

Chronic Absenteeism in Title I Elementary Rural Schools Within Virginia: A Leadership  
Perspective

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Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, Appalachia, chronic absenteeism, leadership, rural

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine how school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachian Title I elementary schools. This study also investigated the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism among students in rural Appalachian schools in Virginia and examined how school leadership can effectively respond to this systemic issue. The study was guided by the research question, How do school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools? Five building-level administrators from multiple rural counties participated in individual Zoom interviews. Transcripts were member checked and analyzed thematically using iterative coding and constant comparison. Leaders described chronic absenteeism as a multifaceted problem driven primarily by out-of-school factors, especially familial determinants, and compounded by limited external accountability. Effective leadership emphasized proactive, student-centered practices, including early identification of emerging patterns through real-time attendance data, relational mentoring, frequent check-ins, and supportive family outreach. Incentive-based systems, implemented at schoolwide and classroom levels, were reported to strengthen engagement and reinforce shared expectations. Leaders also highlighted community collaboration as essential, citing partnerships with school-based health services, instructional recovery opportunities, transportation supports, and strategic social media communication to reduce barriers and increase transparency. Findings suggest that sustained reductions in chronic absenteeism in rural settings require relational leadership, data-informed monitoring, and cross-sector collaboration that extends beyond compliance-oriented policies. Implications include

prioritizing preventive approaches, investing in attendance data capacity and staffing, and supporting flexible, context-specific partnerships that address structural barriers affecting students and families. Future researchers should include student and caregiver perspectives and examine intervention durability across leadership transitions. Policy support for rural divisions should promote transportation and healthcare access, trauma-informed professional development, and coordinated interagency response systems.

*Keywords:* absenteeism, Appalachia, attendance, data-informed leadership, rural schools, trauma-informed practice

### **General Audience Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine how school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachian Title I elementary schools. Five principals from Virginia participated in Zoom interviews that were analyzed to identify common themes. Leaders described absenteeism as a complex issue influenced largely by family challenges and limited external accountability. Despite these barriers, participants emphasize the impact of proactive student center practices, including early identification of attendance concerns, strong relationships with students, regular communications with families, positive reinforcement systems, and incentive programs. Community partnerships, school-based health services, transportation supports and social media communications were also identified as important in reducing barriers and strengthening engagement. Findings suggest that chronic absenteeism in rural schools requires relational leadership, consistent attendance monitoring, and coordinated collaboration among schools, family, and community agencies, along with continued investment in preventative supports and integrated systems that address broader student and family needs.

## Dedication

This work is devoted to my children, Trajan and Addison, and my husband Steven. You all have been my steady foundation through the highs and lows of this journey. Thank you for your endless encouragement during difficult times and for extending grace when I had to miss special moments to pursue this dream. Your love, patience and belief in me carried me further than you will ever know. I am forever grateful for your support during this journey to fulfill my dream.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Overview of Study

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as a notable barrier to academic achievement across the United States. The U.S. Department of Education ([U.S. DOE], 2025) reported that during the 2021–2022 academic year, the national chronic absenteeism rate surged to 31%, nearly doubling the pre-pandemic levels of around 15%. Although there was a slight decline to 28% in the 2022–2023 school year, the rates remained high (U.S. DOE, 2025). This phenomenon undermines students’ educational outcomes in school and their long-term achievement (Gottfried, 2014; Tsevat et al., 2025). For example, in Virginia, data from the 2023–2024 school year indicated that students classified as chronically absent performed 19% below non-chronically absent students in reading and 26% below their peers in math (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2024).

Recent statewide data from the VDOE suggest improvements in chronic absenteeism rates, yet disparities in attendance outcomes remain evident across local contexts. For the 2023–2024 school year, Virginia’s chronic absenteeism rate declined from 19.3% in 2022–2023 to 16.1%, representing 40,974 fewer chronically absent students. Division-level data in Virginia suggest that some rural areas continue to experience higher levels of absenteeism rates than urban and suburban divisions, such as counties like Buchanan with 19.7% and Dickenson at 40.5% (VDOE, 2024). Collectively, these findings reinforce the need for targeted leadership, policy and community-driven interventions to mitigate geographic disparities in attendance (Germain et al., 2024; VDOE, 2024).

The challenge is particularly pronounced in rural Appalachia regions, where geographic, economic, and systemic social issues intersect as compounding barriers to regular school

attendance. Communities within this region experience a notably higher rate of poverty, limited access to healthcare services, and lower levels of adult educational attainment compared to national averages (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2025b). The socioeconomic challenges contribute to the disproportionately higher prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in Appalachia, including abuse, neglect, parental substance use, and household instability (ARC, 2025b; Bethell et al., 2017). The persistence of poverty, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and intergenerational trauma further exacerbate the risk of ACEs in this region. Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and instability in family and community contexts can make consistent school attendance difficult, contributing to chronic absenteeism and widening academic disparities between rural and urban students (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2019; Attendance Works, 2023).

Adverse childhood experiences have been increasingly recognized as both a symptom of and a contributing factor to chronic absenteeism (Tsevat et al., 2025). For example, Tsevat et al. (2025) found that even a single ACE nearly doubled the likelihood of health-related chronic absenteeism among children, with general health status partially mediating this relationship. Stempel et al. (2017) demonstrated that exposure to one or more ACEs notably increased the odds of chronic school absence. Crouch et al. (2019) reported comparable findings, finding that children with four or more ACEs had higher odds of absenteeism, disengagement, and grade repetition compared to peers with fewer ACEs. Bellis et al. (2018) also identified a strong association between ACE exposure and school absenteeism. This dissertation explores the relationship between chronic absenteeism and systemic factors in rural Appalachia in Virginia to uncover underlying challenges and inform actionable interventions that support students through school leadership.

## Statement of Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the impact of chronic absenteeism on academic performance and the strategies employed by school leaders in rural Appalachia to address this issue. Research indicates that chronic absenteeism correlates with lower academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017), increased dropout rates (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022), and diminished future opportunities (Gubbels et al., 2019). While chronic absenteeism is a growing national concern, most existing studies concentrate on urban populations, overlooking the unique challenges faced by rural communities. This gap limits understanding of how rurality, compounded by trauma and socioeconomic disadvantage, influences student attendance and educational outcomes. Studies have shown that the absenteeism crisis begins during the early childhood educational level (Gottfried, 2019; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Early childhood education years have a profound impact on students' academic growth (Gottfried et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2017), their socio-emotional behavior (Gottfried, 2014), and their success and well-being later in life (Watts et al., 2018). When students miss school during the early education stage, they often demonstrate less favorable results in developmental milestones, such as language development, literacy, and numeracy skills (Gottfried, 2014; McCoy et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2018). Chronic absenteeism is a multifaceted issue that encapsulates factors that can negatively affect students' academic performance as well as their social-emotional well-being (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; Özcan, 2021).

The causes of chronic absenteeism are complex and often interrelated. Socioeconomic factors play a pivotal role (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Students from low-income families may face barriers such as unreliable transportation (Gottfried et al., 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019), food insecurity (Gubbels et al., 2019), or unstable housing situations (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Gottfried

& Ansari, 2022). Additionally, health-related issues are a factor that contributes to chronic absenteeism throughout the duration of students' academic careers (Gottfried, 2014). Students who suffer from anxiety and other social issues may find that personal interactions or engaging in daily procedures, such as walking in the halls or classroom procedures, are overwhelming (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Additionally, factors such as negative school climate (Gottfried, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013) and systemic issues that lead to a lack of adequate support resources (Gottfried, 2014) further compound the risk of chronic absenteeism.

Research indicates that systemic factors within educational institutions can play a role in contributing to chronic absenteeism (Kearney, 2021; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). For example, systemic issues, such as schools with fewer resources, inadequate staffing, limited access to mental health services, or a lack of extracurricular programs are more likely to produce higher absentee rates (Gottfried, 2014; Gubbels et al., 2019). These conditions often reflect broader structural inequalities that disproportionately affect schools in lower-income or rural areas, where funding limitations for essential resources, such as mental health professionals, health services, and transportation hinder the implementation of support services (Gottfried, 2014). The lack of supportive personnel, including counselors and school psychologists, reduces a school's capacity to address students' academic, behavioral, and emotional needs, factors that have been closely linked to attendance patterns (H. N. Chang & Romero, 2008).

The absence of extracurricular considerable opportunities limits students' sense of belonging and engagement with the school community, which can further affect attendance issues (Bethell et al., 2017). These deficits can result in students feeling disconnected from the school environment, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and missed school days. School climate also plays an instrumental role in consistent attendance. Scholarly work has shown that negative

school climates, including issues like bullying, poor teacher-student relationships, and inadequate discipline practices, correlate with higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). A study by Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) emphasized that students attending schools with low academic engagement and high levels of discipline issues are more likely to be chronically absent. Gottfried and Ansari (2022) suggested that the lack of supportive systems, such as counseling and academic interventions, can amplify absenteeism, particularly for students who are already facing personal or socioeconomic challenges. Addressing these systemic barriers is key to reducing chronic absenteeism and fostering improved results for all students. Chronic absenteeism among students remains a critical issue in rural Appalachia, impacting educational outcomes and long-term well-being. Research suggests that students facing ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and economic hardship are at a higher risk of disengaging from school, leading to academic failure, social isolation, and reduced future opportunities. Students with exposure to ACEs demonstrate a higher likelihood of experiencing chronic absenteeism. Stempel et al. (2017) found that students with two or more ACEs had twice the odds of chronic absenteeism compared to their peers. Tsevat et al. (2025) reported that the presence of a single ACE more than doubled the likelihood of health-related chronic absenteeism.

In Appalachia, 42% of the population lives in rural areas, which creates challenges due to geographical isolation and limited access to support services (Vance et al., 2012; Vanderpool et al., 2019). Appalachian communities often maintain deep social and cultural bonds, including strong family and community ties, a pronounced sense of place, and values of self-reliance and mutual support that shape daily life and responses to adversity (Gibbons et al., 2019; Paskett et al., 2019). Such cultural orientations influence how community members engage with

institutions and may affect patterns of help-seeking, use of formal services, and perceptions of external interventions, underscoring the importance of culturally informed approaches to understanding and addressing community challenges. School leadership plays a vital role in shaping policies and interventions that support student retention (Leithwood et al., 2004), but the extent to which leadership practices effectively address absenteeism among students in the rural Appalachian community is currently unclear.

Rural Appalachia communities face disproportionately high rates of chronic absenteeism compared to the national average (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018), with some regional and local data indicating rates well above 25% and, in certain districts, approaching or exceeding 30% (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The rural Appalachia region possesses a distinct cultural and historical identity, shaped by geography, economic history, and social values. The geographic makeup of mountainous terrain has historically created physical isolation, fostering tight-knit communities and a reliance on local networks (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Economically, extractive industries, such as coal mining and timber have dominated the region, with boom-and-bust cycles and exploitative practices contributing to long-standing economic instability and skepticism toward outside institutions (Keefe, 2005). Strong community bonds, extended family structures, and deep-rooted cultural traditions, such as storytelling and music further define the unique social fabric that influences behaviors, values, and coping mechanisms (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Keefe, 2005). Collectively, these contextual characteristics shaped participants' experiences and perspectives and informed the development of the study's themes and findings related to leadership practices and attendance outcomes.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education (2023), students in rural settings are more likely to face barriers, such as transportation issues, health disparities, and

limited access to support services. The opioid epidemic has further intensified the impact of ACEs in Appalachia, leading to an increase in children living in kinship care (living with a relative), unstable housing, or foster placements, all factors strongly associated with erratic school attendance (Meinhofer & Angleró-Díaz, 2019). Research has shown that students who experience ACEs are considerably more likely to miss school (Crouch et al., 2019; Stempel et al., 2017). However, there is limited research that specifically examines the effect on student attendance within a unique cultural and socioeconomic landscape like rural Appalachia. Without a nuanced understanding of this dynamic, policymakers and educators may fail to implement targeted strategies that address the root causes of absenteeism.

### **Justification of Study**

This study was justified by the urgent need to address the knowledge gap regarding the intersection of academic performance and chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachia. Existing literature on chronic absenteeism largely focuses on urban populations, leaving a critical void in understanding how rurality intersects with trauma to affect school attendance. Schools in Appalachia often face limited capacity to implement comprehensive interventions at scale (staffing and funding constraints), making it essential to use local needs assessment data to target support where they are most needed and likely to be effective (U.S. DOE, 2023). By examining the factors contributing to absenteeism in this context, the study aimed to provide education administrators and community stakeholders with actionable insights to inform targeted attendance strategies, enhance community awareness of chronic absenteeism, and identify initiatives that promote student engagement and resilience. The research provides rural schools and communities in Appalachia with strategies that could help improve overall attendance,

which could lead to increased student achievement. This research could also be used in professional development for leaders in rural Appalachia.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine what influences chronic absenteeism in Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools and explore ways in which leadership can respond to the systemic challenges. Data collected through interviews with school administrators were analyzed to identify common themes, challenges, and potential strategies for reducing absenteeism and supporting students. By focusing on rural Appalachian contexts, this study highlighted the cultural and economic factors that uniquely influence students' behaviors, school engagement, and attendance patterns.

### **Research Questions**

The research question was, How do school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools? There are three sub-questions:

- (a) What barriers do school leaders encounter when trying to reduce chronic absenteeism in their rural setting?
- (b) What specific leadership strategies have school leaders used to facilitate efforts to address chronic absenteeism?
- (c) If there is collaboration with families, community members, and/or other healthcare providers to mitigate chronic absenteeism, which methods may have worked best or perhaps fallen short of expectations?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) was used to examine the influence of interacting factors on chronic absenteeism within rural Appalachian communities. This framework positions chronic absenteeism not as an isolated behavioral issue, but as a multifaceted outcome shaped by cumulative exposure to trauma and moderated by ecological systems unique to rural Appalachia. By applying this framework, school leaders can better understand how multiple systems converge to shape absenteeism and identify leverage points for intervention across ecological levels.

At the microsystem level, children experiencing ACEs, such as parental substance abuse, domestic violence, or neglect, face disruptions in emotional regulation, executive functioning, and attachment, which can impair their ability to attend and engage in school consistently (De Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018). Factors such as inconsistent routines, health-related concerns, caregiving responsibilities, and limited adult supervision can disrupt students' ability to attend school. These individual-level disruptions manifest in symptoms, such as school avoidance, anxiety, and academic disengagement.

At the mesosystem level, the interaction between families and schools is often weakened by stigma, mistrust, and a lack of trauma-informed infrastructures. Schools in rural Appalachia frequently lack sufficient support personnel (school counselors or psychologists), diminishing their ability to respond effectively to students' trauma-related needs (Chang & Romero, 2008). Weak coordination between schools, families, and external supports may hinder early identification of attendance concerns and delay intervention efforts.

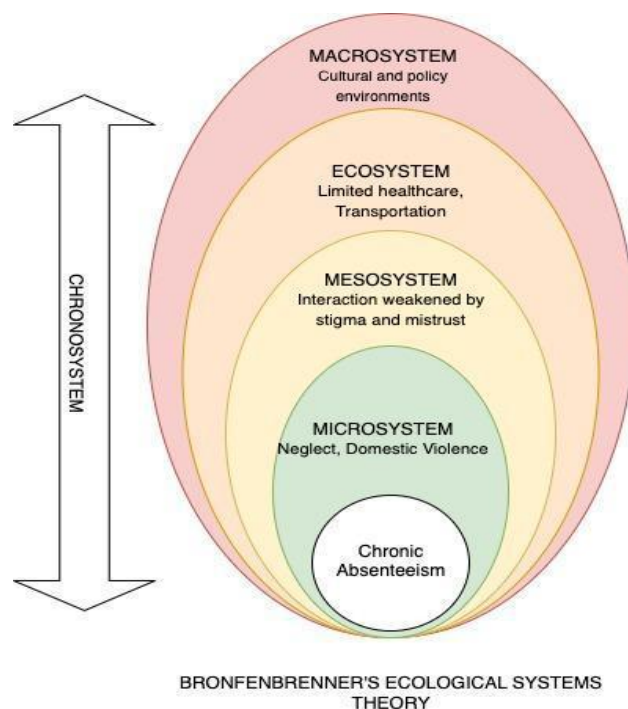
The exosystem reflects broader structural barriers prevalent in rural areas, including limited access to healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity. These contextual stressors exacerbate the impact of ACEs by creating instability in students' lives outside of

school, which can indirectly influence their attendance patterns (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). The macrosystem includes cultural values, regional norms, and policy environments that shape local responses to childhood adversity. In rural Appalachia, cultural stigmas surrounding mental health, intergenerational trauma, and political underinvestment in public services often limit systemic interventions and perpetuate cycles of absenteeism (Showalter et al., 2019).

