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Solutions to Chronic Absenteeism:

An Evaluation of a Kindergarten Attendance Improvement Program in LAUSD

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Debra Lou Duardo

2013

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Title

Solutions to Chronic Absenteeism:

An Evaluation of a Kindergarten Attendance Improvement Program in LAUSD

by

Debra Lou Duardo

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Patricia McDonough, Chair

School absenteeism and truancy confront educators on a daily basis. While public school districts in the U.S. experience daily rates of absenteeism, in the Los Angeles Unified school District (LAUSD), over 26,000 students miss school each day, totaling over 130,500 student absences each week. Regardless of whether these absences are excused (e.g., illness or bereavement) or unexcused (lack of transportation, vacation extensions, etc.), when students are absent from school they miss out on valuable instructional time. Data reveal that children with chronic rates of absenteeism have a more difficult time keeping up with their peers academically, are less likely to pass future courses and graduate high school, and

are susceptible to detrimental social influences such as gang violence, drug use, and teen pregnancy.

Nationally, 1 in 10 kindergartners are considered “chronically absent”; in LAUSD, 1 in 5 kindergartners is chronically absent, double the national rate. Further, for African-American kindergartners in LAUSD, the rate jumps to 1 in 3. In fact, kindergartners have the highest rates of chronic absence of all grade levels in the District. A growing body of research demonstrates that missing school in kindergarten highly correlates with poor student achievement in later grades however, yet very little is known about why our youngest students are missing so much school and what might be done to prevent excessive absence in the first place.

In 2012, LAUSD developed a pilot Attendance Improvement Plan (AIP) to reveal the underlying reasons for this 1 in 3 statistic. This study used that data to reveal which LAUSD schools saw increases in attendance and which failed to make those improvements. After selecting a sample from each of these groups, I interviewed Principals, Teachers, and Attendance Improvement Counselors (Counselors) from six schools to examine what factors contributed to improved school attendance and how these staff members implemented strategies and ideas for doing so. Results from the study reveal recommendations about how to improve kindergarten attendance rates for the 2013-2014 school year.

Key words: Absence, Absenteeism, Dropout, Kindergarten attendance, LAUSD, Truancy

This dissertation of Debra Lou Duardo is approved.

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Todd Franke

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2013

## Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to attendance counselors, social workers, nurses, and other support services personnel working directly with students and families to help them overcome barriers that prevent students from thriving in school. It is these professionals, committed to advocating for students who sometimes go ignored, that make it possible for all students to reach their potential and to become happy, healthy, and productive citizens.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

School absenteeism, also referred to in the literature as “school refusal” and “truancy,” has been an issue of great concern since compulsory education laws were first put into effect in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Clay, 2004; Leyba & Massat, 2009). *Compulsory education*, i.e., requiring minors to attend school, was established to ensure that children receive the education necessary to become productive, contributing adult citizens. Yet, absenteeism and truancy continue to be social problems confronting schools in every state in the U.S. (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001) with some school districts experiencing daily rates of absenteeism as high as 30% (Garry, 1996). In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) alone, thousands of students miss school every day. The reasons why students miss school vary widely: illness, medical appointments, bereavement, family emergency (excused absences), car trouble, lack of transportation, lack of child care, vacation during the school year (unexcused absences), “ditching” (i.e., intentionally missing school), parents keeping their children home without a valid excuse (truancy), and school-imposed absences such as suspension (LAUSD Office of Data and Accountability, June 2012). Regardless of the reason, when students miss school they miss out on valuable instructional time (Eastman & Cooney, 2007). Students who miss days, weeks, or months of school at a time will have difficulty passing their courses and catching up to their peers (Balfanz et al., 2008).

Attendance data for the LAUSD documents a correlation between attendance and proficiency. Students with attendance rates of 87% to 91% or less for the school year were more likely to perform *far below basic* or *below basic* in reading (LAUSD Office of Data and Accountability, June 2012). Those with attendance rates of more than 96% were more likely to

perform at *proficient* or *above proficient* in reading (LAUSD Office of Data and Accountability, June 2012). LAUSD data support what experts note – a pattern of missing classes in the primary grades makes it far more likely that students will have academic and social problems later on (Garry, 1996; Henry & Huizinga, 2005; Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Since low-income students are absent more often than children of other economic groups (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2008), the effects for these children can be devastating. An intentional focus on setting good attendance habits in early education (including kindergarten) could greatly improve student attendance and performance at the primary level. For older students, prolonged absences may make it very difficult to graduate from high school (Thomas, Lemieux et al., 2010).

Research has identified *engagement* as a key element in preventing truancy (Seeley, 2008a). School factors that may contribute to student disengagement and excessive absences include inconsistent and ineffective school attendance policies, poor record keeping, not notifying parents/guardians of absences, and poor student/teacher relations (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Hammond et al. 2007; Heilbrunn, 2007). Furthermore, school policies and procedures may create barriers to good attendance. For instance, some districts impose suspension as a punishment for truancy, which ends up “pushing out” some students. This suspension model fails to address the underlying causes of truancy such as poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, community violence, and substance abuse which can exacerbate the truancy problem, leading students to disengage from school (Gonzales, Richards, & Seeley, 2002). School climate has also been associated with disengagement. Students who attend schools with a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment are more likely to be engaged (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The effects of the

alternative environment – i.e., one lacking safety, comfort, and nurturing – are particularly important during periods of transition by greatly compounding the inherent problems of transition itself – uncertainty, disruption in routine, lack of support – thus increasing the chance of disengagement if the transition is not negotiated well. If students feel connected and welcomed during these periods, engagement can diminish the probability of attendance problems. Periods of transition include starting kindergarten, moving to a new school, matriculating from elementary school to middle school, and matriculating from middle school to high school (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2006).

When chronic absence is pervasive, the achievement of all students suffers (Balfanz et al., 2008; Nauer, White, & Yerneni, 2008; Wilson et al., 2008). Absenteeism harms more than the individual: high truancy and absence rates affect the achievement of the school overall, slowing the rate of instruction which in turn harms all students. Teachers must slow down to assist students who fall behind due to absence and consequently they often fail to fully cover the curriculum. Slowing down instruction to help the absentees “catch up” undermines regular-attending students who become bored by frequent review of material already covered (Morris, 2010). Currently, school administrators are developing strategies to improve attendance so as to improve academic achievement and increase graduation rates (Burzichelli, Mackey, & Bausmith, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

LAUSD is the second largest school district in the nation and each day over 26,000 students miss school. The district averages over 130,500 student absences each week. While excessive or chronic absence in middle or senior high school has gained attention, chronic



absence in kindergarten is an area that has not been addressed. Chronic absence in the early grades, specifically kindergarten, is not only a problem in Los Angeles, but throughout the nation. Chang and Romero (2008) point out that nationally, 1 in 10 kindergartners are considered chronically absent. In LAUSD, 1 in 5 kindergartners is chronically absent, double the national rate. For African American kindergartners in LAUSD, the rate is 1 in 3. (LAUSD Attendance Report, April 2011). In fact, kindergartners have the highest rates of chronic absence of all grade levels in the District, followed by students in ninth grade. When kindergartners are excessively absent, they often develop patterns of poor attendance that impact their achievement throughout their K-12 education. Missing school impedes academic performance and eventually may result in the students dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2008; Hammond et al., 2007).

Not only does poor attendance within LAUSD undermine academic achievement, but high attendance rates generate funding, thus benefitting the district as a whole. The District receives approximately \$32 in Average Daily Attendance for each student in school. In the 2010-2011 school year LAUSD lost almost \$112 million (\$111,994,000) due to student absences. Almost \$14 million in funding was lost due to kindergarten absences alone. Had this money been retained, the District could have avoided laying off 7,000+ employees and eliminating programs due to budget deficits.

### **Impact**

*Chronic absence* is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year (roughly 18 school days), regardless of reason. Chang and Romero (2008) analyzed national attendance data and examined attendance patterns in nine school districts. They found that chronic absence has a profound and negative impact on all students, with particular impact upon the individual child's

later achievement. Chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade and is most pronounced among lower socio-economic Latino children. Poor children who were chronically absent in kindergarten had the lowest performance in reading and math by the time they reached fifth grade. A growing body of research demonstrates that missing school in kindergarten highly correlates with poor student achievement in later grades (Chang & Romero, 2008, Whitker, 1996).

While Chang and Romero's research provides information on the serious academic impact of chronic absence in the early grades, Teasley (2004) and Newsome et al., (2008) show that this pattern likely continues into the later grades leading to eventual school failure, grade repetition, dropout, substance use, early sexual behavior, teen pregnancy, reliance on the welfare system, and involvement with the justice system. Since research indicates that reliable predictors of future dropout are present in early grades, school districts are investing time and resources in identifying students with attendance problems early on. The key indicators identified by several researchers as predictors of students most likely to drop out are: poor grades in core subjects, low attendance, failure to be promoted to the next grade, and disengagement in the classroom including the development of behavioral problems (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Research strongly supports that chronic early absence impacts our students' achievement; however, very little is known about why our youngest students are missing so much school and what might be done to prevent excessive absence in the first place.

### **The Project**

While research shows us that 1 in 5 LAUSD kindergarten students is chronically absent from school, it has not yet revealed why this problem exists or what might be done to prevent it.

This project investigates the reasons why some kindergarten students are chronically absent, as promulgated by certain school personnel who implemented an Attendance Improvement Program (AIP), along with which strategies are most effective to improve kindergartners' attendance. My research addresses the following questions:

- 1) What factors, if any, according to school personnel who participated in a kindergarten AIP, contribute to improved student attendance?
- 2) What are the differences in beliefs, attitudes, and/or actions among school personnel who participated in an AIP in which there was a significant increase in student attendance in contrast to the beliefs, attitudes, and/or actions of school personnel who participated in an AIP in which there was minimal or no increase in attendance?

### **Research Design**

I selected a qualitative rather than a quantitative design for my research because a qualitative design was most likely to elicit useful responses to my research questions. My research questions were designed to determine what the study participants themselves perceived to be the factors that contribute to improved student attendance, as well as to reveal the differences in beliefs, attitudes, and/or actions of school personnel who participated in an AIP in which significant gains in attendance were achieved from those at schools that did not make significant gains in attendance.

I worked with staff members from six LAUSD elementary schools who implemented an AIP specifically targeted to kindergarteners. By interviewing three staff members – the Principal, the kindergarten Teacher, and the Attendance Improvement Counselor (Counselor) – at each of the six sites, I hoped to better understand what factors contributed most to improving student

attendance and why some schools had better attendance outcomes than others. Additionally, I wished to understand how the beliefs, attitudes, and/or actions of these 18 school personnel contributed to the attendance outcomes at their school.

The study has a set goal of using what was learned from the 6 sites that implemented an AIP in the 2011-2012 school year to strengthen the program for future implementation. The ultimate goal is to learn from these sites, strengthen the AIP, and make the pilot program available to more schools in LAUSD. It is a collaborative method to evaluate this existing program and implement action for change. The school Principals, Teachers, and Counselors I interviewed provided first-hand knowledge of what they believed were the most important factors contributing to improved student attendance. By using a qualitative approach, I heard directly from participants about their understanding of the problem and which strategies were most effective when addressing chronic absenteeism with kindergartners and their parents. Because I was interested in what participants said and believed about the effects of the program, as well as in the process of implementing an AIP, qualitative measures were used to provide the level of depth and detail I needed.

### **Methods**

For this study, I used document analysis, data review and analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The project began with a document analysis of the 2011-2012 LAUSD kindergarten attendance data so to have a clear understanding of the attendance rates for the District, its five Educational Support Centers (ESCs), and the schools I selected to study. I met with school staff to introduce the proposed study, and conducted interviews with the school Principals, kindergarten Teachers, and Counselors to understand their perceptions of the problem. In

addition, I asked questions to learn what strategies were used as part of their attendance improvement efforts and which factors they felt contributed most to the success of the Program. Finally, I asked questions to understand why some schools were more effective than others in implementing the pilot program and how the individual beliefs of school staff may have contributed to their attendance outcomes.

### **Significance of the Research**

With LAUSD's loss of \$14 million in state funding from kindergarten absenteeism last year, coupled with evidence that kindergarten attendance is critical for academic success, the Superintendent, ESCs, and school-based staff realize the need to develop good attendance habits early and shift perceptions among parents that attendance in kindergarten is critical. The District also understands that promoting good attendance in the early grades is critical to sustaining school readiness skills necessary for later school success. All educators, leaders, and policy-makers would benefit from a national effort to prioritize attendance in early education and help develop policy recommendations at the local and state levels in order to raise awareness about and ultimately create legislation to combat chronic absenteeism. Efforts to advance kindergarten readiness by promoting greater awareness among educators, parents, and other community stakeholders will help identify systemic barriers contributing to chronic absenteeism during students' kindergarten years and promote the need to advocate for policies and improved practices to reduce those barriers.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

High school dropout rates have gained national attention as reports by researchers and policy makers reveal (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Hammond et al., 2007). President Obama addressed the implication these elevated dropout rates among American youth in his State of the Union Address (Obama, 2011). That students are leaving school without a high school diploma affects individuals, families, and the community. Underlying student underachievement, which leads to high school drop out, is the elevated rate of absenteeism nationally. *Chronic absenteeism*, defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, is a correlate and risk factor for later school dropouts. While we don't know the exact numbers nationally, studies conducted in some states and data available from individual school districts provide small windows into a pervasive problem. Absenteeism impacts children of all ages, with negative patterns of absenteeism beginning as early as kindergarten.

To support this investigation, I first describe what we know about absenteeism, piecing together data from a variety of sources. Secondly, I discuss the research on the factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism and other school problems. Third, I describe the research that documents the negative effects of absenteeism on student achievement, on the students who drop out, and on the social after-effects which include criminal activity, use of alcohol and drugs, sexual activity, and teen pregnancies. Fourth, I document the costs of such absenteeism to school districts and to the education system generally. Fifth, because absenteeism has different effects on students of different ages, I document absenteeism's effects on elementary school students and kindergartners in particular, students often thought to be too young to be negatively affected

by absenteeism. Lastly, I turn to solutions offered to address this problem as it relates to elementary school children. I then present information on a projected intervention.

### **Chronic Absenteeism: The Extent of the Problem**

Communities across the nation are concerned with poor school attendance. Truancy reduction programs designed to serve students who have attendance problems are being designed and implemented to improve attendance. Although various models exist to address poor attendance, all of them share the same purpose: to improve school attendance in the short term, with longer term goals of raising grades and encouraging high school graduation for students at risk of dropping out. To reach these goals, schools and school districts across the country strive to improve attendance and ultimately academic performance.

Chronic absenteeism is a key indicator of potential school problems (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001), which is as high as 30% in some schools (Garry, 1996). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), 15% of U.S. public school teachers consider student absenteeism to be a “serious problem” at their school, yet American youths continue to miss school excessively. A 2003 national survey of U.S. adolescents indicated that 11% of eighth grade students, 16% of tenth grade students, and 35% of twelfth grade students reported skipping school one or more days during the 30 days previous to the survey (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). In New York City’s public school system, the nation’s largest, about 150,000 of 1 million public school students are absent on a typical day (Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, [OJJDP], 2006). The LAUSD, the nation’s second-largest public school system, reports that, on average, 28,000 students (i.e., 4% of its enrollment) are out of school each day (LAUSD MyDATA Attendance Report, 2012).

