

ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

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The Graduate School
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April 14, 2022

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE IMPACT
ON MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THEIR ATTENDANCE

Abstract of Capstone

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
Ernst and Sara Lane Volgenau College of Education
At Morehead State University

By

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Ashland, Kentucky

Committee Chair: Dr. Michael W. Kessinger, Associate Professor

Morehead, Kentucky

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Numerous studies have been conducted on the impact school climate and culture has on student achievement, but little has been studied on how climate and culture impacts student attendance. This study focuses specifically on the teacher-student relationship, parent engagement, and school safety and how these three areas of emphasis affect student attendance. When students feel disconnected, parents are unengaged, and safety concerns are present within the school setting, attendance barriers are created for students. This mixed-methods explanatory approach provided researchers the opportunity to survey all middle school students, and interview 10 individual students per grade level for further investigation into what barriers are present at Rural #0535 Middle School. Although the results from the student body were generally favorable, there were pockets of concern in each of the three areas that indicates reasons to why students are absent from school. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as chronic absenteeism, school leaders must identify ways to address the concerns identified within the investigations. Once identified, school administrators can begin to eliminate the obstacles that are hindering students from attending school.

KEYWORDS: Teacher-Student Relationship, Parent Engagement, School Safety,
Chronic Absenteeism, Attendance Barriers

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Donny: Thank you for always being my **BIGGEST** supporter. When I have doubted myself, you have always provided me with an encouraging word, a simple reminder to take a breath, or the most fitting hug at the most appropriate time! “Love never fails.” – 1 Corinthians 13:7

To my boys, Will and Rylan: Do not ever stop learning, always strive to do your best, and if you fail, pick yourself up and try again. Life will not always be easy, but you will always have me to be your shoulder to cry and biggest cheerleader! “Your education is one of the greatest treasures you can ever acquire and something no one can ever take away from you.” – Susan C. Young

To my mom, Phyllis: Although you left me September 10, 2021, I know you were able to hear me present my capstone defense the night before entering the hospital. No matter the endeavor you were always right beside me every step of the way. Thank you for always being my best friend and biggest champion. I’ll love you forever, mom! “All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my mother.” – Abraham Lincoln

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Since 2005, I have been lucky enough to call Tamala Martin a colleague and friend, but I have also been privileged enough to have her as a mentor. Tammy took me under her wing during my first year as principal and never looked back. She modeled what exemplary leadership looks like and pushed me to step out of the box and challenge myself and my school. Without hesitation, I knew that Mrs. Martin was the perfect selection as a member of my capstone committee. I will forever be thankful for her competitive spirit, her leadership expertise, and her shoulder to cry. I love you, Tammy Martin!

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worked together a little over two years, he knew that my heart was focused on how our students truly felt about school. Dr. Shope knew I wanted to positively impact the way these students felt about and viewed our schools. His connection with his very own students is the desired outcome all educators want to see when it comes to teacher-student relationships. My only regret is that I never had the chance to tell him how much I admired him.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables	15
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	16
Statement of the Problem.....	17
Significance of the Problems	20
Background of the Problem	22
Definition of Terms.....	24
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	25
Introduction (brief discussion on content of Lit Review).....	25
School Climate and Culture	26
Chronic Absenteeism	31
Teacher-Student Relationship.....	34
Parent Engagement	36
School Safety	38
Conclusions.....	41
Chapter 3: Methodology/Procedures/Collaboration Methods (if collaborative capstone)	43
Local Context.....	43
Research Design.....	44
Research Questions.....	45
Sampling	46

Instrumentation	46
Procedure	47
Data Analysis	48
Chapter 4: Findings/Identified Strategies and Products.....	50
Teacher-Student Relationships Data.....	51
Sixth Grade	58
Seventh Grade.....	62
Eighth Grade	64
Parent Engagement Data.....	67
Sixth Grade	72
Seventh Grade.....	74
Eighth Grade	76
School Safety Data.....	78
Sixth Grade	82
Seventh Grade.....	84
Eighth Grade	87
Summary	89
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Actions, and Implications.....	90
Summary of Findings.....	90
Teacher-Student Relationships	91
Parent Engagement	92
School Safety	98

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions.....	102
Limitations	102
Delimitations.....	104
Assumptions.....	104
Recommendations.....	105
Next Steps	108
Reflections	109
Conclusions.....	110
References.....	111
Appendices.....	133
Vita	134

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1	Chronic Absenteeism for Rural #0535 Middle School..... 44
Table 2	Teacher-Student Relationship Items – Student Voice Survey 52
Table 3	Teacher-Student Relationship Items – 6 th Grade 61
Table 4	Teacher-Student Relationship Items – 7 th Grade 63
Table 5	Teacher-Student Relationship Items – 8 th Grade 67
Table 6	Parent Engagement Items – Students Voice Survey..... 69
Table 7	Parent Engagement Items – 6 th Grade..... 73
Table 8	Parent Engagement Items – 7 th Grade..... 76
Table 9	Parent Engagement Items – 8 th Grade..... 78
Table 10	School Safety Survey Items – Student Voice Survey 79
Table 11	School Safety Survey Items – 6 th Grade 84
Table 12	School Safety Survey Items – 7 th Grade 86
Table 13	School Safety Survey Items – 8 th Grade 88

Chapter 1

Introduction

Ask anyone who their favorite teacher was, and they will typically share a story of a person who invested their time and heart into them to make a difference. It may be a teacher excited about the learning taking place in their class, one who goes above and beyond to ensure their students are ready for any obstacles they face. They will speak about individuals who show their passion for their profession and impact students' lives. They may discuss an event that negatively impacted their educational experience and decide how they responded to their academic career.

When students feel connected to their school, teachers, and peers, they develop a sense of belonging and are less likely to act out with reckless behavior (Blum, 2017). How do we as educators make sure that students feel connected in school and ensure that they are participating effectively within the school community? Blum's three areas will encourage "student connectedness" (p. 1): student achievement, relationships between students and staff, and school safety. As leaders, we must provide a pathway to these three areas for every student within our schools.

For all stakeholders to feel successful in their educational endeavors, we know the school faculty and staff, school administration, and students all need to be working towards the same goals. Still, research has demonstrated that parental involvement in their child's schooling is critical to their achievements. Sahin (2019) stated, "Cooperation between schools, teachers, and parents is an essential factor for

the child to be a successful individual at school" (p. 315). Parent involvement does not necessarily mean that they are in the school building every day. Showing interest in their learning, academic successes, and struggles is how parents are engaged in their child's educational experience. When parents engage with their child's teachers, school administration, and even their child, not only do parents gain insight and understanding of daily activities, but this helps open lines of communication for difficult conversations and discussions.

Statement of the Problem

Since March of 2020, students across our nation have faced challenging learning environments. They have struggled to connect with their peers and teachers since most instruction has taken place virtually. As educators embark on closing the gaps this COVID-19 pandemic has created, they must consider their students' social and mental consequences. The bonding and unity made daily within the halls and classrooms of our nation's schools is key to developing a climate and culture where all students feel supported and safe.

However, as Blum (2017) reports, "By high school, 40 to 60% of all students are chronically disengaged from school" (p. 1). Since the federal government recorded these safety statistics before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more pertinent for educators to develop a strong climate and culture and ensure the achievement gaps are closed while remembering to keep their students' mental health and safety needs in focus.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the country have had to tackle the issue of attendance to help alleviate the gaps created by the ever-changing schedules of virtual and in-person learning. According to the recorded information from Kentucky's student information system, Infinite Campus, the average daily attendance for Rural #329 saw an increase of 0.2% in their average daily attendance from the 2017-18 school year to the 2019-2020 school year. Since March 2020, the school has seen almost a 2% drop in attendance percentages (Infinite Campus, 2021). This significant drop will come into play as the district irons out budgeting needs for each school. Students are not just missing one or two days a year. Schools across the nation have seen an increase in chronic absenteeism, too.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the USDOE (2019) began tracking the number of students classified as chronically absent. Chronically absent students fall into this category by missing 10% of the school year. The USDOE reported that over seven million students missed 15 or more days during the 2015-16 school year. As reported within Infinite Campus, 21.4% of the Rural #329 students were classified as chronically absent for the 2017-18 school year, 18% in the 2018-19 school year, 20% in the 2019-20 school year, and 41% for the 2020-21 school year. While these chronically absent percentages are high, the school's average daily attendance (ADA) hovered around 93% (Infinite Campus, 2021).

With over 20% of the student body chronically absent, it is essential to determine if there is a connection between their voice on school culture and climate and the mounting number of absences. This capstone project focused on the impact a

school's climate and culture have on its students' attendance. Educators face copious assignments that address the content of their subjects and the daily tasks of effectively running a classroom and school daily. Still, one of the most significant tasks is to create an environment where students feel safe, engaged, and valued, no matter their economic status. Students who feel as though they are vital members of the school community are excited to come to school and be involved in all aspects of the school community.

School leaders need to understand how the climate and culture derail students' ability or desire to attend school. Culture and climate are critical elements for academic success and social and mental health well-being. School administration must learn to identify strengths and weaknesses within their school community and meet them head-on to create a thriving atmosphere. Climate and culture are not just about the aesthetics of a building but the intentional actions of the faculty, staff, and school administration to create a safe, equitable environment for all students (Blum, 2017).

