

**SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR: EXAMINING TEACHERS’  
PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL REFUSAL BEHAVIOR OF SECONDARY  
STUDENTS**

by  
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*Dedicated to my husband, who offered his unwavering support to turn this dream into a reality*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	7
ABSTRACT.....	8
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	9
Statement of the Problem.....	9
Purpose Statement.....	9
Research Approach .....	9
Definitions of Terms .....	10
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	12
Introduction.....	12
Definition of School Refusal Behavior.....	13
Causes of School Refusal Behavior.....	14
School-Based Interventions .....	16
Students with Special Education Needs and School Refusal Behavior .....	18
Teacher Perceptions of Absences .....	19
Summary .....	20
Research Questions .....	21
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	22
Research Overview .....	22
Setting .....	22
Respondents .....	23
Research Design.....	23
Recruitment and Data Collection.....	25
Data Analysis Procedures and Methods .....	25
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .....	27
Introduction.....	27
Survey Overview .....	27
Analysis.....	28
Findings.....	28
Research Question One- Teacher Perceptions of Student Absences .....	28

Research Question Two- Absences of Students with IEPs .....	32
Summary .....	36
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	38
Introduction.....	38
Review of Findings .....	38
Results with Connection to Previous Literature .....	42
Research Question One- Teachers’ Perceptions of Student Absences .....	42
Research Question Two- Student Absences with IEPs .....	44
Implications for Practice .....	47
CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS .....	49
Brief Summary of Study .....	49
Limitations of the Study.....	50
Questions Omitted from the Survey .....	50
Timing of Survey .....	51
COVID-19 Statement .....	52
Suggestions for Future Research .....	52
APPENDIX A. SURVEY SUMMARY LETTER .....	55
APPENDIX B. SURVEY QUESTIONS.....	56
APPENDIX C. IRB APPROVAL .....	60
APPENDIX D. PRINCIPAL APPROVAL LETTER .....	61
APPENDIX E. CITI APPROVAL .....	62
APPENDIX F. RAW DATA FROM SURVEY .....	63
REFERENCES .....	75

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Three statements dealing with student autonomy within school. ....	30
Figure 2. Dispersion of responses to the statement <i>I believe students with IEPs have more unexcused absences.</i> .....	33
Figure 3. Respondents top three beliefs for student absences. ....	34
Figure 4. Respondents activities and/or policies to improve attendance that they do in their personal classrooms. ....	36

## **ABSTRACT**

Students need to be in attendance at school in order to learn. One concern for schools is when students refuse to attend school on a regular basis. School refusal behavior encompasses all subsets of problematic absenteeism, such as truancy, school phobia, and anxiety. Students dealing with school refusal is a behavior that is multi-faceted. Often times, these students are experiencing psychological matters that are presenting as the symptom of school refusal. The purpose of this study was to survey general education and special education secondary teachers on their perceptions of student absences and to ascertain how they motivate students to attend their classes. The study was centered on two research questions: (1) ‘What are the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences?’ and (2) ‘Are students who exhibit school refusal behavior more likely to be identified as students with special education needs?’ The sample size for this study was 78 certified teachers at an urban high school in the Midwest. The high school had 1,834 students enrolled for the 2020/2021 school year in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, with 238 students designated as having special education services. An online survey was created using Google Forms. The survey was designed to not collect respondents’ email addresses to ensure anonymity and was limited to one response per unique email address. The survey did not ask any identifying information such as number of years teaching, subjects taught, etc. Twenty-six completed surveys were returned, for a return rate of 33%.



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Regular school attendance is fundamental to children's success in academic, language, social, and work-related domains. Regular school attendance is associated with higher standardized test scores and grades (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013, p. 2). School refusal behavior encompasses all subsets of problematic absenteeism, such as truancy, school phobia, and anxiety. School refusal is a behavior that presents as multi-faceted, encompassing severe emotional distress, excessive fearfulness, and anxiety that manifests as physical symptoms of illness. Often times, these students are experiencing psychological concerns that are presenting as the symptom of school refusal.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to survey general education and special education teachers on their perceptions of school refusal behavior of secondary students and to determine how they motivate students to attend their classes.

### **Research Approach**

The Google form online survey was designed based on preceding surveys which measured teacher perceptions of student absences at the secondary level, including positive teacher and student relationships on student absences, how student investment in the material taught affects student absences, and overall school climate and atmosphere. Additionally, questions regarding attendance of students receiving special education services were added throughout the survey. The

surveys were returned and analyzed. Quantitative data was analyzed and represented via bar charts. Qualitative data was grouped together via themes of responses.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**ACEs** stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences which include child maltreatment and household dysfunction, are associated with problems for health and adaptive behavior during adulthood (McKelvey et al., 2018).

**RTI** stands for response to intervention which is a popular model to address academic and related problems in schools. It refers to a systematic and hierarchical decision-making process to assign evidence-based strategies based on student need (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

**School anxiety** is not a psychiatric diagnosis, but it may be a symptom of an anxiety disorder and has been used as a term to refer to school refusal behavior in some research. Treatment usually begins with cognitive behavioral therapy, which teaches relaxation and coping skills and can result in improved behavior over several months (Kawsar & Marwaha, 2019).

**School absenteeism**, also sometime referred to as problematic absenteeism, is the habit of staying away from school without providing a genuine or any reason for not attending classes. Absenteeism is a truant behavior that negatively affects the performance among students (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

**School phobia** is defined as a consequence of separation anxiety and has at times been used in place of the term school refusal behavior in some research (Elliott & Place, 2017).

**School refusal behavior** is defined as child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in class for an entire day (Prabhuswamy, 2018).

**Separation anxiety** is considered to be a relatively common disorder that is associated with panic attacks and is often a precursor to school refusal (Elliott & Place, 2017).

**SWPBIS** stands for school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports and is a systematic approach for implementing school-wide evidence-based prevention practices using a multitiered system to provide behavioral support for all students (Gage et al., 2018).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

While it is difficult to determine the number of students that experience school refusal behavior, up to 28% of American school-aged children refuse school at one time or another in the absence of legitimate physical illness or familial conditions (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). However school refusal behavior affects between 2% to 5% of all school-age children (Kawsar & Marwaha, 2019) and lasts for more than two weeks and/or is associated with symptoms of socioemotional distress such as somatic complaints, tantrums, or aggression (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Given the differing conceptualizations utilized, it is difficult to be clear about epidemiology and many researchers feel that this statistic is an underestimate (Elliott & Place, 2017). School refusal behavior is a challenge for children, families, and school personnel. Failing to attend school has significant short and long-term effects on students' social, emotional, and educational development (Kawsar & Marwaha, 2019).

School refusal behavior is far more common in students with learning disabilities, with rates reported at approximately 40%-53% (Munkhaugen et al., 2017). While school refusal behavior is seen throughout the world and interest in this problem has increased, with increasing number of studies occurring, conceptual confusion over this heterogeneous condition combined with limited knowledge of underlying mechanisms and uncertainty as to the long-term effects of specific forms of intervention remain pervasive (Elliott & Place, 2017). The present paper looks at the many facets of school refusal behavior and explores the current treatments and research to address this behavior.

### **Definition of School Refusal Behavior**

School attendance places a limit on the potential benefits that students can receive from instruction. When a student is frequently absent from school, they are at risk for decreased academic attainment, which can then lead to a host of other problems including grade retention, poor self-esteem, and school dropout (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Originally, a number of researchers and clinicians argued that all child-motivated problems with school attendance, no matter their origin, should be termed school refusal. Now it has since been suggested the use of the term ‘school refusal behavior’ be the preferred construct as this term provides no suggestions of causality, but rather the functions that are served by nonattendance (Elliott & Place, 2017).

The term ‘school refusal behavior’ is meant to coalesce distinct constructs including school phobia, separation anxiety and various conduct-related problems (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). School refusal behavior differs from other school attendance problems due to specific characteristics of students show a reluctance to attend school and display resistive behavior when parents try to get them to attend, students stay home and the parents know about it, school causes these students emotional distress and students do not exhibit antisocial behavior outside of the school setting (Filippello et al., 2019, p. 2). School refusal behavior, sometimes referred to as school absenteeism, is an increasing problem for educators that has garnered copious research and studies over the last twenty years, yet the problem is increasingly becoming commonplace.

Parameters differ for how much school is missed within a certain time frame is classified as school refusal, with the general consensus being, “missing at least 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks, severe difficulty attending classes for at least 2 weeks and/or absences for at least 10 days of school during a semester,” (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013, p. 2). with a 15-18-week period depending on the country. The general guideline for recognizing children with school refusal behavior include children with severe difficulty in attending school, often resulting in

prolonged absence; severe emotional upset, which may involve symptoms such as excessive fearfulness, and complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause (Prabhuswamy, 2018).

### **Causes of School Refusal Behavior**

Students may refuse school due to overwhelming anxiety. Several clinic-based cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have reported high mental health comorbidity in students exhibiting school refusal behavior. In two studies at the Minnesota school refusal clinic, 50% had an anxiety disorder, 25% had a depressive disorder and 25% had a depressive and an anxiety disorder. Many students had multiple diagnoses, the most common comorbid diagnosis being overanxious disorder. Depressive disorders were more likely among adolescent school refusers and the school refusal was found to be more severe (Prabhuswamy, 2018). Separation anxiety is considered to be a relatively common disorder that is associated with panic attacks and is often a precursor to school refusal behavior. However, the original belief that separation anxiety could explain almost all cases of school refusal has now been largely discredited (Elliot & Place, 2017).

There are many cases where adverse events in school factor into school refusal behavior and are a key source of anxiety. Researchers often differentiate between separation anxiety and school phobia, a term they use to describe a fear of school (Elliot & Place, 2017). Therefore, school anxiety is defined as fearfulness associated with the school environment and school phobia defined as a consequence of separation anxiety. In some cases, students may show fear of the school environment and the social and evaluative aspects.

The Functional Model of School Refusal Behavior describes four main reasons why children develop school refusal behavior, 1) “to avoid general school-related distress caused by known or unknown factors, 2) to escape from adverse social situations and/or the school

evaluation system, 3) to draw the attention of parents and 4) to obtain gratification out of school,” (Filippello et al., 2019, p. 2).

Chronic toxic stress resulting from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), can impact the neurological, immunological and hormonal development of children (Bellis et al., 2018). ACEs, including maltreatment and household dysfunction, are associated with problems for health and adaptive behavior during adulthood (McKelvey et al., 2018). Typically, increasing the number of ACEs has a positive relationship with increasing health problems. ACEs are associated with poorer childhood mental health, attendance at school and educational attainment (Bellis et al., 2018). Several studies have indicated that ACEs are predictors for school-related difficulties, including repeating grades, and being identified as a student with special education disabilities. Compared to school-aged children without a lifetime history of ACEs, children with a lifetime history of ACEs exposure had increased odds of less optimal academic outcomes, including 1) decreased school engagement, 2) missing more than 2 weeks of school during a school year, 3) having an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and 4) grade retention (McKelvey et al., 2018). The McKelvey (2018) study used a survey of 10 questions and asked participants to indicate either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ for each. A ‘yes’ response was counted as an ACE. Individuals with 4 or more ACEs in childhood (compared to those with none) are, as adults, more than six times as likely to have negative consequences (Bellis et al., 2018). In addition to the 10 questions, the McKelvey (2018) study asked respondents if they ever had an IEP or had been held back a grade. The results found that ACEs exposure in infancy and toddlerhood was associated with an increased likelihood that a child would exhibit maladaptive behavior along with having an IEP and having been retained a grade in school (McKelvey et al., 2018). Children exposed to ACEs

likely have fewer opportunities to develop self-regulatory skills, including emotional regulation and attention which in turn affect the academic competence.

A range of factors may moderate the impact of ACEs on life course health, providing resilience to developmental harms and consequently, better outcomes despite a history of multiple ACEs. Sources of resilience can include cultural engagement, community support, opportunity to control one's personal circumstances and access to a trusted adult throughout childhood (Bellis et al., 2018). Bellis' (2018) study again used a survey to retrospectively measure respondents' exposure to ACEs prior to 18 years of age and used the format of 10 questions. The study categorized high secondary school absenteeism as 'yes' (those missing >20 days per year) and 'no' (missing <20 days per year). As ACE count increased, a strong and positively related relationship was found with an increase in school absenteeism (Bellis et al., 2018). Conversely, it was found that school absenteeism was negatively related to being given opportunities as well as being treated fairly in the community.