Lastly, the chronosystem incorporates the dimension of time, acknowledging how the cumulative and often intergenerational impact of ACEs within families and communities may affect students' attendance trajectories throughout their academic lifespan. This framework, shown in Figure 1, conceptualizes chronic absenteeism as a trauma-responsive outcome embedded within overlapping environmental systems. By applying this framework, this study emphasized the importance of leadership practices that are responsive to environmental complexity and that leverage collaboration across systems to address the attendance challenges in rural Title I Appalachian schools in Virginia.

## Figure 1

### *Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory*



*Note.* The author created this figure to illustrate how symptoms of chronic absenteeism manifest across the different levels of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

### Key Definitions

*Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)* are traumatic events that occur during childhood which can negatively impact physical and mental health (Barnes et al., 2020).

*Chronic absenteeism* is missing 10% of the academic year for any reason, including excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions (VDOE, 2023b, para. 1).

*Rural* is any population, housing, or "territory not within an urban area, where urban areas include urbanized areas with 50,000 or more people and urban clusters with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999." Therefore, anything outside of these classifications is considered rural (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

*Trauma-Informed School* is an educational environment that recognizes, understands, and responds to the effects of trauma, creating a safe and supportive space that fosters student well-being, resilience, and academic success through policies, practices, and staff training (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017).

*Urban* is any region with a population of 2,500 or more, categorized into urbanized areas with 50,000 or more people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study's limitations and delimitations reflect intentional methodological decisions designed to prioritize depth of understanding over statistical generalizability. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the small sample size, purposive participant selection, and emphasis on context-specific meaning may limit broad transferability; however, these characteristics are aligned with qualitative standards that value rich description and interpretive insight (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, because findings were derived primarily from participant self-report, results may be influenced by social desirability response bias, in which individuals may present responses they perceive as favorable or professionally acceptable (Lim, 2025). The study's regional focus on rural Title I Appalachian schools in Virginia further constrains transferability, yet this boundary strengthened the study by situating leadership practices within the social and organizational conditions most relevant to chronic absenteeism in similar rural contexts (Lim, 2025).

The delimitations clarify the intentional scope of the study by centering exclusively on building-level administrators and focusing specifically on chronic absenteeism, commonly defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). By narrowing the inquiry to leaders positioned close to implementation, the study aligns with

qualitative rigor through clearly defined context and purpose, supporting credibility and meaningful interpretation rather than a broad claim of representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methodological boundaries strengthened the study's trustworthiness by transparently defining its context, purpose, and interpretive framework, while offering findings that may inform future research, policy development, and leadership practice in comparable educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Summary**

This chapter established chronic absenteeism as a considerable educational concern due to its documented association with lower academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017), higher dropout risk (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022), and reduced future opportunities (Gubbels et al., 2019). Although chronic absenteeism is recognized as a growing national issue, the chapter highlighted a gap in existing research, as much of the current literature emphasizes urban settings and does not adequately account for how rural conditions may shape attendance patterns and student outcomes. Limited understanding exists regarding how rurality may influence chronic absenteeism and related educational impacts.

Chapter 1 emphasized that chronic absenteeism is a challenge that often begins during the early childhood years (Gottfried, 2019; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). These early academic years are foundational for children's long-term development, including academic growth (Gottfried et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2017), socio-emotional functioning (Gottfried, 2014), and later educational and well-being (Watts et al., 2018). This chapter also described how chronic absenteeism may disrupt early development, literacy, and numeracy skills (Gottfried, 2014; McCoy et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2018). Chronic absenteeism was framed as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by interconnected academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional factors

(Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; Özcan, 2021), requiring leadership responses that extend beyond simple compliance or attendance enforcement.

Lastly, this chapter justified the need for this study by underscoring the importance of examining the strategies school leaders in rural Title I Appalachian schools in Virginia employ to respond to chronic absenteeism in contextually responsive and sustainable ways. By establishing the study's scope, significance, and scholarly gap, this chapter lays the foundation for leadership practices aimed at improving attendance and supporting student achievement.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

A comprehensive review of literature was conducted to locate the most salient peer-reviewed scholarship on the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism in a rural demographic and how leadership can develop interventions to mitigate chronic absenteeism. The primary purpose of this review was to establish the scholarly foundation for the study, identify gaps in the literature, and inform the development of the study's theoretical framework. These initial searches demonstrated a substantial body of literature addressing absenteeism broadly, with comparatively fewer studies focused specifically on rural educational contexts. The lack of relevant literature pertaining to rural chronic absenteeism led to a search for the most relevant studies on the impact of geographical context and the impact of school leadership in those areas. It was also important to consider how the literature on chronic absenteeism related to ACEs.

A comprehensive search of the literature using the Virginia Tech (VT) remote library began in Fall 2022. This research was enhanced with contributions from cohort and advisor Dr. Carol A. Mullen, who shared multiple-source materials and provided strong guidance over the course of three years. The literature shared provided a direct path to help narrow the focus of the broad topic of chronic absenteeism. This salient research is highlighted in Appendix A.

Academic databases used for this review included EBSCOhost, ERIC, and APA PsycINFO, which were selected due to their extensive coverage of education and social science research. Initial searches using the term *chronic absenteeism* yielded 358 results in both EBSCOhost and ERIC and 136 results in APA PsycINFO. When the term *absenteeism* was combined with *rural schools*, the search produced 90 results in EBSCOhost, 88 in ERIC, and 53 in APA PsycINFO.

A preliminary database search using EBSCOhost, ERIC, and APA PsycINFO was conducted to identify peer-reviewed literature relevant to chronic absenteeism, rural education, and ACEs. The term *chronic absenteeism* yielded 358 results in both EBSCOhost and ERIC, and 136 in APA PsycINFO. Combining *absenteeism* with *rural schools* produced 90 results in EBSCOhost, 88 in ERIC, and 53 in PsycINFO. When filtered to include only full-text scholarly articles published between 2019 and 2024, the search term *chronic absenteeism + education* returned 330 results in both EBSCOhost and ERIC, and 170 in PsycINFO. A more refined query of *absenteeism + rural + education* within the same parameters resulted in 162 articles in EBSCOhost, 160 in ERIC, and 33 in PsycINFO. The term *adverse childhood experiences* alone returned 340 results in EBSCOhost, 332 in ERIC, and a significantly higher number (5,537) in APA PsycINFO, indicating the psychological literature’s intensive focus on trauma research, as seen in Table 1. Additionally, a targeted book search using *leadership + principal + mentor* identified *Equity in School Mentoring and Induction* (Mullen, 2025) as a relevant source to support the dissertation’s framework on leadership and trauma-informed school practices.

**Table 1**

*Database Results*

Search Terms	EBSCOhost	ERIC	APA PsycINFO
Chronic Absenteeism	358	358	136
Absenteeism + Rural Schools	90	88	53
Chronic Absenteeism + Education	330	330	170
Full text and scholarly articles 2019–2025			
Absenteeism + Rural + Education	161	161	33
Full text and scholarly articles 2019–2025			
Adverse Childhood Experiences	340	332	5,537
Full text and scholarly articles 2019–2025			
Book			
Leadership + Principal + Mentor			1

## Google Scholar Search Results

To broaden the scope of the literature review and capture interdisciplinary scholarship, Google Scholar was used as a supplementary search tool. Initial searches using the terms *chronic absenteeism* and *rural education* returned approximately 70,600 results, indicating a broad body of literature addressing attendance and rural schooling. When results were limited to publications from 2019–2025, the number was reduced to 17,200 articles, reflecting more current research relevant to contemporary educational contexts.

Further refinement was conducted by incorporating leadership-related search terms. The search phrase *chronic absenteeism AND rural education AND leadership* yielded 18,200 results between 2019 and 2025. Narrowing the search further to *chronic absenteeism AND rural AND education AND leadership* resulted in 3,240 articles, demonstrating a substantially smaller but more focused body of literature addressing leadership within rural attendance contexts.

To prioritize synthesized and high-quality evidence, review articles were examined separately. Searches for *chronic absenteeism AND rural education* produced 5,600 review articles, which decreased to 218 review articles when limited to publications from 2019–2025. Similarly, the search phrase *chronic absenteeism AND rural leadership* yielded 119 review articles, and a more targeted query of *chronic absenteeism AND rural education AND leadership* resulted in 74 review articles published between 2019 and 2025, as seen in Table 2. The articles were analyzed, with reoccurring patterns identified in chronic absenteeism, which led to 18 relevant main abstracts. The analyzed abstracts led to 11 more sources that contributed to the recurring concepts and provided a foundation for integrating themes in this research.

**Table 2***Google Scholar Search Results*

Chronic absenteeism AND rural education (all articles)	70,600
Chronic absenteeism AND rural education (2019–2025)	17,200
Chronic absenteeism AND rural education AND leadership (2019–2025)	18,200
Chronic absenteeism AND rural AND education AND leadership (2019–2025)	3,240
<b>Review Articles</b>	
Chronic absenteeism AND rural education (all years)	5,600
Chronic absenteeism AND rural education (review articles, 2019–2025)	218
Chronic absenteeism AND rural leadership (review articles, 2019–2025)	119
Chronic absenteeism AND rural AND education AND leadership (review articles, 2019–2025)	74

Titles and abstracts from these searches were screened to identify studies relevant to PreK–12 public education in the United States and to exclude literature focused on medical absenteeism. This process supported the identification of literature that examined systemic attendance challenges, leadership practices, and contextual factors specific to rural educational settings.

**Law and Policy**

Gill et al. (2016) found that when result-based measures are used for accountability in education, the results show stronger student achievement. Following the passing of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), these data-driven measures were developed to ensure that fiscal spending resulted in better student outcomes (Education Commission of the States, 2002). This initial federal accountability program evolved into a national issue when the release of the *A Nation at Risk* report came out in 1983, which emphasized a need for a strong public education system in order to help the economy (Labaree, 2021). The passage of the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) in 1994 marked a critical expansion of federal accountability by requiring states to develop academic standards and aligned assessments in reading and mathematics to meet federal requirements, a framework that later evolved under

subsequent reauthorizations of ESEA, including the ESSA (U.S. DOE, 2020). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 established a federal accountability framework requiring states to report student performance and implement interventions in schools that failed to meet performance standards. This framework was later revised under the ESSA, which maintained federal reporting requirements while granting states increased flexibility in accountability design and intervention strategies (U.S. DOE, 2023).

With the passage of ESSA in 2015, federal education policy placed increased emphasis on student achievement and the implementation of preventative strategies to support graduation outcomes (U.S. DOE, 2020). By 2016, chronic absenteeism was identified by the DOE as a hidden educational crisis, reflecting growing concern about its impact on student success. In response, the federal government launched Every Student, Every Day, the first national initiative developed collaboratively with the Department of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice to address attendance challenges in public schools (U.S. DOE, 2020). Under ESSA, while federal accountability requirements are established nationally, states are responsible for developing their own performance metrics and implementation strategies aligned with local needs. This flexibility allows states and districts to tailor interventions to specific context of the communities they serve. One key ESSA mandate requires public reporting of school performance data, including chronic absentee rates at the school level, with excused and unexcused absences treated equivalently. This policy emphasis reflects a broader commitment to improving student outcomes by addressing attendance as a critical factor influencing academic achievement and long-term success (Rogers & Feller, 2016).

In 2024, the VDOE implemented a streamlined accountability framework that replaced the previous more complex accreditation system with a clear, point-based performance

classification model (VDOE, 2024). The point system is derived by assigning different weights to the framework across elementary, middle, and high school levels. This framework is structured around three key components: mastery, growth, and readiness. In elementary school, readiness emphasizes consistent school attendance and the development of the 5 Cs: critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship. Middle school places a greater emphasis on readiness as students prepare for the academic demands of high school. Regular school attendance remains essential, and students engage in career exploration and gain valuable experience in taking and excelling in advanced coursework. The high school section of the school performance and support framework places an even greater emphasis on readiness, with a primary focus on preparing students for life beyond high school (Nycum & Mullen, 2024; VDOE, 2024).

In Virginia, public education funding is predominantly derived from local government revenue, a structure that disproportionately affects rural Appalachian school divisions with a limited physical capacity. On average, local funding accounts for approximately 50% to 55% of total K–12 education funding in Virginia, while state funding contributes roughly 35% to 40%, and federal funding can process about 8% to 10% of all expenditures (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission [JLARC], 2019; VDOE, 2023a). Appalachian school divisions often struggle to meet local funding expectations due to smaller tax basis, higher poverty rates, and declining population trends. As a result, these divisions are frequently unable to generate the same level of local revenue as more affluent or urban districts, despite comparable state funding formulas. This reliance on local funding exacerbated the quality and staffing, student support services, and program availability, placing rural Appalachia schools at a structural disadvantage

and limiting their capacity to address complex challenges such as chronic absenteeism (JLARC, 2019).

### **Title I**

Title I is a federal program authorized under ESEA, as amended by ESSA, and is designed to provide supplemental funding to schools serving high concentrations of students from low-income families. In Virginia, Title I funds are allocated to local schools based on U.S. Census poverty estimates and are administrated through the VDOE. Eligible schools may operate either a schoolwide program that allows Title I funds to support school improvement plans or a targeted assistance program, which directs services to identified students most at risk of academic failure (VDOE, n.d.). The funding for Title I is intended to supplement state and local funds and commonly used to support instructional staff, intervention programs, family engagement initiatives, and academic support. In rural and high-poverty divisions, Title I often plays a critical role in addressing educational inequities, yet its effectiveness is frequently constrained by staffing limitations and structural barriers to student attendance and achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

### **Rural Appalachia**

Gottfried et al. (2021) review of chronic absenteeism showed that there is a disparity between rural and urban settings. They found that research on the demographic of rural is most often theoretical and there is limited empirical research done on this demographic. Due to the limited amount of research and data available on the demographic differences in attendance, my research is focused on rural Appalachia. Y. Chang et al. (2018) found that rural students in California and Wyoming have surpassed urban and suburban students in chronic absentee rates.

Gottfried et al. (2021) argued that with the emergence of ESSA, there is more focus on addressing the issue of absenteeism in rural areas.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) and the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.) place the term rural in categories based on the distance from urbanized areas. The U.S. Census Bureau currently defines rural and urban areas based on criteria, such as distance, land use, population density, and population thresholds (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Approximately one-third to one-half of schools in 26 states are rural (Showalter et al., 2019). The NCES stated that rural schools made up 28% of all public schools in the United States and enrolled 19% of public-school students (NCES, 2022).

Defining a rural setting is complex and has undergone crucial evolution over time due to technological advancements and demographic shifts (Klar & Huggins, 2020). Thier et al. (2021) found that the majority of studies lack a clear definition of what constitutes a rural area. This study reinforces the understanding that rural America is neither homogeneous nor simply a contrast to metropolitan areas, highlighting the necessity for nuanced perspectives within the research literature. Hawley et al. (2016) argued that while the fact that different definitions exist for rural isn't inherently a problem in rural research, the lack of clearly defining and describing rural in studies makes it very difficult to compare, interpret, or generalize findings from those studies because different researchers might be referring to different areas when they use the term rural, as seen in Table 3. Although a single definition of rural may be neither achievable nor preferred by many researchers and stakeholders, the wide range of definitions and their differing interpretations can create challenges for applying them uniformly and without contention (Hawley et al., 2016; Thier et al., 2021).

**Table 3***U.S. Census Bureau Typologies*

City	Suburban	Town	Rural
Territory in urbanized areas and a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more.	Territory outside the principal city and in an urbanized area with a population of 250,000 or more.	Territory in an urban cluster that is 10 miles or less from an urbanized area.	Rural areas are less than or equal to five miles from an urban area and, less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

*Note.*\* National Center for Educational Statistics (2022) Locale classifications and criteria.