Although bullying has been an issue students have faced over time, the increased actions of bullies both in person and behind a computer screen has grown ten-fold over the last decade. According to Loveless (2021), 64% of students do not report being bullied by a peer. With this high percentage of students reporting, they have experienced bullying; school leaders must determine an effective way for their stakeholders to tell adults about these actions without fear and reservation. Loveless (2021) reports four specific locations where the bullying took place for middle school

students. With the classroom and hallways, the most significant areas, followed by the cafeteria and gymnasium, it is easy to see why middle schoolers' unstructured areas draw the most interest for the bullies (Loveless, 2021). The safety and security of stakeholders cannot be an unaddressed problem; leadership must always have zero tolerance for such actions.

Significance of Problem

The USDOE has been emphasizing the importance of students being present in school. Since 2015, school leaders have attempted to determine the driving factors behind these accumulating absences and correct the identified issues. Public schools across the Commonwealth of Kentucky depend on the ADA of their students for funding. If the environment within their buildings contributes to the accumulating absences, school leaders must quickly address the issues and alleviate them to the best of their ability.

This project is intended for Kentucky's school superintendents, directors of pupil personnel, supervisors of instruction, and school administration to help them identify the school climate and cultural factors contributing to the high percentage rates of chronically absent students. With data identifying specific problems from the students' point of view, school administrators can focus on the matters detected and address their students' academic progress and mental health.

During the 2015-16 school year, all but one of the 25 school districts in eastern Kentucky reported that their chronically absent students were over 20%. The single district with a percentage lower than 20% was Floyd County School District,

which reported its chronically absent rate as around 11% for the 2016-17 school year (Spears, 2017). According to Spears, Kentucky has also reported that 60% of their students were truant, and 40% were habitually truant for that same school year. Between chronic absenteeism and truancy, our schools are grappling with how to solve the accumulating absences that hinder all stakeholders.

If school culture and climate contribute to chronic absenteeism, school leaders must immediately address the concerns and ensure that their staff and students' voices are heard. Since middle school often serves as a challenging and awkward transition time for students, many find themselves looking for reasons not to attend school. Educators must determine if the school climate and culture is the main motive influencing students' absenteeism. What causes the increase in absences at the middle school level, and what is the students' voice telling leaders about their schools?

With chronic absenteeism on the rise in school districts across eastern Kentucky, school and district leaders need to identify the potential causes behind the increase and develop an action plan to tackle this issue head-on. One of the first places that leadership can begin the identification process is by taking an in-depth look at the climate and culture of their school.

In 2007, the USDOE devoted grant money towards the Safe and Supportive School programs ensuring that schools were focusing on collecting and analyzing data so that leaders could put school improvement plans into place for every school (Barksdale et al., 2019). As the focus has continued to shift towards analyzing data regarding school climate and culture, the CDC recommended policies and procedures

be put in place to ensure that schools across the country were focusing on "healthy relationships, school connectedness, and dropout prevention" (Barksdal et al., 2019, p. 2).

Combine all the outside factors weighing on kids plus the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the absolute havoc truly impacting America's schools in the loss of academic instruction, declining attendance and enrollment, and the mental health of all educators' stakeholders. With government recommendations for virtual learning options, students being placed in quarantine multiple times a semester, and the cancellation of school at various times through the year, the pandemic has created chaos for all stakeholders and caused the health and safety of our students to be a more significant issue than ever before.

Background of the Problem

Chronic absenteeism and lack of connectedness within their school community are growing issues school leaders face with their students. As educators, it is critical to understand how the school culture or climate impacts students academically and social-emotionally. "Research overwhelmingly shows a clear connection between school climate and classroom climate" (Barksdale et al., 2019, p. 1). This connection will change when there is a change in administration and the school's overall goals.

In the 2019-20 school year, the average daily attendance for the four elementary schools within the school system was 96%, but Rural #5035 Middle School's attendance percentage dropped off to 94%. Rural eastern Kentucky school

districts have many chronically absent students, including Rural #5035 Middle School, where over 15% of their students were chronically absent over the last four years (Infinite Campus, 2021). As educators, it is our job to create an environment where students feel safe, engaged, and valued.

When students feel they are vital members of the school community, they ensure they are present and involved in school life. With funding depending on the amount of time a student is present; schools must create environments where students of all walks of life want to learn and contribute. School leaders and teachers need to know what factors the students view as pertinent to keep them present and engaged in their schools.

With the average daily attendance rates affecting school funding, leaders must create environments where students are provided with highly qualified staff, updated technology, and enhanced learning opportunities. Besides increased funding, addressing school attendance will significantly impact student academic achievement. With the increased academic performance, students have a higher chance of staying in school and out of the juvenile justice system while being provided with opportunities to expand their future.

This study analyzed data collected from students through surveys and interviews regarding the climate and culture, its impact on student attendance, and the prominent themes found school-wide. For school administrators to gain a strong understanding of the factors related to student absenteeism, they must listen to the voices of their stakeholders and address the issues immediately.

Definition of Key Terms

Average Daily Attendance – the overall school percentage of students present during a designated period.

Chronically absent – a student who misses 10% or more of the school year.

Culture and climate – the physical and personal atmosphere that encompasses the school's mission, values, beliefs, and diversity as described by Rural #5035 Middle School students.

Infinite Campus – the student information system implemented statewide for all public-school systems. This program keeps student data in real-time and allows administrators, teachers, parents, and students to track all aspects of their educational experience.

Teacher-student relationship – refers to the daily interactions and relationships between the school administration, faculty, and staff.

Family dynamics – denotes the involvement, engagement, interactions, and relationships between the parents/guardians of enrolled students and the school administration, faculty, and staff.

School safety – indicates incidents of bullying, equity of discipline, violence, threats, harassment, and substance usage reported by the students' personal experiences at Rural #5035 Middle School.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

For school leaders to effectively diagnose the problems driving the rising percentage of chronically absent students, they must look internally at their school's climate and culture, focusing on faculty and student relationships, the family dynamics of their stakeholders, and school safety. The teacher and student relationships within a school are defined by the amount of care projected by the staff towards students, the ability to trust school staff and confide in them with their concerns or needs, and staff expecting their students to strive to reach high standards (Scales et al., 2020).

Introduction

According to the research conducted by Grepon and Cepada (2021), students' attendance decreased when their parent involvement decreased. As students grow older, parents often feel less needed in their child's learning and try teaching responsibility. However, when parents are involved and present at their child's school, there is a significant increase in students' "self-confidence and self-worth" (Grepon & Cepada, p. 17). Creating solid feelings and happiness about their performance and well-being allows students to see the value and importance of their education.

Student safety and mental health are crucial to understanding the wellness of today's students. From bullying to personal harm, some students have a genuine fear of these issues daily. Educators and parents must get a hold of these issues early and

eliminate them from the school environment to keep physical and personal harm at a minimum. Research has indicated that bullying occurs more in middle school due to physical appearance, academic challenges, and peer dynamics (Ockerman et al., 2014). As schools tackle this ever-growing problem, leaders must be proactive while practicing impartiality in all situations.

School Climate and Culture

Often people consider the school climate and culture as the inside and outside environment of a specific school building. As Waasdorp et al. (2019) noted, the actual school climate is the "values, beliefs and expectations" (p. 53) of a school that ensures it is focusing on all aspects of safety for its students. Over the years, researchers have determined that solid school culture and climate positively impact all facets of a student's educational experience. Unfortunately, there are also negative factors that come into play and affect a student's viewpoint towards the school.

One potential component of students who have a negative opinion of school is their attendance in school. Although data shows that chronic absenteeism can occur at any school level, it is evident that they just do not come to school (Blum, 2017). Chronically absent and truant students typically fall into one or all categories: low socio-economic, students with a disability, transient students, or teens actively involved with the juvenile justice system (Rafa, 2017). Since reasons vary why students are chronically absent or truant, pinpointing the exact reason students are missing school is difficult. When students feel valued and respected, and schools

emphasize the importance of solid relationships, the climate and culture will foster a desire in students to strive to meet the expectations set before them.

When discussing school climate and culture, individuals may think we are talking about the building's aesthetics. Hendron and Kearney (2016) discuss how the aesthetics of a building and classroom are a portion of the definition. School climate can also address the quality and character of school life for students. The relationship between students and their teachers feeds the acceptance of students by their peers and school staff.

When there is a disconnect between a student and the school staff, students' desire to attend school decreases (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). Teachers must ensure that students are engaged in school to feel a part of the school. A student needs to be plugged in and involved, from engagement in the classroom to extra-curricular activities and clubs. Teens value the opinions of their peers, so schools must meet their individual needs with the "curriculum, enforced disciplinary strategies, and disregard for diversity between the school and families" (Hendron & Kearney, p. 110).

Although most publicly reported information focuses on instructional practices and standardized test scores, the Kentucky School Report Card relays pertinent school safety, technology, and even financial spending. Our teachers are no longer just instructional deliverers. They serve as caregivers, social workers, therapists, and sometimes in loco parentis. Their daily interactions forge relationships

that extend beyond the core standards and can help "build trust" (Barksdale et al., 2019, p. 2) that will open avenues of communication.

