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Absenteeism, Building Relationships, and Standards-Based Grading

An Action Research Report
By Patricia Romaine and Heather Sinkler

Absenteeism, Building Relationships, and Standards-Based Grading

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

This action research project investigated the effectiveness of standards-based grading and additional student contact time with chronically absent students in Family and Consumer Science (FACS) classes. The study included 160 ninth- through twelfth-grade students in various FACS classes. Data was collected from pre- and post-intervention self-assessments to gain an understanding of students' feelings about coming to school and FACS class. Grades and attendance were documented at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Anecdotal data was gathered from conversations with students during an optional homework club. Standards-based grading and building relationships helped 50 percent of the students improve their grades and attendance. Moving forward, the teachers in this study will continue to use some standards-based grading methods and focus on relationship-building practices.

Keywords: absenteeism, standards-based grading, relationships, attendance

“Did I miss anything?” Hearing this all-too-common phrase from students who have missed a day or a week of class can cause an instant sense of frustration for teachers. We’d like to reply, “of course you missed something!” While students are frequently concerned only with making up any graded assignments they might have missed, we as teachers are concerned with the lost instructional time and classroom experiences that can be harder to replicate. Whether it is caused by involvement in extracurricular activities, mental or physical illness or other family issues, student absenteeism affects student success in the classroom. While there are many factors contributing to student absence that are beyond a teacher’s control, assessment practices and teacher-student relationships can impact students’ achievement in spite of those absences.

Our research took place in an urban school district in North Dakota. This high school is one of three comprehensive high schools in the district and is composed of 1,200 students in grades 9-12. The demographics of our school population include 16.5% of students on free and reduced lunch. The diversity of our school consists of 17.2% non-caucasian students and a district-wide total of 21.3% non-caucasian. For the purpose of this study, we were looking specifically at the 162 students in our Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) courses. These students consisted of 62 male and 100 female students.

Students in many of our classes struggle with absenteeism. Absenteeism can be defined as missing ten percent or more of the school year. This level of absenteeism impacts as many as 10-15% of students (Kearney, 2014). Absenteeism is even seen as a first step towards dropping out of school entirely (Butts, 2009). Alternately, when students are in class more than 95% of school days, the students are two times more

likely to pass state tests than students who only attended only 85% of classes (Hartnett, 2008).

The causes of absenteeism and truancy have been investigated over time, but the findings can vary considerably depending on the research methods used. For instance, some studies have found that parentally-excused absences are an important contributing factor to absenteeism while others point to bullying or poor teaching (Reid, 2005). According to Martell Teasley, there is no one cause for truancy, "multi-dimensional features are usually involved" (2004).

The United States Department of Education (2009) used four categories to define the causes of truancy: school, family, economic, and student factors. School factors include safety, attitudes of staff and peers, and lack of consistency in attendance policies. Family factors included lack of familial support, poverty, and substance abuse. Economic factors include students working and families lacking transportation or childcare resources. Student factors include substance abuse, mental health issues, and physical health problems (Butts, 2009). This multi-faceted issue of student attendance requires a careful approach so as not to alienate students further from the school environment. Research has shown that punitive attendance policies actually have a negative effect on absenteeism (Teasley, 2004).

Missing many days from school can have life-long consequences for students. Poor attendance can lead to risky behaviors such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and even attempted suicide. Anxiety and even asthma have been linked to absenteeism (Kearney, 2008). Students who struggle attending school may eventually

leave school altogether which may cause economic stress, and have an eventual impact on their future marriage, society, or employment (Kearney, 2008).

Those students who have regular school attendance have better results with standardized tests. When students graduate from high school, they are more likely to find jobs that lead to higher salaries. These students are also less likely to use public assistance programs or be associated with criminal activity (Kearney, 2014).

Research suggests that supportive relationships with teachers positively impacts student academic performance (Klem & Connell, 2004). Taking the time to help students with make-up work puts an extra burden on teachers. However, in addition to providing students with the opportunity to succeed, it communicates that the student, education, and the students' future success are all significant (Butts, 2009). Intervening to help students with attendance issues should not be seen as encouraging absences, rather it is an opportunity to salvage students who are at risk of failing or dropping out.

Positive teacher-student relationships benefit teachers as well as students. When teachers have positive relationships with students, teachers have more commitment to the student and the profession of teaching (Wilkins, 2014). When teachers and students have good relationships, teachers will strive to work harder for the students and the students tend to work more with the teachers as well.

Even with administrative grading policies in place, individual grading practices differ by teacher. English language learners and students with disabilities further extend this grading disparity (Guskey, Jung, & Swan, 2011). Traditional grading practices may provide little useful information about what a student knows if they are rewarded for good behavior, participation in class, and promptly turning in all assignments yet

penalized for disruptive behavior, tardiness and absences (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). With standards-based grading, there is little room for interpretation and grades hold more meaning from class to class (Scriffney, 2008).

