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Engaging Families to Prevent Chronic Truancy

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Abstract

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Truancy continues to be a nation-wide problem that is destroying the opportunity for educational success and future employment for countless adolescents. This complex social issue has been found to have many factors that contribute to it, while at the same time, this issue contributes to many other risk factors in a youth's life. The purpose of this project was to explore the relationship between the professional school staff and families that have students experiencing chronic truancy and to distinguish effective interventions and the contributing factors to this social issue. Using a qualitative design, six volunteer middle school professional staff were interviewed regarding their perceptions about the effective way to engage a family in the intervention process of conquering the student's absenteeism, while also looking at effectiveness in family engagement. The data was analyzed using grounded theory to analyze the data from the transcriptions. The interview responses were then linked to the literature review. The findings indicated that all of the professionals valued the importance of building a strong relationship with the families and engaging them in the process to eliminate the unexcused absences. In addition it was discovered that the school personnel found it beneficial to have some rigid systems in place, but at times these rigid systems could be detrimental to the engagement process with the school and family. These findings accentuate the importance of a positive school and family relationship to prevent chronic truancy.

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Introduction

Education is perhaps the most important function of state and

local government. It is required in the performance of our most basic

public responsibilities. It is the very foundation of good

citizenship…it is doubtful that any child may reasonably succeed in

life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an

opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right,

(which) must be made available to all on equal terms.

Brown V. Board of Education,
347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954)
(Retrieved from Byer and Kuhm, pg. 9, 2007)

Truancy continues to be a nation-wide problem that is destroying the opportunity

for educational success and future employment for countless adolescents. This social

issue has been present since the late 19th and 20th centuries due to compulsory education

requiring mandatory attendance (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). With the awareness

of truancy, many school districts throughout the United States have implemented

interventions to conquer this recognized social issue. With the continued tracking of

school attendance, it has been found that the problem continues to linger throughout the

nation, with some cities reportedly having rates as high as 30 percent for students

experiencing truancy (Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009; Spaethe, 2000; Teasley, 2004; Trujillo,

2006; Garry, 1996).

Traditionally, truancy is an unexcused absence from school, while chronic truancy

is considered habitually unexcused absences. In the United States, each state implements

its own state law on school attendance. Each school district then develops their own

protocol for the action they take against the truant students. Each state law must

determine: "1.) the age at which a child is required to begin attending school, 2.) the age

at which a child may legally drop out of school, and 3.) the number of unexcused

absences at which a student is considered legally truant" (Truancy Prevention, 2013).

Even though school attendance is tracked for each student, researchers have found that

there is inconsistent tracking of students experiencing truancy.

Although the statistical research has been difficult to track, researchers have been

able to track the possible consequences truancy has on an individual's life and future

opportunities. These consequences can range from early school-drop out, delinquency

behavior, substance and alcohol abuse, low academic scores, young pregnancy,

involvement in the juvenile justice system and eventually the adult corrections system

(Hendricks, Sale, Evans, McKlinney, & Carter, 2009; Henry & Thornberry, 2010;

McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). These possible outcomes not only affect the

student, but it can also have an affect on the nation's economy. For example, according

to previous research, it was found that students with early dropout rates tend to be

unemployed or struggle finding decent employment (Trujillo, 2006).

Truancy can be a costly social issue, not only for the student, but also for the

nation as a whole. With a high rate of truancy in a community, the unemployment rate

more than likely will increase and then there will be more spending of the community's

budget will go into funding prevention or intervention programs for truancy (National

Center for School Engagement [NCSE], 2005; Reid, 2010; Trujillo, 2006).   Not only

does it affect the unemployment rate, it also affects local businesses if their employees do

not have a high school diploma or basic skills. The business communities within recent years have been more vocal around needing employees with basic skills and public education, because they are finding these skills difficult to find (NCSE, 2005).

Although it is costly for the community to contribute funding for prevention or intervention programs, it has been found more costly for a community to have students with early drop out rates or to have involvement in the juvenile justice system (Trujillo, 2006). In response to end this costly social concern, there have been multiple interventions and prevention programs within school districts and their community to reduce and prevent the issue, but students continue to be truant.

Research has found that there are a variety of risk factors that contribute to truancy, which makes the issue very complex and difficult for school districts to confront. Studies that have been completed on youth truancy suggest that the systems that should be looked at are; school environment, the family system, the community system, and the individual (Byer & Kuhn, 2007; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Spencer, 2009; Sutphen, Ford & Flaherty, 2010; Trujillo, 2006; Zhang, Wilson, Katsiyannis, Barrett, Ju, & Wu, 2010). It has been found beneficial to look at all four systems when school districts are implementing interventions for this issue.

Along with the truancy laws in each state there are many other systems other than the school districts that implement interventions with this social issue, such as, the community's law enforcement, juvenile justice court system, community agencies and social services. Research has found that school districts have taken a school-based approach by connecting the students within their current schools and engaging their

families in their education (NCSE, 2005; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010; Teasley, 2004). Law enforcement and the court systems have developed collaborative plans with the community and school districts to intervene on truancy cases to resolve the issue (Byer & Kuhn, 2007; Vance, Block, & Heuston, 2008). Other approaches have been implementing solution-focused therapy within the interventions and community-based connections for youth that are disengaged with their schools and community (Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009).

As previously mentioned, the issue of truancy affects many systems and can have an overall affect on the community, which affects many working professionals, such as social workers. The field of social work practice is with many different populations in a community, such as child welfare, unemployment, geriatrics, adolescents, chemical dependency, mental health, etc. Not only does this profession work with a variety of populations, it also works within a variety of settings, such as, hospitals, schools, community agencies, county agencies, mental health agencies, etc. Truancy is a broad, yet explicit social issue that can have an effect on a variety of populations and settings in which a social worker is employed.

When looking at the student as person in environment, it has been found that truancy affects systems such as, family, individual, school and community. All systems have an effect on the student's success, so it would be important for general social workers to look at all systems when trying to overcome this social issue or to have an understanding of one system's effect on a student's attendance. When looking at the possible consequences truancy can have on a community, this researcher found it

important to research within the school districts, since this is the setting at which attendance is tracked and the overall contributing factors can be identified.

School social workers are expected to offer effective and efficient interventions to students to ensure their school success by improving school attendance and grade point average (Newsome, Anderson-Butler, Fink, Hall & Huffer, 2008). To do so, school social workers are trained to collaborate with all systems, such as individual, family, school and community to improve the student's school success. Due to truancy being a complex issue with many contributing factors and risk factors, it would be beneficial for school social workers to be aware of effective and efficient intervention or prevention programs when working with these students. For the school social workers to offer evidenced-based interventions that are effective in working with these students and families, it would be important to explore with school professionals as to what they find is working, not working and what resources they have or need access to when working with these students.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to contribute to the variety of research that has been completed on youth experiencing chronic truancy. This study will examine with middle school professionals on their views of the most effective interventions they can use while working with chronically truant students and the benefits of family engagement within these methods. The purpose of this study is to explore the most efficient and effective way in resolving chronic truancy when it is first recognized and the difficulties, if any, that the school districts are having at resolving chronic truancy.

