A Mixed Methods Program Evaluation of Chronic Absenteeism Interventions at Caroline High School

Amanda M. Harper  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Dana L.G. Chen  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Melissa A. Bugaj  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

William J. Pettus  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Patrick H. Simmons  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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A Mixed Methods Program Evaluation of Chronic Absenteeism Interventions at Caroline High School

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Melissa A. Bugaj, M.A.Ed., George Mason University, 2018; M.A.Ed. Hood College, 2006; B.S., Salem State College, 1999

Dana L.G. Chen, M.A.Ed., University of Phoenix, 2007; B.A., Wake Forest University, 2004


William J. Pettus, M.A.Ed., Longwood University, 2016; B.S., Longwood University, 1995

Patrick H. Simmons, M.S, Montana State University, 2007; B.S., Longwood University, 2001

Chair: Lacey Seaton, Ed.D.
Faculty Director of Quality Enhancement Plan
Assistant Professor
Department of Educational Leadership

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2024

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Abstract

A MIXED METHODS PROGRAM EVALUATION OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM INTERVENTIONS AT CAROLINE HIGH SCHOOL


A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2024.

Chair: Lacey Seaton Ed.D, Faculty Director of Quality Enhancement Plan, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership

This mixed methods program evaluation examines interventions targeting chronic absenteeism at Caroline High School, where being absent for 10% or more of the school year impacts student success. Combining student surveys, parent interviews, and a staff focus group, the study identifies absenteeism trends and evaluates interventions related to student attendance attitudes and behaviors. Findings indicate these interventions have significantly reduced chronic absenteeism, with emphasis on positive reinforcements. The research illustrates absenteeism's complexities, which then in turn require diverse strategies that address both individual student and systemic factors. This Capstone offers insights and recommendations for tackling chronic absenteeism and aims to guide administrators, teachers, and policymakers in enhancing student participation through a holistic attendance improvement approach.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public schools provide opportunities for academic and social growth for children within any given community. School staff can create stability in structure and consistency and meet the multifaceted needs of each student when they are in school. Educators design curriculums and lessons with the expectation that students regularly attend class. However, attendance has been a longstanding issue in the American public education system. When students are not at school, they miss the instruction from their teachers and the assignments that make up their grades. Gottfried (2022) and Kostyo et al. (2017) note that students who consistently miss school achieve at a lower rate than students who attend school more regularly. Over time, student absences can become a persistent and concerning problem for schools, who, according to current policy, must deem students chronically absent.

The purpose of Chapter One is to present the background and context of the problem of chronic absenteeism that this research study investigated and provide an overview of the study design. This chapter introduces the operational definitions, followed by the study's research questions, conceptual framework, and methods.

Operational Definitions

To understand the context of various keywords used throughout the following chapters, working definitions of these terms are included below. While not an exhaustive list, the included terms are the ones most pertinent to understanding the problem of chronic absenteeism and this study.

**Chronic Absenteeism** - A term assigned to students who miss 10% or more of the instructional days in a school year. The Virginia Department of Education tracks student
absenteeism data as an accountability measure to meet the Every Student Succeeds Act requirements (Virginia Department of Education, 2022).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** - A reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965, and it replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which became law in 2002. This federal act was passed on December 10, 2015 and requires each state to measure student performance in reading, math, and science and to choose an additional measurement of school quality, such as chronic absenteeism (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

**Interventions** - A method for teaching a new skill, improving fluency, or inspiring students to use their knowledge in existing competency. A formal intervention has predetermined steps and is monitored to collect data on a student's development.

**Response to Intervention (RTI)** - A data-driven process of implementing interventions to ensure that all students are successful academically and behaviorally (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

**Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)** - An evidence-based, tiered framework that helps students with their behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health while boosting social-emotional learning, academic achievement, and school climate when implemented with fidelity (Center for Positive Behavior Implementation and Supports, 2023).

**Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)** - An integrated, streamlined system of supports encompassing all the critical components of RTI and PBIS (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

**Virginia School Quality Profiles** - Provide information about student achievement, college and career readiness, program completion, school safety, teacher quality, and other topics of interest to parents and the general public. Report cards are available for schools, school
Background and Context

Research on student school attendance shows that the effects of chronic absenteeism are far-reaching in a student’s life. The United States Department of Education (2016) reveals that students as early as kindergarten and grade one who meet the criteria for being chronically absent are less likely to read at grade level by the end of grade three, creating frustration and momentum for school avoidance. Moreover, research from Utah notes that dropout rates increase 17-fold when students are chronically absent in grades nine through twelve (Utah Education Policy Center, 2012). Applying research-based, targeted interventions is essential in continuing to engage and motivate students to attend school regularly.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, requires states to “track at least one non-academic factor as part of school accountability” (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022, p. 4). Henderson and Fantuzzo (2022) note that most states and the U.S. Department of Education define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of school days in a school year, regardless of the reason. Virginia is one of the states that has chosen to define chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of the school year and to track student attendance as a non-academic factor to meet the ESSA requirements. School divisions throughout Virginia have begun to delve deeper to understand the root cause of students being chronically absent.

This study comprehensively explores chronic absenteeism at Caroline High School (CHS) in Caroline County, Virginia, about 30 miles north of Richmond. The county has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Caroline County covers over 500
square miles of land with a population of 31,000 and with 10% of families living below the poverty line. As reported by the Virginia Department of Education in 2023, Appendix A, CHS experienced its highest chronic absenteeism rate in five years for the 2021-2022 school year at 35.79%, with the subgroup of students who are economically disadvantaged comprising the largest percentage at 45.1%.

Caroline High School implemented several attendance interventions for chronically absent students, including utilizing their family engagement specialist and attendance clerk to track student absenteeism throughout the school year. The school leadership team, composed of the school principal, three assistant principals, an activities director, and a school counseling director, worked to implement interventions to improve student attendance. Strategies included interviews with chronically absent students to understand their needs, incentives for good school attendance, and home visits to meet with parents. As of February 2023, Caroline High School reported that their chronic absenteeism rate dropped from 36% to 25%. The high school is questioning whether the dramatic drop in absences directly results from the interventions or is part of a more significant trend toward improvement.

Chronic absenteeism is a complex issue that requires immediate attention and in-depth research. Caroline High School serves as a setting to study multiple aspects of chronic absenteeism within a contained environment. A thorough analysis of attendance issues and related interventions can assist in comprehending the challenges within one high school and the school division as a whole. Gaining various perspectives about the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, including socioeconomic, school culture, family dynamics, and academic motivation, could offer additional insight for the CHS and Caroline County Public Schools administration.
Research Questions

This study examines the effectiveness of strategies to decrease absenteeism at Caroline High School. The researchers sought to understand gaps in attendance interventions based on findings from the current program evaluation. Three research questions guided the work of the Research Team:

*Research Question 1*: How effective were the strategies and interventions implemented by Caroline High School in decreasing chronic absenteeism for their students?

*Research Question 2*: Based on the data collected, do gaps exist in the chronic absenteeism strategies implemented by Caroline High School?

*Research Question 3*: Given finite time and resources, which strategies and interventions should Caroline High School continue to implement to continue to decrease chronic absenteeism rates?

Chapter 3 will delve into these research questions and explain the Research Team's methodology for answering them.

Conceptual Framework

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) tasked schools with utilizing “multi-tier systems of support and positive behavioral intervention and supports so that such children with disabilities and English learners can meet the challenging State academic standards” (ESSA, 2015, p. 128). The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework promotes early intervention and preventative measures in schools for dealing with behavioral, social-emotional, and academic issues through a tiered approach to supporting student needs (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Through the use of the methodologies of Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive
Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), this comprehensive approach addresses academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs.

School-based teams can pinpoint the support required for student success through problem-solving discussions and the utilization of many sources of data for decision-making. Tier 1 interventions focus on improving school attendance and reducing students’ absences to address chronic absenteeism. Tier 1 interventions are usually implemented schoolwide for all students and aim to enhance various aspects of school life, such as safety, climate, physical and mental health, social and emotional abilities, parental involvement, academic readiness, and cultural sensitivity (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Tier 2 interventions aim to address individual cases of school attendance issues and focus on improving the functioning of both students and families. Tier 2 interventions include psychological therapies to address school absenteeism linked to emotional distress, approaches to improve student connection and engagement, and mentoring programs that involve teachers, peers, or other individuals (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). When students have ongoing and serious issues with attending school, Tier 3 interventions are put in place. Tier 3 interventions go beyond the Tier 2 approaches and may include more flexible settings customized to student needs, including case management and a school team involving parents and families (Attendance Works, 2022). In order to determine the most effective plan of action for an individual student, it is crucial to conduct a thorough analysis of the case and gather input from various agencies and evaluators (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

The MTSS framework acknowledges that not all strategies or policies within a school serve the needs of all students at the Tier 1 level, thus a need for more intensive support for some students (Tier 2) and the most intensive amount of support for an even smaller group of students (Tier 3) (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). The MTSS framework can support academics, behavior,
wellness, and, most importantly for this research, tackling chronic absenteeism. The reasons behind chronic absenteeism are complex and often nuanced based on individual student situations (Childs & Lofton, 2021); therefore, a Multi-Tiered System of Support is a necessary framework for determining needed support for students. Through the lens of the MTSS conceptual framework, the Research Team analyzed the interventions used by Caroline High School for students across the three tiers. The conceptual framework of MTSS and ensuring that attendance support is available in all three tiers directly correlates to the design of this study, a mixed methods program evaluation.

**Methodological Overview**

Between spring 2022 and spring 2023, Caroline High School reduced its chronic absenteeism rate from 36% to 25%, working towards the ESSA expectation that all schools’ chronic absenteeism rates are below 10% (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). While this reduction in absenteeism is significant, the school team sought support in understanding which specific strategies were most effective and what might be missing from their current practices to continue on this trajectory of decreasing chronic absenteeism. As a result, the Research Team conducted a program evaluation of the current intervention strategies. A program evaluation helped determine the effectiveness and quality of what works and does not work to improve chronic absenteeism at Caroline High School (Balbach, 1999; Linfield & Posavac, 2018; Posavac & Carey, 2003).

The Research Team used surveys, interviews, and held a focus group with stakeholders to gather data on each group's perspective on the school attendance issue. We coordinated with the CHS administration to disseminate permission and participation requests for the survey, interviews, and the focus group. We administered the survey to students which included Likert
scale and open-ended questions. Parents participated in interviews while staff participated in a focus group. Given that qualitative interviews “capture an individual’s perspectives, experiences, feelings and stories” (Billups, 2021, p. 36), the interview responses helped the Research Team better understand the various stakeholders' perspectives on absenteeism reduction strategies.

The data collected from the surveys and interviews were analyzed to identify the most effective strategies employed by CHS in the 2022-2023 school year to improve student attendance. We used the survey data to rank the strategies by how stakeholders perceive their effectiveness. Another goal of the Research Team was to identify the strategies that were not effective and identify any gaps in the existing strategies based on literature to enable the school staff to focus on those strategies that are effective, thereby conserving resources, time, and staff effort.

This introduction is a thorough preface to the study on chronic absenteeism at Caroline High School (CHS) in Caroline County, Virginia. Beginning with acknowledging the critical role that public schools play in fostering children's academic and social development, the chapter emphasizes the importance of regular attendance for accomplishing these goals. There is an emphasis on how chronic absenteeism affects early literacy and its relevance to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which mandates tracking non-academic factors like attendance. The recent efforts by CHS to reduce absenteeism have resulted in an 11-point decrease, addressing the specific challenges faced by students in Caroline County. The research questions focus on assessing the effectiveness of current strategies at CHS and proposing recommendations for future interventions. The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework is a conceptual framework that aligns with the research design. This study involves a mixed methods program evaluation consisting of surveys, interviews, and a focus group, laying the groundwork
for an in-depth examination of chronic absenteeism at CHS. This assessment will help to establish the Research Team’s methodology and produce strong recommendations that offer valuable insights into the critical issue of students being absent from school.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Every school day in the United States, there are students who are not present at their schools to receive instruction from teachers and to learn with their peers. It is common for students to miss school at some point between kindergarten and twelfth grade, and there are various reasons why a student might need to take time off from school, including legitimate and valid reasons that are considered excused absences. However, missing even an occasional day of school can set a student behind in their learning, especially when the absences accumulate over time, and especially relating to literacy and math. When students are absent from school, they miss out on important instruction and can fall behind in their learning. Students who miss multiple days of school receive less instruction time, require more remediation, have more negative interactions with their peers, and may become socially disengaged (Gottfried, 2019).

Missing more than 10% of the school year, whether for excused or unexcused reasons, can negatively impact their academic performance and overall achievement (Balfanz, 2016; Balfanz & Cornfeld, 2016; Bundshuh et al., 2021; Kostyo et al., 2017). Students who struggle to learn to read in elementary school are more likely to disengage from learning in middle school. As students habitually miss school as a result of disengagement, they become further behind academically and will be more likely to drop out of school (Gottfried, 2019).

Chronic Absenteeism as a School Quality Indicator

In the 2013–2014 school year, about 6.8 million students, or roughly 14% of the school-age population, missed 15 days (or three weeks) of school or more in the United States (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022; U.S. Department of Education & Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Research from the 2015–2016 school year indicates that about eight million students in the United States (U.S.) missed 15 days of school or more (Bauer et al., 2018; Henderson &
Fantuzzo, 2022). In 2015, the U.S. enacted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires each state to implement a measure of “non-academic” factors when measuring a school’s quality (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022, p. 4), and many states began to use student absences as that measure. ESSA is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965, and it replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which became law in 2002. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s website, these laws are part of the nation’s “longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2022, para. 1).

Virginia is one of the states that adopted attendance as a measure of school accountability (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). In Virginia, students who are absent 10% or more of the academic year are considered chronically absent (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Virginia’s compulsory attendance laws compel students to attend school (Code of Virginia, 2023), and still, Virginia’s public schools collectively experienced a 20% chronic absenteeism rate in the 2020-2021 school year (Virginia State Quality Profile, 2022).

When students are absent from school, they miss out on classroom instruction and learning for that day, risk falling behind academically, negatively impact their peers’ academic experiences when teachers’ time is spent providing extra support, and risk negatively shaping their teachers’ views of them (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Gottfried, 2014). School attendance is crucial for student success, and understanding the causes of chronic absenteeism is key to finding solutions. Chronic absenteeism is linked to low academic achievement, is a predictor of high school dropout rates, can be connected to the school-to-prison pipeline (Balfanz & Cornfeld, 2016; Bundshuh et al., 2021), and is an indicator of poor outcomes later in life (Ginsburg et al., 2014; Virginia Department of Education, 2022). The negative
impact chronic absenteeism has on school success magnifies when students who are chronically absent in one academic year are then chronically absent for multiple years (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The missed academic instruction compounds each year a student is absent more than 10% of the academic school days. The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2016) notes that the end result for a student could be the loss of a full year or more of instruction, depending on how many school days a student misses each year.

**Student Achievement and Attendance**

Balfanz and Byrnes (2006) explain that being present in the classroom is critical to the education and development of children, and school officials recognize the importance of school attendance on student success, continually tracking student absences and implementing strategies to improve student attendance. With schools focused on student progress and academic outcomes, the factors that impact student achievement are a source of concern for teachers and school administrators. Henderson and Fantuzzo (2022) note evidence of a relationship between school attendance in the early elementary grades and later student achievement. Multiple researchers assert that being present at school causes young students to demonstrate higher achievement outcomes, and missing school causes young students to have lower achievement outcomes (Goodman, 2014; Gottfried, 2010, 2013). Considerable research highlights the effects of missing school and its correlation with grades in those classes missed (Balfanz, 2016; Grey, 2022). Chronic absenteeism contributes to the disparities in the achievement gap in student grades, standardized test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college completion rates (Malika, 2021). Being present for instruction consistently can contribute to student academic success throughout their school career.
Socioeconomic and Racial Disparities

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) collects attendance data for all public school students. As part of that process, achievement and attendance data is collected for different subgroups within the state’s student population. The subgroups Hispanic, Black, and Native American all demonstrated some of the higher rates of chronic absenteeism in the student attendance data collected by the U.S. Department of Education during the 2014-2015 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), data that was the basis for ESSA requirements. National estimates indicate that students from low-income families, students in urban areas, Black and Hispanic students, English-language learners, and students with disabilities tend to miss more school days than their peers (Applied Survey Research, 2011; Chang & Davis, 2015; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2019; Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022; Jacob & Lovett, 2017; London et al., 2016; Spencer, 2009; U.S. Department of Education & Office for Civil Rights, 2016). These studies suggest that Hispanic, Black, and Native American students with higher absenteeism rates receive less instruction, leading to lower achievement. Students from low-income backgrounds may have limited access to resources and opportunities that can affect their educational experiences. This can include inadequate school facilities, fewer extracurricular activities, less access to advanced courses, and higher rates of disciplinary action.

Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Many factors contribute to students missing school frequently (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022), such as health factors (Childs & Lofton, 2021), being socioeconomically disadvantaged (Grooms & Bohorquez, 2022), and family-specific challenges (Sheppard, 2009). Each of these elements is unique to each individual student’s circumstances. To better understand the reasons for chronic absenteeism, we look at the factors impacting individual children, their family
dynamics, the school environment, and the community in which they reside. Additionally, we explore the systemic interconnections among these factors to understand the holistic reasons behind chronic absenteeism. Notably, missing school is not necessarily the student's fault, as many factors affect an individual child’s ability to attend school regularly. According to Childs and Lofton (2021), the notion that kids choose to be absent from school has "permeated education and served as a distraction that has slowed the necessary resources, time, and policies toward improving students' attendance" (p. 222). As administrators support individual students through multi-tiered systems of support, they seek to identify individual causes of chronic absenteeism created by systemic factors beyond the student’s control. Here, we explore underlying contributing factors leading to chronic absenteeism.

**Health-related Factors**

Children and teens with specific healthcare needs miss more school than children without, making absences due to health conditions expected (Forrest et al., 2011). However, if a child has many health concerns, undiagnosed or undertreated diseases, or a lack of access to healthcare, absences can quickly accumulate and lead to chronic absenteeism (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Similarly, the presence of mental or behavioral health disorders, including anxiety, depression, or trauma, may result in students avoiding school due to emotional distress and might increase absenteeism caused by physical health issues (Allison & Attisah, 2019; Pina et al., 2019). Wood et al. (2012) found that students who demonstrate mental health concerns one academic year are more likely to miss significant amounts of time the following year. Students may refuse to go to school as a coping mechanism for stress caused by mental health concerns (Allison & Attisha, 2019). Providing mental health interventions has been shown to improve school attendance (Hoagwood et al., 2007). One such intervention includes implementing a
mindfulness-based school curriculum (Miller et al., 2023). However, Lawrence and colleagues (2019) posit that, as mental health issues faced by students are inherently individual, the interventions used need to be tailored to the individual and their particular mental health needs.

**Socioeconomic Disadvantage**

Students from low-income backgrounds and those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are more likely to miss school than their peers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Grooms & Bohorquez, 2022). Mac Iver and colleagues (2022) assert that poverty is a reliable chronic absenteeism indicator. According to national data, chronic absenteeism is three to four times more likely in high-poverty schools than in schools with more resources (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Singer and colleagues (2021) note that students identified as economically disadvantaged are 60% more likely to be chronically absent.

Poverty can create barriers to attending class regularly, resulting in chronic absenteeism. That is, there may be underlying reasons for student absences beyond what school staff can identify or address. For example, families may struggle with basic needs such as access to food, clothing, housing, transportation, and healthcare (Race Matters Institute, 2013). Housing instability can disrupt a student's educational routine if a family has to move homes. According to research by Singer et al. (2021), moving residences or schools over the previous academic year enhances a student's risk of being chronically absent. Therefore, focusing on target student populations vulnerable to chronic absenteeism, such as economically disadvantaged and transient families, and implementing programs specifically to help support these groups may help schools improve attendance rates (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Using the MTSS framework guides schools to provide students with issues of chronic absenteeism with Tier 2 and 3 supports (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Interventions and supports need to be targeted, such as those
described by Epstein and Sheldon (2002), including connecting parents to an assigned school contact person and conducting home visits as methods to reduce chronic absenteeism.

**Lack of Engagement and Relevance**

Student engagement levels with school can vary drastically for a variety of reasons. According to Van Eck et al. (2017), students with negative perceptions of their school climate attended schools with higher chronic absenteeism rates. Additionally, when students perceive their education as irrelevant or uninteresting, they are more likely to be chronically absent (Wagstaff et al., 2000). A lack of engagement in the curriculum, inadequate teaching methods, or a failure to connect learning to real-life experiences can lead to disinterest and disengagement, resulting in absenteeism (Gottfried, 2014a). Since a strong school atmosphere is inversely correlated with absenteeism (Young et al., 2020), supporting kids in developing a sense of connectivity may be crucial in reducing chronic absenteeism.

For some students, disengagement is a leading barrier to their school attendance, with many citing boredom when describing school (Holyfield, 2019). Therefore, teachers have an important role in encouraging students to come to school by engaging them in learning. According to Jordan (2019), “one antidote to boredom is relevant curriculum” (p. 16). Jordan (2019) further explained that, for some students, culturally relevant teaching helps students feel more seen and more engaged in learning, which in turn improves the consistency of student attendance.

**Family Factors**

Family dynamics and circumstances can also significantly impact a student's attendance. Shepard (2009) conveys that family factors, such as parental involvement in children's education, significantly influence students' school attendance and achievement more than school-related
factors. According to Ehrlich et al. (2014), children of parents who value attendance are likely to have better attendance. Therefore, it is important to consider how unsupportive or disengaged parents, a lack of parental involvement, or parents' own negative educational experiences can contribute to chronic absenteeism. Families, especially those with poor school experiences, are less likely to initiate interaction with their child's school due to negative perceptions (Hindman et al., 2012). Some students have family responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings or dealing with family crises, which can disrupt regular school attendance (Hooper et al., 2011). Various family-affecting factors cause students to miss school, including housing and living arrangements, employment hours, medical conditions, custody disputes, or disruptive living situations (Gottfried, 2014b).

**Historical Absenteeism**

Poor attendance throughout the previous school year or during the first month of the new school year is a significant predictor of chronic absenteeism in the current year (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2023). Research shows that chronic absenteeism strongly indicates that students are at risk of dropping out of high school (Balfanz & Burns, 2012). Balfanz and Burns (2012) report that students with frequent absences from school in the early grades will likely maintain a pattern of absences over time. As a result, schools need to detect chronic absenteeism early and implement strategies for intervention to help prevent students from continuing to have a high rate of absences.

**Impacts of Chronic Absenteeism**

Chronic Absenteeism impacts students as individuals and the system as a whole. Impacts can be specifically seen in the areas of student achievement (Johnson & Miller, 2016), school and classroom culture (Gottfried, 2014b; Gottfried, 2014c), along with creating staff
relationships and classroom resource issues (Gottfried, 2019). Therefore, it is important to consider the impacts chronic absenteeism has on the individual and the system to help consider the effectiveness of strategies implemented by Caroline High School in reducing the effects of chronic absenteeism on their students and the school community.

**Student Achievement**

Chronic absenteeism often leads to lower academic performance due to missed synchronous instruction and valuable hands-on learning opportunities. In a study in Virginia, Johnson and Miller (2016) found that the academic performance of elementary and middle school students who are chronically absent is meaningfully lower than their non-chronically absent peers as measured by the Mathematics and Reading Standards of Learning (SOL) exams in the third through eighth grades. Johnson and Miller (2016) state that while passage rates at all grade levels are lower among chronically absent students, the difference in the passage rates between those who were and were not chronically absent is more pronounced among middle school students than elementary students.

Johnson and Miller (2016) note that a similar relationship exists between prior chronic absenteeism and academic performance among high school students in Virginia. Students who are frequently absent may struggle to keep up with the curriculum, leading to knowledge gaps and difficulties in mastering essential skills. SOL pass rates in Johnson and Miller's (2016) research conducted in Virginia showed that a familiar pattern presents itself even in high schoolers; chronically absent high school students are less likely to pass the end-of-course SOL assessments than students who are not absent for over 10% of the school year per year. Studies performed in other states show similar impacts on student achievement (Balfanz, 2016; Gottfried, 2019).
The U.S. Department of Education (2019) finds that chronic absenteeism rates are highest in high school, according to data in the 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection. In fact, “overall, more than 20 percent of students in high school are chronically absent compared with more than 14 percent of students in middle school” (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, para. 9). Addressing and correcting the trend of chronic absence in students is essential in their early years of schooling. Research from the U.S. Department of Education (2019) reveals that children who are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read on grade level by third grade. The research shows that students who cannot read on grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of school than their proficiently reading peers. As students enter middle and high school, the achievement gap grows, as their chronic absences also impact the time they receive intervention and remediation. The Utah Education Policy Center study (2012) indicates that students who meet the criteria for being chronically absent within their district for even one year run a risk of setting a pattern of this attendance behavior for the remainder of their school career.