School culture and climate must encompass essential elements for all stakeholders to feel valued and engaged. Trust and respect are critical elements of a thriving culture. When stakeholders trust and respect their teachers, peers, colleagues, or administrators, the school embarks on a pathway to success (Lee & Louis, 2019). These relationships open up conversations between students and teachers and allow school employees to gain insight into each of their students' home environments. When students are absent from school or do not submit an assignment on time, their background knowledge helps teachers recognize potential students' obstacles.

"The U.S. Department of Education conceptualized a three-factor model for school climate: safety, engagement, and environmental" (Waasdorp et al., 2019, p. 53). Focusing on these three areas allows school leadership to understand the students' perspectives better. When addressing the issue of the school environment, Van Eck et al. (2016) notes that students begin to struggle academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. Schools must identify their students' needs and successfully implement programs and strategies to meet their needs. Data show that as chronically absent students' progress through their academic careers, they are more likely to drop out and delve into delinquent behavior (Gleich-Bope, 2014).

In 2013, New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg introduced a program to implement interventions and strategies for public elementary schools with low attendance (Nauer, 2016). Principal Patricia Mitchell stated, "If too many students

miss too much school, the entire school will suffer" (Nauer, 2016, p. 32). Again, attendance is an underlying factor in the school's culture. With adverse effects pouring into the learning, classroom environments, and academic performance, eventually, negativity encompasses the whole school. Influential school leaders must address critical issues and create a positive school culture.

With students progressing through school, data shows that absenteeism increases in middle and high school (Rafa, 2017). Does the question become who is responsible for students in middle and high school attendance? Although they are not yet adults, they are old enough to understand the consequences of their actions. With the students' attendance guidelines reviewed yearly, some districts believe the responsibility falls with the student. Regarding staff views, each has a different idea of who is responsible for attendance and even the enforcement of policies. Though their opinions vary on whose responsibility it is for students to be present in school, most staff agreed that their presence in the classroom profoundly affected their academic outcomes (Barlow & Fleisher, 2011).

Hendron and Kearney's 2016 research focused on the school and its connection to middle and high school absenteeism. Their study revealed that students with problematic attendance felt like their "presence and absence in the classroom went unnoticed by the staff" (p. 113). Hendron and Kearney also revealed that a disagreement with the staff, peer pressure, and bullying were significant factors that led to high absenteeism rates. Suppose these factors go unaddressed by the school

administration. In that case, students will not feel they are a part of the school community, thus leading to the desire to remove themselves from the environment.

With ESSA focusing on school culture and climate, the U.S. Department of Education identified three specific areas: "school safety, engagement, and environment" (Van Lone et al., 2019, p. 39). Chronic absenteeism is high in kindergarten and increases again in the middle and high school grades (Rafa, 2017). School administrators need to address the culture and climate to promote their school's positive factors to create an environment where all stakeholders feel apart. Everyone needs to feel valued and heard when issues arise. As students focus on their peers and academic achievement, a school culture that supports academic motivation and strong peer-to-peer relationships creates an ideal learning environment for all stakeholders (Van Lone et al.). When a school's climate seems to be "poor with unfair discipline policies," students' rate of dropping out increases (Van Lone et al., p. 40).

As schools across the country deal with teacher retention and a decline of those entering the field, school administrators face the ultimate issue of addressing school culture. Van Lone et al. (2019) outlined a series of interventions to address secondary school climate needs. From developing a leadership team composed of all stakeholders to analyzing data (Van Lone et al.), administrators must be willing to address all issues brought to the forefront while being consistent and transparent. Van Lone et al. (2019) found that West Lake High School administrators saw positive outcomes following the eight-step multi-tiered action plan. The action plan involved intervention strategies where students were mentored by school staff, creating a line

of communication for the students and staff to address problems as they occurred. Teachers' mindset towards their jobs was upbeat, and students showed high academic achievement. For schools to ensure that each action positively impacts their school culture, instructional leaders need to listen to their stakeholders' voices and ensure each stakeholder group understands the expectations for attendance (Van Lone et al.).

Eck et al. (2016) also researched the school climate's impact on students' absenteeism. Their analysis concluded that "negativity within the school was a significant determinant in students' absenteeism" (p. 89). Through student surveys, Eck et al. found attendance improved by providing students with the opportunity to be heard, and academics showed progress. Eck et al. discussed how students feel valued and understood that the first step to improving the school culture was strong relationships.

With rapport established and awareness of expectations promoted, administrators' consistency is essential. Students, parents, and staff need to know that student attendance is part of the educational process, and students' academic progress will be affected if they are not present in class. All stakeholders need to strive to reach high standards set by the school leadership. Thus, creating an environment where all stakeholders will prosper.

Chronic Absenteeism

With negative attitudes toward education on the upswing, school leaders must figure out how to reconnect with their students, especially during the formative teenage years of middle school. According to Blum (2017), researchers provided a

statistic stating that across the country, up to 60% of all students were disengaged by the time they entered high school. Students' attitude and perception impact their bond with the school and the faculty and staff.

With the introduction of the Every Student Succeeded Act (ESSA) in 2015, the USDOE brought chronic absenteeism to the forefront of accountability for America's schools. The reporting of chronic absenteeism rates as an indicator of the quality of education schools provided for their students allowed politicians and policymakers to highlight how students were chronically absent from class, which impacted the academic success of America's students.

As with many aspects of academic accountability, understanding chronic absenteeism can be problematic for the public. The federal government states that a student who misses 10% of the school year with either excused absences, unexcused absences, or discipline reasons (Rafa, 2017) will be classified as chronically absent. Kentucky recognizes this exact definition but quickly points out that chronic absenteeism does not denote truancy (Vanderhaar, 2020).

No matter the explanations for the absences, the amount of time out of the classroom for these students is detrimental to their academic performance. Identifying the underlying causes of these mounting absences will help leaders determine the students' accurate perception of the school. The information provided by the 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is staggering when you see the number of students who are absent from America's schools. The CRDC reported that during the 2015-16 school year, seven million public school students missed at least 15 days or

more (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This statistic means that one in every six students in America's schools missed 10% of their school year. The amount of instructional content lost plays a significant role in each student's academic outcomes.

The absences acquired by chronically absent students can be excused or unexcused. Excused or unexcused absence is the distinguishing factor between them and their truant peers. Although these absences can be from underlying health issues or merely playing hooky from school, the number of chronically absent students is astounding. According to the data report in the 2015-16 CRDC report, the statistics show that chronically absent students come from lower socio-economic families (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Also, every ethnicity is represented in the information.

The CRDC report also indicates that the highest percentage of chronically absent students were Native Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Over 30% of Native American students were chronically absent, making them the highest ethnicity group. Although males and females were equally represented, the most significant gap falls between students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Spears (2017) stated that "compared to seven neighboring states, Kentucky ranked second overall in chronic absenteeism - first on the high school level, second on the middle school level, and third at the elementary level" (para. 4). Most school districts fell in eastern Kentucky and the Louisville area, with the only eastern county not exceeding the 30% chronic absentee rate being Floyd County (Spears, 2017).

With chronic absenteeism, Kentucky's rate is significant, and the eastern part of the state must address this issue, or we will continue to fall behind on all levels.

Across the nation, states began developing laws and regulations dealing with chronic absenteeism and truancy. Indiana lawmakers enacted a law in 2015 requiring their education department to provide public school systems with programs and interventions to address absenteeism (Rafa, 2017). Rafa also points out that Connecticut schools must create teams to review attendance and develop action plans.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The impact that teacher-student relationships can have on a school's climate and culture is substantial. When students are active participants within the school community, there is a strong bond and a sense of pride demonstrated by each group of stakeholders. When adults and students do not feel the connectedness, it provides reasons for the academic decline, excessive absences, and lack of relationships with peers and staff.

Blum (2005) discusses that connectedness is critical at every educational level, but it is crucial during the adolescent years. Blum also cites that when students feel attached to schools and their staff, they are less likely to participate in harmful behavior and show strong academic performance. With student performance and safety at the forefront of every school's summative assessment, this gives the administration another reason to impress the importance of connectedness.

Three prominent school characteristics present themselves when middle schoolers feel a part of the school community. Students are more likely to perform

high on standardized tests due to effective teaching and strong support within the school. Students also display a positive attitude and a respectful tone with all stakeholders while feeling safe and secure both physically and emotionally (Blum, 2005) when a sense of association is present.

Trust and engagement with the school community provide students with an outlet and a line of communication. Strong school connections will help alleviate "substance abuse, emotional distress, violent or deviant behavior, and risky behaviors" (Blum, 2005, p. 1) and provide students with a resource to turn to when problems or issues arise. Consistent expectations and systematic procedures will allow students to feel a sense of belonging, equitable treatment, and opportunities to excel and exceed no matter who the student is.

For schools to effectively integrate positive relationships within their community, administrators and teachers must meet the same objective with all students. *The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections* (Hrobak & Reed, 2003) outlines the skills and factors that can impact a student's attitude towards the school community. Staff must set high standards for their students and themselves while creating a sense of responsibility for their actions in the classroom, school, and district.

Hrobak and Reed (2003) stated that connectedness between students and their school positively impacts academic performance, decreases discipline issues, decreases absenteeism, and increases graduation rates. These statistics apply to all genders, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic groups. This committee also states

that creating an environment where strong peer relationships, like teacher-student relationships, will cultivate a strong school climate and culture, impacting all aspects of the school experience for stakeholders.