While many researchers consider truancy a middle or high school issue, chronic absenteeism actually begins in elementary school (Chang & Romero, 2008; McCray, 2006). Rates of absenteeism in kindergarten and first grade often equal or surpass those found in secondary school. Although the early elementary years are a time when it is most critical for children to be in school in order to build the foundation of academic and social skills needed for future educational success, low attendance rates in elementary schools are often overlooked (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Education Commission of the States, 2010; Romero & Lee, 2007; Sparks, 2010). According to a report published by the NCCP, chronic absence in kindergarten is high. In its review of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECL-K) the NCCP reports that, on average, children missed 5 days of school in kindergarten, 4.5 days in first grade, and 3.7 days in both third and fifth grades (National Center for Education Statistics, [NCES], 2009). However, almost 14% of kindergartners, 12% of first graders, 11% of third graders, and 10% of fifth graders were *at-risk absentees* having missed an average of 12 to 18 days during the school year. In total, one-quarter of all kindergarten children were either *at-risk* or *chronic* absentees. In the earliest grades, 1 out of every 10 kindergartners and first grade children miss at least one month of school during the school year (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Researchers have also found that rates of chronic early absence vary widely across districts. The NCCP study found that, across nine localities, chronic absenteeism ranged from 5% to 25% for students enrolled in kindergarten through Grade 3 (Chang & Romero, 2008). The Education Commission of the States (2010) reported that within different schools in the same district chronic early absenteeism can actually range from less than 1% to over 50%. Research also suggests that attendance during the first four to six weeks of the school year is predictive of attendance during the remainder of the year (New York City Department of Education, 2010).



Data collected from the LAUSD also demonstrate the prevalence of chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Only 65% of LAUSD elementary school students (K-5) and 53% of its kindergarten students are *proficient* in attendance (LAUSD MyDATA Attendance Report, April 2011). While chronic absence in middle or senior high school is *high*, chronic absence in kindergarten is *prevalent*, with 1 out of every 5 kindergartners chronically absent, double the national rate. Moreover, for African American kindergartners in the LAUSD, the rate is 1 out of every 3 students (LAUSD MyDATA Attendance Report, April 2011). Strikingly, LAUSD kindergartners have the highest rates of chronic absence – higher than all other grade levels – followed by students in ninth grade.

Although these rates are high, chronic absence may be under reported. Some researchers argue that this may be due to inaccurate reporting and record keeping across schools and districts (Balfanz, 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008). Discrepancies in the tracking and reporting of attendance makes it difficult to measure the extent of absenteeism because schools and school districts across the nation use different attendance-taking practices and tracking. Due to the lack of a standardized method for collecting and tracking student attendance, it is impossible to clearly understand the extent of the problem or to compare attendance data across schools, districts, or states (NCES, 2009). For example, some school districts take full day attendance while others take attendance period by period. Some school districts assume absences are excused unless they hear otherwise, while other districts have clear coding practices for excused and unexcused absences. Regardless of the reported rates of absenteeism, researchers agree that chronic absence negatively impacts children’s educational and life outcomes. Chronic absenteeism is a multidimensional problem associated with a host of overlapping and interconnected adverse individual, family, social, and community risk factors that contribute to

school problems (Chang & Romero, 2008; Hammond et al., 2007).

### **Risk Factors Contributing to School Problems**

The four domains associated with chronic absence, academic failure, and subsequent dropout are characteristics of the *individual*, the *family*, the *school*, and the *community*; they are interconnected, overlapping, and show interacting dynamics of the various systems. The culmination of various factors across these four domains puts students at greater and greater levels of risk for negative academic outcomes (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Rhodes, 2007).

#### **Individual Characteristics**

Factors such as ethnicity and gender are *individual risk factors* related to school problems including truancy and dropout (Glanville & Wilhagen, 2007; Rumberger, 1987; Teasley, 2004). Research shows that African-American males are disproportionately represented among students who drop out of school (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; *Education Week*, 2009b). Poor cognitive and social skills, along with low levels of academic functioning, especially in mathematics and reading, are found among children who drop out (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Nettles & Robinson, 1998; Richman et al., 2004). Physical health problems, medical disabilities, and emotional disorders are also common among individuals who prematurely leave school (Rumberger, 1987; Teasley, 2004; Zhang et al., 2007). Behavioral problems such as fighting, aggressive behavior, and hyperactivity often negatively impact children's school experiences (Achenbach, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Miller-Lewis et al., 2006). Children who demonstrate poor interpersonal skills often have social and school problems (Hallfors et al., 2002; Pritchard & Williams, 2001; Teasley, 2004; Zhang et al., 2007). Individual characteristics that place children

at risk for poor academic outcomes include parenthood, excessive work outside of school, delinquency, affiliation with high-risk peer groups, and substance abuse (Brown et al., 2008; Richman et al., 2004). Dropping out of school is associated with poor attendance patterns and being uninterested or disengaged from school (Fraser et al., 2004; Rhodes, 2007). Children with chronic school attendance problems, especially those children with on-going and enduring absenteeism problems, are at risk for poor academic outcomes, and these on-going problems often begin in elementary school (Chang & Romero, 2008; Dillon, Liem, & Gore, 2003; Teasley, 2004).

### **Family Characteristics**

Several authors identify risk factors in the family domain, including poverty and low socioeconomic status, inconsistent discipline and ineffective parenting skills, low family social support and high family mobility, parental emotional disorders, and child abuse or neglect (Alexander et al., 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; OJJDP, 2006). Additional risk factors identified within families are: single parent homes, large family size, transportation problems, family conflict, and domestic violence (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Frank, 1990). Overprotective or overly-permissive parenting styles also contribute to truancy and dropout (Franklin, 1992; Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Teasley, 2004), as do families that are uninterested in or unsupportive of education (Deval & de la Rosa, 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Lagana, 2004; Sandau-Beckler, 2002; OJJDP, 2006). Other family-level risk factors include low levels of family engagement with school and low parental and sibling educational attainment (Hammond et al., 2007).

### **School Characteristics**

Many students who drop out come from schools with low school attendance rates, poor

relationships among students, problems with harassment and school safety, and *stratified educational tracking*, i.e., the segregation of students into classes by academic ability (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Wayman, 2002). These school traits are characteristic of *school disengagement*, conceptualized as students' perceptions that they do not fit in with their school environment. Students who are disengaged may feel that their school does not offer the types of classes or learning environments suitable for them. Disengaged students often are bored with school and learning, regard school policies concerning discipline as being unfair, and consider academics to be irrelevant to their lives. These mindsets can negatively affect students' academic performance and attendance patterns (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Finlay & Heilbrunn, 2006; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; King, 2002; McPartland, 1994; Stern, Wu, Dayton, & Maul, 2005).

Large schools, particularly urban schools with large proportions of ethnic minority students living in poverty, present additional risk factors (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Richman et al., 2004). Schools with high dropout and truancy rates often have high teacher-student ratios, high absenteeism among students (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002), and overall low achievement by their students, as well as fewer resources and supports to meet educational needs for the student body (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Golden et al., 2005; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Negativity in the school environment, particularly troublesome teacher and staff attitudes, are also found among schools with high dropout rates (Brewster & Bowne, 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Golden et al., 2005; Sinha, 2007; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994).

### **Community Characteristics**

The presence of crime, gangs, violence, delinquent peers, and interracial tensions within the community impact the child's ability to function well in the school environment (Alexander

et al., 2001; Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; McCluskey, Bryum, & Patchin, 2004; Teasley, 2004). Dropout is prevalent in urban settings and geographic regions with concentrations of poverty and minority populations (Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Fram et al., 2007; Hammond et al., 2007). The societal consequences associated with individuals who do not complete school weaken the communities in which they live through examples such as lower family and individual incomes, loss of national income and tax revenue, and higher unemployment, as well as through increased demand for social services, reduced political participation, and higher health care costs (*Education Week*, 2009a; Fraser et al. 2004; Richman et al., 2004). Additionally, Richman and colleagues report that when communities have high dropout rates, public health problems such as higher incidences of sexually transmitted diseases and school-age pregnancy increase as well.

### **Negative Effects of Chronic Absenteeism**

Chronic absenteeism has been recognized as an early indicator and a risk factor that leads to future problems including teen pregnancy, substance abuse, delinquency, and eventual school failure and dropout (Gandy & Schultz, 2007; Grooters & Faidley, 2002; Hallfors et al., 2002; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Research suggests that chronic absenteeism in the early grades is a significant risk factor for school failure (Newsome, et al., 2008; Chang & Romero, 2008; Romero & Lee, 2008a; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Longitudinal data show that children who average 16 absences in their Grade 1 year eventually drop out, while those who average 10 absences per school year do graduate from high school (Alexander et al., 2001). Chronic absenteeism is not a problem in and of itself; rather, it is a symptom of other underlying issues such as high poverty rates, high rates of mobility, inconsistent parenting, domestic violence,

mental illness, substance abuse, and inadequate health care (John W. Gardner Center, 2010; Naurer, et al., 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). In the early school years, chronic absenteeism can negatively influence a child's academic future because it indicates a host of psychosocial concerns that may escalate into potentially severe problems.

### **Student Achievement**

When students are chronically absent, they see their academic performance decrease. In a study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago (2007) researchers found that high school freshmen who miss more than two weeks of school on average flunk at least two classes, regardless of whether they arrived at high school with top or below-average test scores. Furthermore, freshmen who arrive with high test scores but miss two weeks of school per semester are more likely to fail a course than are freshmen with low test scores who miss just one week of school (Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, 2007).

Research highlights the importance of addressing chronic absenteeism in the early grades. Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero (2008) analyzed national U.S. Department of Education national for 21,260 children from kindergarten entry in 1998 to Grade 5. Chronic absence was defined as missing 10% or more of a school year, i.e., at least 18 days out of a 180-day school year. They found that chronic absenteeism is disproportionately problematic within elementary schools that serve mostly poor Black and Hispanic children and that it contributes to the achievement gap between these children and their White, Asian, and middle class peers. Furthermore, students who have many absences in kindergarten are likely to have similar attendance problems in first grade. By the end of first grade, these children are already slipping behind in reading, math, and general knowledge. Chronic absence in kindergarten is also

strongly associated with lower reading and math performance in fifth grade for poor children. Other researchers make similar associations between attendance and academic outcomes in the early grades.

Recent research conducted about New York City schools has documented that as many as 90,000 New York City elementary students missed a month or more of school in the 2007-08 school year (Nauer, White, & Yerneni, 2008). The Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), a group formed by parents and education advocates concerned with New York City's educational system, conducted this study to determine the relationship between chronic absenteeism and student performance. The researchers reviewed the attendance records, state assessment scores, and various demographic factors for 64,062 fourth graders attending 705 New York City public schools that year. They found high rates of chronic absence in nearly 300 schools, all of which had at least 20% of fourth graders missing more than one month of school (Musser, 2011). Furthermore, the researchers analyzed other student factors that contribute to academic performance including poverty, ethnicity, disability, English language proficiency, racial or ethnic background, mobility, and past performance. They also considered school characteristics such as average attendance and test scores, percentage of minority students, teacher education, and teacher turnover rates. Holding other student and school variables constant to isolate the role of attendance, the researchers examined the relationship between attendance and student performance. They found that attendance in third and fourth grade has a significant relationship to student performance.

The results of the CFE analysis underscore the importance of attending school. A growing body of research demonstrates the same. In Philadelphia, researcher Michael Gottfried found similar associations between attendance and standardized test performance in a study of

public school students in third through eighth grades. His research demonstrated that this association exists independently from other family characteristics such as parent education and involvement in school activities (Gottfried, 2011). Research conducted for the San Francisco Unified School District found similar results. Researchers applied a longitudinal study linking students' school readiness levels at kindergarten entry to their later academic outcomes. They found that students who had good attendance in both kindergarten and first grade had the highest third grade scores – significantly higher than any of the other groups. Students with good attendance scored an average of 50 points higher on the English Language Arts tests than did students who were chronically absent during their first two years of school. Furthermore, their study demonstrated a consistent trend that, as absences in kindergarten and first grade increase, the likelihood of a student performing at grade level decreases (Attendance Works, 2011). They also found that poor attendance was attributed to a loss of school readiness skills and that kindergartners who started school with strong readiness skills might lose any benefit of that preparedness if they were chronically absent in their first two years of school, suggesting that it may not matter if students enter school strongly prepared to succeed if they are chronically absent. The research discussed above demonstrates the critical importance of good attendance and certainly makes the argument that early onset of chronic absenteeism should be a key point of intervention (Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004). Thus, identifying students with chronic absence early in their educational path may prevent them from falling behind in school and eventually dropping out.

### **Student Drop Outs**

The link between chronic absenteeism and dropping out has been demonstrated by a number of studies that show that dropouts may have had attendance problems as early as



kindergarten (Chang & Romero, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). In a longitudinal study, Alexander and colleagues (2001) found that students who average 16 absences in the first grade eventually drop out, but those who average 10 absences per school year graduate from high school. Balfanz and Herzog identify low attendance as one of four key indicators of students at risk of dropping out of school (2006). They followed an entire cohort of Philadelphia students (approximately 14,000 children) who entered the sixth grade in September 1996 to determine their dropout status six years later. When reviewing sixth grade data, they looked for any signals, such as poor course grades or low test scores, that would yield a high school drop out probability of at least 75%. They found that sixth graders who attended school below 80% of the year had at least a 3 in 4 chance of dropping out of high school.

Researchers analyzing students in the LAUSD made similar associations between attendance and dropouts. Silver, Saunders, and Zarate (2008) found attendance to be a key predictor of high school dropout in the LAUSD. These findings confirmed the research conducted by Balfanz and Herzog (2006) of the Philadelphia school district they had analyzed, showing that academic experiences play a critical role in students' lack of persistence to high school graduation. It also confirmed that many students begin to fall off the graduation track years before they enter the ninth grade. Attendance rates and course failure in math and English during eighth grade were found to have strong predictive power for high school completion. In this study, Silver et al. (2008) analyzed a seven-year longitudinal dataset of the LAUSD's class of 2005. They examined over one million course-taking records of students who attended LAUSD from the 1998-99 school year through December 2005, as well as demographic, testing, attendance, and graduation data. Attention was focused on the cohort of 48,561 students who entered the ninth grade for the first time in 2001-02 and were expected to graduate in 2005.

The researchers found that a student's chances of graduating from an LAUSD high school were less than half. Four years after beginning high school, 48% of the district's first-time freshman in 2001-02 had graduated. In addition to identifying course failure as an indicator to dropout, they found that frequent absences usually indicated a student's disengagement from school. As such, poor attendance can signal the probability of dropping out. Members of the cohort who did not complete high school were absent on average twice as often when they were seventh and eighth graders as did those who graduated on time (14 to 15 days per year compared to 7 days per year). The researchers found that absences at the middle school and high school levels have a significant and similar impact on high school completion: students who missed an average of 0 to 5 days of school in the seventh, eighth, or ninth grades graduated at rates of 65% to 69%. The chance of graduating dropped to approximately 40% for students who were absent an average of 10 to 20 days, and dropped to between 17% and 24% for those students who were absent 21 days or more (more than 10% of the school year).

### **Other Negative Consequences**

*Truancy.* Beyond the fact that poor attendance predicts dropping out of school, chronic absenteeism can result in other negative consequences for students and schools such as truancy, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, and other risky behavior. When youth are absent from school, there are increased opportunities for them to engage in high-risk behaviors. Young people face both direct and indirect legal consequences of failure to attend school. Direct consequences stem from school rules about class attendance, court appearances, and sanctions resulting from violation of state compulsory laws. Indirect legal consequences include the increased probability of delinquency related to juvenile justice involvement and later adult involvement with the criminal justice system. Generally, the student feels the first consequence

of school truancy, i.e., disciplinary actions such as after school detention, yard clean up, and/or loss of privileges such as attending school dances, participating in field trips, athletics, clubs, and even the graduation ceremony. The most serious consequences of truancy may be students “hanging out” without adult supervision when their parents think they are in school. For example, students attending “ditching” parties often engage in unprotected sex, consume drugs and/or alcohol, and drive while under the influence.