Standards-based grading aligns assessment with student mastery of content (Guskey, Jung, & Swan, 2011). The concept of standards-based grading relies on content proficiency alone and focuses on making grading more valid and meaningful to the student (Spencer, 2012). Advocates of standards-based grading believe that grades should exclude factors such as attendance, behavior, and homework, and focus exclusively on demonstrating knowledge (Shippy, Washer, & Perrin 2013). This focus on standards allows students to see the concepts they have attained and which they are still striving for which can be highly motivating (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Standards-based grading is also very similar to the evaluations used by employers which will prepare students for their future roles in the workforce (Shippy, Washer, & Perrin 2013).

After reading the current research on our topic, we wanted to determine if students had an accurate reference point for how often they are missing classes, their perception of how teachers care for them, and how to accurately determine if they are meeting the standards we are hoping they master. Our research will be an investigation of the potential for teacher effectiveness in the area of student absenteeism within our FACS classrooms. Our primary research question is: What effect will standards-based grading and additional student contact time with chronically absent students have on their academic achievement in Family & Consumer Science classes?

Methodology

Several different tools were developed to assess student opinions and behavior. We worked within a four-week window and included a self-reflection at the beginning and end of our research. A homework club was created for students to meet with us for extra help with school work that they missed during absences or with which they needed additional support. We kept a reflective journal after meeting with individual students to document opinions or conversations. Grading practices were adjusted to include standards-based grading and we also documented students' grades at the beginning, middle, and end of our research time. We recorded the number of absences for each student in order to compare their opinion of how often students were absent on average.

During the first week of research, we asked all students to complete a self-reflection via an anonymous Google Form (see Appendix A). We felt that anonymity was an important feature in order for students to be willing to answer freely and honestly. Google Forms were easily accessible for students on their personal learning devices and allowed us easy access to their responses for data analysis. We composed 11 questions looking for student feelings about school in general and FACS class in particular. We wanted to gauge student perceptions of their absences against actual attendance records as well, so we asked them to estimate how many times they had been absent during the third quarter of the school year. We also asked them about their future aspirations and how well their teacher knew them in order to try to make a connection between teacher-student relationships and attendance. Some questions were multiple choice, others asked students to rate on a scale from one to ten, and others were open-ended response questions to allow them to describe their feelings. None of the questions were required,

allowing students to opt out at any time. Our goal with the student self-reflection was to gather baseline data in regards to their opinions of school and FACS classes, along with teacher relationships and the importance of school attendance for comparison to the end of research self-assessment.

The homework club was offered during two different teacher preparation periods throughout the day and also available after school two different days of the week. During the optional homework club, a tally sheet (See Appendix B) was used to document student behaviors such as eye contact and initiating conversation. We broke down the information by recording conversations about school and non-school related topics while we documented if the teacher or student prompted the discussion.

A reflective journal was kept to recall our experiences and interactions with the students after each homework club meeting. We made notes about any evidence we saw in which the standards based grading shift was impacting the student. Comments were also included if we witnessed any impact the homework club may have made to shift student performance or attitude about school. There was also space to record anything we observed that would affect our students' attendance in general.

While improving student attendance was not the primary objective of our research, we recognized that it could be a key piece of information to assess whether or not our interventions were impacting our goal of building relationships with them. We documented student attendance at the beginning of our research and once again at the end of our research. The process involved simply capturing information available to us in our student attendance software through the district.

Another source of data we collected was student grades in our classes. We wanted to take a closer look at how well the students were mastering the objectives in our classes. This meant that rather than grading each individual assignment, we assessed students' mastery of the content using rubrics aligned to the course standards and allowed them to re-submit work on standards-based assessments until they met proficiency. We recorded student grades at the beginning, middle, and end of our research period using the Power School online grade book.

We concluded our data collection with a Google Form nearly identical to the one given at the beginning of the research (See Appendix C). Our goal in asking students the same questions, was to see if their perceptions changed from the beginning of the research period to the end. We were specifically interested in students' perceptions of teacher relationships when we were focusing on how we could reach out to students and be more available for extra help.

Analysis

Several different forms of data were used to begin the process of answering our primary research question: What effect will standards-based grading and additional student contact time with chronically absent students have on their academic achievement in Family & Consumer Science classes? Our data collection included a Google Form seeking self-reflection from our students, student grades, student absences, and teacher observations collected during the optional homework club offered to students. The information provided a unique perspective of our students and helped us to draw conclusions about how we can help our students to succeed in the future.

Our first piece of data collection was the Google Form asking students about their current perceptions of school. The form asked the students 11 questions reflecting on how many hours they study for school and FACS classes, how many days they thought they were absent, and if they were above the average number of missing days or not. The students were asked their feelings about coming to school, FACS class, and their long-term goals in life. Our final baseline question asked their thoughts on how well they felt their teacher knew them.