Parent Engagement and Family Dynamics

Students are usually more likely to engage in risky behavior when their parents are disengaged from school information and activities (Fornander & Kearney, 2019). School and family counseling can provide a talking point for a therapist to stress the importance of being present and engaged in their child's educational experience. Truancy is a status offense, but the National Center for Education Statistics states that truant students are more likely to become involved in criminal activity than those present in school (Gleich-Bope, 2014).

Rogers and Feller (2019) found that parents firmly believed that the school was inaccurately reporting attendance on their child and that their child's attendance was comparable to their peers. The disengaged parents said that there was little or no notification from the schools that their child was absent, and they were not actively involved in their child's education (Rogers & Feller). In collaboration with the School District of Philadelphia, Rogers and Feller implemented an intervention system to inform parents about their child's attendance. Through mailing letters and telephoning parents at various attendance targets, parents became more aware of their child's attendance, and schools saw a one% decrease in their chronic absenteeism rate.

Parental attitude conveys easily from parent to student. When the parents or guardians view education as less important, their presence in school becomes even

less. When Gleich-Bope (2014) researched truancy students, data revealed: that "low socio-economic single-parent families considered school a very low priority and often found in the court system due to their child's truancy" (p. 111). With the parents' expression of negativity towards education, the students often reflect the same lack of enthusiasm in the classroom when they are present.

Parental actions and attitudes directly reflect a student's educational experience, but are the parents' work ethics and habits demonstrated by their children also? According to Hysing et al. (2017), the answer is 'Yes.' When parents are unemployed or display chronic illnesses, their students mimic their actions in school. Students who reported that "their fathers were unemployed were two% higher, with seven or more days absent from school than their peers" (Hysing et al., p. 3). A similar reflection was found in their peers who reported their mother out of work. When many think that peer pressure would lead to a significant number of absences, parental work ethics and absenteeism also come into play for these students.

When parental involvement in a child's educational experience is minimal, and there is an increase in parental work absences, it is evident that the adults will positively influence students in their lives. As educators, we must develop a connection with families through community resources to stress the importance of productivity in the workforce for parents and students. These connections and support can also impress the significance of being present in the work field and classroom. The value of relationships will open a line of communication for community partners, school personnel, students, and parents.

School Safety

Today's schools are faced with safety issues that have evolved significantly over the last 30 years. From school shootings to the prevalence of cell phones and social media, school administrators are not only challenged with ensuring curriculum and academic standards are met, but the issues of bullying, mental health issues, and student discipline continue to dominate their attention.

According to the federal government, bullying is "unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance" (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (ASPA), 2020). The critical point regarding bullying is that this behavior is repetitive actions that continue over a period and can impact the victim or bully for a significant number of years, if not life. The Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs (2020) explains a bully's imbalance of power as the concept where the individual is either physically more prominent or has information that the bully can use to embarrass the victim in certain situations.

Most administrators are familiar with various forms of bullying, but ASPA points out three prevalent forms of bullying are reported in our nation's schools (2020); verbal, physical, and social bullying. Students experience these types of bullying altercations daily across America, which affects their attendance. Physical forms like hitting, spitting on, or taking the victim's items are probably the most known forms of bullying. However, teasing, taunting, inappropriate sexual comments, and social bullying events such as being socially isolated and circulating false rumors also occur daily. The lasting impact that these actions have on students' mental health

and feelings of safety at school is significant and must be addressed by administrators immediately.

With the creation of social media and smartphones, students are experiencing a different type of bullying. Cyberbullying has increased over the last ten years with the same actions as traditional bullying but occurs through social media interfaces and text messaging. Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) report that sexual cyberbullying has become even more prevalent through text messages, videos, and pictures passed through these outlets causing significant detriment to the victims of this type of bullying. With some apps and programs making it more difficult to trace the actions, cyberbullying can expand outside the school's walls yet trickle in and affect the victim, bully, and bystander.

Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) discuss the fact that bullying does have an effect on all parties involved, but "the most harm is experienced by the victim" (p. 297). Saldiraner and Gizir's report discusses that victims may suffer from poor self-confidence, feelings of not fitting in, loneliness, and suicidal ideations. These factors can impact students' academic progress and desire to attend school. School administrators must understand all avenues of bullying in and outside the school setting while planning to confront bullying head-on.

The impact of bullying on school climate and culture is noted through the prevalent factors that principals reported when dealing with bullying in their schools. Saldiraner and Gizir found five recurring themes in the issues that 20 principals handled when addressing bullying: "family factors, personal factors, environmental

factors, school factors, and teacher-related factors" (p. 299). With 30% of middle schools reporting significant or numerous amounts of bullying activity (Ockerman et al., 2014), it is evident that bullying has become a significant safety issue within our schools.

The theme of family elements in bullying is defined by the parental attitude displayed towards education or school in general. When parents express a negative viewpoint towards education, the school, school administration, or even specific teachers, their students mirror that same attitude towards the school. A second element playing a part in the family theme is socio-economic status. KHQA (2007) reported that teenagers use fashion as a weapon in bullying. With clothing labels and shoe designers on the rise with teenagers, it gives school bullies another tool to classify their victims and continually abuse those that may not wear what that bully considers popular.

Of course, a personal theme is prevalent in the Saldiraner and Gizir (2021) research. This premise focuses specifically on the individual students. Physical appearance, medical issues, and even failing grades give reasons for students to be picked on and singled out by the bully. When weaknesses are identified, victims find their shortcomings are amplified for their peers to notice and create a sense of inadequacy compared to others. Physical differences are always prevalent in bullying behavior. Weight, height, and sexual orientation are identified as some of the standards students use to bully others. The last personal factor Saldiraner and Gizir

named is "academic performance" (2021, p. 300). Utilizing low academic performance or failure provided the bullies another avenue to attack their victims.

Environmental factors were another prominent theme throughout Saldiraner and Gizir's interviews. Violent video games, social media platforms, movies, television shows, and community standards influenced the school's environment and students' actions (Saldiraner & Gizir, 2021). Thirty years ago, students were not as engaged in violent video games, and there was no Snapchat, Facebook, or Instagram. The community revered the school and school personnel. When families and communities embrace factors that promote intimidating activities, students strive to mimic that same behavior and impress their peers through bullying conduct.

Conclusion

Educators struggling to identify the leading causes of chronic absenteeism must begin that investigation within the walls of their schools. The school culture and climate must exhibit strong connections between faculty and students. It is essential for the families and students to feel they are a vital part of the school community who positively impact the school, not just existing within the halls and classrooms. With most students' days spent in school, administrators must create an environment where the social and emotional needs and safety are fully addressed.

Just as educators focus on closing the achievement gap for students academically, they must also address the influencing factors within the culture and climate of their facilities. Fostering strong teacher-student relationships will open lines of communication and build a mutual trust that allows everyone to flourish

academically and personally. Being considerate of each stakeholder's circumstance allows the individual needs of each family and student to be met while creating an environment of acceptance and understanding. A school where the whole child's needs are met socially, emotionally, and academically is the best way to break down the barriers leading to chronic absenteeism.

Chapter 3

Methodology

With the increase in chronic absenteeism, school leaders are scrambling to identify the causes and stop the surge of the mounting number of days students are out of the classroom. With student achievement hindered by the increasing number of absences, the first issue that school leaders need to examine is the culture within their buildings. When students do not feel like belonging within the school community, it is an incentive not to attend school. This study identified three specific themes from student voice surveys that lead to excessive absences: teacher-student relationships, parent engagement, and school safety.

Local Context

With research showing that absences rise in middle school, this project focused on Rural #5035 Middle School. Nestled in northeastern Kentucky, Rural #5035 serves as the only middle school for the county's public school system. In the 2021-22 school year, Rural #5035 houses sixth through eighth grades with 665 students.

Approximately 95% of the student body is Caucasian, and the other five% are Hispanic and African American.

Between 2015-16 and 2019-20 school years, this school has had three different principals, three different assistant principals, and a considerable turnover in faculty and staff. The changes in school administration mean changes to processes and procedures and the overall vision and mission of the school.

From 2017-18 to the 2020-21 school years, Rural #5035 Middle School has consistently averaged 93% to 94% daily attendance and above 15% yearly of chronically absent students (Infinite Campus, 2021). With over 20% of their students reported as chronically absent, there is an unknown underlying cause for this excessive number of absences (Table 1). Focusing on the school climate and culture, school leaders wanted to identify the reasons behind the absences and address those issues through improvement plans.

Table 1

Chronic Absenteeism Percentages for Rural #5035 MS

School Year	Chronic Absenteeism Percentage	Average Daily Attendance Percentage
2017-2018	21.4	94.0
2018-2019	18.4	94.0
2019-2020	16.0	94.0
2020-2021	41.0	92.3

Note: Infinite Campus. Retrieved September 3, 2021, from <https://kyede1.infinitecampus.org/campus/main.xsl>.

Research Design

The study utilized mixed methods explanatory research focusing on student perception of the middle school climate and culture. A questionnaire focused on relationships, family dynamics, and school safety provided the quantitative data to identify common themes that lead to excessive absences throughout the student body.

Using the quantitative data from the student voice survey, interview questions were created to gain student perspectives on the three theme domains. The interviews were conducted with equal sets of male and female students. These face-to-face discussions provided a chance for open-ended questioning, allowing more detailed information to be collected.