### **School-Based Interventions**

School-oriented factors most predictive of absenteeism include aspects of poor school climate, inadequate peer and teacher support, poor student and teacher relationships and lax attendance management (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). Teachers and peers play a crucial role in providing social support to students. Social support helps to provide a sense of belonging and encourages attendance and participation in school. Educational support can be offered by looking at classroom placement and the need to identify the most conducive environments to facilitate learning should be addressed. In secondary education, there are many teachers with different classroom management and instruction styles teaching the same course and curriculum. Matching



students to their preferred classroom style can assist in overcoming school refusal (Gage et al., 2018).

Parent-teacher intervention to help students overcome school refusal behavior was highlighted by Hilt (2014) with the need for both school administrators and legal guardians to work as a team to set clear expectations for the student both in school and at home. School administrators should examine school refusal behavior for the individual and not expect to apply the same solution for each student refusing school.

Poor student and teacher relationships often arise from a lack of awareness on the part of the instructor. Teachers need to realize that not all students respond the same to instruction and some require personalized educational practices. While there are compulsory school attendance laws throughout the country, lax attendance management of student absences still exists in various schools with inaccurate and delayed reporting of absences. Conversely, positive school climates, which include constructive student and teacher relationships, are related to improved school attendance. In addition to classroom placement, school administrators can implement positive behavior expectations school wide to increase attendance and address school refusal behavior to the entire student body.

School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) is a systematic approach for implementing school-wide evidence-based prevention practices using a multitiered system to provide behavioral support for all students (Gage et al., 2018). SWPBIS is not a curriculum or program, but rather a process aimed at implementing effective and preventive behavioral programs, making data-based and team-based decisions and building a positive school climate leading to school improvement. SWPBIS is a tier-based system with primary prevention aimed at all students, secondary prevention implemented for small groups of students failing to

respond to primary intervention and tertiary intervention provided to individuals based on their unique needs (Gage et al., 2018).

Response to intervention (RTI) shares similarities to SWPBIS in that it too is tier-based and is compatible as both have an emphasis on prevention. RTI models eschew a wait to fail approach and instead emphasizes early identification and treatment of students. RTI for school absenteeism are problem-solving oriented or protocol driven. Problem-solving approaches isolate specific skill deficits and shape targeted interventions for one or more students. Protocol driven approaches utilize a standard set of interventions to remediate an academic or behavioral problem (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

### **Students with Special Education Needs and School Refusal Behavior**

School refusal behavior is far more common in students with learning disabilities, with rates reported at approximately 40%-53% (Munkhaugen et al., 2017). A number of studies looking at school refusal behavior in students in special education were conducted in the early 2000s. Hicks (2002) examined 21,798 attendance records representing the entire student population of a Missouri school district, where 2,764 students (12%) were receiving special education services. Hicks (2002) compared attendance data across grades 1-12. Results were consistent with preceding reports documenting attendance problems of students with special educational needs. In Hicks' (2002) sample, students receiving special education services had significantly lower rates of attendance than did their general education counterparts. Additionally, Hicks' (2002) sample reported that within the students with special educational needs, the lowest overall attendance rate was found to in Grade 9. Students with specific learning disabilities including those of dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia were further found to

experience adverse school experiences including those of grade retention, and school refusal behavior.

A study conducted by Martin (2014) looked specifically at the role of ADHD in academic adversity including school refusal behavior. In the study, Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) in addition to ADHD were examined, as it is known that both are comorbid (Martin, 2014). Having both ADHD and a Specific Learning Disability amplifies the academic risk and having two or more risk factors increases the possibility of academic failure. The results found that students labeled as SLD was the most profound predictor of adversity in academics including grade retention and lower overall rates of graduation (Martin, 2014).

### **Teacher Perceptions of Absences**

Despite the great knowledge that parents and teachers can provide together in clinical assessments, teachers' reports are underused in contrast to the more regular use of reports from parents alone. Teachers may be able to identify anxious children in the classroom and can provide valuable information to clinicians about anxiety symptoms or how they affect child adjustment.

Crawshaw (2015) looked at school refusal behavior over a twenty-year period and found contradictions whereby teachers reported a significant increase in difficult students while research studies indicated that the proportion of children with difficult behaviors, of which lack of attendance was a main difficult behavior, remained approximately the same. Crawshaw (2015) cited the move by countries including the United States to place children in the least restrictive environment during this same twenty-year period as the likely reason for the discrepancy. "This may mean that teachers in mainstream education setting are now exposed to student behaviors that would previously have occurred only in segregated settings," (Crawshaw,

2015 p. 295). Consistent approaches to behavior management are critical at the secondary level to manage student behaviors and having a unified approach across the multiple teachers interacting with students throughout the course of a school day would prove most effective.

The style of teaching also impacts student behavior in the same way as consistent behavioral management. Psychologically controlling teachers adopt behaviors such as limiting overt verbal expression, exhibiting disapproval or ignoring students who do not achieve academically or do not behave according to their standards in an effort to manipulate students into compliance. This controlling style of teaching has shown to bring about feelings of anxiety and fear of failure in students, resulting in decreased school engagement, negative feelings towards schools and eventually, school refusal behavior (Filippello et al., 2019). Teachers with this controlling style of teaching are more likely to have negative perceptions of student absences, placing blame solely on the student. Conversely, teachers who create a supportive learning environment incorporate opportunities for encouragement, praise and pay attention to individual student needs and decrease student stress, while increasing student engagement and overall student attendance (Filippello et al., 2019). Teachers with this supportive teaching style are more often to report perceptions on student absences as something that the teacher can work with individual students to encourage a reduction of absences.

### **Summary**

The unifying theme of school refusal behavior is that of school administrators working in conjunction with medical professionals and legal guardians to support the student during a major time of need in their life. Expecting to resolve school refusal without the support of all three major components, school administrators, legal guardians and medical professionals, is not going to lead to lasting success for the student. School refusal behavior is far more common in students

with learning disabilities, with rates reported at approximately 40%-53% (Munkhaugen et al., 2017). While school refusal behavior is seen throughout the world and interest in this problem has increased, with increasing number of studies taking place in non-English-speaking countries, conceptual confusion over this heterogeneous condition combined with limited knowledge of underlying mechanisms and uncertainty as to the long-term effects of specific forms of intervention remain pervasive (Elliott & Place, 2017). School refusal behavior in secondary students remains a major area of concern and is something that parents, teachers and students will need to continue to address.

Therefore, this study looked at the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences of both students with special educational needs and general education students. The questions for this study are outlined below.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this study will center on two research questions.

1. What are the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences?
2. Are students who exhibit school refusal behavior more likely to be identified as students with special education needs?

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Overview**

Students need to attend school in order to be successful within school. A concern for schools is when students refuse to attend school on a regular basis that develops into a detrimental behavior known as school refusal behavior. School refusal behavior encompasses all subsets of problematic absenteeism, such as truancy, school phobia, and anxiety. School refusal is a behavior that is multi-faceted; often, these students are experiencing psychological matters that are presenting as the symptom of school refusal. The purpose of this study was to survey teachers on their perceptions of student absences and to learn how they motivate students to attend their classes.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was an urban high school in the Midwest. Certified teachers encompass a board range of subject and academic levels of students. The high school offered different degrees of rigor from academic integrated classes up through dual enrollment classes. The high school had 1,834 students enrolled for the 2020/2021 school year in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. For the 238 students designated as special education, 234 were in general education for 80% or more throughout the day, with the remaining 4 in general education 70% of the day. Students were either fully virtual or attending school twice a week and learning virtually the other days for the 2020/2021 school year. Teachers were responsible for teaching both the virtual and blended

learning students in a synchronous learning format and for recording attendance for each period of the day for both learning modalities.

### **Respondents**

The total number of certified teachers at the high school was 78 with 11 full time special education instructors. The electronic survey was distributed to all via their school email address. A survey return rate of 20 to 30% was expected, given that this survey was conducted in a school year heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the teachers did know that the survey was related to this study through the summary letter, it was not known which response corresponds to which teacher, therefore ensuring anonymity of those involved. Google forms allows surveys to be sent out and results collected without displaying the email address of the respondent to ensure anonymity. Additionally, Google forms allowed for only one response to be recorded per unique email address. Teachers were given a survey summary letter before beginning the survey and were allowed to opt out or stop at any time.

### **Research Design**

An IRB (Institutional Review Board) approved research design was obtained prior to proceeding with the research (APPENDIX C). An IRB is a type of committee that applies research ethics for proposed research. Additionally, the researcher completed CITI Program training certification preceding submission to the IRB (APPENDIX E). CITI Program, also known as the

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, offers web-based educational courses in research, ethics and research administration.

An online survey was created using Google Forms. The survey was designed to not collect respondents' email addresses to ensure anonymity and was limited to one response per unique email address. The survey did not ask any identifying information such as number of years teaching, subjects taught, etc. E-mail addresses of participants were provided from administration and one email per participant was sent with a hyperlink to the survey included. The survey summary letter was included in the body of the email above the hyperlink and included that the survey was voluntary, would take 12-15 minutes of the respondent's time and was open for a period of five days only. The survey was comprised of 18 questions focusing on teacher perceptions of student absences and consisted of 15 statements utilizing a Likert Scale for responses. A Likert Scale is an additive index of 4, 5 or 7- value ordinal variables, each which captures the strength and direction of agreement (or disagreement) with a declarative statement (Pollack III, 2020).

For the first 15 questions, respondents can select one of four answer choices: "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree." The four-point Likert scale is the most common "forced" Likert scale — it allows a range of responses, but does not provide an option for a neutral response.

The 15 questions had built-in redundancy, with questions measuring the similar concept of student absences, but with different wording. This was designed to combat the tendency of respondents to agree with question statements. The next two questions were open ended response format, and the final question was a yes or no response. These questions were analyzed separately from the first 15 in the results section of this thesis. Qualitative responses were grouped by themes



for analysis (Patton, 2002). Overall, the survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes to complete.

### **Recruitment and Data Collection**

All certified teachers were included in this survey and sent via their school email. Teachers at the high school represent various demographic characteristics and range in educational experience from over 35 years in the educational setting to this being their very first year in teaching. The survey was sent twelve weeks into the 2020/2021 school year. No additional methods for increasing response rate were used in this study. Preceding the survey, participants were provided a survey summary letter digitally stating that they have been selected to participate and could choose not to participate or to stop at any time. All questions were to be answered to the best of their knowledge, all answers were to remain confidential and responses would remain anonymous. Due to the answers being anonymous, the demographic characteristics of the respondents was not known.

### **Data Analysis Procedures and Methods**

For the first 15 statements of the survey being measured at the ordinal level, bar charts were created with the survey results. Ordinal-level variables communicate relative differences between units of analysis. Ordinal-level variables measure the attitude of respondents and allow

for classification of responses into different categories (Pollack III, 2020). For this study, the categories were designated as strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

Dispersion was also analyzed. Dispersion is the variation or spread of responses across the possible values. A variable's dispersion tells the degree to which observations share the same value or have diverse values (Pollack III, 2020).

The next two questions had open answer responses. Responses were analyzed to look for similarities among the respondents (Patton, 2002). The final question had either a yes or no response.

## **CHAPTER 4:RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

Students need to be in attendance at school in order to be successful. School refusal behavior encompasses all subsets of problematic absenteeism, such as truancy, school phobia, and anxiety. Students dealing with school refusal is a behavior that is multi-faceted and includes students, their families and teachers. The purpose of this study was to survey general and special education teachers on their perceptions of student absences and to discover how teachers motivate students to attend their classes.

### **Survey Overview**

Twenty-six completed surveys were returned, for a return rate of 33%. While this return rate was on the low side, it exceeded expectations given that this survey was conducted in a school year impacted by COVID-19 and declining student attendance either virtually or in-person was a pervasive issue. The survey took respondents an average of twelve minutes to complete according to Google analytics, including the two short answer response questions. The survey was comprised of 18 questions focusing on teacher perceptions of student absences and consisted of 15 statements utilizing a Likert scale for responses. Respondents could select from one of four answer choices: “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” A “neutral” option was purposely omitted in order to force the respondent to form an opinion either way. The questions measured similar concepts, but were worded differently. The next two questions were open ended response narratives, and the final question was a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response. The focus of this survey was centered on the two research questions: (1) ‘What are the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences?’, (2) ‘Are students who exhibit school refusal behavior more likely to be

identified as students with special education needs?’. The raw data from this survey is in APPENDIX F.