Literature Review

Truancy is created by many different factors within a student's life. Research suggests that the main systems that can contribute to truancy are; school environment, family factors, community influences, and student variables.

Family Factors

Over the years, family dynamics and characteristics have been identified contributors to school truancy for many students. Poverty is seen as a risk factor that can contribute to family dynamics, due to the lack of transportation, adequate housing, and lack of stable employment for parents (McKluskey, Bynum, Patchin, 2004). Studies have shown that juveniles that have been referred for truancy court come from low-income households (Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009; Hendricks, et al. 2009; Zhang, et al. 2010; McKluskey, Bynum, Patchin, 2004). Students who receive free or reduced lunches have also been linked to truancy throughout their time in the education system (NCSE, 2005; Reid, 2010).

In a study completed with 100,955 juveniles born between 1981 and 1988, Zhang, et al. (2010) found that first time truancy offenders came from families with a criminal history and low family income. This suggests that a high degree of family disorganization is often found with students that encounter a pattern of absenteeism (Zhang, et at. 2010).

Research also suggests that parents with higher socioeconomic status (SES) compared to parents with lower SES are more likely to be involved in their child's education, their teachers, and overall academic success (Teasley, 2004). Students from low SES may have to stay home while a parent is at work, due to the lack of affordable

childcare or the means to afford childcare for younger siblings (Teasley, 2004). A parent

may have to work early or late hours, which can contribute to low monitoring of the

students before or after school (National Center for School Engagement [NCSE], 2007).

Aside from parental barriers with employment, there are times that high school students

experience similar barriers, such as, working during school hours to help contribute to

their family income (Teasley, 2004).

Although poverty is a contributing factor within the family system, the family's

belief system and values can also affect a student's attendance. Research has found that

there are certain family characteristics that may affect a student's attendance and

completion with their high school diploma. Often times these characteristics are the

parent's attitude towards the education system, lack of guidance or supervision, drug and

alcohol abuse, mental health problems, and a lack of knowledge of the truancy laws

(Hendricks, et al. 2009; Teasley, 2004). In a latent class analysis study conducted by

Dembo, et al. (2012) they discovered that 57 percent of the youth studied that were

experiencing chronic truancy had a family member with a history of substance abuse,

while 34 percent reported family history of mental health problems.

Within family history, Dembo, et al. (2012) discovered that many of the youth

had experienced a traumatic event within their lifetime. This study found that 52 percent

experienced unemployment of one parent, 43 percent had divorced parents, 18 percent

were evicted from their apartment or home, and 63 percent lost a loved one (Dembo, et

al. 2012). Students were also found to be struggling with emotional and environmental

consequences for the absence of one biological parent, which seemed to affect their ego

strength, character and general outlook on life (Dembo, et al. 2012).

Lastly, another family factor that may contribute to truancy is family structure, such as single-parent households compared to two-parent households. Typically, in a two-parent family unit there tends to be higher monitoring of the children, due to both parents taking on the role of supervision and involvement. In a research study completed by Teasley (2004), it was found that single parent homes have higher rates of truancy, due to lower monitoring and involvement. It was found that youth that live in one-parent households were more likely to engage in sexual intercourse, skipping school, fighting and using alcohol or tobacco (Teasley, 2004).   Dembo, et al. (2012), discovered that of the truant youth that were researched, 14 percent of the youth lived with their biological parents, while 35 percent of the youth lived with their biological mother and 34 percent lived with their mother and another adult.

Individual Factors

Within the individual system there are factors that can contribute to truancy. These individual-level characteristics include social skills, cognitive skills, health problems, learning disabilities, and emotional disorders, all of which can influence the youth's school experience and ultimately affects school attendance (McKluskey, et al. 2004). It has been found that students with emotional or behavioral disorders are more likely to dropout when compared to children with other disabilities (Minnesota Department of Health, 2004). Individual mental health has been shown in research to be a common theme with highly truant youth and delinquent youth (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Spencer, 2009). In the study completed by Dembo, et al. (2012), 50 percent of the youth that were studied had some type of treatment for emotional or behavioral problems.

This study also found that 64 percent of the youth had used alcohol and 92 percent reported using marijuana (Dembo, et al. 2012).

An individual demographics may contribute to a higher chance experiencing chronic truant. It has been found that boys tend to increase their rates in truancy as they advance grade level (Teasley, 2004). Not only does the literature show that lower socioeconomic status students have higher rates of truancy, but so do minority groups. A study completed by Spencer (2009) on 42 students who took part in a truancy prevention program, found that the majority of the students were bilingual (Spanish and English), and did not use English as their primary language within their home.

In the research completed by Teasely (2004) it suggests that chronic truancy tends to be higher in inner city school districts, which have a higher number of ethnic minorities when compared to urban school districts. African Americans constitute approximately 70 percent of the student population, and Hispanics account for nearly 20 percent in the nation's largest school systems (Teasley, 2004). Due to the high population of ethnic minorities in the largest school districts, there tend to be a higher amount of minority students that are chronic truants.

Allegedly truant students report less attachment to their school, either from difficulty in their academics, or no attachment to their peers or teachers. Research has been found that there is a link between high truancy and the drop out rate for students. This research has suggested there are symptoms that are exhibited by the students prior to them dropping out. Often times these symptoms show as, disengagement from their social life and no emotional involvement in their school (Tam, et at. 2012). In a study

completed by Hendrick, et al. (2009), youth that reported that they dropped out or skipped school was because of being bored, loss of interest in school, irrelevant courses, course work being too difficult or easy, suspensions, difficult relationships with their teachers or other students and feeling unsafe in school. It has also been found that students who regularly miss school tend to lack self-esteem, social skills, poor peer group relationships and lack of self-management skills (Reid, 2010).

A study completed by Dembo, et al. 2012, they found that 92 percent of the youth studied had used marijuana, and 64 percent were found to have used alcohol to the point of feeling intoxicated. Research has found that the majority of truant youth experience substance abuse or use (Dembo, et al. 2012; Henry & Thornberry, 2010). Youth substance abuse has been found through research as a contributing factor to youth truancy (Henry & Thornberry, 2010).   Henry and Thornberry (2010) found that when an adolescent's involvement in truancy was increased, the substance abuse would increase as well. This study also found that youth that are connected to a negative peer group tend to have less monitored time, which escalates their chances of substance abuse and consequently truancy (Henry & Thornberry, 2010).