Creswell and Clark (2018) discuss the benefits of mixed methods and how the data collected through the quantitative and qualitative research combined gives examiners a better understanding of the problem. Using the explanatory research method, insight and information provided a more explicit focus on student experiences, opinions, and beliefs on teacher-student relationships, parental engagement, and school safety at Rural #5035 Middle School.

When experiences of disconnectedness and instability present themselves in the school environment, students are provided the perfect motivation to be absent and become detached from their school experiences. In the fall of 2021, the Rural #5035 Middle School student body received a 40-item student voice survey assessing the school's climate and culture and its effect on student attendance. This opportunity provided 608 students an opportunity for their voice to be heard while spotlighting a better understanding of the underlying causes of absenteeism for district and school leadership.

Research Questions

Two research questions helped provide a focus to address the chronic absenteeism concerns of the district. Those questions were:

- 1) What aspects of the school culture and climate do Rural #5035 Middle School students feel impact their educational experience? and
- 2) What school climate and culture obstacles lead to chronic absenteeism?

Sampling

In the fall of 2021, 608 Rural #5035 Middle School students completed the online student voice survey focusing on school climate and culture elements. The survey population was comprised of 185 sixth graders, 200 seventh graders, and 223 eighth graders. Three identified themes were pinpointed and analyzed for their impact on student absences occurring at the middle school level.

Instrumentation

The student voice survey consisted of 40 statements generated by the Kentucky Department of Education to gauge students' perspectives on their school culture and climate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students responded to the climate and culture statements using a Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree Likert scale. Focusing on the responses emphasizing three crucial school climate and culture areas, school leaders understood their stakeholders' needs, opinions, and attitudes about their school.

Utilizing the language arts class at each grade level, all students received the school survey via Google Forms. With 40 statements, the students answered items using a 5-point Likert scale. The survey focused on relationships, family dynamics, and school safety. Each item provided a personal perspective of how these three areas affect their attendance.

The collected data identified the obstacles and troubles present and ensured that students' voices were heard, and hindrances addressed. This type of transparency helps bridge gaps in the school's culture and climate. With the focus on the identified themes for teacher-student relationships, family dynamics, and school safety, school leadership could consider developing action plans which provide stakeholders with the strategies to improve the culture and student attendance.

The second portion of the research focused on 10 students per grade level who were interviewed one-on-one to provide an even more in-depth look at the school climate culture based on the three underlying themes identified in the survey. School administrators purposefully selected the students who participated in the interview process. This heterogeneous group of 30 students was diverse in ethnicity, socio-economic status, and extra-curricular activities. All participants received the same interview questions focusing on the teacher-student relationship, peer relationships, and school safety.

Procedure

Rural #5035 Middle School sixth, seventh, and eighth graders received the Google Form in their language arts class. At the beginning of their language arts class, students received their survey identification number from their teacher and were given time to complete the student voice survey. The 40-item survey focused on teacher-student relationships, parent engagement in school activities, and school safety. As previously defined, each of these focus areas were analyzed to determine if they have influenced the student's attendance in school.

Once the students completed the online survey, the data collected was exported into an Excel spreadsheet with each student's response charted under the 40 items. To determine percentages for each survey item, the total number of responses was tallied and then divided by the total number of responses. After the comprehensive data was compiled, analysis was conducted for each grade level. Understanding how the sixth graders feel about the three prominent themes compared to their seventh and eighth-grade peers is a significant talking point for administrators.

Next, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 10 students from each grade level, providing the research with an opportunity to discuss relationships, parent engagement, family dynamics, and school safety. Five males and five females from the sixth, seventh and eighth grades were interviewed individually during the school day. Using the percentages from the quantitative data, the questions for the personal interviews were targeted to show a connection between the identified themes in the student voice survey and the reasons behind the increasing chronic absenteeism of Rural #5035 Middle School. The questions (Appendix A) provided a more personal look into the thoughts and feelings of Rural #5035 Middle School students.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was completed on the student voice survey using the 5-point Likert scale with possible responses of Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). Dependent upon the statement, the responses provided either a favorable or unfavorable disposition towards the specific themes. School administrators considered 20% or more as an unfavorable percentage and a

possible obstacle leading to absenteeism. However, the neutral response could reflect the students not fully understanding the statement, not having a preference, or not feeling comfortable sharing their thoughts. It is difficult to determine how the students genuinely felt on some items since a significant number answered neutrally.

Student responses were placed in three sub-groups to analyze the data more intensely. The subgroups consisted of the entire student population and grade level. Each group's data provided an even more in-depth look at the student's areas of concern and strengths at Rural #5035 Middle School. Interestingly, comparing grade levels allows district and school administration teams to understand each grade's perspectives. Pinpointing the issue of a sixth grader's perspective on school safety or an eighth grader's perception of teacher-student relationships provides an opportunity for more planning of professional development activities for staff and addressing the issues of improving parent engagement and school safety dealing with specific areas.

The interview portion of the research was conducted with ten students from each grade level. The researcher met personally with the student and used guiding questions focusing on the themes to determine individual perspectives on teacher-student relationships, parent engagement, and school safety. The interviews provided powerful information from various viewpoints. These students come from diverse backgrounds and provide poignant details that need to be heard about the school climate and culture.

Chapter 4

Results and Findings

This chapter focuses on the data and findings from the research conducted at Rural #5035 Middle School. Using the student voice survey of 40 statements, 608 students provided insight and information regarding the school climate and culture and its effects on student attendance. The researcher focused on three prevalent themes identified through the student voice survey: teacher-student relationships, parent engagement, and school safety. Utilizing the data from the entire student body, 10 students from each grade level were interviewed, focusing on those specific themes and barriers created within the school that lead to absenteeism.

The mixed-methods research approach allowed the quantitative data to expand more in-depth conversations through the qualitative interview while providing awareness of the underlying problems. The data showed specific reasons for each grade level why students miss school, and the interviews provided a more in-depth study into the three identified theme domains. Digging deeper into the reasons behind chronic absenteeism offers insight and information from the student's perspective.

The data collected in the student voice survey and the personal interviews provided the researcher with issues students viewed as common obstacles leading to absenteeism in their eyes. The teacher-student relationship, parent engagement, and school safety themes had significant problems that needed to be explored more through the personal interviews. The disconnectedness between certain teachers and

students, lack of parental engagement, and specific safety issues rang out as troubled areas for Rural #5035 Middle School students.

Teacher-Student Relationship Data

During the interview process, every student explained what made their favorite teachers stand out from the rest of the staff at Rural #5035 Middle School. Most of the responses came back with "they made learning fun" or "they made them feel special in their class." Other descriptive characteristics consisted of phrases like "engaged in our class," "welcomed me with a smile," and "talked about things other than my grades." These qualities provided by specific staff members helped the students feel secure and confident. Students recognize that adults at Rural #5035 Middle School have developed positive relationships and serve as a liaison to confide in when an issue arises. Adults within the school have explicitly worked to form a bond with specific students. In fact, 79.1% of the students report having at least one adult to go to with a problem (Table 2, Item 7).

Teacher and student relationships are a critical aspect of the school climate and culture, and it is vital for students to feel valued and heard. The personal connection made by intentional conversations and interactions opens the door to helping solve relationship problems, lack of parental engagement, and concern for school safety. When these purposeful actions occur within the school, the climate and culture begin to prosper. Although students report a connection with specific adults, approximately 21.7% of the student population felt disassociated at school (Table 2,

Item 3). Finding students' niches and integrating them into the school community promotes unity.

Table 2

Teacher-Student Relationship Items - Student Voice Survey (N=608)

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS is a caring and safe place.	147 (24.2%)	266 (43.8%)	152 (25.0%)	28 (4.6%)	15 (2.5%)	3.83 (0.93)
2.	My teachers make me feel welcome in class.	167 (27.5%)	286 (47.0%)	124 (20.4%)	24 (4.0%)	7 (1.2%)	3.96 (0.86)
3.	I feel I am an important part of RURAL #5035 MS.	91 (15.0%)	191 (31.4%)	194 (31.9%)	92 (15.1%)	40 (6.6%)	3.33 (1.10)
4.	RURAL #5035 MS staff stays calm dealing with behavior issues.	88 (14.5%)	192 (31.4%)	200 (32.9%)	100 (16.5%)	28 (4.6%)	3.35 (1.06)
5.	My teachers are available to help me if needed.	187 (30.8%)	284 (46.7%)	116 (19.1%)	12 (2.0%)	9 (1.5%)	4.03 (0.84)
6.	The consequences are the same for all students.	179 (29.4%)	204 (33.6%)	118 (19.4%)	69 (11.4%)	38 (6.3%)	3.69 (1.19)
7.	There is one adult at RURAL #5035 MS I can talk to if needed.	256 (42.1%)	225 (37.0%)	72 (11.8%)	34 (5.6%)	21 (3.5%)	4.09 (1.03)
8.	My teachers have made a personal connection with me.	95 (15.6%)	202 (33.2%)	221 (36.4%)	71 (11.7%)	19 (3.1%)	3.47 (0.99)
9.	If I miss school, my teachers ask how I am when I return.	100 (16.5%)	180 (29.6%)	175 (28.8%)	102 (16.8%)	51 (8.4%)	3.29 (1.17)
10.	I miss school because of friend drama.	6 (1.0%)	25 (4.1%)	59 (9.7%)	206 (33.9%)	312 (51.3%)	1.70 (0.88)
11.	I perform better in my core classes because of my new Wednesday exploration classes.	136 (22.4%)	170 (28.0%)	195 (32.1%)	77 (12.7%)	30 (4.9%)	3.50 (1.12)
12.	I have better attendance through the week because of Wednesday classes.	119 (19.6%)	165 (27.1%)	194 (31.9%)	82 (13.5%)	48 (7.9%)	3.37 (1.17)
13.	I have learned new information and skills in my Wednesday classes that I have not learned in my M, T, TH & F.	263 (43.3%)	213 (35.0%)	77 (12.7%)	33 (5.4%)	22 (3.6%)	4.09 (1.05)
14.	Adults at RURAL #5035 MS are concerned when I miss school.	70 (11.5%)	182 (29.9%)	218 (35.9%)	86 (14.1%)	52 (8.6%)	3.22 (1.10)