### **Analysis**

For the first 15 questions of the survey, results were first grouped by which research questions they were related to. Being at the ordinal level, bar charts were then created from the results. Qualitative evaluations use qualitative data in combination with quantitative data. Qualitative methods include three kinds of data collection: (1) open-ended responses; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents (Patton, 2002). For this survey’s qualitative responses, data collection was in the form of two open ended questions that the respondents’ answers were then grouped into categories based upon similar themes and bar charts were created.

### **Findings**

#### **Research Question One- Teacher Perceptions of Student Absences**

##### ***Student Autonomy within Classrooms***

The first question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students attend class more frequently when teachers use resources that reflect students’ backgrounds*. The respondents were divided among the four categories offered, and this question had the second highest dispersion of responses, with the majority of the respondents, 54%, agreeing with this statement, and 15% strongly agreeing, for a total percentage of 69% of respondents in favor of the first question. Conversely, 23% of respondents disagreed with this statement, and 8% of

respondents strongly disagreed, for a total percentage of 31% of respondents not in favor of the first question.

The second question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students attend class more frequently when learning includes students' input about what and how topics will be discussed in class*. Again, the respondents were divided among the four categories, with the majority of the respondents, 46%, agreeing with this statement, and 35% strongly agreeing, for a total percentage of 81% of respondents in favor of the second question. On the contrary, 8% of respondents disagreed with this statement and 11% strongly disagreed, for a total percentage of 19% of respondents not in favor of the second question.

Survey questions three through five had identical percentages of respondents in the strongly disagree category and disagree category, 4% and 8% respectively. The overwhelming majority of respondents strongly agreed with each of the statements in three through five. The third question asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students attend class more frequently when teachers make learning more relevant to their daily life*. Sixty-one percent of respondents strongly agreed with the statement and another 27% agreed for a total percentage of 88% of respondents in favor of the third question. The fourth question asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students attend class more frequently when teachers care about students' learning*. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement and another 19% agreed for a total percentage of 88% of respondents in favor of the fourth question. The fifth question asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students attend class more frequently when students feel connected to the teacher in class*. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement and another 19% agreed for a total percentage of 88% of respondents in favor of the fifth question. The results from questions three, four and five are illustrated in *Figure 1*.

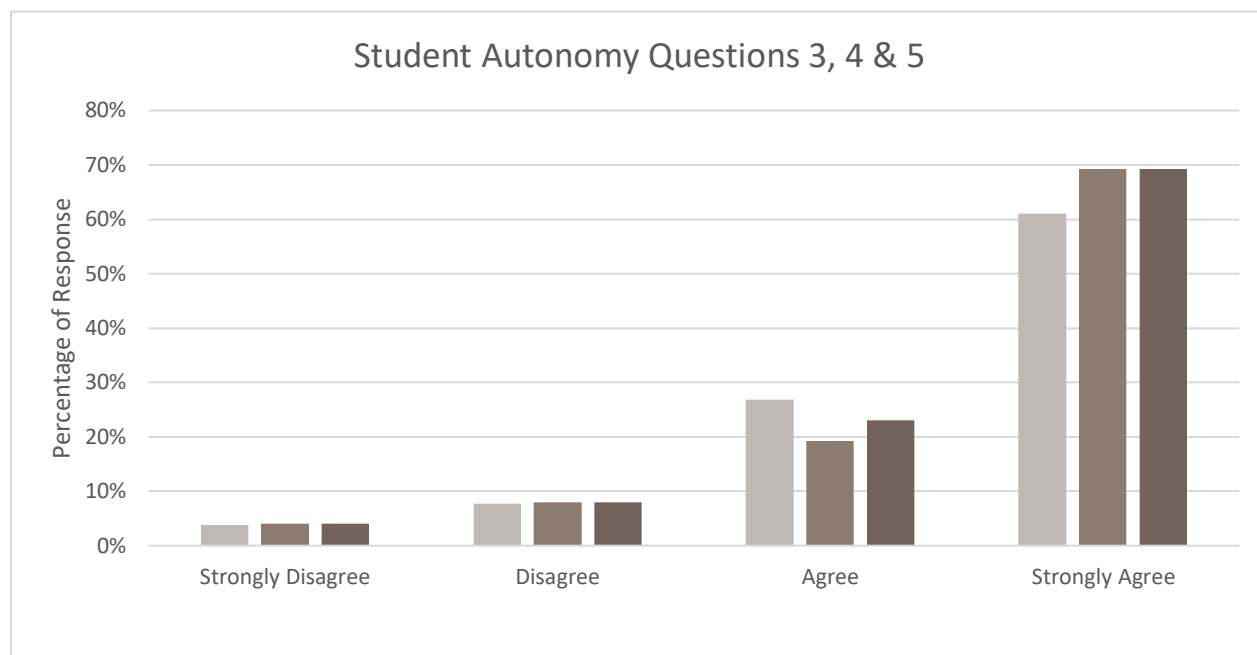


Figure 1. Three statements dealing with student autonomy within school. All three statements had identical percentages in both the strongly disagree and disagree category. The third statement was *Students attend class more frequently when teachers make learning more relevant to their daily life*. The fourth statement was *Students attend class more frequently when teachers care about students' learning*. The fifth statement was *Students attend class more frequently when students feel connected to the teacher in class*.

The sixth question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students attend class more frequently when they feel they belong in the school*. This statement saw the entirety of respondents agree or strongly agree, with the percentages being 58% and 42% respectively. This was one of only two questions in the survey which had an unanimous favorable response by the respondents.

The eighth question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *I believe that students are provided with opportunities throughout the school day to identify and express their feelings*. This was the question of the survey with second highest dispersion of responses. Sixty-five percent of respondents agreed with this statement, with 8% strongly agreeing, for a total

percentage of favorable responses of 73%. Conversely, 27% of respondents disagreed with this statement and 4% strongly disagreed, for a total percentage of unfavorable response of 31%.

### ***Relationships Between Teachers and Students***

The ninth question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *I believe that students have at least one teacher who knows and cares about them*. Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed with this statement, with 73% of the response. An additional 15% strongly agreed, for a total percentage of favorable responses of 88%. No respondents strongly disagreed with the statement and only 11% disagreed.

The tenth question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *I believe that having an adult at school who cares about students positively impacts student attendance*. This statement was the second in the survey that saw the entirety of respondents agree or strongly agree, with 38% agreeing and 61% strongly agreeing.

For the twelfth and thirteenth questions, responses were very similar and correlated to the statements asking similar things. Question twelve asked respondents to respond to the statement, *Students are more likely to attend school when teachers show respect for them*. Question thirteen asked respondents to respond to the statement, *Students are more likely to attend school when teachers understand students' needs*. Responses were identical for unfavorable, with no respondents strongly disagreeing with either statement and only 8% of respondents disagreeing with each statement. For the twelfth question, respondents were evenly divided between the categories of agree and strongly agree with 46% in each column, for a favorable response

percentage of 92%. For the thirteenth question, 50% of the respondents agreed, with an additional 42% of the respondents strongly agreeing, for a favorable response percentage of 92%.

For the fourteenth question of the survey, teachers were asked to respond to the statement, *Students are more likely to attend school when families and teachers work together to support the students*. The majority of respondents strongly agreed with this statement, 54%, and a further 42% agreed, for a favorable response percentage of 96%. Only 4% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

### **Research Question Two- Absences of Students with IEPs**

The seventh question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *I believe that the absences of students with IEPs affects them meeting their academic goals in class*. This was the first question on the survey that directly addressed special educational students and absences. It was also the first question of four on the survey that changed the statement format. This was purposely done in an effort to help respondents refocus in reading the questions and select the option that best matched their personal perception. Only 4% of respondents had an unfavorable response to this statement and strongly disagreed compared with 46% agreed and 50% of respondents strongly agreed, for a total percentage of 96% of respondents having a favorable response to this statement.

The eleventh question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *I believe students with IEPs have more unexcused absences*. This was the question in the survey with the highest dispersion of responses. Fifty-three percent of respondents agreed with the statement and a further 11% strongly agreed, for a total percentage of favorable responses of 64%. Conversely, 31% of respondents disagreed with the statement and a further 4% strongly disagreed, for a total



percentage of unfavorable response of 35%. The results from question eleven are illustrated in *Figure 2*.

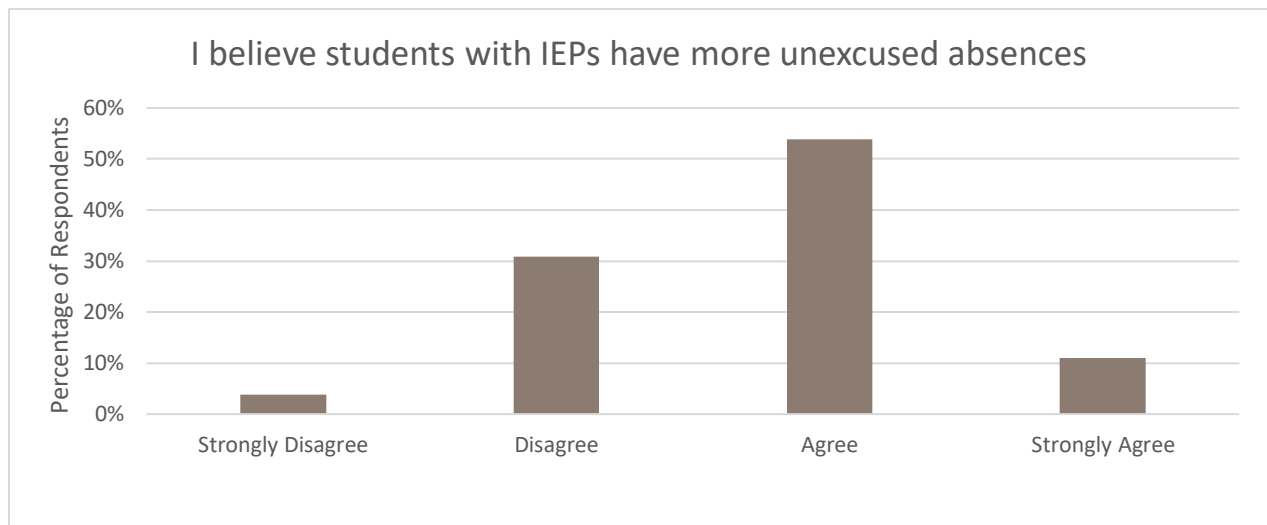


Figure 2. Dispersion of responses to the statement *I believe students with IEPs have more unexcused absences*.

The fifteenth question of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statement, *Students with IEPs need different strategies to encourage attendance*. Again, the majority of respondents agreed with this statement, 61% and a further 27% strongly agreed, for a favorable response percentage of 88%. Eleven percent of respondents disagreed with this statement.

### ***Narrative Responses***

#### ***Top Three Reasons for Student Absences***

The sixteenth question of the survey was open ended and asked teachers to provide what they believed the top three reasons for student absences in their class. A typed response of any length was required to advance the survey to the next question. Therefore, twenty-six responses were recorded. Three responses either preferred not to answer, typed in random characters to

advance the survey, or provided only one reason. These answers were grouped together as ‘Preferred Not To Answer’ category and comprised 11% of the responses. Eight responses were grouped into the ‘External Factors’ category, for 31%, which included factors such as no accountability at home, responsibilities at home and students preferring to engage in an activity other than school. Five responses were grouped into ‘Internal Factors’ category, for 19%, which included factors such as mental health and too much pressure placed on students to perform well in school. Five responses were grouped into ‘Issues with School Environment’, for 19%, and included factors such as bullying, peer pressure and teachers and/or students not interested in the material being taught. Finally, five responses were grouped into the ‘COVID-19’ category, for 19%, which included fear of the virus, placed in quarantine and being sick with the virus. The results from question sixteen are illustrated in *Figure 3*.