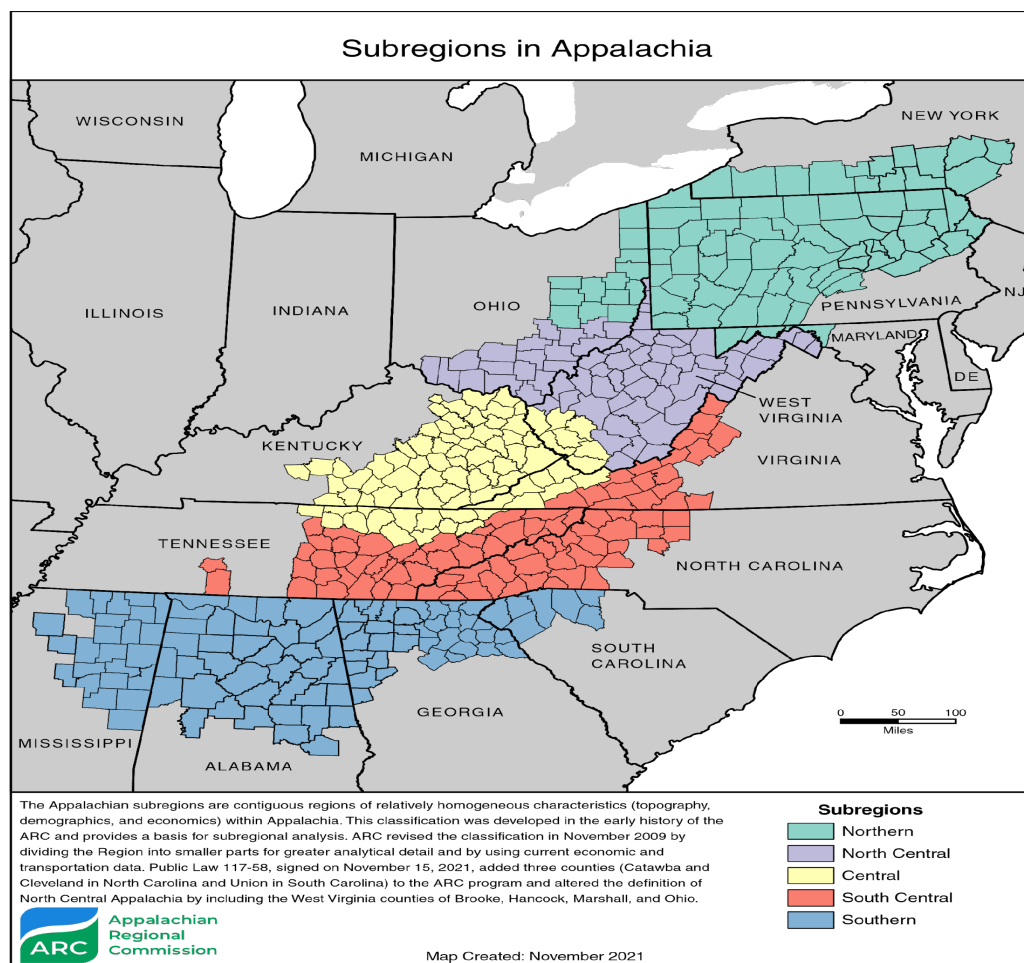
Although each area typology faces its own set of limitations regarding resources, findings indicate that these concerns tend to be unique to each category. For example, less-dense urban areas tend to have limited resources due to population and geography (Y. Chang et al., 2018). Rural is a multifaceted concept that encompasses both “structural and cultural dimensions,” including the physical characteristics of location and population density, as well as the cultural aspects that define rural communities and perspectives of the people who live there (Halfacree, 2017; Inouye et al., 2024). The concept of rural reflects the unique community characteristics, challenges, and strengths of these areas, going beyond mere geography to capture the identity and experiences of rural life (Halfacree, 2017; Thier et al., 2021). Recognizing that each place possesses a unique identity far richer and more nuanced than standard agency definitions of rural allows for a broader understanding of rurality, deepening our insight into these distinct contexts (Inouye et al., 2024).

The Appalachian region, as defined by the ARC (2024) in its authorizing legislation, spans 205,000 square miles, following the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. This region includes all of West Virginia and portions of 12 additional states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The region of Appalachia comprises five

subregions: Northern, Northern Central, Central, South Central, and Southern, as shown in Figure 2 (ARC, 2023). Historically, the Appalachian economy was heavily reliant on industries, such as mining, forestry, agriculture, chemicals, and heavy manufacturing.

## Figure 2

*Map of Appalachian Region (ARC, 2021)*



*Note.* From Subregions in Appalachia [Electronic Image], Research, Evaluations, Maps and Data, 2021. Adapted from: <https://www.arc.gov/map/subregions-in-appalachia/>.

## Chronic Absenteeism

The U.S. DOE (2020) estimated that 12–16% of students in middle and high school were considered chronically absent due to missing 10% of the school year. Studies have shown that

the absenteeism crisis begins during the early childhood educational level (Gottfried, 2019; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). The early childhood education years have a strong impact on students' academic growth (Gottfried et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2017), their socioemotional behavior (Gottfried, 2014), and their success and well-being later in life (Watts et al., 2018). Students who miss more days in their early education often have less favorable results in developmental milestones due to less availability for practicing skills in more supervised environments (Gottfried, 2014; McCoy et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2018). Research indicates that chronic absenteeism correlates with lower academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017), increased dropout rates (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022), and diminished future opportunities (Gubbels et al., 2019). Chronic absenteeism is a multifaceted issue that encapsulates factors that can negatively affect students' academic performance as well as their socioemotional well-being (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; Özcan, 2021).

Research has found that systemic issues within schools can strongly contribute to chronic absenteeism (Kearney, 2021; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Schools with fewer resources, such as inadequate staffing, limited access to mental health services, and a lack of extracurricular programs, are more likely to see higher absentee rates (Gottfried, 2014; Gubbels et al., 2019). These deficits can result in students feeling disconnected from the school environment, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and missed school days. Additionally, school climate plays a crucial role in attendance. Studies have shown that negative school climates, including issues like bullying, poor teacher-student relationships, and inadequate discipline practices, correlate with higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). A study by Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) emphasized that students attending schools with low academic engagement and high levels of discipline issues are more likely to be chronically absent.

Gottfried and Ansari (2022) suggested that the lack of supportive systems, such as counseling and academic interventions, can exacerbate absenteeism, particularly for students who are already facing personal or socioeconomic challenges. Addressing these systemic barriers is key to reducing chronic absenteeism and fostering improved results for all students.

### **Themes From the Literature**

In the analysis of literature, four themes emerged.

(a) ACEs scores are associated with consistent school attendance (Stempel et al., 2017; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022);

(b) Misconception of parental beliefs of absenteeism and school importance (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018; Robinson et al., 2018);

(c) Demographics may have an influence on chronic absenteeism rates and academic performance (Gottfried et al., 2021; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018);

(d) data indicate that a positive school climate and implementation of intervention programs increase student development (Adams & Khojasteh, 2018; Gottfried et al., 2020).

The recurring themes of chronic absenteeism explored during this research strengthen the need for specific demographic research on chronic absenteeism and how policies are implemented by school leadership. Through systemic analysis, the emergent themes were synthesized into overarching categories representing potential contributing factors within rural Appalachian schools, ACEs, parental beliefs and misconceptions, and school climate, including implementation of intervention programs.

### **Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are defined as potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood, which can negatively impact physical and mental health (Barnes et al.,

2020). These stressors, occurring before age 18, often arise from traumatic events, such as abuse, household dysfunction, and neglect (Loveday et al., 2022). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) categorized ACEs as abuse, neglect, and household challenges (CDC, 2019). Research consistently links children who have experienced 2 or more ACEs with an increased likelihood of chronic absenteeism in school (Bethell et al., 2014; Stempel et al., 2017).

Jimenez et al. (2016) found that children susceptible to ACEs during formative years are prone to have poor educational outcomes, including difficulties in language and literacy development. Neurological and emotional responses resulting from prolonged exposure to ACEs are notably correlated with an increased risk of externalizing and internalizing behaviors, as well as diminished prosocial functioning in children (Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Hicks et al., 2021). Higher ACEs scores are associated with behavioral and academic challenges, as children facing multiple ACEs may struggle with self-regulation, social interaction, and attention, all of which are critical for academic success (Jamil et al., 2025; Jimenez et al., 2016). Emotional responses such as anxiety and depression can lead to avoidance behavior in a school setting (Jones & Hoffmann, 2023). Neurological responses to stress during critical developmental periods, particularly in brain regions responsible for executive functioning, attention, and memory retention (Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Hicks et al., 2021; Jones & Hoffmann, 2023), can affect a student's ability to regulate emotion (Jamil et al., 2025), focus on learning tasks, and retain information (Xu et al., 2020). For students with 3 or more ACEs, these challenges often lead to lower performance in both academic and social contexts (Jimenez et al., 2016; Stempel et al., 2017).

Early exposure to ACEs can hinder classroom performance and foundational academic mastery, potentially affecting future academic progress (Stempel et al., 2017). A student's

success in school can be shaped by various ACE-related factors, encompassing individual, environmental, and family influences. Environmental factors, including neighborhood safety and school climate, also impact attendance, with students in unsafe environments often exhibiting disengagement from school, which correlates with lower academic success (Attendance Works, 2018a; Crouch et al., 2019). Exposure to violence or unsafe conditions in their community may lead to anxiety and social isolation (Gottfried, 2014).

Stempel et al. (2017) identified common ACEs affecting children, including family-related issues, such as divorce, substance abuse, and financial instability. The study found that chronic absenteeism was closely associated with multiple ACEs and that exposure to community violence is a known result of poor academic outcomes (Stempel et al., 2017). Students from dysfunctional households are at a higher risk for chronic absenteeism and academic retention (Bethell et al., 2014; Crouch et al., 2019; Stempel et al., 2017). Contributing factors include food insecurity, limited parental involvement, unreliable transportation, and caregiving responsibilities within the household. These factors often exacerbate mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which further detract from academic focus (Gottfried, 2019; Kearney, 2021; Stempel et al., 2017). Children who experience neglect and poverty are more likely to face behavioral challenges, which can lead to increased absenteeism (Bethell et al., 2014; Crouch et al., 2019; Felitti et al., 1998; Stempel et al., 2017). This absenteeism often contributes to social alienation, affecting both the student's and their peers' academic performance, with noticeable declines in reading and math scores for classmates of frequently absent students (Gottfried, 2019). Stempel et al. (2017) concluded that "children with 2 or more ACEs had higher odds of chronic absenteeism" (p. 841). A higher ACEs score correlates with a greater likelihood of

negative educational outcomes, as students affected by ACEs often face barriers to academic success.

### **Parental Beliefs and Misconceptions of School Importance**

Consistent attendance starting in younger grades is a greater predictor of student success later in life (Robinson et al., 2018; Stempel et al., 2017). When students have chronic absenteeism, there are a variety of negative consequences in academics (Gottfried et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018; Stempel et al., 2017), as well as social and emotional disadvantages (Gottfried et al., 2020). In the classroom setting, teachers must respond to those individuals who miss critical instruction by providing a type of remediation in response to the absence. If there are multiple days missed, the pace of instruction is slowed and interferes with the pace of instruction for all students (Gottfried, 2019). Gottfried (2019) hypothesized that chronic absenteeism in students can produce a greater disruption since the teacher is occupied with “catching up” the student who missed instruction.

One factor that may influence chronic absenteeism is parental beliefs about school. Parents who had a negative school experience tend to believe that their child will have the same and exhibit distrust (Robinson et al., 2018). Parents often miscalculate or are unaware of the number of days that their child has been absent (Gottfried et al., 2021; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018; Robinson et al., 2018). The lack of awareness of missed days may be due to poor communication by the school to the parents, which Robinson et al. (2018) deduced led to a delay in intervention. Robinson et al. (2018) hypothesized that parents fail to comprehend how important elementary attendance is compared to the attendance of older students. The challenge of changing parental beliefs starts with correcting misbeliefs and a lack of knowledge of the issues involved in chronic absenteeism (Robinson et al., 2018).

## **Demographics may have an influence on chronic absenteeism rates and academic performance**

Rural Appalachian students feel the effect of policies that tend to focus on more urban educational reform, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which focused on accountability for schools struggling with achievement gaps (Zhang, 2008). The NCLB and ESSA both based funding on the number of enrolled students, which meant rural schools, like those in Appalachia, receive less funding than urban schools. Local taxes, which account for the majority of funding for students, provide more funding in more affluent urban areas. This lack of funding in rural areas results in fewer resources, outdated materials, and limited technology access (Baker et al., 2020; JLARC, 2019).

Communities that are located in rural areas are often characterized by a higher prevalence of farm families and greater distances to school; however, these factors have not been found to notably contribute to chronic absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2021). Instead, economic challenges such as limited job opportunities and increased poverty levels have been linked to higher rates of student mobility during the academic year, which in turn contributes to increased chronic absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2021). Although rural schools tend to have smaller class sizes and improved student-to-teacher ratios, they are also more susceptible to school closures and consolidations, disrupting educational continuity (Gottfried et al., 2021). Additionally, rural communities often face limited access to critical resources, including technology, transportation, and employment opportunities, which further impact educational stability (Atkinson et al., 2010; Schafft, 2016). While support programs for families, children, and mothers are available, these services frequently have long waitlists due to the scarcity of options in rural areas (Bierman et al., 1997).

The well-being of children, particularly in young families, is deeply influenced by economic stability, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021). Rural areas offer fewer jobs that provide a sustainable income, forcing many families to juggle multiple low-paying jobs (Green, 2014). Between 2016 and 2022, the ARC reported that approximately 14.7% of Appalachian residents lived below the poverty level, defined as an annual income of less than \$26,246 for a family of two adults and two children (ARC, 2024). According to a Population Reference Bureau (PRB) analysis, rural Appalachia has more unemployment and a higher rate of poverty compared to other rural communities (PRB, 2024).

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience chronic absenteeism at disproportionately higher rates. Studies have persistently demonstrated that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are more likely to miss substantial amounts of school compared to their more affluent peers (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; H. N. Chang & Romero, 2008). Balfanz and Byrnes (2013) found that students from low-income families had higher rates of chronic absenteeism, with many missing a month or more of school each year. A study by the National Center for Children in Poverty, investigated with researchers Romero and Lee (2008), found that 21% of poverty marginalized kindergarten students were chronically absent, in contrast to only 8% of their counterparts. This trend is also observed in broader student populations, where those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—often an indicator of lower socioeconomic status—are more likely to miss more than 10 days of school during the academic year (Chang et al., 2018).

Research has consistently shown a strong correlation between low socioeconomic backgrounds and increased school absenteeism, often driven by health-related factors. One notable contributor is obesity, which is more prevalent among children from lower-income

families due to limited access to nutritious foods and a higher reliance on processed, unhealthy options (Rappaport et al., 2011). Additionally, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to live in environments that expose them to health hazards, such as toxic mold, which can trigger or exacerbate respiratory conditions like asthma (Mizan et al., 2011; Rappaport et al., 2011). Mizan et al. (2011) identified evidence between asthma-related school absences and low-income households, where poor housing conditions contribute to higher exposure to allergens and pollutants. These factors collectively create barriers to regular school attendance, further widening educational disparities for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

According to data from the ARC (2021), Appalachia has made considerable progress over the past 5 decades in its poverty rate, which decreased by 2% during the 2012–2016 period and further by 2.1% in the 2018–2022 time period (ARC, 2024). Despite these improvements, several counties in the region still struggle with high poverty rates. According to the ARC’s report, *The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2018–2022 American Community Survey*, residents in extreme poverty during the 2018–2022 period were slightly higher than the national average of 6.4%, “with 1 in 10 residents living in rural Appalachia considered to be in extreme poverty” (p. 99). The ARC showed that the biggest changes in educational achievement have occurred in the Appalachian rural region, with “83.7% of adults over 25 years old obtaining a high school diploma during the 2018–2022” time period (p. 83). This was a 1% increase over more urban areas of Appalachia. The improvement in educational outcomes as a region is notable in improvement for the numbers obtaining a high school diploma, but considerably lower for numbers receiving a bachelor’s degree. The national average of adults age 25 and older with a bachelor’s degree in 2018–2022 was 34.3%, and the Appalachian region was half that, at 15.8% of adults over 25 having earned a bachelor’s degree (ARC, 2024). While educational

outreach and online classes have made it easier for rural areas to access more educational opportunities, device ownership and internet access in Appalachia have failed to keep up with the national average, even after state and federal programs were enacted to increase internet access in rural areas.

Keefe (2005) summarized that rural Appalachian is known for its culture of self-reliance and traditionalism and is distinctive in its attitudes toward education and vocation. This often results in a generational workforce due to the rural Appalachian culture of following traditions (Gibbons et al., 2019). A once-dependent region that mostly relied on mining as a main source of workforce, Appalachia is now a majority manufacturing and agriculture industry (ARC, 2024). The local economies have taken a hit in rural areas due to the manufacturing and industrial jobs transitioning the labor to overseas (Bailey et al., 2014). According to the Population Reference Bureau (2024), due to the lower level of education and higher rate of poverty in rural Appalachia, the ability to move out of the region to obtain a higher salary is more difficult unless there is family in a more urban area that offers assistance. These ongoing struggles have led to ACEs that persist across generations, negatively affecting student attendance and academic performance as parents or guardians are working multiple jobs (Stempel et al., 2017).

The culture of Appalachia is often characterized by a hesitance to accept outside assistance, particularly in healthcare (Stanzak & Oliver-Lemieux, 2023). The reluctance is rooted in historical experiences of negative or patronizing portrayals in the media and repeated disappointments from outside interventions (Keefe, 2005). Keefe (2005) noted that past efforts by external agencies to provide aid frequently left communities facing economic hardship and environmental damage. As a result, there is often a feeling of skepticism toward outside

institutions and a strong reliance on local resilience, which is further reinforced by geographic isolation.