*Juvenile Delinquency.* Skipping school causes even more troubles and sends young people on a downward spiral of school failure and juvenile justice involvement (Henry, 2005). Truancy often leaves young people with nothing productive to do and offers ample opportunity for getting into trouble. In fact, several studies show a drop in crime rates for communities in which police have conducted truancy sweeps (Berger & Wind, 2000; Gavin, 1997; Hopkins, 2005). Data from the National Incident Based Reporting System (2004-2005) reveal that the incidence of crime by youths aged 10 to 17 during the 2004-05 school year was 26% higher during school hours (Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.) than out-of-school hours (Monday through Friday, 3 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.) and crimes against other youths were 13% higher (MacGillivray & Erickson, 2006). “The interview data and the focus group data confirm that when students are skipping school, they are usually up to no good,” noted the authors. Chronic truants reported “hanging out, cruising in cars, and getting into trouble while skipping school” (p. 30).

The direct and indirect consequences of truancy for individuals, schools, communities, and society in the short and long term are so serious, and truancy is so prevalent, that the OJJDP named truancy reduction one of its national priorities (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; OJJDP, 2003). Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs that youth potentially are

headed for delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure. Research has shown that truancy is related to delinquency, substance abuse, high school dropout, and early sexual intercourse.

Data from the Rochester Youth Study also show the association between delinquency and self-reports of truancy (Henry & Huizinga, 2007). Students who admitted to occasional or chronic truancy were, respectively, 4 and 12 times as likely to report having committed a serious assault, about 5 and 21 times as likely to report having committed a serious property crime, and 2 and 7 times as likely to report having been arrested (Henry & Huizinga, 2007) when compared to non-skippers. The truancy-delinquency connection appears to be particularly acute among males (Kelley et al., 1997). In addition, decades of research have also identified a link between truancy and later problems in marriage and jobs, and with violence, adult criminality, and incarceration (Catalano et al., 1998; Dryfoos, 1990; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). This association starts early: the findings from the OJJDP's Study Group on Very Young Offenders (Loeber & Farrington, 2000) indicate that chronic truancy in elementary school is linked to serious delinquent behavior at age 12 and under.

***Substance Abuse.*** Another form of delinquent behavior associated with chronic absenteeism is substance abuse. Studies demonstrate a clear link between truancy and substance abuse. In the Rochester Youth Study, data comparing 14-year-olds showed that those who skip occasional classes are 4 times as likely to start using marijuana as are those who never skip school. In the Monitoring the Future survey, data show that self-admitted high school senior-truants are more likely to use marijuana than are their peers (Heilbrunn, 2007). Recent research shows that truancy is not only the most significant risk factor for predicting first time marijuana use, it predicts 97% of first time drug use (Seeley, 2008). There is a linear relationship between

the two; the greater number of days truant, the greater the drug use (Seeley, 2008). Henry and Huizinga (2007) suggest that the strong relationship between truancy and the start of substance use may be largely due to the amounts of unsupervised time that truants spend with peers.

***Other Behaviors.*** School absenteeism and truancy resulting in unsupervised time can create an opportunity for children to engage in other negative behaviors. These negative behaviors include engaging in sexual behavior at an earlier age, teen pregnancy, and gang involvement, to name a few.

### **The Financial Cost of Chronic Absenteeism**

Absenteeism harms more than the individual and his or her future. High truancy and absence rates affect the overall achievement of the school by slowing the rate of instruction which ultimately harms all students (Balfanz et al., 2008; Nauer, White, & Yerneni, 2008). Chronic absence has an even more direct financial impact on communities: the loss of federal and state education funding. School districts in California receive approximately \$32 per day per student in state-awarded Average Daily Attendance subsidies. When a student is absent, regardless of the reason, the district loses money. For example, in the 2010-11 school year, LAUSD reported a total of 4,975,525 student absences, costing the district \$157,226,590 in lost financial support. Kindergarten absences alone accounted for \$14,188,210 of this loss.

Reducing student absenteeism and truancy is a goal of many schools across the country. Yet surprisingly, little research focuses on what schools can do to increase and sustain students' daily attendance; even fewer studies explore how family-school-community partnerships may contribute to this goal. Despite the significant evidence demonstrating the association between school attendance and students' academic and behavioral outcomes, the research on effective

interventions to improve attendance is also limited (Sheldon, 2007). Programs that were associated with improved student attendance include: 1) creating smaller schools or learning communities (McPartland et al., 1998); 2) connecting students to school business partners (Scales et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004); and, 3) increasing school–home communications (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Helm & Burkett, 1989).

### **Solutions**

One troubled high school in Baltimore increased student attendance from 94.64% to 95.28% when the school portioned itself into smaller academies thereby increasing student-teacher interactions and decreasing the anonymity of students at the school (McPartland et al., 1998). This increase in attendance was also associated with the school’s business and community partnerships. When schools design and implement activities to increase school-home communication, attendance improves (Epstein et al., 1997). Research demonstrates that telephone calls to parents of absent students are associated with an increase in student attendance (Helm & Burkett, 1989). Similarly, timely information to families about student absences and school policies on absenteeism help improve attendance (Roderick et al., 1997). Other less comprehensive reforms may not improve student attendance. Among the practices that do not predict better attendance in high school are the adoption of uniforms (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998) and the use of the court systems with chronically absent students (Hoyles, 1998). To prevent and correct serious attendance problems, schools need to change the way they are structured, improve the quality of instruction, and intensify interpersonal relationships between students and teachers (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Historically, schools have addressed issues of truancy by blaming individual students and

families. Truant and chronically absent students were considered “deviants” (Hoyle, 1998). Schools rarely involved families until the problem was so severe that the students were failing their courses. Families are now being recognized as an important influence on student attendance and an important resource for decreasing truancy and chronic absenteeism (Corville-Smith et al., 1998).

### **School-Family-Community Partnerships**

One framework used to improve attendance through school-family-community partnerships is Epstein’s framework of six types of involvement (Epstein, 2001). The author argues that schools, families, and communities are important contexts for children’s learning and that greater coordination among these environments benefits children’s education and development. Furthermore, actions by school personnel, parents, students, and community members can reduce or increase the conflict between and among these environments. Epstein’s framework is linked to specific school-improvement goals (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Epstein advocates that schools should conduct partnership activities for each type of involvement:

- 1) *parenting* – helping all families establish supportive home environments for children;
- 2) *communicating* – establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children’s progress;
- 3) *volunteering* – recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or other locations;
- 4) *learning at home* – providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials;

- 5) *decision making* – having family members serve as representatives and leaders on school committees; and,
- 6) *collaborating with the community* – identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs.

Epstein argues that schools should implement *action teams* to confront the challenges associated with involving families in their children's education. Other researchers have evaluated Epstein's approach. Researchers at John Hopkins University examined whether implementing the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) program affected student attendance in schools located across Ohio (Sheldon, 2007). In this study, Sheldon focused on student attendance in elementary schools to identify factors that help explain changes in average daily attendance from one year to the next. Sheldon investigated whether schools that implemented a school-wide program of school, family, and community partnerships demonstrated an increase in student attendance as compared to similar schools not using this approach. A regression analysis indicated that – after controlling for prior attendance, racial composition of the school, Title I status, per-pupil spending, and pupil-teacher ratio – schools implementing the NNPS partnership program had higher levels of student attendance than did the matched sample schools which were not in the NNPS. Additionally, schools that were members of NNPS in 2001 reported greater improvement in student attendance than did the matched sample of schools. Schools with stronger programs of school, family, and community partnerships were overall more likely to experience an increase in student attendance than schools with weaker partnership programs.

Sheldon suggests that elementary schools should take greater responsibility for connecting with and involving family members in their students' schooling. The analyses showed that educators are more likely to perceive improvements in student attendance when they



implement a guided approach to partnership program development. They particularly noted the need for school personnel to reach out and connect with the full range of diverse families at the school. When school administrators and teachers make high-quality family and community involvement part of their overall school improvement strategy, students are more likely to attend school and increase their chances of succeeding academically.

Other researchers have reported that specific family involvement practices such as parental monitoring, parent-child discussions, parent participation at the school, and PTA membership are linked to student attendance (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; McNeal, 1999). Some parenting activities are more likely than others to affect attendance. Schools that want to increase daily student attendance are more likely to succeed if they reach out and work with parents to address this problem (Epstein & Sheldon, 2007). Other research has also shown positive relationships between specific school practices to involve parents and improve student attendance.

### **Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Early**

Studies show that nationwide 1 in 10 students younger than Grade 3 is considered *chronically absent*, defined as missing 10% or more of the school year (Chang & Jordan, 2010; Sparks, 2010). Researchers from the NCCP, using nationwide data from the ECLS-K, found that over 11% of children in kindergarten and almost 9% in first grade were chronically absent. Since studies indicate that chronic absenteeism usually begins in the elementary grades, the start of elementary school is the critical time to shape attendance patterns. Researchers have noted that efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism become more difficult as students age, suggesting that the earlier intervention occurs, the more likely it is to succeed (Joseph, 2008; Sparks, 2010). Hedy Chang, Director of Attendance Counts, suggested that interventions focused on improving attendance begin when children are in preschool (Chang & Jordan, 2010). Early interventions

that create partnerships between the school, students, families, and the community have been found to be most effective for reducing chronic absenteeism. School-based strategies designed to promote consistent elementary school attendance include: identifying chronic absentees as soon as troubling attendance patterns begin to develop, communicating with parents about absences and the importance of regular school attendance, and coordinating with community agencies to provide student and family services. In addition, effective school-based interventions establish support programs that address families' social, medical, and economic needs, such as access to preventative health care and universal student meal program.

### **Conclusion**

It has long been recognized that high rates of absenteeism in middle school and high school are significant problems, but low attendance rates in elementary schools are often overlooked. Studies have found that chronic absenteeism usually begins in the elementary grades and efforts to change attendance patterns become more difficult as students age. Early chronic absenteeism disrupts classroom instruction, reduces the amount of funding schools receive from the state, and is associated with lower levels of academic achievement in later grades, chronic absenteeism in later grades, higher dropout rates, and engagement in at risk behaviors. Early interventions that create partnerships between the school, students, families, and the community have been found to be effective in reducing chronic absenteeism. When educators work with families to get students to school every day, these efforts appear to be successful.

Therefore, in schools where students have attendance problems, educators may need to go beyond the school building to involve families in reducing absenteeism. By conducting a

qualitative research study working directly with school personnel that implemented an AIP for kindergarten students, I expand on existing knowledge and develop an intervention to improve kindergarten attendance in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

Good student attendance is key to school success and ultimately to meeting the requirements to earn a high school diploma. Regardless of the reason, when students miss school they miss out on valuable instructional time (Eastman & Cooney, 2007). Chronic absenteeism is a red alert that students are headed for academic trouble and eventually for dropping out of high school (Attendance Works, 2012). Poor attendance isn't just a problem in high school. It often starts in kindergarten and can lead to some students developing patterns of poor attendance that continue throughout their K-12 experience. School districts are losing billions of dollars in subsidies due to student absences and need practical, effective strategies to get students to attend school regularly. Numerous studies have focused on how poor attendance impacts individual students, families, and society. Few studies have evaluated AIPs or have explored whether and how early intervention and prevention can lead to improved student attendance.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study is to understand and describe the key factors that contributed to improved kindergarten attendance at select schools participating in the LAUSD's Attendance Improvement Pilot Program, as well as those that may have impeded attendance improvement. I was interested in learning why some schools were successful and others were not. Since the attitudes and beliefs of teachers, counselors, and school principals play a critical role in improving student attendance, I interviewed LAUSD employees in these roles to better understand how the AIP was implemented at their school and why some schools made

significant attendance improvements and others did not. This study delves deeply into the factors that contribute to improved student attendance and how the attitudes and beliefs of teachers, counselors, and principals impact attendance outcomes at schools implementing an AIP. Ultimately, the information gained as a result of this research will be used to strengthen the AIP of the LAUSD and develop tool kits to assist school personnel throughout the district to improve attendance. To address these objectives, my study answers the following questions.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) What factors, if any, according to school personnel who participated in a kindergarten AIP, contribute to improved student attendance?
- 2) What are the differences in beliefs, attitudes, and/or actions among school personnel who participated in an AIP where there was a significant increase in student attendance in contrast to the beliefs, attitudes, and/or actions of school personnel who participated in an AIP where there was minimal or no increase in attendance?

### **The Project**

I interviewed 3 school personnel at 6 different elementary schools which implemented a pilot program to improve kindergarten attendance last school year (2011-2012), for a total of 18 interviews. Prior to meeting with participants, I conducted a data analysis of all 51 schools that participated in the attendance pilot program. The data analysis consisted of grouping the schools by those that met their performance improvement target of a 5% increase of the number of kindergartners attending school 96% of the time and those that did not. I then took a closer look, analyzing the data month by month to see the exact attendance patterns of the kindergarten

students at all schools. This included disaggregated data on absenteeism by grade level, gender, ethnicity, disability, and English language mastery. This in-depth look at the data helped me understand the trends of attendance at each of the schools. For example, I explored which days of the week are the least- or best-attended and which calendar months may be associated with better or worse attendance, and I assessed whether specific events such as holidays or testing had an impact on attendance. Upon completion of the data analysis, I used the information gained to select the schools to participate in my study. I then interviewed all 18 participants from that school, including the School Principal, the Kindergarten Teacher, and the Counselor, to learn what factors contributed to the attendance outcomes at their schools and how their beliefs, attitudes, and actions may have impacted the results.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative design was used because it provided a level of depth that was difficult to ascertain using quantitative methods. There are several types of data collection that can be used when using qualitative methods such as observations, interviews, document analysis, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2003). For the purposes of this study, personal interviews with Principals, Teachers, and Counselors were conducted.

Within the literature, there are specific theoretical reasons for taking a qualitative approach. Among the characteristics of qualitative research, Merriam identifies three, which are advantageous to my study (Merriam, 1998). To begin with, I was interested in the *emic*, or the insider's perspective that school personnel have on improving student attendance. Furthermore, the information captured through interviews occurred in the form of narratives or explanations of processes. Merriam asserts that, in such circumstances, the interview format is appropriate

because relating such stories and processes provides the necessary depth to understand what is happening within the phenomena (Merriam 1998).

Finally, for the study to reflect the views of school personnel, I did what Creswell (2009) terms “natural interviewing,” or interviewing my participants on site. By interviewing staff, I gained insight from these Principals, Kindergarten Teachers, and Counselors who implemented an AIP at their school site. Creswell (2003) identifies three primary means through which interviews can occur: face-to-face, telephone, and in groups. I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in this study in an attempt to capture the unique context and intimacy that cannot be revealed via phone or group interviews.

To learn from staff that already implemented an AIP targeting kindergartners, I conducted interviews and gathered information from multiple stakeholders in addition to analyzing the attendance data at each school. As a result of collecting data from different sources, I gained an understanding of what perceived factors contributed most to the schools attendance outcomes. This type of direct interaction with staff was the best way to fully probe my research questions and to learn directly from key stakeholders.