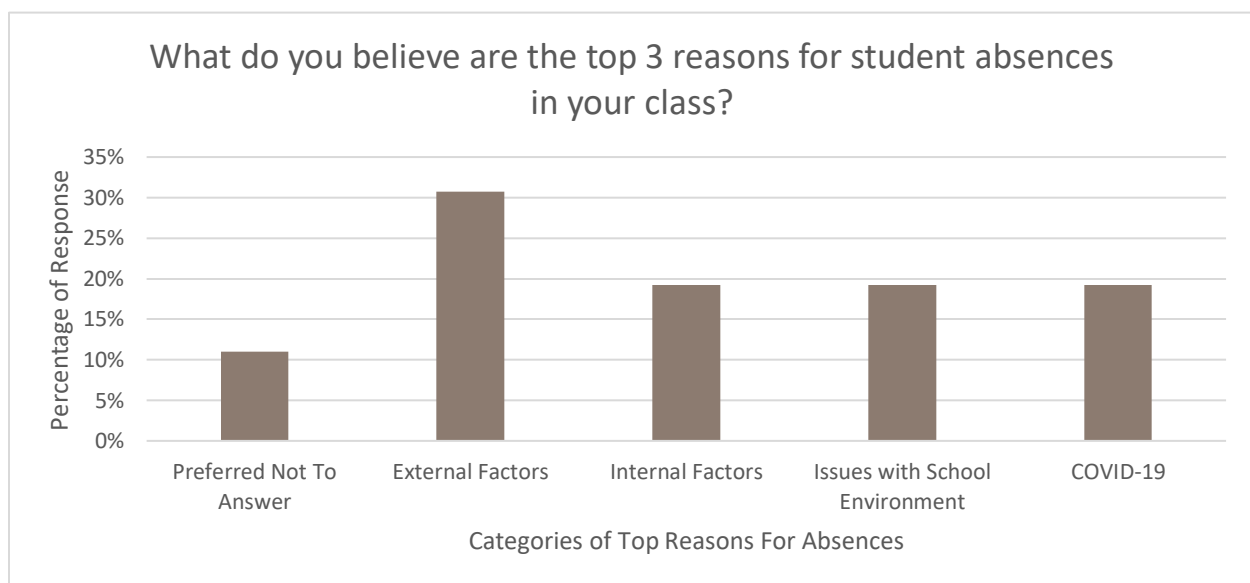


Figure 3. Respondents’ top three beliefs for student absences.

### *Activities and/or Policies to Improve Student Attendance*

The seventeenth question of the survey was again open ended and asked teachers to share any activities and/or policies that they personally do to improve student attendance in their class. Again, a typed response of any length was required to advance the survey and twenty-six responses were recorded. Three responses either preferred not to answer, typed in random characters or did not feel that attendance was a problem and were grouped together as ‘Preferred Not To Answer’ category and comprised 11% of the responses. Ten responses referenced connections and relationships to reinforce attendance and were grouped together as ‘Building Positive Relationships’ category and comprised 38% of the responses. Seven responses referenced classroom routines and the need for fun, engaging activities. These responses were grouped as ‘Engaging Activities’ category and comprised 27% of the responses. Two responses referenced involving other school personnel or policies for student attendance such as tardy school, and were grouped as ‘Other School Policies/Personnel’ category and comprised 8% of the responses. Finally, three responses listed frequent communication to parents for 11% of responses and was grouped into ‘Frequent Communication Home’ category. The results from question seventeen are illustrated in *Figure 4*.

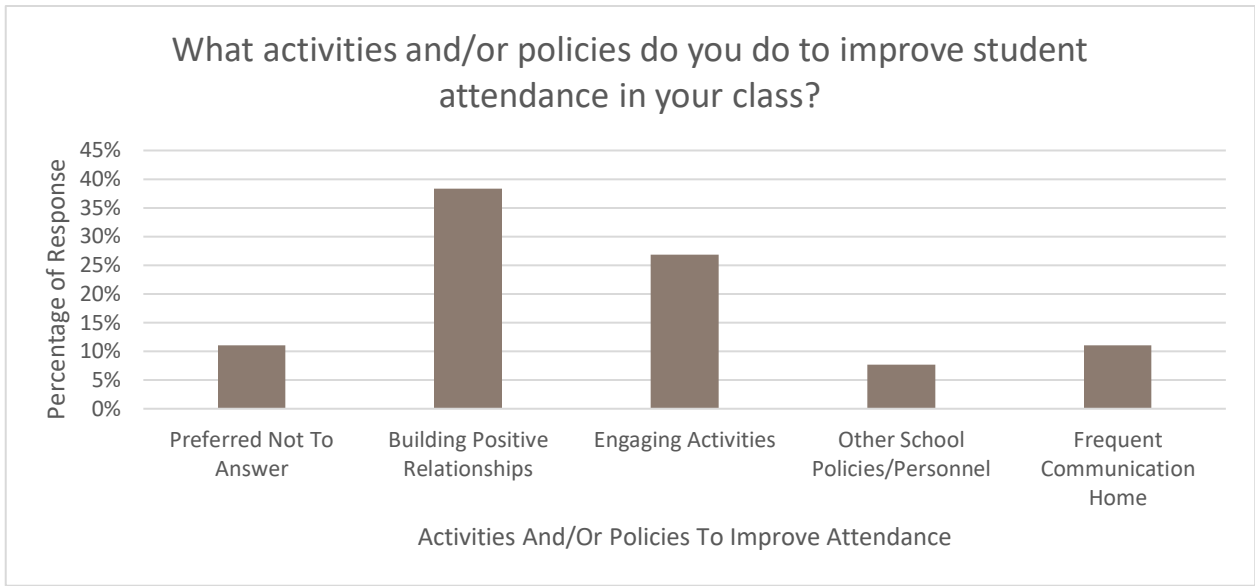


Figure 4. Respondents' activities and/or policies to improve attendance that they do in their personal classrooms.

### ***Further Support and Materials***

The eighteenth and final question of the survey asked teachers to respond either yes or no to the question, *Would you like suggestions and/or school wide policies/procedures to help with student attendance.* Responses were almost evenly split with 54% selecting 'yes' and 46% selecting 'no'.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to survey both general and special education teachers on their perceptions of student absences and to ascertain how teachers motivate students to attend. The focus of this study was centered on two research questions: (1) 'What are the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences?' and (2) 'Are students who exhibit school refusal behavior more likely to be identified as students with special education needs?' Twenty-six completed surveys were returned, with the survey comprised of 15 statements utilizing a Likert scale for

responses. Respondents could select from one of four answer choices, with the neutral option purposely being omitted in order to force the respondent to form an opinion either way. Two questions were open ended and the final question was either yes or no. Responses to survey questions were grouped into either being related to research question one or research question two, with additional subcategories under each research question.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

School attendance concerns can cause a plethora of additional concerns in terms of failing grades, lack of school engagement and declining graduation rates. School refusal behavior encompasses all subsets of problematic absenteeism and is a multi-faceted behavior. The purpose of this study was to examine secondary general and special education teachers' perceptions of school refusal behavior of secondary students through an anonymous electronic response survey created on Google Forms sent via teachers' school email. Twenty-six completed surveys were returned, for a return rate of 33%.

The focus of this study was centered on two research questions: (1) 'What are the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences?' and (2) 'Are students who exhibit school refusal behavior more likely to be identified as students with special education needs?'

### **Review of Findings**

Overall, the majority of teachers had favorable responses to survey questions related to the first research question dealing with teacher perceptions of student absences. Teachers felt that creating a classroom environment that reflected students' background, providing opportunities for student input and connecting classroom learning to students' daily life all positively impacted student attendance. All of these statements collectively could be summed up by the sixth question of the survey, which addressed students feeling like they belonged within a school having a positive impact on student attendance. This sixth question was only one of two within the survey in which an unanimous favorable response was reached by all respondents. This strong level of a response indicated that both special education and general education teachers inherently know how

a classroom environment should be structured for greater student engagement and attendance. Further, teachers understand that connecting the curriculum taught to the students' diverse backgrounds and daily lives helps to enrich the school experience.

A subset of research question one specifically focused on the relationships formed between teachers and their students and looked at the impact of those relationships on increasing student attendance. Respondents felt that when teachers show respect for students and when teachers attempt to understand students' needs both correlate to increased student attendance with only 8% of respondents disagreeing with both of these statements. Responses to surveys were anonymous, however given the identical percentage of unfavorable responses one might assume that the same teachers responded negatively to both of these statements focusing on the relationship aspect between teachers and students.

Survey questions directly relating to the second research question focusing on absences of students with IEPs again had a majority of respondents favorably agreeing with the statements. Statement topics ranged from absences impacting special education students meeting their individual academic goals, special education students having more unexcused absences, and special education students needing different strategies to encourage attendance when compared to general education students. The eleventh question of the survey addressed special education students having more unexcused absences when compared to general education students. Unexcused absences is the crux of school refusal behavior with the general consensus of research deciding that missing at least 25% of total school time within a minimum of a two week time frame. This question was expected to have an absolute favorable response from all yet was the question with the highest rate of dispersion amongst the respondents. A total of 35% of respondents had an unfavorable view of this question, compared to 64% favorable response, suggesting the the

teachers surveyed do not feel that special education students have more unexcused absences when compared to general education peers. Whether this was a true reflection of teachers' beliefs or the caveat of the absences being classified as unexcused in the survey remain unknown and would be an area that would certainly benefit from additional investigation in future research.

When reviewing the narrative responses for the two open-ended questions, the survey was set to require a typed response of any length to advance the survey to the next question. Because of this, three respondents chose to not answer both questions in entirety or to respond without addressing it completely. These responses were grouped into a category of 'preferred not to answer' and the remaining responses were analyzed for trends and themes within the respondents. Given that the exact number of respondents chose not to answer both questions, it was assumed that it was the same teachers for both questions.

For the first narrative responses which asked for the top three reasons for student absences, the highest percentage of responses were grouped into the 'external factors' category, accounting for 31%, and included factors such as lack of accountability at home, responsibilities at home and students preferring to engage in an activity other than school as the most prevalent reasons for student absences. These responses were in direct conflict with the percentage of respondents that had previously responded favorably that the environment of the classroom and the connection of curriculum to students' lives played a vital role in the overall attendance of students. Only 19% of respondents listed concerns with the school environment, which encompassed such factors of bullying, peer pressure and disinterest in the material being taught as the primary cause of student absences.

For the second narrative response, teachers were asked for any activities and/or policies that they personally do within their own classrooms aimed at improving student attendance. Unlike



the prior narrative response, the pattern of these responses closely aligned with the responses to the preceding questions in the survey. The highest percentage of responses, 38%, referenced building positive relationships with students. Another 27% of responses referenced classroom routines and the need for fun, engaging activities to be built into the curriculum so that students know what to expect each and every day within the classroom setting. An interesting item of note was found when only 11% of respondents listed frequent communication to parents as something that improved student attendance. Parent and teacher communication was referenced earlier in the survey with the fourteenth question, where teachers were asked if students are more likely to attend school when families and teacher work together to support students. This question had 96% of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to this statement. The discrepancy may lie with the second narrative response asking for any activities and/or policies to be provided. Respondents may have done several activities in conjunction to support students, but only provided one or two in the survey.

Perhaps the greatest discrepancy between the anticipated responses and the actual responses received was illustrated in the last question of the survey, which asked respondents for a yes or no response on whether they would like suggestions and/or school wide policies/procedures to help with student attendance. Responses were almost evenly split with 54% in favor and 46% not in favor of additional support on increasing student attendance. Given that this survey was conducted during the 2020-2021 school year in mid November might be the reason for this response rate to this particular question. Teachers were already 12 weeks into an 18 week semester and might have been resigned to the fact that the hybrid learning style of teaching due to

COVID-19 was something that negatively impacted student engagement and student attendance and implementing new policies or procedures would have been fruitless.

## **Results with Connection to Previous Literature**

### **Research Question One- Teachers' Perceptions of Student Absences**

The first question of the survey had teachers respond to the impact of students attending more frequently when instructional resources reflected students' background. Sixty-nine percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed while 31% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This level of negative response could be attributed to the fact that teachers surveyed at this particular school have curriculum that is created by the school corporation and leaves little room for an individual teacher to tailor to a particular group of student's interest. According to Filippello et al. (2019), teachers who create a supportive learning environment incorporate opportunities for encouragement and pay attention to individual student needs, thus increasing overall student attendance. Teachers with this supportive teaching style are more often to report perceptions on student absences as something they play an active part in encouraging.