According to Rye (2006), the focus of rural life is based on an abstract characteristic of social aspects of life and structures. For example, within a rural area with a sense of traditionalism, the school might be the most impactful social structure and is important for developing a feeling of community (Schafft, 2016). The concept of rural life in terms that encapsulates how socialization occurs might be the phrase “everyone knows everyone.” According to Stanzak and Oliver-Lemieux (2023), individuals in Appalachia are less likely to possess health insurance coverage, whether through private providers or government assistance programs. The cultural landscape of Appalachia has contributed to delays in medical treatment, as limited healthcare accessibility and a deep-seated distrust of external providers have led many individuals to seek holistic or alternative treatments. Structural inequities in access to care, availability of services, and financial barriers remain serious challenges for rural Appalachian communities (Morrone et al., 2021).

According to the ARC (2024), the region falls below the national average in both mental and physical health outcomes. Compared to urban settings, rural areas often face substantial limitations in healthcare services, particularly in mental health care (Kepley & Streeter, 2018). Challenges in addressing mental health in rural communities have been identified as a lack of specialized personnel (Lewis et al., 2016). Merkel (2010) conducted a psychiatric study in southwest Virginia, revealing that 65% of patients reported considerable childhood trauma. Morales et al. (2020) found that therapists who are rural based often report that individuals are reluctant to seek out mental health services due to a culture of independence and a stigma of being self-reliant. Primarily shaped by geographic isolation, inadequate public transportation,

and scarce social support networks beyond immediate family, these factors collectively reinforce persistent health disparities that extend into educational challenges in Appalachia (Elder & Robinson, 2018).

Research on rural school culture often highlights distinctive characteristics shaped by geography, local economies, and tight-knit community values. Rural schools, as defined by the NCES (2022), are categorized based on their proximity to urban areas, but this categorization does not fully capture the unique cultural dynamics present within these schools. In addition to being geographically remote, rural schools often foster close relationships among students, teachers, and families, driven by limited resources and shared community values (Crouch et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2019; Schafft, 2016). This community-centric approach can foster a sense of belonging and resilience among students but can also create challenges in addressing educational disparities (Crouch et al., 2020; Schafft, 2016), such as gaps in resources (Crouch et al., 2019; Stempel et al., 2017) and access to digital technologies.

Studies suggest that rural school culture is shaped substantially by the localized interactions of families, schools, and community institutions (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Campbell-Halfaker & Gregor, 2021; Stempel et al., 2017). For instance, family-school partnerships in rural settings emphasize parental involvement, though such involvement can vary widely depending on factors like economic stability and available resources within the community (Stefanski et al., 2016). This focus on community ties often means that rural educators and administrators must develop culturally sensitive strategies tailored to the specific challenges and strengths of their communities (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Stefanski et al., 2016). Moreover, there is a growing call for research in rural educational contexts to better understand these unique dynamics and develop policies that respect and enhance the strengths of rural culture in education (Crouch et

al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). Such insights underscore the importance of designing policies and educational practices that address the distinct needs of rural students, accounting not only for their educational needs but also for the cultural and economic realities of rural life (NCES, 2022; Crouch et al., 2019).

### **School Climate and Implementation of Intervention Programs**

In the growing interest in understanding the underlying factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism, all involved must be held accountable. The extent of outside factors that schools have the inability to change, such as social and family issues, can contribute to how programs are initiated and how they hold students accountable (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). There are barriers that inhibit families from sending their students to school, such as jobs or careers that prevent transportation to school (Gottfried et al., 2021). A support system is needed for those parents who may have a one-parent household and/or multiple jobs. This support is something that Adams and Khojasteh (2018) stated is of great importance, as it joins home life to the school environment. A good school climate is defined as a supportive and engaging place where a sense of belonging occurs (Adams & Khojasteh, 2018; Stempel et al., 2017). A school climate can also be seen as the relation between teachers and community. Educators provide the first line of intervention to issues that students may encounter. A concept of “need-support climate” for students is one that Adams and Khojasteh (2018) explored that allows students to feel a sense of “relevance” in their learning experiences.

A need-support climate involves addressing students’ psychological needs by fostering nurturing relationships (Adams & Khojasteh, 2018). An integration of practices and intervention programs, specifically aimed at building a positive impact on students, could help deter chronic absenteeism. Stripling (2019) used an adaptive form of behavior education to help school

counselors implement an incentive program that reduced chronic absenteeism. This program focused on students who needed a positive relationship and help with strategies that incorporated coping and regulation skills. Programs implemented to help with chronic absenteeism need multiple prongs in order to succeed. Stripling's study found that having an incentive program reduced daily absences but did not fully prevent chronic absenteeism. Adams and Khojasteh (2018) concluded that students wanted multiple options for multiple backgrounds in their need-supportive climate.

Attendance Works (2018a) has developed a three-tiered approach to reduce chronic absenteeism, which focuses on prevention, early intervention, and intensive support. The first tier emphasizes prevention, which involves creating a positive school climate and engaging families to ensure that students are motivated to attend school regularly (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). At this level, schools focus on promoting attendance as part of the school culture, with strategies such as awareness campaigns and fostering a sense of belonging among students. The second tier involves early intervention, targeting students who show early signs of absenteeism. This includes identifying students at risk and providing support, such as check-ins with counselors or mentors, to address barriers that may prevent attendance (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Finally, the third tier involves intensive intervention for students with high rates of absenteeism. At this stage, schools work closely with families, community organizations, and social services to address deeper systemic issues, such as health problems, housing instability, or trauma, which may be contributing to absenteeism (Chang & Romero, 2008).

While the root causes of chronic absenteeism are often multifaceted and may not originate within the school environment, schools can play a critical role in mitigating its impact and reducing the number of days missed. Lenhoff and Pogodzinski (2018) found that

interventions produce no remarkable reduction in chronic absenteeism in schools that had no consistent organization in their methods. Therefore, family and individual characteristics are more influential in determining attendance than the level of influence the schools have (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018).

### **Educational Leadership Impact on Absenteeism**

The focus on school accountability has intensified the emphasis on student achievement, particularly through the accreditation process. The plethora of educational and developmental literature has provided insight on how absenteeism affects educational outcomes (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; Gottfried et al., 2021; Gubbels et al., 2019) and focuses on leadership practices that affect chronic absenteeism. As schools are held accountable for student learning, the connection between school performance and student success has become increasingly pronounced (Smith, 2024). One key factor in this success is school leadership, particularly the role of principals. Research consistently supports the idea that principal leadership is vital to both student achievement and overall school performance (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Quin et al. (2015) noted a wide range of research exploring the impact of school leadership on student success, driven by the increased accountability on schools and the central role of leaders in driving student achievement. Mullen (2025) emphasized the role of equity-oriented leadership in translating principles into action by addressing inequities, promoting inclusive decision-making, and cultivating conditions that support leadership, learning, and meaningful change.

Regular student attendance is a crucial element of school success and has long been recognized as a key factor influencing academic performance. Research consistently shows that absenteeism negatively affects learning and academic progress (Berkowitz et al., 2017), with

even brief absences hindering academic achievement (Kearney, 2021). Regular attendance is a strong predictor of academic success (Berkowitz et al., 2017), as it supports inquiry-based learning, promotes student participation, and supplies important time for collaboration with peers and teachers (Anchunda & Kaewurai, 2025). On the other hand, recurring absenteeism can impede both academic and social development (Gottfried, 2014). Students who miss school regularly tend to fall behind, become disengaged, and struggle academically (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Furthermore, chronic absenteeism contributes to a marginalization from peers, teachers, and the school environment, exacerbating the problem (Gottfried et al., 2021). Over time, students with poor attendance may feel increasingly isolated, which can further perpetuate absenteeism (Gottfried, 2019).

Alongside accountability measures introduced through educational policy, interest in principal leadership has expanded (Mitchell et al., 2015). Studies demonstrate that effective leadership by principals positively influences student success (Andreoli et al., 2020). Although research suggests that the impact of leadership on student achievement is often indirect (Smith, 2024), it remains clear that leadership styles can still have a momentous, positive influence on educational outcomes. Rural school leaders in Appalachia often face systemic constraints, including limited staffing, high administrative demands, and restricted access to external resources (H. N. Chang & Romero, 2008; Vanderpool et al., 2019). Mullen and Fleming (2024) reported that Appalachian school principals frequently manage mentoring and leadership responsibilities within the context of high workload and limited resources, which may limit their capacity to implement sustained, relationship-based practices essential for addressing chronic absenteeism and supporting consistent student attendance.

Principals play a vital role in combating chronic absenteeism, as their leadership influences school culture, policies, and practices related to attendance (Andreoli et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018; ). Effective principals establish a culture of high expectations and accountability, emphasizing the importance of regular attendance (Gottfried, 2019; Kraft & Rogers, 2015). By fostering a positive and inclusive school environment, principals ensure that students feel valued and engaged, which helps reduce the likelihood of absenteeism. Principals who actively promote a culture of attendance through school-wide initiatives and personal involvement can have a considerable impact on students' motivation to attend school regularly (Andreoli et al., 2020; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Robinson et al., 2018).

Research indicates that effective school leadership directly impacts school climate and student outcomes, including academic achievement, school climate, and teacher retention (Chang et al., 2018; Daily et al., 2020; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Robinson et al., 2018). Principals' influence on student achievement is primarily indirect, but it operates through school-level factors that support student learning, such as fostering instructional quality and a positive school climate (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Principals directly affect instructional quality through teacher recruitment, retention, feedback, coaching, and the creation of a positive school climate (Robinson et al., 2018). Principals' leadership behaviors can also directly influence student attendance rates.

Research highlights that teachers who are successful at reducing absenteeism may not always be the same individuals who drive striking improvements in test scores (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). To improve both attendance and academic outcomes, principals can invest in professional development and coaching focused on effective attendance strategies (Bartanen, 2020). Furthermore, principals can play a key role in reducing absenteeism by enhancing

communication with families. Principals have the opportunity to reach out personally to parents and implement school-wide policies aimed at improving communication (Boyles & Mullen, 2020). Many parents of chronically absent students are often unaware of the severity of their child's absenteeism and providing them with clear and timely attendance information has been shown to improve student attendance outcomes (Rogers & Feller, 2016). For example, Robinson et al. (2018) found that sending personalized, mail-based reminders about absences led to a decrease in absenteeism. Other studies have shown that consistent communication with parents, even if not specifically attendance-focused, can also help reduce absences (Kraft & Rogers, 2015).

In addition to direct communication, principals can integrate attendance support into school policies, especially for at-risk students, such as responsive interventions or behavior management strategies (Bartanen, 2020). Principals can also collaborate with local stakeholders and community resources to raise awareness about chronic absenteeism and its impact on student success (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Klein et al., 2022).

Educational leadership styles that prioritize creating supportive and inclusive school climates are often highly effective in reducing chronic absenteeism (Bartanen, 2020). Principals and administrators who adopt a transformational leadership style, for example, work to inspire and motivate both students and staff. They set a positive tone by fostering relationships, encouraging goal setting, and promoting a shared vision of academic success (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Transformational leaders actively involve students in the school community, making them feel valued and engaged (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). By building a supportive and motivating school environment, transformational leaders address some of the underlying issues of absenteeism, such as a lack of connection to the school (Leithwood, 2021).

*Instructional leadership* focuses on improving the quality of teaching and learning, which directly impacts student engagement and attendance (Bellibaş et al., 2021). Instructional leaders emphasize data-driven practices to identify attendance patterns and develop targeted interventions (Adanne, 2024). By collaborating closely with teachers to implement engaging and relevant curricula, instructional leaders create a school environment where students feel that attending is valuable and directly tied to their success (Moore et al., 2024). This style often involves collaborating with teachers to recognize and support students who may be at risk of chronic absenteeism, thereby creating a proactive and supportive approach to keeping students engaged in school.

Beyond setting expectations, principals also play a crucial role in implementing and monitoring attendance policies to ensure they are clear, consistently enforced, and supportive of students' needs (Smith, 2024). By collaborating with teachers, counselors, and parents, principals can identify and address the root causes of chronic absenteeism. This may involve targeted interventions for at-risk students, such as personalized support plans (Robinson et al., 2018), mentorship programs (Allensworth et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018) or addressing external barriers like transportation issues (Gottfried et al., 2021) or family challenges (Gottfried et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2018). By coordinating efforts across multiple areas, principals can create a comprehensive and supportive system that addresses absenteeism from multiple angles (Allensworth et al., 2020; Boyles & Mullen, 2020; Gottfried et al., 2021; Kraft & Rogers, 2015; Robinson et al., 2018).

### **Implementation of Findings**

Preventing chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachia requires a targeted approach that addresses both systemic and local challenges. Policies must focus on reducing barriers, such as

food insecurity (Crouch et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2019), unreliable transportation (Susman-Stillman et al., 2018), and limited access to healthcare (Gottfried, 2019; Stempel et al., 2017), all of which are common contributors to absenteeism in this region. Schools can partner with local organizations to provide essential services, including meal programs, transportation assistance, and mental health support. Culturally sensitive practices that build trust and involve families in decision-making are crucial, given the close-knit nature of Appalachian communities (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Stefanski et al., 2016). Furthermore, investing in broadband infrastructure and providing technology for remote learning can ensure educational continuity when students face unavoidable absences (Smith, 2024). Training educators to implement trauma-informed practices and identify early warning signs of disengagement can further support at-risk students, creating an integrated approach to improving attendance and educational outcomes in rural schools (Allensworth et al., 2020; Frankland, 2021). These interventions require collaboration between policymakers, educators, and communities to succeed.

### **Future Research**

Future researchers studying chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachia should focus on addressing critical knowledge gaps and consider the region's unique challenges and cultural nuances. Researchers should investigate how cultural and familial dynamics, such as strong community ties, family expectations, and stigma surrounding absenteeism, influence attendance rates in this context (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Crouch et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016). Transportation infrastructure, or the lack thereof, poses pronounced challenges in rural areas (Attendance Works, 2018b; Gottfried et al., 2021), and researchers should evaluate innovative solutions, such as community-based transportation programs, to mitigate this issue. Researchers need to further explore mental health concerns, often exacerbated by rural isolation, regarding

the effectiveness of trauma-informed practices and school-based mental health programs tailored for rural students (Gottfried, 2019; Stanzak & Oliver-Lemieux, 2023; Stempel et al., 2017).

Parent-school relationships are another critical area, as strategies to foster stronger engagement and address intergenerational poverty are underexplored (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Stefanski et al., 2016). Finally, researchers need to examine the implementation and effectiveness of state and federal policies targeting rural absenteeism to assess their impact and scalability in this unique setting.

In summary, future researchers should investigate how community can influence school-based policies to help with the reduction of chronic absenteeism. Educational systems can rely on community-based resources, such as services that help with mental health, physical health, or that offer other support, such as after-school programs. Collaboration with families and community organizations can target areas of support in order to promote and sustain positive attendance. Future researchers need to focus on flexible policies in order to adapt to the evolution of societal trends, community needs, and technology and have a sustainable approach to chronic absenteeism. A one-size-fits-all approach to the prevention of chronic absenteeism is something that this literature review indicated will be ineffective.

## **Summary**

This literature review examined research on school level leadership practices that can be implemented in the Appalachian region to prevent or reduce chronic absenteeism. Findings consistently indicate that early and frequent absences are associated with lower academic performance and negative school experiences, as teachers are required to devote increased time to remediation. A positive school climate, characterized by strong communication between schools and families, supports regular attendance. However, parental misconceptions and

misunderstandings about attendance expectations can undermine those efforts. School leadership plays a central role in fostering supportive environments and establishing clear expectations that encourage consistency and engagement.

The review also highlights the complex and interconnected factors contributing to chronic absenteeism, including socioeconomic challenges, food insecurities, health concerns, and negative school climates. Roll Appalachia communities face unique barriers related to limited resources, economic instability, and cultural influences, underscoring the need for targeted context specific interventions. Federal policies, particularly under ESSA, emphasize accountability and public reporting of attendance data while allowing States and districts flexibility in implementation. This flexibility enables schools to design locally responsive programs that address students' needs through collaboration with families, community partners, and educators. Reducing chronic absenteeism requires comprehensive community-based leadership approaches that integrate policy, prevention, and student support to improve long term academic outcomes.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study was grounded in the understanding of the relationship between attendance and student achievement, with emphasis on understanding the challenges that school leadership faced in a rural geographic setting. Research has shown that students demonstrate lower academic performance when they miss a considerable amount of school (Gottfried et al., 2021; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022; Stripling, 2019). Although literature has shown that there are specific and strategic interventions that assist students improve attendance (Bickelhaupt, 2011), the research was inconclusive for specific geographic areas due to a lack of available data (Gottfried et al., 2021).

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine what influences chronic absenteeism in rural Title I Appalachian schools in Virginia and explore ways in which leadership can respond to the systemic challenges. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, I sought to identify leadership practices and initiatives implemented to mitigate and prevent chronic absenteeism in rural schools within the Appalachian region, such as creating supportive and resilient school environments (Germain et al., 2024).

#### **Research Questions**

The research question was, How do school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools? There are three sub-questions:

- (d) What barriers do school leaders encounter when trying to reduce chronic absenteeism in their rural setting?