School Environment

Individual and family factors have been a main focus in research as indicators for truancy. Just recently, researchers have been focusing on the school environment and how this may affect a student's attendance. School can play a vital role in an adolescent's life and provide consistency for many students. It is important for students to experience positive connections with their school and teachers. Students are more

likely to remain academically engaged and less likely to engage in antisocial behavior when they have a strong school bond (Henry & Thornberry, 2010).

In a literature review that focused on school-based factors completed by Marcus & Sanders-Reio (2001), it was found that a student's attachment to their teachers, which tend to be teachers who are caring and regularly praise the students, affects the student's academic motivation, behavior and reduces dropout rates. Not only do the teacher relationships affect a student's attendance, but peer relationships play a main role as well. Students who tend to dropout of school, usually have fewer friends in school and a small amount of close relationships in their lives (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001).

In a study completed by Spencer (2008), it was found that school-related factors pertaining to truancy were unsafe/unwelcoming school climate, push-out policy (suspension), and automatic F's for poor attendance. Research also suggests that larger school environments can play a major role in truancy, due to the lack or ability to enforce attendance laws on all the students (Spencer, 2009; Teasley, 2004).   Teasley (2004) found that 55 percent of teachers from inner city schools reported that truancy is a serious problem.

Research has found that truancy within in school districts or inner city schools can be due to lack of funding, a variety of teaching styles for learning styles, low teacher expectations, inconsistent school discipline, and poor interactions between parents and school personnel (Rodriguez & Gilberto, 2009; Spencer, 2009; Teasley, 2004; Trujillo, 2006).

A new identified issue within the school system is both bullying and cyber bullying (Reid, 2010; Trujillo, 2006). Research has been shown to indicate that school bullying has prevented students from attending school. Bullying has become another nation wide social problem, which has been found as a connection to student truancy. Although this social issue does not solely contribute to truancy, it can play an important role into a student's desire not to attend school (Seeley, Tombari, Bennett & Dunkle, 2011). However, Seeley, et al. (2011), found in their research that this relationship is actually weak, yet it does still exist. It was found that it depends on the type of bullying and how it was mediated by the factor of the student's school engagement (Seeley, et al. 2011).

Community Factors

Community factors have also been found to contribute to a student's absenteeism. Some pressing factors within the community would be, delinquent peers and street gangs. Reid (2010) found that the community issues that revolved around socio-economic factors would be: location, housing, local attitudes, culture, criminality, vandalism and a sense of feeling safe. Family socioeconomic status connects to a community and neighborhood factors as it determines where the students live and the schools they attend (Reid, 2010; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Spencer, 2004). These community factors have been found to expose the students to mental and physical stressors, such as, abuse, neglect, neighborhood and domestic violence, family and paternal strife (Reid, 2010; Teasley, 2004).

Teasley (2004), found that families that live in higher socioeconomic communities tend to have more access to support systems and resources, which have been proven to reduce truancy. Families that own their own homes tend to contribute more to their communities and the surrounding resources for families in need (Teasley, 2004). Lower -socioeconomic neighborhoods, which tend to be urban and ethnic minority families seem to experience continued acts of violence, attend poorly funded school, and experience maltreatment through their communities environment (Teasley, 2004).

Truancy Interventions

There are many factors that connect together to create this social problem. Many systems such as school, community, law enforcement, social services and court systems have created many different interventions to prevent or address this complex issue. The more research that has come out to show that there are multiple factors that contribute to this issue, more interventions have been created to incorporate all factors as an intervention approach.

Family Interventions

Research literature has shown that family factors play a significant role in a student's attendance. Family and student interventions have shown through research that these interventions are the most successful (Stuphen, et al. 2012; Teasley, 2004).   When involving the family as part of the intervention process, family involvement has been found to have the highest success rate. A study conducted by Marvul (2012), used three techniques to intervene on inner city students who were chronically truant. The

techniques were, daily telephone calls to the home before school, participation in moral issues class, and sponsoring of football and basketball teams. This study found that employing a school staff to make daily telephone calls to the family increased the family trust and interest in the child's success, which in turn increased attendance. This study also found that some cases cut absences by 50 percent after this approach was applied. The results of this study found that using all three techniques as an intervention increased attitudes and expectations of school for each student and it decreased absences (Marvul, 2012).

Research has shown that the most effective interventions utilize individual and family interventions while focusing on the family structure and functioning, family values and attitudes toward school and education, socioeconomic status, parental knowledge of a child's academic performance, parental methods of disciplining children, and parent and child understanding of local truancy laws (NCSE, 2007; Marvul, 2012; Sutphen, et al. 2010; Teasley, 2004).

Homelessness has been a rising issue within our country and this growing social issue affects a student's attendance and ability to attend school everyday and on time. A way for the nation to handle and intervene on this issue was by developing, The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The McKinney-Vento Act was established under the No Child Left Behind Act, to offer public school assistance with transporting a student who by federal law meets the definition of homeless. If a student meets this definition and becomes homeless during their enrollment at school, that school district by law must offer transportation to these to students to and from their current location. This

act was developed to ensure access to public education for any student (Nashy-Rocky Mount Public Schools, 2013).

Teasley (2004), suggests that the successfulness of an effective student and family intervention programs would be comprehensive, responsive, and flexible, while viewing the children in their family context and with an understanding of the effects of the neighborhood and community on the student's life. The research completed by Stuphen, et al. (2010), was focused on the evaluation of truancy interventions that were effective. When looking at the student and family-based interventions, they found that programs that included individual behavioral contracts, group guidance meetings, tangible rewards, and telephone calls to the parents were the most effective in reducing truancy rates among the students studied.

Individual Interventions

Solution-focused therapy has been found to be an effective individual intervention. Enea & Dafinoiu (2009) completed a non-randomized pilot study on motivational stimulation strategies, motivational interviewing and solution-focused counseling on 38 adolescent students. The study found a significant decrease in absences among the students that were tested after receiving this type of counseling.

Although they found a significant decrease, their study showed that there was a lack of parental participation and involvement of the teachers, which they suggest that parental involvement should be emphasized when working with the students on this issue (Enea & Dafinoiu, 2009). Although, this study found solution-focused therapy effective, another study found that there was no difference when compared between students who

received this therapy compared to the students who did not (Sutphen, et al. 2010). The truancy intervention study completed by Sutphen, et al. (2010), also found that using single-group programs with incentives and student support groups to be effective in reducing truancy rates.

School Interventions

School districts have taken a variety of interventions to address the complex issue of truancy. It has been noted that early intervention is the most efficient way to reduce and prevent this issue, which suggests that schools should monitor school attendance more regularly (Huck, 2011). Sutphen, et al. (2010) found that school reorganization was found to be effective. School reorganization would include providing students with classes pertaining to the student's career interest, extended instructions for specific subjects, and after-hour programs for youth (Sutphen, et al. 2010).