**School and Classroom Culture**

Gottfried (2014b) acknowledges that chronic absenteeism not only has a damaging effect on those individuals missing excessive school days but also has the potential to reduce outcomes for others in the same educational setting. When students are absent, maintaining a cohesive classroom environment becomes more challenging, impacting both the absent students and their peers. Chronic absenteeism can disrupt the school culture by affecting the sense of community and shared learning experience. Gottfried (2014c) points out that chronic absenteeism impacts students who miss excessive days of school and those students’ classmates because the instructional pace slows to remediate students who are absent when they return to school.
Because of varying academic levels within a class of students, keeping pace with learning and assessment is challenging even when all students are present daily. When students are absent from school, they may feel disconnected from their peers, teachers, and the overall school environment, leading to negative interactions and a lack of social engagement when they return to classes (Gottfried, 2019).

Daily and colleagues (2020) examine the relationships between school climate, satisfaction, attendance, and grades, concluding that school climate is positively associated with school satisfaction. Students with a greater positive perception of school climate are likelier to enjoy school. They suggest that a positive school climate increases satisfaction, reduces absences, and keeps students in school. Research has shown an association between absenteeism rates and low family income status, but school-level factors can mitigate the impact of the barriers of family poverty on chronic absenteeism (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). For example, there are multiple resources at the school level where stakeholders can work to assist impacted families and students with local resources and funds. School leaders should create a positive atmosphere that encourages students to attend school and learn and addresses the underlying factors that may cause students to miss school excessively.

**Staff and Resources**

When students are absent, whether occasionally or consistently, it can be difficult for teachers to manage the logistics of catching them up on missed work and provide direct instruction that other students have already received. When a teacher dedicates time to make up instructions for one student or a small group of students, it can detract from their ability to move the rest of the class forward with new instruction. Regular attendance allows for stronger teacher-student relationships vital for student engagement and success. Chronic absenteeism can
hinder the development of relationships, potentially affecting the student's motivation to learn and participate in school activities and behaviors. Gottfried (2019) found that students who are absent from school can cause more academic and behavioral disruptions than their peers who attend regularly. Similar to academic disruptions, behavioral disruptions can also impede the learning progress of students who are regularly present in the classroom, as teachers have to allocate their time and resources toward classroom management instead of instruction, which can affect the overall learning experience (Gottfried, 2019). When students return from extended absences, teachers have to take time to remediate what the student has missed, which can inadvertently slow the pace of the curriculum, causing the remainder of the class to lose momentum.

Effective Strategies for Intervention

Narin (2020) suggests that chronic absenteeism has plagued the educational system since its inception and that efforts to address the concern have been futile because of the many varying causes for individual student absences from school. Further, the solutions are daunting due to the number of available interventions in contrast to the lack of evidence-based practices to delineate what works to improve a school’s chronic absenteeism problem. Attendance Works (2018) has identified five strategies for reducing absences: “engaging families, recognizing improvements in attendance, monitoring attendance data and practices, providing personalized and early outreach, and developing programmatic responses to barriers” (para 1). Throughout the research, these five strategies consistently appear across districts and schools and will serve as organizing categories throughout the next section.
Engaging Families

Schools can support students’ attendance by taking a comprehensive approach to family and community involvement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Given the pervasive correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism rates, Tash (2018) emphasizes the importance of community services in supporting students with school attendance. Strategies to increase parent involvement in school decision-making, parent participation in school activities, and teacher-parent trust may boost attendance rates and decrease chronic absenteeism (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018).

Another critical aspect of engaging families is to balance accountability with supportive activities that give a human quality to corrective action (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). For example, when families are connected with a responsive contact person who cares about their child’s well-being, they are less likely to keep their child home from school for family reasons. When parents have clear and personalized information about school attendance policies and the importance of attendance, more parents may convey to their children the importance of school and good attendance.

Schools must be cognizant of students experiencing homelessness and provide additional support for their families. Family support includes providing access to school social workers, school psychologists, and community service providers to help homeless students attend school daily, especially when students are most likely to be chronically absent, such as when transitioning between schools (Kostyo et al., 2018). The McKinney-Vento Act, which is part of ESSA, requires states to remove legal barriers for homeless students in registering and accessing public school education (National Center for Homeless Education, 2023). However, these students may continue to be absent due to the instability in their home lives.
Childs and Lofton (2021) warn that engaging stakeholders can provoke conflicting values due in part to the variety of worldviews, political agendas, backgrounds, and traditions. Schools should consider using communication methods that include native languages and respecting the holidays of stakeholders. Stakeholder involvement demands thorough planning, constant communication, and a dedication to establishing points of agreement while honoring the many opinions and values held by stakeholders. Conversely, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) find that the “degree to which schools overcame the challenge of communicating effectively with diverse groups of families was related to gains in student attendance and lower rates of chronic absenteeism” (p. 315). Therefore, school leaders must root their outreach practices from a culturally responsive lens. For example, Attendance Works (2023) recommends that information about attendance sent to families should be translated into home languages, and interpreters should be available for attendance-related meetings, ensuring that all families feel seen, heard, and supported.

**Recognizing Improvements in Attendance**

Positive support for school attendance can help inspire changes in students’ outlooks, motivation, and habits. Incentivizing attendance or improvements in attendance is a strategy that has had mixed results across districts. Recognition of improved attendance motivates some students to attend school more regularly (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Attendance Works (2023) offers guidelines for effectively recognizing improvements in attendance, including rewarding behavior, acknowledging family efforts, and shortening reward cycles to encourage success.

Some research focuses on attendance as a behavior and recommends using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to reward those who attend school regularly. According to Petrasek et al. (2022), “When individuals are rewarded or recognized for positive
behaviors, they are more likely to repeat those behaviors” (p. 42). Johnson (2020) finds that
rewards and support for attendance improve students’ feelings of connectedness to the school,
increasing their motivation to attend regularly.

Monitoring Attendance Data and Practices

For teachers, administrators, and school support staff to effectively develop interventions
to support students in regularly attending school, data about student attendance must be
intentionally collected and monitored. A school's average daily attendance data can overlook the
chronic absences of individual students, as these students may be absent on different days
(Kostyo et al., 2018). For example, a school with a strong average daily attendance of 90% for
the year might have a concerning 30% or more of its students chronically absent. Chronic
absenteeism is a more accurate measure for tracking individual students’ attendance.

Using data tools to track absences is one strategy in the literature on chronic absenteeism
that makes a difference. Some school districts utilize simple spreadsheets to track attendance,
while other districts like Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) use a more sophisticated
tracking tool through Tableau that allows schools to benchmark their attendance with other
schools. The Indicator and Intervention Manual written at Johns Hopkins University (JHU)
School of Education for the Everyone Graduates Center (EGC) emphasizes using data to create a
tiered approach to encouraging student attendance (Johns Hopkins University, 2019). This
approach is based on Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
(MTSS), promoting differentiated student support based on need (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).
The Indicator and Intervention Manual encourages schools to provide and track data on Tier 1
support to all students to ensure consistent attendance while giving students with heightened risk
factors more intensive support through Tier 2 and Tier 3 programs (Johns Hopkins University,
For example, they recommend using peer grouping for Tier 2 students when designing and tracking data on supports, whereas individualized interviews are a strategy they recommend for Tier 3. In addition to the tiering of students to differentiate needed supports, Mintken (2018) emphasizes the importance of having attendance data readily available to all staff members to build collective ownership of students’ attendance, a practice that ensures that students at all levels receive the support they need.

**Providing Personalized and Early Outreach**

Each factor causing an individual student’s absences must be addressed to improve their school attendance (Narin, 2020). Schools have provided early outreach personalized interventions by partnering disengaged students with mentors to build relationships and develop solutions between students, parents, and schools (Kostyo et al., 2018). One key pillar of The Everyone Graduates Center’s early warning system is having “champions” or mentors within the school community to support students (Johns Hopkins University, 2019). Champions work to build relationships with students to provide a specific intervention.

Money can often be a barrier to accessing interventions. The additional personnel required to provide individualized support can strain school budgets. May and colleagues (2021) propose early outreach mentoring as a practical and sustainable research-based intervention that effectively reduces absenteeism in high-poverty schools. In their research, students from a district with high poverty rates who participated in an affordable mentoring program during their middle and high school years had significantly fewer absences. In addition, when the students had fewer absences, their grade point averages increased. According to May et al. (2021), money may not be the sole factor that drives student success. Instead, having personnel who genuinely care and are committed to building and maintaining relationships is crucial in creating an
environment where students are motivated to attend school. Establishing a warm and inviting atmosphere that encourages students to attend school can be challenging and cannot be solved by simply allocating funds to programs. Schools should prioritize investing in staff dedicated to fostering cultural connections and passionate about setting high standards for academic success (May et al., 2021).

**Developing Programmatic Responses to Barriers**

Studies have found that students face various barriers that prevent them from attending school regularly (Attendance Works, 2023; Lim et al., 2019; Williams, 2020). Schools have found Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to be an effective strategy for removing barriers. According to Clayton Johnson (2020), the PBIS approach includes targeted support, especially for Tier 3 students, and regular meetings with attendance teams. Conversely, Riley (2019) notes that the lack of fidelity in implementing these strategies can lead to a lack of change in chronic absenteeism rates. Therefore, for strategies to be effective at removing barriers for students, they must be implemented with fidelity.

One way to think of MTSS is as a hybrid approach that combines elements of both PBIS and Response to Intervention (RTI) systems (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). The RTI method includes a system with multiple tiers that offer high-quality core instruction to all students. Students who need extra help with their academic performance can access additional levels of support (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). PBIS is a comprehensive method for encouraging positive behavior and addressing disruptive and negative behavior within schools. The MTSS framework places importance on preventing issues and providing a range of support options, including consistent monitoring, evidence-based assessment and intervention techniques, utilizing data to make decisions and solve problems, and ensuring proper implementation. With the MTSS
framework, it is possible to prioritize multiple focus areas simultaneously, including students’ academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical health domains (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

A growing number of researchers and school-based professionals are adopting blended, integrated models of multi-tiered service delivery. This approach addresses multiple domains of functioning or content areas, including academic performance, social and behavioral competencies, and mental health (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Reducing chronic absenteeism in schools can be achieved through a collaborative effort involving school staff, families, and community partners using the MTSS approach. At the Tier 1 level, staff require training to identify early warning signs of attendance issues and to maintain regular communication among the attendance team, administration, and parents. At the Tier 2 level, school attendance teams should work with mental health professionals and community-based organizations to address mild to moderate cases of absenteeism. A district-wide approach may be necessary at the Tier 3 level, including establishing panels or review boards to coordinate data collection and provide comprehensive services for chronic and severe absenteeism cases. These targeted supports at the three tiers, when implemented with fidelity, are proven to be effective in reducing chronic absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

**Chapter Summary**

Narin (2020) illustrates the persistent challenge of chronic absenteeism in schools, attributing its complexity to diverse individual reasons for student absences. Attendance Works (2016) proposes five key strategies, including engaging families through comprehensive community involvement, recognizing improvements in attendance as positive reinforcement, monitoring attendance data with tiered approaches like RTI and MTSS, providing personalized
and early outreach through mentorship programs, and developing programmatic responses to barriers through PBIS and the MTSS framework. Engaging families involves addressing the correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism, recognizing the importance of community services, and clear communication. Recognizing improvements in attendance through PBIS serves as a positive motivator. Monitoring attendance data and using tiered approaches to provide differentiated support based on individual needs is necessary. Personalized and early outreach involves addressing the root causes of absences through mentorship, emphasizing the significance of genuine care and commitment from personnel. Developing programmatic responses to barriers includes removing obstacles with comprehensive and collaborative efforts involving school staff, families, and community partners. The study emphasizes the necessity of fidelity in implementing these strategies to effectively reduce chronic absenteeism in schools.

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

As Caroline High School administrators wanted to know what is and is not working in their efforts to combat chronic absenteeism at their school, it was appropriate to consider an educational program evaluation to facilitate decision-making “about the applicability or worth of something in a situation” (Krathwohl, 2004, p. 588), and “because it is decision-driven, the value of an evaluation lies in its usefulness” (Krathwohl, 2004, p. 588). Therefore, the Research Team proposed a mixed methods program evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the tiered intervention strategies implemented by Caroline High School to reduce chronic absenteeism among their student population and to determine if there are gaps in the existing strategies and interventions in place for all students (Tier 1), for some students (Tier 2), and for a select few students (Tier 3). A program evaluation is:
a collection of methods, skills, and sensitivities necessary to determine whether a human service is needed and likely to be used, whether the service is sufficiently intensive to meet the unmet needs identified, whether the service is offered as planned, and whether the service actually does help people in need at a reasonable cost without unacceptable side effects. (Posavac & Carey, 2003, p. 2)

These evaluations give program impacts greater scope for observation and assessment (Balbach, 1999). Using a program evaluation makes it possible to pinpoint the elements that facilitate providing high-quality services to those in need (Linfield & Posavac, 2018). Therefore, this program evaluation supports the Research Team in identifying which strategies to reduce absenteeism are and are not working at Caroline High School and in determining if there are any gaps in their implementation.

Studies support the Research Team's decision to use a program evaluation in this instructional setting. Program evaluations can provide K-12 educational institutions with valuable insights to address specific instructional needs (Dallavis & Johnstone, 2009; Miranda & Hermann, 2010; Yin, 2009). Chronic absenteeism is an instructional need that affects students' academic outcomes (Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2014a). Therefore, this program evaluation will help the Research Team answer the questions asked by CHS administration regarding chronic absenteeism and their ability to implement interventions to help improve student attendance and meet ESSA requirements for schools to have less than 10% chronic absenteeism.

**Site Selection**

Caroline High School (CHS), the partner for this Capstone project, is located in Caroline County, about 30 miles north of the state capital of Richmond in eastern Virginia. The 2020 U.S.
Census reports that as of July 2020, there are 31,957 residents representing seven major demographic groups living in the 527 square miles of the county. U.S. Census Bureau (2020) data identifies that white-only residents comprise 67% of the county population, while Black residents are the next largest group at 26%. Hispanic, Mulit-racial, and Asian residents make up percentages between seven and one percent, while American Indian and Native Hawaiian are less than one percent each of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The U.S. Census Bureau (2020) reports that there are 12,943 homes in Caroline County with an average value of $226,600, and about six percent of these households speak a primary language other than English in their homes. The Census report describes the population density of Caroline County as 58 persons per square mile, which is an increase of about four persons during the past ten years. The median household income is $76,528, and a $36,953 per capita income, as reported by the Census in 2020. Census data also shows that 11% of the Caroline County residents live in poverty. Education levels reported indicate that 89% of residents 25 and older are high school graduates, and 22% of that population holds at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

**Caroline High School Population**

Caroline High School’s (CHS) student enrollment for the 2022-2023 school year was 1,251, representing a steady increase of about 35 students in the past two years (Caroline High, 2023). CHS’s population reflects the changes of growing diversity in the county’s population as reported in the 2020 census data. Virginia’s School Quality Profile for Caroline High (2023) shows the school’s largest demographic group is White but at a significantly lower rate of 48% compared to the total population of Caroline County, Virginia. Black students comprise the next largest group at 28%, while the largest difference is in the Hispanic student group, which is 14%
of the school population and only seven percent of the county’s population (Caroline High, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Students who identify as Multi-racial, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian all have a larger percentage of the school population than their group represents in the community-wide census data (Caroline High, 2023).

**Caroline High School’s Accreditation**

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) assigns values to the accountability measures prescribed by policy for each school and school division. These school quality indicators include Math, Reading, and Science assessment scores and non-academic measures such as chronic absenteeism (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Each of these school quality indicators is ranked based on the school’s yearly data as Level One, Level Two, or Level Three. Level One school quality indicators are considered at or above the state standard. When an indicator is Level Two, the school or division is near the state standard for that indicator. A Level Three indicator means the school or division does not meet the standard. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) collects this information on all Virginia public schools and makes it available to the public through the School Quality Profiles on its website.

CHS’s accreditation data on its Virginia School Quality Profile webpage shows that CHS performs well on state testing. On the 2023 accreditation status, CHS is Level One in English, Math, Science, Dropout Rate, and Graduation Rate (Caroline High, 2023). The school’s areas that are Level Two for accreditation are English Gap Groups and Chronic Absenteeism. Level Three areas are Students with Disabilities in both English and Math Gap Groups. CHS students performed above state averages in 2022 state assessments for English and Math, while Science and Writing were at or near the state average. History was the only area where CHS performed well below state assessment averages (Caroline High, 2023).
Caroline High School’s Chronic Absenteeism History

Caroline High School’s chronic absenteeism rate reflects significant changes over the three years of the triennial cycle, which illustrates the impact of the school closure during the pandemic and the hybrid return to instruction. In the 2017-2018 school year, the CHS chronic absenteeism rate was 21%; the following year, the rate dropped to 17% (Caroline High, 2023). The 2020 school year data is unavailable because of the state-wide public school shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the following year that the VDOE School Quality Profiles has data for CHS is 2020-2021, where chronic absenteeism rates increased to 20%. The 2021-2022 school year saw a dramatic increase in chronic absenteeism to 36% of the student body.

In examining the attendance data, we find that the 16% increase in chronic absenteeism from 2021 to 2022 reporting years represents a total addition of 186 students to the number of students who missed more than 10% of the previous school year (Caroline High, 2023). Disaggregating the data for subgroups within the school population, we see that chronic absenteeism rates increased for all but one subgroup in CHS by over 10% from 2021 to 2022 (Caroline High, 2023). The chronic absenteeism rate for Hispanic students increased from 20% to 32%, representing the largest growth by any subgroup (Caroline High, 2023). The Students with Disabilities is the only subgroup whose chronic absenteeism rate increased by less than 10% during that same school year. CHS implemented a series of interventions to address the rise in chronic absenteeism.

Interventions

As Caroline High School returned to a more typical format in the reopening phase following the school closure due to the pandemic, the administration and staff of CHS began to work to reduce chronic absenteeism among the students. According to CHS Assistant Principal
Dr. Tom Connolly, CHS followed the Caroline County Public Schools policy for absences by tracking them and communicating with parents as absence levels increased. Caroline County Public Schools policy, JED-R, describes the action steps for staff for each level of absence. For unexcused absences, which is an absence where the parent or guardian does not communicate the reason for the absence, the policy calls for action at absences 3, 5, 10, 12, and 15. Action steps include a letter to the parents, a conference with parents, a follow-up conference with parents, and then a referral to the Department of Social Services (Attendance Policy Student Absences/Excuses, 2017). The Caroline County Public Schools attendance policy also addresses excused absences, identified as absences where the parent communicates the reason for the absence within three days of the student returning to school. Interventions for excessive excused absences begin at the tenth excused absence, where the principal or designee is required to make contact with the parent or guardian (Attendance Policy Student Absences/Excuses, 2017). The policy requires that further absences require third-party documentation such as a doctor’s note.

Caroline High School Administration identified additional interventions that the school added beyond the school division policy. These interventions included interviewing chronically absent students, identifying student and family needs, establishing staff mentors, facilitating home visits, and providing student transportation. Chronic absenteeism rates decreased at CHS from 36% in 2022 to 25% in 2023. The focus of this study is to determine which of these interventions created the most significant effect on chronic absenteeism rates.

**Research Questions**

This study evaluates the effectiveness of current chronic absenteeism strategies implemented at Caroline High School. Through this mixed methods study, the Research Team utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the following research questions:
• How effective were the strategies and interventions implemented by Caroline High School in decreasing chronic absenteeism for their students?
• Based on the data collected, do gaps exist in the chronic absenteeism strategies implemented by Caroline High School?
• Given finite time and resources, which strategies and interventions should Caroline High School continue to implement in order to continue to decrease chronic absenteeism rates?

Design Overview

The Research Team used the Explanatory Sequential design to collect quantitative data through surveys to students, interviews with parents, and a focus group with staff. Explanatory Sequential design starts with the collection of quantitative data, followed by the collection of qualitative data, and finally, analysis, which aids in the further explanation of the quantitative data (Harvard Catalyst, 2023). The Research Team surveyed students and provided them with the opportunity to provide qualitative feedback through open-ended questions as a part of the survey. The Research Team then followed up by contacting parents who volunteered to participate in the study with a virtual interview or a staff who volunteered to participate with a focus group to collect qualitative data. As described by Fetters and Creswell (2013), this data was “analyzed thematically to provide richer insights and explanations for the quantitative results obtained in the surveys” (p. 2145). The primary goal of utilizing this design was to expand upon quantitative findings through qualitative insights.

Sample

Students, parents and guardians, and school staff are three stakeholder groups that are important to consider when addressing the issues of chronic absenteeism, as each has its own valid viewpoint of the absenteeism issue. Students have a unique understanding of their choices
and barriers to school attendance. Parents and guardians possess knowledge of familial struggles and background experiences that impact their students' struggle with attending school regularly. School staff have experienced student absenteeism and its impact from another vantage point and have worked to reduce the impact on students.

The Research Team requested survey participation from current students at Caroline High School (Appendix B). We requested participation from all Caroline High School (CHS) students in grades 10, 11, and 12 because these students were enrolled at CHS last year and would have been active participants in any strategies or interventions put in place by CHS administration. Current 9th-grade students were not included in this sample because they were not a part of the school’s student population the previous year. These 10th, 11th, and 12th-grade students’ viewpoints of the strategies and interventions provided valuable insight into how or if these strategies impacted their school attendance last year and informed planning to positively impact attendance in future school years. This sample included students from every racial and economic group represented at CHS to allow for the most comprehensive results possible. Soliciting the parent’s viewpoint provided additional understanding of how the school’s strategies and interventions met the needs of families in getting their students to attend school regularly. The Research Team anticipated that the school staff’s perceptions of the success of the attendance strategies could differ from the students and parents due to the impact it has on their professional practice. Gathering and analyzing these perceptions helped determine the gaps and successes of the intervention strategies. Understanding how student attendance affected school staff helped the team understand the value of strategies and interventions and the willingness of staff to implement them.
Khan and Fisher (2014) explain that “interview research must also develop a sample that is representative of the population” (p. 110). Parents interested in participating in an interview could express their interest by completing a Google Form, which was distributed to them by the CHS administration via email. Similarly, the CHS administrative team notified staff about the chance to join a staff focus group. Ultimately, seven parents were interviewed and four staff members participated in the focus group, which represents a small, limited demographic sample size from these two stakeholder groups.

**Research Tools**

The following section will explore the research tools used to evaluate the program and answer the research questions listed above. Deciding how to collect data is an important part of the research process (Khan & Fisher, 2014). The initial tool used was a student survey administered to students who were a part of the Caroline High School student body to gather quantitative and qualitative data on student’s feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about chronic absenteeism and about interventions that have been put in place to support their regular attendance. Through the open-ended portion of the survey, students expressed their perspectives on chronic absenteeism interventions.

The researchers used an interview process to gather parent perspectives on the Caroline High School chronic absenteeism interventions. The researchers needed to consider more than just the carefully designed interview questions; behind the interview was the human factor. In order to make the interviewees comfortable and available, the Researcher Team was well-rehearsed in what they would ask by preparing an interview guide and protocol. As Khan and Fisher (2014) state, “Having a protocol to follow will contribute strongly to the reliability of the data and increase the ease of the flow of the process” (p. 110). Interviews began with
introductions. The researchers asked permission to record the interview. All participants were willingly recorded. To gather staff perspective, the Research Team facilitated a focus group with members of the Caroline High School staff.

**Surveys**

An educational survey is designed to gather statistics and information for a range of educational topics. Surveys can be distributed to many stakeholders to gather their opinions and thoughts and to identify patterns and relationships across multiple variables (Khan & Fisher, 2014). These topics can include learning strategies, teacher, student, and family satisfaction, effective teaching methods of the curriculum, and reasons for absenteeism. When used intentionally, participants are recruited based on their “capacity to provide detailed information, based on their unique experiences and perspectives” (Billups, 2021, p. 3).

