

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

The success of the school in carrying out its primary charge of educating and socializing students is contingent on students attending school regularly. In recognition of the importance of regular school attendance to quality education, attendance becomes a priority goal (At-Risk Youth in Crisis Handbook, 1993).

Educators have long emphasized the importance of class attendance. Only in the classroom may the student hear the teacher's presentation, participate in class discussions, and enjoy the benefits of spontaneous interactions between the students and teacher. It comes as no surprise that students with high absence rates earn lower grades than students with better attendance (Redick & Nicoll 1990). Fleming and Zafirau found that over three-fourths of school failure rates were explained by the attendance rate (Fleming & Zafirau 1982).

Student absenteeism has been a problem for years. State departments of education and school boards across the country have developed policies, procedures, and programs aimed primarily with the objective of reducing and preventing

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student absenteeism. To improve achievement, many districts have adopted policies calling for academic penalties for student absence (Redick & Nicoll 1990). A survey of 547 Iowa School principals showed that 58% reduce grades for excessive absences (Bartlett Vol.16). In 1985, it was estimated that twelve Texas school districts adopted a rule that any student with five absences during a semester would not receive credit, subject to appeal (Ligon 1990).

Newport News Public Schools has relied on the same attendance policy for approximately fifteen years. The district has developed individual student attendance procedures and district-wide attendance programs to address the reoccurring problem of student attendance. Newport News Public Schools adopted a policy similar to some of the school districts in Texas which includes failure of a high school subject after five unexcused absences for a specific marking period (Ligon, 1990).

The School Board of Newport News Public Schools during the 1995-1996 school year adopted the new attendance policy for full implementation beginning with the 1996-1997 school year.

In summer of June 3, 1996 the interim superintendent was named by the school board. He was appointed superintendent of schools November 20, 1996. The newly elected school board requested data from the superintendent that would determine if the new attendance policy and attendance program were

affecting the attendance of high school students. This³ causal-comparative study addresses the need for an evaluation of Newport News Public Schools attendance policy and attendance program and its perceived effects on high school student attendance.

Purpose of the Study

School divisions must collect and examine data regarding policies and programs that are designed to improve student attendance to provide school boards and administrators with evidence of their effectiveness. The purpose of this study is to conduct an evaluation of Newport News Public Schools newly introduced attendance policy and program in order to determine their perceived effects after one year of implementation.

Rationale for the Study

The need to collect and analyze attendance data gave impetus to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Newport News Public Schools current attendance policy and program. The study helped the superintendent in providing the school board, central office administrators, building level administrators, teachers, parents, students, business leaders, and communities of Newport News Public Schools with evidence that determined the effectiveness of a newly adopted attendance policy and

attendance program on student attendance. The study benefited the school division by providing the current policy committee and future policy committees with valuable data that may assist committee members in developing division attendance policies that would have a direct effect on thousands of children. The study further offered future superintendents and school boards with historical data upon which to base their decisions as they deliberate on future policies for possible adoption.

Research Questions

This study addresses the overall research question:

Is the new attendance policy and attendance program of Newport News Public Schools effective as indicated by statistical analyses of attendance data, students, parents, and teachers perceptions, and programmatic data after one year of implementation at the high school level?

The specific research questions that were investigated are:

- (1) Is there a statistically significant interaction between grade level (9, 10, 11 for year 1995-1996) and gender (male, female) with respect to year 1996-1997 high school attendance after adjusting for initial

differences on the 1995-1996 high school attendance?

- (2) What are the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers regarding the new attendance policy and attendance program after one year of implementation?
- (3) Is the Saturday Redemptive School affecting the pass rate of participants after one year of implementation?

Significance of the Study

This study attempted to describe whether the Newport News Public Schools attendance policy and attendance program improves student attendance. The results of this study provided valuable data to Newport News Public Schools and other local school divisions regarding the effectiveness of school attendance policies and attendance programs. This study adds data to the limited research database pertaining to the evaluation of attendance policies and attendance programs.

Definition of Terms

Attendance - According to Newport News Public Schools, attendance is monitored on a daily basis. The Code of Virginia, Section 22.1-254, requires that all children who have reached their fifth birthday on or before September 30th and who have not yet reached their 18th birthday must attend school.

Attendance Policy - According to Rights and Responsibilities Handbook, Newport News Public Schools is committed to the academic success of all students. It is also committed to the belief that all students must have the opportunity to achieve full development of their potential through the acquisition of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills essential to becoming productive adults. The school division requires students attend school daily so that they will receive the maximum benefit from the instructional program and develop habits of punctuality, self-discipline, and responsibility.

All parties involved in the educational process attempt to work cooperatively to keep absences and tardies to a minimum. However, student attendance at school is the responsibility of students and parents. In order for parents to fulfill their legal responsibility, the school is required to keep parents informed of student absences. Parents have an

obligation to keep the school informed whenever their child is absent.

Within one calendar month of the opening of school, the principal of each school will send to the parents or guardian of each student enrolled in the school a copy of the compulsory school attendance requirements of the Commonwealth of Virginia (See Appendix A).

Attendance Program refers to the Saturday Redemptive School for high school students who have more than five absences in a marking period from any class due to reasons other than those which exempt the student from the sanctions of the attendance policy.

Saturday Redemptive School (SRS) is defined by the Rights and Responsibilities Handbook as a school established at a central location to accommodate those students who have missed one or more days from an individual class or school and want to address their attendance deficiencies by completing class assignments, homework, and other academic work.

Transportation is not provided for students attending the Saturday Redemptive School program. There will be in each high school a redemptive option for students who face sanctions for excessive absences. This

redemptive option will provide an opportunity for students to address attendance deficiencies that have caused them to be subject to the sanctions of the attendance policy. A student will have no more than ten administrative working days beyond

the end of the marking period or semester (whichever is⁸ applicable) to fulfill a redemptive option. After the close of a marking period or semester, the maximum number of days that can be redeemed to avoid a sanction will be two days (See Appendix B).

High Schools refer to the five high schools (grades 9-12) in Newport News Public Schools.

Perception refers to the mental image or concept interpreted by teachers, parents, and students regarding Newport News Public Schools' attendance policy and attendance program.

Delimitations

One delimitation is that the study focuses on one community. For example, the study concentrates on high school student attendance, effectiveness of Saturday Redemptive School, and perceptions of high school students, parents, and teachers because the school division decided to allocate and reallocate a majority of the attendance resources and funding from the elementary and middle school attendance program to the high school attendance program.

An additional delimitation is that the study is limited to the evaluation and implementation of the attendance policy and program after one year of implementation.

Organization of the Study

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter One provides the background of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, delimitations/limitations, and organization of the study. Chapter Two presents a review of related literature which includes the following sections: introduction, importance of attendance, historical overview of attendance, historical overview of the attendance policy in Newport News Public Schools, descriptions of related attendance policies, descriptions of related attendance programs, and students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of attendance policies. Chapter Three details the methodology used in the study. This chapter includes the subjects, instrumentation, procedures developed to collect data, statistical analyses, interview analysis, and internal-external validity. Chapter Four describes the findings of the study including charts and tables. Chapter Five presents the summary, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations of the study.