- (e) What specific leadership strategies have school leaders used to facilitate efforts to address chronic absenteeism?
- (f) If there is collaboration with families, community members, and/or other healthcare providers to mitigate chronic absenteeism, which methods may have worked best or perhaps fallen short of expectations?

### **Research Design**

The research design of this study was a qualitative research study. When exploring rural schools, qualitative research often involves gathering participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The grounded theory qualitative research design was selected for this study to examine and gain an understanding of how school leadership affects chronic absenteeism within schools in rural Appalachia. This approach allows for the identification of patterns and themes emerging from data collected through interviews and observations, rather than relying on pre-established theories. By analyzing the perspectives of school leaders, I sought to generate insights that can inform policy and intervention strategies to reduce absenteeism in rural educational settings while accounting for the social, emotional, and environmental factors that influence student engagement and academic success.

Khan (2014) defined grounded theory qualitative research as a methodological approach that prioritizes data collection, such as tracking the percentage of days missed per year, over reliance on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This method allows for the emergence of reasoning from data rather than being constrained by predetermined theories. As noted by Khan, grounded theory facilitates conceptual development, particularly in geographic areas with limited empirical studies compared to urban and suburban contexts. Furthermore, examining the

experiences and past knowledge of school leadership while comparing relevant data can contribute to testing and refining empirical theories (Khan, 2014).

The research focused on elementary schools in rural Appalachia in Virginia, with rural being defined by the NCES (2022) as schools “25 miles from an urbanized area.” The Appalachian region spans over 200,000 square miles across 13 states, extending from New York to Mississippi, as outlined by the ARC. The investigation sought to include divisions within the region, with the selection of a district and school based on their classification as rural and their geographic location within Appalachia and in Virginia. I conducted a 15-25-minute interview with the school leader to inquire about how chronic absenteeism is addressed at the school level and district level and what steps are being taken to combat this issue. A one-on-one interview allowed for more in-depth questioning, such as exploring what programs or initiatives are being implemented to specifically address attendance. This includes both school-based interventions and community outreach efforts aimed at supporting student engagement.

I aimed to include divisions representing both high-poverty and average-income schools to examine variations in attendance strategies. The study focused on identifying initiatives implemented at each school to promote consistent daily attendance, forming the central theme of the research. Data collection involved qualitative interviews with school leaders, as well as an analysis of chronic absenteeism rates reported in the state report card for each selected division or school. This approach enabled the exploration of potential correlations between chronic absenteeism and the individualized strategies employed by each school.

Gottfried (2014) emphasized the need for further research to explore the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism in rural school districts, as existing studies have primarily focused on suburban and urban areas. I aimed to address this gap by examining whether

differences exist in how rural, suburban, and urban districts approach the issue of chronic absenteeism. A comparative analysis of these educational settings is essential for developing targeted strategies to effectively reduce absenteeism within diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

### **Research Positionality**

Research positionality is a critical component of this dissertation, as it acknowledges the researcher's professional background, experiences, and perspectives and their potential influence on their research process. As an educational leader working within rural Appalachia school communities, I bring firsthand knowledge of the systemic challenges, resource limitations, and contextual factors that shape student attendance and academic engagement. This positionality provides valuable insight into participants' experiences while also requiring intentional reflection to minimize bias and ensure ethical, balanced interpretation of the data. Throughout this study, I engaged in ongoing reflectivity by examining personal assumptions, maintaining analytical memos, and grounding interpretations in participants' voices and established scholarship. By recognizing and transparently addressing my positionality, this research upholds rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness while honoring the lived realities of rural educators and students.

### **Study Participants**

This study was conducted in the Commonwealth of Virginia and focused on public elementary schools in the rural Appalachian region. A list of 14 school divisions was compiled; all were Title I schools serving high proportions of economically disadvantaged students with limited instructional and financial resources. Participants included individuals in administrative roles or their designees responsible for the development and implementation of school policies and initiatives. The definition of rural follows the parameters established by the NCES, which

classifies schools as rural if they are located at least 25 miles from an urban area. The eligibility criteria for participation required that the school had reported a Level Two designation for chronic absenteeism within the past 5 years, though current classification at this level is not necessary. According to the VDOE, a Level Two classification indicates a chronic absenteeism rate of 15–25% for a given academic year, meaning that this percentage of students were absent for at least 10% of the school year.

The selection of this population based on the demographic classification of a rural area constitutes a purposive sampling method. This sampling approach was utilized to strategically select participants who meet the criteria of being located in a rural setting in the state of Virginia and having experienced a Level Two designation for chronic absenteeism within the past 5 years. According to Patton (2014), purposive sampling enables the selection of participants who can provide a more in-depth understanding of the research problem due to their specific demographic characteristics.

The participants were identified by compiling a list of rural schools in the Appalachian region of Virginia that have reported chronic absenteeism rates within Level Two on the accreditation chart, defined as 15–25% absenteeism at the school level. To maintain confidentiality, I designated schools as “School A” through “School Z,” with labels corresponding to each institution. I deployed a list of approximately 25–30 schools meeting the specific criteria. After I identified schools, I collected administrator contact information from district websites. I sent out recruitment emails to all administrators on the list, and if no response was received within 3 days, I conducted a follow-up email with a different heading to encourage participation.

Participants engaged in a semi-structured interview designed to explore the reasons for student absenteeism, the attitudes of school personnel regarding school attendance, previous and current interventions addressing absenteeism, and perceptions of how schools and communities can collaborate to support improved student attendance. A Zoom meeting link was scheduled and emailed to participants who chose to take part in the study. The Zoom platform facilitated transcription of the interviews, enabling a more in-depth analysis of participant responses. The interview questions were developed with a focus on school-based strategies aimed at preventing chronic absenteeism and the role of leadership in supporting attendance-related programs and initiatives. The use of open-ended questions facilitated detailed responses, allowing for the identification of interventions implemented at the school level in contrast to those initiated at the district or state level. I then analyzed the collected responses using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns that may emerge across interviews. I categorized the data based on effectiveness, performance, and overall success in addressing chronic absenteeism.

### **Data Collection**

Approval of this study was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (Appendix B). I completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certification on October 2, 2023 (Appendix C). A formal email (Appendix D) was sent to the superintendent or designee that included a brief introduction, a description of the study's purpose, and notification that follow-up emails would be sent to school administrators or designees. Twenty-one emails were sent to school principals and/or designees, outlining the study's purpose and extending an invitation to participate (Appendix E). In response to agreeing to participate in the study, a response email (Appendix F) was sent to confirm the date and time for a Zoom interview.

This study employed a purposive sampling method, focusing on administrators and school leadership committees that have contributed to reducing chronic absenteeism. I chose this approach to recognize that each leader may have unique perspectives, strategies, and insights regarding absenteeism reduction. Purposive sampling is designed to generate relevant and applicable data (Kelly et al., 2010) on a specific subject while ensuring the effective use of limited research resources (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The participants engaged in a structured interview focusing on their respective school buildings. The interview explored their interpretation of the reasons behind student absenteeism, their role in intervention strategies, community attitudes toward public education, and the effectiveness of existing programs or incentives aimed at reducing chronic absenteeism. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, with each session lasting 15–25 minutes. The format was open-ended, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how school leadership addresses absenteeism within their schools. The interview questions were designed to assess the participants' leadership experiences, their backgrounds within the school, and their level of involvement in addressing chronic absenteeism. The use of open-ended prompts generated additional insights and supported ongoing inquiry during data analysis.

Community involvement in addressing absenteeism was also identified, suggesting a need for further examination of the relationships and outcomes among community stakeholders, students, and service supports. Questions regarding district participation in grant initiatives, such as community development or housing grants that provide benefits linked to student attendance, were included to determine the extent to which these resources influence absenteeism reduction efforts.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis was completed by using the data analysis spiral process that Creswell and Poth (2018) developed. Creswell and Poth described the data analysis spiral as one that is created by moving in “analytic circles” (p. 150) by interpreting the data and finding themes and emergent ideas in the qualitative material. The first loop of the analysis is done by management of the data collected into files, notecards, and distinguishing groupings of ideas (p. 150). One prevalent theme was who was involved in programs at the school level in dealing with chronic absenteeism and how it was addressed. The involvement of outside resources, community members, or outside businesses is another part of the spiral. Once all the data were collected from the sources, the grouping helped develop the second part of the loop.

I analyzed and listened to the interview transcripts to get an understanding of the overall ideas. The attention to the grouping of the ideas that came from the transcripts and taking notes assisted with the ability to develop the data before coding into the groups. The second loop is classifying and describing the outcomes from the first spiral of loops. The repeat listening and documenting of phrases and themes in the data is an important step in this loop. Creswell and Poth (2018) described part of this loop as what the author is interpreting or their understanding of the data presented.

Once the loop of description started, I began to code their interpretations into the categories. Creswell and Poth (2018) detailed how they would identify themes from the code that was found in the second loop:

1. Themes anticipated prior to data collection
2. Emergent themes that were not initially expected
3. Notable or unusual findings identified during analysis

I began bringing themes forward by developing the codes from key words (chronic absenteeism, rural education, community, leadership, poverty, and student achievement). Although codes will be developed in research, a priori codes emerged during this loop of data analysis. The codes are separated and color-coded into the separate categories to calculate the frequency of use by each participant, which helped determine the emergent or prefigured themes developed. Table 4 presents examples of deductive and inductive codes employed in the analysis.

**Table 4**

*Sample of Deductive and Inductive Codes*

Code	Description
<b>Deductive Codes</b>	
CA	Chronic Absenteeism
RE	Rural Education
LD	Leadership
PV	Poverty
SA	Student Achievement
<b>Inductive Codes</b>	
FAM	Family/Home Issues
TRAN	Transportation
CK	Check-in
MN	Mentoring
AI	Attendance Incentives
DM	Data Monitoring
CP	Community Partners
DM	Decision Making
SE	Socioeconomic

The development of interpretations of the data, or what the data represent, through the themes and visualization, is the final loop of the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the separation into color-coded phrases or themes, the connection is interpreted by looking at the reoccurring words, phrases, and patterns that emerge. The interpretation of the qualitative

data is one in which all the results lead to a summary of all evidence to the research question.

The relationships among categories and codes were used to inform interpretations and align emerging findings with the research question. This summary presented and contextualized the research findings, highlighting key patterns and implications derived from the study.

Interpretations were demonstrated in the use of tables and figures. These tables and figures showed a breakdown of categories that emerged, common phrases used, and data findings.

### **Instrument Design and Validation**

The initial phase of data collection involved the development of a valid, detailed, and effective research instrument to ensure the collection of accurate and meaningful data. The process of designing and refining the instrument adhered to established qualitative research methodologies, ensuring both adequacy and validity in the data-gathering process. The procedures for organizing and conducting interviews were structured in alignment with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommended interview guidelines, found in Table 5. These procedures ensured a systematic approach to data collection, facilitating consistency, reliability, and depth in participant responses.

**Table 5***Interview Procedures*

Interview Design and Procedures	Aligned Procedures
Formulate research questions to be addressed by interview participants.	The research questions were formulated based on insights derived from the scholarly literature reviewed in the study. The development of these questions was guided by existing theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and gaps identified in prior research, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and contribution to the broader academic discourse.
Select participants who can provide the most relevant insights using a purposeful sampling method.	Individuals that were interviewed are school leadership or designee that are currently in a rural Appalachian public school district.
Determine the most effective interview format and method for obtaining valuable information.	A 15-25-minute interview was scheduled to facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the questions and responses, ensuring clarity and depth in participant insights.
Utilize appropriate recording techniques to ensure accurate data collection.	The interviews were conducted via the online platform Zoom, with each session recorded and transcribed. In addition to digital recordings and transcriptions, handwritten notes will be taken to supplement the data and will be incorporated into the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
Develop and implement a structured interview protocol or guide.	The interview questions were reviewed, framed, and refined for clarity and relevance. The interview protocol can be found in the Appendix F.
Ensure the interview setting is free from distractions.	The researcher utilized a distraction-free office environment to ensure the quality and accuracy of the recordings. Participants selected a location that was most conducive to their engagement and comfort while using Zoom.
Secure participant consent through a pre-approved consent form.	The information form for the interview (Appendix G) was approved by the IRB on November 18, 2025.
Follow established protocols for conducting qualitative interviews.	Established interview protocols were adhered to, including maintaining alignment with the study parameters, utilizing the designated question protocol, ensuring the interview is completed within the allotted period, demonstrating respect and consideration, and limiting the scope of questions and guidance provided. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interview Design and Procedures	Aligned Procedures
Prepare for transcription and data management in advance (p. 165).	Interviews were conducted via the online platform Zoom, with each session recorded and transcribed. In addition to the recordings and transcripts, handwritten notes were taken to support data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

*Note.* Adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018).

## **Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

The methodology was developed using a review of similar literature. The analysis and procedures followed current research techniques and guidelines. The early analysis of literature helped in determining the sample selection of individuals who are involved with absences at the campus level.

The data collection for this study utilized the spiral data collection process outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). A broad set of questions was initially developed and subsequently refined to specifically address the central research question. The interviews were conducted under strict confidentiality, ensuring that individual responses were collected without external influence. This approach minimized potential bias resulting from peer or group dynamics. The data collection and analysis procedures were implemented using rigorous methods designed to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study's findings.

### **Transferable**

The findings of this study were expected to reflect the characteristics of rural Appalachia, as it is representative of the student population within the selected school. Participants provided detailed and descriptive responses during the interviews, contributing to the depth of the data collected. Using the spiral data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018), a coding analysis identified key shared characteristics and recurring phrases among participants. However, the

transferability of this study may be limited due to the specific geographic and demographic context of the research site.

### **Dependability**

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method, as this approach facilitates a more comprehensive exploration of the research problem and the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collection process, which involved in-depth interviews on school-based incentives and practices, can be replicated. The inclusion of real-world experiences contributes to individual interpretations that enrich the research (Ellis & Hart, 2023). While individual responses may vary based on personal experiences, the consistency in the questions and scope of inquiry ensures reliability in the research process.

### **Confirmability**

In qualitative research, confirmability refers to the degree to which the research findings are rooted in the data and remain uninfluenced by researcher bias. The rigor of the study can be ensured through the use of an external auditor, who critically reflects on the qualitative analyses to validate the findings (De Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018). Incorporating an auditor enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the results. In this study, classmates served as the auditor and reviewed the categorization of participant responses to ensure accuracy and objectivity. All responses were collected confidentially, further supporting the integrity of the data analysis process.

### **Confidential and Ethical Treatment of the Data**

Measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and the ethical handling of all data. The material were securely maintained, including consent forms, survey data, recorded transcripts, and identifying information stored in an Excel spreadsheet, on the VT Google Drive.

These records will be retained until 2029 and then destroyed. To safeguard participant privacy, each individual was assigned an alphabetical code. Member checking strategies were employed to enhance the accuracy of data interpretation, allowing participants to review and verify their Zoom transcripts. Prior to the interview, each participant received a VT information sheet explaining the research study (Appendix D), which did not require formal consent. Participation was entirely voluntary and individuals retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were informed of their option to decline specific questions while remaining in the study. Participants in this research involved minimal risk, comparable to the risk associated with daily experiences. The research protocol (number 25-1136) was approved (11/18/2025).

### **Summary**

An overview was provided of the research design, established procedures, and detailed the processes of data collection and analysis. The study utilized surveys and interviews as primary data collection methods. Through these interviews, participants had the opportunity to share their perspectives on principal instructional leadership practices and their perceived impact on chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachia. The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using the online platform Zoom. Deductive coding was employed to analyze the collected data, identifying common themes based on key terms from the literature review.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia’s rural Appalachian Title I schools. The research question guiding the study was: How do school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia’s rural Appalachian Title I schools? Three sub questions further informed this inquiry: (a) What barriers do school leaders indicate they encounter when trying to reduce chronic absenteeism in their rural setting? (b) What specific leadership strategies do school leaders indicate they have used to facilitate efforts to address chronic absenteeism? (c) If there is any collaboration with families, community members, and/or other healthcare providers to mitigate chronic absenteeism, which methods do school leaders indicate may have worked best or perhaps fallen short of expectation? This study included 5 participants: four current elementary school leaders and one leader from a combined elementary school, representing multiple rural counties in Virginia. The school leaders’ experience ranged between 3–7 years as administrators and 12–33 years in public education as seen in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Demographic of Interview Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Years in Education</b>	<b>Years in Administration</b>	<b>Prior Experience</b>
Leader A	Female	Elementary	17	3	Special Education
Leader B	Male	Combined Elementary	17	3	Physical Education
Leader C	Male	Elementary	22	13	Math
Leader D	Female	Elementary	33	7	PreK Teacher
Leader E	Female	Elementary	12	3	Special Education

The school leaders participated in a one-on-one virtual interview conducted via Zoom. Each interview was audio recorded with participant consent, and Zoom was used to generate automatic transcriptions. Following completion of interviews, participants were sent a follow-up email that included their respective transcripts to allow for member checking and accuracy. One participant responded with corrections to their transcript, which were attributed to transcription errors.