The first question we analyzed was the students’ perceptions of how often they were absent compared to the actual average number of times students were absent. Our initial data revealed that 19.4% of students felt they were gone from school more than the average student (Fig. 1). The fact was 37.5% of students were gone more than the average. The responses demonstrated that the students did not have a full comprehension of how often they were missing classes.

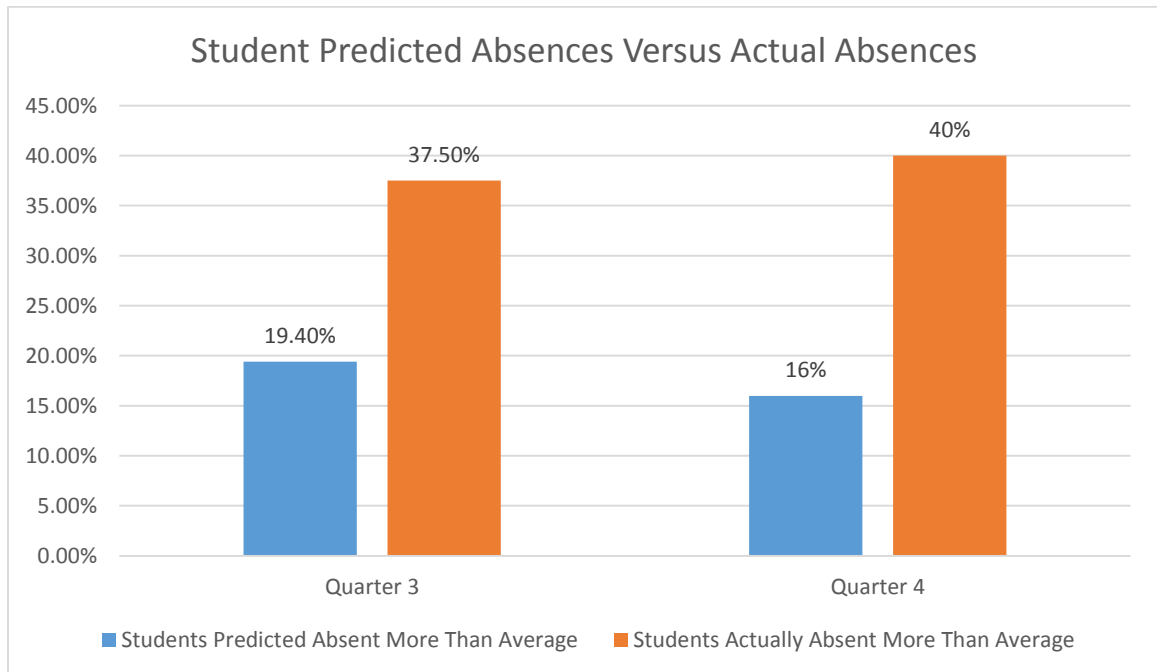


Figure 1. Student perceptions of absences 3rd quarter and 4th quarter versus actual absences

The data showed similar results in the self-reflection after our research period. We had 16.1% of students respond that they were likely to be absent more than the average student (Fig. 1). Our data reveals 40% of students are missing class more than calculated average of 2.65 days. In this case, the actual student absences were twice that of what the students believed was the average.

We also asked the students what their perception was regarding the importance of attending school regularly (Fig. 2). The self-reflection given at the beginning of our research showed the most frequent response being students strongly agreed school was important to attend. The results were comparable for the 4th quarter replies and again the high occurrence of strongly agree was repeated. Overall the students showed they placed a high value on attending school regularly.