The first five questions of the survey asked teachers to respond to various statements dealing with student autonomy within the classroom with teachers tailoring curriculum and content to reflect students' backgrounds, input, and connecting content to students' daily lives increase student engagement and student attendance. All questions had more respondents respond favorably to the statements suggesting that the respondents had a supportive teaching style and felt that the environment teachers created played an integral part in encouraging student attendance.

The ninth and tenth questions of the survey asked teachers to respond to the statements, *I believe that students have at least one teacher who knows and cares about them* and *I believe that having an adult at school who cares about students positively impacts student attendance*. The

percentage of favorable responses were 88% and 100% suggesting that the respondents understand the importance of connecting with students on a personal level first in order to help them find success on an academic level. School-oriented factors most predictive of absenteeism include aspects of poor school climate, inadequate peer and teacher support, poor student and teacher relationships and lax attendance management (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). The style of teaching impacts student behavior. Teachers who adopt behaviors such as exhibiting disapproval or ignoring students who do not achieve academically have classrooms rife with fear of failure amongst students, resulting in decreased school engagement, negative feelings towards school and eventually, school refusal behavior (Filippello et al., 2019). Teachers with this absolute style of teaching are more likely to have negative perceptions of student absences. The twelfth and thirteenth questions asked teachers to respond to similar statements *Students are more likely to attend school when teachers show respect for them* and *Students are more likely to attend school when teachers understand students' needs*. Respondents indicated a favorable response to both questions with 92% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with both statements. These high levels of favorability further suggest that teachers know the most conducive environment for their classrooms is one that focuses on the relationship aspect between teachers and their students. These respondents agree with Elliot and Place (2017) in that there are many cases within research where adverse events in school factor into school refusal behavior and are a key source of anxiety of students. In some cases, students may show fear of the school environment and the social and evaluative aspects (Elliot & Place, 2017). Teachers providing emotional support through relationships with students can stand to bridge this gap of existing adverse feelings of school. An

additional five questions of the survey focused specifically on relationships between teachers and students and the positive impact that it had on student attendance.

### **Research Question Two- Student Absences with IEPs**

Chronic toxic stress resulting from adverse childhood experiences, commonly referred to as ACEs, is associated with poor childhood mental health, attendance at school and educational attainment (Bellis et al., 2018). Exposure to ACEs in infancy and toddlerhood was associated with an increased likelihood that a child would exhibit maladaptive behavior along with having an IEP (McKelvey et al., 2018). While ACEs was not specifically addressed within the confines of this survey, it is understood that a sustainable portion of secondary students have had adverse childhood experiences. A lack of positive experiences associated with school at the elementary level manifest as deficits in academic competence and emotion regulation at the secondary level. The current research aligned with the seventh question which covered how absences of students with IEPs affected meeting their academic goals. When a student is frequently absent from school, they are at risk for decreased academic attainment, which can then lead to a host of other problems including grade retention, poor self-esteem, and school dropout (Redmond & Hosp, 2008). Ninety-six percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement and only 4% of respondents had an unfavorable response to this statement and strongly disagreed.

The eleventh question of the survey dealt with students with IEPs having more unexcused absences when compared to their non-disabled peers. This question turned out to have the highest dispersion of responses, with respondents divided among the four categories of response choices. Between respondents agreeing and strongly agreeing, a total percentage of favorable responses was 64%, with 31% of respondents disagreeing and a further 4% strongly disagreeing, for a total percentage of unfavorable response of 35%. This divide between anterior research and survey

results suggest that school refusal is increasing at the secondary level and teachers do not see an increased prevalence among special education students when compared to their non-disabled peers.

This was in direct conflict with preceding research that school refusal behavior is far more common in students with learning disabilities, with rates reported at approximately 40%-53% (Munkhaugen et al., 2017). This is a distinct increase from the percentage of school refusal behavior on all school-age children, which affects between 2% and 5% of all school-age children (Kawasaki & Marwaha, 2019). A number of studies looking at school refusal behavior in students in special education were conducted in the early 2000s. Hicks (2002) examined a school district where roughly 12% of the students were receiving special education services. In Hicks' (2002) sample, students in special education had significantly lower rates of attendance than did their general education peers. Therefore, it was expected that the survey respondents would be highly in favor of the statement asked in the eleventh question of the survey, which was not the case.

School administrators should examine school refusal behavior at the individual level and not expect to apply the same solution for each student that struggles with attendance. Classroom placement and the need to identify the most conducive environments to facilitate learning should be addressed. In secondary education, there are many teachers with different classroom management and instructional styles teaching the exact same course and following the exact same curriculum (Hilt, 2014). Additionally, Crawshaw (2015) looked at school refusal behavior over a twenty-year period and found teachers reported a significant increase in difficult students, with lack of attendance as a main difficult behavior being reported. Crawshaw (2015) cited the push for students to be placed into the least restrictive environment during this same time period as the likely reason for this increase, with teachers in mainstream education being exposed to student

behaviors that would have previously been contained within direct taught classroom settings (Crawshaw, 2015).

This research was supported by data collected in the fifteenth question of the survey which addressed students with IEPs needing different strategies to encourage attendance. The majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, for a favorable response percentage of 88%. Educational support can be offered by looking at classroom placement and the need to identify the most conducive environments to facilitate learning should be addressed (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). In secondary education, there are many teachers with different classroom management and instruction styles teaching the exact same course and curriculum. Matching students to their preferred classroom style can assist in overcoming school refusal. Within the realm of special education, students can be placed into integrated classroom settings for core subjects at the secondary level, where two certified teachers, one special education and one general education, co-teach the class each day. This arrangement allows for a lower student to teacher ratio, opportunities for small groups, moments of purposeful reteaching and an increased opening for meaningful student-teacher relationships to be formed. All of these factors combine to create a classroom environment that is more inclusive and encouraging of student attendance. The sixteenth question of the survey was open ended and asked teachers to provide what they believed the top three reasons for student absences in their class. Five responses were grouped into “Issues with School Environment”. Respondents included factors such as bullying, peer pressure, and teachers and/or students not interested in the material being taught as reasons for student absences. Additionally, five responses were grouped into “Internal Factors”, which shared some overlap with the school environment as a whole, with five respondents including factors such as students’

mental health, too much pressure placed on students to perform well and students not feeling valued at school as reasons for student absences.

### **Implications for Practice**

Some special education teachers include attendance data of students in the progress monitoring section of IEPs and absences are discussed during case conferences and quarterly progress monitoring reports. From both a district level and state level, attendance of a student is not something that an IEP goal can be written for, since it is not considered a skill that can be learned or mastered. Many special education teachers have pushed back against this, particularly when a student's attendance (or lack thereof) is the greatest barrier to them being successful within the school setting. The research shows that school refusal behavior is far more common in students with learning disabilities, with rates reported at approximately 40%-53% (Munkhaugen et al., 2017), so this division between research and practice should be considered as an important aspect of student attendance within the confines of IEPs.

Both anterior research and the results of this study show that teachers agree relationships are important for students to be present in school with school-oriented factors most predictive of absenteeism including aspects of poor school climate, inadequate peer and teacher support, poor student and teacher relationships and lax attendance management (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). However, when asked directly at the end of the survey if respondents would like suggestions and/or school wide policies/procedures to help with student attendance, the responses were almost evenly divided with 54% of respondents indicating a favorable response and 46% of respondents indicating an unfavorable one. This division amongst respondents suggests that although teachers know that relationships are a paramount factor in student engagement and a school refusal deterrent, the prospect of additional training and/or planning dissuaded a large percentage of

teachers from wanting additional support. Therefore, schools need to focus on relationship building at the start of each school year to ensure that the proper school climate is adopted from the beginning and schedule purposeful planning of relationship building moments throughout the school year to ensure that the desired school climate continues to be fostered. By scheduling times throughout the school year, schools can shift the burden of planning from the individual teachers and allow teachers the time to create and cultivate an environment that is engaging and nurturing for both teachers and students.

Preceding research was published prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to the results of this survey being collected in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anterior research shows that both adverse events within the school environment and overwhelming student anxiety are key factors in exacerbating school refusal behavior in students, yet school refusal behavior only affected between 2% to 5% of school-aged children (Kawsar & Marwaha, 2019). Since the start of the pandemic, adverse events within the school environment have increased exponentially, such as closures, mask mandates, social distancing, quarantine periods and hybrid learning have combined to increased student anxiety. When asked to provided the top three reasons for student absences, respondents to this survey repeatedly referenced internal factors such as students' mental health, issues within the school environment, and COVID-19 concerns as the top reasons for student absences. These top reasons provided by both general education and special education teachers alike, suggest that school refusal behavior is becoming more widespread and mainstream than prior research has shown. Connecting with students, building meaningful relationships and providing opportunities for positive school experiences can all combine to increase student engagement and decrease school refusal behavior.



## **CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **Brief Summary of Study**

School attendance concerns with students cause a plethora of additional concerns in terms of failing grades, lack of school engagement and declining graduation rates. The purpose of this study was to examine general and special education teachers' perceptions of school refusal behavior of secondary students through an anonymous electronic response survey created on Google Forms sent via teachers' school email. Twenty-six completed surveys were returned, for a return rate of 33%.

The study was centered on two research questions: (1) 'What are the perceptions of secondary teachers on student absences?' and (2) 'Are students who exhibit school refusal behavior more likely to be identified as students with special education needs?' The survey was comprised of 18 questions focusing on teacher perceptions of student absences and consisted of 15 statements utilizing a Likert scale for responses. Respondents could select from one of four answer choices: "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree." A "neutral" option was purposely omitted in order to force the respondent to form an opinion either way. The questions measured similar concepts, but were worded differently. The next 2 questions were open ended response narratives, and the final question was a 'yes' or 'no' response.

Both previous research and the results of this study show that general education and special education teachers agree relationships are important for students to be present in school with school-oriented factors most predictive of absenteeism including aspects of poor school climate, inadequate peer and teacher support, poor student and teacher relationships and lax attendance management (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). However, when asked directly at the end of the survey if respondents would like suggestions and/or school wide policies/procedures to help with student

attendance, the responses were almost evenly divided with 54% of respondents indicating a favorable response and 46% of respondents indicating an unfavorable one. This division amongst respondents suggests that although teachers know that relationships are a paramount factor in student engagement and a school refusal deterrent, the prospect of additional training and/or planning dissuaded a large percentage of teachers from wanting additional support. Therefore, schools need to focus on relationship building at the start of each school year to ensure that the proper school climate is adopted from the beginning and schedule purposeful planning of relationship building moments throughout the school year to ensure that the desired school climate continues to be fostered. By scheduling times throughout the school year, schools can shift the burden of planning from the individual teachers and allow teachers the time to create and cultivate an environment that is engaging and nurturing for both teachers and students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

#### **Questions Omitted from the Survey**

An impactful limitation to this study was not being able to collect identifying information to distinguish respondents' answers in this study. The study was amended three times in order to be approved by the IRB and each revision redacted survey questions that the IRB deemed as too invasive or identifying. The first section of the original survey attempted to distinguish respondents as either general education teachers or special education teachers. Being able to distinguish between general education and special education teachers would have allowed for further analysis of teacher perceptions of student absences. Additionally, general education teachers would have

had to select the number of integrated classes (comprised of both general educational students and IEP students) that they taught within a 6 period day.

Another section of the original survey asked respondents to select how many years of teaching experience they had when completing the survey. This question may have had allowed for interpretations of the data with comparisons and contrasts on teacher perceptions of student absences based on experience. Additional data such number of years teaching may have increased the receptiveness to the importance of building relationships or decreased it.

The final amendment to the original survey was the removal of grouping all a respondent's individual responses together in the data section. Grouping a single respondent's opinions together would have allowed for analysis of overall opinion on the survey. For instance, in both short answer responses, two identical responses were recorded. One response had random letters entered for both questions and the other had 'prefer not to answer' typed for both questions. It was assumed that both of these responses were made by two respondents. In looking back over the raw data of the survey, questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, and 13 also had two respondents select 'disagree'. Due to the responses not being identified under a single respondent, it is impossible to know if two respondents shared these unfavorable opinions to all of the above listed questions.