## **Findings**

All participants were asked the same eight questions from the interview protocol. Their responses were analyzed to identify common themes related to their perceptions and experiences as school leaders addressing chronic absenteeism. A finding was considered major when similar themes emerged in the responses of at least three of the five participants. Identified themes included familial determinants (five participants), gaps in external accountability (three participants), incentive-based systems (five participants), relational mentoring (four participants), data-driven monitoring (five participants), and community engagement (five participants).

The data were analyzed using an iterative review and constant comparison, the identified themes were refined and synthesized into overarching findings that address the study's research questions. The process involved examining how individual themes interacted and contributed to the broader patterns of leadership practice and school culture. Findings were developed by interpreting these themes in relation to existing literature and the study's theoretical framework, allowing for identification of key leadership approaches that influence student attendance. Collectively, the themes were transformed into five findings that reflected both contextual realities of rural Appalachia schools and the effective practices employed by the school leaders

to mitigate chronic absenteeism. Table 7 displays the themes that emerged in alignment with the corresponding interview questions.

**Table 7**

*Leadership Practices, Strategies, and Outcomes Related to Chronic Absenteeism in Rural Title I Schools*

Participant	Obstacles	Leadership Actions	Strategies Implemented	Data Monitoring Approaches	School Culture Practices	Community Collaboration	Success Stories / Outcomes
Leader A	Parental support; school zone/transportation issues	Monthly incentives; pop-up incentives; pairing at-risk students with teachers ( <i>Sidekick</i> program)	Set district attendance goals (10% → 8%); utilized attendance officers to connect with families	PowerSchool; <i>Sidekick</i> program	Monthly celebrations recognizing student attendance	Shorter, attainable goals to maintain community engagement	Increased community engagement; families actively participating in attendance initiatives
Leader B	Low parental support; court system limitations; low external accountability	Monthly incentives displayed prominently	Developed relationships with families; leveraged social media	PowerSchool; partnership with Boys & Girls Club	Fostering a close-knit school community	Community-based initiatives; limited budget hindered sustainability	Family of four transitioned from chronic truancy to consistent attendance after winning monthly incentive
Leader C	State accountability constraints; parental support; medical provider practices	Assign after-school remediation to recover instructional hours	Partnered with <i>Communities in Schools</i> ; DOE-regulated afterschool programs count toward attendance	PowerSchool	Teacher buy-in; community involvement; educating families on impact of attendance	School social media successful; town meetings ineffective	Overall improvement in school culture related to attendance awareness
Leader D	Limited parental understanding of chronic absenteeism; accountability gaps	Promote attendance as a core value; monthly incentives at school-wide and classroom levels	Strengthened connections with families	PowerSchool	Empowering teachers to make connections with families	Use of school social media	Student reduced absences from 55 days to 15 days due to targeted interventions
Leader E	Parental support challenges; lack of outside accountability	Partnered with <i>Communities</i> school-based clinics; “School Uber” rides	Partnered with community implemented monthly attendance incentives	PowerSchool; attendance officers/clerks	Teacher buy-in and community involvement	Building connections with families	Strengthened connections with students; celebrated achievements beyond attendance to reinforce

This chapter presents the study's findings through thematically organized responses from participants. Direct participant quotations were included to support the credibility of the findings and to provide rich, contextual insights into the lived experiences of school leaders in rural Virginia. The findings revealed that leaders perceived familial deterrence as a primary obstacle to overcoming chronic absenteeism, noting that many attendance challenges originated outside the school environment. Participants also described the consistent use of proactive and student-centered leadership practices as contributing to reductions in chronic absenteeism by emphasizing early engagement, relationship building, and individualized student support. Systemic data monitoring emerged as essential component of leadership practice, enabling administrators to identify emerging attendance concerns early and guide targeted interventions. Leaders emphasized the importance of cultivating a school culture that valued consistent attendance as a shared responsibility among educators, families, and community partners. Lastly, collaboration with community agencies expanded schools' capacity to address non-academic barriers to attendance by connecting students and families with additional resources and support help. These findings illustrate the multifaceted leadership approaches use our rural school leaders to respond to chronic absenteeism.

### **Finding 1**

Leaders felt that familial determinants are a primary obstacle to overcoming chronic absenteeism.

**Analysis to Support Finding 1.** These perceptions align with research demonstrating that family instability, limited access to health and social services, and reduced parental engagement are strongly associated with chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Gottfried, 2014; Kearney, 2021). A unanimous finding among all 5 participants (100%) was that

the family unit functions as the primary determinant of student attendance rates. Participants consistently emphasized that student attendance behaviors are shaped by family attitudes, expectations, and daily routines. Leader A and Leader B reported that a lack of parental support and limited understanding of the long-term academic and social consequences of absenteeism create a foundational barrier. As Leader A explained, “Attendance really starts at home. If school isn’t a priority for the family, it’s very difficult for us to change that at the school level.” When attendance is not prioritized within the home, administrators reported that school-based interventions often have limited impact. “We can support students all day long, but if families don’t reinforce it at home, attendance doesn’t improve,” Leader B emphasized.

Leader D further noted that many families do not fully understand the technical definition of chronic absenteeism, particularly its cumulative nature. Families frequently perceive individual or sporadic absences as insignificant, despite their contribution to chronic absenteeism thresholds. As Leader D explained, “Parents often say, ‘They’ve only missed a few days,’ without realizing how quickly those days add up over the year.” This lack of understanding results in a misalignment between school attendance expectations and family practices, complicating administrators’ efforts to intervene proactively. Leader B stated, “You can put every intervention in place, but if parents don’t see attendance as important, the impact is limited.” Participants also described additional family challenges, including inconsistent home routines, competing responsibilities, and limited access to reliable transportation. While the specific circumstances varied across communities, administrators consistently identified the family unit as the most influential factor affecting attendance outcomes.

In addition to familial determinants, Table 8 displays that participants identified several logistical and stress-related barriers that further complicate attendance efforts in rural Virginia.

Transportation emerged as a critical obstacle, particularly for students residing outside designated schools. Leader A noted that “out-of-zone students are often not eligible for district transportation, which places the responsibility entirely on families to get students to and from school.” Participants reported that transportation limitations frequently resulted in increased absences, especially for families with limited financial resources or inflexible work schedules. As Leader E explained, “If a parent misses work to drive a child to school, attendance becomes a financial decision, not an educational one.”

**Table 8**

*Leadership Perceptions of Obstacles to Chronic Absenteeism in Rural Title I Virginia Schools*

Leader A	Parental support; school zone and transportation issues
Leader B	Low parental support; court system limitations; low external accountability
Leader C	State accountability constraints; parental support; medical provider practices
Leader D	Limited parental understanding of chronic absenteeism; accountability gaps
Leader E	Parental support challenges; lack of outside accountability

These leaders consistently emphasized that factors beyond the schools’ direct control, particularly those rooted in the home environment, pose substantial barriers to improving attendance. Leader A noted that “attendance issue almost always starts at home,” citing limited parental follow-through and competing family responsibilities. Leader D described challenges related to student disengagement and unmet family needs, explaining that “many of our students don’t have consistent routines or an adult at home making sure they get to school every day.” These conditions, according to the participants, reduce the effectiveness of school-based interventions when attendance expectations are not reinforced outside the school setting. Leader E further highlighted how family health concerns and transportation limitations frequently resulted in repeated absences, stating, “A lot of our absences are tied to health issues or families simply not having a reliable way to get students here.” Participants indicated that these barriers

were particularly pronounced in rural communities, where limited access to healthcare and transportation infrastructure often places additional strain on families.

Medical documentation practices were also identified as structural challenges. Leader C observed that students are frequently withdrawn from school for an entire day to attend brief medical appointments, noting that “students miss a full instructional day for a 15-minute doctor’s visit.” Participants further reported that some medical providers issue broadly written or extended excuses that are difficult for schools to contest. As Leader D explained, “Once we get a doctor’s note, there’s very little we can do, even if it becomes a pattern.” Participants acknowledged that this challenge is compounded in rural areas, where fewer medical facilities are located near schools, often requiring families to travel long distances for appointments.

A lack of external accountability further compounded these challenges. Leaders C, D, and E described a perceived absence of meaningful enforcement mechanisms beyond the school level. Participants noted that court systems and state regulations often lack the necessary authority or consistency to compel attendance or reinforce school-level interventions. As Leader D explained, “There really isn’t anything beyond the school that holds families accountable for attendance.” Leader E echoed this concern, stating, “Once we’ve done everything, we can at the school level, there’s nowhere else for the issue to go.” According to the participants, this lack of accountability limits administrators’ ability to escalate attendance concerns and diminishes the overall effectiveness of existing attendance policies.

**Finding 1 Discussion.** The leaders perceived that family influence was a crucial structure for preventing chronic absenteeism in their rural school. In response to the question asking what barriers do school leaders face when trying to reduce chronic absenteeism, they unanimously replied that the family unit functions as the primary determinant of student attendance patterns in

their buildings. Participants consistently emphasized that student attendance behaviors are shaped by family attitudes, expectations, and daily routines. Participants reported that when attendance is not prioritized at home, school-based interventions have limited impact. Leader E noted that a lack of parental support and limited understanding of the long-term academic and social consequences of absenteeism create a foundational barrier to improving attendance outcomes.

### **Finding 2**

Leaders perceived the consistent use of proactive and student-centered school leadership practices as contributing to a reduction of chronic absenteeism.

**Analysis to Support Finding 2.** All 5 leaders reported intentionally implementing strategies focused on early identification, relationship building, and ongoing monitoring of student attendance to prevent patterns of chronic absenteeism. These perceptions align with existing research emphasizing the importance of consistent, supportive, and student-focused leadership in addressing attendance challenges (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Leaders reported that approaches centered on student engagement, individualized support, and clear attendance expectations were more effective than reactive or punitive approaches. Leader A explained that supportive strategies were more effective than discipline-based responses, noting that “When we focus on connecting with students and supporting families, instead of threatening consequences, attendance improves.” Participant responses suggested that when leadership prioritizes proactive and student-centered practices, improvements in attendance are more likely to occur, particularly within their rural school buildings.

Use of incentive-based systems emerged as the most frequently cited leadership strategy for improving student attendance, as seen in Table 9. Participants reported that incentives were

intentionally designed to motivate students through positive reinforcement rather than punitive measures. Leader A described implementing both structured and spontaneous incentives: “We use monthly rewards, but we also do pop-up incentives when they aren’t expecting them, it keeps attendance exciting and reinforces consistency.” This approach was described as particularly effective in maintaining student engagement and reinforcing positive attendance behaviors. Leader B emphasized the importance of maintaining high visibility of attendance incentives throughout the school environment. According to Leader B, “We keep attendance awards posted and talk about them all the time. When students see it everywhere, it builds excitement and keeps attendance at the forefront.” Participants indicated that frequent reminders and visible recognition increased student participation and reinforced attendance expectations.

### Table 9

#### *Leadership Actions Implemented to Address Chronic Absenteeism*

Leader A	Monthly incentives; pop-up incentives; matching at-risk students with teacher mentors
Leader B	Monthly attendance incentives displayed prominently to increase visibility and motivation
Leader C	Assignment of after-school remediation to allow students to recover instructional hours lost due to chronic absenteeism
Leader D	Promotion of attendance as a core value; monthly incentives implemented at both school-wide and classroom levels
Leader E	Partnership with <i>Communities in Schools</i> ; implementation of school-based health clinics; provision of “School Uber” transportation for students who missed the bus

Leader D described implementing incentive systems at both the schoolwide and classroom levels, allowing attendance recognition to function as both a collective and individualized effort. As Leader D explained, “We reward attendance as a school, but we also recognize classrooms so students feel like they’re contributing to something bigger.” Leader E noted that classroom level incentives encourage positive peer accountability, explaining that “students don’t just want the reward for themselves, they want their class to earn it together.” These approaches were reported to foster collaboration and shared responsibility among students.

Across all cases, participants identified incentive-based systems as effective tools for cultivating a school culture that values regular attendance. As Leader E stated, “When attendance is celebrated instead of punished, students are more motivated to show up every day.” Collectively, these findings suggest that incentive-based strategies, when implemented consistently and visibly, play a meaningful role in promoting attendance and strengthening school culture.

In addition to incentive-based approaches, participants described a range of innovative structural solutions for addressing home-based and systemic factors that impede consistent attendance. These interventions focused on reducing logistical barriers and mitigating the academic consequences of missing instructional time. Leader C reported utilizing DOE regulations to implement an after-school instructional recovery program. According to participants, these programs allowed students who had accumulated extensive absences to recover lost instructional hours, therefore reducing academic deficits associated with chronic absenteeism. Participants described instructional recovery as a supportive, student-centered alternative that complemented broader attendance improvement efforts.

Leader E partnered with Communities in Schools and established home-based health clinics to address absenteeism related to medical and social needs. Communities in Schools operates through a community partnership designed to reduce nonacademic barriers to student success, including limited access to healthcare, transportation challenges, and unmet family needs. By providing access to health services on campus, Leader E reported a reduction in absences caused by external medical appointments, explaining, “When students can see a provider at school, they’re not missing an entire day just to go to the doctor.” This approach was viewed as particularly effective in reducing instructional time lost to off-campus medical visits.

Leader E implemented, in conjunction with community-based partners, a “School Uber” initiative that gave a means of transportation to students who missed the bus. This intervention directly addressed transportation barriers, which participants identified as a common attendance barrier.

**Finding 2 Discussion.** Leaders perceived the use of consistent proactive and student-centered school leadership practices contributed to the reduction of chronic absenteeism. In response to interview question 3, asking what they have used to facilitate efforts to address chronic absenteeism in their building, participants reported having implemented strategies. These strategies focus on early identification, relationship building, and ongoing attendance monitoring. They emphasized that supportive and engagement-focused approaches were more effective than reactive or punitive measures. Incentive-based systems emerged as the most frequently cited strategy, with leaders noting that positive reinforcement, high visibility of recognition, and peer accountability helped foster a culture that values regular attendance. Leaders reported implementing community-based supports, such as an on-campus health clinic, and opportunities to regain missed instructional time, as strategies that reduced external barriers to attendance and supported students’ consistent engagement in school. Table 8 contains an overview of strategies participants implemented to address chronic absenteeism.

### **Finding 3**

Systemic data monitoring was essential for identifying attendance issues early and guiding targeted interventions.

**Analysis to Support Finding 3.** Consistent use of data systems emerged as a critical leadership practice for supporting early intervention efforts to address chronic absenteeism. All participants identified power school as their primary attendance monitoring tool and emphasized

that routine review of attendance records enable the timely identification of emerging patterns of concern. Leaders reported that regular analysis of attendance data allowed them to intervene before absences escalated into chronic patterns. As leader A explained, “We check Power School every morning. If a student has missed two or three days in a row, that triggers a conversation right away. We don’t wait until it becomes ten or fifteen days.” Similarly, later D stated “Power School lets us see patterns before they turn into problems, so that we can meet with families before he gets out of hand.”

All 5 leaders reported using PowerSchool as their primary data management system for tracking student attendance. Participants described the platform as essential for monitoring daily attendance patterns and identifying students at risk of chronic absenteeism. Leader C noted, “PowerSchool lets us see patterns immediately, not weeks later.” Leaders A and Leader E reported supplementing this technology tool with attendance clerks, with Leader E explaining, “Having someone dedicated to attendance means we can respond the same day, not after the problem grows.”

Several participants described supplementing digital monitoring systems with additional personnel and programs to strengthen follow-up efforts. Leader E reported, “Our clerk runs weekly reports and flags students who are close to be chronically absent, so we can start interventions before they cross that line, “while Leader A emphasized, “Having someone focused on attendance makes sure nothing falls through the cracks.” Participants also described integrating attendance data into mentoring and intervention programs. For example, Leader A connected Power School data to the Sidekick program, which is where a teacher is paired with students that might be struggling to come to school. These meeting or check-ins help teachers develop a relationship with the students and help them feel more connected to school. These

practices demonstrate how leaders used data not only for documentation but also as a foundation for individualized support and coordinated intervention.

Across all cases, participants viewed systemic data monitoring as essential for informed decision-making. Leader C summarized this perspective by stating “Without the data, we’d just be guessing. PowerSchool shows us exactly who needs help.” Collectively, these accounts illustrate how leaders relied on consistent data review to guide timely responses, allocate resources, and engage families in attendance improvement efforts.

**Finding 3 Discussion.** The findings indicate that consistent use of attendance data systems strengthens schools’ capacity to identify emerging attendance patterns early and implement targeted supports. Participants emphasized routine monitoring, collaborative follow-up, and data inform intervention aligns with prior research highlighting the importance of real time attendance data in preventing chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014). By using power school and supplementary monitoring structures leaders were able to move beyond reactive approaches and adopt proactive, preventative strategies.