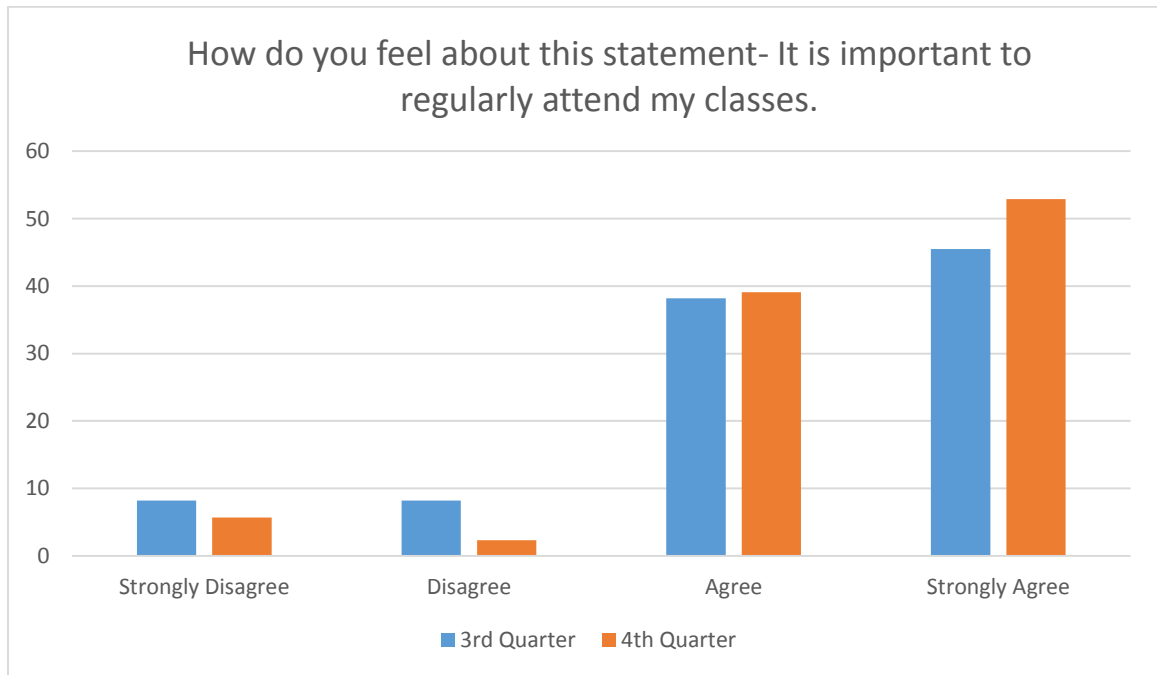


Figure 2. Student perceptions of the importance of school attendance

As we started breaking down the student attendance for the 160 students, we discovered several interesting data points. While tracking the absences for the students, students were gone anywhere between 0 and 17 class periods in each quarter (Fig. 5). The average number of absences for the 3rd quarter of school was 3.05 days. When the students suggested they were gone an average of 1.49 days in the quarter, they were actually absent twice the number of their perceived absences. The 4th quarter data was similar in the average number of absences was 2.65 days, but their estimated number of absences was 1.85 days (Fig. 3). Even though the students claim to place a high value on school attendance, on average they did not have a clear understanding of how much they were absent from class.

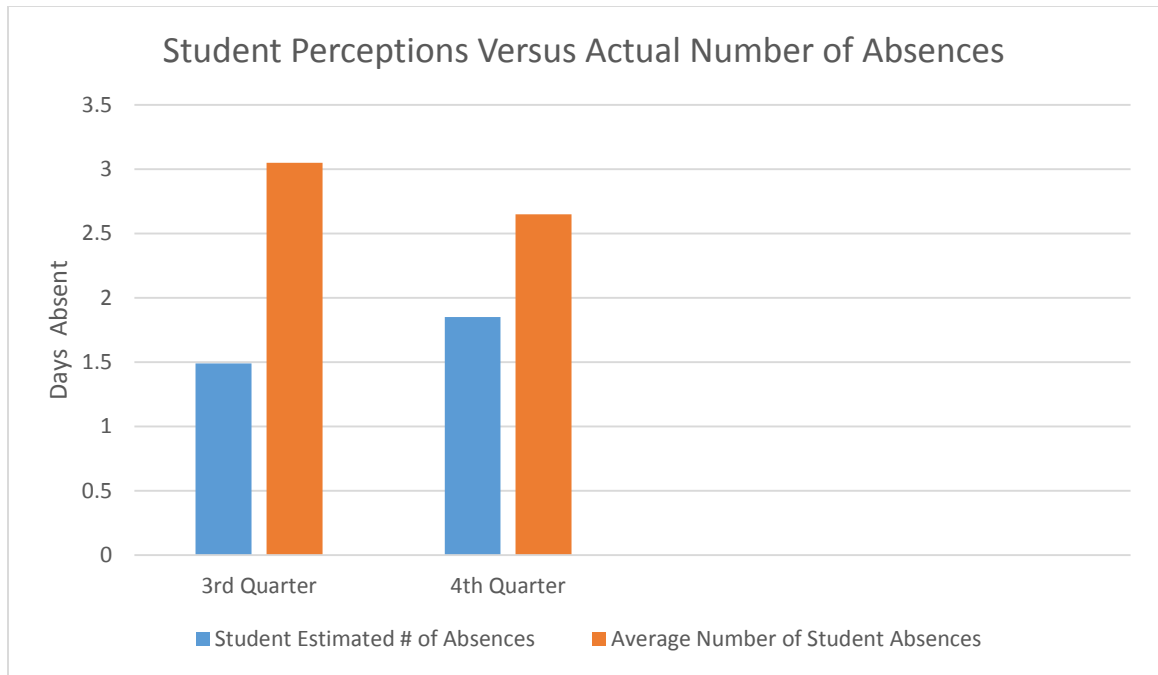


Figure 3. Student perceptions compared to actual number of absences

Using our school attendance policy as a guide, we focused our attention on students who were placed on contracts by administration for poor attendance. These students were offered additional invitations to our homework club. We also initiated

conversations with them in regards to reasons for their absences and their feelings about being at school. These students equated to 20 out of the 160 students in our study. We have documented their grades (Fig. 4) and number of absences (Fig. 5) anonymously for the 3rd and 4th quarter.