Labeling students as they enter their classrooms or students thinking they are treated differently than other specific students is the perfect storm for students to feel detached from the school setting. These thoughts align with the 32.9% of neutral responses and 21.1% who disagree/strongly disagree with the statement that staff stays calm when dealing with students (Table 2, Item 4). Approximately 37% of the students reported neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree with the consequences are the same for all students (Table 2, Item 6). It supports the notion that students with these mixed feelings will utilize this as motivation not to attend school.

Another point of interest in the student voice survey data regarding relationships is that roughly 25% of the student body reported that no one is concerned when they miss school (Table 2, Item 14). These staggering statistics seem to outline a problem for a group of students who feel disconnected from the faculty and staff of Rural #5035 Middle School. In that same area of focus on students' absenteeism, 24% of the students report that no one asks how they were once they return to school (Table 2, Item 9). This data point emphasizes how the disconnected feeling some students are experiencing can lead to reckless behavior in and out of the classroom. Another outlet or obstacle leading to the growing trend in chronic absenteeism and increasing their chances of dropping out of school altogether is the disconnection between staff and students. Leaders must find ways to address relationship building between all stakeholders.

This fall, as students started to return to in-person instruction, achievement tests showed that students are struggling academically, but they are also suffering in

mental health. The Center for Disease Control reports that emergency department visits for suicidal attempts increased 30% in 2020 (Vestal, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic brought mental health to the forefront of conversations and the spotlighting within our nation's schools. Now more than ever, teacher-student relationships must be the focus of educators across our country to meet the individual needs of every child.

During the personal interviews, most of the statistics mirrored the percentages reported from the student voice survey. Approximately 46% of the students surveyed felt they were an essential part of Rural #5035 Middle School (Table 2, Item 3). Two of the students interviewed felt as though no one cared if they were in school or not, but roughly 26%, 7 of the 30, felt important sometimes. One surprising statistic was that five out of the 10 interviewed eighth graders report they feel as though they are an essential part of the Rural #5035 Middle School community only some of the time. One student stated, "most of the time, the teachers seem unengaged in my classes. It is just simply the stand and deliver type of instruction."

Although most students reported that they felt welcomed in the school and classrooms, there was a struggle with personal interaction regarding specific staff members. When asked why they felt more uncomfortable with specific teachers, one student reported she "felt unwelcomed in her classroom. She never smiles, and I feel like she does not want to be here." The other four female eighth graders interviewed reported the same type of feeling regarding specific classrooms or staff members. Feeling as though you belong and are accepted by your teachers and peers is crucial

at any age, even more so in middle school. When you feel like no one cares, it provides another outlet for the students not to want to be in that specific class or school.

One seventh-grade student reported that he felt like the staff "looked at him differently because he has been a troublemaker in the past." Another student in the sixth grade at Rural #5035 Middle School reports that specific staff "yells at certain kids who ask questions, but the popular students can get away with anything." These two statements are powerful and explain the comments about feeling anxious or stressed when entering specific classrooms. This type of behavior is unacceptable, but it also provides students and families with evidence of why they avoid coming to school. This type of treatment is detrimental to relationship building and the student's mental health. All 30 students explained what they disliked about their most minor favorite class and replied: "the teachers' attitude."

When students feel connected with their teacher, they are excited to come to school. Making connections with the students opens a line of communication and allows the staff to learn more about their students. Strong relationships were the key to student success when the COVID-19 pandemic fell on the shoulders of educators. Students' uncertainties created stress and anxiety that perpetuated a less ideal learning environment. School leaders must ensure that as students navigate the return to classrooms, they focus on building strong relationships between staff and students. Creating an environment where students feel safe to take an academic risk and close

the gaps generated by the massive amount of personal instruction lost over the last two years should be the goal of every educator in Rural #5035 Middle School.

The Rural #5035 Middle School leadership team understands the importance of addressing mental health and achievement gaps that may have been cultivated throughout the pandemic and virtual learning environments. These discussions led to reconfiguring their master bell schedule, providing a full day of remediation, acceleration, and exploration for the entire student body, and a chance for students to see their teachers from a different perspective. The goal was to form a bond between staff and students while expanding skills through acceleration or remediation for all students based on academic performance. Using their 2021 assessment scores, students receive more in-depth instruction and reinforcement of skills through remediation programs, while others receive a more challenging curriculum in accelerated courses. Nevertheless, everyone attends two to three exploration courses based on their answers to a questionnaire conducted in their homerooms and focuses on their individual interests.

The incorporation of remediation, acceleration, and exploration in the students' schedules appears to have had a positive effect on the student body and relationships between the staff and students. Approximately 78% of the students' report learning new information and skills in these Wednesday classes that they would not have learned in their core classes. Roughly 50% of the student body also states that they feel more confident in their core classes because of these Wednesday classes. These two data points provide the school leadership evidence that students

feel the changes in their academic schedule this year positively impact their experiences and academic performance.

The one concerning statistic involving the Wednesday schedule changes is the percentage of students who report that they are neutral or disapprove of the schedule transformation. Approximately 49.7% or 324 students reported they were neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree that the change of instruction on Wednesday has positively affected their attendance throughout the week (Table 2, Item 12). Although closing the academic achievement gap is the primary goal of the schedule change, leadership was confident this change would help improve the overall student attendance percentage. Unfortunately, it does not seem that is the case based on the survey and interviews.

In the personal interviews, the split was evident when discussing the Wild Exploration Wednesday options. Ten seventh and eighth graders reported they enjoyed the exploration, while 10 reported they did not like the change. Six sixth graders reported they enjoyed these optional classes, but four students did not like the new ones. This statistic is consistent with the entire student body's student voice survey reports.

Trying to determine why those interviewed felt differently than the responses provided for items 11, 12, and 13, it was evident that the students were unsure of what to expect with this type of curriculum change. "The Wild Exploration Wednesday is very confusing for me. I am not always sure where I am supposed to go." Although the students were unfamiliar with the concepts and disconnection

between the students and school staff on these days can layout another impediment to student attendance.

The school administration was hopeful this exploration time would bridge gaps and form bonds between staff and students. Still, unfortunately, a simple change to class schedules will not remove the obstacles standing in the way of strengthening relationships. Intentional curriculum and allocated time for teachers and students to engage in meaningful conversations help forge connections that transform toxic school climates into safe environments where all stakeholders feel valued and appreciated.

Sixth Grade

Being new to middle school, the point of view of sixth graders can provide great insight for school leaders. Understanding what students may view as a problem or deem a success helps to refine the focus of the climate and culture so that leadership can develop a robust action plan focusing on teacher-student relationships. One refreshing note from the sixth-grade surveys was incorporating the exploration course on Wednesday. Table 3 notes Item 13, "I have learned new skills or information in my Wednesday classes that I have not learned in my classes on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday," had a mean of 4.21 with 147 (79.5%) reporting a strongly agreed or agreed response. This strong response shows that the sixth graders feel confident about their learning in their exploratory courses. However, the students interviewed were apprehensive of the changes in their schedules and fearful that it was hindering their academic progress. These individual

apprehensive feelings show mixed reviews and need to be monitored to ensure students' voices are heard.

Another encouraging statistic revealed in Table 3 (Item 7) was the 4.18 average reported by sixth graders. There was at least one adult at Rural #5035 Middle School they could talk to if needed. With 150 (81.1%) of the 6th graders reporting strongly agree or agree that there is an adult they can talk to, students feel a bond with teachers or staff and have somewhere to turn if they are struggling academically, physically, emotionally, socially, or mentally. It is critical to have an individual who can serve as a lifeline one can cling to during struggles in today's society. It is evident through the robust response of the sixth grade that they feel a connection with at least one individual within the building. Now, the school administration needs to build off those bonds.

In Table 3, the third-highest item focused on the availability of teachers for help. With 78% (144), the sixth graders reported they strongly agreed or agreed that teachers were available to help them when needed (Table 3, Item 5). Again, this is a strong indicator that the students feel comfortable seeking help when needed, forming a bond. However, the students interviewed reported they felt very little connection between the staff and them when they missed school. Students reported they had to take the initiative to find out what was missed and were rarely asked how they were or if everything was ok.