Surveys can evaluate and assess the efficacy of teaching strategies, curricula, and educational initiatives. They assist educators and administrators in identifying the positive and negative aspects of student academic outcomes when implementing data-driven changes. Surveys efficiently gather feedback from students regarding their experiences to provide a “holistic picture of an experience or phenomenon” (Billups, 2021, p. 3).

The Research Team developed surveys with Likert scale and open-ended questions to assess the research questions. The questions were developed in alignment with the framework outlined by Billups (2021), which underscores the importance of survey questions that are time- or place-bound, not value-laden, and in a sequence that begins conversationally and moves later to more in-depth or controversial topics. Surveys were distributed to CHS students through an emailed Google Form and time was given during the students’ homeroom classes to complete the survey. Survey participants were given a two-week window to respond to the survey before it
closed and CHS administration emailed a reminder to students to complete the survey. In order to test the validity of the survey, it was tested out with stakeholder groups at one of the Research Team’s schools. “Well-designed and well-conducted pilot studies can inform us about the best research process and occasionally about likely outcomes” (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001, para. 14). The pilot students indicated that the survey used in this study was effective as designed and were able to follow the directions of the survey easily.

The Research Team sought to survey current CHS students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades by obtaining permission from parents and guardians (Appendix C). Using a Google Form as a secure survey platform, the student survey (Appendix D) collected data on each respondent's self-reported absences last school year, and the effectiveness of any attendance improvement strategies they experienced. The survey included free response questions to allow respondents to provide their unique viewpoints on attendance improvement strategies and motivating factors. The Research Team protected student data by not collecting personal identifying information except for the student email addresses of survey participants.

Surveys included Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. Likert scale questions were designed for ordinal analysis by the Research Team. Sullivan & Artino (2013) explain that:

In an ordinal scale, responses can be rated or ranked, but the distance between responses is not measurable. Thus, the differences between “always,” “often,” and “sometimes” on a frequency response Likert scale are not necessarily equal. In other words, one cannot assume that the difference between responses is equidistant even though the numbers assigned to those responses are. (p. 541)
Interviews

Reeves and colleagues (2015) note, “a study applying qualitative interviews holds the potential to give voice to minorities and groups in society that may not be heard elsewhere” (p. 1002). Therefore, the Research Team conducted semi-structured interviews to give voice to parents regarding CHS tiered interventions (Appendix E). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the semi-structured interview method enables researchers to effectively address the respondent's developing worldview and new understandings of the subject. Furthermore, it allows for a general list of open-ended questions while, depending on the participants' comments, the freedom to investigate further questions and dig into particular topics. When the interviewee is delving deeper into the question, it is important that the interviewer practices reflective listening. Simply using skills such as paraphrasing the answers given or clarifying what was said demonstrates active listening and encourages the interviewee to share more. Semi-structured interviews improved the Research Team’s understanding of the impact of the tiered strategies used by CHS to reduce chronic absenteeism, how these chosen strategies impact students' attendance rates, and whether there are any perceived gaps in the interventions used.

The interviews were offered either on a field site, virtually, or by phone, allowing interviewees more flexibility and comfort in participating. Considering that all the interviewees would have different availability and internet connection demonstrates the researchers’ interest in understanding the interviewee’s input and considering their time, comfort, and space. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) emphasize that when interviewing, it is necessary to follow the interview protocol and monitor the time allotted to maintain respect for the interviewees’ time constraints. After all, these interviews aimed to respectfully gain each participant’s perspective on chronic
absenteeism to move the needle forward in improving the students’ experiences within the school to increase engagement and attendance.

The interview aimed to identify parent perceptions on the benefits and challenges of implementing strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism. Therefore, the interview questions were based on themes from the literature review and school attendance data. Arranging the questions in a logical sequence helped the consistency of the flow throughout the interview. Starting with broad, introductory questions helped to develop rapport and allowed for a more gradual move into more specific and in-depth inquiries. Interviews included the initial questions written by the Research Team (Appendix E). As interviews occurred, researchers had the flexibility to ask additional clarifying questions and probe for additional detail. McGrath et al. (2019) remind the researcher that in the qualitative interview, the interviewer should not be seen as someone who taints or biases the data but rather as a co-creator of data with the interviewee, where the interviewer's prior experience may be crucial to understanding the context or the interviewee's experiences. Another important aspect of interviewing is not imposing the interviewer’s vast knowledge of the subject to guide the conversation. Weller and colleagues (2018) note in their article to avoid leading phrases, keep the questions focused on a particular theme or topic, and use follow-up questions to delve deeper into the interviewee’s own experiences or perspectives.

As Billups (2021) recommends, the Research Team asked follow-up questions that were “neutral and ambiguous” in order to ensure that they were not leading participants toward one correct response (p. 46). Semi-structured interviews, conducted and recorded by one Research Team member, were used to collect qualitative data, a practice that ensures that “everything said is preserved for analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 131). Team members transcribed and coded interview data using the Dedoose electronic data platform. Data collected from these
interviews were used to develop a more complete picture of stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of the attendance interventions.

**Focus Group**

Focus groups are an effective method for gathering rich insights into qualitative research since they allow for both structured and flexible conversation. Focus groups are particularly useful for obtaining in-depth, nuanced understanding of complicated topics in organizational contexts.

A focus group, as defined by Krueger & Casey (2015), is “a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.” They are unique in their ability to foster conversation and interaction among participants. Focus groups allow for extensive sharing, comparing, and elaboration of ideas and viewpoints.

Throughout the focus group, the Research Team employed the technique known as 'funneling' to gently guide the discussions, initiating conversations on broad topics and gradually transitioning to more specific and intricate subjects (Appendix F). This approach assisted the researchers, who were also the moderators of the focus group, in leading the participating staff members from general conversations to focused and meaningful exchanges. “This makes it possible to hear the participants' own perspectives in the early part of each discussion as well as the responses to the researcher’s specific interests in the later part of the discussion,” (Morgan, 2019, p. 41). As a means of respecting the valuable time of the volunteer staff, the Research Team allocated a limited duration of 60 minutes for the focus group session. This time frame proved to be optimal for delving into the necessary details while preserving a high level of engagement and productivity. Carey and Asbury (2016) conveyed that “focus groups are
beneficial because people like to be heard; that someone is listening and cares about their concerns” (p. 16).

The data platform that was used for the student surveys and parent interviews, Dedoose, was also employed for the analysis of the focus group data. The Research Team collaboratively uncovered themes through identified codes and engaged in discussions to assess the data. The use of Dedoose streamlined the process of understanding the data, ensuring a comprehensive and systematic analysis. This method allowed the Research Team to identify the themes from the codes that accurately reflected the diverse perspectives and ideas of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

**Quantitative Analysis**

The surveys provided to students were analyzed using the Likert Scale, which is used for measuring attitudes, such as opinions. “Likert-type responses are the results of single questions and should be treated as ordinal data” (Batterton & Hale, 2017, p. 37). Ordinal data is “data in which an ordering or ranking of responses is possible, but no measure of distance is possible” (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 64). Students responded to a series of questions to rank the impact of strategies using the standard *Strongly Agree, Agree, No Impact, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.* Responses that fell in the *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* category were treated as positive feedback on an intervention. Responses that were *Disagree* and/or *Strongly Disagree* were treated as negative feedback.

**Qualitative Analysis**

Once the survey collection was completed, the Research Team began the analysis process. In order to get the most accurate results from the surveys, the data was checked for any missing responses within the survey. Downloading this information into a spreadsheet helped the
researchers organize, categorize, and graph the findings. The visual representation clearly displayed trends, patterns, and outlier answers in the responses from the survey. The Research Team also considered the demographics, such as age and/or subgroups within the analysis. Once the findings were presented in tables, charts, and narratives, the Research Team used a variety of methods to ensure the findings' validity. Examples included having two coders work on each piece of data to lessen the possibility of bias, having extensive team conversations to decide on interpretations of the data and gain a comprehensive perspective of the data, and using a team procedure to decide on initial codes.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed within the Dedoose software. Dedoose is a software program for mixed-methods and qualitative research that is web-based and intended for data analysis, which provides, as described by Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana (2023), an “accessible and systematic way to analyze qualitative texts” (p. 1). The researchers have a vast array of experiences in working with students, staff, and parents in the area of chronic absenteeism. Due to this, while analyzing the data, the researchers paired up to assure the accuracy of the verbiage and limit possible hidden biases, which could impact the interpretation. The transcripts were analyzed to determine in vivo themes or ones that emerge from the data (Billups, 2021). Each Research Team member read through the transcripts utilizing codes to find emerging themes within the Dedoose software. Following the initial analysis of the transcripts, the Research Team had continuous conversations regarding the most accurate and appropriate labels of codes, utilizing a majority consensus model. Once themes and codes were established, the Research Team moved into what Billups (2021) describes as phase III of data analysis, determining the story being told by the data and establishing findings. The conclusions then
determined the Research Team's recommendations to Caroline High School as a part of the chronic absenteeism program evaluation.

**Limitations**

While the use of mixed methods was beneficial for data collection purposes, there was potential for two common limitations, as described by Khan and Fisher (2014), “time and resources” (p. 188). One resource that arose as a limitation was the participation of only four staff members in the focus group, which limited the data collected and may not represent a full cross-section of staff beliefs and understanding. Another limitation in regard to resources was the limited number of parents who participated in the interviews. While the invitation to participate in the parent interview was offered to all parents at CHS, only eight parents responded to this request, seven of whom were interviewed. As well, the parents that were interviewed did not provide a broad cross-section of the CHS community given that none of the interviewee’s students had a history of chronic absenteeism, nor was this sample representational of all ethnic groups, races, English language learners, or student with disabilities, an essential resource for understanding the rationale behind individual students’ absences. As Malika (2021) discusses throughout their research, there is a personal nature of attendance for many families due to a variety of barriers and factors, which could explain why families of students with large numbers of absences did not participate in the interviews, limiting data collection.

Another limitation of this survey involves the lack of data collected through the research methods on all interventions implemented by Caroline High School. While data was collected on the attendance interviews that were conducted last year, there were interventions that were not mentioned by stakeholders nor were they directly asked about. The data collected was lacking with regards to the effectiveness of CHS home visits and staff mentors, likely because parents
participating in the interview were not families whose students required these interventions. As well, staff and students may not have mentioned them as the questions did not directly ask about them. Finally, given that the purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the chronic absenteeism strategies at one site, Caroline High School, a limitation could exist in scaling the findings from this research study to other sites.

**Positionality**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) speak to the importance of recognizing one's positionality as either an insider or an outsider within a research study and the advantages, disadvantages, and biases that exist due to this status. All members of the Research Team are school-based administrators and, as such, would be considered insiders due to our experiences with the effects of chronic absenteeism in our educational settings.

Due to our experiences with the subject matter and in implementing strategies to combat chronic absenteeism, there was potential for inherent bias, particularly regarding the effectiveness of strategies. While our experiences with chronic absenteeism position us as insiders, conversely, given that none of the members of the Research Team work in Caroline County, potential challenges with access to aspects of the school could position us as outsiders and present a challenge to gathering high-quality data.

Identity also affects researcher positionality (Perry et al., 2020). All five Research Team members are parents and educators and recognize many families' challenges in encouraging their students to attend school regularly. When collecting data for this study, the researchers needed to remain mindful of our collective and individual positionality and work to ensure the integrity of the research process.
Reliability and Validity

As described above in the research tools section, data was collected from various stakeholders through surveys, interviews and a focus group. The collection and handling of responses was important to the validity of the data collected and the study. Participants in interviews and the focus groups gave their permission to be recorded and this data was kept on a password-protected secure site. The only personally identifying information collected by the Research Team from participants were phone numbers required to contact parents for interviews and email addresses to ensure students did not repeat the survey, and this data was stored on a password-protected secure site. The security process was important to create research that is, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “valid, reliable, and ethical, specific measures [needed] to be implemented to promote validity” (p. 237).

As interviews were collected and coded by two team members, removing identifying information was an important strategy for maintaining confidentiality. The use of qualitative data in the form of participant responses, quantitative data in the form of response trends, and attendance data from the school allowed for triangulation of data, a method for producing “greater depth and breadth of understanding” (Billups, 2021, p. 29). Fischer (2021) also observed that “based on data triangulation, open-ended questions can be used to overcome a typical problem with data collection using surveys: Human behavior can only be captured as stated or intended, but not as real behavior” (p. 40). To develop a deeper understanding of student survey respondents’ experiences, open-ended questions allowed for personal responses. The Research Team also acknowledged the potential of biases based on our positionality and utilized the strategy of debriefing and reflection to minimize these biases in ourselves and each other. As Greene (2014) describes, “This allows the researcher to think critically about the research, test
hypotheses, and to acknowledge any feelings that may affect judgment” (p. 8). These strategies were vital for increasing the reliability and validity of the results found.

**Chapter Summary**

The Research Team conducted a mixed methods program evaluation of the Caroline High School student absenteeism intervention strategies. Caroline High School improved its chronic absenteeism rate by 11% from 2021 to 2022. At this point, Caroline High School administrators were unsure which interventions positively impacted student attendance.

The Research Team used a survey to understand basic student attitudes about the effectiveness of the school's strategies. After this data was analyzed, the Research Team conducted interviews with parents/guardians and a focus group with staff members to better understand each group's viewpoints on the strategies' effectiveness. Using a Multi-Tiered System of Support framework, the team assessed the effectiveness of the supports from a tiered lens. Data from these three sources allowed the researchers to have a deeper understanding of the impact of each strategy and its effect on school attendance rates.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

The methods chapter provided a detailed outline of the data collection process. Chapter 4 now shifts the focus to the analysis of the data collected by the team, delving into the findings. Furthermore, this chapter explains the Research Team's data coding process, illustrating the progression from codes to themes to final findings.

Between November 2023 and December 2023, the Research Team gathered data from stakeholders through three different sources: a student survey with 625 respondents, seven parent interviews, and one focus group involving four staff members from Caroline High School. Data collection from all three sources was designed to support the three research questions developed by the Research Team. Table 1 below displays how the research questions correlated with the questions asked in the surveys, interviews, and focus group.
### Table 1

**Connection Between Research Questions and Data Collection Tools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question (RQ)</th>
<th>Questions Asked of Stakeholders to Address This RQ:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Research Question 1:** How effective were the strategies and interventions implemented by Caroline High School in decreasing chronic absenteeism for their students? | Student Surveys:  
  - How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I am aware of positive rewards or interventions for attendance.  
  - If you participated in an attendance interview, how strongly do you feel that this attendance interview conducted by school administration had a positive effect on your school attendance?  
  
  Parent Interview:  
  - Did you receive any information from Caroline High School about student attendance? If yes, did it impact your student’s attendance? Why or Why not?  
  - Were there any positive rewards or interventions that made your student want to come to school?  
  
  Staff Focus Group:  
  - Was there an attendance incentive that you felt made students want to come to school? What was that specific incentive? Why? |
| **Research Question 2:** Based on the data collected, do gaps exist in the chronic absenteeism strategies implemented by Caroline High School? | Student Surveys:  
  - Some students are absent often. Why do you think students do not come to school?  
  - What motivates you to come to school regularly?  
  
  Parent Interviews:  
  - Are there any other supports or resources that you feel parents need to help their students to attend school regularly?  
  
  Staff Focus Group:  
  - What supports or resources do you think help students attend school regularly?  
  - Are there any interventions or strategies around school attendance that you think would recommend for Caroline High School? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question (RQ)</th>
<th>Questions Asked of Stakeholders to Address This RQ:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Research Question 3:** Given finite time and resources, which strategies and interventions should Caroline High School continue to implement to continue to decrease chronic absenteeism rates? | **Student Surveys:**  
- Some students are absent often. Why do you think students do not come to school?  
- What can the school do to support students who are absent a lot?  
- What motivates you to come to school regularly?  

**Parent Interviews:**  
- What do you think causes students to miss school? What causes your student to miss school?  

**Staff Focus Group:**  
- How do you think having a school staff member check in with students who struggle with attendance helps them attend school?  
- Are there any interventions or strategies around school attendance that you think would recommend for Caroline High School?  
- What barriers to school attendance do you feel impact student school attendance the most? Why or how? |

Once data were collected, the Research Team worked together to analyze the data through a multi-step process. Figure 1 illustrates the qualitative data analysis process employed by the Research Team for analyzing the data obtained from student surveys, a staff focus group, and parent interviews. Team members paired up to organize and analyze the quantitative data and code each piece of qualitative data to provide more than one perspective and to reduce bias.
Once all coding was completed using Dedoose, a cross-platform app for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods, the Research Team determined themes that became apparent through their data analysis and recorded those in a common document, organized by data source. Individually, team members combed through the various data sources to look for quotes that supported the most common themes and included them in the shared document. Next, the Research Team made connections across the three stakeholder groups of parents, students, and staff members. For example, a team member highlighted a common theme of attributing attendance challenges to early start times from the student interviews and another team member made a connection to comments from the parent interviews about the same topic. This discussion and the use of the shared document to record themes, codes, and findings created a space to capture the team’s shared understanding of the data. Following this discussion, team members used the team’s agreed-upon themes, codes, and data to develop the findings shared below.

Focus Group Findings

The Research Team conducted a focus group with four staff members of Caroline High School. Three members of the Research Team posed open-ended questions designed to gather the staff’s perspective of their collective and individual experiences with students’ absences.
Each of the six questions addressed an aspect of why student absences occur, possible barriers and school supports, and the impact of relationships on student attendance.

**Staff’s Perceptions of Impacts of Absenteeism**

The first of the open-ended staff focus group questions asked participants to consider if it is important for students to attend school regularly to be successful at school and why. Participants discussed that attendance is connected to grades; students who miss a lot of school have lower grades. The group discussed that being absent from school affects students academically and socially and that students who are absent frequently become social outcasts; students crave having friends and having someone to engage with in meaningful conversation. The group suggested that the year of virtual learning emphasized the importance of attendance because the lack of being in the building was difficult for most students. A group member stressed the importance of returning to full instruction five days a week:

> A lot of it is that everybody blames COVID. When COVID was here, we didn't have to go to school and this wasn't such a big deal, but COVID's over and done, and we need to figure out how to move past that.

The group concluded that attending school virtually negatively impacted students’ perceptions about the importance of daily school attendance because the virtual structure created a false sense of ability to be successful in school without physically being present in school. As the recovery from the pandemic continues, it is crucial for students to attend school in person every day to fully engage with their educational journey and ensure their success.

**Staff’s Perceptions of Attendance Incentives**

The second question explored attendance incentives to make students want to come to school. The group acknowledged the challenge of offering incentives that students genuinely
perceive as motivating and expressed that incentives are the most effective when students know something fun is going to happen. The group described an incentive where students who had good attendance, good grades, and no disciplinary infractions were invited to a basketball game during the school day. Caroline High School partnered with another school to host the basketball game. Students who did not earn the incentive stayed in their classroom while students who met the criteria for the incentive attended the basketball game. Other incentives provided in the past were an ice cream social in the cafeteria hosted by the school counselors for students who had perfect attendance, and goodie bags with pencils and candy when students came to school. The group discussed that food seems to be a good incentive, but it can become costly to provide. Focus group participants concluded that it is unknown whether or not these incentives made students want to come to school more because data had not been collected. A group member made an important point that when students do not know about the incentive until it is given or within a short period of time before it is given, it becomes a reward rather than an incentive. The group suggested that students had not known about the incentives that have been provided with enough advanced notice to work toward them.

**Staff’s Perceptions of Barriers to Attendance**

When asked what barriers impact student school attendance the most, staff focus group participants suggested that students missing the bus is the biggest problem. It was noted that it is typical for teenagers to sleep in late. Since classes start at 7:30 a.m., students arrive at 7:10 a.m. Many students live 30-45 minutes from school, which is too far for their parents to bring them to school. A staff member suggested that most students who have chronic absences also have mental health issues and suffer from anxiety and depression. Other students have medical concerns, such as gastrointestinal issues or Crohn's disease that cause them to have to use the
bathroom frequently, and they do not want to use the bathroom at school. The staff member reiterated, “They legitimately have medical issues and they don't want to contend with them.”

**Staff’s Perceptions of Attendance Interventions**

The staff focus group participants discussed an effective intervention they have seen done sporadically at CHS of having a school staff member check in with students who struggle with attendance. The school has support groups for students for attendance, academics, and behaviors. Teachers and administrators reach out to families of students who are not passing for the year because they have missed too much school. They also review academics and behavior. One of the group members has been in attendance meetings with parents and said, “Sometimes it kind of clicks. Some of it can be hostile. So you never know what you're gonna get.” Parents receive phone calls, emails, and letters from school staff. School social workers and school counselors have made some home visits to reach individual students. A teacher in the group shared that they email students when they are absent about how they can make up their missing work and get their grades up. Still, the teacher does not consistently receive responses from students because students often do not have internet access at home, and if they are sick, they cannot go somewhere else to use the internet. The same teacher suggested that it could be helpful for students who are absent due to health issues but do not qualify for homebound instruction to participate in virtual learning. They thought it would be nice to have something in between staying home for a week with COVID or the flu and homebound instruction. They also thought that homebound services do not provide sufficient time for a teacher to work with a student and that homebound instruction is more of a delivery service.

I've been involved in homebound instruction and that's really difficult. It really is not sufficient. Time offered to the homebound teacher to work with the student, to ask
questions and get them caught up on things, it's really more of a delivery service, as far as the amount of time that's allotted.

A staff focus group member suggested that students who play sports tend to come to school when the sport is in season, but when the season ends, the student begins to be absent from school. The participant suggested that it is important to bridge the gap between seasons, but no specific suggestions were given on how to achieve that.

**Resources for Students**

When asked what supports or resources help students attend school regularly, the staff focus group participants described food and clothing that are available to students. CHS has a small food pantry, although according to a staff member in the focus group, this resource has not been widely advertised. They also have a Cavalier Closet with school supplies, book bags, and hygiene products. These basic necessities are available for students who need them. There is also a washing machine and a dryer available if students need to wash their clothes. All of these efforts are to help prevent absences and not just respond to absences.

**Alternatives for Out-of-School Suspension**

The staff focus group participants brainstormed additional interventions or strategies around school attendance and proposed alternatives for out-of-school suspensions. They discussed a proposal for a Refocus Center where students would report to school in lieu of an out-of-school suspension for offenses other than fighting or vaping but there has not been support from the school community because the students would not be allowed to ride the bus. The Refocus Center would be housed at Lotus Academy, which is the Caroline County Public Schools alternative education program. The group thought that parents would not want to drive their children to that school, so a better solution would be to have a trailer on the campus of the
high school so that students could use the internet and have lunch, and teachers could visit the students and help them if they needed help. Students would be counted as present instead of absent from an out-of-school suspension. The group discussed that fighting is an automatic ten-day out-of-school suspension, and students knowing this has reduced the number of fights. While out-of-school suspensions for fighting hurt the chronic absenteeism count, the staff focus group members persisted that reducing the number of fights by having high expectations and accountability is ultimately the best solution for a safe learning environment. The group members shared that fighting and vaping have the most strict consequences, but they would like to see some restorative practices for other offenses, such as vandalism.

The Research Team condensed the main findings from the focus group below in Table 2.
Table 2

*Outcomes of Staff Focus Group Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Ideas</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Regular Attendance</td>
<td>Belief that regular attendance is crucial for students' academic and social success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges and Barriers to Attendance</td>
<td>Factors impacting student attendance, such as transportation, health concerns, and logistical difficulties, mental and physical health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives and Motivation</td>
<td>Discussion about the importance of timeliness in the effectiveness of incentives (events, food, rewards) in encouraging attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of COVID-19</td>
<td>References to how the pandemic has altered perceptions and practices around attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Technology and Communication</td>
<td>Mention of virtual learning, email communication, and challenges of technology access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and Policy Impact</td>
<td>Discussion on how school policies, such as suspensions, affect attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and Family Engagement</td>
<td>Insights family and community involvement in student attendance, such as the resource closet and food pantry for students, and parents being invited to student interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorative Justice and Alternative Approaches</td>
<td>Consideration of restorative justice and alternatives to traditional disciplinary measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Availability</td>
<td>Mention of resources like food pantries, clothing, and support systems at the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Activities and Sports</td>
<td>Insights into how activities and sports influence attendance patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and Staff Roles</td>
<td>Understanding roles and perceptions of staff members and how important it is to build relationships regarding attendance issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parent Interview Findings

Parent interviews were conducted to provide input from this stakeholder group regarding student attendance at Caroline High School (CHS). CHS administration sent parents an email containing information about this study. Included in the email was an opportunity for parents to agree to participate in an interview regarding student attendance at CHS. Eight parents indicated their willingness to participate, and seven parents completed the interview process. Members of the Research Team were assigned a specific parent or two parents to interview. Each team member used the Parent Interview Questions found in Appendix E to guide the interviews. Additional follow-up questions were asked of parents by the interviewer if further information was needed to understand the parent’s response to a particular question. Upon completion of the interview, the interviewer completed the initial coding of the parent’s responses. A second Research Team member then conducted a second coding of the interview. Finally, the Research Team discussed the themes represented in the codes for each parent response and determined how they contributed to the development of larger themes of Student Connectedness, Relationships, Mental Health, Excused Absences or Policy, and School and Future Success.