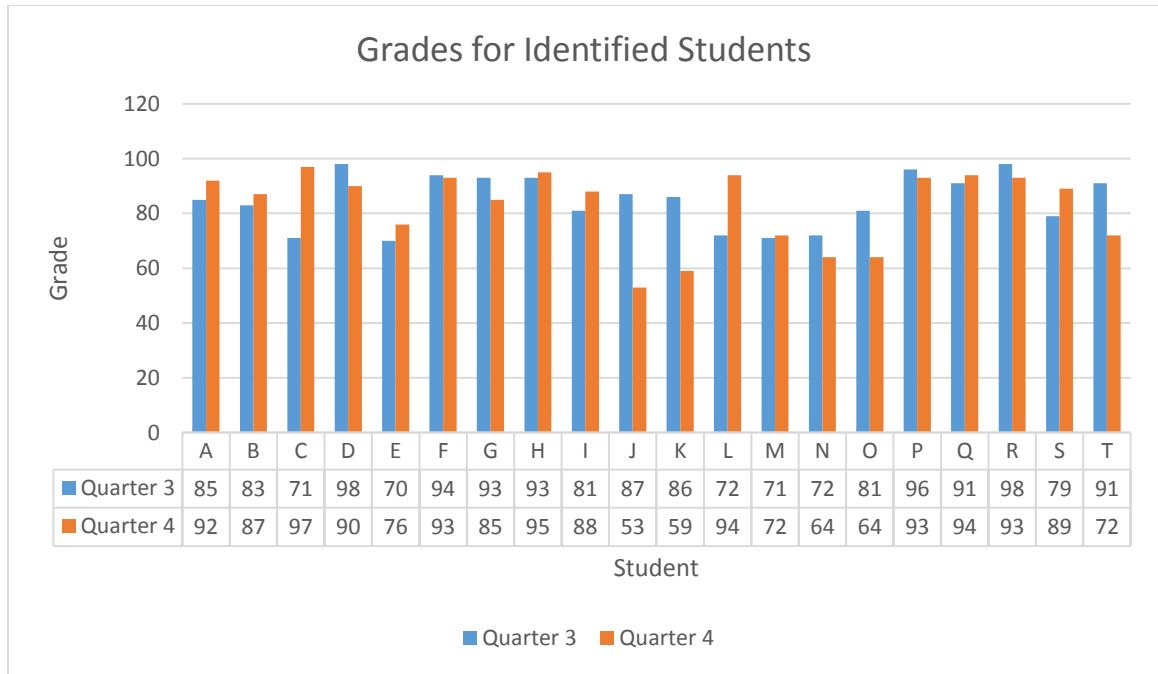


Figure 4. Grades for students identified with attendance issues

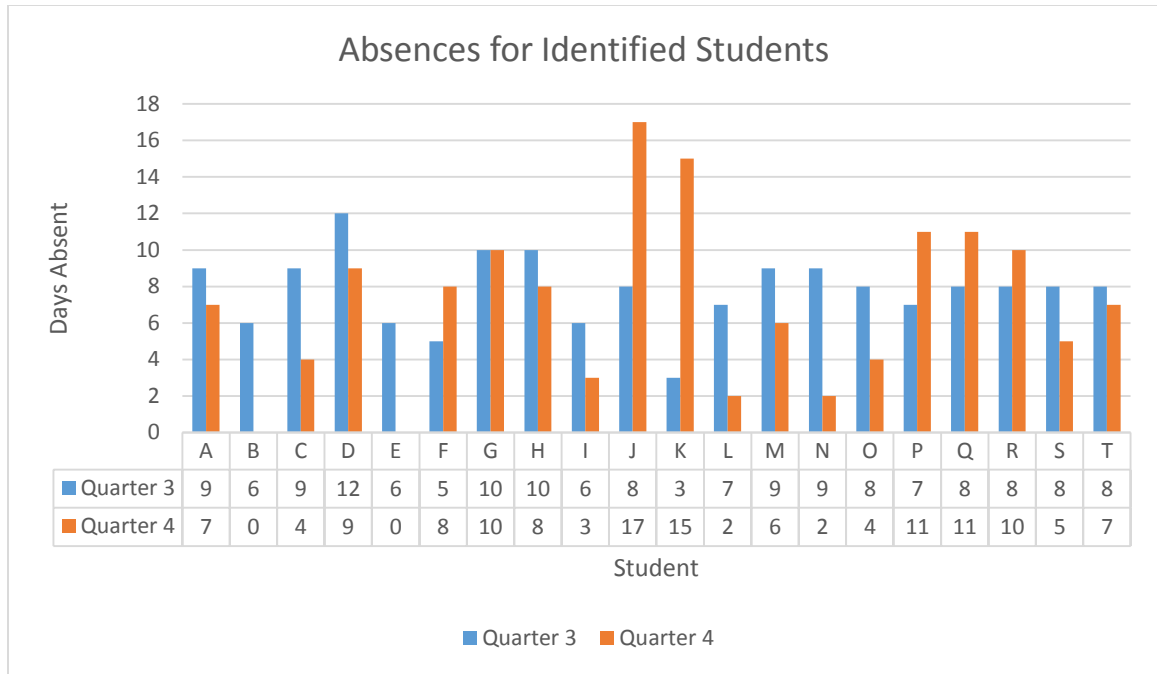


Figure 5. Absence totals for students with attendance issues

Of these students who were given additional encouragement to attend, only one student regularly visited the offered homework club for extra help with her school work. We were quite disappointed with this low participation in the club, but realize it was a risky venture to ask students who already struggle to attend classes regularly to spend extra time in school. Through our conversations with these students, we found that some of them struggled with attendance due to family issues, some due to physical or mental illness, or some just didn't see the importance of being in school if they could keep their grades up despite lack of attendance. It was very eye-opening to hear them speak so candidly in some cases. Over the course of the intervention period, 10 of the 20 students improved their grades in FACS class (Fig. 4) and 13 of the 20 missed fewer days during the 4th quarter of school (Fig. 5).