Community Interventions

In a qualitative study conducted by Rodriguez and Conchas (2009) it was found that an important intervention for truant youth would be offering them a safe space to attend after school hours. This research study suggests that having a safe space, such as, a community center for at-risk youth, helped build positive peer relationships, supervised time and positive role models (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). They found that this critical space increased self-esteem, maturity, and confidence, which allowed the youth to find and pursue a positive role in their schools, communities, and society (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009).

McKluskey et al. (2004), found that a multimodal intervention that included written letters and phone calls to parents, referrals to needed services, such as mental health agencies or social service agencies, and visits with law enforcement had positive results for truancy reduction. These interventions were found to be the most effective when started in the beginning stages, such as, elementary school. Sutphen et al (2010), also found in their research that intervention models that include parenting, community, volunteering, decision making, and collaboration with the community to have a strong impact on the families and the students.

School and Community Interventions

When looking at truancy prevention there have been multiple approaches by school districts nation-wide. Many districts are collaborating with the community and school. Some studies suggest that it is important to take proactive and reactive approaches that relate to the student's generation (Taffel, 2005). Youth look up to social icons, due to their constant connection to social media and wish to be near celebrities (Taffel, 2005).   Some school districts such as, New York developed a system that relates to the student's generation and their connection to the famous world. This program, which is called, "Wake up! NYC", started out serving 6,500 students and is now serving 39,000 students (Phillips, 2011). This new system will send a voice message to a truant student from one of the New York Mets baseball players or even famous basketball players, like Magic Johnson. The automated voice message encourages and motivates the students that have missed 10 or more days, to attend school and to graduate high school (Koebler, 2011).

Another school district in New York, connected the truant youth with a mentor, then they added a GPS tracking system to the cell phone of the students and to the mentor's cell phone. The mentor then monitors the GPS tracking system during the day to make sure the student is in school. If the mentor notices that the student is not in school, the mentor is able to track the student down and encourage the student to go back to school (Koebler, 2011).

Minnesota's Interventions: Twin Cities

This widely spread social issue affects students every day in Minnesota. Although there are not many resources that have tracked the rates of truancy in Minnesota, school districts across the state have come together with their communities to develop a plan to help reduce truancy.

There are seven counties that make up the Twin Cities Metropolitan area, these include; Anoka County, Washington County, Ramsey County, Hennepin County, Carver County, Scott County and Dakota County. Each county has taken similar and different approaches to addressing this social problem. According to the Minnesota Statute 260C.007, Subd. 19. "A child is considered a "habitual truant" if she or he is under the age of 16 years and is absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse for seven school days. Children ages 16 and 17 will be considered truant if they have not lawfully withdrawn from school with their parents' permission" (Ramsey County, 2013).

A common approach within Minnesota is the Truancy Intervention Program (TIP). The TIP program addresses the problem at 3 or more unexcused absences with the parent and child. The first step is for the parent and child to attend a large school meeting addressing the laws and legal issues around truancy. If the student misses 5-7 unexcused

absences, the student and parent will meet with the county attorney to sign a contract together. If the student misses more than 10 days, the case is petitioned to Juvenile Court (Ramsey County, 2013).

As with everything, there are pros and cons to these programs regarding the community's overall well being. There are arguments of whether the school's money is being put to good use for these programs and other arguments that there is not enough money for more programs similar to the ones mentioned above. Truancy not only costs society money for prevention programs, it can also affect a school's funding. Federal and State funds will be given to some school districts for their daily attendance rates and at times they are at risk for losing these funds based on their daily attendance reports (Trujillo, 2006; Garry, 1996).

According to the literature review, there appears to be a successful rate when the schools engage the families during the intervention process for students experiencing truancy. It appears to be most efficient by connecting all fours systems; family, individual, community and school to most effectively tackle this social issue. This research project will be completed within a nine month timeframe, so for timely purposes, this researcher decided to focus on the school engagement process with these student's families. It appears that the Minnesota school districts have the TIP program in place within their districts, so this researcher found it valuable to explore with school personnel on their approach with these families, the barriers and strengths of the program they have in place and what they find to be most effective and if at all during the engagement process.

Conceptual Framework

Systems theory will be used in this qualitative study focusing on chronically truant students, while exploring in what ways Minnesota school districts are engaging families to resolve the issue of truancy. Systems theory was first introduced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1940s and later continued by Ross Ashby in the 1950s (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1999). Von Bertalanffy introduced the idea that, "systems are open to, and interact with their environments, and that they can acquire qualitatively new properties through emergency, resulting in continued evolution" (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1999). Family, individuals, community and school are examples of systems that are organized, interact and grow together. All of these systems and subsystems intertwine day by day, which would support that idea that families should be included within truancy intervention programs.

Systemic thinking has been used in work by sociologists and within family psychotherapy. For example, Cox and Paley (1997), explain that the family is organized in a hierarchical structure and consists of subsystems, such as, parental, marital and siblings, and then surrounded by a larger system, which would be community. These subsystems and systems interact on different levels and continuously. This theory has found that the interaction between the subsystems develops boundaries within the larger system. For example, a child can develop poor regulation when there is a problematic parent-child relationship (Cox and Paley, 1997). Also, within the subsystems an individual learns their boundaries through their family members, such as household rules and expectations, these boundaries will then get carried over when the individual is in the community, such as school (Cox and Paley, 1997).

Systems theory looks at the individual family system and how it affects the systems outside the family. When looking at truancy, the literature has shown that there are many factors that contribute to the issue, so it is important when looking at effective interventions to look at the family system. Cox & Paley (1997) found in their research that when there is a disturbance within the parent-child relationship there tends to be a poor peer relationship.   Their research also found that poverty impacts a parent's parenting style. As stated in the literature, poor peer relationships and poverty are contributing factors for truancy.

Research on effective truancy interventions by Marvul (2012), found that using the school system and family system was an effective approach for students and provided positive participation by the student and their family. The intervention provided family inclusion by encouraging parents to have higher monitoring of their children and participation within the school, while providing incentives for the students, positive school activities, opportunities for students to reflect on their behavior, and offered a more caring school environment (Marvul, 2012).

Henry and Thornberry (2010), also understood that when looking at truancy, there are major systems and subsystems that affect a student's life which in result are the student's risk and protective factors.   For example, poor family functioning can result in low parental monitoring, poor parent-child relationships, low socioeconomic statues, which then results in the student's poor school connection, negative peer groups and poor academic success (Henry & Thornberry, 2010). It is then determined that it is important to understand a student's underlying systems and subsystems when providing an intervention and promoting school success.