The integration of data with mentoring programs, attendance personnel, and community-based supports reflects research suggesting that effective attendance intervention require both technological and relational components (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Leaders’ reliance on systemic data analysis enabled them to coordinate interventions across school and community context, thereby strengthening accountability and consistency.

Overall, this finding underscores the central role of data-driven leadership in promoting student engagement and attendance. Leaders who prioritize consistent monitoring and responsive intervention were better positioned to prevent the progression of absenteeism and to sustain long term attendance improvement efforts. These results supported existing literature demonstrating

data informed practices on foundational to effective leadership in high need in rural education settings (Gottfried, 2014).

**Finding 4.**

Leaders emphasized the importance of cultivating a school culture that valued consistent attendance as a collaborative and shared responsibility with external stakeholders.

**Analysis to Support Finding 4.** Participants consistently described the improvement of student attendance as fundamentally rooted in the intentional cultivation of a school culture that prioritizes consistent engagement and shared accountability. Rather than framing attendance solely as an administrative requirement, leaders conceptualized it as a relational and community driven endeavor. They emphasized the meaningful progress occurred when attendance expectations were embedded within the broader culture fabric of the school and reinforced collectively by educators, family and community stakeholders. These findings indicate that leadership practices integrating real-time attendance data with relational, teacher-empowered, and community-engaged strategies enable schools to identify early warning signs and implement timely, targeted supports (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Gottfried, 2014). Leaders further emphasized that attendance initiatives were most effective when teachers, families, and community members were actively engaged in reinforcing shared attendance expectations (Kearney, 2021).

Leader A articulated this distinction, stating “Data tell us who needs help, but relationships are what actually increase the attendance,” underscoring the belief that relational trust and connection are the primary mechanism for behavioral change. Similarly, Leader E noted, “Attendance isn’t just numbers; it’s about our students. When they know we care, they want to be here.” These perspectives reflect an understanding that student engagement is strengthened when students perceive authentic investment and belonging within the school

community. Findings along with research demonstrating that positive school climate and strong student teacher relationships are notably associated with improving attendance and academic engagement (Kearney, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013).

Teacher empowerment emerged as a critical component of fostering a school culture that values attendance. Leaders C, D, and E stressed that meaningful teacher buy-in was essential to the success of attendance initiatives. Leader D noted that empowering teachers to establish direct, relational connections with families was more effective than relying solely on top-down administrative mandates. Participants reported that when teachers were equipped and encouraged to communicate with families regarding attendance, interventions were perceived as more personal and supportive. Table 10 shows the practices that support a school culture of attendance.

**Table 10**

*Leadership Practices Supporting a School Culture of Attendance*

Leader A	Monthly celebrations to recognize student attendance achievements
Leader B	Fostering a close-knit school community to encourage student engagement
Leader C	Promoting teacher buy-in; involving the community; educating families on the impact of attendance on school outcomes
Leader D	Empowering teachers to establish direct connections with families and students
Leader E	Encouraging teacher buy-in and active community involvement to support attendance initiatives

**Finding 4 Discussion.** The findings indicate that the cultivation of a positive, relationship-centered school culture played a pivotal role in improving attendance within rural Appalachian Title I schools. Leaders perceived attendance not merely as a compliance metric but as a shared moral and communal commitment reinforced through relational trust, teacher empowerment, and community collaboration. These results substantiate prior scholarship demonstrating that supportive school climates, distributed leadership practices, and strong

family–school partnerships are associated with improved student engagement and reduced absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013).

### **Finding 5**

Partnership with community agencies increased schools' ability to address non-academic factors that affect student attendance.

**Analysis to Support Finding 5.** Participants consistently reported that collaboration with community agencies played a critical role in expanding their schools' capacity to address non-academic barriers contributing to chronic absenteeism. Leaders emphasized that challenges such as limited access to healthcare, transportation difficulties, family instability, and economic hardship extended beyond the scope of school-based resources. As Leader E explained, "We can't solve everything inside the building. When students don't have rides, medical care, or stable support at home, we have to lean on our community partners." This statement reflects participants' recognition that attendance barriers are embedded within broader social and environmental contexts.

Several leaders highlighted partnerships with organizations such as Communities in Schools, Boys & Girls Clubs, school-based health clinics, and local social service agencies as essential to providing wraparound supports. Leader C described the role of Communities in Schools in coordinating services, stating, "They help us bridge the gap between home and school. When families don't know where to turn, they step in and guide them." Similarly, Leader B emphasized the value of after-school programming, noting, "The Boys & Girls Club keeps students connected after hours, and that connection carries over into better attendance." These accounts illustrate how external partnerships expanded schools' capacity to provide consistent academic and social support.

Participants also described transportation-related collaborations as particularly important in rural contexts. Leader E shared, “Our ‘School Uber’ rides made a difference for families who just didn’t have a way to get their child here consistently.” Leaders reported that when practical barriers were reduced through coordinated community services, students were more likely to attend school regularly. These findings align with research indicating that access to health, transportation, and social supports plays a critical role in promoting consistent attendance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Kearney, 2016).

Community involvement was also identified as an important factor in strengthening attendance efforts, as reflected in Table 11, which displays summaries of participants’ perceptions of community collaboration. Leaders described intentional efforts to educate the broader community about the relationship between student attendance and school accountability outcomes. Leader C reported that increasing community awareness helped shift attendance from a school-only responsibility to a shared concern, stating, “Local businesses and community members helped by providing incentives.” Research supports the role of community engagement in addressing attendance challenges, particularly in rural contexts where schools often function as central community institutions (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; Özcan, 2021).

**Table 11**

*Community Collaboration: Successful Strategies and Challenges*

Leader A	Setting shorter, attainable goals for community engagement	Successful in maintaining interest and participation
Leader B	Community-based initiatives	Limited budget hindered sustainability of programs
Leader C	Use of school social media; town meeting–style informational sessions	Social media was effective; town meetings were largely ineffective in reaching at-risk families
Leader D	Use of school social media	Social media successfully increased transparency and engagement
Leader E	Building connections with families	Strengthened relationships and supported attendance efforts

Most participants further identified the use of social media as an effective strategy for strengthening communication and transparency with families and community members. Leaders B, C, and D reported that social media platforms allowed schools to share attendance-related information, celebrate improvements, and publicly recognize attendance successes. Leader C explained, “When attendance is posted and celebrated online, it reaches families and community members who might not hear it otherwise.” Participants noted that increased visibility through these platforms fostered a sense of shared accomplishment among students, families, and community members. Leader D described the impact of public recognition, “When we recognize attendance successes online, students feel proud and families feel included.” Leader A noted that social media helped reinforce collective responsibility by “showing the community that we are working together.” All participants viewed social media as a valuable communication tool that enhanced transparency and strengthened community engagement.

Despite the benefits of collaboration, several participants expressed concerns regarding sustainability and funding. Leader B remarked, “The partnerships work, but we’re always worried about whether we can keep them going.” This concern reflects prior research indicating that rural and high-poverty schools often face financial and structural limitations that constrain long-term implementation of comprehensive support systems (Kearney et al., 2025).

**Finding 5 Discussion.** Participants consistently emphasized that reductions in chronic absenteeism were supported by leadership practices grounded in real-time data monitoring and the intentional cultivation of a schoolwide culture that prioritized attendance. Teacher empowerment emerged as a critical subtheme, with leaders noting that when educators were equipped to build relational connections with families and actively reinforce attendance

expectations, interventions were perceived as more personal and effective. Community collaboration further strengthened attendance efforts, as leaders engaged families and community partners through shared accountability initiatives and various communication strategies, such as social media, to reinforce attendance norms. Table 12 displays the success of implementing leadership practices.

**Table 12**

*Success Stories Demonstrating the Impact of Leadership Practices on Attendance*

Leader A	Increased community engagement, with families and community members actively participating in school attendance initiatives
Leader B	A family of four students previously exhibiting chronic truancy won a monthly incentive; all students transitioned to consistent attendance
Leader C	Observed an overall improvement in school culture related to attendance awareness and engagement
Leader D	A student reduced total absences from 55 days in the previous year to 15 days in the current year due to targeted interventions
Leader E	Strengthened connections with students; celebrated achievements beyond attendance to reinforce positive engagement for students with attendance challenges

The findings indicate that collaboration with community agencies expanded schools' capacity to respond holistically to student needs by addressing barriers beyond academic instruction. Leaders perceived these partnerships as essential for mitigating structural challenges that contribute to chronic absenteeism. Consistent with ecological perspectives on student development, participants recognized that attendance is shaped by interconnected family, school, and community systems that require coordinated intervention (Kearney, 2016).

These results support existing scholarship demonstrating that integrated school–community partnerships enhance student engagement and attendance by aligning academic supports with health, social, and logistical services (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). In rural Appalachian Title I schools, where geographic isolation and limited institutional capacity intensify attendance challenges, such collaborations appear particularly critical. By leveraging community expertise

and shared responsibility, leaders strengthened their schools' ability to reduce non-academic barriers and promote sustained student attendance.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of the study concerns its limited geographic scope. Due to potential ethical considerations surrounding researcher bias, data were not collected from the school division in which the researcher is employed, by request of the superintendent's office. This restriction was followed to preserve the integrity of the study and prevent any perceived or actual prejudice from influencing participants' responses or interpreting the interview data.

### **Summary**

Participants described chronic absenteeism as a multifaceted issue shaped by interconnected familial, structural, community level influences. Leaders identified barriers such as economic instability, transportation challenges limited access to health care services, and reduced external accountability structures as contributing factors that extend beyond the school's immediate control. The findings further reveal six interrelated themes: familial determinants, gaps in external accountability, incentive-based systems, relational mentoring, data-driven monitoring, and community collaboration. These themes collectively underscore the complexity of attendance challenges within rural Appalachian contexts and the importance of leadership responsiveness to local conditions.

The data suggested that sustainable attendance improvement in rural settings require more than procedural or compliant-oriented interventions. Rather, effective leadership is characterized by the intentional cultivation of inclusive, relational grounded school cultures in which educators, families and community partners share responsibility for student success. Participants emphasize proactive engagement strategies, consistent use of real time data to

inform decision making, and the development of trust-based relationships with students and families as central to reducing absenteeism. Cross-sector collaboration with community organizations further strengthened the schools' capacity to address barriers beyond the classroom. These findings indicate leadership practices grounded in relational trust, data informed actions, and collaborative partnerships can mitigate contextual barriers and promote sustained improvements in attendance.

## **Chapter 5: Findings, Implications and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools. As outlined in Chapter 1, chronic absenteeism represents a persistent and complex challenge in rural educational contexts and is associated with adverse academic outcomes, including reduced academic achievement and increased risk of disengagement from school. In rural Appalachian communities, attendance challenges are often compounded by geographical isolation, limited access to healthcare, transportation barriers, and socioeconomic constraints.

This study explored school leaders' perspectives to better understand the systemic factors contributing to chronic absenteeism and the leadership practices employed to address attendance concerns within Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools. Guided by the central research question, how do school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism, this research examined leaders' experiences related to attendance barriers, prevention strategies, and collaborative efforts with families and community stakeholders. A focus on leadership perspectives offers insight into how administrators navigate attendance challenges within environments characterized by limited resources.

In alignment with the purpose and research questions presented in Chapter 1, I sought to examine how school leaders conceptualize the relationship between chronic absenteeism and student academic performance within a rural Appalachian Virginia context. Findings indicate that leaders view consistent attendance as essential for academic engagement, yet they also recognize that attendance behaviors are influenced by out-of-school stressors, such as poverty, unstable home environments, health challenges, and limited access to community supports. This

perspective aligns with Appalachian leadership research describing how rural principals operate within the conditions of systemic overload, where student needs related to illness, special needs, family instability, and housing insecurity often supersede instructional priorities (Mullen & Fleming, 2024). Through a qualitative analysis of leadership practices, the study identified approaches that emphasize early intervention, promote consistent attendance, and cultivate a school culture in which responsibility for attendance is shared among schools, families, and community. Chapter 5 synthesizes the study's findings and discusses their implications for leadership practices, policy development, and future research in rural Appalachia education settings.

### **Research Question**

The research question was, How do school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in Virginia's rural Appalachian Title I schools?

Three sub-questions were:

1. What barriers do school leaders encounter when trying to reduce chronic absenteeism in their rural settings?
2. What specific leadership strategies have school leaders used to facilitate efforts to address chronic absenteeism?
3. If there is collaboration with families, community members, and/or other healthcare providers to mitigate chronic absenteeism, which methods have worked best or perhaps fallen short of expectations?

### **Discussion of Findings**

There were three main findings, as follows.

1. Leaders perceived that familial determinants are the primary obstacle to overcoming chronic absenteeism.
2. Leaders perceived use of consistent proactive and student-centered school leadership practices have contributed to reduction of chronic absenteeism.
3. Leaders perceived the cultivation of a school culture that values consistent attendance as a collaborative and shared responsibility with external stakeholders.

The leaders described chronic absenteeism as a multifaceted issue requiring leadership responses that extended beyond traditional administrative practices. Consistent with the existing literature, participants emphasized the absenteeism in the rural Appalachian context is often driven by structural and family factors rather than student disengagement alone. Leaders noted that poverty, healthcare access, mental health concerns, and transportation limitations frequently disrupted regular attendance and required flexible, empathetic leadership responses.

Participants also highlighted the role of proactive leadership in mitigating absenteeism. The use of real-time attendance data allowed leaders to identify at-risk students early and implement targeted interventions before attendance issues became chronic. This approach aligns with research emphasizing the importance of data-driven decision making and early warning systems in improving attendance outcomes. Leaders described integrating data analysis with relational practices, such as mentoring, check-ins, and family outreach, as critical to their success.

These findings underscore the importance of fostering a schoolwide culture that prioritizes attendance as a collective responsibility. Leaders reported that attendance initiatives were more sustainable when teachers, families, and community partners shared accountability and reinforced consistent attendance expectations. Collaborative efforts, such as partnerships

with local healthcare providers, social services, and community organizations were particularly valuable in addressing barriers beyond the school's control. Participants also acknowledged limitations in collaboration, noting constraints related to resources available within the community, communication, and inconsistent family engagement.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of the study suggest several important implications for school leadership practice in rural Appalachian settings. The findings indicate that school leaders should prioritize a preventative, relationship-centered approach to attendance improvement rather than rely exclusively on compliance-based or punitive responses. Consistent with existing research, participants emphasized that chronic absenteeism is most effectively addressed when students feel connected to school and supported by trusted adults (Gottfried, 2014; Kearney, 2021). Relationship-building strategies, such as mentoring, intentional check-ins, and supportive communication, enable leaders and staff to identify the underlying barriers to attendance and respond in ways that promote student engagement rather than avoidance. Table 13 shows that these findings reinforce the need for school leaders to foster climates of care, belonging, and accountability that encourage regular attendance through positive reinforcement and shared expectations.

**Table 13***Implications for Practitioners*

<b>Implications</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Strength in family engagement strategies	Finding 1: Familial determinants
Increase communication with caregivers to improve understanding of attendance expectations	Finding 1: Familial determinants
Implementation of student centered and relationship focused interventions	Finding 2: Proactive Leadership
Positive reinforcement rather than punitive responses	Finding 2: Proactive Leadership
Use of real-time attendance data system, such as power school	Finding 3: Data Monitoring
Create a positive school climate that emphasizes belonging and engagement	Finding 4: School Culture
Partnerships with social services, health providers and local organizations.	Finding 5: Community Partners

An important implication of this study is the integration of real-time attendance data with intentional follow-up processes that emerged as a critical leadership practice. Participants consistently reported that timely access to attendance data allowed schools to identify early warning signs and intervene before absenteeism becomes chronic. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting the effectiveness of early identification and tiered interventions in reducing absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013). The findings also suggest that data alone is insufficient. Leaders must ensure that data is actively used to guide decision-making, initiate personalized outreach, and coordinate support systems. In rural settings, where staffing and resources are often limited, the strategic use of data systems can maximize efficiency and support more targeted student-centered responses.

Finally, an important implication of the study is the importance of strengthening partnerships with families and community stakeholders to address systemic barriers contributing to absenteeism. Participants emphasized that challenges, such as transportation limitations, healthcare access, and family obligations often extend beyond the capacity of the school to resolve independently. Consistent with the ecological perspective informing the study, effective attendance interventions required collaboration across systems, including families, healthcare providers, social service agencies, and community organizations (Chang & Romero, 2008). Leaders noted that while collaborative efforts were sometimes constrained by resource availability and communication barriers, partnerships that were sustained and relationally grounded yielded more meaningful support for students. These findings suggest that school leaders should intentionally cultivate community relationships and advocate for cross-sector collaboration as a central component of attendance improvement strategies. Collectively, these implications highlight the need for school leaders in rural Appalachian contexts to approach chronic absenteeism as a systemic challenge requiring relational leadership, data-informed practices, and collaborative problem-solving.

