalized follow-up in terms of clarification or elaboration was done with what the principals provided on the online survey.

A second limitation was the response rate and timing of the data collection. While the response rate was typical for an online survey, nearly 20%, an even higher response rate would have increased the sample size and may have included a more diverse sample. One factor that could have affected the response was the collection of data over the summer. It is feasible to believe that many principals may have retired, changed positions, or did not check their email during the data collection period. Due to the limited response rate, the demographic categories of gender and ethnicity could not be used to make valid comparisons. The percentages of these categories were similar to the overall reflection of national average. However, the actual numbers of responses in the gender and ethnicity categories were limited.

A third limitation of the study is that the actual attendance rate for each of the schools represented in the study was not recorded. Principals were asked to rate their own buildings. Given that the principals are the assumed leaders of their schools, it may be that the principals were less likely to admit a problem existed “on their watch” and thus may have given a more favorable depiction of their school than evident in reality.

However, the focus of this study was on the perceptions of the principals which knowingly has its biases.

Fourth, the data in this study did not have corroborating information in which to test fully its validity beyond face validity. This researcher assumed that the responses provided were honest and accurate to the best of the principals' respective abilities. No comments were excluded as outliers given the qualitatively exploratory nature of the study.

Lastly, only public high schools were included in this study. According to the Ohio Department of Education (2015), there are 184 community high schools, 174 private high schools, and 49 joint vocational school districts. There are a total of 1,151 high schools in the state of Ohio with 744 of them being public high schools. No private, charter, or other alternative schools were included.

#### *Future Studies*

This study is meant to be a beginning in analyzing students' attendance in school and finding ways for improvement. The principals' perceptions are just a start. Future studies should involve the perceptions of students and parents. They are two additional groups who have a direct stake in attendance. If those studies are completed, then the perceptions of all three groups, who have a direct impact on students' attendance, can be compared to see if there are meaningful similarities and differences among the perceptions. Only then can school administrators make meaningful decisions to implement interventions that truly have a positive impact on increasing students' attendance in school by targeting effective areas.

Future studies should also try to increase the response rate. This may be accomplished by conducting the questionnaire in a different format other than email invitation. Researchers could utilize mail and also personal communications to try to obtain participation. This could also help researchers gain greater diversity among the respondents and if using an interview format, would allow for follow-up

Researchers should also include reaching out to all types of high schools in Ohio in future studies. The data would then show a more complete picture of the perceptions of all principals within the rural/small town, suburban, and urban locations than the current one.

Finally, future research could also screen the data to ensure that outliers are not included. Some responses, included in this study, were given by a minimal number of principals. This would increase the validity of the study and provide power for a quantitative analysis of the data which would compliment the themes derived from this qualitative study.

Further research is encouraged to build upon this study.

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## Appendix 1

### Research Questions

1. How does the geographic location of the principals' respective high school influence their perceptions of the reasons for students' absences?
2. How does the geographic location of the principals' respective high school influence their perceptions of the factors that affect students' attendance?
3. How does the geographic location of the principals' respective high school influence their perceptions of factors that would help increase students' attendance in high school?

## Appendix 2

### Principal Questionnaire

1. What is the location of your high school?  
Rural/Small Town    Suburban    Urban
2. How many years have you been an administrator?  
0-3                    4-7                    8-10  
11-15                16 or more
3. What is your gender?  
Male    Female
4. What is your ethnicity?  
African American    Caucasian  
Hispanic                Asian                Other
5. On average, how would you rate student attendance in your school?  
Excellent    Good                Average  
Poor                Bad
6. Do you believe that good attendance to school is important?  
Yes                No
7. Do you believe that good attendance is directly related to academic success?  
Yes                No
8. Do you believe that high school is relevant to the rest of your students' lives?  
Yes                No
9. Do you encourage students to further their education beyond high school?  
Yes                No
10. Do you believe that student attendance affects whether a student is active in school /  
participates in extracurricular activities?  
Yes                No
11. Do you believe that attendance has an effect on a student's behavior and discipline?  
Yes                No

12. Do you believe students feel safe at school?

Yes            No

13. Do you encourage your students to be at school?

Yes            No

14. Does your current board policy help improve attendance?

Yes            No

15. Generally, what do you believe are the top three reasons students attend school?

(Text Box)

16. Generally, what do you believe are the top three reasons students are absent from school?

(Text Box)

17. What are the top three factors, specific to your school, that you feel affect students' attendance?

(Text Box)

18. What interventions do you have in place to help improve students' attendance?

(Text Box – Maximum of three)

19. What do you believe would help increase students' attendance?

(Text Box)

## Appendix 3

### INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Public High School Principal:

I am a student from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study to investigate the perceptions of attendance in public rural, suburban, and urban schools. In this study, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire about student attendance in school and current attendance policies. I will also need to collect information to describe you such as gender, ethnicity, and length of experience. You will be asked to go online for one session and your participation should take about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

You may be at minimal risk of harm because of this research. The harm include/s: the potential breach of privacy. The study will link questionnaire responses to your email address during the data collection. The likelihood that you will be harmed is minimized because I will remove your email address, leaving no identifying data, once the data collection is complete.

The benefits of this study will be to identify potential perceptions about student attendance in school. It will also identify if there are similarities or differences in the perceptions of public high school principals based on location, gender, ethnicity, and length of experience. This study will help determine if there are more effective ways to increase daily student attendance in school.

Your privacy is important and I will handle all information collected about you in a confidential manner. I will report the results of the project in a way that will not identify you. Your participation in this study is anonymous. I do plan to publish the results of this study. You will receive a copy of the results of this study upon its completion.

You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to participate, simply close this email and do not continue on to the questionnaire. If you do agree, you can stop participating at any time and exit the questionnaire. If you have any additional questions you may contact the persons listed below.

If you have questions about this research project please contact my dissertation chair Dr. Robert Beebe (330-941-2128, [rjbeebe@ysu.edu](mailto:rjbeebe@ysu.edu)). If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact Dr. Edward Orona, Director of Grants and Sponsored Programs at YSU (330-941-2377) or at [eorona@ysu.edu](mailto:eorona@ysu.edu)

Thank you for your participation. It is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Timothy A. Neal  
Youngstown State University

By continuing to participate in this questionnaire, you are agreeing to the following statement:

I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

July 14, 2015

Dr. Robert Beebe, Principal Investigator  
Mr. Timothy Neal, Co-investigator  
Department of Educational Foundations, Research, Technology & Leadership  
UNIVERSITY

RE: HSRC PROTOCOL NUMBER: 001-2016  
PROTOCOL TITLE: Perceptions of Administrators: Improving Student Attendance in  
Urban, Suburban and Rural Public Schools

Dear Dr. Beebe and Mr. Neal:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed the abovementioned protocol and determined that it is exempt from full committee review based on a DHHS Category 3 exemption.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,

Michael A. Hripko  
Associate Vice President for Research  
Authorized Institutional Official

MAH:cc

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