## **Methods**

### **Site Selection**

The six sites were selected based on their participation in the District’s Attendance Improvement Pilot Program last school year (2011-2012) and the attendance outcomes they achieved.

***Attendance Improvement Pilot:*** The school must have participated in the pilot program for a full year without interruption of assignment of the primary participants: the Principal, the

Kindergarten Teacher, and the Counselor. All three of these key personnel must have been at the school during the entire year of the pilot.

***Attendance Outcomes:*** After a complete and thorough data analysis of the 51 elementary schools that participated in the pilot, schools were placed into two categories: those that met their attendance outcomes and those that did not. Within these categories, I then looked for commonalities among school sites such as school size/type, the area in which the school is located, and student demographics such as socioeconomic status, race, and language proficiency. To the extent possible, I aimed to select schools which were more similar than were different in terms of their school type and student population in order to rule out the probability that attendance outcomes were due to differences such as school size, student demographics, and school location.

### **Population Sample**

The study involves 18 personnel at three school sites that implemented the District's AIP last school year (2011-2012). Three (3) Principals, 3 Kindergarten Teachers, and 3 Counselors were interviewed to learn the key factors that contributed to improved kindergarten attendance at schools that implemented the pilot program and how the attitudes and beliefs of teachers, counselors, and principals may have impacted their attendance outcomes. The selection of the participants was critical to the study. Maxwell (2005) argues that when conducting a qualitative study one should use "purposeful selection," a strategy "in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p.88). This is different from a random selection. In a *purposeful selection* the researcher is looking for specific individuals who are most able to provide information needed to answer the research questions. For this project, all of the participants had experience



implementing the pilot program and had first-hand knowledge regarding the factors that contribute to improved attendance.

### **Recruiting Participants**

Locating potential participants was somewhat challenging because the personnel who participated in the study last school year may not have been assigned to the same school this year. With the reorganization of the District into five ESCs, layoffs of teachers due to financial instability, and reassignment of Counselors who met their attendance outcomes, chances were that many of the teacher and counselor participants were not at the same school they were at last year. Therefore, before I could contact the potential participants I had to investigate their current assignment. Once I located them, I sent each potential participant an email to request his/her participation in my study. This email included information regarding the purpose of my study, why they were selected to participate, and the benefits of participating for them individually, for their school, and for the district. In this initial contact I informed the participants that I would be contacting them in the near future via telephone to provide additional information and to answer any questions they may have. Once I reached the potential participants via telephone, I explained the research study and the commitment being asked of them. I also assured potential participants that their participation was entirely voluntary and that their identity and that of the school would be kept confidential. As staff agreed to participate, I sent them each a letter as a follow up to our telephone conversation with all of the details of the study. I also sent them written information about the study with a consent form for their review and signature.

## **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

My data collection process began with a data analysis of all 51 elementary schools that participated in the Attendance Improvement Pilot Program in order to identify the schools that I would select for the study. Once the schools were selected, I conducted a complete analysis of the schools' attendance data. I also created a comprehensive report of the schools' attendance data that included information about which students had the worst attendance, as well as trends or patterns surrounding attendance related to poor weather, days of the week, testing, holidays, and school schedules. I then conducted one-hour, individual, semi-structured interviews with the Principals, Teachers, and Counselors at their school sites. With participants' written permission, each interview was taped and recorded. Participants were notified that they were able to stop the recording at any time if they felt uncomfortable or if they wanted to discuss any issue "off the record." Another technique I used to ensure credibility of my study is what Merriam refers to as "member checks" (p.217). This is a process whereby the researcher seeks feedback from the participant to ensure that s/he did not misunderstand or misinterpret the information provided by the participant.

I used observations from my field notes on the research process. Each meeting was recorded and key decisions memorialized in a journal. I also wrote reflections throughout the project based on my observations and interactions with the participants. All data collected was recorded, transcribed, and coded for later analysis. Transcriptions were coded based on themes that emerged from the interviews. I looked for similarities and differences among the various interviewees' comments and identified common themes.

## **Credibility of Study**

To ensure that my research was credible, I minimized my bias by implementing data collection that used theoretical concepts and models and standardized protocols and systematic data analysis. For example, I used my notes and journal entries, participant anecdotes, and school attendance data to identify common concepts and conclusions. Gathering information from a variety of sources and methods is one aspect of *triangulation*, a process that reduces the risk of bias by not relying on only one source or method (Maxwell, 2005). By collecting data from a variety of sources, I drew inferences that could not have been gained from one source alone. For example, Counselors and/or Teachers may have had a completely different perspective on what factors contributed to improved attendance than from that of the school Principal. Likewise, the school Principal may have felt a Teacher's inability to engage her students was the primary reason some students missed school. In reviewing the data, I was able to identify information that came from more than one source, thus making it more credible. Using multiple methods of data collection allowed me to compare various perceptions of attendance challenges and to check for common theories or understandings.

The primary threat to the credibility of my study was the fact that participants may not have been honest about how the pilot program was implemented at their school nor about their perceptions and attitudes regarding student attendance. This unwillingness may have been exacerbated because of my role as the Executive Director of Student Health and Human Services and District Administrator, holding schools accountable for improved student attendance. Participants may not have felt safe sharing information with me that they think might be used to judge or evaluate their role in improving attendance at their site. To address this issue, I needed to build trust with my participants and assured them that my role in this study was as the

principal researcher conducting research needed for my dissertation, not as the Executive Director of Student Health and Human Services. I needed to make clear the intent of the study was not to judge or evaluate schools with poor attendance, but rather to understand the barriers that may be preventing schools from effectively implementing programs to improve student attendance. Participants were informed that the primary purpose of the study was to understand the factors that contributed to improved attendance and to use that information to support other schools throughout the district in meeting their attendance goals.

### **Ethical Issues to Consider**

There are several issues I needed to consider while conducting research at these sites. First and foremost, I needed to ensure that I was protecting the privacy of the participants. As mentioned previously, the participants were responsible for implementing an AIP at their sites to improve student attendance. Some of them made gains and others did not. All were being held accountable to increasing the percentage of students attending their school 96% of the time. Although I was not the immediate supervisor of any participant, I am part of the District's executive management team and the lead administrator overseeing student attendance. Finally, I needed to be able to separate my role as the director/administrator responsible for improving attendance from my role as researcher gathering information.

## **CHAPTER 4: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

### **Creating the Attendance Improvement Plan**

Shortly after John Deasy's appointment as Superintendent of LAUSD, he developed five goals to improve student outcomes: 1) 100% graduation; 2) 100% attendance; 3) proficiency for all; 4) parent and community engagement; and, 5) school safety. To reach these goals, the District created a performance meter to measure and guide its performance with clear targets and expectations. The Office of Pupil Services (OPS) was charged with developing a plan to improve student attendance and began analyzing attendance data, looking for trends and patterns of student absenteeism to better understand the severity of the problem, as well as to identify specific areas of concern such as higher rates of absenteeism by grade level, ethnicity, gender, geographic areas, etc. After a thorough analysis of the data, the OPS discovered that kindergarten students had high rates of chronic absenteeism, more than any other grade level. OPS then used this information to develop a strategic plan to reduce chronic absenteeism and improve attendance district-wide; A central component of this AIP was the implementation of a pilot program designed to improve kindergarten attendance.

After reviewing the literature on strategies that positively impact student attendance and conducting several focus groups with students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators, a theory of change was developed to identify the actions necessary to improve student attendance in kindergarten. The theory included the following beliefs:

- Early identification and intervention is important.
- Parents, students, and teachers need to understand the importance of good attendance and the correlation between good attendance and academic success.

- Everyone (parents, students, school staff, and administrators) is responsible for improving student attendance.
- Schools must actively engage parents.
- Schools should use incentives and rewards to motivate students to attend school regularly.
- Communicating with parents regarding their child's attendance is critical to improving attendance.
- The tracking and monitoring of attendance data is critical to understanding and addressing attendance problems.
- Schools need the resources to do this work.

Hence our theory of change is:

If kindergarten parents, students, teachers, and administrators understand the importance of good attendance and its correlation to academic success, if all stakeholders work together and understand their role in improving attendance, and if schools receive the resources to track/monitor attendance, implement attendance incentive programs, educate parents and staff, then kindergarten attendance will improve.

Using this theory of change, a theory of action was developed to implement the AIP at schools with high rates of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten. Table 4.1 illustrates the elements of the program's theory of action:

**Table 4.1: LAUSD Theory of Action**

**Goals – Each program school will:**

1. Support a viable Attendance and Dropout Prevention team, which will implement a comprehensive plan that is fully responsive to current attendance trends.
2. Demonstrate increased staff, student, and parent awareness of attendance expectations and Performance Meter goals.
3. Demonstrate an increased use of prevention and intervention programs to improve student attendance school-wide (incentive programs, community partnerships, and parent supports).
4. Have at least a 5% increase in the percentage of students attending at 96% or better in the targeted grade level.

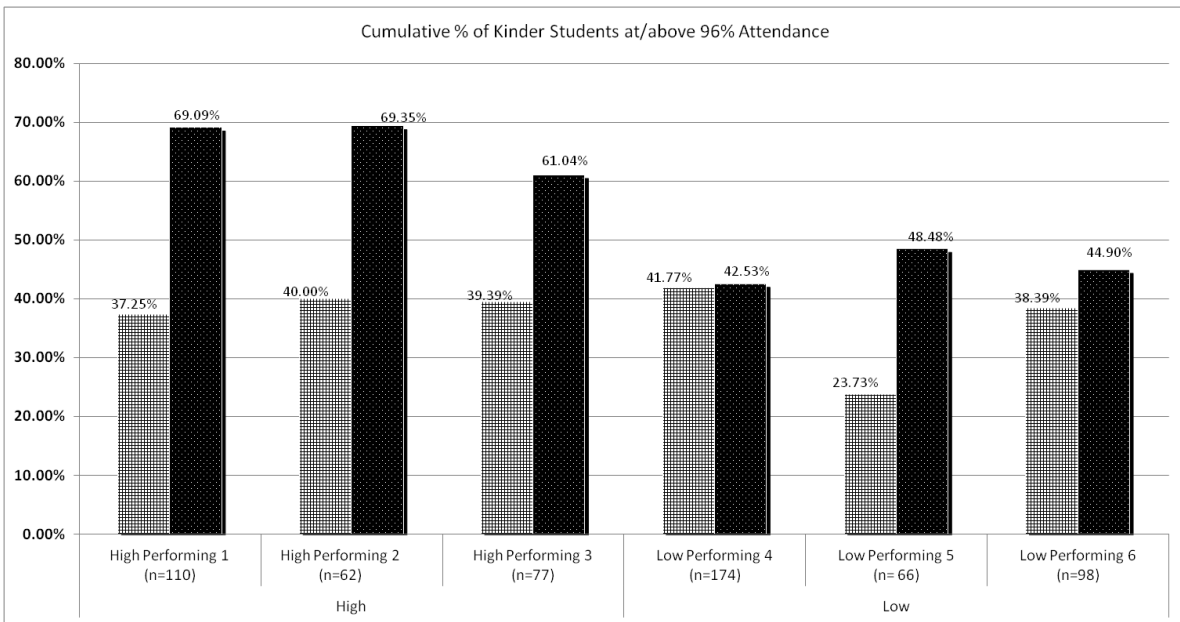
INPUTS	ACTIVITIES		OUTCOMES		
What we invest	What we do	Who we reach	Why this project: short-term results	Why this project: intermediate results	Why this project: long-term results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupil Services and Attendance (PSA) Counselors (<i>Child Welfare and Attendance professionals</i>)</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Money</li> <li>• Research base</li> <li>• Technology</li> <li>• Materials</li> <li>• Partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach and reinforce the importance of regular school attendance</li> <li>• Offer incentives to students and parents for good /improved attendance</li> <li>• Engage stakeholders by articulating improvement goals, sharing current data, and celebrating/ incentivizing measurable attendance improvements</li> <li>• Meet with students, families, and school staff regularly</li> <li>• Provide counseling services to help address any barriers to regular attendance</li> <li>• Cultivate in-kind donations from businesses</li> <li>• Develop partnerships with community organizations/ businesses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9<sup>th</sup> grade and Kindergarten students</li> <li>• Parents and family members</li> <li>• School staff members</li> <li>• Community organizations</li> <li>• Businesses</li> </ul>	<p><i>Learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of attendance requirements/ benefits</li> <li>• More time in the classroom for students</li> <li>• Easier transition to kindergarten and 9<sup>th</sup> grade</li> <li>• Increased access to social services for families</li> <li>• Motivate students to attend/achieve</li> </ul>	<p><i>Action</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater achievement among students and schools</li> <li>• Increased revenue from higher attendance rates</li> </ul>	<p><i>Conditions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dropout prevention</li> <li>• Increased graduation rates</li> <li>• Economic/civic benefits to society</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assumptions</b> (<i>i.e., the beliefs we have about the program, the people involved, and the context and the way we think the program will work</i>):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused support and services from a PSA Counselor will result in measurable attendance improvement</li> <li>• School attendance is a behavior that can be shaped and improved</li> <li>• Program activities will result in increased engagement and involvement of key stakeholders (students, parents, staff, community) toward achieving program goals</li> <li>• Students who attend school regularly during critical transition years (kindergarten and Grade 9) are more likely to achieve academically and ultimately graduate from high school college-prepared and career ready</li> </ul>				<p><b>External Factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture, economics, politics, demographics</li> </ul>	

Fifty-one (51) schools were chosen to participate in this pilot program and all made gains in the percentage of students attending at 96%. However, there were clearly some leaders and some lagers in terms of attendance outcomes after AIP implementation. Forty-nine (49) out of 51 elementary schools met the goal of a 5% increase of students attending at 96%. The median increase was 17.2%. Ten (10) schools met or exceeded the student attendance performance target of 66% at 96% or higher. These attendance gains reduced the days of lost instruction in kindergarten compared to the previous year by 10,430 days and saved the District \$335,653 dollars in lost financial support.

Table 4.2 shows that three schools continued as *low performers* and three schools made sufficient gains in attendance to change their status from *low performers* to *high performers*. What determines whether a school's attendance performance is high or low is its year-end rate of proficient/advanced attendance, as opposed to their improvements in attendance. All six schools started off as low-performers in 2010-11 with proficient/advanced rates ranging from 23.73% to 41.77%. The three schools whose proficient/advanced rates increased to at least 61% in 2011-12 were considered *high-performing* schools; the other three schools were considered *low-performers* as their 2011-12 year end rates of proficient/advanced were no higher than 48.48%. These six schools were chosen as the focus of this study.



Table 4.2: Schools Chosen as Subjects of This Study



For example, LP5 is one of these latter schools; it is still considered a low-performing school despite an increase of 24.75% in its rates of proficient/advanced attendance from 2010-11 to 2011-12 because its final rate was only 48.48%. This situation illustrates that, despite achieving significant success within the AIP in terms of increasing rates of proficient/advanced attendance, schools can still be considered low-performers if, at the end of the program, their attendance rates are still low relative to the rest of the district. However, it should be noted that although LP5 school is not considered a high performing school for this study, this school made significant gains in attendance, doubling the number of its kindergartners attending 96% of the time. The district acknowledged this school for going far beyond the AICs goal of a 5% improvement of students attending at the proficient rate.