### **Timing of Survey**

Another limitation of the study was the timing of the survey having to be sent out 12 weeks into an 18 week semester due to needing the proper approvals in place prior to sending it to teachers. Sending out the survey before the start of the school year and then having a follow up survey sent to the exact same respondents halfway through the semester (9 weeks) and comparing answers may have allowed for analysis of the difference in teacher perceptions of student absences

before the start of the year and then two thirds of a way through a semester to see if perceptions fluctuate throughout the school year.

### **COVID-19 Statement**

This study was conducted during a year dominated by COVID-19. The survey was given in November of 2020 to both general and special education teachers 12 weeks into an 18 week semester that was unlike anything previously experienced in the field of education. The high school had over 1800 students enrolled in one of two modalities consisting of fully virtual or a hybrid blend of learning that consisted of attending school twice a week and learning virtually the other days. Parents were allowed to switch their children from either modality throughout the school year in an effort to accommodate concerns of the pandemic. Teachers were solely responsible for keeping track of the modality of the student and teaching both the virtual and the in-person students in a synchronous learning format, where the virtual students were present via Zoom. Teachers were responsible for connecting with students who are absent for extended periods of time due to quarantine and/or ill from the virus and ensuring that materials are accessible, engaging, and students are progressing through the curriculum at a pace comparable to their peers within the classroom. During this period, students were frequently truant from school for weeks at a time and parents were unresponsive to multiple attempts to contact by both teachers and school administrators. The number of unexcused student absences increased dramatically during this time and teachers often felt that there was little they could do to rectify the situation.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research could explore tracking student attendance from elementary grades for both general education and special education students to screen for school refusal patterns that may be

developing by using the general agreed consensus of research parameters of school refusal behavior as, “missing at least 25% of total school time for at least 2 weeks, severe difficulty attending classes for at least 2 weeks and/or absences for at least 10 days of school during a semester,” (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013, p. 2). With identification, early intervention and support can be implemented to both the student and the parent with a goal to reduce or eliminate school refusal behavior prior to the student reaching the secondary level of schooling. ACEs are associated with poorer childhood mental health, attendance at school and educational attainment (Bellis et al., 2018). Several studies have indicated that ACEs are predictors for school-related difficulties, including repeating grades, and being identified as a student with special education needs. Compared to school-aged children without a lifetime history of ACEs, children with a lifetime history of ACEs exposure had increased odds of less optimal academic outcomes, including 1) decreased school engagement, 2) missing more than 2 weeks of school during a school year, 3) having an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and 4) grade retention (McKelvey et al., 2018).

This study focused on teachers’ perceptions of student absences. Future research could expand to include a variety of stakeholders; not only teachers’ perceptions, but also parents and secondary students themselves could be ascertained using the same survey format and results could be compared amongst all three groups of respondents.

This study was limited to one school. Future research done with a larger sample size with multiple high schools would increase the generalization of the research. Having both rural and urban high schools studied would also increase the generalization of the research.

This study looked at both general education and special education teacher perceptions of student absences at the secondary level during school years heavily impacted by COVID-19. A primary conclusion from anterior research and supported by this study is that students need to build

relationships with teachers to increase attendance in schools. A secondary conclusion is that students with IEPs may need different or multiple strategies to increase attendance. It is common knowledge that significant absences can be detrimental for students with multiple absences affecting their academics and social and emotional well being. School refusal behaviors can impact students' overall perceptions of school and of the community as a whole. It is in the best interest of all stakeholders: parents, students, teachers, schools and communities that students attend school regularly and are able to obtain the best academic and emotional skills possible.

## **APPENDIX A. SURVEY SUMMARY LETTER**

### **Secondary Student Survey Summary Letter**

Attendance is an important factor in student success. Research tells us that students who attend school regularly are more successful than students who do not. We would like your input in identifying potential reasons and possible solutions to this issue. We welcome this opportunity to learn from you about potential reasons for low student attendance. Your responses to this survey will inform district and school plans to improve school attendance.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. All teachers have been sent this survey. Responses are anonymous, so please answer honestly. You may stop the survey at any time and your responses for the questions answered will be counted. The survey should take you no more than 10 minutes to complete.

Thank you-

## APPENDIX B. SURVEY QUESTIONS

### Secondary Student Attendance Survey

Attendance is an important factor in student success. Research tells us that students who attend school regularly are more successful than students who do not. We would like your input in identifying potential reasons and possible solutions to this issue. We welcome this opportunity to learn from you about potential reasons for low student attendance. Your responses to this survey will inform district and school plans to improve school attendance.

Your participation in this survey is **voluntary**. All teachers have been sent this survey. Responses are anonymous, so please answer honestly. You may stop the survey at any time and your responses for the questions answered will be counted. The survey should take you no more than 10 minutes to complete.

Thank you-

### Secondary Student Attendance Survey Questions

**Please indicate how much you DISAGREE or AGREE with each of the following statements.** *(Check one response for each statement.)*

1. Students attend class more frequently when teachers use resources that reflect students' backgrounds.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree

McKelvey, L.M., Edge, N.C., Mesman, G.R., Whiteside-Mansell, L., & Bradley, R.H. (2018). Adverse experiences in infancy and toddlerhood: Relations to adaptive behavior and academic status in middle childhood. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.05.026>

2. Students attend class more frequently when learning includes students' input about what and how topics will be discussed in class.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree

Filippello, P., Buzzai, C., Costa, S., & Sorrenti, L. (2019). School Refusal and Absenteeism: Perception of Teacher Behaviors, Psychological Basic Needs, and Academic Achievement. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01471>



3. Students attend class more frequently when teachers make learning more relevant to their daily life.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

McKelvey, L.M., Edge, N.C., Mesman, G.R., Whiteside-Mansell, L., & Bradley, R.H. (2018). Adverse experiences in infancy and toddlerhood: Relations to adaptive behavior and academic status in middle childhood. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.05.026>

4. Students attend class more frequently when teachers care about students' learning.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Filippello, P., Buzzai, C., Costa, S., & Sorrenti, L. (2019). School Refusal and Absenteeism: Perception of Teacher Behaviors, Psychological Basic Needs, and Academic Achievement. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01471>

5. Students attend class more frequently when students feel connected to the teacher in class.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Bellis, M., Hughes, K., Ford, K., Hardcastle, K.A., Sharp, C.A., Wood, S., Homolova, L., & Davies, A. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences and sources of childhood resilience: a retrospective study of their combined relationships with child health and educational attendance. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5699-8>

6. Students attend class more frequently when they feel they belong in the school.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

7. I believe that the absences of students with IEPs affects them meeting their academic goals in class.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Elliott, J.G. & Place, M. (2017). Practitioner Review: School refusal: developments in conceptualization and treatment since 2000. *The Journal of child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 60, 4-15 Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12848>

8. I believe that students are provided with opportunities throughout the school day to identify and express their feelings.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Elliott, J.G. & Place, M. (2017). Practitioner Review: School refusal: developments in conceptualization and treatment since 2000. *The Journal of child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 60, 4-15 Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12848>

9. I believe that students have at least one teacher who knows and cares about them.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Bellis, M., Hughes, K., Ford, K., Hardcastle, K.A., Sharp, C.A., Wood, S., Homolova, L., & Davies, A. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences and sources of childhood resilience: a retrospective study of their combined relationships with child health and educational attendance. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5699-8>

10. I believe that having an adult at school who cares about students positively impacts student attendance.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Kearney, C.A., & Graczyk, P. (2014). A response to intervention model to promote school attendance and decrease school absenteeism. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, (43), 1-25. Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-013-9222-1>

11. I believe students with IEPs have more unexcused absences.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Hicks, J.S. (2002). *Absenteeism within special education: An exploratory analysis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia.

12. Students are more likely to attend school when teachers show respect for them.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Filippello, P., Buzzai, C., Costa, S., & Sorrenti, L. (2019). School Refusal and Absenteeism:

Perception of Teacher Behaviors, Psychological Basic Needs, and Academic Achievement.  
Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01471>

**13.** Students are more likely to attend school when teachers understand students' needs.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Hilt, R.J. (2014). School Refusal and Online High School. *Pediatric Annals; Thorofare*, 43(11) Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.3928/00904481-20141022-02>

**14.** Students are more likely to attend school when families and teachers work together to support the students.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Crawshaw, M. (2015). Secondary school teachers' perceptions of student misbehavior: A review of international research, 1983 to 2013. *Australian Journal of Education*. 59(3) 293-311 Reviewed from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944115607539>

**15.** Students with IEPs need different strategies to encourage attendance.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Martin, A.J. (2014). Understanding and supporting students with ADHA at school. *School Psychology*, Vol 29(4) Reviewed from <http://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000069>

**16.** What do you believe are the top 3 reasons for student absences in your class? (Please share your thoughts.)

**17.** What activities and/or policies do you do to improve student attendance in your class? (Please share your thoughts here.)

**18.** Would you like suggestions and/or school wide policies/procedures to help with student attendance?

- Yes
- No

## APPENDIX C. IRB APPROVAL

Date: 11-19-2020

IRB #: IRB-2020-1381

Title: School Refusal Behavior: Examining Teachers' Perceptions of School Refusal Behavior of Secondary Students

Creation Date: 9-24-2020

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: JANE LEATHERMAN

Review Board: Exempt Reviewer FY2021

Sponsor:

### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	<b>Exempt</b>
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### Key Study Contacts

Member	JANE LEATHERMAN	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	jleather@purdue.edu
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Member	Nicole Block	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	njblock@purdue.edu
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## APPENDIX D. PRINCIPAL APPROVAL LETTER



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FORT WAYNE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

To whom it may concern:

I have reviewed the proposal of research made by Nicole Block entitled " School Refusal Behavior: Examining Teachers' Perceptions of School Refusal Behavior of Secondary Students". I permit her to conduct this research at R. Nelson Snider High School. Nicole Block is a Special Education teacher in the area of Emotional Disabilities in the building, and the survey will be administered to the teachers in the building through a digital format.

I understand that participation in this survey will be voluntary for the teachers at their own discretion. Additionally, I understand that any data collected from this survey will be anonymous and no indefinable information will be collected.

Please accept this letter as my formal consent for this research to be conducted at R. Nelson Snider High School.

Sincerely,




Chad Hisson

*R. Nelson Snider High School*

4600 Fairlawn Pass • Fort Wayne, IN 46825 • Phone: 260.467.4600 • Fax: 260.467.4729



## APPENDIX E. CITI APPROVAL

 	<p>Completion Date 19-Dec-2019 Expiration Date 18-Dec-2022 Record ID 34521785</p>
<p>This is to certify that:</p> <p><b>Nicole Block</b></p> <p>Has completed the following CITI Program course:</p> <p><b>GCP - Social and Behavioral Research Best Practices for Clinical Research</b> <b>GCP - Social and Behavioral Research Best Practices for Clinical Research</b> <b>1 - Basic Course</b></p>	<div><p>Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).</p></div> <p>(Curriculum Group) (Course Learner Group) (Stage)</p>
<p>Under requirements set by:</p> <p><b>Purdue University</b></p>	 <p>Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative</p>
<p>Verify at <a href="http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w379bb0c4-27c2-404d-b205-147ad5b581ab-34521785">www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w379bb0c4-27c2-404d-b205-147ad5b581ab-34521785</a></p>	

## APPENDIX F. RAW DATA FROM SURVEY

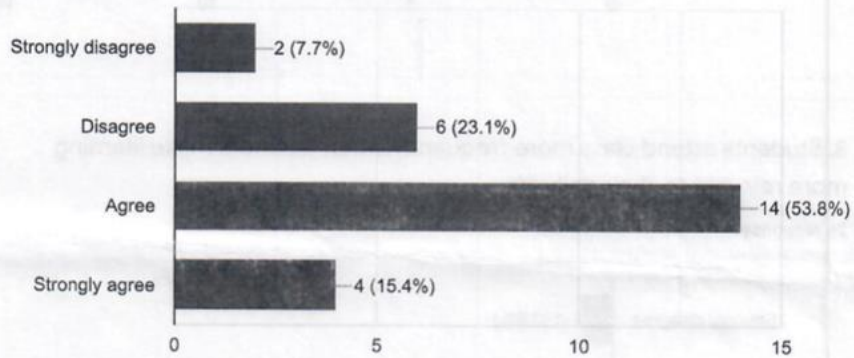
### Secondary Student Attendance Survey Questions

26 responses

[Publish analytics](#)

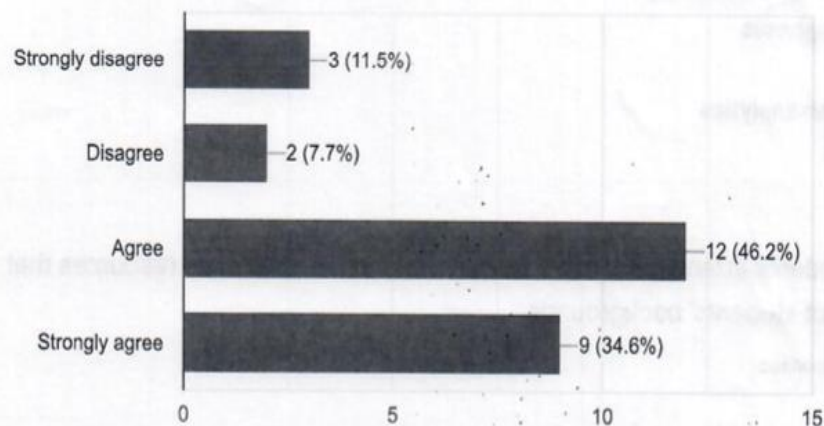
1. Students attend class more frequently when teachers use resources that reflect students' backgrounds.