Regular School Attendance

All parents interviewed agreed that regular attendance is important for students and linked this importance to future success. Parent 1 stated, “If he’s not learning, it doesn’t set him up for future success when he gets out of high school.” This highlighted the direct connection learning has with regard to their child's future opportunities. Parent 7 pointed out that attending school “teaches the value of showing up,” a crucial skill for future job success. These comments show that parents understand that attendance is important for their children, extending beyond just acquiring the requisite knowledge to building fundamental habits for the future.
Communication

Parents noted appreciation regarding communication from the school and division about attendance. Parent 4 valued the consistent updates from the school and school board, highlighting the weekly call from the principal about attendance as a helpful reminder of the importance of regular attendance. Parent 7 valued the weekly communications, noting the principal’s weekly message, “[The principal] sends something about attendance every week when he sends out his Sunday message.” Parent 7 also noted that she was, “following the emails from the superintendent and school board meeting and the need for improved attendance within our district.” These responses suggested CHS is providing strong school-to-parent communication to keep families informed and engaged in students’ attendance.

While the majority of responses indicated a positive response to the school’s communication efforts, a few concerns emerged. Parent 6 noted the need for alternative communication channels beyond email for those without internet access and that “there should be ways to consider this population.” Parent 6 further perceived a lack of openness to parent questions where “parents ask questions they are so used to being shut down that they stop asking and they do what they want to do in spite of whatever the rules are...” Additionally, this parent noted, “I don't believe there is a full outline and explanation to parents of how attendance works,” indicating concerns about lack of communication about these school policies. However, contrary to this, Parent 5 explained that “[CHS Staff] talked to us and explained why it’s important that they be there...”. Additionally, this parent noted, “We all got a copy of the...student handbook where it also talks about the need to be present in class.” While the overall parent responses were positive, these comments suggested there may still be communication concerns with CHS’s ability to clearly provide information to parents about the
attendance policies of the school and to foster a collaborative, open, and inclusive communication environment where all parent voices are heard and valued.

**Attendance Incentives**

Parents appeared generally aware that attendance incentives were available to students at CHS. While some parents embraced the idea of school incentives, others had reservations. Parent 6 discussed how a basketball game incentive was a positive motivator for their student’s attendance. For Parent 3, extrinsic motivators undermine the intrinsic value of education. They noted that “school is their [the students’] job,” with academic achievement being its own reward. These opposing viewpoints highlight the complex debate surrounding the use of incentives in school. While some parents see them as tools for motivation and engagement, others see them as compromising the inherent value of education that succeeds in only temporary compliance.

**Parental Influence**

Parents noted that their opinions and attitudes toward school impacted their students' attendance. Across the interviews, parents discussed their commitment to their children’s education and viewed themselves as responsible for ensuring regular school attendance. Parent 4 saw attendance as a foundation for academic achievement and that “being absent does not allow the child to get all the information that’s being given to them on a daily basis,” and noted that “attendance is critical to education as a whole.” Parent 5 echoed the sentiment and noted that missing school “particularly for those students who are struggling and needing additional help...puts them behind in their learning.” These parents both believed that by seeing value in education, their child would also see this value and have a positive impact on their attendance. However, not all parents felt their opinions of school had as great an impact. Parent 1 indicated that even when parents provide positive influences, it’s not always as impactful as we would
hope. Parent 1 explained, “[Our child] has had reinforcement from his dad and me and it has not increased his desire to go to school.” This suggests that some students are impacted more by parent’s opinions than others.

The impact of parents' attitudes on student attendance also came up among some parents, specifically, comments made by parents about Caroline County Public Schools on social media and their impact on student perceptions. Parent 7 believes that “parents' opinions affect everything [their] student does…” and she further posits “…the negative towards Caroline County Public Schools is horrible on the social media platform…” Parent 7 continues, “[Parents] want to blame everything on the teachers and the teachers’ faults and of course students feed off everything the parents do.” This mindset may have a bigger impact on attendance than just affecting students' attitudes. This is evident when Parent 3 noted, “I’ve seen it on social media sites and things around the community and other sites nationwide that parents are keeping their kids home from school because something has gone on they don’t agree with.”

**Causes of Student Absences**

Parents highlighted a range of concerns that they believed contributed to student absences, including mental health, social-emotional needs, transportation, meeting basic needs, start times, social media, and student apathy. Many parents expressed concern about the impact of school on their children’s mental well-being. Parent 6 pointed out that the overwhelming school environment, described as “chaotic,” can lead to occasional necessary “mental health days.” Parent 3 noted that students sometimes have difficulty “...dealing with emotional things that happen as the kids get older” such as “...not making a sports team…” Parent 7 saw regular attendance as crucial for learning vital social-emotional support, coping mechanisms, and growth. These comments emphasize the comprehensive needs of CHS students, questioning
whether there is a dedicated focus on fostering emotional, social, and mental well-being extending beyond mere academic achievement.

Parents also raised concerns regarding physical health and medical concerns as factors influencing student attendance. Parent 7 attributed all instances of their particular student's absences to medical issues. This perspective, while seemingly straightforward, becomes more nuanced when acknowledging the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parent 1 noted the current atmosphere of caution by saying “With COVID, everyone pushed if you have the first symptom or the sign of symptoms of any type of illness, stay home,” Parent 1 stressed how during cold and flu season, it feels like “the responsible thing to do.” Emphasizing the significance of safeguarding others' health illustrates the need to acknowledge the interconnectedness between students' physical well-being, academic requirements, and the overall health of the wider school community.

Parents also had concerns with practical challenges impacting attendance, including basic needs and logistical barriers. Parent 6 shared that some students in the county have issues meeting basic needs. When a student's basic needs go unmet, their ability to prioritize and engage in school diminishes (Race Matters Institute, 2013). Parent 6 explained that “often in the cold, dark mornings, students don’t often have appropriate outerwear to keep them warm.”

Transportation was another concern parents had, particularly as Caroline County is a rural county. Parent 7 explained that it can be difficult for parents to bring their children to school if they miss the bus. Multiple parents found that this is further compounded by early school start times, particularly for high school students. Parent 6 pointed out that as a result of the early start time, the bus picks up their child as early as 5:45 a.m. Parent 1 echoed that sentiment, adding that expecting teenagers to function at an early hour is unrealistic, noting that “it's difficult to make a
teenager at six o’clock in the morning do anything.” These concerns emphasize the need for schools to consider the broader context of students’ lives, especially in rural communities, and ensure that all students have the support and resources to navigate basic needs and logistical challenges.

**Relationships with School Staff**

Parents noted the importance of positive student-staff relationships in having a positive impact in promoting school attendance. Parent 7 highlighted the value of teachers seeking out specific students, noting how it positively influenced her child’s attendance: “[They have] a very good relationship with [their] teachers and staff, and that absolutely helps [them] attend.” Parent 3 echoed this sentiment, stating their children also had someone they felt connected with at school. Parent 4 similarly pointed to their child’s positive relationship with school staff as a contributing factor to regular attendance. These parents' observations emphasize the importance of creating supportive relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility, positively impacting attendance.

While some parents highlighted the positive impact of strong student-staff relationships on attendance, others offered a contrasting perspective that was more nuanced. Parent 1 acknowledged the importance of relationships, but noted that their child’s positive connection with their first-period teacher had not translated into improved attendance. Parent 6 highlighted the potential negative consequences of school staff actions by describing their student’s lack of connection to the school and relayed a personal experience in which they overheard a group of teachers talking negatively about students with other students within earshot. These contrasting perspectives illustrate the complexity of relationship-attendance dynamics, suggesting that the nature and quality of these interactions matter significantly and that effectiveness may go beyond
more than connection.

**Additional Support Needed**

Parents recognized that there is a need for additional support to students at CHS with regard to attendance. Parent 7 advocated for “solutions individual to the specific families’ needs” when considering these questions. The CHS administration uses attendance meetings as a collaborative platform for developing individualized plans for supporting families. However, Parent 2’s experience with an attendance meeting at CHS was negative, citing a meeting where both parents took off work, but then the meeting was rescheduled and took place before they got there. This was compounded by a lack of communication from the school, as Parent 2’s child had to inform them the meeting took place after the fact. Furthermore, Parent 2 found it “off-putting to be threatened” by the meeting’s focus on possible consequences and felt that this tactic was counterproductive as it “does not motivate the student or parent” to do better.

**What Else Do We Need to Know?**

In considering additional information the Research Team should know, parents offered insightful suggestions for future considerations. Parent 5 proposed the school explore how to prepare students for the transition from school attendance to the different demands of workforce participation. This parent suggested implementing a mentorship program where experienced 12th grade students guide and support incoming 9th grade students, building connections and easing the transition into high school. This is echoed in the concerns of Parent 6, who highlighted a perceived lack of inclusivity in the social landscape of Caroline County Public Schools. They expressed concern about a “cliquey” atmosphere where “the same students get opportunities afforded to them, and the ones that need help get overlooked.” This created a concern that students who are not currently getting support would be overlooked when it comes to initiatives
regarding attendance and the hope that CHS will ensure that all students have access to the same resources, opportunities, and support regarding attendance.

Parent interviews conducted at CHS provided valuable insights into various aspects of student attendance. Causes of student absences were varied, ranging from mental and physical health issues to practical challenges like transportation and meeting basic needs. The impact of COVID-19 on attendance decisions was also noted, with parents exercising caution during illness. Relationships with school staff were highlighted as crucial, with positive connections encouraging attendance, although some parents noted areas for improvement in these relationships. Table 3 outlines the parent interviews at CHS revealing a complex array of factors influencing student attendance.
Table 3

Analysis Outcomes of Parent Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis Outcomes of Parent Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overarching Ideas</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Descriptions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular School Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Influence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Causes of Student Absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with School Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Support Needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Else We Needed To Know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Survey Findings**

The Research Team’s student survey included two types of questions designed to collect two types of data from the Caroline High School students. As seen in Appendix D, questions one through six sought to collect quantitative data to determine the survey respondents'
demographics and obtain their perspectives on certain interventions. The student survey also included three open-ended questions which were designed to gather the student perspective of their collective and individual experiences with absences. Each of the three questions addressed an aspect of why student absences occur, possible school supports, and the value of relationships on student attendance. Student surveys allowed students to offer their opinions and ideas on each of these topics. As the students completed the survey, data were collected for review by the Research Team. A member of the Research Team coded each of the three questions and a second member coded the same responses to ensure consistency of the codes for that question.

**Survey Qualitative Findings**

The Research Team’s student survey received 1,875 open-ended student responses, which were coded by members of the team. The coders created 150 different codes in reviewing the students’ answers to the survey questions. Some of the codes created included disengagement, negative perceptions, sickness/illness, I don’t know, mental health, good grades, and college plans as noted in Table 4. Through review and discussion, these codes were reduced to several main themes including Student Connectedness, Mental Health, Excused Absences and Policy, Relationships, and School and Future Success.
Table 4

Codes to Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement, Negative Perception</td>
<td>Student Connectedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives, Want Engagement, School Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with class or activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick/illness, Family Issues</td>
<td>Excused Absences or Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know, Requests that violate law or policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask, Tell, Understand</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend, Parent, Trusted Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for Mental Health days off</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Grades, College Plans, Future Success</td>
<td>School or Future Success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Connectedness is a theme that describes how students’ connection to their school impacts their willingness to attend school regularly. Codes included in this theme are disengagement, negative school perceptions, and requests for engagement. The Mental Health theme identifies students’ recognition of the need to protect their mental health or the mental health of other students as it relates to not attending school. The Student Illness and Family Issues themes cover responses that indicate an excusable absence as described in the Caroline County Public Schools attendance policy. The Excused Absences and Policy theme identifies responses that suggest a direct violation of the excused code or policies of the school division. The Relationship theme identifies the students' acknowledgment of relationships as a factor in their own or other students’ school attendance. The School or Future Success theme includes responses that indicate the importance of the student's success at school or as a step toward college or their future success.
**Excused Absences and Policy**

The first of the open-ended questions addressed the concept of why students feel that other students are absent from school. This question asked students about other students' reasons for missing school rather than their own reasons for missing school. The Research Team identified some themes that were found throughout the students’ answers. The survey response of student illness was coded 217 times out of 625 responses. Taken with the survey response of Family and Life Circumstances (125) as a theme, these two codes make up a large portion of student responses. Student illness, family situations, and doctor’s appointments are all common reasons students indicated for being absent from school and Caroline High School policy identifies these as excused absences (*Caroline Attendance Policy*, 2017).

**Student Connectedness**

Student disengagement was the most common student answer, occurring over 320 times in the 625 responses. Student responses to this question that were coded as disengagement included responses like “cause they don’t feel like it” and “because they don’t want to,” which the Research Team identified as showing a high level of disengagement with school. A similar code, which the Research Team termed as negative perceptions, occurred 176 times. These responses included answers such as “cause school is boring” and “because school is draining” and showed a negative feeling toward school by the student. Taken together as a theme, Student Connectedness represents a significant portion of student responses that do not connect absences to illnesses or family situations. 496 of the 625 student responses to this question included a negative or disengaged student response, leading the Research Team to determine that students see a lack of connectedness as a significant reason for student absences.
**Mental Health**

Student mental health was a continuous theme running through many of the open-ended question responses. In student answers, mental health was mentioned 79 times for the question asking why students miss school and 46 times for the question asking how the school can support students. These responses included quotes such as “just need a mental health day” or “kids need mental health days once in a while,” indicating the student perception that students should just be able to take days off to protect their mental health. Students also described in the survey feeling pressure or being stressed, which they felt impacted their mental health and their perception of school. Some students indicated that they knew that missing school would further impact their mental health because each missed day added additional school work and increased the pressure to complete assignments.

**Interventions**

The next open-ended question that students responded to in the survey asked what supports the school could put in place that would support students who were often absent from school. The major theme derived from this question was that students want to be able to talk to school personnel about why they are missing school, occurring 153 out of 625 responses. Student responses included “talk to them” and “have someone to talk to they trust and are comfortable with.” The students want there to be understanding and communication about the reasons for absences and why these absences continue to occur. These responses suggest that students desire a connection with school personnel to effectively communicate their concerns and ensure that the school hears their voices concerning their absences.

Another response by students indicated that many of the students who responded to the survey do not know what services or resources the school can provide to meet the needs of
students who are often absent from school. The response “I don’t know” occurred 120 times in the students’ answers, a student survey code that occurred frequently in the theme of Legal Constraints and Policy and showed a disconnection between students and the laws governing student attendance. Students in this response type (106) wanted to be allowed just to miss as many days as they wanted or to have days that did not count against their absence total. Students blamed the school 20 times for these policies instead of the state laws that compel the school to require students to attend school. A student stated:

I want to maintain good grades. Also, I constantly feel pressured to not miss school due to the attendance policies in place. Even though I only miss school when I am sick, I am still affected by the attendance policy. When I am sick, I find myself asking if it is worth taking a sick day -- what if I'm even sicker in a few months and I can't miss any more school?

Student responses also included requests for more engagement, attendance incentives, and changes to school structures, such as the school’s scheduled start time. Students expressed views such as “make school fun” for enhancing engagement, better teacher interactions, and the nature of classroom assignments by having “more engaging activities.” Students mentioned the early start time for school as an issue in their school attendance. School attendance incentives, such as the student basketball game, were mentioned in student responses 34 times as reasons for attending school as a motivating factor for students improving attendance. Taken as a whole theme, the three codes of engagement, attendance incentives, and changes to school structures represented 150 student responses, which is almost as many as the largest single response. Since students were seeking connection to the school and staff, these responses were included in the Student Connectedness theme.
Relationships

The final open-ended student response question asked what motivates the student to attend school regularly. Student responses for this question included the codes Friends/Social, Parent Influence, and a Trusted Adult/Teacher, making up 288 out of 625 responses. These codes where the student is seeking a connection or a relationship with another person involved in their school experiences were included in the theme Relationships. The people identified by the student responses as seeking or confirming the importance of the connection were student-to-student, student-to-staff members, or the student to their own parents' relationships. Students described particular friends, “my best friend,” or someone they are in a relationship with, “my boyfriend,” as being important, as well as teachers, whom several students named specifically. An 11th grade student noted:

For many students, school is draining. We as students are told to come to the admin when there is an issue but we as a whole do not feel like enough is done. Many teachers do not really bother to check on students and don't care. Many of us feel that if we are heard and trust adults at this school maybe then we would care about school. We treat the teachers the way that they treat us but we seem to be the problems.

Based on this student’s feedback, along with other responses, students felt that they lacked a connection with a trusted adult at school.

The final theme included the codes Good Grades, Graduating, Future/College Plans, and other positive school responses, making up 195 codes. The responses as a whole indicate that relationships between students, their parents, and school staff are very important in motivating students to come to school. Having a plan, setting goals, or being self-motivated are also important factors for students coming to school. Students revealed their thoughts about being
self-motivated by responding “Knowing what I do in high school goes on my college applications” or by stating “graduating” and “getting my work done” as what keeps them motivated.

**Survey Takeaways**

Student responses to the open-ended section of the survey provide insight into how they think about school attendance, why students miss school, what support students need, and who students attend school for. Student Connectedness is the central theme that is identified in the data either as a reason that students miss school or as something that students are seeking from Caroline High School. Excused Absences and Policy is a theme that describes responses demonstrating reasons for absences that are excused under CHS policy or requests to allow absences that are not excused under state law or CCPS policy. Relationships are another theme indicated by students that strongly influence student attendance. The themes of Mental Health and School and Future Success are identified by students as impacting student attendance.

**Survey Quantitative Findings**

The following analysis of quantitative data was derived from a survey conducted among 625 students who were in grades 9-11 during the 2022-2023 academic year. The primary focus of the survey was to assess students' perceptions and attitudes toward school attendance and the support systems available to them. Participants rated their agreement on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neither Agree nor Disagree), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly Agree) on three key statements: their awareness of the importance of attending school, the presence of trusted adults at school with whom they connect, and their knowledge of positive rewards or interventions for attendance. Additionally, the survey gathered demographic information, including grade level, gender, and ethnicity. This allowed for a deeper analysis of the data across
those variables. A comprehensive approach of this type provides valuable insights into the factors influencing student attendance and engagement, which is essential for developing targeted interventions and support systems.

**Whole Sample Response Analysis**

**Question 1.** The survey response to the first question “How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I received information about the importance of attending school” produced the following results. In analyzing each of the questions for the 625 students’ survey responses across grades 9-11, the highest number of students, 181 (29%), indicated that they agreed that they received information about the importance of attending school. Following closely, 179 (28%) of students strongly agreed with this statement. On the contrary, 41 (7%) of students strongly disagreed and 51 (8%) of students disagreed with the information that they were given. Moreover, 173 (28%) of students expressed neither agreement or disagreement with the statement. The data on students' perceptions of receiving information about the importance of attending school reflects varying levels of awareness within the collective student body as shown in Figure 2.
Question 2. When the 625 survey responses were analyzed for the second question, “How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I have a trusted adult(s) who I connect with at school,” the following was revealed for the cumulative grades 9-11. Based on the analysis of responses to the second question regarding students' connections with trusted adults at school, the data reveals a nuanced picture of student relationships within the educational environment. A combined 286 (46%) of students from grades 9-11 positively affirmed having a trusted adult at school with whom they can connect, as 146 (24%) strongly agreed and 140 (22%) agreed. However, a significant portion, 159 (26%), remained neutral, neither agreeing or disagreeing with the statement, highlighting a potential area of uncertainty in student-adult relationships. The remaining combined 180 (28%) of students expressed disagreement, with 102
(16%) who disagreed and 78 (12%) who strongly disagreed. These findings, as seen in Figure 3, demonstrate the importance of fostering strong, supportive relationships between students and adults within schools to ensure a positive and nurturing educational environment.

**Figure 3**

*Whole Group Question 2 - Trusted Adult*

![Bar chart showing responses to question 2.](image)

**Question 3.** The analysis of responses to the third survey question, "How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I am aware of positive rewards or interventions for attendance," yielded insightful data. A total of 128 (20%) of students strongly agreed that they were informed about positive rewards or interventions for improving attendance, closely followed by 149 (24%) who agreed. A quarter of the respondents, 156 (25%), remained neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. However, the percentage of students expressing disagreement
showed a downward trend, with 110 (18%) who disagreed and 82 (13%) strongly disagreed with awareness of such interventions. This distribution of responses indicates a mixed level of familiarity among students about the rewards or interventions aimed at encouraging school attendance. Figure 4 dissects each question by the number of students and survey category students chose.

**Figure 4**

*Whole Group Question 3 - Positive Rewards and Incentives*
**Detailed Responses by Grade**

**Question 1.** The survey's response to the initial question, "How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I received information about the importance of attending school," unveils a diverse array across grades 9 to 11. Of the 625 responses, 366 (58%) were 9th grade students during the 2022-2023 school year. Within the 9th grade sample, 26 (7%) strongly disagreed, and 26 (7%) disagreed, about the importance of attending school. Conversely, 103 (29%) of 9th graders strongly agreed, while another 107 (29%) agreed, which is a substantial portion of students who recognized they received information on attendance. Meanwhile, approximately (105) 28% of students positioned themselves as either agreeing or disagreeing.

Shifting focus to the 168 (27%) 10th grade responses broken out from the whole group sample of 625, 12 (7%) strongly disagreed, and 18 (11%) disagreed, about receiving information on the importance of attending school. In contrast, 41 (24%) strongly agreed and 46 (27%) agreed they had received information about the value of consistent attendance. Notably, a slightly higher proportion, 51 (30%), remained neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

There were 91 (15%) 11th grader responses to the survey from the total 625. The 11th graders indicated 7 (7%) strongly disagreed and another 6 (7%) disagreed. On the agreement spectrum, a higher acknowledgment of receiving information was observed with 29 (32%) strongly agreeing and 28 (31%) agreeing. Additionally, 21 (23%) 11th graders neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This analysis across different grade levels highlights the challenges and successes in effectively communicating this important aspect of their education, which can be found in Figure 5.
**Question 2.** In analyzing students' perceptions of their connections with trusted adults at school, the survey data presents the following picture from Grade 9, Grade 10, and Grade 11. In Grade 9, there was a positive acknowledgment of having a trusted adult in school, with 77 (21%) of students who strongly agreed and 80 (22%) who agreed. However, 92 (25%) of students remained neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. On the other hand, a segment of the student population expressed disagreement, with 49 (13%) strongly disagreeing and 68 (19%) disagreeing.

Moving to Grade 10, the students' level of disagreement was as follows: 20 (11%) strongly disagreed and 19 (11%) disagreed, which indicated a slight reduction in students feeling the absence of trusted adult connections compared to the 9th grade. Conversely, the areas of agreement saw an increase, with 43 (26%) who strongly agreed and 38 (23%) who agreed,
reflective of having supportive adult relationships within the school. Notably, the highest proportion of 10th graders, 48 (29%), were neutral about the adult relationship aspect of their school experience when they chose neither to agree nor disagree.

By Grade 11, the trend towards positive perceptions becomes more pronounced. The disagreement rates were lower at 9 (10%) for those who strongly disagreed and 15 (16%) for those who disagreed with having a trusted adult at school. The agreement side strengthened, with 26 (29%) who strongly agreed and 22 (24%) who agreed. Yet, there were still 19 (21%) of students who neither agreed nor disagreed with having a trusted adult at school.

More positive responses were evident as each grade progressed as graphed in Figure 6. The data showed that by grade 11, a larger percentage of students recognized they had supportive people within the school. This emphasized how important it is to foster relationships throughout the high school years.