The interview data from this study helped identify factors, which contributed to the improved attendance seen at some of the schools; all 18 of the participants interviewed identified

these same factors. *Student recognition efforts* such as awards, certificates, and letters to parents praising students for good attendance were recognized as contributing factors to improved attendance at all 6 schools. Participants also identified *incentive programs* that reward students for good attendance such as prizes, raffles, pizza parties, and the earning of special privileges such as attending field trips, concerts, and assemblies; these programs were used to motivate students and led to improved attendance. Most participants identified *strategies to educate parents* on the importance of good attendance in kindergarten and the need to inform parents that kindergarten is rigorous, standard-based, and the building block to students' overall K-16 education. Such education could also include the idea that the kindergarten experience today is quite different from what it was for their parents: kindergartners no longer take naps, drink milk, eat cookies, and simply play games; today's kindergarten curriculum is more dependent on regular attendance. Participants agreed that *parent involvement* is critical to improving attendance and that schools need to regularly communicate with parents via parent meetings (individual and group), parent conferences, phone calls, letters, and home visits if necessary.

Participants also identified the need to create a *school culture* of good attendance amongst all stakeholders (parents, students, staff, and administrators) and believed that schools should have clear attendance policies, communicate them to the stakeholders, and ensure the policies' enforcement. Participants also agreed that schools need support through additional *District-supplied resources*, such as a school-dedicated Counselor, to help implement the AIP.

All 18 school-based staff interviewed basically agreed that the above factors – *student recognition efforts, incentive programs, parent education strategies, parent involvement, school culture, District-supplied resources* – are what contributed to their ability to improve attendance. What was strikingly different in my findings between the high- and low-performing schools were

the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of the staff who implemented the program at high performing schools versus those at the low performing schools. I identified five themes that emerged around these differences: 1) perceptions of parents and community served, 2) collaboration, 3) parent involvement, 4) level of program implementation, and 5) school leadership.

### **Participant Perceptions of Parents and the Community**

All six schools selected to participate in this research study are located in areas with high rates of poverty and transiency, serve predominantly minority students and families, and have enrollment numbers ranging from 382 to 857 students. Although these schools all have similar demographics, study participants defined the school culture differently. Participants interviewed (3 Principals, 3 Teachers, and 3 Counselors from each of the six schools) were asked to define the school's culture and the community it serves. Responses to this question were very different between high-performing and low-performing schools. Staff at high-performing schools defined the school culture and community it serves positively; participants used words like "healthy," "safe," "receptive," and "strong" to describe the school culture and community served. One Principal observed:

The culture is... I think it's a culture, which [is] a community that is actually very stable. I was a teacher there. I started teaching at [name of school] and the same families that I knew at the time were there when I was there as principal, and I actually got to see parents of students that were my students and who actually had graduated from college or came to visit and so on. So it's a very stable community. One in which they continue to do the same things every single day but maybe are not aware of behaviors or things that are occurring that may not be as beneficial to them unless it's pointed out. So issues about

attendance weren't as obvious to them until it was pointed out through data. So it's a community that's very stable, but I think it's also very... receptive to information when it's given to them. Initially there's a little bit of push back, but then once more discussion occurs and collaboration about how to solve the problem, they're receptive to it. But it's been a very stable community. (Principal HP2)

This Principal clearly sees the school culture and community in a positive light and infers that some of the behaviors impacting attendance may be due to parents' unawareness rather than a lack of concern about their child's education. She also recognizes that parents may be resistant; however, she believes that once parents are given information, they are receptive to change. It is important to note that the families sending their children to this school, according to census data, have many challenges and risk factors. Median income is \$30,882 with the number of people per household at 4.1%; 100% of the school's students qualifies for free or reduced lunch.

Another Principal's response to the question regarding the culture and community served was:

I think we have a very good culture here. And I think that, well you know, yesterday we had an incident and the crisis team came out today and they did say that we have a very good culture and we do a lot of college-going things and most of the parents are receptive to the interventions that we might require them to be part of. (Principal HP3)

This Principal's response was quite interesting because the "incident" she referred to was not a minor one but, rather, a violent act that occurred directly in front of the school placing it into "lock down." This is a situation where the perimeter of the school is secured, all school entrances and classrooms are locked, and no one is allowed to enter or leave the campus for the protection of students and staff. In other words, lock down is a serious response to an eminent

danger and the fact that this Principal was able to identify the school culture positively despite the serious incident is quite remarkable. It also demonstrates that she does not focus solely on school and/or community deficits but, rather, is able to see its strengths.

Staff at high-performing schools also mentioned that their communities had high numbers of immigrants, families of low socio-economic status, and issues such as single parents raising children alone, foster care, and transiency. Although these issues were mentioned, they were not the focus of their responses. Participants spoke of the positive attributes of the community and, more specifically, of the parents. For example, participants identified parents as “concerned,” “receptive,” “wanting the best” for their children, “hard-working,” “appreciative,” and “willing to help.” In other words, they saw the strengths in parents and the community and did not focus solely on their deficits. When asked if it was possible to influence parents’ perception about attendance, one Counselor at a high-performing school said:

Yeah, so of course they’re impressionable as parents; often times when you’re working with a parent of a kindergartner, if this is their first child, they are very influential because certainly... first of all they’re not too sure what to expect. And at that school they were very supportive of participating in my different programs. So I think going in at the beginning of the year, I know that they were receptive, they wouldn’t have come to the meeting if they weren’t receptive, so I think that is an indication that they were impressionable, open to being influenced regarding attendance issues. (Counselor HP1)

A Counselor at another high-performing school responded to the question about the culture of the school and community she served:

Well, the culture was a pretty positive culture. I mean overall. The school’s expectation level already was pretty high. The support was overwhelming, really, with having

someone in the school that focused on attendance where they didn't have a PSA there. So in my opinion, the school climate was positive. A lot of parent support was at the school when I came so it wasn't a real push to begin a program like that at this school because they were already willing; the parents were receptive and wanted the best for their children. (Counselor HP3)

Again, this Counselor speaks highly of the school and its community and perceives parents as concerned for their children and willing to participate. Her relationship with parents is strong and she sees them as a resource rather than a problem. Counselor HP1, describing her similar school culture, said:

I would say, in terms of the parents – because I worked pretty closely with the parents – a very tight-knit group. They were very actively involved in my assemblies and, yes, so the turnout was pretty good. They had a parent rep on campus and the turnout was pretty good. And so in terms of the culture of the parents, it was quite an involved representation of the parents. Even teachers, the staff on campus, it seemed to be a pretty close-knit campus. Teachers, students – it being an elementary school, I think the students felt safe and there was certainly a sense of school pride if there was any type of competitions or they would have different rallies. And so there was a lot of participation from the students and from the parents, so it was good. (Counselor HP1)

Again, this Counselor defines a positive school culture where students feel safe and proud and parents, teachers, and students are all working together. As another example:

I mean, I really feel like the parents really want their kids to learn. I know like some people say, “Oh the parents don't...,” you know. I think a lot of them do; I think some of them, well most of them just are not sure because they're from other countries, their

schooling system is different. And they see education as valuable because here we have free school and other countries, sometimes they don't have free school. If you can't pay, your kids go to no school. So I think a lot of them want their kids to learn; they're just not sure what to do because they don't know the system here. (Teacher HP3)

This Teacher speaks highly of the parents at her school and perceives parents as caring and concerned about their children's education. However, because they are from other countries, they might need support in understanding how the U.S. education system works. It's important to note that staff at high-performing schools also expressed concern and or frustration with parents for allowing their children to miss school for unexcused reasons. This is what Counselor HP1 said when asked why kindergarten parents keep their students home from school:

Number one reason was due to illnesses. And then on occasion sometimes the kids were kept home as kindergarteners because a parent was unable to bring the child if they had another child that was sick... then the other kindergartener, if they were not the one [who was] sick, they had no way of transporting them. Or if the parent was sick and if they were the only ones to be able to take them to school. So at the kindergarten level that often was a reason sometimes because... if it was their birthday, or there were other reasons that was invalid for them to stay home in addition to not being able to transport them... because parents should be able to make other provisions for that. Let's see, if the family was taking vacation and they wanted to take their kid on vacation with them, that was another big reason. (Counselor HP1)

Although this Counselor is frustrated that parents keep children home on their birthdays or to take vacation during school time, she does not appear to make judgment regarding the

parents' moral character, nor does she infer that parents do not care about their child's education. When asked why kindergarten parents keep their children home from school, Principal HP2 said:

Because they love their children, they love them so much that they don't realize. I think because when they hear their child say that they don't want to go to school, they won't push back and say, "Well why not? What's the issue? What's the problem?" "My stomach hurts. Children have already learned how to stay home, you know? And I think once parents understand that you have to then look deeper into what the issue is... then they'll be more willing to take them to school. (Principal HP2)

In addressing the situation where parents keep their children home from school without a valid excuse, this Principal is not blaming or judging them; she identifies the reason that parents give in to their children as "because they love them." She also points out that once parents are educated on the importance of good attendance and begin to ask themselves what are the real reasons their children want to stay home, they will send them to school.

The responses of staff at low-performing schools were quite different. Where staff at high-performing schools defined the school culture and the community it serves as positive, staff at low-performing schools defined the school culture and the community it serves as negative. Staff at low-performing schools defined the school culture and community as "chaotic," "unsafe," "difficult," with high incidents of violence, divorce, foster care, grandparents raising grandchildren, and with high numbers of families of low socio-economic status, substance abuse problems, and transiency issues. When asked to define his school culture and the community served, one Principal said:

Well we're very small. We're very needy. I do have many challenges, one of them being attendance. I have a lot of kids who are absent frequently. I have a lot of students being



raised by grandparents and great-grandparents. I feel that I have a high percentage of students in foster care, more than in other schools. So I think that's what brings down a lot of my attendance. (Principal LP5)

This was the Principal's entire response. He did not identify any strengths in his school/community culture. A Counselor at another low-performing school responding to the same question said:

The culture of the school is fairly eclectic, a little bit chaotic; the neighborhood not the safest, a lot of parental issues in terms of, like, joblessness and just economic challenges with some of the parents in the kindergarten classes. Parents not getting along with one another and not getting along with the teachers. I guess over all, a little chaotic would probably sum it up. (Counselor LP4)

Again, this was her entire response and nothing positive was identified in terms of the school or the community cultures. When asked why kindergarten parents keep their students home from school another Counselor said:

The first reason is their child is sick or they believe their child is sick and then once some parents are told what are reasonable or excused and unexcused absences from school, parents will use an excuse that their child is asthmatic but maybe not have the documentation. So when things like that come up, some of the other reasons that might be associated is family business, family emergencies, personal appointments...and then you know there is a problem with tardiness and some parents have expressed that it was they slept in or they thought that it would be better to keep them home from school versus come in late. (Counselor LP5)

This Counselor not only infers that parents do not make their child's education a priority, she goes on to say that they lie about why their children are absent once they are informed of what type of absences are deemed excused versus unexcused.

When also asked why kindergarten parents keep their children home from school a Teacher at another low-performing said:

Some of them for convenience, honestly. I don't know. Maybe the school isn't possibly a priority for some of them unfortunately. Maybe issues at home possibly, I can't say... Just, I think... their problems get to them and it's just another task to bring their child to school and pick them up, that kind of thing, which is ridiculous when this should be first and foremost. This is a place where they're safe, they're fed, they're getting an education.  
(Teacher LP5)

When asked to describe the culture at her school, Principal LP6 said:

"Some parents don't feel like it's as important because it's kinder and we sometimes feel like they think it's like a babysitting service and they want to bring the students when they want to." (Principal LP6)

This Principal then elaborated when asked whether some students were more likely to miss school:

"I would have to say it's our African American students. And we try to encourage the parents by even giving them some type of incentive to students here...so that has helped but for the most part, some of them, oh I overslept, or I couldn't get them here, or I was sick, or you know there are a lot of basic excuses." (Principal LP6)

In contrast to the high-performing schools, staff at low-performing schools did not identify any sources of strength in the community or its parents. Additionally, staff at low-

performing schools identified parents as “needy,” “unconcerned” about the education of their children, “rude,” “difficult,” and “dishonest.” Because staff members at low-performing schools were unable to identify the strengths of the parents and community they served, they worked from a *deficit-based* versus a *strength-based* approach in their solutions to addressing attendance problems. In other words, since their perceptions of parents were negative, their approach was more punitive, more judgmental, and less trusting. This poor perception of parents may be the reason why staff at low-performing schools expressed difficulty engaging parents and getting them more involved in the program activities. In fact, some of the low-performing schools appeared to give up on parents and instead focused their efforts on improving attendance by working directly with students, using them to hold their parents responsible for getting them to school. One Teacher, when asked if she thought it was possible to influence parents’ perceptions regarding attendance, said, “Those who think it’s kind of not a priority or put it on the backburner, just being honest, they don’t really change their attitude, unfortunately [Teacher LP5].” When asked what strategies or activities contribute most to improved student attendance, this same Teacher said, “I think for the children just holding them accountable or try to tell their parents, like, I need to come to school.” Another Teacher at a low-performing school said:

A lot of parents may not have experienced success at school when they were younger and so they want to stay as far away as they can from it. And if they have something that they need to do, school’s the first thing that can go by the wayside. Or if they want to go on a vacation to visit family far away, we can be out of school for as long as we need to because it’s really just not that important, “I didn’t [get] that much from it when I was young and it’s just not that important for our kids.” But I think that with the attendance programs that we have this year it’s reinforcing to the kids and it’s making the kids say to

their parents, “No. I’ve got to go to school. We can’t do laundry. I have to go to school.”

(Teacher LP4)

When asked what strategies or activities contributed most to improving student attendance, Teacher LP4 said, “Getting the kids involved because the kids are the ones who have influence with their parents more than anybody else. So making it important to the kids makes it important to the parents.” All three of these low-performing schools’ Teachers felt the best strategy to improving attendance was to work with students rather than parents.

Because staff at high-performing schools have a more positive perception of parents and hold the belief that they care about their child’s education (especially after they are more informed), members are more receptive to change, have higher expectations of their students and parents, are less judgmental, and are better able to engage parents. Coming from a more strength-based approach, these staff members were hopeful about their ability to create change and become more solution-focused.