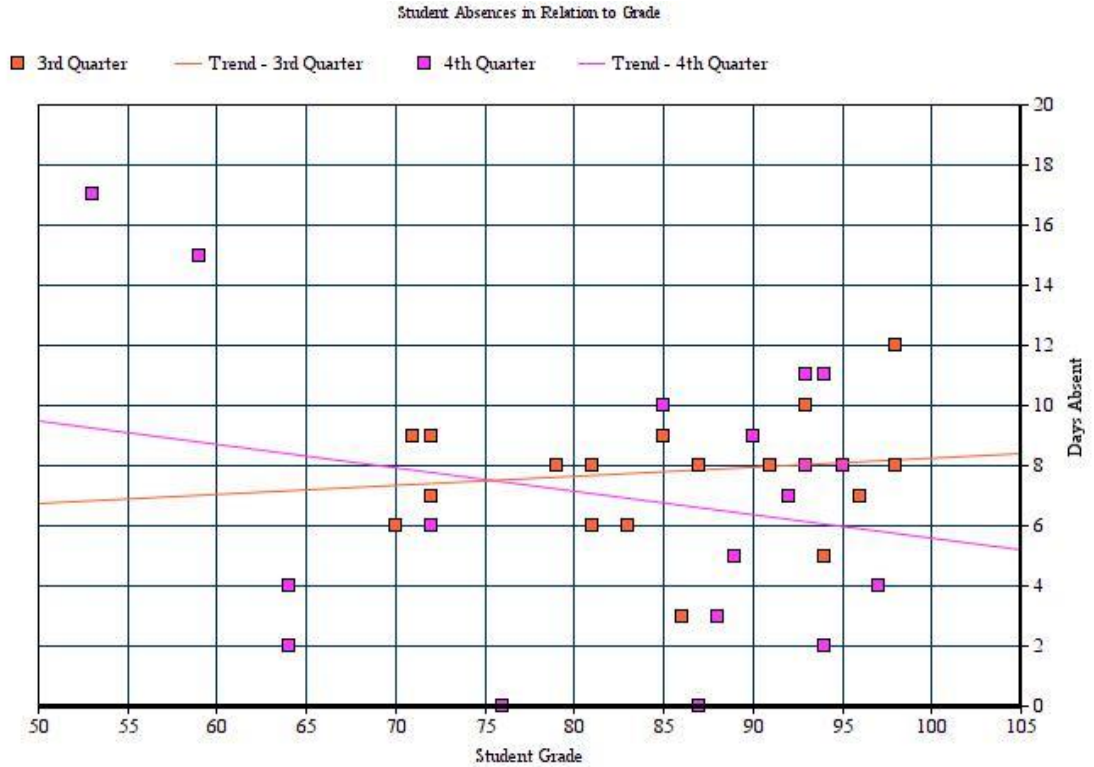


Figure 6. Student absences in relation to grade

While we expected to see a clear correlation between the number of days absent and student grades, Figure 6 shows that this is not the case. Some students missed many days of class and were still able to maintain a passing grade. This could be due to a number of factors. In our conversations with students during homework club, we learned there were a wide array of factors influencing students' absences. One student had a child of her own and was struggling with childcare and trying to pass her core classes in order to graduate. She made the decision to focus less on her FACS class grade in order to focus on the credit she needed to graduate, this caused her absences to go up and her grade to go down. Another student indicated that she felt supported and had a good relationship with her FACS teacher, but didn't feel comfortable with many of her peers in

school. She told her teacher, “Why do I have to be here, if I can get the work done and maintain good grades?”