According to the survey response from sixth-graders, 45.5% (84) believe the adults were concerned about them when they missed school. However, 30.8% of the

respondents recorded a neutral rating (Table 3, Item 14). It appears that teachers and students have a connection when they are present in their class. However, the overall feeling of the sixth-grade students when they miss is that the adults are not concerned that they are absent. Showing concern about students or expressing how much they were missed is a simple task of connectedness. This task is the key to meeting the whole child's needs. When they feel they belong, they will more likely engage in classroom and school activities, leading to more academic success.

Table 3*Teacher-Student Relationship Items - 6th Grade (N=185)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS is a caring and safe place.	60 (32.4%)	73 (39.5%)	40 (21.6%)	6 (3.2%)	6 (3.2%)	3.95 (0.98)
2.	My teachers make me feel welcome in class.	65 (35.1%)	78 (42.2%)	35 (18.9%)	4 (2.2%)	3 (1.6%)	4.07 (0.88)
3.	I feel I am an important part of RURAL #5035 MS.	44 (23.8%)	60 (32.4%)	50 (27.0%)	17 (9.2%)	14 (7.6%)	3.56 (1.17)
4.	RURAL #5035 MS staff stays calm dealing with behavior issues.	40 (21.6%)	52 (28.1%)	56 (30.3%)	28 (15.1%)	9 (4.9%)	3.46 (1.13)
5.	My teachers are available to help me if needed.	70 (37.8%)	74 (40.0%)	34 (18.4%)	4 (2.2%)	3 (1.6%)	4.10 (0.89)
6.	The consequences are the same for all students.	73 (39.5%)	52 (28.1%)	29 (15.7%)	22 (11.9%)	9 (4.9%)	3.85 (1.20)
7.	There is one adult at RURAL #5035 MS I can talk to if needed.	92 (49.7%)	58 (31.4%)	19 (10.3%)	9 (4.9%)	7 (3.8%)	4.18 (1.05)
8.	My teachers have made a personal connection with me.	41 (22.2%)	57 (30.8%)	66 (35.7%)	16 (8.7%)	5 (2.7%)	3.61 (1.01)
9.	If I miss school, my teachers ask how I am when I return.	20 (21.6%)	53 (28.7%)	47 (25.4%)	33 (17.8%)	12 (6.5%)	3.41 (1.20)
10.	I miss school because of friend drama.	2 (1.1%)	5 (2.7%)	15 (8.1%)	54 (29.2%)	109 (58.9%)	1.58 (0.84)
11.	I perform better in my core classes because of my new Wednesday exploration classes	44 (23.8%)	51 (27.6%)	62 (33.5%)	23 (12.4%)	5 (2.7%)	3.57 (1.07)
12.	I have better attendance through the week because of Wednesday classes.	41 (22.2%)	54 (29.2%)	53 (28.7%)	24 (13.0%)	13 (7.0%)	3.46 (1.17)
13.	I have learned new information and skills in my Wednesday classes that I have not learned in my M, T, TH & F.	93 (50.3%)	54 (29.2%)	27 (14.6%)	6 (3.2%)	5 (2.7%)	4.21 (0.99)
14.	Adults at RURAL #5035 MS are concerned when I miss school.	31 (16.8%)	53 (28.7%)	57 (30.8%)	28 (15.1%)	16 (8.7%)	3.30 (1.17)

Surprisingly in the sixth-grade data, the students view bullying as a minor issue at Rural #5035 Middle School. According to the responses, students do not miss school due to friend drama or bullying. The lowest mean focused on the item of

missing school due to friend drama and bullying. Uncharacteristic of the national trend, only 7 (3.8%) sixth grade students answered that they do not allow problems with their friends or bullying to keep them from school (Table 3, Item 10).

Seventh Grade

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the seventh-grade students have not had a consistently typical year in middle school. During the 2020-2021 school year, these students were only in the building two days a week for in-person instruction, and then the other three days served as virtual learning days. Relationships were challenging to build, so the statistics for this grade specifically were fascinating to study.

Table 3 indicates that Item 7 is the highest scoring item in teacher-student relationships. With 79% (158) students reporting there is one adult in the building they can go to if needed (Table 4, Item 5), the seventh graders mirror the feelings of their sixth grade peers regarding a strong relationship with at least one adult in the building. This strong response shows an essential bond has been established between staff and students, fostering positive responsiveness.

The relationships can positively impact the school climate and culture with appropriate education. Again, the seventh graders expressed their excitement about the exploratory classes on Wednesday. According to Table 4 (Item 13), 77.0% of the seventh-grade students have learned a new skill in their Wednesday classes. With the strong response from the seventh grade, these students are excited about discovering interests in other areas and focusing on remediation in areas where they may have

fallen behind. However, only 50.5% of the students reported they performed better in their core classes because of the change in schedule structure on Wednesday (Table 4, Item 11), and 44.5% stated that the change in the schedule positively impacted their attendance (Table 4, Item 13).

Table 4*Teacher-Student Relationship Items - 7th Grade (N=200)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS is a caring and safe place.	44 (22.0%)	83 (41.5%)	58 (29.0%)	11 (5.5%)	4 (2.0%)	3.76 (0.93)
2.	My teachers make me feel welcome in class.	57 (28.5%)	93 (46.5%)	37 (18.5%)	12 (6.0%)	1 (0.5%)	3.97 (0.87)
3.	I feel I am an important part of RURAL #5035 MS.	28 (14.0%)	62 (31.0%)	60 (30.0%)	39 (19.5%)	11 (5.5%)	3.29 (1.10)
4.	RURAL #5035 MS staff stays calm dealing with behavior issues.	31 (15.5%)	63 (31.5%)	61 (30.5%)	39 (19.5%)	6 (3.0%)	3.37 (1.06)
5.	My teachers are available to help me if needed.	57 (28.5%)	91 (45.5%)	46 (23.0%)	4 (2.0%)	2 (1.0%)	3.99 (0.83)
6.	The consequences are the same for all students.	56 (28.0%)	68 (34.0%)	40 (20.0%)	20 (10.0%)	16 (8.0%)	3.64 (1.22)
7.	There is one adult at RURAL #5035 MS I can talk to if needed.	88 (44.0%)	70 (35.0%)	24 (12.0%)	11 (5.5%)	7 (3.5%)	4.11 (1.04)
8.	My teachers have made a personal connection with me.	28 (14.0%)	70 (35.0%)	72 (36.0%)	24 (12.0%)	6 (3.0%)	3.45 (0.98)
9.	If I miss school, my teachers ask how I am when I return.	35 (17.5%)	70 (35.0%)	51 (25.5%)	27 (13.5%)	17 (8.5%)	3.40 (1.17)
10.	I miss school because of friend drama.	3 (1.5%)	11 (5.5%)	25 (12.5%)	64 (32.0%)	97 (48.5%)	1.80 (0.96)
11.	I perform better in my core classes because of my new Wednesday exploration classes.	43 (21.5%)	58 (29.0%)	69 (34.5%)	19 (9.5%)	11 (5.5%)	3.52 (1.10)
12.	I have better attendance through the week because of Wednesday classes.	40 (20.0%)	49 (24.5%)	76 (38.0%)	23 (11.5%)	12 (6.0%)	3.41 (1.11)
13.	I have learned new information and skills in my Wednesday that I have not learned in my M, T, TH & F.	87 (43.5%)	67 (33.5%)	25 (12.5%)	13 (6.5%)	8 (4.0%)	4.06 (1.09)

14. Adults at RURAL #5035 MS are concerned when I miss school.	18 (9.0%)	64 (32.0%)	72 (36.0%)	27 (13.5%)	19 (9.5%)	3.18 (1.08)
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Lastly, the seventh-grade students revealed that their teachers are available for help when needed (Table 4, Item 5). With a 3.99 mean, it is evident that the students are comfortable speaking with their teachers in and out of class if they have a problem with the curriculum. During the personal interviews, all 10 students stated that they found it easy to communicate with their teachers when the student had to switch to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students reported that they could utilize email, Google Chat, Google Classroom, and even REMIND to communicate with their teachers at any time during a virtual learning day. Again, lines of communication help create a strong culture and climate, and it seems that the students feel confident interacting with their teachers.

Eighth Grade

The eighth-grade class has not had a regular school year since fifth grade, so learning their perception of the school climate and culture is impactful. These students were sixth graders and cruising through their sixth-grade year when COVID-19 hit. Their survey data and interview responses reflected their feelings are somewhat similar to their sixth and seventh grade peers, but you can start to see signs of concern in several areas. The eighth-grade students reported strong connections with specific staff members in the building, but during interviews the eighth-grade students were more vocal about the disconnect between other staff and students that

they have experiences since returning to in-person learning. All 10 of the students stated they do not have a connection with any of the teachers they have this year.

The eighth-grade students showed strong small positivity around the new exploratory and intervention curriculums offered to the students on Wednesdays. Approximately 78% of the eighth graders stated they had learned new skills in their Wednesday classes (Table 4, Item 13), but only 51.4% reported their attendance was better because of this schedule change (Table 4, Item 12). Although school administration was hopeful this curriculum and schedule change would positively impact attendance and academics, the data however does not indicate a definite increase in attendance due to these changes.

Approximately 80% of the eighth grade reported their teachers are available to help if needed (Table 5, Item 5), making this item the most favorable result in the student voice survey focusing on teacher-student relations. It is evident the teachers have established a connection where students are aware how to reach out for help. During the interviews, the students stated that they didn't feel as comfortable asking questions in person as they did virtually. Middle schoolers are known to be embarrassed to ask questions in class, so staff must ensure they have conveyed to all students how the classroom environment is a safe learning environment where everyone is promoted to think and question.