**Figure 6**

*Question 2: Trusted Adult Response by Grade*
Question 3. The third survey question asked, "How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I am aware of positive rewards or interventions for attendance." In Grade 9, there was a relatively high level of awareness about positive rewards or interventions for attendance. The percentages were somewhat evenly distributed across the scale in the agreement category with 81 (22%) who strongly agreed and 87 (24%) who agreed. Consistently, 99 (27%) of students neither agreed nor disagreed that they were aware of positive awards. This suggests that a significant portion of 9th grade students were either neutral or were in a level of agreement with the rewards or interventions. The percentages that indicated disagreement decreased by nearly half, where 41 (11%) of students strongly disagreed and 58 (15%) disagreed.

By Grade 10, the percentages for strongly agreed dropped to 24 (14%), while both agree and neither agree nor disagree were at 42 (25%). The strongly disagree and disagree responses also decreased to 29 (17%) and 31 (18%). This suggested that 10th graders who responded to the survey were not as aware of the rewards or incentives or positive rewards for attendance.

Grade 11 responses showed an increase in awareness of these positive attendance interventions with 23 (25%) of students who strongly agreed that they were aware of positive rewards for attendance. The percentage for agreement was 20 (22%), which was similar to the disagree category of 21 (23%). Only 12 (13%) strongly disagreed, while 15 (16%) of students neither agreed nor disagreed. This trend indicates that by Grade 11, students were more familiar with the school culture and expectations. Figure 7 illustrates the above data.
Figure 7

*Question 3: Positive Rewards Response by Grade*

![Bar chart showing positive rewards response by grade for 9th, 10th, and 11th grades.]

**Attendance Interviews**

From the 625 student responses, 366 (59%) 9th grade students, 168 (27%) 10th grade students, and 91 (14%) 11th grade students responded to the survey. A total of 130 (21%) students out of the 625 student responses self-reported that they took part in the attendance interviews conducted by school staff. From those 130 students, 59 (45%) reported they were in 9th grade, 41 (32%) in 10th grade, and 30 (23%) in 11th grade.

Student survey participants were asked, “If you participated in an attendance interview, how strongly do you feel that this attendance interview conducted by school administration had a positive effect on your school attendance?” The survey revealed that the majority of 9th grade students did not perceive the attendance interviews as greatly impacting their school attendance.
Only 15% strongly agreed, while 19% agreed that the interviews had a positive effect. The largest percentage, 34%, neither agreed nor disagreed. On the opposing side, 7% strongly disagreed, and 25% disagreed that the interviews led to improvements in their attendance.

By Grade 10, the data shows a distinct dichotomy. The percentage of students who strongly agreed and agreed was the same at 15%. This nearly doubled with 29% strongly disagreeing, 10% disagreeing, and 31% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, indicating the majority of 10th grade students did not feel the interviews were effective.

In Grade 11, there was a noticeable divergence of opinions regarding the statement. A substantial 50% of students strongly disagreed, and an additional 20% disagreed, indicating that a significant portion of 11th grade students do not view attendance interviews as beneficial. In contrast, 10% strongly agreed, 7% agreed, and 13% neither agreed nor disagreed that their attendance showed improvement following the interviews.

**Absenteeism Patterns Across Demographic Groups**

The survey results reveal insightful patterns in self-reported student absenteeism across grades 9-11, with a breakdown by sex, ethnicity, and the number of days absent. The data categorizes absenteeism into three ranges: 19 or more days absent, 10-18 days absent, and 0-9 days absent. The ranges provide an understanding of absenteeism trends within the participation student body. The analysis shows variations when explored by sex, with clear absenteeism patterns emerging between male and female students. When analyzed by ethnicity, there are distinct gaps in absenteeism rates among different ethnic groups. These variations are particularly evident in the highest and lowest absenteeism categories. Furthermore, the survey data helps in understanding how absenteeism connects with students' academic year, offering insights into whether absenteeism rates increase or decrease as students progress from grade 9 to
11. This detailed breakdown of absenteeism, taking into account sex, ethnicity, and days absent, highlights the complexity of the issue and identifies specific areas for targeted interventions to address student absenteeism effectively.

**9th Grade Female Absenteeism Patterns.** In this group of twenty-nine 9th grade females, the majority of students fall into the lowest absenteeism category (0-9 days) at 15 (52%). The moderate level of absenteeism (10-18 days) was reported by nine (31%) and the highest absenteeism category (19+ days) reported the lowest number and percentage of absenteeism at five (17%).

The racial distribution across these twenty-nine students showed that white students' self-reported absences were most represented across all levels of absenteeism. Black female students were observed to be represented consistently across all three absenteeism categories, and Multiracial female students demonstrated a similar distribution across all three levels of absenteeism. In contrast, Asian individuals were minimally represented, with one being noted in the highest level of absenteeism and another in the lowest. Hispanic individuals had limited representation, with one falling into the moderate level and another in the lowest level of absenteeism.

**9th Grade Male Absenteeism Patterns.** Analyzing 27 self-reported absenteeism responses from 9th grade male students involved the examination of distribution patterns. The students were categorized based on their days absent: high (19+ days), moderate (10-18 days), and low (0-9 days) absenteeism. The majority of males, 17 (63%), fell into the category of low absenteeism. A smaller number, eight (30%), had moderate absenteeism, while the least was in the high absenteeism category at two (7%).
Regarding racial distribution, Black male students self-reported rates were only found in the low absenteeism group. White students were represented across all levels, with a higher concentration in the moderate level. Multiracial students were present in all three categories, notably half of the sample group in the moderate absenteeism group. Only two Hispanic students self-reported in the lowest absenteeism category. The data shows Black male students had lower rates of absenteeism, while White and Multiracial students were more evenly distributed, particularly in the moderate group. Despite the smaller number of Hispanic students, they exhibited lower rates of absenteeism. Figure 8 presents this data for 9th grade male and female students.

**Figure 8**

*Self-Reported 9th Grade Absenteeism by Demographic*
***10th Grade Female Absenteeism Patterns.*** When analyzing the 18 total self-reported absences from 10th grade female students, patterns were observed and categorized into three levels based on the number of days absent: high (19+ days), moderate (10-18 days), and low (0-9 days). The majority, 11 (62%), fell into the moderate absenteeism category. Female students who reported in the high absenteeism category made up two (11%) of the participants, while five (27%) were in the low absenteeism category.

In analyzing the ethnic distribution across absenteeism levels, White students were predominantly found in the moderate absenteeism category and were also present in the high absenteeism group. Black students appeared in both the moderate and low absenteeism categories. Hispanic students were present across all levels of absenteeism, with representation in both the high and low categories, and Hispanic 10th grade females reported in the moderate group. One Multiracial student was represented in the low absenteeism category.

***10th Grade Male Absenteeism Patterns.*** The self-reported absenteeism trends among 10th grade male students showed that 22 male participants provided information on their absenteeism rates. The group was divided into three categories based on the number of days absent: high absenteeism (19+ days), moderate absenteeism (10-18 days), and low absenteeism (0-9 days). From the survey, 14 (63%) of 10th grade male respondents were categorized under moderate absenteeism. Students who fell into the high absenteeism category represented two (9%), while six (27%) were found in the low absenteeism category.

The distribution of absenteeism among 10th grade males by ethnicity revealed the following patterns: White students mainly fell into the moderate absenteeism category, with minimal representation at the lowest level. Black students were distributed across all absenteeism levels, with their presence being one in the highest, three in moderate, and one in the lowest
categories. Hispanic students, totaling two, were evenly split between high and moderate absenteeism, with no representation in the low category. Multiracial students appeared in both the low and moderate categories. This data is further visualized for both male and female 10th grade students in Figure 9.

**Figure 9**

*Self-Reported 10th Grade Absenteeism by Demographic*

**11th Grade Female Absenteeism Patterns.** Sixteen 11th grade female students were categorized into three self-reported absenteeism levels: high (19+ days), moderate (10-18 days), and low (0-9 days). The largest number and percentage, nine (56%), fell into the moderate absenteeism category. Three (18%) students were in the high absenteeism category, while four (22%) communicated low absenteeism.
The ethnic distribution across absenteeism levels for 11th grade females found that Black students were represented in all absenteeism levels respectively. White students were most represented in the moderate absenteeism category and also appeared in the high-level category. Hispanic and Multiracial students each self-reported in only one category, the moderate absenteeism category.

**11th Grade Male Absenteeism Patterns.** Twelve 11th grade male students self-reported their absenteeism patterns. The categories were high (19+ days), moderate (10-18 days), and low (0-9 days). When reported, moderate absenteeism was noted at five (42%), and low reports were five (42%) as well. The highest number of self-reported days made up two students (16%).

The ethnic distribution across this small group of 12 students saw that Black students were represented by one student in the high absenteeism group and one student in the low absenteeism group. Hispanic students were present in all three categories. White students were the most represented ethnicity in the moderate and low absenteeism categories, each with three, self-reported. In contrast, Multiracial students were only represented in the moderate absenteeism category at one. As seen below, Figure 10 displays the following demographic characteristics.
**Limitation of the Findings**

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this data. The reported number of absences on the survey relies on students' self-reporting, and the accuracy of the data may be influenced by students’ own perceptions of how many days they were absent. Additionally, the small sample size, particularly in certain ethnic groups, limits the representation of these findings to a broader population. These considerations are essential for interpreting the data accurately and for formulating any subsequent interventions.

**Analysis of Convergence and Divergence in the Findings**

Gathering information from three stakeholder groups (students, staff, and parents) provided the opportunity to determine both commonalities and differences among perspectives. Each stakeholder group offered a slightly different perspective on topics, and there were
differences within the student stakeholder group. There were, however, topics in which two, or even all three, stakeholder groups shared a common perspective around chronic absenteeism.

Convergence in Findings

Several topics in particular were mentioned across the three stakeholder groups, including student connectedness to the school, the school’s early start time, transportation challenges, and student mental health. Through the design of this study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and the trends mentioned above were referred to across data points and demographic groups, making these findings notable to the Research Team.

Student Connectedness

Student connectedness to school, both the presence of it and the absence of it, was a common topic across all three stakeholder groups. Positive relationships with teachers were mentioned in both the student surveys and the parent interviews as an important motivator for student attendance. On the survey question about what the school can do to support student attendance, 25% of student respondents answered with a response that was coded as, “Ask, Talk, Support, Understand.” A commonality among responses in this code included suggestions for the adults in the building to listen to, support, or understand the needs of students to encourage their daily attendance rate. Additionally, student connectedness to a trusted adult came up in another student survey question in which 48% of respondents stated that they either agreed or strongly agreed that they have a trusted adult in the building. The power of positive relationships was also mentioned in the parent interviews. One parent noted about their daughter, “[They have] very good relationships with [their] teachers and very good relationships with staff, and that does absolutely help [them] attend.”
In addition to positive relationships with peers or teachers, many students felt connected through athletics. This topic was mentioned in the student survey 48 times and once in parent interviews as something that motivated students to come to school. Positive relationships and positive influence from teachers or trusted adults in the building codes came up in student surveys 181 times, twice in the focus group, and five times in the parent interviews. Table 5 below highlights the ways that relationships, both positive and negative, were mentioned across stakeholder groups.

**Table 5**

*Student Connections*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connections to Caroline High School</th>
<th>Student Surveys</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Parent Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Connections</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask, Talk, Support, Understand</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends / Positive Social Relationships</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Influence/ Trusted Adult</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative Connections</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Structure</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing / No Motivation to Attend School</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Perception of School</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feelings of a lack of connectedness to the school came up across stakeholder groups. In response to the survey question about why some students miss school, the code with the highest number of responses was disengagement. The most common responses in this code are “because they don’t like school,” “because school is boring,” and “because they don’t want to go to school.” In the student survey question about what motivates students to attend school, 52 responded that nothing motivates them to attend school. Additionally, one parent who was interviewed noted that she does not feel that her child has a trusted adult she can rely on at school. Challenges with the structure of the school came up as a barrier to student connectedness 67 times in the student surveys and four times in the parent interviews, identifying certain structures in place that are a barrier to students’ feelings of connectedness to the school. For example, better systems for making up work while absent, longer lunches, and better food options.

**Student Mental Health**

Student mental health was mentioned by students, staff, and teachers alike as a barrier to attendance for some students. When asked why some students miss school, one student shared:

I think a lot of kids are not motivated enough to come to school and I think in high school mental health issues are something you see a lot and I don't think Caroline High talks about it enough and we also don't talk about how draining school can be mentally.

Mental health and its impact on student attendance came up four times in the parent interviews, with the parents interviewed mentioning that sometimes their students take mental health days as needed. During the focus group, a staff member also noted a barrier to attendance caused by mental health challenges by saying, “Honestly, most of the ones who have chronic absences also have mental health issues or chronic illnesses that cause them to suffer from anxiety or they
suffer from depression…They just have issues keeping them at home.” The need for mental health days came up across both the student surveys and in one of the parent interviews. Table 6 reveals the frequency with which mental health or support for students’ well-being was mentioned in the data.

**Table 6**

*Student Mental Health and Attendance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mental Health/ Social-Emotional Health</th>
<th>Mental Health Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Surveys</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Early Start Times**

Caroline High School starts at 7:30 a.m., a fact that was mentioned as a contributing factor for student absence by students, staff, and parents alike. Early start times or tiredness from the early start time were mentioned 69 times in the student surveys, five times in the parent interviews, and two times in the staff focus group. When asked why some students missed school, one student shared, “Because school start times are way too early and it's draining to wake up that early at our age.” Parents also found the early start times to be challenging, one sharing, “It's difficult to make a teenager at six o’clock in the morning do anything.” Table 7 demonstrates the frequency with which students, staff, and parents mentioned early start times or tiredness.
Table 7

*Early Start Times and Student Tiredness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early School Start Time and Student Tiredness</th>
<th>Start Times</th>
<th>Tired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Surveys</td>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Transportation Challenges*

Transportation challenges in getting to school were mentioned across all three stakeholder groups of students, staff, and parents, and were often mentioned in connection with the prior topic of early start times. In particular, members from all three groups mentioned that some students travel long distances to come to school and if they miss the bus, they do not have another means of transportation to school. One focus group member commented, “I think for some students just the logistics of getting here if they miss the bus, that's it. They don't have another option.” Across all three groups, connections were made between transportation challenges and early school start times. One parent summed up the overlap of transportation challenges and early start times by saying:

If you're having a bad morning, you have to get on the bus at 5:45 and you're living on the border of Caroline and Hanover or Caroline and King George and you have to get up early. You're in a bad mood by the time you walk to the end of your road…to get [to the bus stop]. You're going to give up and you're going to go back in the house, especially if your parents aren't there and they can't leave their job.

Table 8 displays the frequency with which transportation-related comments were mentioned in the surveys, focus group, and interviews.
Table 8

Transportation Challenges and Student Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th>Lack of Transportation</th>
<th>Long Bus Ride</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Surveys</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Divergence in Findings

While there were several topics that came up across all three stakeholder groups interviewed, there was also divergence in the responses or cases in which one group mentioned a factor and the others did not. Attendance policies, suspensions, social media, and attendance incentives constituted the areas in which divergence was present within the findings.

Excused Absences and Policy

One area of divergence in responses was rooted in an understanding of the state policies around attendance and legal constraints that schools have around what they can provide to incentivize students to attend more regularly. Several parents who were interviewed mentioned regular communication from both the Caroline High School principal, as well as the Caroline County School Board, around the importance of attendance and attendance policies. While many students requested to miss more days than permitted by state and local policies or to be allowed to take "mental health" days that did not count against them, some students showed that they understood the state policies governing attendance regulations by responding that students can miss school for sickness and illnesses. In one survey question that asked students if they received information about the importance of attendance, 29% of students surveyed responded Agree and
27% of students surveyed responded *Strongly Agree*, representing over half of the student respondents.

While students and parents alike responded that they received information about the importance of attendance, many students showed a lack of understanding of current attendance policies and regulations. When asked what the school can do to encourage students to attend school more regularly, some students named solutions that are not within the school’s purview based on state and school division level regulations, including student mental health days and not having consequences for student absences or tardies. Currently under the Caroline County Attendance Regulation, “all students must be in school a minimum of three hours to be counted present and students with five tardies or five early dismissals will not be eligible for perfect attendance” (Attendance Policy Student Absences/Excuses, 2017). One student even noted, “Sometimes life hits us with situations where school can’t be our priority and we get punished for that at school when it's out of our control.” Gaps in understanding of the state and local attendance policies were evident among students who were surveyed, but not among the parents who were interviewed.

**Suspensions**

Another area of divergence in the findings was around the impact of suspensions and discipline issues on student attendance, which was mentioned throughout the focus group with staff. One staff member noted, “I just think the constant every time you turn around kids are being kicked out for something.” In contrast, this topic was not mentioned at all in the parent interviews or the student interviews, demonstrating that from the staff perspective, this is a major contributing factor; however, it was not deemed as such by the other two stakeholder groups.
Social Media

Another area of divergence among responses was in the area of social media and its impact on student attendance. Negativity about Caroline High School on social media was mentioned five times throughout the parent interviews as a contributing factor to student absences. One parent noted, “Parents' opinions affect everything your student does so the negativity towards Caroline County Public Schools is horrible on the social media platform.” Conversely, social media was not mentioned at all in the student interviews or the staff focus group as a contributing factor.

Attendance Incentives

A final area of divergence in the data involved the attendance incentives provided by the Caroline High School team. Research question 1 asks specifically about the effectiveness of attendance incentives, stating: "How effective were the strategies and interventions implemented by Caroline High School in decreasing chronic absenteeism for their students?” As a result, a question about the attendance incentives was included on all three data collection forms: the survey, the interviews, and the focus group. On the student surveys, only 43% of students stated that they were aware of incentives put into place for attendance. Also, of the seven parents interviewed, only three were aware of incentives in place and the remainder did not feel that their students were motivated to attend school by any school incentives in place. In contrast, during the focus group, the staff members spoke at length about various incentives, including attendance at a basketball game, ice cream socials, and goodie bags that were given out in the past. However, some focus group members were skeptical of the effectiveness of the incentives, perceiving them more as rewards due to the timeliness of when they were made known to students.
Chapter Summary

Throughout the three data sources, commonalities across responses arose, especially in the areas of student connectedness, mental health, early start times, and transportation. Where the differences in responses and perspectives arose were in the areas of attendance laws and policies, suspensions, social media, and incentives. The data from the three stakeholder groups were analyzed to determine findings and notice trends in responses. The next chapter will make connections between the findings mentioned above and the research around chronic absenteeism, shared in the literature review, combined to offer recommendations to the Caroline High School team for future actions.
Chapter 5: Recommendations

As the Research Team begins to present our recommendations, a review of the research questions is in order to assess the findings. The first research question asked which of Caroline High School’s attendance incentives and strategies were effective. Findings showed that student engagement and attendance interviews were not effective, as evidenced by student survey responses. Reward incentives and attendance team meetings were approaching effective, as some students’ self-reported engagement with school, extracurricular activities, and student internal motivation were effective, as illustrated below in Figure 11. The second research question asked if there were any gaps in the strategies that were put into place. The Research Team identified gaps in relation to student engagement, mental health, and out-of-school suspensions, which align with recommendations offered in this chapter. The final research question asked if, given the limited time and resources available to Caroline High School administration, what strategies could be implemented. This chapter includes the Research Team's recommendations for research, changes to policy, and changes to practice to try to meet the identified needs.

Figure 11

Effectiveness of Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Effective</th>
<th>Approaching Effective</th>
<th>Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Chronic absenteeism interviews</td>
<td>- Reward type incentive events (basketball game)</td>
<td>- Students with a connection to school attend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Student self-reported perception of engagement</td>
<td>- Attendance team meetings</td>
<td>- Extracurriculars and sports are an attendance draw for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Attendance messaging with parents</td>
<td>- Many students are motivated to attend regularly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In recent years, the amount of research on chronic absenteeism and its impact on student achievement and schools has increased nationwide (Gottfried, 2022; Kostyo et al., 2017; United
States Department of Education, 2016). This research has generally identified the impacts of chronic absenteeism by comparing absenteeism rates to student achievement on assessments and graduation rates. This study was designed to understand a rural Virginia high school’s efforts to combat the rise in its chronic absenteeism rates. These rates rose dramatically following the school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic and the school year of virtual instruction that followed. Caroline County, the site of this study, is one of 70 Virginia school divisions that use the one high school model based on the population within its locality (Virginia School Quality Profiles, 2016). The results and recommendations of this study may be transferable to other similar school divisions.

The goal was to investigate if the strategies implemented by Caroline High School staff to address chronic absenteeism were successful in reducing the number of students who missed more than 10% of the school year. Additionally, the study aimed to identify any gaps in the interventions and strategies employed. Considering the limited resources available, the researchers explored whether there are alternative strategies or interventions that might prove more effective in improving student attendance. Student survey data, parent interviews, and a staff focus group provided the Research Team with insight into the thinking and perspective of each stakeholder group. This chapter will discuss the data collected from the participants in the surveys, interviews, and the focus group. The Research Team will also make recommendations for changes in policies and possible interventions or additional research-based strategies to continue to address chronic absenteeism among Caroline High School students.

**Discussion**

Utilizing data from all participant groups, the Research Team developed five themes to understand the impact of the causes of chronic absenteeism and the interventions put in place:
Student Connectedness, Relationships, Mental Health, Excused Absences and Policy, and School and Future Success. Each theme shows a different aspect of student chronic absenteeism, shedding light on the reasons why schools find it challenging to address the issue effectively. The Student Connectedness theme was identified based on responses that showed a lack of engagement, a negative perception of the school, or students wanting the school to be more engaging. Gottfried (2019) notes that students who habitually miss school as a result of disengagement become further behind academically and will be more likely to drop out of school. The substantial number of responses indicating a lack of student connectedness to the school implies a direct influence on the chronic absenteeism rate among students. As noted in Chapter 2, research shows disengagement is a leading barrier to some students’ lack of attendance, with many citing boredom when describing school (Holyfield, 2019). Creating opportunities such as incentives, engaging academic activities, and social events that encourage student connectedness at Caroline High School should be a focus for improved attendance and improved academic outcomes.

All groups participating in the study identified the need to develop positive relationships between students and staff, students and other students, or students and their parents. Relationships were identified as a frequent factor in students attending school regularly, mentioned 51 times by students describing who they attended school for, including other students, parents, and trusted school employees. In their survey responses, students expressed a desire to be listened to and understood by school staff when providing explanations for their absences. Having a positive relationship at school contributes to a positive school climate, which is considered to have the strongest effect on student absenteeism in a school setting (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gray, 2022).
The theme of Student Mental Health plays a role in addressing school absenteeism, as it has a direct impact on students' attendance and, in turn, their academic success. Allison and Attisha (2019) suggest that students may refuse to go to school as a coping mechanism for stress caused by mental health concerns. Awareness of the problem of mental health concerns is prominently highlighted in student survey results, parent interviews with the researchers, and a staff focus group. Providing mental health interventions has been shown to improve school attendance (Hoagwood et al., 2007). Schools can be useful partners in linking students with mental health needs with providers.

The theme of Excused Absences and Policy was developed from data that dealt with legal and policy requirements on schools and districts for student attendance. This theme includes participant responses that illustrate how the function of school structures impacts student attendance, such as transportation and the start time for the school day, given that both of those are set by school and county policy guidelines. Data collected by the Research Team indicates that stakeholders, particularly students, demonstrate a lack of understanding of existing legal and policy requirements and the rationale behind them. Frequently, student survey responses seek permission for students to skip school at their discretion and advocate for a lack of consequences for such absences. It is important to educate students and other stakeholders about the rationale behind these requirements and their implications on school policy and student obligations. Balfanz (2016) praises the efforts of the Attendance Works group, particularly in their approach to incorporating parent education into their strategies to address chronic absenteeism. Their methods have resulted in a notable reduction in absenteeism rates. Initiating dialogue with stakeholders to enhance their comprehension of policies and exploring potential adjustments to policies could contribute significantly to building an understanding of these requirements.
School and Future Success emerged as a theme among students who expressed positive attitudes toward school or a drive to be successful based on self-motivation. Students describe wanting to graduate or move on to higher education as part of their determination to be academically successful and attend school consistently. Strategies for improving student motivation, as discussed later in this chapter, may require a comprehensive approach, providing both academic and socio-emotional support and cultivating educational settings that are engaging, nurturing, and attentive to students' goals and needs. Creating a drive for student success and connections to future opportunities for engaging a larger portion of the Caroline High School students has the potential to positively impact attendance rates and improve student assessment scores.