We implemented a standards-based grading system in our classes during our research period. This process involved looking through our curriculum and focusing on the standards we wanted our students to be able to master. It was interesting to observe that students didn’t seem concerned with the change in our grading practices. The students were ultimately more concerned with receiving “full points” on an assignment. In the case of the student who verbalized the ability to maintain good grades when not in class, the standards-based grading shift offered a benefit to her as she was able to demonstrate her mastery and not be penalized for attendance.

Our other focus and final point of data from our self-reflection Google form was the student perception of how well their FACS teacher knew them (Fig. 7). Our literature review reinforced connections between teacher and student relationships and the success of students in our classrooms. As much as you can quantify relationships, we were looking for extra time with our students during the homework club to connect with students and encourage them. This data is general in that every student was asked to answer the question regardless if they ever attended a homework club, but it does give us an idea of how students feel about our relationships at school.

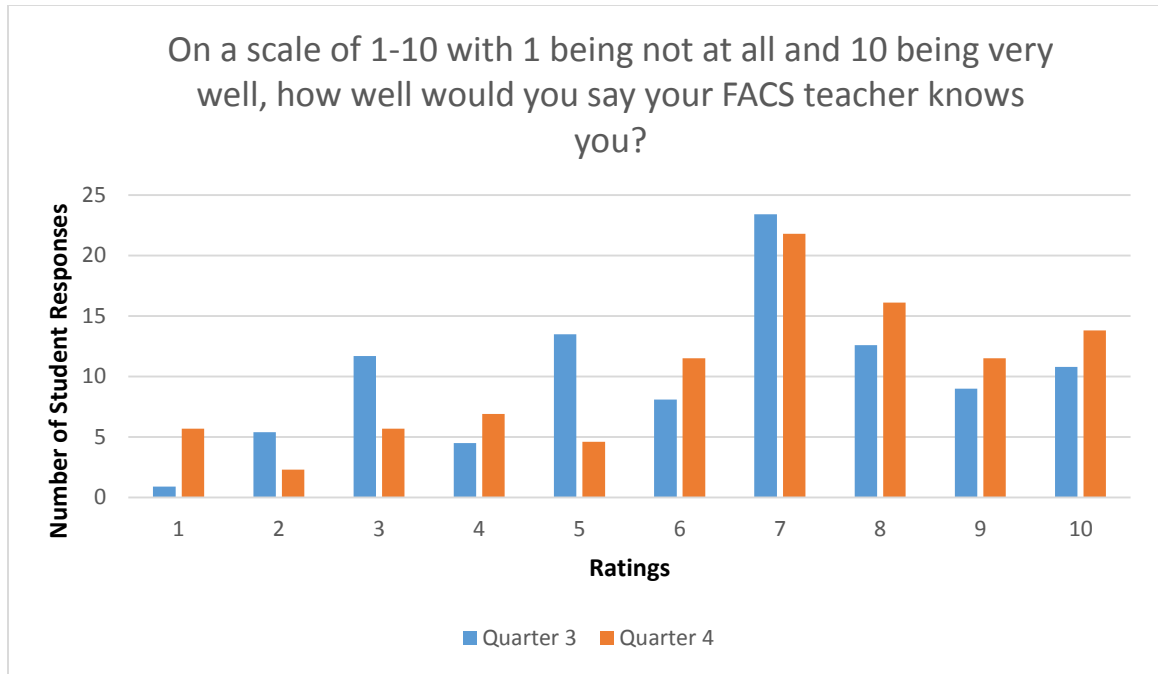


Figure 7. Student perceptions of teacher relationships

It was encouraging to note that the responses on the top end of our scale were answered by more students both before and after the research period, however we had hoped for more growth in this area overall. We had less participation in the self-reflection at the end of the data collection, and feel this may have resulted in not as much growth as we had hoped. Our research window was at the very end of the school semester and one possible reason for less participation was students were ready for summer, and therefore were less likely to contribute to our information gathering.

One reassuring result in the data was 63.9% of students rated a 6 or above at beginning of the research for how well they feel their teacher knew them on a scale of 1 to 10. After the weeks of focusing on building relationships, 74.7% of students rated 6 or above on the same measure. The difference between the beginning and end of research period was a gain of 17 percent. Regardless if the homework club was a success or

failure by the lack of number of student participants, we felt this was a positive note in building relationships with our learners.

Action Plan

The conclusion of our data collection provided us with many things to consider. It was surprising to see how often students were actually gone even though attendance was something we knew to be an issue. In our most impactful example, a student was gone 17 days out of the quarter, which equated to over one-third of the school days. This is a clear example of why researching student attendance is pertinent. Tracking this information was very thought provoking, and made us consider new habits in the next school year to help students to succeed.