### **Participants’ Perceptions of Collaboration**

There was also a difference in the level of collaboration between high-performing and low-performing schools’ stakeholder groups. Staff at high-performing schools contributed their success to strong collaboration, a school-wide effort to improve attendance and “everyone working together.” Participants described the role each stakeholder played to improve attendance and how, through shared work and accountability, they were able to make significant gains in attendance. When asked which stakeholder contributed most to attendance gains at their school, staff at high-performing schools were more likely to discuss a combined, or team, effort. Although most of the staff identified the Counselor as the person with the most critical role, they

also identified other staff as holding integral roles and some had difficulty identifying just one person, pointing to a truly combined effort. One Teacher at a high-performing school said:

I believe it's a combination. Having [the Counselor] call for us to see what's going on, because sometimes we can't do that, and the teacher buying into the program, and having a principal that's accepting of this program and really wanting the attendance to improve... like, it's a combination of everybody. Because if it was just teachers, it wouldn't work. If it was just for her, the attendance person, it wouldn't work. So I think it's has to be a collaborative, everyone has to buy into it. (Teacher HP1)

It was clear that at high-performing schools everyone had a role in improving attendance and they worked together to create change. For example, Principals at high-performing schools defined their role as working with the team to review attendance data, communicating with all stakeholders, understanding underlying issues that prevent parents from sending their children to school, establishing clear attendance expectations, and enforcing policy. They also felt it was their responsibility to attend parent meetings and assemblies, and to participate in attendance improvement activities. Some Principals held individual parent meetings with parents of children with excessive absences, made phone calls to parents, and even made home visits. One Principal talked about assisting her Counselor with a situation where a kindergarten student refused to get out of the car when her mother was dropping her off at school. The child was screaming and crying and holding on to the seat of the car, refusing to get out. The Counselor was talking to the parent and the Principal physically picked the child up and carried her to class while the Counselor helped the parent deal with the anxiety of separating from her child. Many high-performing Principals were actively involved in the attendance improvement efforts and were not afraid to roll up their sleeves and do whatever was necessary to assist their staff. When

asked about her role in kindergarten attendance improvement, this Principal of a high-performing school said:

At the beginning of the school year I met with the kindergarten parents and introduced our counselor. When there were issues that came up, I sat in meetings with the counselor to sign the contracts to review the expectations. We visited homes together. I communicated with kindergarten parents on every Monday morning assembly, or sending out the electronic calls, what they called “ConnectEd.” Sending out letters. So I was definitely very present but always made that connection to our counselor. Here’s the counselor to support you and she can provide you resources or strategies to help support you... and when children didn’t want to come to school and they’d be in the car and they were crying and didn’t want to come out, she would be there to support me and I would be there to get the child out of the car. (Principal HP2)

Teachers at high-performing schools were also actively involved and committed to improving attendance. Teachers described their role as teaching good attendance habits to their students and implementing incentive activities in the classroom to motivate students to come to school every day. Teachers also said they talked to parents regularly about the importance of good attendance and the correlation between good attendance and academic success. Many Teachers at high-performing schools said they worked hard to dispel parents’ myths that kindergarten was not important. These Teachers met with parents to discuss kindergarten standards and showed them the curriculum and work expected of their children. They also welcomed the Counselor into their classrooms and worked together to improve attendance and assist those parents who had trouble getting their children to school regularly. When one

Teacher at a high-performing school was asked if improving student attendance was a priority to teachers, she said:

I think we were all on board, we weren't complaining about "Oh the assemblies!" or anything like that. We were excited. And we kind of had a friendly competition where whichever class had more percentage, like higher attendance, [it] got rewarded. So we're always like yeah, you know. (Teacher HP1)

Teacher HP1 elaborated on the role teachers play in improving attendance:

As teachers, we participated monthly at like an attendance award ceremony each month, which the parents and the teachers loved. We recognized the students coming to school every day because we felt that was very important. I think the parents like it because we gave them recognition too, like saying great job, because maybe they don't get that enough. We also make sure, teaching the kids that coming to school is important. And we also, when we had our kindergarten orientation, we had a kindergarten attendance contract that we didn't have before, saying it's their responsibility to make sure to bring their kids to school every day and on time, that was another stress that we made. (Teacher HP1)

Counselors at high-performing schools spoke often about the support they received from their principal, the teachers, and parents. They attributed their attendance gains and success of the program to a team effort. Another Counselor at a high-performing school said this regarding the active role of her teachers:

We needed the teachers to follow through on the incentives that were given so that the program would work as far as giving kids the information on when you're going to get a prize and actually following through on it. That was important. And also giving me the

time to meet with their students. They were very flexible on allowing me to do lessons in their rooms and to take out of their time; they gave me opportunities to read stories and to do lessons on washing your hands and prevention. Teachers also helped me with conferences, letting me know when they had conferences with certain parents so that we could be a tag team kind of, in there with them to support improving attendance in certain areas. And we worked on parent meetings together a lot with finding out what days would be best for parent meetings. And we worked together on when we did our end-of-the-year programs for the kids, when we did our slideshows and we compiled pictures together we'd done all school year. [The teachers] were very supportive in a lot of different ways. (Counselor HP3)

Counselor HP3 describes a strong collaboration with teachers and a general sense that theirs is a partnership. She uses the word “we” when defining their work together and clearly demonstrates that it was a team effort. The Counselors also shared this sense of collaboration. Many Counselors identified their teachers or principal as having the most critical role in the success of the program. When asked if improving attendance was a priority to the Principal, one Counselor said:

Yes, definitely it was a priority for her. And she would seek me out routinely and ask for statistics and we would discuss trends, what days do they have the highest absent rate, what we could do to implement things school-wide. Yes, the principal was very interested in attendance and very interested in improving attendance. I think that's not always true across all schools but at [name of school] it was. (Counselor HP2)

In contrast, staff at lower-performing schools did not express the same type of collaboration amongst stakeholders. In fact, staff at lower-performing schools described their



role as one of support to the Counselor. Rather than being a part of a true team effort in which everyone was rolling up their sleeves and actively working to implement the program, staff at the lower-performing schools took a secondary role to the Counselor. For example, when these Teachers were asked about their role in improving attendance, they responded with answers such as “to support the AIC,” or “to allow the AIC time to meet with my students,” or “to keep accurate attendance records.” Principals also had similar responses: “I allowed the AIC to implement the program,” or “I provided the AIC with the resources she needed to implement the program,” or “I informed staff that the District was sending a Counselor to implement an attendance improvement program.” When asked whether the staff was creating incentives to support the AIP at her school, one teacher responded:

“She did. She had assemblies, she had weekly prizes, she had weekly certificates, she went out to the neighborhoods, she got them Shakey’s certificates, Home Town Buffet, BJ’s, so if they were here for the that whole week, they received a certificate of perfect attendance and like an award to one of those places in the neighborhood.” (Teacher LP6)

It’s interesting that this teacher spoke solely of the effort of the Counselor, making it appear that the bulk of the attendance improvement effort was the Counselor’s responsibility.

In turn, the Counselors also expressed frustration with a lack of collaboration at their schools and, when asked about barriers to the success of the program, in many cases the Counselors talked about teacher resistance. Some Counselors discussed situations in which teachers did not consider attendance a priority, not allowing them access to their classroom to talk to students about attendance, and not conducting attendance activities. These teachers felt that focusing time on attendance took away from their instructional time which could impact students’ academic achievement for which they are being held accountable. And, even though,

for the most part, all participating Teachers seemed to understand that poor attendance impacts academics, as demonstrated by statements such as “You can’t teach to an empty seat,” they didn’t seem to think it was their job to improve attendance; it was the job of the attendance Counselor. Teachers at low-performing schools were okay with handing out certificates that the Counselors created, but they were not willing to take on any of the “extra work” involved. They made it very clear that they don’t have time to make phone calls, create activities, or implement strategies around attendance that distract from their teaching. Consider this from one Teacher at a low-performing school regarding her role in implementing the program and improving attendance:

Nothing formal, just mentioning and really hyping [attendance] up more than I used to. For next year that’s something that I hope to do... to try to set up my own incentive program for kids. And I mention every day, if we get perfect attendance, if everybody comes today we get to put a star on the poster. And I really hype that. Everything that they’re setting up I hype up and that’s pretty much all I’ve done this year. Basically right now it’s just backing up what Miss [name of Counselor] is doing and being a cheerleader for attendance and hopefully next year we’ll step it up a little bit more with our role.

(Teacher LP4)

When asked if improving student attendance was important to kindergarten teachers, Counselor LP4 responded:

For some of them, not all of them. I went to a couple of their teaching meetings to ask them about different ideas that I had and would they be interested in participating: Did they think it was a good idea? Did they have any suggestions that might better suit their students? So improving attendance was a priority for some of them, not all of them.

Teachers were mostly responsible to keep accurate records so that when I pulled reports and pulled the data, I could send out the appropriate letters to the students that actually needed assistance with attendance. Their main role was keeping accurate data, keeping accurate records. (Counselor LP4)

This Counselor explains her teachers' participation as limited, with their primary responsibility being the keeping of accurate attendance records. Teachers at low-performing schools were not only resistant to taking on more of a key role in improving attendance, but in some instances they even hoped students would stay home from school. To this point, Teacher LP4 said:

I'm going to be honest. Attendance, we know that attendance is important but when it gets to the end of the year, the last week of school, and we have so much on our plate and we are just kind of hoping that the last few days we will not have a lot of kids there so that we can get the packing away done and all the stuff that we have to do. So that's kind of where we butt heads with attendance. But that's the only place though, and I'm being honest with you. (Teacher LP4)

Likewise, some Counselors at low-performing schools felt a lack of support from Principals:

"The principal basically gave the PSA and the AIC the approval to implement strategies from the school's attendance improvement plan. AIC kept principal informed of program interventions." (Counselor LP6)

When asked about the teachers role in the program, this same counselor said, "The teachers understood the AIP, but would not be making an extra efforts to improve student attendance." And, when this same counselor was asked about barriers to implementation of the program, she

said “the barriers were wide and varied.” When asked about barriers to program implementation at her school, Teacher LP4 replied:

Barriers to the program implementation? Well just like the one I told you about, about the end of the school year. That’s one problem, one little glitch that I see. The teachers are not ever going to say don’t come to school but they are hoping that they’ll get some time to work. (Teacher LP4)

Principal LP5 was asked if improving attendance was a priority for his teachers; his response was: “I would hope so. I don’t know. They participated in the activities and they rewarded the kids. They went along with whatever [name of counselor] said. And they gave input.” When asked how teachers were involved in the actual program activities, this same Principal replied:

Miss [name of Counselor] tries to make it as easy as possible for the teachers because they have a lot of things to do. So she’d create a lot of different things for them. She does a lot of the prep work for them so hopefully they will do what she asks them to do. (Principal LP5)

When further asked what some of the barriers to implementing the AIP might be, he answered:

Barriers? I would say it could be maybe teachers not focusing or making it a priority, maybe some of the teachers don’t make it a priority, maybe leaving a lot for Miss [name of Counselor] to do and not seeing what their role is or what their role could be or would need to be if Miss [name of Counselor] was not here. (Principal LP5)

A Counselor at another low-performing school also identified teachers as a barrier to the program:

There were maybe one or two teachers that just weren't as engaged as the others, so just having to constantly remind them, “Please don't forget to mark them tardy. Please don't forget to turn in your attendance on time. Please don't forget to do your incentive chart in the classroom,” that kind of thing. (Counselor LP4)

### **Parent Involvement**

A clear distinction between high- and low-performing schools in terms of parent involvement was also evident. High-performing schools reported greater parent involvement and attributed much of the AIP's success to parents. Staff at high-performing schools referred to parents as “key contributors” and described them as “actively involved,” not only in terms of attending meetings and assemblies, but also through their help with designing and facilitating activities, purchasing awards and materials for bulletin boards, and chaperoning field trips. Parents at these schools supported and educated other parents on the importance of good attendance, using their attendance data to inform parents of developments in attendance. For example, at one high-performing school, kindergarten parents were so excited about the gains made in attendance that they decided the information needed to be shared with local Pre-K parents. These kindergarten parents, with the help of the Counselor, created a presentation of the AIP's data points, results, and expectations, then shared this information with parents of Pre-K students in order to encourage them to achieve daily kindergarten attendance. These parents also served as mentors and sources of support to parents having difficulty getting their children to attend school regularly. One Counselor described how parents' beliefs were changed after implementation of this AIP:

The beliefs on kindergarten attendance – the parents had changed, in my opinion, where they knew that kindergarten is just a stepping stone; it's a stepping stone to first grade. And they were becoming teachers of it because in the Pre-K classrooms we even had a few of the parents come and talk and help us out with Pre-K to tell them what they've learned because we had to talk to some of those parents about what the expectations were. The kindergarten parents were saying, "Yes, we have to teach this to the Pre-K parents." So it was really building knowledge to the parents, having them teach other parents, and maybe hopefully their kids will have that foundation that they need to continue thinking that school is important. (Counselor HP3)

Another Counselor said this when asked about the role parents had in attendance improvement at her school:

They would come to the assembly and so their role in supporting the children... and as I mentioned, we had a large response from the parents. So just really making sure that the parents knew from the get-go. And so one of the things that we were encouraged to do or instructed to do was to have an orientation meeting at the beginning of the school year. And so I had some data prepared and we were provided a PowerPoint presentation and we just tailored it to the need of our particular school. So I made sure at the beginning of the school year [that] I brought all the parents together, and actually I remember it was raining that day and the turnout was so high; it was so wonderful to have so many of the parents come even though it was raining. So I know that to have, like, the library so packed that parents were standing in the back, and a night that it was raining, that there was going to be great involvement. Then we just kept sharing the data and showing them

where we were with attendance and they were motivated to meet our goals. (Counselor HP1)

Counselor HP3 also addressed the role of parents in improving attendance:

The parents supported the program in that they would help us get together the incentives;, those parents that were very active. We have a lot – they had a lot of parent support at this school. They had days where parents would come and do a lot of... come to put together packs for the kids or activities for different teachers. They were there, the parents. Really strong; Mondays and Wednesdays in particular they were there. So we're able to ask for support and they would pop our popcorn for us, bag it for us, even take it to the classrooms once they knew which rooms. Also, when we went to the Chivas game, a lot of parents went to the game, they helped chaperone. I had one parent in particular, she was just phenomenal in that she would be there whenever it was an activity she would always ask, "Can I help? Can I help?" And she was great. And we have plenty more that maybe weren't kinder parents but there were other grade levels and they wanted to help, they just wanted to be there to help in any way they can. So I wish that most schools had the support that this school had... They were phenomenal parents.

(Counselor HP3)

This Counselor recognizes and values the importance of working collaboratively with parents and the critical role parents have in improving attendance.

Staff at the low-performing schools expressed frustration over the lack of parent involvement at their schools. In fact, most staff members at low-performing schools identified "lack of parent involvement" as a key barrier to improving attendance. When staff at low-performing schools discussed the role of parents in improving attendance, they tended to

describe the parents role in isolation. In other words, staff mostly identified the role of the parent as the primary person responsible for making sure their child attends school regularly. One Counselor at a lower-performing school explained:

I wish they would have had a bigger role but, ultimately, because the kids are so small, it's all on the parents to get them there. But none of the parents ever showed up to the group. So their role I would say was pretty limited. I mean their main role is to bring the kids to school, but around that I thought that maybe they could be engaged in some other ways and maybe they weren't interested, I don't know. (Counselor LP4)

When asked how parents were involved in the attendance improvement activities, this same Counselor said:

They really weren't until the very end of the year. So like the group – no one showed up to the group. Well, I guess I shouldn't say they weren't involved. No one showed up to the group so they weren't involved in the group, but when it came to... like the last incentive with the police officers and the firemen, there were several parents who came. And I didn't mind them coming at all. But then some of them came so that they could bring their other kids. So that was a little bit distracting and kind of causes some hold ups a little bit with time because they just were, I don't know, being a little rude and they were little kids that didn't go to the school; they had brought them with them to see the fire truck and the police car. And at first I thought "Okay, that's fine," but some of them were taking a long extra time with the kids and taking pictures of their other kids in the vehicles and so it kind of held up a tad. And then I did a parent and kid ice cream social at the end of the year, and a lot of parents did attend that. So I thought that was nice, that they came out at the end of the year. (Counselor LP4)



Counselor LP4's account illustrates that she perceives her parents as people who only get involved in the AIP when offered certain incentives such as a special event with police officers and firemen, or when given a treat such as ice cream. Additionally, she perceives parents as rude for only showing up for incentives and bringing their younger children along. When she was later asked if the parent's beliefs changed after the implementation of the AIP, she answered:

I really don't know. I mean I don't know that for most of them much changed. A lot of the kids were still having the same attendance issues at the end of the year and some of the parents just didn't seem to be that concerned. (Counselor LP4)

Participants at higher-performing schools discussed the need for parents to make attendance and education a priority over their "personal needs" by establishing routines such as regular bedtime hours, having homework, lunch, clean uniforms and clothes, and backpacks ready the night before. Staff at low-performing schools also discussed the role of parents as being responsible for not keeping their children home if they did not have a legitimate excuse such as illness, and not "giving in" to kindergartners who simply did not want to attend school for other reasons.