**Recommendations for Research**

This first section of recommendations focuses on themes for further research that arose from the findings of this research study. While further research could be conducted on a variety of topics affecting chronic absenteeism, the Research Team identified student disengagement as the most relevant topic for further investigation because it was frequently mentioned in student responses as a common reason for absences. As explained in Chapter 4, disengagement from school was reported in the student survey responses as a primary reason cited by students for why some students miss school. Among responses within this category, the most common were “because they don’t want to,” “because school is boring,” and “because school is draining.” These findings connect to research from Wagstaff et al. (2000), explaining that students are more likely to be chronically absent if they perceive their education as irrelevant or uninteresting. While it was beyond the scope of this research to study the instruction at Caroline High School, the findings mentioned above pave the way for additional research on teaching methods for
engaging students in learning and attending school regularly. As well, given the frequency with which student connectedness came up in the survey data, further research into teaching methods could analyze strategies that teachers can utilize in order to deepen connections with students to encourage regular attendance.

The Research Team also found a link at Caroline High School between students who feel a connection to school and those who attend school regularly, with the most commonly noted connections being student friendships, relationships with staff members, and extracurricular activities like sports. Young et al. (2020) emphasize that an important aspect of reducing chronic absenteeism is supporting students in developing a sense of connectivity to school. The findings from this research study open opportunities for further research into the question of what students need most to feel engaged with the school itself, beyond just learning that happens in the classroom.

**Recommendation for Policy Change**

This section provides recommendations that may require a change in either current state or local policy. These policy changes are important for addressing chronic absenteeism effectively since they impact broader aspects of student well-being and access to education beyond the scope of individual school policies. By advocating for and collaborating on systemic changes at the state or local level, educational leaders can create an environment that better supports students' attendance and academic success, ensuring that all students have equitable access to education and opportunities for achievement.

**Mental Health**

Students' mental health has become a major concern in today's educational environment, calling for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to support and intervention in schools. As
well, mental health surfaced as an area of concern across all three stakeholders at Caroline High School, suggesting that current policies might need to be developed in order to better meet the needs of students. “Schools represent the most common setting in which both mental illness prevention and mental wellness promotion programs are delivered” (Cook, 2015, p. 2). Incorporating mental health support systems into educational settings not only helps students meet their individual needs but also creates a supportive and welcoming environment that is beneficial to their general well-being and academic achievement. Caroline High School highlighted that in February 2024, Caroline County Public Schools added a behavior intervention therapist, a music therapist, and a virtual music therapist to their team, who will be coming to schools across the county in some capacity.

Having school-based mental health services available is essential to giving students quick access to support. The presence of mental health professionals such as social workers, psychologists, behavior specialists, and counselors within the schools provides students encountering mental health difficulties immediate access to support and services. Regular mental health screenings can help prevent the progression of mental health concerns by proactively identifying students who require support and encouraging early intervention. A study by Husky et al. (2011) found that “Systematic voluntary school-based mental health screening and referral offers a feasible means of identifying and connecting high-risk adolescents to school- and community-based mental health services” (p. 850). Beyond just identifying students who are at risk, the research also shows the importance of connecting them to support services. Husky et al. (2011) further noted:

Three of four adolescents found to be at risk were not currently receiving any mental health treatment, highlighting the extent of unmet need and reinforcing the importance of
proactive screening as a means of uncovering previously unidentified individuals at risk.

(p. 849)

The establishment of a secure and encouraging school atmosphere is crucial in reducing elements that may have a negative impact on students' mental well-being. Chang (2018) reinforces the idea that offering assistance to a single student who is persistently missing school is important, but so is identifying issues that affect big groups of students. Schools and districts in these situations have to decide whether to implement policy changes or programmatic solutions. The assistance must be based on an awareness of the fundamental issue causing an identified set of students' absences. Wellness areas in the school can contribute to a reduction in students' stress and anxiety while promoting a sense of belonging.

Addressing students' mental health requires actively involving and engaging with both staff and families to advocate for the policies necessary to address students’ needs in this area. Encouraging these stakeholders to play an active role in children's mental well-being and equipping them with tools to positively influence their overall health are two ways in which workshops and counseling services extend the support system beyond the school environment. Ensuring continuity of care and support for students with more profound mental health needs involves establishing clear referral protocols and educating both students and families about the local mental health options available to them. Healthy Schools Campaign (2023) noted that an important strategy for raising school attendance is to provide students access to behavioral health programs offered in schools.

Tailored support for a range of student needs should be delivered through specialized programs and therapies targeting high-risk groups, incorporating mindfulness and stress reduction techniques. Raviv et al. (2022) highlight that a continuous cycle of assessment and
development founded on input and data-driven choices ensures that mental health support services continue to adapt to students' changing needs. These programs should provide specific tools and strategies to effectively tackle the unique challenges encountered by different student demographics. When implemented consistently over time, this process will enhance the impact of mental health interventions through the promotion of continual learning and adjustment.

**Early Start Times**

As discussed in Chapter 4, challenges associated with the current start time at Caroline High School, 7:30 a.m., were mentioned by all three stakeholder groups: students, staff, and parents. The early start time was mentioned as a contributing factor to chronic absenteeism for many students. Neuroscience research shows that due to natural shifts in circadian rhythms, teens have a later natural sleep onset (Wahlstrom & Owens, 2017), and their bodies produce melatonin between 11:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. (O’Malley & O’Malley, 2008). Nahmood et al. (2019) also found that students who attended schools with later than 8:30 a.m. start times accumulated “172 minutes, 117 minutes, and 105 minutes more sleep when compared to their peers starting before 7:30 a.m., 7:30 - 7:59 a.m., and 8:00 - 8:29 a.m., respectively” (p. 5). Therefore, early school start times do not always align with teenage sleep rhythms, which can have a negative effect on student attendance rates.

Beyond affecting student sleep rhythms, studies have shown a correlation between later school start times and increased attendance rates. In a study of later start times, McKeever et al. (2022) saw a 10% increase in graduation rates and a 3% increase in attendance rates across 28 schools. Fuller and Bastian (2020) found a correlation between later start times and increased student engagement in school. This directly aligns with one of the key findings in this study, where disengagement and the desire for connectedness were consistently emphasized. Fuller and
Bastian additionally presented a theoretical model outlining various positive outcomes associated with later school start times. These benefits encompass enhanced sleep, improved alertness, attention, memory, and mental health, along with heightened school engagement and improved academic achievement (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12**

*Fuller and Bastian (2020) Theoretical Model*

![Diagram showing the theoretical model](image)

While there are numerous factors to examine when considering a change in school start times, including transportation, staff contracts, and community beliefs, as McKeever and Clark (2017) explain, the unique sleep needs of adolescents must be greatly considered when determining school start times. Therefore, an area of policy change worth considering at Caroline High School pertains to adjusting school start times to better align with natural teenage sleep-wake cycles. Such a change has the potential to contribute to reduced rates of chronic absenteeism and increased student engagement.

**Bus Routes**

As explained by the Race Matters Institute (2013), and as shown in the findings in Chapter 4, a variety of home factors can affect students’ attendance rates, including transportation. Bus transportation in Caroline County’s rural school division can present various challenges, including the large geographic distance being covered by buses, areas with lower population density, and staffing qualified bus drivers. Given that bus routes are set at the county level and not the school level, any overhauls of the current system will require the assistance of
the transportation department to ensure that current offerings are meeting the needs of students and their families. Riding the school bus “may harm performance if it encroaches on time for homework, extracurricular activities, or sleep, or increases absenteeism—due either to the timing of pickup or drop-off or the length of the commute itself” (Cordes et al., 2022, p.689).

Addressing the challenges of transportation requires a comprehensive approach at the division level to analyze bus routes and identify opportunities to optimize transportation efficiency, potentially reducing travel times and ensuring timely arrivals. Streamlining travel times could minimize disruptions and encourage regular student attendance at school.

Evaluating the area's geography and demographics could lead to adjustments in bus stop locations, making them more accessible to students. Identifying and addressing transportation barriers, such as long distances, could contribute to improved attendance. Cordes et al. (2022) found negative effects of long commutes on attendance and chronic absenteeism. Restructuring routes or implementing alternative transportation solutions may be necessary to ensure that transportation-related barriers are addressed. Engaging with community partners, as part of a community-wide initiative, could provide alternative transportation for students who miss the bus or fall into Tier 2 or Tier 3 chronic absenteeism categories. Faith-based and non-profit community partnerships, in addition to using school division-operated cars and vans, may cut down on costs, route times, and staffing needs. Targeted improvements in transportation logistics and accessibility may be needed to positively impact student attendance. Improvements may require adjusting the number of buses and assigning additional staff to enhance the overall transportation system.
Coding Instruction Outside of Normal Hours

Caroline High School may consider opportunities to help students recover lost time when they are absent from school. An email from the VDOE Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction on January 31, 2024, included in Appendix G, outlines steps for addressing attendance coding questions related to flexible, in-person instructional opportunities in schools. The message clarifies the standards for coding attendance for flexible instructional time, emphasizing a higher standard than the one set during the pandemic. The criteria for coding attendance in flexible, in-person instructional time include being taught by a licensed teacher, in-person engagement, adherence to pupil-to-teacher requirements, instruction tied to Virginia content standards, consistent interactions, and occurring outside normal school hours. The communication also details the conditions under which the Chronic Absenteeism rate will be adjusted based on attendance in flexible instructional time, providing specific hour requirements and limitations. The email emphasizes the importance of tracking and reporting flexible instructional hours, ensuring that they do not erase previous absences but contribute to mitigating learning loss. Santibañez et al. (2021) found that “although all students experience the negative effects of absenteeism on academic outcomes, certain vulnerable subgroups of students—particularly low-income students, students with disabilities, and homeless and foster youth—are more subject to learning loss than other students” (p. 399). School divisions must creatively use opportunities outside of the normal school day to mitigate the learning loss caused by chronic absenteeism.

The examples provided in the email from the VDOE Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction illustrate how the adjustment in chronic absenteeism calculation works for students participating in after-school, in-person flexible instruction programs. A recommendation
for Caroline High School is to offer after-school or Saturday school opportunities for students to engage in in-person flexible instruction programs outside of the normal school day and use the guidance provided by the VDOE to track “Hours of Flexible Instructional Time.” Meals and transportation should be provided to students during the programs outside of the school day to ensure that students’ needs are being met. This initiative will align with the VDOE’s guidelines and ensure that CHS maximizes the effectiveness of flexible instructional time to address absenteeism and enhance student achievement.

**Recommendation for Practice**

The final section of recommendations highlights four practices to strengthen the impact of what is currently in place at Caroline High School that could bolster student attendance rates, including the establishment of an attendance task force, an out-of-school suspension center, a mentorship program, and a community-wide chronic absenteeism initiative. As stated in the literature review, student reasons for missing school are nuanced and often affected by external factors. As such, the recommendations below focus on tackling the issue of chronic absenteeism from multiple angles.

**Attendance Task Force**

At present, Caroline High School incorporates attendance discussions within grade-level team meetings. Attendance is one portion of the agenda during these meetings, which are attended by four members of the administration team, as assigned by grade level. The administration team then convenes weekly to provide updates from each of the meetings on their specific grade level, attendance being part of that discussion. The formation of an attendance task force, launched by school leadership, would mark a pivotal step towards addressing and improving school attendance. This task force would be dedicated to identifying, understanding,
and tackling the underlying issues contributing to absenteeism. Leadership in this initiative will be crucial, as it requires a balanced approach combining data analysis, empathetic understanding, and proactive problem-solving. Initially, the task force must establish a regular meeting schedule and formulate a predetermined agenda to ensure that the team stays focused and adheres to the allotted time. Sprick and Sprick (2018) reveal that highly effective attendance teams have succeeded in creating positive change, including significant reductions in office disciplinary referrals and suspensions, improved attendance, and improved staff morale and sense of efficacy. “These teams have clear goals and objectives, meeting structures, and roles and responsibilities, and they continuously work to get all staff members on board with the initiative” (Sprick & Sprick, 2018, p. 25).

**Define the Purpose and Objectives**

The first step in establishing an attendance task force is to clearly outline the goals of the team. This could include reducing chronic absenteeism, improving overall attendance rates, identifying at-risk students, and developing intervention strategies. “Meetings should be long enough to ensure that the team can analyze schoolwide data, develop plans to address concerns, and allocate responsibilities for creating needed materials or guiding implementation” (Sprick & Sprick, 2018, p. 26). The emphasis should be on ensuring that meetings provide ample time for comprehensive discussions and strategic planning to effectively address and manage various aspects of school-related challenges or initiatives. Chang (2022) reinforces that improving attendance is not a solo endeavor. It is necessary to establish school and district teams that can collaborate effectively to implement multi-tiered supports, identify and address widespread barriers to attendance, determine and build upon successful strategies, and involve the entire community in the effort to improve attendance rates.
A secondary objective of the task force would be to include stakeholders in developing systematic changes at CHS that would improve student engagement. As mentioned in the findings section, 324 out of 625 students on the survey expressed that students do not attend school because it is “boring” or “draining.” As Gottfried (2014) shared, chronic absenteeism affects school culture at both the system level as well as the individual student level. In addition to encouraging students to attend more regularly, the attendance task force could tap into stakeholder voices to determine Tier 1 strategies aimed at improving school culture, which would encourage students to want to attend and build a stronger sense of belonging.

**Select Team Members**

Caroline High School currently uses a grade-level team model where they review academics, behaviors, and attendance of students. The administration then reviews each grade level’s concerns and notes at the weekly administration team meeting.

As much as possible, the team should include members from across the school staff, including the following: at least one administrator (e.g., principal, assistant principal, dean); several teachers, from both general education and special education, a school resource officer or campus security officer, and an attendance clerk or other classified staff member in charge of attendance data. (Sprick & Sprick, 2018, p. 24)

Addressing attendance concerns in the school requires strong leadership and must be a collaborative effort involving diverse members of the school community.

**Tightening Up Attendance Practices: Connection with MTSS**

The task force's efforts to refine attendance practices should be closely tied to the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Cook et al. (2010) highlight that numerous researchers have supported and promoted the adoption of MTSS as an efficient and effective
method for structuring and delivering a continuum of mental health services in schools. This connection is vital as MTSS is designed to provide varying levels of support to students based on their individual needs. As Cook (2016) notes, “MTSS represents a service delivery framework grounded in the public health model of prevention and consists of providing a continuum of evidence-based practices and making data-driven decisions” (p.167). While each grade level meets in formal meetings, the leadership of CHS reported attendance was a portion of a larger agenda in the meetings. By integrating attendance strategies within this framework, the task force ensures that attendance interventions are part of a holistic approach to student welfare. This integration makes it possible to provide individualized support that tackles both academic and non-academic barriers to attendance, fostering a deeper awareness of each student's specific situation.

**Intentionality in Rollout**

One of the primary objectives of the task force will be to establish clear and consistent information outlining the distinctions between chronic absenteeism and regular attendance, which entails distributing information to staff, parents, and children so that everyone is aligned with the same understanding. The task force's clear definition of these terms and their meanings will enhance awareness within the school community. By disseminating consistent information, the task force will create a shared comprehension across all stakeholders. A proactive approach will minimize confusion and bring a heightened awareness within the school community regarding the significance of consistent attendance. In doing so, the task force will establish a foundation for proactive measures and interventions, ultimately contributing to a positive and engaged school environment.
Staff

The more the attendance task force can support staff in implementing attendance strategies, the more likely it is that the strategies will be effective. “It is vital that how the teacher feels in the situation is assessed or understood. For teachers to effectively help to improve student attendance, they must feel motivated, prepared, and most of all capable” (Razor, 2022, p. 18). The importance of the staff and student connection in student attendance is evident in the student survey responses, as many students mentioned specific teachers by name as a reason for attending school. This finding demonstrates the importance of the staff and student relationship in creating a sense of belonging for students and in encouraging students to attend regularly.

Providing a series of professional development for staff could equip staff with effective strategies and resources to address chronic absenteeism among high school students, fostering a culture of regular attendance and enhancing student success. Staff members should leave the sessions with a better awareness of chronic absenteeism, the ability to pinpoint its underlying reasons, a sense of preparedness regarding how to address students’ absences, and a well-defined action plan tailored to their particular situation. By using a comprehensive approach, the staff will acquire not only theoretical knowledge but also useful tools and a plan for implementing real improvements at Caroline High School.

Parents

In turn, the school staff can apply the insights gained from professional development to enhance their communication and connection with parents regarding attendance. There are multiple modalities to inform parents about attendance, such as emails, social media, the school website, and text message alerts to share attendance tips, success stories, and reminders from classroom teachers. Staff can conduct workshops to educate parents on the importance of
attendance and how they can support their children. Participants can provide feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshop and identify areas for improvement. Feedback can inform future parent engagement initiatives and support efforts to improve student attendance rates. School data may indicate that specific times of year are problematic for school attendance. “Before these times of year, increase communication with families and encourage regular attendance” (Sprick & Sprick, 2018, p. 119). Strategic and targeted communication is needed to educate parents and guardians about the importance of attendance. Continuous feedback and data analysis should further guide targeted initiatives, ensuring sustained efforts to improve student attendance rates throughout the school year.

**Students**

Caroline High School has a system of interviewing students who are chronically absent. Based on the Research Team’s findings, while the attendance interviews are intended to address individual chronically absent students, 74% of high school students who participated in the interviews and answered the survey question reported the effectiveness of the interviews in the categories of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, or Neutral. These interviews, which are meant to help students improve their attendance and engagement in school, may not be effective for all students. Josovitz (2017) revealed, “Students who are struggling but who have significant relationships at school are more likely to communicate with their school about support they need” (p. 7). The findings suggest that alternative approaches or interventions at CHS may be necessary to better support those who struggle with attendance.

**Individualized Support Plans.** Instead of relying solely on attendance interviews, the school could develop individualized support plans for students who are chronically absent. These plans could involve collaboration between students, parents, teachers, counselors, and other
support staff to identify underlying issues contributing to absenteeism and implement targeted interventions to address them.

**Follow-up and Monitoring.** It is essential to have a system in place for follow-up and monitoring to track the progress of students who receive interventions. This could involve regular check-ins with students, adjustments to support plans as needed, and recognition of improvements in attendance. Additionally, ongoing communication between school staff and parents/guardians is crucial for maintaining accountability and support.

**Tailored Communication.** Caroline High School should consider connecting with students to educate them about the importance of school attendance by developing messaging and materials that are relatable and engaging for students. Staff should utilize student-friendly language, visuals, and examples to communicate the importance of regular attendance and the consequences of chronic absenteeism. An example of a graphic provided by the VDOE is included in Appendix H.

Another strategy is to encourage students to create their own content, such as posters, videos, or social media campaigns, to promote the importance of attending school consistently. An example poster is included in Appendix I. Having these materials visibly posted around the school in high-traffic areas such as the main office, hallways, and each classroom may not only empower students to take ownership of their school environment but also ensure that the messaging resonates with their peers. Messaging could also support the secondary objective of improving culture at CHS and could promote a sense of belonging among students with messages such as: “You Belong Here” or “We Need You Here at School.”
Incentives

An innovative aspect of the attendance task force's strategy may involve the intentional use of incentives to promote attendance, going beyond mere rewards. The attendance task force should craft incentives with the dual purpose of motivating attendance and fostering a sense of community and belonging among students. Incentives should be carefully chosen to be meaningful and relevant to students, thereby enhancing their effectiveness. The intentional use of incentives is part of a broader effort to create a positive school culture where regular attendance is valued and celebrated. Gillet and colleagues (2012) revealed that numerous studies have shown that students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is linked to many types of positive educational outcomes, including performance, school satisfaction, and persistence at school. Gillet et al. (2012) go on to say that choices, such as seen in Figure 13, provide opportunities for students to contribute their perspectives and participate in incentive decision-making while minimizing the use of pressure from parents or teachers.

The effectiveness of an attendance team relies on its ability to work collaboratively, respond to students' unique needs, and maintain a commitment to ongoing evaluation and improvement. As Chang (2016) describes, support for a group of students should be tailored to their specific needs and take into account the underlying issues causing their absences.
Student Support Center (Out-of-School Suspension Center)

Being suspended from school for an extended period can lead to disengagement and further behavioral issues for students (Balfanz et al., 2014). Out-of-school suspensions may have compounding effects on students’ future academic progress.

The exclusion of students from school for disciplinary reasons are directly related to lower attendance rates, increased course failures, and can set a student on a path of disengagement from school that will keep them from receiving a high school diploma and
further affect their chances of enrolling in post-secondary schooling and realizing many life-long career opportunities. (Balfanz et al., 2014, p. 1)

Staff who were interviewed in the focus group shared concerns about work that students miss when they are out due to suspensions. Implementing a Student Support Center (an out-of-school suspension center) at Caroline High School, where students would be placed for one to ten days as an alternative to out-of-school suspension, could offer several potential benefits, including providing a controlled, academic environment where students can receive targeted behavioral intervention and support while reducing student absences (VDOE, 2022).

**Benefits of a Student Support Center**

A Student Support Center at CHS could provide a more structured environment compared to allowing suspended students to be unsupervised at home during an out-of-school suspension, which sometimes may feel like a reward to students. This structured setting located on the school campus may offer a better chance for students to reflect on their poor behavior choices and make a plan for moving forward positively with the guidance of school staff. Such a center could instill a sense of accountability and responsibility in students by requiring them to actively participate in their own behavioral improvement plans and reduce their absenteeism rates. This could involve goal-setting, counseling, and reflection on their actions. The center could facilitate greater parental involvement in the disciplinary process, which can be crucial in addressing underlying issues and supporting behavioral change.

Balfanz et al. (2014) suggest a single suspension early in a student’s high school years can lead to further suspensions, absenteeism, failing grades throughout their remaining high school years, and not finishing high school. Students placed in the Student Support Center would have the opportunity to continue their school work during the suspension period. They would
have access to the internet, and their teachers would provide instructional materials and assignments. This could help reduce the interruption of their learning and ensure they stay engaged with academic materials. When assigned to the Student Support Center, students would be engaging in instruction and would be counted as present for the school day.

**Staff and Student Perceptions**

The need for an alternative to out-of-school suspensions aligns with the perspectives expressed in the staff focus group, suggesting a desire among CHS educators to explore a disciplinary approach that preserves students' attendance at school while upholding high expectations for students' conduct and behavior. During the staff focus group, a CHS teacher stated, “The students miss so much that I would rather see instead of a 10-day suspension, actually something smaller. I mean, they have to stay after school for so much time to get caught up on the work that they have missed.” Staff members emphasized the importance of maintaining instructional progress even while addressing behavioral issues, suggesting that alternatives to out-of-school suspensions could keep students more engaged and connected to the school community.

However, this view diverges from the feedback obtained through student surveys, where students cited feelings of disengagement from school. Being removed from the school setting disrupts their academic progress and weakens their ties to the school community, which can exacerbate feelings of disconnectedness. Alternative disciplinary methods are needed to address behavioral issues without severing students' school engagement. Administrators can work towards disciplinary methods that promote positive outcomes by exploring alternatives that keep students within a supportive school environment, such as a Student Support Center.
Comparable Out-of-School Suspension Centers in Virginia

School divisions across the Commonwealth of Virginia have implemented out-of-school suspension centers (VDOE, 2022). The Montgomery/Pulaski Counties Regional Alternative Education Program provides a comprehensive alternative education program for at-risk middle and high school youth in Montgomery and Pulaski counties. The program at Montgomery Central provides an alternative to out-of-school suspension for middle and high school students and a therapeutic education program for at-risk students in grades 6-12. The “New Horizons” daytime program within Wythe/Bland Alternative Education Academy works to increase the number of students staying in school, improve attendance, reduce the number of suspensions, increase the passing rate in academic classes, provide credit recovery opportunities, and provide an accelerated academic program for students who have fallen behind their graduation cohort.

Comparable On-Campus Intervention Program (OCIP)

While research on out-of-school suspension centers is scarce, Armstrong and colleagues (2003) documented an On-Campus Intervention Program (OCIP) aimed at "expanding availability and filling gaps in services offered to children and families" (p. 491). The study reviewed a report from Harvard University (2000) on promising practices in school disciplinary programs and concluded that "students who attended OCIP exhibited improved behavior after being assigned to the program, leading to reduced disciplinary referrals" (p. 491). OCIP offers a proactive alternative to suspension by integrating counseling services with academic support, specifically tailored to address challenges such as defiance and other non-violent behaviors among students (Boroughs et al., 2002). A longitudinal evaluation of OCIP in a Florida school district suggests an alternative to traditional out-of-school-school suspension by incorporating three key elements. Firstly, students are separated from the general student population within the
school premises during their suspension period. Secondly, a dedicated teacher is assigned to guide students through their academic assignments, ensuring they remain up-to-date with their studies. Thirdly, the program includes counseling services by a trained counselor, offering intervention for behavioral and emotional issues students may be facing. Students may also be connected with adult mentors for further support.