Methodology

Research Design

This study serves to contribute to the findings from this literature review, to distinguish whether engaging families in truancy prevention and intervention is a successful and efficient approach for students that are experiencing chronic truancy. This study explored with middle school professionals within the school districts of the twin cities metropolitan area, who work directly with students experiencing chronic truancy.

The focus of this research study was on the research question of, "To what extent are Minnesota schools engaging families to resolve chronic truancy"? According to the research literature there are multiple factors that contribute to a student's truancy issue, which makes it difficult for truancy interventions to be successful. Research did however find that involving the student's family with the intervention process was found to be more successful than not. The focus of this study is on whether the school districts within the metropolitan area are engaging the families in the process of the school's prevention or intervention. It also explored effective methods used by the professional staff to contribute to evidenced-based practice for school social workers. This study gathered the information and research information through a qualitative study.

Sample

The participants in this qualitative research study were middle school professionals that work directly with middle school students experiencing chronic truancy. These professionals were four social workers, a teacher and a school police officer liaison whom all had experience working with a student that was or is involved in

the district's truancy intervention method. The criteria for participation in this study was

that the participants were adults who currently work within a middle school and have had

direct practice with middle school youth experiencing chronic truancy. The participants

were recruited through a snowball sample.

The starting referrals were from neighboring school districts within Ramsey

County, which were connections from my research committee members. This researcher

connected with the initial contacts and provided a detailed description of what the study

entailed and requested for connections with other middle school professionals they knew

would be willing to participate in this study. This researcher contacted the connections

via telephone and email to recruit the possible professionals that were suggested. This

researcher did not go through the school system to recruit the participants, but asked the

three starting connections from the research committee members for other contacts.

The targeted participant group was 20 human subjects, with 1-10 being male and

1-10 being female. This clinical research project involved six participants. Four were

school social workers, one was a school police officer liaison, and one was a teacher.

Participants that were excluded from this research study was anyone under the age of 18,

students that are experiencing chronic truancy, professionals in the school districts that do

not have direct involvement with students that are chronically truancy, and professionals

not involved with the school district.

Protection of Human Subjects

An informed consent form was created by the researcher based on the University of St. Thomas' template and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The consent form addressed the purpose of the study, the background for the focus of the research topic, procedure information, the risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality notification, the voluntary nature of the study, and contact information for the researcher and the course instructor. The researcher reviewed the informed consent process with each participant before conducting the interview. The participants and researcher signed and dated two consent forms. The researcher provided one copy for the participant and one for the researcher.

The interviews were audio recorded on a password-protected device.   After the interview, the researcher transcribed the interviews for data collection. The transcriptions were saved in the researcher's password protected laptop. When the transcriptions were complete, the researcher deleted all of the audible recordings.

Data Collection instruments and process

A semi-structured interview was used for this qualitative research study on family engagement in resolving chronic truancy within the school districts. The interview questions were developed through the literature review and the themes that related to this study's research topic. The questions were open-ended and focused on the participant's area of expertise and experience with chronically truant youth. The interview questions focused on the participant's experience with truancy intervention and the barriers they experience when implementing their interventions. It also focused on the ways in which

the school districts are engaging the youth's family in the intervention process, as this

was found to be an effective approach in the literature. The interviews also explored with

the participants on what they are finding successful and not successful when working

with these students and their families. The interviews took place within the participant's

workplace in a private room.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was used to analyze the data from the transcriptions. Grounded

theory's methodology focuses on discovering basic social processes. It emphasizes the

observations of social relationships, the behavior of these groups, and the affects on an

individual's life while focusing on the areas that have had little exploration (Crooks,

2001). After the interviews were complete, the researcher transcribed the interviews onto

the researcher's password protected laptop. The researcher used the transcriptions to find

the themes and subthemes from the professionals that were interviewed. Themes and

subthemes were developed through the coding process with the transcriptions and were

used to developed a hypothesis.

Findings

This qualitative study presented dominant themes and subthemes. The manifest content presented the type of approach the professionals take, preventative approaches and family involvement. The latent content presented individualistic and structural attributions to the reasons for successful and unsuccessful interventions with youth and their families when dealing with chronic truancy. The first main theme was "Joining with the family". The subthemes of this main theme were, Engagement, Where to place the blame, Mental Health, Social Desirability, and Flexibility. The second main theme was "Rigidity of Systems". The subthemes of this main theme were, Court Process, Connecting with TIP (Truancy Intervention Program), and Prevention.

Joining with the family

One of the main dominant themes throughout the interviews would be joining with the student's family to resolve the chronic truancy issue. The participants articulated the importance of the style or approach you take in joining with the families. Throughout the interviews the participants mentioned numerous terms when discussing successes they have had in working with families, such as, engagement, inviting, communicating, encouragement, and connections.

These terms describe the views of the professionals on how they effectively worked with families that have or had a student experiencing chronic truancy. This main theme incorporates the school and family connection. The participants explained that is important to have a healthy and strong connection between the school and family to effectively resolve the student's issue of truancy.

Engagement.

Often times the participants revealed that the best way to resolve truancy would be to engage the families and the student. All participants expressed the importance of building a strong relationship with these families.

The school police officer liaison felt that an effective way to get a student engaged at school is coming up with some type of benefit. This participant explained their view on patterns with children living in poverty and their desire for instant gratification.

> These kids are thinking day by day, not a year down the road. They are
> not thinking how their decisions now are going to affect their lives down
> the road. In the whole culture of poverty they often want feedback now or
> immediate gratification. They value fun, relationships, and friendships, so
> trying to engage them as a group. There has to be some sort of positive
> experience for them to get to school.

Another common theme found in the transcriptions was the idea of sitting down with these families and showing them that the school cares about their child's success. The participants all strongly presented that approaching the families in a non-judgmental way or non-authoritative way is the best way for their engagement. One social worker described this by saying,

> Help them look at what their desire is for their child, what their desire is
> for their education and really focus on, I back off on being an authority
> figure or telling them that I know what is best for their family. I want to

explore with the family to find out what their hope and dreams are for

their family. Usually I find that they have good intentions for their kids,

that they want them to be successful, healthy and happy. I really try to

focus on the family on the bigger picture and look at the macro level view

of the family and society and parents. I think they usually are trying to the

best they can.

Each participant shared a successful intervention that they have done or have seen

done when working with truant youth. One social worker's story represents the

importance of the school engaging the family and approaching the topic using a team

approach with the parent. This participant explained the following,

He was homeless in St. Paul, so we had to get a bus and get all of the

transportation set up. He didn't show up, so I drove out there one day to

have them sign some paperwork, so I think that connection that is

provided and then everyday he knows that I know if he is here or not.

And to remind him by saying, "Hey remember to wake up for the bus in

the morning". Even though his mother was not able to follow through,

there is only so much he can do on his own to get himself to school. I

think that would be a way I really connected with him, we knew he

wanted to be in school, it wasn't that he wanted to sleep in everyday, even

though mom isn't able to help him, he has the motivation to do it himself.