In addition to parents serving as the primary person responsible for their child's attendance, staff at low-performing schools also felt parents should attend parenting meetings, parent conferences, award ceremonies, and student performances as part of their role in improving attendance. However, in contrast to the high-performing schools, staff at lower-performing schools did not talk about parents serving as equal partners and stakeholders, working collaboratively with school staff to develop and implement programs, or taking a leading role in the AIP.

## **Level of Commitment to Program Implementation**

There was a marked difference in the level of program implementation at high- and low-performing schools. In high-performing schools, staff delved more deeply into the problem and were more concerned about assessing the needs of their parents in order to address the underlying issues that impacted student attendance. One Principal of a high-performing school explained how school staff can best assist students and parents in overcoming obstacles to school attendance:

I think one of the things is you have to find out what the problem is, why the kids aren't in attendance, and sometimes it's they don't have clean clothes, and sometimes it's they have a doctor's appointment, and so we encourage them to make them at the end of the day, once school is over. There are a lot of barriers in our neighborhood, for the lights might have been turned off, they didn't get their homework done. There are a lot of barriers, but letting people know and [see] us as a resource because we do have a Healthy Start program, and just being able to help them in their needs as well. And again, developing that relationship with the parents. (Principal HP3)

Principal HP3 clearly understands the need to identify the underlying problems that prevent parents from sending their children to school. She also recognizes the need for the staff to form positive, trusting relationships with parents so that they will see the school as a source of support and seek assistance when needed. Teacher HP3 elaborated about which implemented strategies contributed most to improved attendance:

Well for one, for the parents – having them realize what their children had to know, how important it was for them to know these things because this is the foundation. And then also making the parents see how important it is by calling, by going to the house. And I

think some of the parents – it made them feel like somebody cared. Because in some of the cases we ended up having to get counseling for some parents; some parents are really going through stuff. But by her going to the house, calling the parents, they actually started talking about other things going on with them and she was able to refer them to our school psychologist, to our Healthy Start, which kind of helped them because then they were bringing the kids to school more because they were getting their needs met.

(Teacher HP3)

Again, this school was investing time and resources toward identifying the underlying issues that created barriers to good attendance. Staff was calling and visiting the homes of their students and helping identify how they could meet the needs of the students and families.

Staff at high-performing schools talked about reviewing attendance data and looking for trends to see if they could identify specific times of the year or days of the week when students were more likely to miss school. They then used that information to decide which the types of strategies to use. For example, one school noticed attendance was lowest right before long weekends or holidays and so implemented special activities to motivate students to come to school. The higher-performing schools seemed to take the Program more seriously and were more committed to investing time and resources to improve attendance. As Principal HP3 explained:

I think that parents just saw the urgency of [good attendance] when we began educating them. We invited them in and then they saw the curriculum as well... if your kids are out, this is what they're missing. And we explained to them that one day out is equivalent to being out three days. They miss the instructions and they miss when you go over it again. And also I think putting in the newsletter how much money, how much

revenue was lost [due to absences] also kind of changed the parents' minds when they started seeing it in dollars and cents. I think that made a difference too. (Principal HP3)

Staff at higher-performing schools worked hard to educate parents on exactly what their children were learning, the curriculum, daily lessons, and how much their child would lose if not in school. When asked if it's possible to influence kindergarten parents' perceptions about kindergarten attendance, Counselor HP3 further explained:

It's definitely possible to influence parents. You influence them through giving them the knowledge that they need on the facts of attendance and how their kids can benefit from better attendance. Giving them the information that the day that they're missing – for some reason a lot of parents don't think ten, well, fifteen, twenty absences is a lot. So getting them to stop and think about the hours like I was saying before... Breaking down hours and breaking down days and breaking it down to the point where they can really understand that your ten days are ten, but they're times the five hours, so it adds up.

(Counselor HP3)

This Counselor appreciates the important role of parents and the need to make sure that they understand how much their child is missing in terms of instruction. This school broke down the instructional time by the minute so parents could understand that missing a day of school meant missing several minutes of critical instructional time on various subjects.

While both high-performing and low-performing schools addressed the need to educate parents on the importance of kindergarten attendance, staff at low-performing schools described their actions to educate parents on a more superficial level, such as talking to parents individually and/or at parent meetings. However, staff at high-performing schools developed a plan to

demonstrate kindergarten rigor through parent workshops, displaying student work, sending home kindergarten standards, and using parents to teach other parents.

Another example of the differences of program implementation between high- and low-performing schools can be seen by how staff address absences due to illness. Both high- and low-performing schools expressed a concern that parents tend to “baby” their kindergartners and keep them home from school for minor symptoms such as “a little snuffle” or “tummy ache,” illnesses parents do not allow with their older children. To address this concern, staff at low-performing schools again “talked” to their parents about the issue, where staff at high-performing schools took implementation of the AIP to another level. For example, one school designed a handout guide for parents to help them distinguish between situations of when to keep their child home (fever, vomiting, etc.) and when to send them to school (sniffles, a minor cough, etc.). The guide also delved into more uncertain situations, like when a child is feeling anxious so says s/he is sick or has a stomachache. As one of this school’s Teachers explained:

We even sent a note home, ”If your child is sick, these are the symptoms. If they have these symptoms, keep them home. If they don’t, you can bring them to school, it’s okay.” So we kind of had to give a guide to the parents on what was acceptable to come to school when ill and what wasn’t. So it kind of helped the parents out a little bit more on when they can send their kids to school or not. (Teacher HP3)

A Principal at a high-performing school was also concerned about parents keeping children home because they “have a stomachache”:

It made me look deeper into the other grade levels and this is what I saw was an issue: the whole stomachache thing. The kids get a stomachache and don’t want to come to school. And it wasn’t just in kinder, it was across the grade levels. But the stomachache

came from somewhere. And then it lead me to research on anxiety and how we create anxiety at the school and the whole testing thing and the whole homework thing, and “I didn’t bring my homework,” and “I don’t want to go to school because of the consequences.” I just looked deeper and deeper and deeper into why children didn’t want to come to school...it lead me to do something about it, establish a more comfortable environment as much as possible. (Principal HP2)

Principal HP2 noticed a recurrent absenteeism issue (stomachaches) and took it upon herself to conduct research on the underlying problem (anxiety) and ultimately create a solution (creating a “more comfortable environment”). This is an example of moving attendance improvement beyond surface issues and trying to have a better understanding of why children ask to stay home from school, including taking a look at the school’s role in creating an atmosphere where children feel safe, even during the stressful times of testing or forgetting homework.

This level of commitment to delving deeper into the underlying issues of absenteeism and implementation of plans to address them was not apparent with the low-performing schools. Staff interviewed from these schools were similarly concerned about improving attendance but, as challenges arose, they did not make the same kind of effort as staff members from the higher-performing schools to come up with solutions. This is illustrated through the words of one Principal:

They would get sick! Like what we’re experiencing now, “I’m sick, everybody’s sick,” and so [name of Counselor] and I are working but we’re like “Oh my god. The attendance is down.” And this is my newsletter from January – we’re down a percentage point. But it’s not for lack of trying’ but everyone...and you know we’ve been verifying

and the kids are sick, they really are sick. And the staff members are sick, and so that's out of our control, but I think that's right now our frustration. We're like pulling out our hair, "No! We went down!" We also had other health concerns. We had a class that broke out with lice and ringworm and it's like "Oh great." So, you know, things like that. So I had the nurse go to classes and talk about hygiene and prevention and stuff like that.

(Principal LP4)

This Principal clearly wants to improve attendance but is frustrated and appears overwhelmed by the underlying problems. Though she indicates that she sent a nurse to the classrooms to discuss good hygiene to prevent illness, her approach seemingly remains at the surface level. She did not mention the need to involve parents, or perhaps take a closer look at why so many students were becoming ill. She did not consider whether something within the community was affecting children's health and needs to be addressed.

A sense of hopelessness seems to pervade the participants of the lower-performing schools, a feeling that there wasn't much the school could do to improve attendance, that there were external factors over which they had no control. In regard to creating effective ways to work with parents of kindergarten students who are chronically absent, one Teacher said:

Some children, no matter what, they don't come to school. I don't know whatever the reason might be. We can do every trick in the world to try to get them here but some people are resistant to it, "I know my rights." I'm just being 100% honest. (Teacher LP5)

When Teacher LP5 was asked why these kindergarten parents keep their children home from school she replied:

Some of them for convenience, honestly. I don't know. Maybe issues at home possibly, I can't say. Like the ones that don't miss that much, I know it's because they're ill.

They're children that come in every day on time because an education is important to them. (Teacher LP5)

This Teacher appears to have given up on some students, inferring that some parents and students are impossible to reach because an education is simply not important to them.

### **School Leadership**

School leadership made a significant difference on attendance improvement. All three high-performing schools had a principal that was very supportive of the program and involved in the program activities. In comparing just two of the schools, a large difference in how the staff perceived their Principals' roles was evident, as were their involvement in the AIP. When asked if she felt attendance improvement was a priority for her principal, one high-performing school Teacher explained:

It did seem like a very high priority, especially since every Monday morning assembly it was announced about attendance. It just seemed to always coincide whenever we even had a meeting – “Look at the attendance.” It would come up a lot. So even if we were putting in paperwork for a student who had an SST coming up, she always wanted to know, “Well how many days were they here? How many days were they absent?” It was a big deal almost in every category – attendance. (Teacher HP2)

The Counselor at the same school responded to the same question thus:

Yes, it definitely was a priority for her. And she would seek me out routinely and ask for statistics and we would discuss trends: What days do they have the highest absent rate? What we could do to implement things school-wide? Because what we do is we're focused on kindergarten, but we can implement some of the same interventions school-



wide that we use in kindergarten. So she was very interested in her attendance. She was very motivated to reach that... I believe last year it was 66% goal. (Counselor HP2)

According to both the Teacher and Counselor, improving attendance was definitely a priority for this principal. They also indicated that the principal was actively involved in the day-to-day activities of the AIP and working with staff to communicate the importance of attendance, as well as exploring trends and reasons for absences that would assist in creating solutions to address absenteeism.

Principals of high-performing schools took ownership of their implemented AIP and set the tone by sending a clear message that attendance was a top priority to their staff, for parents, and ultimately for students. When asked if attendance was a priority to her, Principal HP3 replied:

Most definitely yes. Yes it was. And we do a lot of incentives for our kids. I don't know if you saw the chart [displayed outside her office] when you came in the office – we have a chart where the kids have to [it] spell out; every time they have perfect attendance, they put a dot in until they spell [name of the school] and then there's a series of incentives that they receive along the way. And we talk about it at our Monday morning assembly. Any opportunity that I have to talk about attendance, we do. Even as part of the principal's honor role, the kids have to have a 98% attendance rate to even be on the honor role. And the trophies: we do semester trophies, we do the end of the year bigger trophies for the kids who have perfect attendance, and we also do monthly assemblies. So the kids who have perfect attendance for that time, they are honored in front of their peers. (Principal HP3)

And as another example, from Principal HP2:

I was very involved. Because the attendance piece was part of the single plan, it had already been identified and established before the counselor arrived, in terms of the incentive piece and what we were going to do. So we had already established that. But when she came on board, there were just that many more activities and that focus on kindergarten that wasn't there before. And so I was involved in leading the school towards adopting these strategies and the single plan that was adopted, I was very involved in leading that and bringing strategies, bringing their data, bringing research. Then when she came on board, she brought more, and then we would take it back to the school Site Council. Just that leadership element about adopting it and everyone being aware of it and then having our trophy being circulated, having lunch with me – the kids would have lunch with the principal if they did well. So when I had kinder lunch, I was there but she helped me with getting the lunch. So I was definitely very much involved in the process. (Principal HP2)

Although staff at all schools indicated that improving attendance was important to the principal, staff at lower-performing schools did not indicate the same level of principal support, as shown through the words of Teacher LP4:

The program activities? You mean the program that [name of Counselor] does? She supports it... I've never seen her actually at an attendance awards assembly, the vice principal usually does that. But I know that she meets with her and they probably do a lot of planning together. But I don't think that it's her responsibility to attend. That hasn't been her responsibility. (Teacher LP4)

This is how the Counselor at the same school responded to the question "Given that principals have many accountabilities, was improving student attendance a priority for him/her?":

I think so. But I think that, like you're saying, she had a lot of different things going on. And this was her first year as principal at that school. I think first year as principal. So I know that her attention was kind of pulled every which way. But I did feel that she was supportive and that that was a goal of hers, but I'm not certain that she knew all that it would take to get there. And most definitely that it can't happen in one year, but all that it would take to get there. So, yes. I would say that it was a goal... it wasn't a top priority maybe, but it was one of the goals, one of the many. (Counselor LP4)

When further asked how the Principal was involved in the program activities, Counselor LP4 went on to say:

I wouldn't say she was involved necessarily in the activities. I would just let her know what it was that I wanted to do, and me and the teachers would do it. But she didn't... I'm trying to think... I want to say she may have come to one of the assemblies but I don't remember actually. (Counselor LP4)

Both the Teacher and Counselor at this school describe the Principal as concerned but not very involved in AIP implementation or supportive activities. This lack of involvement was also apparent in Principal LP4's response to the question "Of all the stakeholders, who had the most critical role in impacting kindergarten attendance at this school?" She answered:

Oh. I would say [name of Counselor] definitely did. She was key. I think, like I said, as a principal and teachers we're pulled in a lot of different directions. But to have someone that was just laser focused on that, I think was key. (Principal LP4)

Principals at the low-performing schools did not speak with the same level of passion about the AIP nor about their desire to improve student attendance. Their responses to most questions

were brief and it appeared that they did not have as much information or knowledge about the Program as did the principals at higher-performing schools.

## **CHAPTER 5: RESULTS**

After analyzing LAUSD data on attendance and completing 18 interviews with staff at six different schools that implemented the AIP, I was able to learn more about why some schools made significant gains in attendance, moving from the designation as a low- performing to one of a high-performing school, and why others were not able to make this transition. Findings from this study support existing research that addresses the reasons why students miss school, as well as what practices are most effective in improving attendance, particularly for young children.

### **Reason for Absence**

As indicated by Clay (2004) and Leyba and Massat (2009), the reasons why students miss school vary widely: illness, medical appointments, bereavement, family emergency, car trouble, lack of transportation, lack of childcare, vacation during school year, and parents keeping their children home without a valid excuse. Participants at all six schools in this study also identified similar reasons for student absence, with the most-offered reason being illness, followed by lack of childcare and parents keeping their child home from school without a valid excuse. Childcare was an issue for parents who had more than one child for, when one child was ill, they did not have someone to care for the ill child while they took the other child to school. Rather than leaving the ill child unattended, they chose to keep the other child home from school as well.

Participants in this study also discussed parents keeping their children home from school without a valid excuse. This includes vacations during the school year and when their child

refuses to attend school (where parents give in to a child's tantrum), and situations of inconvenience for the parent (such as personal business); remarkably, some participants spoke of parents keeping their children out of school on their birthdays to take them to Disneyland. Participants attributed this type of behavior to parents not understanding the importance of kindergarten attendance and the impact of excessive absence on academic achievement. Further, at the low-performing schools, participants also attributed this behavior to parents' lack of concern or appreciation for education.