26 responses



2. Students attend class more frequently when learning includes students' input about what and how topics will be discussed in class.

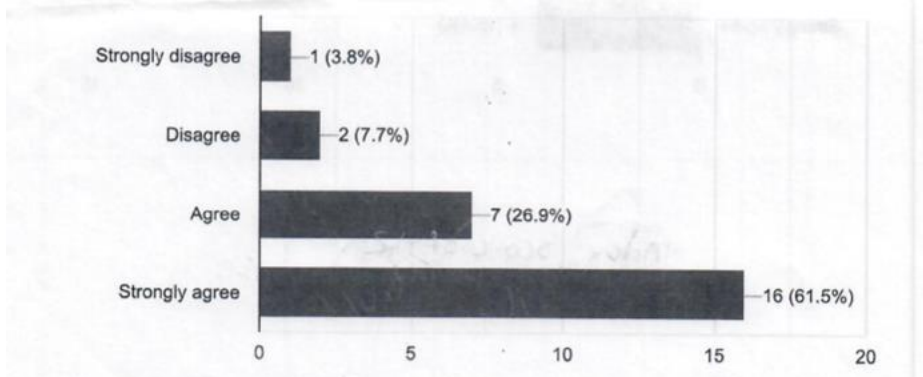
26 responses





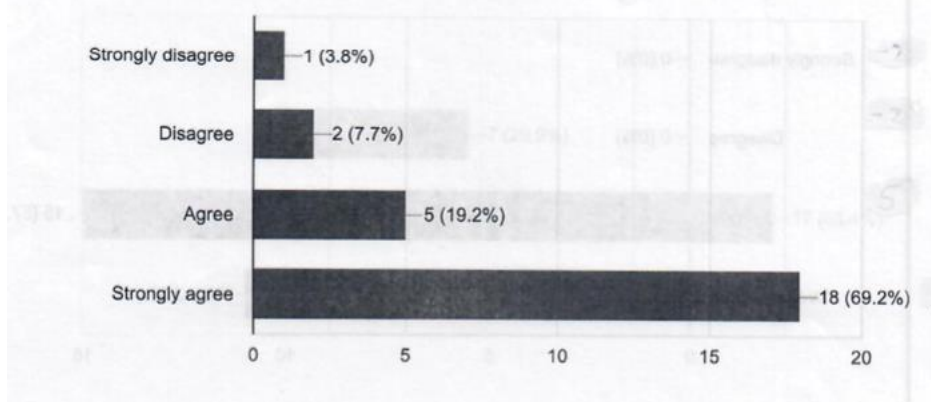
3. Students attend class more frequently when teachers make learning more relevant to their daily life.

26 responses



4. Students attend class more frequently when teachers care about students' learning.

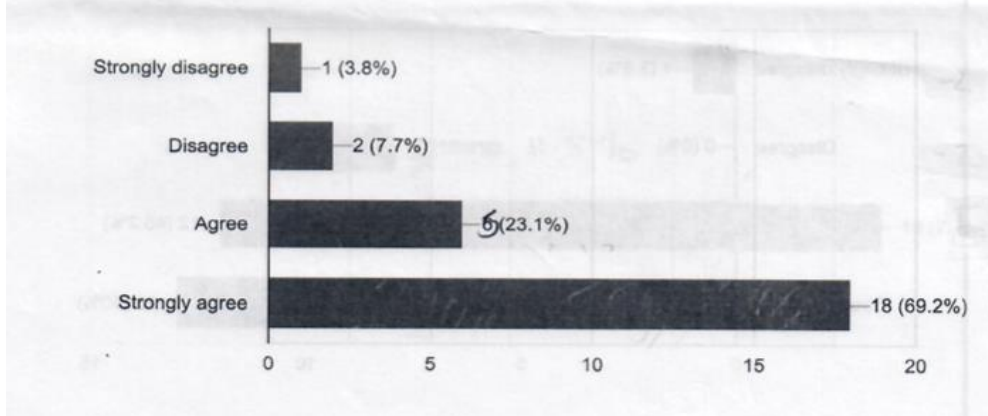
26 responses





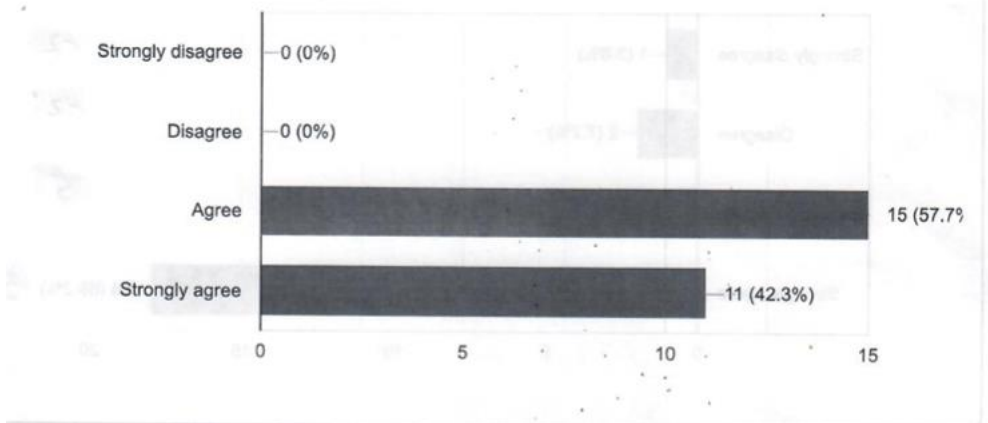
5. Students attend class more frequently when students feel connected to the teacher in class.

26 responses



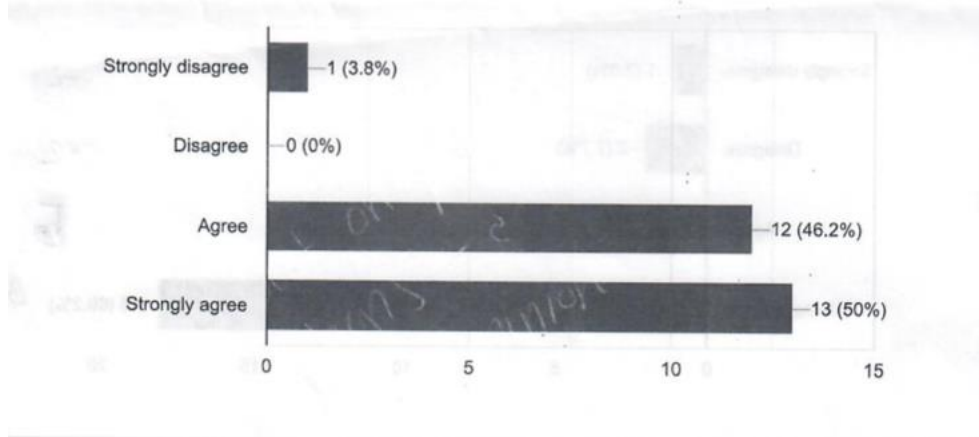
6. Students attend class more frequently when they feel they belong in the school.

26 responses



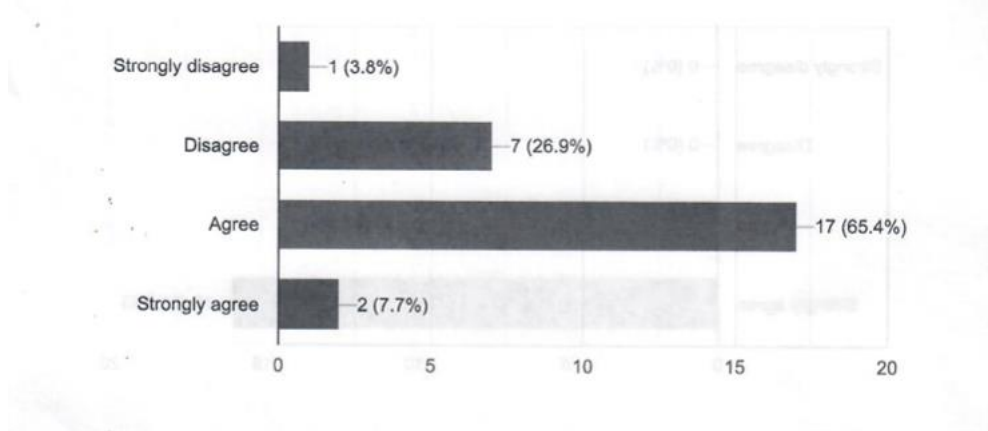
7. I believe that the absences of students with IEPs affects them meeting their academic goals in class.

26 responses



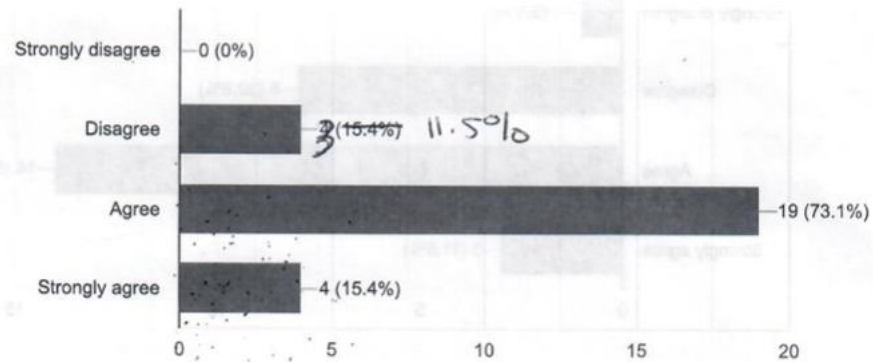
8. I believe that students are provided with opportunities throughout the school day to identify and express their feelings.

26 responses



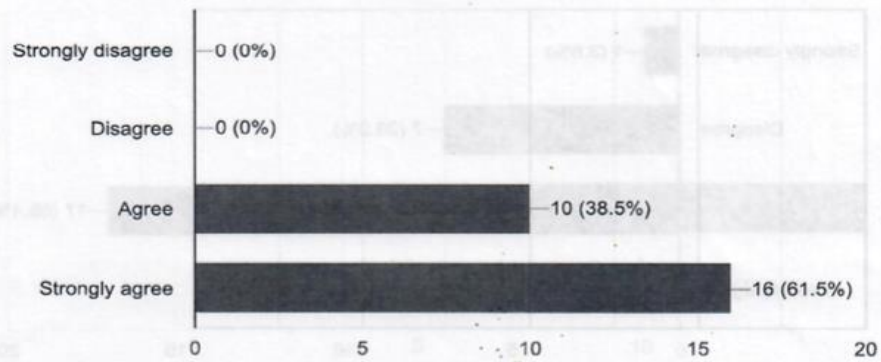
9. I believe that students have at least one teacher who knows and cares about them.