Where to place the blame.

Another important way to engage the families was by having the parents place the blame on the school, the county or the laws. The first step was to engage the parents by inviting them to the school, going to their home or calling them on the phone. Then it was to help the parents decipher on how to distribute the blame while trying to resolve the issue. The participants explained that the parents are already going through a lot and this seems to help take the pressure off. It makes the school the reason why the parents have to make their child go to school. This subtheme also incorporates another theme that presented during the interviews, which is being a team with the family.

Being a team with the family was widely mentioned along with engaging the families and encouraging them to spread the blame. This was found to be especially important, if the truancy issue continues and the school has to have the county involved in resolving it. One of the social workers explained the following,

> Having the parents see you not as the enemy is important. Sometimes when the truancy program or the ball starts rolling, you know the parents are getting letters from the county, and it can sometimes become some kind of antagonistic relationship with the school and parents. So definitely trying to help the parents understand that we are all on the same team this is really important to us. That having the county involved it can help the parent to not be the bad guy and that we aren't mad at the parents that their kids aren't coming to the school.

This participant really voiced the importance of the relationship between the school and the family from the very beginning. This could help avert any issues that may arise if the school has to have the county involved. If the school includes the county process, it was found that it was effective to educate the family right away on the process and to explain how this program can be helpful for their child.

Mental Health.

Another common subtheme throughout the interviews was the understanding of mental health and the barriers it can create on getting certain students to school. The participants conveyed that there has been a high increase of mental health needs among the students that are experiencing truancy and at times with the student's parents. This subtheme appeared throughout all of the interviews and was mentioned as an important issue to be aware of. The professionals explained that sometimes they would not start the TIP program or send the first letter, even if the student had missed over 10 days, because they will develop a different plan with the family to meet the needs of the mental health barrier that is taking place. As one social worker explained,

> I have a student who is dealing with a lot of anxiety. We didn't even send
> the letter because I've worked so closely with that family, that I know
> where they are. We are not even pushing the letter on this case or the
> process with the family, because I have been in such close contact with the
> family, I know why he is missing school. So that is just something that I
> set up with the student and parent. It's not a set this is A, B and this will
> be C. You really need to just go with it.

The participants expressed that there are many students who are experiencing anxiety or depression, which makes it difficult to come to school. Another reason would be that the parents are experiencing some type of mental health issue, so the students will stay home due to worrying about leaving their parents alone. Some of the school social workers have set up personal plans with the students and their parents to accommodate to these student's needs. The accommodations that the school social workers shared, were the following; having the student check in each morning with them, meeting the student at the end of each class and walking to the next class with them, and leaving an open door policy for the students to come to their office whenever they need to.

Social Desirability.

Another subtheme that was presented in the interviews would be social desirability. The participants expressed the difficulty that this can bring to the engagement process with the school and the families. Some participants reported that they believed the families would tell the school what they thought the school wanted to hear. Also, lack of follow through on the parents end with the interventions that the school developed with the family was another barrier in the engagement process. Although, there was a strong mutual agreement throughout the transcriptions that the participants had a belief that the parents want their children in school, there were reportedly times that the parents did not follow through on their end of the plan.

Flexibility.

The final subtheme for "Joining with families" would be flexibility. Each participant explained that there is a strong need in their line of work for the ability to be

flexible when working with these families. This flexibility ranged from providing home

visits with these families, changing the student's school schedule, working closely as

professionals to provide an overall understanding of the student's needs while in school,

the classroom and offering creative solutions to make the student feel connected to

school.

Rigidity of Systems

The next dominant theme that presented throughout the interviews was the

rigidity of systems. This common theme presented as the use of the interventions

provided to the professionals to use and the difficulty it can create between the school

and the engagement of the families. Each participant addressed the benefits and the

setbacks that some of the interventions create when engaging with these families.

Court System.

Most of the participants mentioned that the court systems can be beneficial when

the school is unable to engage the families or the student continues to not attend after all

of the possible efforts. Some also mentioned that the court systems have a different time

frame, which can be difficult and can lead to the students missing more school than they

would like to see. The lack of immediate action was another mentioned setback to the

interventions they have access to within the school setting.

One social worker discussed that after countless efforts of trying to engage a

family and student into attending school, the social worker had to eventually refer the

student to the court system due to continued unexcused absences. The referral was in

hopes that this would push the student to be in school. This participant expressed that the

process was frustrating due to how slow the court calendar was in setting a court date for

the student. It was difficult to try to enforce a student to go to school when the court

system was moving so slow. This social worker expressed the following,

> When they get into the county system it is so prolonged that we are not on
>
> the same timeline. It's that we want things to change right now. We want
>
> the kid back because every day they are gone they are missing a ton of
>
> schooling, but when they get into the system and they are home until they
>
> have court, or they are home until they have a probation officer…it feels
>
> like forever. When the county gets involved it's a great relief for us, but
>
> it's also very hard because they are on a different timeframe than we are.

The school police officer liaison expressed that sometimes the protocols within

the school districts or the court system can work against the needs of the student. This

participant explained that high mobility or residential instability could have an effect on a

student missing school. There are students who move around a lot, whether it's due to

their parent's job or due to being homeless. Some students, who are highly mobile, know

that they will not be in the same school district the following year or possibly for the full

school year, which can affect their desire to be in school.

This participant explained a story of student who had recently moved into their

school district. This student had already moved around multiple times in the last few

years, so this student did not have a connection or desire to connect with the school due

to the possibility of moving again. This student showed up to school because the student

would rather be in school than home, but would wander the halls and not participate in

class. The participant continued the story by explaining how the protocol or the system worked against this student,

> They would suspend him for not being in class and then he got put in the truancy process, but that does take a long time, because they couldn't even get the kid to sign the contract because he was never there. So here is a student who had been truant almost everyday, he will be at school, like he will take the bus because he wants to be in school. Residential instability doesn't give them a need to connect, because they know they are going to be gone.

Another point in the subtheme of the court system would be the process the school needs to take to get to the point of sending a referral to the court system. The school police officer explained that it limits the ability to have immediate consequences of these kids.

> I think the lack of immediate consequences. The truancy process is good, but every school does it differently and you have to have your three days or more. Then the letter, then 7-10 days unexcused, then the court date. Now in between that time to set the court hearing you have missed 17 days and that's the lack of something that you can do immediately is difficult.

One of the social workers explained that the court system could be beneficial due to the school districts not having enough "teeth". This participant explained a story of a girl that was struggling with anxiety and probably without the court system she wouldn't have went to school.