The rationale of OCIP is that while students are held accountable for their disruptive or rule-breaking behavior, they remain under supervision on school grounds, which allows them to keep up-to-date with their academics and receive necessary counseling to address the root causes of their behavioral challenges. The program evaluation suggests OCIP effectively reduces out-of-school suspensions, reduces recurring disruptive behaviors, and fosters academic continuity among participating students (Boroughs et al., 2002).

**Student Support Services**

A Student Support Center at CHS could serve as a space for targeted behavioral intervention and support. Teachers and staff could work with students to address the root causes of their behavioral issues, facilitate reflection, and provide counseling or other support services. Students receiving related services would be able to access some services under the direct guidance of their special education case managers. The center could also serve as a hub for connecting suspended students with community support services, such as counseling or social services. Such a holistic approach could address various contributing factors to students’ behavioral challenges. By removing students with behavioral challenges from the regular classroom setting, the Student Support Center would help maintain a focused and positive learning environment for students, maintaining high behavioral expectations and measures of accountability intended with out-of-school suspensions.
Incorporating mental health supports would be essential when considering a Student Support Center to ensure students receive the assistance they need to manage emotional, behavioral, or social challenges. For instance, access to counseling services, behavioral therapy, or social skills training could help maintain the educational connection and contribute to students' personal growth and well-being. Mental health services could help staff in addressing the root causes of students' behavioral issues, rather than merely punishing students. By ensuring that mental health supports are available, the Student Support Center could create a nurturing environment that could lead to better behavioral outcomes, enhanced academic performance, and a stronger, more inclusive school community.

Implementing an effective alternative to out-of-school suspensions, particularly one that includes mental health supports, will require careful planning around staffing. Ensuring that the school has the appropriate personnel allocated to the Student Support Center would be crucial to its success. Required personnel may include general education and special education teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, behavioral specialists, and administrative support. Investing in a team of professionals and partnering with community resources equipped to address students' academic and emotional needs would be key to successfully reducing out-of-school suspensions and supporting students in a Student Support Center.

**Evaluation of the Student Support Center**

Given the scarcity of research regarding the efficacy of out-of-school suspension centers, implementing a thorough evaluation process for such a program would be especially necessary. A program evaluation should assess various aspects of the center, including its impact on student behavior, academic performance, and emotional well-being. Demographics of the students being referred would need to be analyzed, specifically to consider race, disability, and gender, to
identify any patterns or biases in the referral process. The evaluation should also track the
duration of each student's stay in the Student Support Center. Data on recidivism rates, academic
outcomes, and student and staff feedback on students' feelings of connectedness and engagement
should be analyzed. The evaluation should provide valuable insights into how effectively the
center would serve as a disciplinary alternative and whether it contributes to or hinders students'educational progress. Such an evaluation could explore the center's long-term effects on students'
reintegration into the regular school environment. A comprehensive approach would fill a gap in
existing research and guide future practices on implementing and improving out-of-school
suspension policies, ensuring they are implemented fairly and effectively across all student
groups.

**Mentorship Program**

The Research Team recommends the implementation of a mentorship support program at
Caroline High School as support for Tier 2 high absentee students and Tier 3 chronically absent
students to help reduce student apathy, increase student connectedness, and improve student
attendance. Tier 2 interventions aim to address individual cases of school attendance issues and
focus on improving the functioning of both students and families. Interventions include
approaches to improve student connection and engagement, and mentoring programs that involve
teachers, peers, or other individuals (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Mentoring is an effective and
evidence-based approach to fostering positive youth development (DuBois et al., 2011). May and
colleagues (2021) show that low-income students who were mentored during middle school and
high school had significantly fewer absences. Therefore, students at CHS with high numbers of
missed days at school may benefit from the implementation of a mentoring program.
Program Set-Up

When setting up a mentoring program at CHS, staff should consider the components needed. Successful components of a mentoring program include monitoring program implementation, training mentors, parent involvement, planning strategic activities for mentors and their mentees, and clarifying expectations regarding the frequency of mentoring meetings (Dubois et al., 2002). When setting up this program, staff should determine the type of mentoring program to offer. The Research Team recommends that CHS use the group mentoring model to support identified students who would benefit from this intervention. Recommendations for this model are based on a study by Dubois (2011), which found similar effect sizes between 1-to-1 mentoring compared to groups. Furthermore, studies regarding group models have shown it is effective in improving participant outcomes related to topics being mentored (Geenam et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2018; Plourde et al., 2017).

Implementation

After CHS determines the preferred model for implementation, staff personnel must be assigned the task of planning, implementing, and monitoring the program to ensure fidelity and success. Next, CHS will need to identify mentors to work with students. Students who fall into Tier 1 categories for absenteeism may benefit from peer-led group mentoring (Gunn et al., 2017), whereas students in Tier 2 or Tier 3 category may need an adult lead group mentor (Kuperminc et al., 2020). The team might consider using student groups such as the Student Council Association and National Honor Society members who are example setters and may need to earn community service hours. With regard to adult mentors, the team might consider teachers, coaches, parents, and community members approved by the School Board to support students within the school building. Next, the team will need to determine how parents will participate in
the mentorship program. Will they be updated on student progress? Will they be consulted and included in scheduled events? Training the mentors will be the next step in this process. The team must determine the scope of mentor-to-mentee relationships, define topics to be addressed, identify events to attend, outline how mentors will build relationships, and specify the nature of relationships with their mentees. Finally, the selected program supervisor will need to monitor program implementation, which may require consideration of what data to collect and what benchmarks CHS will set for this program to be considered successful.

Identification of Students for Participation

When identifying students for receiving mentorship services, the team should consider tiered systems of support. Groups of students to consider are newly transitioning 9th grade students, students who currently fall into the Tier 2 category (near chronically absent students), and students who currently fall into the Tier 3 category (chronically absent students). Additionally, focusing on a tiered system of support will help students at their current level of need. For example, supporting Tier 2 and Tier 3 transitioning 9th grade students may require consultation with Caroline Middle School administration to identify students who were chronically, or near chronically absent in 8th grade, lack a connection to their middle school, or display difficult student behaviors or apathy towards school. By considering tiered support through mentoring, CHS could provide an avenue of support for each student's individual needs while working to help students build connections and learn to form better school-based relationships.

Community-Wide Chronic Absenteeism Initiative

Student survey data shows that disengagement and negative perceptions are problems for Caroline High School. The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) approach suggests that
implementing various interventions at different levels can effectively address students with varying levels of school attendance. Research suggests that disengagement is directly linked to poor school attendance, but strategies to increase parent involvement in school decision-making, parent participation in school activities, and teacher-parent trust may boost attendance rates and decrease chronic absenteeism (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Similar to students, families may also experience disengagement from both the school and the broader community it serves.

School leadership and staff can positively impact student attendance through parent and community engagement because “studies suggest that schools that want to increase daily student attendance are more likely to succeed if they reach out to and work with parents in specific ways to address the problem” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p. 309). Singer (2024) suggests, based on research in Michigan schools experiencing high rates of absenteeism, that effectively addressing chronic absenteeism requires acknowledging the complex and interconnected causes of absenteeism and prioritizing targeted efforts to identify and mitigate the barriers preventing regular attendance. The Research Team recommends that CHS, as a part of Caroline County Public Schools (CCPS), work to develop a community-wide chronic absenteeism initiative to foster engagement with student attendance. Strategies such as communicating with families in native languages, planning events around community events, and intentionally working to engage community members from historically underrepresented populations, as these students often experience higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Applied Survey Research, 2011; Chang & Davis, 2015; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gottfried, 2019; Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022; Jacob & Lovett, 2017; London et al., 2016; Spencer, 2009; U.S. Department of Education & Office for Civil Rights, 2016).
The Research Team identified five themes emerging from the student survey, parent interviews, and focus group response data. These five themes are Student Connectedness, Excused Absences and Policy, Relationships, Mental Health, and School and Future Success. The parent and community involvement recommendation through the community-wide chronic absenteeism initiative would seek to address each of these themes as part of an MTSS approach to the problem. With the MTSS framework, it is possible to prioritize multiple focus areas simultaneously, including students’ academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical health domains (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Varied strategies in these recommendations would allow CHS to engage families, address the misunderstanding of laws and policies governing student attendance, provide mental health supports, develop relationships, and provide connections for student success.

The first groups of students addressed in the MTSS approach would be the Tier 1 students. This group represents the largest group of students making up 80 to 85% of students who do not typically have historical chronic absenteeism issues. Community outreach for increasing parent and student engagement can be developed to work through the MTSS approach by applying wide-ranging strategies that seek to engage, inform, and impact this largest group. Creating a community-wide message and plan can have a positive impact on everyone’s understanding of the issue of chronic absenteeism. Jordan (2019) suggests that using strategies such as positive messaging, forming partnerships within the community, nudge messaging, relationship building, creating a welcoming school culture, and offering incentives can impact Tier 1 students, parents, and community engagement at Caroline High School. School staff can engage parents and community leaders by creating a shared message and utilizing these strategies that prove effective in the Caroline community.
Tier 2 students and families in the MTSS approach are students who show a need for some additional support beyond the needs of the larger group. This group of students would show historical chronic absenteeism in their school attendance background. Jordan (2019) suggests strategies such as early warning, mentoring, youth engagement, addressing chronic health issues such as asthma, and targeted transportation. Each of these strategies can be employed by Caroline High School as part of the community-wide chronic absenteeism initiative. The community can provide mentors, health care providers, and transportation as part of their involvement in the initiative, allowing parents and students to access support and improve attendance in conjunction with the other recommendations.

MTSS identifies Tier 3 students as demonstrating the most intense needs and, therefore, requiring the most support. Students in Tier 3 will have participated in each step of the Caroline County Public School’s attendance policy JED-R. Strategies for assisting this group through the community-wide chronic absenteeism initiative include policy actions, interagency case management, and housing assistance (Jordan, 2019). Most of the strategies fall outside the resources of Caroline High School but not out of the Caroline County community. With a shared mission of reducing chronic absenteeism, support and resources from the government agencies within the community can work in concert to help address the needs of this smallest group in the tiered system.

**Conclusion**

Chronic absenteeism is a national educational issue in both the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia. Research shows that chronic absenteeism has a significant impact on a student’s success in life (The United States Department of Education, 2016). Caroline High School’s administration expressed their determination to meet the needs of students in their care
and do what is best for their school community. Therefore, the Research Team sought to understand gaps in attendance interventions based on findings through this analysis.

The Research Team’s methods provided opportunities for stakeholder groups to contribute to this conversation. Student surveys, parent interviews, and a staff focus group were conducted to give voice to all impacted stakeholders while gathering the data needed to provide CHS with the best possible understanding of the impact of their strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism in their school. Data collected identified key themes regarding the need to develop relationships at CHS, address student mental health, understand unexcused absences and policies, and the desire for school and student future success.

The Research Team's recommendations include the need for CHS to consider policy changes in the areas of school-based mental health services, school start times, and bus routes. The recommendations for immediate implementation made by the team include consideration for an attendance task force, consideration of an out-of-school suspension center, implementation of a mentoring program, and a community chronic absenteeism initiative. It is therefore proposed that CHS staff continue their work in reducing chronic absenteeism through MTSS and its impact on students by focusing on their current attendance programs, policy changes, and the recommendations presented in this study.
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

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Appendix A

Absenteeism by Subgroup at Caroline High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>2020-2021 Below 10%</th>
<th>2020-2021 10% or Above</th>
<th>2021-2022 Below 10%</th>
<th>2021-2022 10% or Above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>232 (19.6%)</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>418 (35.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>109 (19.6%)</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>200 (36.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>123 (19.5%)</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>218 (35.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>67 (20.3%)</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>118 (37.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>28 (20.1%)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>44 (32.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>97 (16.4%)</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>204 (34.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Races</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>36 (32.4%)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>38 (24.1%)</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>62 (32.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>160 (30.4%)</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>241 (45.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Learners</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2 (8.3%)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4 (211%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Study and Introduction Letter

Chronic Absenteeism Study

November 27, 2023

Caroline High School students, parents/guardians, and staff members,

The Caroline High School administrative team is excited to announce a partnership with a Virginia Commonwealth University research team. Last year the CHS community reduced the number of students who missed more than 18 school days by more than 10%. This was a huge achievement for the community because being at school is essential for student success. This research team is seeking to study the impact of the student attendance incentives that made this achievement possible. The team also wants to help the school administration understand which incentives were the most effective and if there are other strategies that might also impact student attendance. Each of you can help with this process.

Each member of the CHS community has a viewpoint on the past incentives that can help the team form a clear picture of student attendance last school year. The team will be inviting members of the community to participate by completing a survey, participating in an interview, or being in a focus group about how the attendance strategies impacted them last year.

We look forward to joining the CHS community and working with each of you to continue the growth and development of students at CHS.

If you do not want to participate in the study, please complete the research opt out portion of the form that is attached to this letter and return it to Dr. Connolly at CHS.

Sincerely,
The VCU Research Team

Melissa Bugaj
Dana Chen
Amanda Harper
William Pettus
Patrick Simmons
Appendix C

Consent for Participation in Research

Title: A Mixed Methods Program Evaluation of Chronic Absenteeism Interventions at Caroline High School

Introduction: This form aims to provide you with information that may affect your decision to participate in this research study. The team performing this research will answer any additional questions. Please read the information below carefully and ask any questions before agreeing to participate or opting out. This form will be used as a record of your consent or your decision to opt out of participation.

Purpose of the Study:
This quantitative and qualitative (mixed method) study aims to understand how the student attendance improvement strategies at Caroline High School impacted student attendance during the 2022-2023 school year.

What will you be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a short online survey which will ask about:
- basic non-identifying demographic information
- Provide information about your school attendance during the 2022-2023 school year
- Your opinion on the effectiveness of attendance interventions
- If you are a parent, you will be asked if you want to participate in an interview
- If you are a staff member, you will be asked to participate in a focus group that will ask about the impact of the attendance strategies

What are the risks involved in the study?
There are risks associated with any survey or interview. The risk is connected to issues of confidentiality. The team has worked to limit potential risks for any participant. There is no foreseeable risk other than the possible loss of survey and interview data. The team will not collect any personally identifying data from participants. There may be unforeseen risks.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
The possible benefits of this study include (a) understanding which interventions benefited the most students and (b) allowing Caroline High School to continue to implement effective strategies. Participating in the interviews will allow CHS to better understand the impact of their positive student attendance incentives. The information
collected may not benefit you directly however it may influence the practices within the division. You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study and the information learned will be helpful to others.

Do you have to participate?
Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all and may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not affect your relationship with Caroline High School in any way. If you would like to participate in this study, please sign this consent form. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be compensation?
You will not receive any type of payment for participation in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this study?
Surveys will be provided on a secure platform and data collected will not include personally identifying information. Interviews and focus groups will be scheduled in a private area or in a supervised online format. The research team will ask all participants to keep any information disclosed in the interview confidential. All data will be stored on a password-protected cloud server, and Audiotapes and transcripts will be de-identified. Demographic questionnaire responses will be kept in a locked office file cabinet and will be destroyed after transferring data to a digital format. All data will be destroyed after one year.

If you choose to participate in the voluntary interview or focus group portion of the study, you will be audio-recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the research team will have access to the recordings, and recordings will be kept for one year and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?
Contact any research team member via email Melissa Bugaj (bugajma@vcu.edu), Dana Chen (givensd@vcu.edu), Amanda Harper (harperam3@vcu.edu), William Pettus (pettusw@vcu.edu), or Patrick Simmons (simmonsph@vcu.edu). You may also contact Dr. Lacey Seaton at seatonle@vcu.edu.

Participation
You do not need to do anything if you wish to participate in this survey. If you do NOT, please sign below and return it to Caroline High School, attention to Dr. Thomas Connolly, Assistant Principal.
You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks and have received a copy of this form. You agree to keep the information disclosed by others in the focus group private. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. You are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Parent Interviews Participation

In addition to student surveys, we are also interested in interviewing interested parents about attendance. If you would like to participate in an interview, please indicate by filling out this form.

Survey OPT-OUT

If you would prefer for your student to not participate in this survey, please fill out this form.
Appendix D
Student Survey Questions

Student Survey Possible Questions (for students across tiers)

1. Enter your student ID number.

2. How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I received information about the importance of attending school.
   a. Strongly Disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neither Disagree nor Agree
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly Agree

3. How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I have a trusted adult(s) who I connect with at school.
   a. Strongly Disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neither Disagree nor Agree
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly Agree

4. How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I am aware of positive rewards or interventions for attendance.
   a. Strongly Disagree
   b. Disagree
   c. Neither Disagree nor Agree
   d. Agree
   e. Strongly Agree

5. If you participated in one, how strongly do you feel that the absentee interviews conducted by school administration had a positive effect on your school attendance?
a. Strongly Disagree
b. Disagree
c. Neither Disagree nor Agree
d. Agree
e. Strongly Agree
f. Did not participate in one

6. What is the best description of your race?
   a. Asian
   b. Black
   c. Hispanic
   d. White
   e. Multiple Races

7. What is your gender?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Non-binary
   d. Prefer not to disclose

8. What grade level were you in during the 2022-2023 school year?
   a. 9th grade
   b. 10th grade
   c. 11th grade

9. Some students are absent often. Why do you think students do not come to school?

10. What can the school do to support students who are absent a lot?

11. What motivates you to come to school regularly?
Appendix E

Parent/Guardian Interview Questions

1. Do you think it is important for students to attend school regularly? Why? Does school attendance impact student success?

2. Did you receive any information from Caroline High School about student attendance? If yes, did it impact your student’s attendance? Why or Why not?

3. Were there any positive rewards or interventions that made your student want to come to school?

4. Do you think that parents' opinions of school affect their students’ attendance rates?

5. What do you think causes students to miss school? What causes your student to miss school?

6. Does your student feel like they have a trusted adult at school? Did that relationship affect their attendance?

7. Are there any other supports or resources that you feel parents need to help their students to attend school regularly?

8. Are there any topics around school attendance at Caroline High School (CHS) last year that we have not asked you that you want to tell us about?
Appendix F

Staff Focus Group Questions

1. Do you think it is important for students to attend school regularly to be successful at school? Why?

2. Was there an attendance incentive that you felt made students want to come to school? What was that specific incentive? Why?

3. What barriers to school attendance do you feel impact student school attendance the most? Why or how?

4. How do you think having a school staff member check in with students who struggle with attendance helps them attend school?

5. What supports or resources do you think help students attend school regularly?

6. Are there any interventions or strategies around school attendance that you think would recommend for Caroline High School?
Appendix G

Email from the VDOE Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

DATE: January 31, 2024

TO: Division Superintendents

FROM: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

SUBJECT: In-Person, Flexible Instructional Time Coding: How to Code Instruction Outside of Normal School Hours - Scenarios Below Updated for Clarity

Many of our school divisions continue with important efforts to provide additional flexible, in-person instructional opportunities to help recover lost instructional time and meet students’ academic needs. This email is intended to address attendance coding questions regarding a number of flexible instructional approaches under consideration by divisions to help our students when they miss normal school hours. This email clarifies the standard necessary to code attendance for flexible, in-person instructional time (also called meaningful engagement). This flexible instructional time may be used to recover lost time due to student absences using classroom instruction methods outside of the normal school day.

First, it is important to note that this standard for flexible, in-person instructional time is much higher than the standard of pandemic “meaningful interaction” described by the department in 2020 (Superintendent’s Memo #188-20). To meet this in-person flexible instructional time standard, the school division must ensure the following, including:

1. Be taught by a licensed teacher,
2. The flexible, instructional time must be in-person,
3. Cannot exceed pupil to teacher requirements outlined in the Standards of Quality,
4. A student must be engaged in instruction tied to Virginia content standards that is consistent with the curriculum the student missed during the regular school day or curriculum areas with which the student has struggled,
5. Interactions and engagements between teacher and student are consistent with regular school day classrooms interactions, and
6. Must be outside of normal school hours (before or after the official school day begins/ends or Saturday).

Again, your efforts to provide flexible, in-person instructional time to recover time lost in the classroom is important. If a student attends flexible, in-person instructional time, outside of
normal school hours, your chronic absenteeism rate will be adjusted by VDOE provided the following conditions are met:

1. A K-5 elementary student must attend two hours of flexible in-person instructional time and 6-12 secondary students must attend 3 hours of in-person flexible instructional time as outlined above to reduce a traditional day absence by one (1) day.
2. A student can attend as many flexible instructional hours outside of the normal school day as needed to ensure that learning loss is mitigated.
3. However, only fifteen (15) flexible instructional days, maximum, will be applied to the Chronic Absenteeism calculation.
4. When a student is absent, they must be marked absent in your student information system per 8VAC20-110-100. Flexible in-person instructional hours cannot erase previous absences recorded in your SIS. The VDOE will continue to collect the aggregate days present and aggregate days absent on the end of year student record collection. The adjustment to the student’s chronic absenteeism calculation by attending flexible, in-person instructional time outside of the regular school day will be adjusted using a unique field in the SRC called Hours of Flexible Instructional Time.
5. Per 8VAC20-110-130, school divisions must change a student’s status from “enrolled” to “withdrawn” when the student has been absent for 15 or more consecutive days regardless if those days are excused, unexcused, or a combination of both.
6. Hours of Flexible Instruction Time do not affect Regulations Governing the Collection and Reporting of Truancy-Related Data and Student Attendance Policies (8VAC20-730). If student absences are unexcused, the mandated intervention process for unexcused absences should be followed. And school divisions should follow its procedure for addressing excused absences with the goal of reengaging the student.

School divisions must track when students are attending flexible, in-person instructional time outside of the normal school day as they will report those tracked hours in a new data field on the End-of-Year SRC called “Hours of Flexible Instructional Time.” The division will report the time in hours and VDOE will use that data to adjust each participant’s days of absence in the Chronic Absenteeism rate. For additional clarity, VDOE and not school divisions will run the calculation for how many flexible in person instructional hours equates to a day and will adjust the overall Chronic Absenteeism rate.

Thank you for your ongoing efforts to help students recover from lost time during the regular school day. The table below includes an example of how flexible, in-person instructional time can work regarding the calculation of chronic absenteeism, as well as more technical information for those that will submit your SRC to the VDOE.

Questions related to the SRC should be directed to the Office of Data Services at resultshelp@doe.virginia.gov.
For more information on the Chronic Absenteeism Rate contact the Office of Accountability at accountability@doe.virginia.gov.

Example of Change in Chronic Absenteeism Calculation:

A 7th grade student missed 28 days of school last year. This student attended the Saturday school program in-person for 2.5 hours from 9:00 – 11:30 a.m. for 20 weeks. This student received in-person, flexible, in-person instruction from a licensed, high school math teacher.

| End-of-Year Student Record Collection Reporting for this student | How this student factors into the Chronic Absenteeism Formula WITHOUT participation in an after-school, in-person flexible instruction program | How this student factors into the Chronic Absenteeism Formula WITH participation in an in-person, after-school flexible instruction program |
A 5th grade student missed 18 days of school last year. On April 2, this student attended an After-the-Bell Program from 3:30 p.m. -5:30 p.m. receiving in-person, flexible instruction from his 5th grade teacher.
### End-of-Year Student Record Collection Reporting for this student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How this student factors into the Chronic Absenteeism Formula <strong>WITHOUT</strong> participation in an after-school, in-person flexible instruction program</th>
<th>How this student factors into the Chronic Absenteeism Formula <strong>WITH</strong> participation in an after-school, in-person flexible instruction program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate Days Present</td>
<td>Adjusted Aggregate Days Absent [\frac{\text{Days in Membership}}{\text{Days in Membership}}]</td>
<td>Adjusted Aggregate Days Absent [\frac{\text{Days in Membership}}{\text{Days in Membership}}]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate Days Absent</td>
<td>Adjustments: none, no participation</td>
<td>Adjustments: 1 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of Flexible Instructional Time</td>
<td>Days in Membership: 162 + 18 = 180</td>
<td>(2 hours replaces one day for elementary students)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chronically Absent threshold: 10%</td>
<td>Adjusted Aggregate Days Absent: 18-1 = 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 / 180 = 10.0%</td>
<td>Days in Membership: 162 + 18 = 180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This student is chronically absent and counts against the school’s Chronic Absenteeism Rate</td>
<td>Chronically Absent threshold: 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17 / 180 = 9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>This student does NOT count against the school’s Chronic Absenteeism Rate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H

Graphic Provided by the VDOE

Every Student, Every Day

#AttendanceMattersVA
Appendix I

Example Poster

ROLL CALL!
THIS IS WHY ATTENDANCE MATTERS!