Existing research has identified *engagement* as a key element in preventing truancy (Seeley, 2008). Researchers Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent argue that certain school policies, such as ineffective attendance plans, poor record keeping, not notifying parents/guardians of absences, and poor student/teacher relations, sometimes contribute to student disengagement and excessive absences (2001). School climate has also been associated with disengagement. Students who attend schools with a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment are more likely to be engaged (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). This study also found that student as well as parent engagement to be key factors to good attendance and school engagement.

### **Risk Factors that Contribute to School Problems**

In their 2008 research, Chang & Romero indicate that chronic absenteeism is a multidimensional problem associated with a host of overlapping and interconnected adverse individual, family, social, and community risk factors that contribute to school problems and, ultimately, lead to students dropping out of school. Research articles identify four domains associated with chronic absence, academic failure, and subsequent dropout, i.e., characteristics of the *individual*, the *family*, the *school*, and the *community*, and show interacting dynamics of the

various systems (Fraser, Kirby, & Smolowski, 2004). These domains are interconnected, overlapping, and show interacting dynamics of the various systems. The culmination of factors across the four domains puts students at greater and greater levels of risk for negative academic outcomes.

### **Individual Student Characteristics**

Individual characteristics include poor cognitive skills, health problems, poor interpersonal skills, and behavioral problems such as fighting, aggressive behavior, and hyperactivity. In this study, health problems was a concern identified by all six schools with many participants discussing illness as the number one reason for students missing school. Absence of students with chronic health problems (such as asthmatic students) was identified as a significant impact on student attendance. Participants also discussed the lack of health insurance as contributing to the problem because many students not receiving adequate health care are unable to manage their conditions, causing them to miss more school days than necessary.

Poor cognitive skill was also identified by many of the study participants; however, it was difficult for them to identify the source of the cognitive problem. Participants had a hard time determining if students lacked cognitive skills due to some type of learning problem, or if it was a situation resulting from missing so much school. Participants in this study did not address student behavior or interpersonal skills as a significant problem contributing to poor attendance. This may be due to the young age of kindergarten students compared to older students who are more likely to exhibit behavior problems when interacting with others.

## **Family Characteristics**

Risk factors in the family domain include poverty or low socioeconomic status, inconsistent discipline and ineffective parenting skills, low family social support and high family mobility, and parental emotional disorders (Alexander et al., 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Other family level risk factors include low levels of family engagement with school, and low parental and sibling educational attainment (Hammond et al., 2007). Families of students attending the six schools selected for this study all had some or many of the above risk factors. All participants interviewed identified poverty, high mobility rates, homelessness, grandparents raising their grandchildren, and parental emotional disorders when describing the families they serve. However, as noted previously, high-performing schools were able to identify family strengths and did not focus solely on the challenges of the families they serve.

## **School Characteristics**

School characteristics that affect attendance as well as drop out rates include poor relationships among students, problems with harassment and school safety, and large schools with large proportions of ethnic minority students living in poverty (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Richman et al., 2004). Negativity in the school environment, particularly troublesome teacher and staff attitudes, are also contributing factors that impede academic success (Brewster & Bowne, 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006). Findings from this research study indicate a clear and strong connection between school characteristics and program outcomes. As discussed in the Chapter 4, all low-performing schools seemed to exhibit negativity within their school environment, including having poor relationships with parents and focusing on parent deficits with little attention to parent strengths. This poor relationship with parents most likely contributes to the lack of parent involvement at these school sites, as well as



the lower-performing schools' inability to progress to high-performing status. Troublesome teacher and staff attitudes were also of concern at the low-performing schools. As indicated in the Chapter 4, teachers and staff at low-performing schools tend to attribute sole responsibility for poor attendance to parents and to students attitudes and actions; they did not identify that the school's role and/or school practices could be contributing to the problem. Teachers' attitudes were of particular concern as they seem to play a limited role in the AIP and, in some cases, create significant barriers to program implementation by not giving the Counselor access to their classroom. Additionally, this type of negativity exhibited at low-performing schools may contribute to an attitude of hopelessness as discussed earlier, a situation in which school personnel feels it is impossible to create change in the parents and community they serve.

### **Community Characteristics**

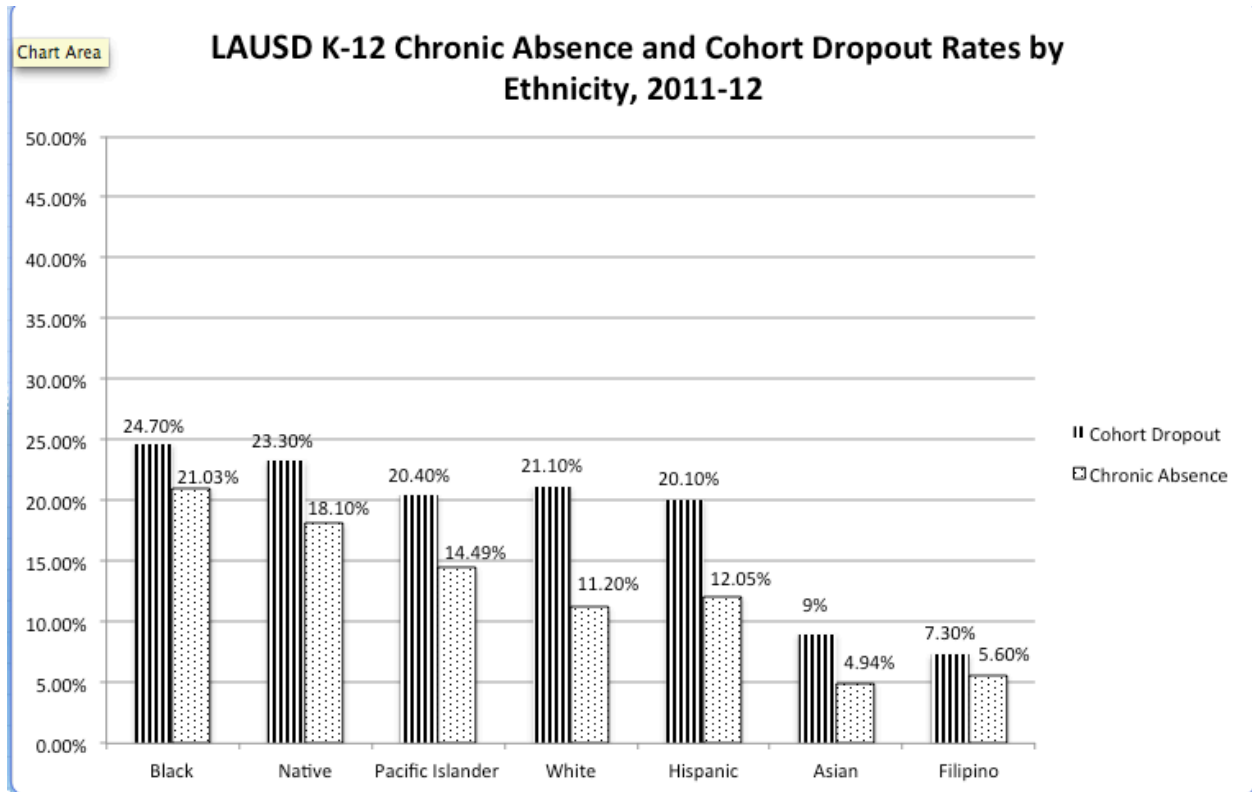
The presence of crime, gangs, violence, delinquent peers, and interracial tensions within the community impact the child's ability to function well in the school environment (Alexander et al., 2001; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; McCluskey, Bryum, & Patchin, 2004; Teasley, 2004). All six schools that participated in this study are located in areas of low-economic status, with high rates of criminal activity and incidents of violence, with a predominantly minority population. And, although all schools identified the above-mentioned community challenges, the three high-performing schools were able to make significant gains in attendance despite them.

### **Chronic Absenteeism and Cohort Dropout Amongst Ethnicities**

Communities with concentrations of poverty and minority populations are also a contributing factor that impedes academic success (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz & Legters, 2006; Richman et al., 2004). A side-by-side comparison of LAUSD's 2011-2012 rates of

chronic absence and cohort dropout, broken down by ethnicity, anecdotally suggests a correlation between absenteeism and dropping out.

Table 5.1: LAUSD Absence & Dropout Rate by Ethnicity



While Blacks represent about 8.9% of LAUSD students, this group has far higher rates of chronic absenteeism (at every grade level) and a higher cohort dropout rate than the other major ethnicities that comprise the LAUSD student body.

This disproportionality of attendance rates for Black students may be a factor which prevented the Study’s three low-performing schools from achieving high-performance rates of proficient/advanced attendance. The three low-performing schools have far larger relative African American populations than the three high-performing schools.

## **Lessons Learned**

Taking a close look at LAUSD's kindergarten AIP has proven to be beneficial. By interviewing teachers, principals, and counselors who implemented the Program, much useful knowledge was gained to boost efforts to improve not only kindergarten attendance, but also to that of all LAUSD grade levels and other districts across the nation. The lessons learned from this study will be used as LAUSD prepares for the next school year (2013-2014) and the third year of AIP implementation.

It is important to point out that improving student attendance is difficult work and even more difficult for schools located in areas of high poverty, crime, gangs, violence, and limited community resources. Staff at all six schools were committed to increasing their attendance and worked extremely hard to meet their performance targets. All Principals acknowledged that improving attendance was a priority at their sites and understood the correlation between good attendance and academic success.

## **Theory of Change**

Our theory of change stated that kindergarten attendance will improve if: 1) kindergarten parents, students, teachers, and administrators understand the importance of good attendance and its correlation to academic success; 2) all stakeholders work together and understand their role in improving attendance; and, 3) schools receive the resources to track/monitor attendance, implement attendance incentive programs, educate parents and staff. This study asserts that our theory of change appears to be true.

The high-performing schools in this study seemingly did a better job than low-performing schools in implementing the AIP in accordance with our theory of change. Staffs at high-performing schools were able to create a school culture where good attendance was everyone's responsibility and not simply that of one person, i.e., the Counselor. All high-performing school stakeholders, parents, students, teachers, and principals clearly understood the importance of good attendance, its impact on academic success, and their role in it. Because of this strong collaboration, high-performing schools were able to delve more deeply into the root causes of absenteeism and develop plans that could lead to positive outcomes. Parents were included as key members of the attendance improvement teams and were integrally involved in creating solutions to improving attendance. Parents were not only engaged, but also served as true collaborators. Another important factor that stands out for high-performing schools is staff members' positive perceptions of parents and the community. Staff at high-performing schools used a strength-based framework and held an overall belief that parents love their children and want them to succeed. This positive framework created trust among parents and staff that lead to strong parent involvement and positive relationships among parents and staff.

Low-performing schools did not appear to develop good relationships with parents and this may be due to staffs' negative perception of the parents and community. Staff at these schools used more of a deficit-based framework and tended to blame parents for poor attendance, deterring good relationships with parents. Poor relationships with parents may be the reason why parent involvement was so limited at low-performing schools. The existence of a deficit-based framework may have also contributed to the hopelessness exhibited by staff at low-performing schools which, in turn, impacted their ability improve student attendance.

## **Recommendations**

This study exposed five key areas critical to the implementation of a successful AIP: 1) school staff perceptions of parents and the community served, 2) parent involvement, 3) collaboration among school staff, 4) level of school staff commitment, and 5) school leadership. As LAUSD prepares to implement the AIP for a third consecutive year, it should focus on these areas to ensure success at each school site.

### **Improve Staff Perceptions of Parents and the Community Served**

Parents have the most to gain or lose when it comes to improving student attendance. Parents need to be included in every step of attendance improvement efforts, from program design to program implementation. However, it is difficult – if not impossible – for school staff to involve parents in this effort if staff holds a negative perception of parents and the community served. It is recommended that the District should be more intentional in improving school staff’s perception of their parents and community. For LAUSD’s AIP, this would mean altering the professional development designed for schools implementing the Program to include information on how the staff’s perception of the people served impacts the outcomes, educating staff on how to do so, and aiming to use a strength-based model.

### **Increase Parent Involvement**

Improving staff perceptions of parents and the community served and using a strength-based model is the first, but not the only, step needed to improve attendance. Staff must also develop strong, trusting relationships with parents so that parents feel needed, valued, and listened to. Parents must be equal partners and collaborators, involved with every aspect of the program from planning to implementation. It must also be acknowledged that parents face many challenges that may make it difficult for them to get involved in their child’s school. However,

if parents are kept in high regard, treated with dignity and respect, and appreciated for their role in the success of their child's education, they are more likely to get involved. It is recommended that LAUSD spend more time developing training and providing best practices for creating good relationships with parents so that they will be actively engaged, collaborating with staff, and committed to improving attendance.

### **Improve Collaboration**

Ensuring that parents are actively involved as equal partners in school programs is one part of the collaborative effort. However, schools need to ensure that all stakeholders are working together toward a common goal of improving attendance and reducing chronic absenteeism. It is critical that students, teachers, and principals work together and that everyone understands their roles in making attendance gains. This study identified teachers at low-performing schools as causing barriers to successful implantation of the Program; therefore it is recommended that more emphasis be placed on working with teachers to help them understand their role in improving attendance. The District also needs to think about end-of-the-year practices that lead to teacher burnout and cause some teachers to hope for low attendance so they can have time to finalize their grades and close out the year.

### **Level of Staff Involvement: Delving Deeper**

This study reveals that schools with great AIP success delved more deeply into the underlying issues that impact student attendance. These schools closely monitored their attendance, looking for patterns and trends, and then designed interventions to address them. For example, schools that identified low attendance on Mondays and Fridays scheduled activities to incentivize students to attend on these days. Staff at high-performing schools also looked at their own school policies and practices that may create student anxiety and therefore negatively

impact attendance. Homework, testing, discipline, and bullying are some examples staff members discussed as possible contributors to poor attendance. It is recommended that LAUSD work with schools to more closely examine why attendance is low and to better understand the root causes, including school practices that may contribute to the problem.

### **Develop Strong Leadership**

This study identified strong leadership as a contributing factor to the success of the Program. Staff at high-performing schools all identified their Principals as strong, dynamic leaders, highly-committed to improving attendance, and very much involved with Program activities and the overall implementation. Principals at high performing schools took an active role in creating a culture of good attendance and communicated an expectation that improving attendance was a priority for everyone. Strong leaders at high-performing schools had the ability to get everyone focused on a common goal, created a shared vision, and led the way. These leaders led with compassion and excitement, and were committed to doing whatever was necessary to see their attendance improve. It is recommended that LAUSD work directly with principals implementing attendance improvement programs in order to support them in their work with staff, parents, and the community. Professional development for principals that includes best practices on improving attendance and developing the leadership skills necessary to lead a school/community in these efforts is recommended.

### **Best Practices**

LAUSD would benefit by having schools that have made significant gains in attendance share some of the strategies used to make improvements. The District should share best practices with schools that are struggling to meet their attendance targets and have successful

principals, teachers, and counselors present at professional development meetings to assist their colleagues at other sites. Best practices may also be posted on the LAUSD Pupil Services website along with other materials to create a toolbox with resources to support attendance improvement efforts.

### **Address High Levels of Chronic Absenteeism Among African American Students**

This study identified that African American students exhibit higher rates of chronic absenteeism, at all grade levels, than any other group. Additionally, it appears that the AIP was less effective in serving this population of students based on student attendance outcomes. It is recommended that the District take a closer look at AIP strategies to determine why the Program is not meeting the needs of this population. It is recommended that the District create a task force with members of the African American community, which should include parents and students, to learn more about the why our African American students are attending at lower rates than other students, and to develop strategies specific to this population.



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