I had a girl who had major social anxiety. The parents just couldn't get

her out the door for school. I took a lot of time, I'm not kidding you, but it

ended up going to court, and I said to the judge that this was a very good

student you know, she had a lot of potential, this child is a good

investment, whatever you have to do, put her in a shelter for a couple

days, it's worth it. Framing it in a way to not be afraid to come down hard

on her because she is not naughty, she has a lot of potential to be a good

student, in fact you want to come down hard on her because she is going

to make something of herself. She is not in to drugs, you know keep her

out of that, you need to invest in her to prevent that from happening.

Connecting with TIP (Truancy Intervention Program).

A subtheme that came up amongst the professionals was the use of the Truancy

Intervention Program (TIP). This program was expressed as beneficial, but also could be

detrimental to the relationship or the engagement process with the families and the

school. Most of the participants felt that their first approach to the first sign of a student

missing school would be contacting the parents by a phone call or visiting the parent in

their home.

The next common step was connecting the families to local resources such as,

mental health agencies, and community agencies to assist with housing or basic needs, or

county eligibility programs. The majority of the participants said that it's important to

find resources that will help with long-term change. The professionals explained the

importance in their role as understanding the issues of poverty and how this can affect a

student's attendance. The McKinney-Vento Act was reported as a beneficial resource for

the school as they have to bus students to their schools if they become homeless during

that school year. This has been helpful, but it can affect a parent's ability to be engaged

with the school. One of the social workers explained,

> Through the McKinney Vento Act all students when homeless are given
>
> the right to transportation to school. We are able to send a van to a student
>
> who is staying in a shelter or has moved in with a grandparent because
>
> they lost their home. That helps it stay consistent for the student, but it
>
> makes it challenging for the adult to stay connected and involved with
>
> school. And as parents are really stressed out with financial concerns,
>
> school becomes really low. It becomes needs and wants kind of things
>
> and when they are really really focused on needs, school becomes – Okay,
>
> I want them there, so get them there, but then I need to focus on this and
>
> this. The poverty and homelessness becomes a challenge for the parents.

With the understanding of the effects of poverty and the student's ability to fully

attend school, the professionals decide whether a student is a good fit for the TIP program

or if there are alternative methods that the school can use. If they do file a truancy

petition with the county, one participant expressed the importance of sharing everything

they know about the family to the county attorney and then offering the school's

recommendations. The participant felt that this was the most efficient and effective way

to get the services in place that the school was having a difficult time doing. Sometimes,

the school will see that the first meeting with the county attorney or the first letter to the

parent's will improve a child's attendance, other times they see that the parents get upset and want their kids to switch schools.

Prevention.

The last subtheme for the "Rigidity of Systems" would be the use of preventative approaches. All of the participants expressed a strong desire for preventative approaches and more immediate consequences. When exploring this approach with the participants it was expressed that there are some limitations with the school district, which prevents their ability to offer more preventative approaches.

Some expressed that they have high caseloads and a broad spectrum of students they have to work with, so they don't have enough time each day to dedicate to the students that are experiencing truancy. Others expressed different concepts or ideas they could do to work with the families in the beginning of the school year. They proclaimed that they have not done this before due to it not being something they have done in the past. Another barrier they seemed to experience was the rules and guidelines to the law of truancy, and then the implementation with the TIP program. It was found that once the students were in the county system, the school did not have control over the outcome of the situation.

Discussion and Implications

The findings in this research study support the results of the studies found in the literature review. These findings are the complexity of the issue of truancy, the effects of poverty on a student's attendance, the importance of family engagement and the effects of mental health issues with the student or with the parent. These findings also included system barriers between the community, school, family and individual.

Strengths and Limitations

This qualitative study had several advantages and disadvantages for this area of research. The interview questions were gathered based on the literature reviews that only focused on youth at-risk for truancy and youth that are experiencing chronic truancy. The questions that were used for the interviews were based off of the themes from the literature review, which was specifically focused. The study was limited to professionals that work directly with a student involved with the truancy intervention within their school district. This study did not interview students that are currently involved in the truancy intervention process, which contributes to limitation for a richer understanding from individuals fully involved in the intervention.

Interpretation of the findings

Overall, the findings in this research project indicate that truancy is a complex issue with many contributing factors. This was a main theme that was found within the literature review. The findings did indicate that the school districts are aware of the complexity of the issue and continue to address the factors that they are able to within limits. To overcome this complex issue, the findings indicate the importance of the

relationship with the school, the family, and other systems involved, such as the court

systems or the TIP program. Having a positive relationship amongst all systems is key to

overcoming this issue.

It was found in the literature review that previous studies had also found that

multi-systemic approaches were effective in resolving chronic truancy. McKluskey et al.

(2004), found that a multimodal intervention that included written letters, phone calls to

parents, referrals to needed services, such as mental health agencies or social service

agencies, and visits with law enforcement had positive results for truancy reduction. This

process that McKluskey et al, which is identified as a successful approach in resolving

truancy, was a similar method identified by the school professionals that participated in

the interviews.

The engagement process was found to be beneficial when the school was able to

assist the family with community resources and/or connections to outside resources. This

was also a theme that came up throughout the literature. Sutphen et al (2010), found in

their research that intervention models that include parenting, community, volunteering,

decision-making, and collaboration with the community to have a strong impact on the

families and the students.

Although, the findings indicate the understanding and knowledge of this

relationship, there were identified barriers that seem to prevent the school districts and

the systems to not have a strong relationship. It was found that when family engagement

is not working and the students continue to not attend school, the court systems could be

beneficial. However, it appeared that the court systems have a different time frame,

which seems to work against the goal of the district and usually the parents, which would be getting the student back to school right away. This factor seems to indicate that it causes tension between all systems involved, which destroys the needed positive relationship.

The findings also suggested that there are no immediate consequences for these students and sometimes the families. The findings indicate that immediate consequences are important, especially when working with families living in poverty. There were many different reasons for these consequences to not exist. Some that were mentioned were, due to budget cuts, less professional staff, high caseloads, and program cuts. The participants mentioned the importance of immediate consequences and not having access to them. This was found to be frustrating for the professional staff because sometimes they could not find enough, "teeth", as one professional said, "to get the kids in school".

The findings supported the importance of engaging the families when trying to resolve the issue. Overall, most of the findings indicated that the parents genuinely cared about their child's success in school and wanted them to succeed. It appeared that it would depend on the professional's approach with the family. It was found that a parent's approach to their child's situation could depend on their experience in school. If a parent had a difficult time with school and did not get along well with staff, this could shape their view on the school. The professionals in this study indicated that it's important for school staff and other workers to be aware of this and to be flexible. They found it invaluable to help change this perception to a positive experience for the family and the student.