When a student misses 2 days per month, they will miss...
• **20 days** a year!
• Over **20 hours** of English and Math over a school year!
• **Over 1 full year** of school by the time they graduate!

When a student misses 4 days per month, they will miss...
• **40 days** a year!
• Over **40 hours** of English and Math over a school year!
• **Over 2 full years** of school by the time they graduate!
Appendix J

Executive Summary

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM INTERVENTIONS AT CAROLINE HIGH SCHOOL

Chronic absenteeism has far-reaching effects on student achievement, with research indicating a significant impact on early literacy and increased dropout rates in later grades. The study highlights the particular context of CHS, where a high rate of chronic absenteeism has been a concern.

Prepared by:
Melissa Bugaj
Dana Chen
Amanda Harper
William Pettus
Patrick H. Simmons

April, 2024
Virginia Commonwealth University
School of Education
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Causes of Chronic Absenteeism
- Research Design
- Findings
- Recommendations
This study comprehensively explored chronic absenteeism at Caroline High School (CHS) in Caroline County, Virginia, about 30 miles north of Richmond. Caroline High School implemented several attendance interventions for chronically absent students, through which their chronic absenteeism rate dropped from 36% to 25%. The administration at CHS submitted a Request for Assistance to VCU to further explore what strategies were most effective and which ones the team could improve.

**Chronic Absenteeism**

In Virginia, chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% of school days in a school year, regardless of the reason. When students are absent from school, they miss out on important instruction and can fall behind in their learning. Students who miss multiple days of school receive less instruction time, require more remediation, have more negative interactions with their peers, and may become socially disengaged (Gottfried, 2019).
This study examined the effectiveness of strategies to decrease absenteeism at Caroline High School. The researchers sought to understand gaps in attendance interventions based on findings from the current program evaluation. Three research questions guided the work of the Research Team.

**Question 1**
How effective were the strategies and interventions implemented by Caroline High School in decreasing chronic absenteeism for their students?

**Question 2**
Based on the data collected, do gaps exist in the chronic absenteeism strategies implemented by Caroline High School?

**Question 3**
Given finite time and resources, which strategies and interventions should Caroline High School continue to implement to decrease chronic absenteeism rates?
CAUSES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

What The Research Says

Many reasons contribute to students missing school frequently (Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2022), such as health factors (Childs & Lofton, 2021), being socioeconomically disadvantaged (Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021), and family-specific challenges (Sheppard, 2009). Each of these elements is unique to each individual student's circumstances.

Lack of Engagement
Research shows that when students perceive their education as irrelevant or uninteresting, they are more likely to be chronically absent (Wagstaff et al., 2000).

Health-Related Factors
Children and teens with specific healthcare needs miss more school than children without, making absences due to health conditions expected (Forrest et al., 2011).

Family Factors
Family factors, such as parental involvement in children’s education, significantly influence students' school attendance and achievement more than school-related factors (Shepard, 2009).

Historical Absenteeism
Poor attendance throughout the previous school year is a significant predictor of chronic absenteeism in the current year (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2023).
This study was designed to gather feedback from the three major stakeholder groups: staff, parents, and students around beliefs about attendance, beliefs about existing attendance incentives, and perspectives on incentives that could be implemented to improve student attendance. Data from these three sources was collected and coded to determine themes and findings.
FINDINGS

Chronic Absenteeism at CHS

Students, parents, and staff members had the opportunity to offer their perspectives on different aspects of student absences at Caroline High School. Students answered a survey in their homerooms, parents who chose to participate were interviewed, and staff members joined a focus group. These themes emerged from the various responses.

Student Connectedness

Many students are disengaged from school or have a negative attitude about school. Students are also seeking a more engaging experience in classes and at school.

Relationships

A number of students want positive relationships with friends, teachers, and coaches or sponsors at school. Peer relationships have a positive impact on school attendance. Student and teacher relationships can have a positive or negative impact on attendance.

Mental Health

Many students are aware of their mental health and acknowledge the pressure that high school creates. Students want support in maintaining good mental health. Many students do not know what those supports are or what is available.

Excused Absences and Policy

Students miss school for illness and family issues. Some students want to miss school without consequences or the need to make up work. Students want the school start time to be later. Students feel there is a punishment aspect to the attendance process.

School and Future Success

A portion of the students want to be successful and know that high school is a step in that process. They want to go to college and know that they will need good grades to get into college.
FOCUS GROUPS

FROM CHS STAFF

“It’s very evident the students who aren’t in the building, how they are not connected... I think a lot of them crave having a friend or having someone to talk to and they’re just missing out.”

–CHS Staff Member

LOGISTICS

• Held in December 2023
• Four CHS Staff Members
• Due to the sample size, these staff members may not represent the entire CHS staff
• Staff from different lenses of the school
• Originally planned 2 Focus Groups
• One hour in length
• Gained permission to record prior to the meeting
• Met virtually via Google Meet

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• Attendance is important for success
• There are barriers to student attendance
• Student attendance incentives and parent communication are impactful
• Suspensions impact attendance
• Community donates supplies for students in need
• Extracurricular activities improve attendance
PARENT INTERVIEWS

FROM THE PARENTS

“Pinpoint who's missing school, why they're missing school, what we can do to help, because we're all on the same team in the county, right?”

-CHS Parent

LOGISTICS

- Held in December 2023
- Requested participation from all CHS parents through school communication
- Eight parents responded and seven were reached and interviewed
- Due to the sample size, these parents may not represent the entire CHS community
- Parent interviews completed via phone on Google Meet

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Attendance is important for student success and future work/career habits
- Student attendance incentives and parent communication are important
- Parents play an important role in student attendance
- Relationships with teachers can have a positive or negative impact
### STUDENT SURVEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement, Negative Perception</td>
<td>Student Connectedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives, Want Engagement, School Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with class or activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick/illness, Family Issues</td>
<td>Excused Absences and Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know, Requests that violate law or policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask, Tell, Understand</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend, Parent, Trusted Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for Mental Health days off</td>
<td>School or Future Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Grades, College Plans, Future Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### LOGISTICS
- Permission granted to survey students by Assistant Superintendent in November 2023
- Sent out by CHS in December 2023 during homeroom time
- Portion of the student survey was quantitative
- Three open-ended questions
- 625 Student Responses
- Completed via Google Forms

### KEY TAKEWAYS
- Some students do not feel connected to CHS
- Students want more engaging classes/assignments
- Students want relationships with people at school such as friends, teachers, and coaches/sponsors
- Mental health impacts student attendance
- Students get sick or have issues at home
- Students want time off from school without penalty
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Question 1**
How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I received information about the importance of attending school.

**Question 2**
How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I have a trusted adult(s) who I connect with at school.

**Question 3**
How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: I am aware of positive rewards or interventions for attendance.
Q1. The data on students' perceptions of receiving information about the importance of attending school reflects varying levels of awareness within the collective student body.

Q2. These findings demonstrate the importance of fostering strong, supportive relationships between students and adults within schools to ensure a positive and nurturing educational environment.

Q3. This distribution of responses indicates a mixed level of familiarity among students about the rewards or interventions aimed at encouraging school attendance.
The student survey gathered demographic information, including grade level, gender, and ethnicity. This allowed for a deeper analysis of the data across those variables. A comprehensive approach of this type provides valuable insights into the factors influencing student attendance and engagement, which is essential for developing targeted interventions and support systems.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this data. The reported number of absences on the survey relies on students' self-reporting, and the accuracy of the data may be influenced by students' own perceptions of how many days they were absent. Additionally, the small sample size, particularly in certain ethnic groups, limits the representation of these findings to a broader population.
White female students' self-reported absences were most represented across all levels of absenteeism. Black female students were represented across all three absenteeism categories, and Multiracial female students demonstrated a similar distribution across all three levels of absenteeism. In contrast, Asian individuals were minimally represented, with one being noted in the highest level of absenteeism and another in the lowest. Hispanic individuals had limited representation, with one falling into the moderate level and another in the lowest level of absenteeism.

Black male students' self-reported rates were only found in the low absenteeism group. White students were represented across all levels, with a higher concentration in the moderate level. Multiracial students were present in all three categories, notably half of the sample group in the moderate absenteeism group. Only two Hispanic students self-reported in the lowest absenteeism category.
White female students were predominantly found in the moderate absenteeism category and were also present in the high absenteeism group. Black students appeared in both the moderate and low absenteeism categories. Hispanic students were present across all levels of absenteeism, with representation in both the high and low categories, and Hispanic 10th grade females reported in the moderate group. One Multiracial student was represented in the low absenteeism category.

White students mainly fell into the moderate absenteeism category, with minimal representation at the lowest level. Black students were distributed across all absenteeism levels, with their presence being one in the highest, three in moderate, and one in the lowest categories. Hispanic students, totaling two, were evenly split between high and moderate absenteeism, with no representation in the low category. Multiracial students appeared in both the low and moderate categories.
Black female students were represented in all absenteeism levels, respectively. White students were most represented in the moderate absenteeism category and also appeared in the high-level category. Hispanic and Multiracial students each self-reported in only one category, the moderate absenteeism category.

Black male students were represented by one student in the high absenteeism group and one in the low absenteeism group. Hispanic students were present in all three categories. White students were the most represented ethnicity in the moderate and low absenteeism categories, each with three, self-reported. In contrast, Multiracial students were only represented in the moderate absenteeism category at one.
Student survey participants were asked, “If you participated in an attendance interview, how strongly do you feel that this attendance interview conducted by school administration had a positive effect on your school attendance?”

34% 30% 17%
9th graders strongly agree or agree 10th graders strongly agree or agree 11th graders strongly agree or agree
Neutral Neutral Neutral
34% 31% 13%
9th graders strongly disagree or disagree 10th graders strongly disagree or disagree 11th graders strongly disagree or disagree

A total of 130 (21%) students out of the 625 student responses self-reported that they took part in the attendance interviews conducted by school staff. From those 130 students, 59 (45%) reported they were in 9th grade, 41 (32%) in 10th grade, and 30 (23%) in 11th grade.
### EFFECTIVENESS OF STRATEGIES

Based on the data collected in this study, the Research Team categorized the strategies below employed by CHS to improve chronic absenteeism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Effective</th>
<th>Approaching Effective</th>
<th>Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Chronic absenteeism interviews</td>
<td>• Reward type incentive events (basketball game)</td>
<td>• Students with a connection to school attend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student self-reported perception of engagement</td>
<td>• Attendance team meetings</td>
<td>• Extracurriculars and sports are an attendance draw for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attendance messaging with parents</td>
<td>• Many students are motivated to attend regularly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### RECOMMENDATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Student Disengagement</td>
<td>• Mental Health</td>
<td>• Attendance Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engagement Beyond Learning in the Classroom</td>
<td>• Early Start Times</td>
<td>• Student Support Center (Out of School Suspension Center)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Bus Routes</td>
<td>• Mentorship Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recovering Absences Outside of Normal Hours</td>
<td>• Community-Wide Chronic Absenteeism Initiative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Student Disengagement
Disengagement from school was reported in the student survey responses as a primary reason cited by students for why some students miss school. Among responses within this category, the most common were “because they don't want to,” “because school is boring,” and “because school is draining.” This finding leads to the recommendation of further study regarding the use of teaching methods for engaging students in learning and in attending school regularly.

Engagement Beyond Learning in the Classroom
The findings of this study found a link at Caroline High School between students who feel a connection to school and those who attend school regularly with the most commonly noted connections being student friendships, relationships with staff members, and extracurricular activities like sports. This leads to the recommendation of further research into the question of what students need most to feel engaged with the school itself, beyond just learning that happens in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGES

The Research Team provides recommendations that may require a change in either current state or local policy. These policy changes are important for addressing chronic absenteeism effectively since they impact broader aspects of student well-being and access to education beyond the scope of individual school policies. By advocating for and collaborating on systemic changes at the state or local level, educational leaders can create an environment that better supports students' attendance and academic success, ensuring that all students have equitable access to education and opportunities for achievement.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGES

Mental Health

Students' mental health has become a major concern in today's educational environment, calling for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to support and provide interventions in schools. Mental health surfaced as an area of concern across all three stakeholders at Caroline High School, suggesting that current policies might need to be expanded to better meet the needs of students. According to research (Fuller and Bastian, 2020), schools are the most popular places to prevent mental illness and promote wellness.

What is needed:
- Quick access and support to mental health services and professionals
- Establishing a secure and encouraging school atmosphere and creating wellness areas
- Active engagement with student mental health
- Ensuring continuity of care for profound needs
- Targeted programs and therapies for high-risk groups

Early Start Times

The early start time at CHS was mentioned as a contributing factor to chronic absenteeism by all three stakeholder groups in this study. CHS should consider the possibility of a later start that is more in line with students' natural sleep rhythms. This is supported by research showing an increase in graduation rates and student engagement (McKeever et al., 2022). Benefits encompass enhanced sleep, improved alertness, attention, memory, and mental health, along with heightened school engagement and improved academic achievement (Fuller & Bastian, 2020).

When considering this policy change, CHS should consider many factors, such as transportation, staff contracts, and community beliefs.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGES

Bus Routes

Bus transportation in Caroline County's rural school division can present various challenges, including the large geographic distance being covered by buses, areas with lower population density, and staffing qualified bus drivers.

A comprehensive approach is needed at the division level to:
- Analyze bus routes and identify opportunities to optimize transportation efficiency
- Potentially reduce travel times and ensure timely arrivals
- Streamline travel times
- Minimize disruptions and encourage regular student attendance at school.

Coding Instruction Outside of Normal Hours

Necessities of in-person flexible instructional time:
- Be taught in-person by a licensed teacher,
- Cannot exceed pupil-to-teacher requirements outlined in the Standards of Quality,
- A student must be engaged in instruction tied to Virginia content standards that is consistent with the curriculum the student missed during the regular school day or curriculum areas with which the student has struggled,
- Interactions and engagements between teacher and student are consistent with regular school day classrooms interactions, and
- Must be outside of normal school hours (before or after the official school day begins/ends or Saturday).

(VOOE Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, personal communication, January 31, 2024)

Meals and transportation should be provided to students during the programs outside of the school day to ensure that students' needs are being met. This initiative will align with the VDOE’s guidelines and ensure that CHS maximizes the effectiveness of flexible instructional time to address absenteeism and enhance student achievement.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Attendance Task Force

Define the Purpose and Objectives
- Reducing chronic absenteeism
- Improving overall attendance rates
- Identifying at-risk students
- Developing intervention strategies

Select Team Members
- Strong leadership
- Diverse members of the school community

Connecting with Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports
- Holistic approach to student welfare
- Individualized support that tackles both academic and non-academic barriers to attendance

Intentionality of Rollout
- Clear and consistent information outlining the distinctions between chronic absenteeism and regular attendance
- Minimize confusion and bring a heightened awareness within the school community regarding the significance of consistent attendance

Goals of the Attendance Task Force:
- Work collaboratively
- Respond to the unique needs of students
- Maintain a commitment to ongoing evaluation and improvement

Highly effective attendance teams have succeeded in creating positive change, including significant reductions in office disciplinary referrals and suspensions, improved attendance, and improved staff morale and sense of efficacy (Sprick & Sprick, 2018).
### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

**Staff**
- Professional development
- Increase awareness of strategies to pinpoint underlying reasons for chronic absenteeism and address them
- Plan for improvement strategies

**Parents**
- Enhance communication and connection
- Workshops to educate about the importance of attendance
- Continuous feedback and data analysis to guide targeted initiatives

**Students**
- Student-friendly visuals to communicate the importance of regular attendance and the consequences of chronic absenteeism
- Posters around the school in high-traffic areas
Incentives should have the dual purpose of motivating attendance and fostering a sense of community and belonging among students.

- Going beyond mere rewards
- Be meaningful and relevant to students
- Timeliness and communication of awareness and distribution
- Celebrate and value regular attendance

Students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is linked to many types of positive educational outcomes including performance, school satisfaction, and persistence at school (Gillet et al., 2012).
# Recommendations for Practice

## Student Support Center for Out of School Suspension

A Student Support Center is recommended not to increase suspensions but to support a reduction in chronic absenteeism, as students would be counted as present during the suspension period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logistics</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Short-term placements (1 to 10 days) in place of an out-of-school suspension where students can receive Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students would have access to the internet and be provided with instructional materials and assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students would receive counseling support to prepare to reconnect and restore relationships upon returning to Caroline High School after the suspension period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could provide a more structured environment compared to allowing suspended students to be unsupervised at home during an out-of-school suspension, which may feel like a reward to students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would help maintain a focused and positive learning environment for students, maintaining high behavioral expectations and measures of accountability intended with out-of-school suspensions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Effective Components for Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logistics</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on restorative practices of reflection and goal-setting to provide students with the skills to move forward positively</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Careful consideration of staffing for this program to ensure that students are supported, including special education, counseling, behavioral support, and administrative staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Presence of mental health supports to emphasize student connection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Evaluation Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logistics</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The Caroline High School team should establish an evaluation process that continually examines the program's effectiveness:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frequency which students are included</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Repeated program assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student demographic data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evaluation tools could include:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student and staff focus groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student and staff surveys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Measure program effectiveness and monitor for unintended and/or negative impacts on students and the school environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The exclusion of students from school for disciplinary reasons are directly related to lower attendance rates, increased course failures, and can set a student on a path of disengagement from school that will keep them from receiving a high school diploma and further affect their chances of enrolling in post-secondary schooling and realizing many life-long career opportunities” (Balfanz et al., 2014, p. 1).
## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

**Mentorship Program**

A mentorship program is recommended to reduce student apathy, increase student connectedness, and improve student attendance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Components for Implementation</th>
<th>What Model to Use?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Training mentors</td>
<td>• Research based group mentoring model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent involvement</td>
<td>• Tier 1 Students - Peer Led Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Planning strategic activities for mentors and their mentees</td>
<td>• Tier 2 and 3 Students - Adult Led Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clarifying expectations regarding the frequency of mentoring meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Monitoring for fidelity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Implementation</th>
<th>Identification of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Choose the preferred model at CHS</td>
<td>• Identify Tier 1, 2, &amp; 3 students for participation in the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assign staff personnel tasks of planning, implementing, and monitoring the program to ensure fidelity</td>
<td>• Consult Caroline Middle School to identify rising 9th graders who are Tier 1, 2, &amp; 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify peer and adult mentors approved by school board to work with students</td>
<td>• Consider current CHS students whose needs fall into Tiered categories based on current CHS attendance data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Train mentors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Involve parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Program supervisor will monitor for fidelity and collected data on program effectiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By considering tiered support through mentoring, CHS could provide an avenue of support for each student’s individual needs while working to help students build connections and learn to form better school-based relationships.
Community-Wide Chronic Absenteeism Initiative

School officials may be able to increase daily attendance by reaching out to engage parents. The data included five themes regarding attendance at CHS:

- Student Connectedness,
- Excused Absences and Policy,
- Relationships,
- Mental Health, and
- School and Future Success.

The recommendation of parent and community involvement through the community-wide chronic absenteeism initiative would seek to address each of these themes as part of an MTSS approach.

Tiered Supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 1</th>
<th>Tier 2</th>
<th>Tier 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive messaging</td>
<td>Early warning</td>
<td>Completed/Exhausted all Steps of Caroline's Attendance Policy - JED-R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming partnerships within the community</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Policy actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nudge messaging</td>
<td>Youth engagement</td>
<td>Interagency case management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship-building</td>
<td>Addressing chronic health issues such as asthma</td>
<td>Housing assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a welcoming school culture</td>
<td>Targeted transportation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering incentives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25
CONCLUSION

A Tiered Approach to Chronic Absenteeism

The Research Team recommends that the Caroline High School team use Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016) to continue reducing chronic absenteeism and resolving underlying challenges that make regular attendance challenging for some students.

The policy recommendations are for advocacy and consideration of larger policies that may be hindering attendance: early start times, mental health, bus routes, and coding of instruction outside of school hours.

The recommendations for further research offer opportunities to delve into additional issues that were not directly studied through this research and yet may be pertinent to continued study, including engagement through instruction and engagement beyond the classroom. Finally, the recommendations for practice incorporate the tenets of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and focus on strategies at Tier 1 (good for all students), Tier 2 (needed for some students), and Tier 3 (needed for few students). Implementation of these efforts is intended to support student success with attendance at all three tiers (Kearney & Graczky, 2020).


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


VITA

Melissa A. Bugaj was born on September 1, 1977, in Newburyport, Massachusetts. She graduated from Bishop Fenwick High School in Peabody, Massachusetts in 1995. She received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Salem State College in Salem, Massachusetts in 1999 and subsequently taught in the public schools in Loudoun County, Virginia for two years and in Frederick County, Maryland for three years. She received her Master of Education in Special Education from Hood College in Frederick, Maryland in 2006. She taught in Frederick County, Maryland for two years and in Loudoun County, Virginia for ten years. She received her Masters in Education Leadership and Administration from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia in 2018 and was a Dean of Special Education in Loudoun County, Virginia for four years. She has been an Elementary Assistant Principal in Loudoun County Public Schools for the last three years. She has taught as an Adjunct Professor for Shenandoah University for the past nine years. She worked at Hillside Elementary School in Ashburn, Virginia; North Frederick Elementary and Orchard Grove Elementary in Frederick, Maryland; Loudoun Valley High School in Purcellville, Virginia; and Legacy Elementary School in Brambleton, Virginia.

Dana L. G. Chen was born on March 4, 1982, in Richmond, Virginia. She graduated from Varina High School in Richmond, Virginia in 2000. She received a Bachelor of Science in Communications from Wake Forest University and subsequently taught in Japan, Henrico County, and Fairfax County. She has worked at Varina High School in Henrico, Virginia; Twain Middle School in Alexandria, Virginia; Justice High School in Falls Church, Virginia; Haycock Elementary in Falls Church, Virginia; and White Oaks Elementary, in Fairfax, Virginia. In addition to teaching, she was an instructional coach for a year at Justice High School and was an
Educational Specialist in the Office of School Support in Fairfax County for four years. She received her Masters in Education from the University of Phoenix in 2008 and her endorsement in Leadership and Administration through the University of Virginia in 2017. She has worked as an assistant principal in Fairfax County for the last four years.

Amanda M. Harper was born on September 4, 1983, in Richmond, Virginia. She graduated from Louisa County High School in Louisa County, Virginia in 2001. She received an Associate in Science Degree from Piedmont Virginia Community College in 2003. She graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2008, earning a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Master of Teaching degree. She began her teaching career in Louisa County Public Schools at Trevilians Elementary School and then Jouett Elementary School. In 2016, she earned a Post-Master’s Certificate in Educational Leadership and Administration from James Madison University and began as an assistant principal of Louisa County Middle School. Since 2022, she has been Principal of Louisa County Middle School.

William J. Pettus was born on March 3, 1972, in South Boston, Virginia. He graduated from Randolph-Henry High School in Charlotte County, Virginia in 1990. He received an Associate Arts and Science degree from Southside Virginia Community College in Keysville, Virginia in 1993. He graduated from Longwood College in 1995, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in United States History. He began his teaching career in Nash-Rocky Mount Schools in North Carolina teaching at Cedar Grove Elementary School and Red Oak Middle School. From there he moved to Dare County, North Carolina where he taught at Manteo Middle School. Returning to Rocky Mount, North Carolina he taught at Edwards Middle School before becoming the
Principal of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic School. Moving back to Virginia, he taught at Halifax Middle School and Central Middle School in Charlotte County. In 2016, he earned a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership from Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. That same year, he became the Instructional Coach and then Principal of Bacon District Elementary School in Charlotte County. In 2023, he became Principal of Appomattox Middle School in Appomattox, Virginia.

Patrick H. Simmons was born on August 25, 1979, in Washington, District of Columbia. He graduated from King George High School in King George, Virginia, in 1997. He received his Bachelors of Science in Liberal Studies, with a Minor in Biology, and a Concentration in Elementary Education from Longwood University in 2001. He earned a Master of Science in Science Education from Montana State University in 2007. In 2008, he earned a Post-Master’s Certificate in Educational Leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University. He was employed as an elementary/middle school science teacher from 2001-2018, an assistant principal from 2018-2020, and has been serving first as a middle School principal in 2020 and then an elementary/middle school (PreK-7) principal since 2022.