Our school policy places students on attendance contracts when they are absent two times in a semester without an excuse. Excessive excused absences are handled on a case by case basis. When we focused on the grade and attendance data for these specific students, we discovered that standards-based grading and relationship building benefitted some students in spite of poor attendance.

Career and Technical Education, that include FACS classes, prepare students for the world of work. Therefore, the students who randomly choose to show up to work are not making the commitment to succeed. They may be able to perform well at work when they are there, but will not keep their employment for much time if they choose not to attend. A North Dakota standard has a section that includes job-keeping skills. We see the connection between attendance at school and in the workplace. Regular attendance demonstrates the ability to be a professional in the workplace.

In regards to standards based grading, we appreciated the fact that we focused on mastery of learning rather than completion of work. However, we want to encourage attendance especially in our career based classes, and standards-based grading didn't necessarily encourage attendance. We did notice that students were more concerned with the completion of classroom work versus being able to demonstrate their competency. In order to continue, we feel it would be helpful if mastery versus completion was a school-wide initiative. This change would possibly teach students to be less conditioned to check items off of a list and more focused on learning.

In the future, we would like to offer the homework club to all students. Although participation was low, this did open up an opportunity to talk to students outside of class. We would like to have specific hours available to students to keep the lines of communication open and show our commitment to them.

Tracking attendance is a valuable tool for our teaching practice. School policy requires daily attendance, but having the numbers in front of us during our research alerted us to situations and ultimately the conversations necessary to offer help to students. It was beneficial to know what circumstances were keeping them from school or school work and alerted teachers to any underlying issues of their absenteeism. This realization highlighted the importance of communication and taking the time to get to know students early in the semester.

The relationship component of the research did improve student grades and attendance. This conclusion is reinforced in our literature review that found supportive relationships with teachers positively impact student academic performance (Klem &

Connell, 2004). When we learn of their life circumstances, we can more effectively intervene and help them succeed.

This action research project has encouraged us to think about attendance issues and relationships along with standards-based grading. One potential idea for a future action research project would be linking attendance issues to any demographics for example, socioeconomics, English Language Learners, gender, or involvement in extra-curricular activities. It would be interesting to see what connections could be made, or conclusions could be drawn from this particular information.

As we move forward, we will continue to reflect on what we have learned on this project and look ahead to future endeavors to help students. This research has given us concrete information to work with instead of theories and speculation. The bottom line is when we build individual relationships, we can effectively help students and create lifelong learners.

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Appendix A

Student Self-Reflection

This self-reflection will give us some understanding of your opinions about school and FACS classes. Please be honest, as this is anonymous and will not affect your grade in any way. Your participation is voluntary and you may opt out at any time.

How many hours in an average week do you study (all classes included)?

How many hours in an average week do you study for FACS class?

On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not at all and 10 being very well, how well would you say your FACS teacher knows you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at All Very Well

What are your feelings about coming to school?

What are your feelings about coming to FACS class?

How many times have you been absent from your FACS class 3rd quarter?

Would you say you are absent more than the average student?

- Yes
- No

How do you feel about this statement - It is important to regularly attend my classes.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

What are your goals after high school?

What else do you want Mrs. Romaine / Mrs. Sinkler to know?

What do you feel would help you to succeed in FACS?

You can select more than one option.

- More time to work on assignments in class
- Extra assistance from my teacher
- Time after school with teacher
- Time during Study Hall or Intervention with teacher
- Better attendance in class.

Appendix B

Building Relationships

Student: _____

Date: _____

Eye Contact	
Conversation About School Initiated by Student	
Conversation About School Initiated by Teacher	
Conversation About Non - School Topic Initiated by Student	
Conversation About Non - School Topic Initiated by Teacher	

Notes:

Post Homework Club Reflection Questions

- What evidence did I see today that standards based grading shift was positively/negatively impacting students?
- What evidence did I see today that after school homework help had impacted student performance or attitudes about school?
- What evidence did I see/hear today that affects student attendance?

Appendix C

Student Self-Reflection, End of Year

This self-reflection will give us some understanding of your opinions about school and FACS classes. Please be honest, as this is anonymous and will not affect your grade in any way. Your participation is voluntary and you may opt out at any time.

How many hours in an average week do you study (all classes included)?

How many hours in an average week do you study for FACS class?

On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not at all and 10 being very well, how well would you say your FACS teacher knows you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at All Very Well

What are your feelings about coming to school?

What are your feelings about coming to FACS class?

How many times have you been absent from your FACS class 4th quarter?

Would you say you are absent more than the average student?

- Yes
- No

How do you feel about this statement - It is important to regularly attend my classes.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

What are your goals after high school?

What do you feel would help you to succeed in FACS?

You can select more than one option.

- More time to work on assignments in class
- Extra assistance from my teacher
- Time after school with teacher
- Time during Study Hall or Intervention with teacher
- Better attendance in class.

What else do you want Mrs. Romaine / Mrs. Sinkler to know?