The professionals indicated that when working with a family in crisis, it is important to be aware of the current stressors and the resources that are available to offer to the family to help eliminate them as soon as possible. It was also indicated that it's important to take a different approach with families struggling with mental health vs. families struggling with corrections. The findings indicated that the more punitive, authoritative approach does not work, especially when working with students or families struggling with mental health. It was suggested that it's important to be flexible and creative when working with the families.

Although, there are some limits when working in a school, the findings suggest that the professionals need to be willing to spend an amount of time on these students developing appropriate plans with them to help ensure the attendance in school. It was identified in the literature review and with all of the school professionals interviewed, that many youth who experience truancy are experiencing some type of mental health issue. As noted in the literature review, individual mental health has been shown in research to be a common theme with highly truant youth and delinquent youth (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Spencer, 2009). This understanding among the professionals presenting a finding that there needs to be more mental health resources within the schools and in the communities for these kids. It was also mentioned by a professional the importance of being flexible with how the truancy process works and what will work with the specific student you are dealing with. This finding indicated that the TIP program can be beneficial, but for certain students, not particularly students struggling with mental health issues.

Implications for social work practice

This study emphasized the importance of understanding person in environment and the connections of all systems. It offers research for social workers to better understand the current barriers within the systems and how to best engage families to work on eliminating truancy. The study indicated that there may need some changes within the systems, such as the time frame for the court systems, to better ensure efficiency amongst all the systems.

Another implication would be the understanding of needing more immediate consequences and preventative programs. The participants all expressed a desire for more preventative approaches-some as simple as more education around the truancy laws in the beginning of the school year, and the idea of reaching out to the families right away in the school year to get them engaged before the issue begins.

Implications for research

This research project suggests that there needs to be more research on preventative approaches that are success for truant youth. Through the literature review and this research study it shows that there is not a lot of research on preventative approaches to chronic or habitual truancy. This would be helpful to understand effective approaches, so they could be implemented within the school districts.

Much of the literature for this research study was completed with professionals that work directly with youth that experience truancy or high absences from school. This could imply the need for a study to be completed with the actual youth who are truant and

their families. There is little literature that has been done with involving qualitative

studies with the youth experiencing truancy.

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Appendix A: Unsigned Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN MINNESOTA ENGAGING FAMILIES IN RESOLVING CHRONIC TRUANCY?

I am conducting a study about school districts in Minnesota and how they are engaging families in resolving chronic truancy with middle school youth. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience with middle school youth that are experiencing chronic truancy. You were selected when you received a letter from me and responded due to your interest in participating. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Christine Zins, an MSW student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas under the direction of Ande Nesmith, a faculty member in the Social Work Department at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to better understand how school districts in Minnesota are engaging families in the resolution of their child's truancy issues. This study will explore with school professionals who work directly with chronically truant students on their approach to resolving the issue of truancy. In addition, this study intends to explore with school professionals the type of approaches they take with each family and what they find to be beneficial. It will also explore the barriers the school professionals experience in trying to engage a chronically truant student's family. By better understanding the school's approach on engaging families with students experiencing chronic truancy, the successes and barriers the schools experience; professionals can learn new approaches to working with families with similar experiences.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 45-60 minute face-to-face audio-recorded interview. After the audio recorded interviews, I will transcribe the interviews onto a password secured computer to gather my findings. I will present an oral presentation of my cumulative findings of this study to the faculty and students at the College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas and community members at large. No identifying information will be used in this oral presentation.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has no known risks.

The study has no direct benefits.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. Findings from the transcribed interview will be shared with my research supervisor, Ande Nesmith, for educational purposes only and all identifying information will be removed. Research transcripts will be saved in a password secured computer. I am the only person who has access to this computer and password and will be the only person to have access to the transcribe records. I will personally transcribe the interviews. While I transcribe my interviews, the audio-recorded interviews will be saved in a password secured device. The audio recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed by June 1, 2013.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to engage in this study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used in this study.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Christine Zins. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 763-350-9966. Also, you may contact my professor, Ande Nesmith, at,. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to have the interview audio-recorded. I consent that my answers will be shared with faculty and students at the College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas and the community at large as part of the final report.

_____   _____

Signature of Study Participant   **Date**

_____

Print Name of Study Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   **Date**

Appendix B: Interview Questions

School Social Workers/ Psychologists/Counselors/Principles

1.   How often do you work with youth who are experiencing chronic truancy?

2.   If you notice a student is chronically truant, what are the first steps you take to address the issue?

a.   If the issue continues, what are the next steps?

3.   What have you found to be successful when working with youth experiencing truancy?

4.   What have you found to be unsuccessful?

5.   How does the school monitor a student's attendance?

6.   Tell me about a successful intervention that you have done or seen done for a student that was chronically truant?

7.   What factors have you observed that contribute to school truancy?

8.   Do the youth you work with have any legal issues? Parental legal issues? If so, what type of legal issues?

9.   At what level are the parents involved in the student's education?

10. What themes do you notice among parents with low involvement?

11.   What value do these parents place on education?

        A. What is the family's attitude towards school and getting a high school diploma?

        B. What are the families's view towards school attendance?

12.   Does the school provide interventions that include the family system or encourage family involvement? If so, tell me about it.

School Police Officer Liaisons

1.   How often do you work with youth who are experiencing chronic truancy?

2.   How do you get involved with a student experiencing truancy?

3.   What have you found to be successful when working with youth experiencing truancy?

4.   What have you found that is the least helpful?

5.   Tell me about a successful intervention that you have done or seen done for a student that was chronically truant?

6.   What factors have you observed that contribute to school truancy?

7.   What is the most difficult barrier to work with when working with these students?

8.   Do the youth you work with have any legal issues? Parental legal issues? If so, what type of legal issues?

9.   At what level are the parents involved in the student's education?

10. What themes do you notice among parents with low involvement?

11. What value do these parents place on education?

   A. What is the family's attitude towards school and getting a high school diploma?

   B. What are the parent/guardian's view towards school attendance?

12.   Are there supports or interventions you wish you had access to for these students?

Teachers

1.   How often do you have students that experience truancy?

2.   When you first notice that a student has been chronically truant, what are the first steps you take to address the issue?

a.   If the issue continues, what are the next steps?

3.   What have you found to be successful when working with students experiencing truancy?

4.   What have you found that is the least helpful?

5.   How does the school monitor a student's attendance?

6.   Tell me about a successful intervention that you have done or seen done for a student that was chronically truant?

7.   What factors have you observed that contribute to school truancy?

8.   Do the youth you work with have any legal issues? Parental legal issues? If so, what type of legal issues?

9.   At what level are the parents involved in the student's education?

10.   What themes do you notice among parents with low involvement?

11.   What value do these parents place on education?

    A.   What is the family's attitude towards school and getting a high school diploma?

    B.   What are the parent/guardian's view towards school attendance?

11.   Does the school provide interventions that include the family system or encourage family involvement? If so, tell me about it.