26 responses



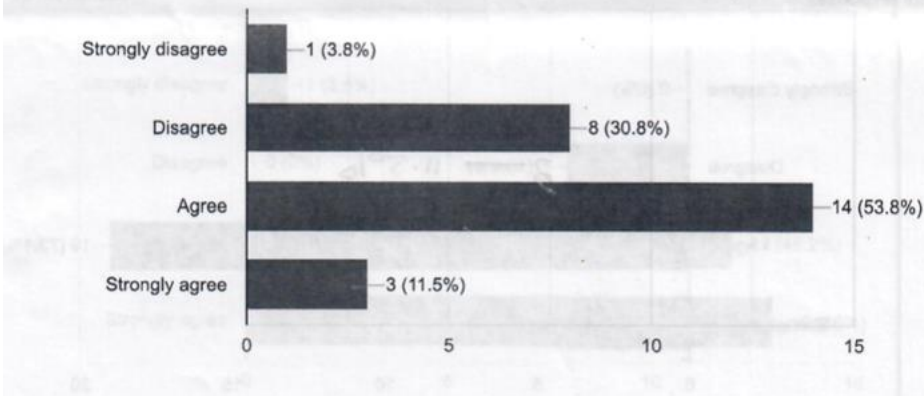
10. I believe that having an adult at school who cares about students positively impacts student attendance.

26 responses



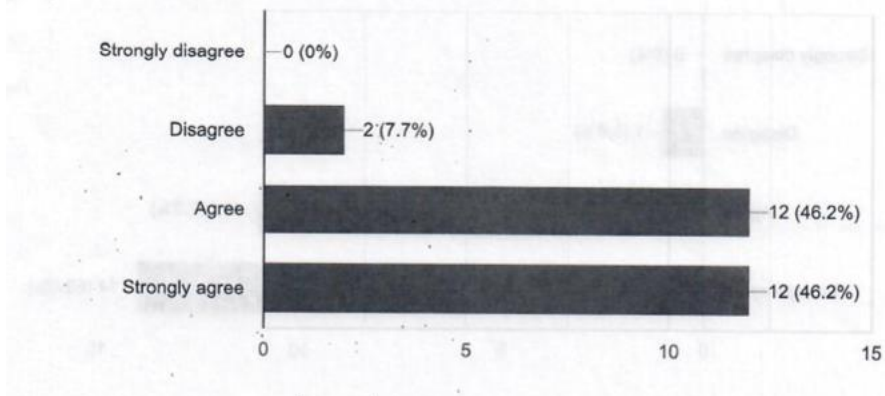
11. I believe students with IEPs have more unexcused absences.

26 responses



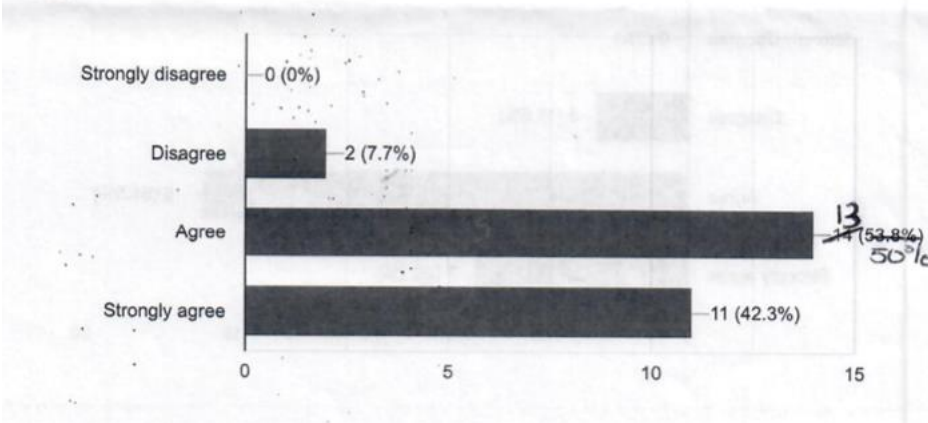
12. Students are more likely to attend school when teachers show respect for them.

26 responses



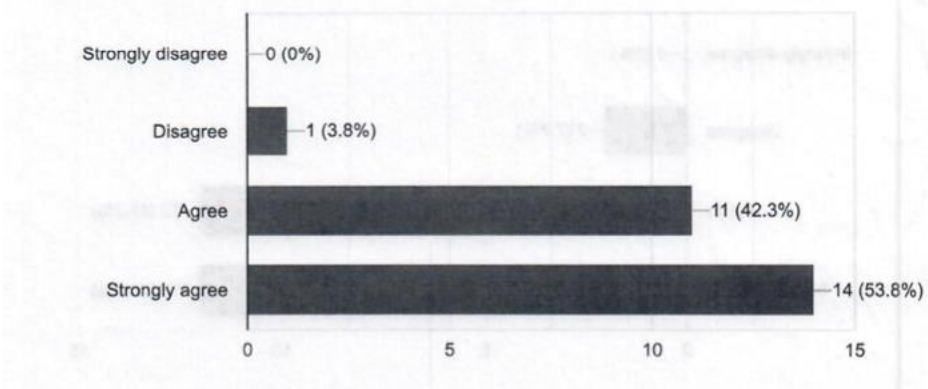
13. Students are more likely to attend school when teachers understand students' needs.

26 responses



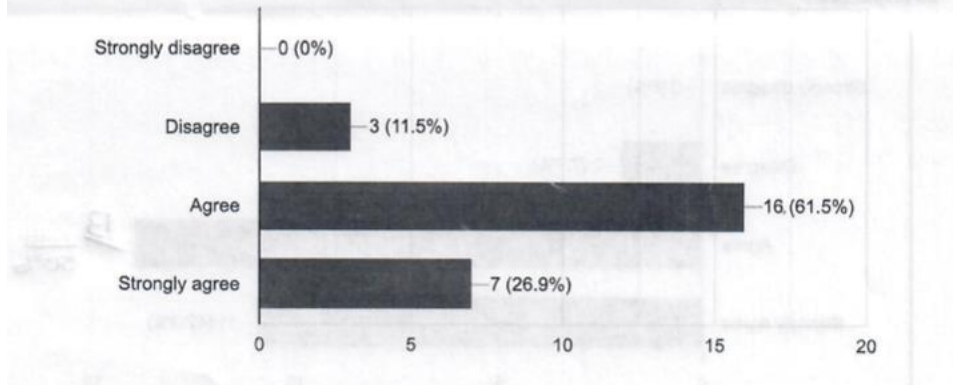
14. Students are more likely to attend school when families and teachers work together to support the students.

26 responses



15. Students with IEPs need different strategies to encourage attendance.

26 responses



16. What do you believe are the top 3 reasons for student absences in your class?  
(Please share your thoughts.)

26 responses

too much freedom for the virtual students.

No accountability at home, No repercussions from school, Poor academic Habits and they fall behind to the point it is insurmountable

Lack of academic interest/engagement, difficulty connecting/learning in an academic environment, personal issues

Illness, social problems, anxiety/depression

Lack of motivation, haven't figured out who they are, boredom

hjhjllk

Illness, Family dynamic, apathy

Sickness, Family Situations, Laziness



16. What do you believe are the top 3 reasons for student absence in your class? (Please share your thoughts.)	
too much freedom by the school students	
1. They don't feel they "need" the information 2. They have external factors contributing to their absence from the 1. No accountability at home leading more pressure than support, home distractions responsibilities problems, mental health	
School education isn't important at home; they don't feel like they're wasting. They don't feel like they're doing a good job, and it becomes overwhelming (anxiety)	
1) They are bored of getting into (Circle 1-5) 2) They often have to watch their younger brothers or sisters because their parents work during the day, and 3) They enjoy playing at home in their own room, etc.	
lack, guaranteed, opportunities	
They don't care, not interested in doing school, No support from home	
Illness, social problems, anxiety/depression	
lack of parent support, lack of illness, emotional issues	
Illness, quality, conflicts with things outside of school	
1) Lack of parent support. The parents don't value school and that the kids do not value school. 2) No motivation or consequences for not attending school. 3) Lack of interest in school	
Education is not important or needs a priority in family	
Lack of academic interest/engagement, difficulty connecting learning to an academic environment, personal issues	
Illness, family dynamic, quality	
Siblings, Family Situation, Learning	
1. They feel lost. (Sense of displacement due to COVID rules). 2. Not understanding the expectations for blended learning. They feel that they will get a break this last Spring. 3. Technology issues. 4. They often siblings are the sole caretaker for younger siblings, causing a lack of work completion and added stress to the student.	
Lack of motivation, haven't figured out why they are, boredom	
It is not an expectation for them to be there by their family. They think the class is a waste of time. They know they will just forget it because there are no major consequences.	
Discipline, Parental involvement, Lack of education	
at home circumstances, not understanding, not feeling included	
teacher not interested in subject	
To go out and visit and social. Used up friends/family/friend	
Protest not to answer	
Highly	
boredom, parenting, sibling	
No accountability at home, No representation from school, Poor academic habits and they left behind in the past it is irreversible	

17. What activities and/or policies do you do to improve student attendance in your class? (Please share your thoughts here.)

26 responses

I show the students how excited I am to see them in my class.

Incentives

I take attendance aloud every day (so kids know I'm paying attention to that) and I usually give kids nicknames and talk to them during attendance (I'm hoping to try to develop a connection). I also try to show I care about them by asking about life outside of class.

Forming positive relationships with ALL students, encouraging students to talk to someone, trying to keep discussions centered around current student interests if possible.

Bring real world learning to class and build relationships with students so they know I care

hjkhkj

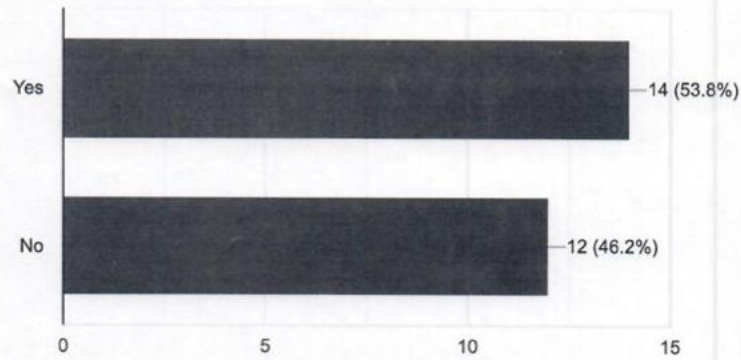
All 26 responses are included on the following page:



17. What activities and/or policies do you do to improve student attendance in your class? (Please share your thoughts here.)	
I show the students how excited I am to see them in my class.	
Have celebrations, show funny videos and things they want to see	
making personal connections, regular communication, demonstrating care about the whole person	
1. Show them that their valued. 2. Show them they can do good work.	
I call or text my students. I will also email, but they prefer and answer more frequently when I text them.	
Our kids come to school, this isn't the big city	
Address each student and discuss where there is need for improvement and also congratulate them when they get a positive grade on an assignment in any of their classes.	
Forming positive relationships with ALL students, encouraging students to talk to someone, trying to keep discussions centered around current student interests if possible.	
I try to incorporate fun, hands on activities	
Monday Night School, Guidance Counselors	
I try to build a relationship with the students. I try to create a positive environment to get students to want to come to my class.	
I try to communicate to home as much as possible	
I take attendance about every day (so kids know I'm paying attention to that) and I usually give kids nicknames and talk to them during attendance (I'm hoping to try to develop a connection). I also try to show I care about them by asking about life outside of class.	
Project attend, Tmaracy card, classroom rewards, develop relationships, phone calls	
Try to make it something they want to be a part of.	
I email, call, and text parents and students to let them know I miss seeing them in class or in the classroom. I have also emailed TCRA, guidance, attendance, and administrators for help with cases where the student does not show up for class as well.	
Bring real world learning to class and build relationships with students so they know I care	
They know that I care about them. Building a relationship with students is most important. They have to know that you care about them.	
Food, reinforcement of learning	
Inclusivity, generate ideas through discussion, positive peer pressure	
reward attendance	
Acknowledge that no kid is the same and you need to figure out what keeps their interests.	
Prayer not to answer	
hahah	
role playing	
Incentives	

18. Would you like suggestions and/or school wide policies/procedures to help with student attendance?

26 responses



## REFERENCES

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- Hilt, R.J. (2014). School Refusal and Online High School. *Pediatric Annals; Thorofare*, 43(11)  
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