### **Implications for Policy**

At the policy level, the findings highlight the need for increased support and targeted resources for rural school divisions addressing chronic absenteeism. State and local education agencies should consider policies that promote access to healthcare services, transportation assistance, and community-based support programs that may indirectly improve attendance outcomes by addressing factors that extend beyond the school environment. Table 14 shows that the findings suggest a need for policies that support early identification and the implementation of structured attendance intervention frameworks. State-level guidance that encourages use of

real-time attendance data and tiered response systems may help school divisions identify at-risk students earlier and allocate resources more effectively. Funding models that allow flexibility in staffing, such as attendance liaisons, social workers, or school-based coordinators, may further enhance schools' capacity to respond to attendance challenges in rural contexts.

**Table 14**

*Implications for District and Policy*

<b>Implications</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Investment into family engagement initiatives and parent education programs.	Finding 1: Familial Determents
Professional development for principals and teachers on relational leadership mentoring and student engagement strategies	Finding 2: Proactive Leadership
Access to reliable attendance data.	Finding 3: Data Monitoring
District wide attendance initiatives and messaging that emphasizes positive school climate and student belonging	Finding 4: School Culture
Establishment of formal partnerships with community agencies	Finding 5: Community Partners

Professional development policies also warrant attention. Leaders in the study emphasized the importance of relationship-centered and preventative approaches to attendance improvement. Policies that support ongoing professional development and trauma-informed leadership, data-informed decision-making, and collaboration may better equip school leaders to address chronic absenteeism. Importantly, professional development should be context-specific and reflective of geographic communities, including rural Appalachia, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all model. Lastly, findings point to the importance of interagency collaboration at the policy level. Policies that encourage partnership between schools, healthcare providers, and

community organizations can help address the complex and interconnected factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachian settings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Researchers may expand upon the findings by incorporating the perspectives of students and families affected by chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachian communities. While the study focuses on school leaders' perceptions, exploring students' and caregivers' experiences may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the contextual and relational factors influencing attendance. Qualitative studies that take the students' experiences could illuminate how school climate, relationships with educators, and perceived relevance of schooling influence attendance behaviors, particularly in rural settings.

A longitudinal research design may contribute valuable insights into the sustained impact of leadership interventions on attendance outcomes over time. Examining how proactive, data-informed, and relationship-centered leadership practices influence attendance trajectories across multiple academic years may help determine which strategies yield lasting improvements. Researchers could also explore how leadership transitions, policy changes, or shifts in community resources affect the effectiveness of attendance interventions. Lastly, researchers evaluating partnerships among schools, healthcare providers, social service agencies, and community organizations could offer insight into how coordinated supports influence attendance and academic outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study contributes to the existing body of literature by examining how school leadership practices influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachia Title I schools in Virginia. Through the perspectives of school leaders, the study highlights the

complexity of attendance challenges within rural contexts and underscores the importance of leadership approaches that are responsive to the environmental, relational, and structural factors. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the findings reinforce the understanding that chronic absenteeism is not an isolated educational issue but rather a complex challenge shaped by multiple, interconnected influences operating across students' home, school, and community environments.

The findings demonstrate that effective leadership practices extend beyond compliance-based attendance policies and instead emphasize preventative, relationships-centered, and data-informed strategies. School leaders reported that early identification of attendance concerns combined with intentional follow-up and individual supports was crucial in mitigating chronic absenteeism. The cultivation of a positive school culture that prioritizes attendance as shared responsibilities emerged as a key component of sustainable attendance improvement efforts.

This study highlights the essential role of collaboration among schools, families, and community stakeholders in addressing attendance barriers that exist outside the immediate control of schools. In rural Appalachian communities, where access to healthcare, transportation, and social services may be limited, partnerships with external agencies were viewed as instrumental in supporting students and families. These findings suggest that leadership practices grounded in collaboration and community engagement are particularly vital in rural settings.

As this study underscored there is a need for school leaders to approach chronic absenteeism through a systems-based lens that acknowledges the broader ecological contexts influencing student attendance. By adopting leadership practices that integrate relational engagement, data-driven decision making, and collaboration, school leaders may be better positioned to support student success and improve academic outcomes in rural Appalachia

communities. The findings offer practical insight for educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers seeking to address chronic absenteeism in ways that are context-responsive and sustainable.

### **Researcher Reflection**

This study represented both a professional and personal journey into understanding the complex nature of chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachian schools. As an educator with experience in rural education, I entered this research with awareness of systemic challenges faced by students, families, and school leaders. My professional background provided valuable insight into school operations, leadership practices, and attendance policies. It also required an intentional reflection to ensure that personal experiences and assumptions did not influence data interpretation. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was prioritized to maintain objectivity and scholarly rigor.

This research also strengthened my appreciation for the vital role school leaders play in addressing attendance challenges through proactive, student-centered and community inform approaches. Findings affirmed my belief that chronic absenteeism cannot be addressed through policy compliance alone. It requires intentional relationship building, ongoing communication, and coordinated systems of support. As both a researcher and practitioner, the study has deepened my commitment to advocating for content-sensitive interventions that recognize and honor the unique strengths, challenges, and cultural values of rural Appalachia communities.

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## Appendix A

## Literature Matrix

Author/ Year	Purpose/ Goal	Methods/Data/ Sources	Types of Poverty	Challenges for Stakeholders	Central Themes
Robinson, Lee, Dearing, Rogers (2018)	How to improve student attendance in K–5 by increasing parental involvement	Quantitative Study: Phone survey/ mailer with facts about early intervention and importance of being present. *Parents’ perception of days missed was wrong. *Parents believed missing school in older grades was more significant. *Intervention helped repair parental beliefs about the importance of early years in school.	Urban, suburban, and rural  California: 10 districts	Changing the culture of society and parental beliefs by “interfering” or telling parents what is best for their kids.	Attendance Intervention Parental involvement
Rhoad- Drogalis, Justice (2018)	To determine if absenteeism was a factor in developing language and literacy skills in PreK students	Quantitative Study  Control group implemented a curriculum of choice.  Intervention group received the “Read it Again” curriculum. Both groups tested in fall for baseline scores and again in the spring, using PALs scoring.	Rural, Appalachi an Southeaste rn US  (Ohio, VA, WV)  PreK, Headstart	Students that attended regularly had no significant difference in language development. Those with chronic absenteeism (30 or more days) displayed less growth in literacy. Didn’t address school readiness as a factor in differences.	Chronic Absenteeism  Social/Emotio nal  Early Education
Gottfried, Ozuna,	Looking at the effect of those	Quantitative study: Direct assessment	Rural	Study showed that rural school	Chronic Absenteeism

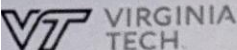
Kirksey (2021)	students who ride the school bus compared to those who don't in relation to chronic absenteeism	of rural, urban and suburban districts nationally. Schools categorized by absence ranges.		bus riders had fewer absent behaviors compared to other demographics.  The rural areas have features such as, demographics, climates, and terrain that need to be further examined. Example: one-way streets, long driveways, and turn-around areas for buses	Community
Gottfried, Kirksey, Ozuna (2020)	If there is evidence between elementary students and classmates regarding absenteeism	Quantitative study: Administrative data from the district office for three years  Linear probability	Urban, California	No data on reasoning for absences, behavior, or other reasoning	Chronic Absenteeism  Classmates  Social/Emotional
Stripling (2019)	To determine if implementation of Behavior Education Program (BEP) intervention would help address chronic absenteeism. "Explore the effectiveness of a practical, school-based attendance intervention."	Quantitative study: Daily recording of attendance and goal progression over the course of three months on 11 different students	Urban, Southern California setting	Different populations will have different results. Date of implementation was the last three months of the school year. Small size of those involved.  "Student absenteeism concerns are connected to many larger	Adaptive Behavioral Education  Chronic Absenteeism Check-ins  Positive student-adult interaction

				issues, such as mental health concerns, family conflict, and negative experiences in school.”	
Adams, Khojasteh (2018)	When supporting psychological needs for students, is there a climate of need-support for educators?	Mixed methods Non-experimental  Empirical investigation	Southwest ern U.S.  5th, 8th,11th grades	Study finds need-support climate is a controllable way to increase student development.  Need-support offers more social interactions with teacher-student engagement that focuses on relatedness.	School Climate  Leadership  Need-support
Stempel, et al. (2017)	If there is a correlation between chronic absenteeism and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	Telephone survey on children 0–17 years old, given by guardian  Multivariable	Random, Nationwid e, U.S.	Analyzing ACEs scores dependent on individual scoring  Screening of level of ACEs score  Determining if ACEs score is the driving factor of chronic absenteeism	School Absent Adverse Childhood Experiences
Gottfried, Kirksey (2017)	Does the timing of absences have an impact on testing outcomes for elementary education students?	Quantitative study  Tracking absences in a short time period before standardized testing	Urban  Elementar y  California	Lack of information on parents and families’ reasoning for absence  Focus was only on spring	Absenteeism  Testing  Elementary Education

	Understanding of those who are affected the most by missing school		3rd, 4th and 5th grade	assessment and not testing throughout the year  No data on student view of school climate or student perspective on school	
Stewart-Tufescu et al. (2022)	Relationship between childhood adversity and poor education outcomes	Quantitative study Longitudinal study  Random digit-dialing  Middle school age  Student reporting, not parental	Urban, Mid-size Canadian city	The unknown age of ACEs occurrence  Specific events were not documented. Small participation for sample size	Adverse Childhood Experiences  Middle School
Lenhoff, Pogodzinski (2018)	Extent in which variation in school organizational effectiveness is associated with chronic absenteeism	Quantitative study Exploratory  5 Essential Measures: *Effective leadership *Collaborative teachers *Instruction *Supportive environment *Involved families	Urban	There was a lack of evidence of the student relationships between the effectiveness of school organizational efforts toward absences.	Chronic Absenteeism  School Organization  Accountability

## Appendix B

### IRB Approval Letter



**Division of Scholarly Integrity and  
Research Compliance**  
Institutional Review Board  
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)  
300 Turner Street NW  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-3732  
irb@vt.edu  
<http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp>

**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** November 18, 2025

**TO:** Carol Ann Mullen, Ashley Duncan Cannon

**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Chronic Absenteeism in rural Virginia: A School Leadership Perspective

**IRB NUMBER:** 25-1136

Effective November 18, 2025, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:  
<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>  
(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

**PROTOCOL INFORMATION:**

Determined As:	<b>Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)</b>
Protocol Determination Date:	<b>November 18, 2025</b>

**ASSOCIATED FUNDING:**

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol.

Invent the Future

## Appendix C

### CITI Certification



Completion Date 02-Oct-2023  
 Expiration Date 02-Oct-2026  
 Record ID 51356434

This is to certify that:

**Ashley Cannon**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of  
 certification through CME.

**Research Study Design (RSD)**

(Curriculum Group)

**Research Study Design (RSD)**

(Course Learner Group)

**1 - Basic Course**

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)**

# CITI

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## Appendix D

### Request for Professional Organization Permission Email (Information Sheet)

Subject: Request for Distribution of Research Study Information

Dear [contact person for research at organization],

My name is Ashley Cannon, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Virginia Tech Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. I am conducting research to gather insights from school leadership on practices that impact student attendance, particularly in relation to rural parts of Virginia. This research is being conducted through Virginia Tech, IRB #25-1136 under the supervision of my dissertation chair, Dr. Carol A. Mullen.

The purpose of this study is to examine how school leadership practices, that influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism. By acquiring insights from leadership and community stakeholders, this research seeks to identify strategies that effectively address social, emotional, and societal factors that impact student attendance. Your participation will contribute to a deeper understanding of how trauma-informed leadership can support students' academic engagement and well-being, ultimately helping schools develop more responsive and equitable attendance interventions.

I am using a basic qualitative research design to gather detailed narrative data from participating individuals. I am seeking leadership members at the school level who have experience working with chronic absenteeism in public schools. Participation involves completing a brief one-to-one interview. All participant's information will remain confidential and anonymous.

If you are willing to share information about this study with your members, I would greatly appreciate it if you could distribute the attached recruitment flyer through your preferred communication channels. Before proceeding, I am happy to discuss any questions you may have about the research.

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

Ashley D. Cannon

Doctoral Candidate

Virginia Tech School of Education

## Appendix E

### Email to Potential Participants for Interviews

Subject Line: Interview Invitation: Chronic Absenteeism in rural Virginia: A School Leadership Perspective

Dear [Name],

Thank you for completing the demographic survey that was shared through professional organizations and social media. I am Ashley Cannon, a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech studying under Dr. Carol A. Mullen. You have been selected as a potential participant for the interview phase of my research examining the impact that school leadership has on prevention of chronic absenteeism in rural Appalachia.

If you choose to participate, please:

1. Review the attached informed consent.
2. Use this link [link] to schedule your interview.
3. Share any relevant documents you feel would inform the study.

Your participation is voluntary but valuable. Interviews will take approximately 20-35 minutes. This research is important because it addresses a critical gap in understanding how rural contextual factors intersect to influence chronic absenteeism.

Please contact me with any questions.

Regards,

Ashley Cannon

Doctoral Candidate, Virginia Tech

[ashleyld@vt.edu](mailto:ashleyld@vt.edu)

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol

**Title of Research Study** Chronic Absenteeism in rural Virginia: A School Leadership Perspective

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Carol A. Mullen, PhD; College of Liberal Arts & Human Science, School of Education, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program, Virginia Tech

**Co-Investigator:** Ashley Cannon, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program, Virginia Tech

*The co-investigator will conduct the interviews via Zoom.*

**Interviewer:** Thank you for participating in this study to gather insights from school leadership on practices that impact student attendance in rural Virginia. This interview should take 20–35 minutes and consist of eight questions. The purpose of this study is to examine how school leadership practices, influence the prevention of chronic absenteeism.

I will record this interview using Zoom. Only the audio and transcription will be used for data analysis. I will share the edited transcript for your review and approval. All data will be stored securely in Microsoft and Google accounts for three years after the research is completed, after which all files will be deleted. Only the principal investigator and I will have access to this data.

Do you agree to participate and be recorded? You may skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. All questions are open-ended. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I may interject with probes such as, but not limited to, “Tell me more,” “Could you expand on that,” or “Can you share an example?” in order to collect more detailed information.

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself, please include how long you have been in education, your role and position?
2. What obstacles do schools face when trying to reduce chronic absenteeism?
3. What do you as a school leader used to facilitate efforts to address chronic absenteeism in your building?
4. What, if any, strategies have you implemented?
  - a. Did you have success?
  - b. Why or why not?
5. Can you describe any data driven approaches you have used to monitor attendance?
6. What leadership practices have been most effective in building a school-wide culture that promotes attendance?
7. Is there any collaboration with families and/or the community to mitigate chronic absenteeism? Which methods have worked or failed?
8. Can you share any successes that you have had in improving chronic absenteeism?

## Appendix G

### Informed Consent

**Title of Research Study** Chronic Absenteeism in rural Virginia: A School Leadership Perspective

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Carol A. Mullen, PhD; College of Liberal Arts & Human Science, School of Education, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Virginia Tech

**Co-Investigator:** Ashley Cannon, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program, Virginia Tech

**Key Information:** The purpose of this study is to gather insights from school leadership on practices that impact student attendance in rural Virginia. This research will adopt basic qualitative methodologies. Research will be gathered through individual interviews.

**To whom can I talk?** If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you think the research has caused harm, you can talk to Dr. Carol A. Mullen, PhD; College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences, School of Education, Educational Leadership Program at Virginia Tech

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at XXXXX if

- you have questions about your rights as a research subject;
- the research team is not answering your questions, concerns, or complaints;
- you cannot reach the research team; or
- you want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research.

**How many people will be studied?**

We plan to interview 5-15 people for this research study.

**What happens if I agree to participate in this research?**

- Upon consent, a link for time slot will be emailed to the participants.
- Participants selected for the interviews will receive a letter describing the format and purpose of the study, as well as a request to participate and a consent form.
- Data will be collected during a one-on-one 20–35-minute interview. Interviews will be conducted through the online platform Zoom. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed.

**What happens if I say yes but change my mind later?**

You can leave the research anytime, for any reason, and it will not be held against you. If you decide to leave the research, all data collected through your responses will be destroyed. If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator, Dr. Carol A. Mullen. The investigator will contact the researcher, who will destroy all data collected before the withdrawal.

**Is there any way participating in this study could be bad for me?**

There are no known risks to participation in this study.

**What happens to the information collected for the research?**

We will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech.

Your private information, with the identifiers removed, or any samples that are collected during this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for the same purpose without additional consent from your side.

The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, reports to the sponsor, academic papers, and as part of a thesis or dissertation. Federal law provides additional protections to your medical records and health information. These are described in an attached document.

### **Can I be removed from the research without my approval?**

The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval.

### **What else do I need to know?**

We will offer to share your individual test results with you. You may accept or decline these results.

### **Statement of Consent**

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research. We will provide you with a signed copy of this form for your records.

Signature of participant	Date
Printed name of participant	
Signature of fix obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of fix obtaining consent	

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.