The second highest favorable result fell in the area of new skills learned in their exploratory classes on Wednesdays. These classes allowed students to explore skills and curriculum they may not have necessarily learned during their regular core

classes. With a 4.01 average (44.8%), this change in the schedule and curriculum has not shown any positive impact attendance. The students overall seem excited about the new exploratory courses and the change of pace, but it is not positively impacting their attendance.

Similar to the sixth and seventh grades, 77.6% of the eighth-grade reports there is one adult in the building that they can go to should there be a need (Table 5, Item 5). The interesting trend with this item is the eighth graders are not as confident with their answer in finding an adult to go to as their sixth-grade peers. Determining the cause of the downward trend in this item's data is challenging due to the many variables present in teenagers.

A strong personal relationship between teachers and students will positively impact students' academic performance and influence their attendance. Students who feel valued within the school have fewer discipline issues, engage in-class activities and develop trust with adults in the building. This type of positivity influences the climate and culture, thus leading to students wanting to be in school.

Table 5*Teacher-Student Relationship Items - 8th Grade (N=223)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS is a caring and safe place.	43 (19.3%)	110 (49.3%)	54 (24.2%)	11 (4.9%)	5 (2.2%)	3.78 (0.89)
2.	My teachers make me feel welcome in class.	45 (20.2%)	115 (51.6%)	52 (23.32%)	8 (3.6%)	3 (1.4%)	3.86 (0.83)
3.	I feel I am an important part of RURAL #5035 MS.	19 (8.5%)	69 (30.9%)	84 (37.7%)	36 (16.1%)	15 (6.7%)	3.18 (1.03)
4.	RURAL #5035 MS staff stays calm dealing with behavior issues.	17 (7.6%)	77 (34.5%)	83 (37.2%)	33 (14.8%)	13 (5.8%)	3.23 (0.99)
5.	My teachers are available to help me if needed.	60 (26.9%)	119 (53.4%)	36 (16.1%)	4 (1.8%)	4 (1.8%)	4.02 (0.82)
6.	The consequences are the same for all students.	50 (22.4%)	84 (37.7%)	49 (22.0%)	27 (12.1%)	13 (5.8%)	3.59 (1.14)
7.	There is one adult at RURAL #5035 MS I can talk to if needed.	76 (34.1%)	97 (43.5%)	29 (13.0%)	14 (6.3%)	7 (3.1%)	3.99 (1.00)
8.	My teachers have made a personal connection with me.	26 (11.7%)	75 (33.6%)	83 (37.2%)	31 (13.9%)	8 (3.6%)	3.36 (0.98)
9.	If I miss school, my teachers ask how I am when I return.	25 (11.2%)	57 (25.6%)	77 (34.5%)	42 (18.8%)	22 (9.9%)	3.09 (1.13)
10.	I miss school because of friend drama.	1 (0.5%)	9 (4.0%)	19 (8.5%)	88 (39.5%)	106 (47.5%)	1.70 (0.82)
11.	I perform better in my core classes because of my new Wednesday exploration classes.	49 (22.0%)	61 (27.4%)	64 (28.7%)	35 (15.7%)	14 (6.3%)	3.43 (1.18)
12.	I have better attendance through the week because of Wednesday class.	38 (17.0%)	62 (27.8%)	65 (29.2%)	35 (15.7%)	23 (10.3%)	3.26 (1.21)
13.	I have learned new information and skills in my Wednesday that I have not learned in my M, T, TH & F.	83 (37.2%)	92 (41.3%)	25 (11.2%)	14 (6.3%)	9 (4.0%)	4.01 (1.05)
14.	Adults at RURAL #5035 MS are concerned when I miss school.	21 (9.4%)	65 (29.2%)	89 (39.9%)	31 (13.9%)	17 (7.6%)	3.19 (1.04)

Parent Engagement Data

Research has consistently shown "the link between positive school climate and other important measurements of school success such as academic achievement,

effective classroom management, and high staff morale" (Okay et al., 2013, p. 16). However, as students progress through their educational careers, we know that parental involvement drops off significantly. The key for educational leaders is to determine if this is the parents' belief, the students' desire, or the school environment's unwelcomeness.

In the student voice survey conducted at Rural #5035 Middle School, students identified parents helping their children at home as an area of strength.

Approximately 88% of the students report that their parents are willing to help or have helped with homework assignments and projects (Table 6, Item 2). When parents are involved and engaged in their child's education, it displays their concern about their child's learning and the fact that they value education. Eighty percent of the students report that good grades and attendance are essential to their families (Table 6, Item 6). Another compelling statistic is that 67% of students reported that their parents would not allow them to stay home if they did not want to come to school (Table 6, Item 5). With these solid numbers reported, it is evident that Rural #5035 Middle School families are concerned about their child's academic performance and their child attending school.

Table 6*Parent-Engagement Items – Student Voice Survey (N=608)*

	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	My parents attend events hosted by the school.	107 (17.6%)	172 (28.3%)	191 (31.4%)	88 (14.5%)	50 (8.2%)	3.33 (1.17)
2.	My parents help with homework and/or projects	359 (59.1%)	178 (29.3%)	47 (7.7%)	16 (2.6%)	8 (1.3%)	4.42 (0.85)
3.	My parents volunteer for RURAL #5035 MS activities.	52 (8.6%)	129 (21.2%)	206 (33.9%)	152 (25.0%)	69 (11.4%)	2.91 (1.12)
4.	My parents contact the teacher if I am failing.	184 (30.3%)	198 (32.6%)	154 (25.3%)	58 (9.5%)	14 (2.3%)	3.79 (1.1)
5.	If I don't feel like coming to school, my parents allow to stay home	14 (2.3%)	40 (6.6%)	141 (23.2%)	174 (28.6%)	239 (39.3%)	2.04 (1.05)
6.	Good grades and attendance are important to me and my family.	289 (47.5%)	197 (32.4%)	92 (15.1%)	22 (3.6%)	8 (1.3%)	4.21 (0.92)
7.	My parents check my grades and attendance once a week on IC.	205 (33.7%)	190 (31.3%)	141 (23.2%)	42 (6.9%)	30 (4.9%)	3.82 (1.12)
8.	The school contacts my family when I am tardy or absent.	102 (16.8%)	190 (31.3%)	190 (31.3%)	91 (15.0%)	35 (5.8%)	3.38 (1.10)
9.	If I miss the bus, I have to stay home due to no other form of transportation.	12 (2.0%)	28 (4.6%)	84 (13.8%)	187 (30.8%)	297 (48.9%)	1.80 (0.98)
10.	My parents receive notification when I do something GREAT.	68 (11.2%)	114 (18.8%)	203 (33.4%)	130 (21.4%)	93 (15.3%)	2.89 (1.21)
11.	My parents have been contacted by someone from RURAL #5035 MS this year.	195 (32.1%)	189 (31.1%)	133 (21.9%)	51 (8.4%)	40 (6.6%)	3.74 (1.19)

Communicating with families is another critical pathway in the parent engagement domain of the school climate and culture. According to Table 6 (Item 7),

395 students, or approximately 65%, report that their parents monitor Infinite Campus and their grades at least once a week. This student information program allows families and students to track their performance on attendance, assignments, and behavior. The survey also identified that 63% of the students reported that parents contact their teachers when they fail (Table 6, Item 4). Infinite Campus monitoring and teacher communication ensure parental awareness of failing grades or missing assignments and creates a connection between the home and school.

However, the form of personal communication at Rural #5035 Middle School is lacking. Although 63% reported their parents had been contacted by the school this year, only six of the 30 students interviewed stated that their parents had been contacted this school year. The contact was for a negative or bad situation. "My mom was called because of the girl drama that the teachers were tired of dealing with it." Another young man stated that the only time the school had contacted his parents for the past two years was when he hit his head on his locker.

The interview response to the contact made with their family is consistent with the approximately 30% who reported their parents had been contacted when they did something great (Table 6, Item 10). If the only time parents interact with school staff is during negative situations, parents are less likely to reach out when they are concerned or need assistance. When staff has positive talks with parents, more complex conversations can occur easier. Parents want to hear when their child is successful in school.

Every student interviewed reported that the school and staff handled all communication through telephone conversations, emails, or the use of the school district's communication initiative, the REMIND app, to communicate with parents or guardians. Keeping parents abreast of students' performance creates a school environment where families feel free to express their gratitude and concern when an issue arises. This open line of communication will help produce a school culture of trust and rapport; while creating lines of communication and opportunities to find each family's niche to help plug them inappropriately.

With students reporting the strength of parental involvement in students' academic performance and homework assignments or projects, it is difficult to understand why there is a lack of parental presence in school activities and events. Only 45.9% of students report that they strongly agree or agree with their parents' attending events hosted by the school (Table 6, Item 1). While just 22.7% of the students stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed regarding their parents' attending events hosted by the school (Table 6, Item 1).

The lack of parental attendance at school events is an obvious problem at Rural #5035 Middle School. Often, the lack of parental involvement is due to their personal experiences in school. Some parents experienced unpleasant or harmful interactions during their time in school, thus leading to an opposing viewpoint of schools and education in general. This is where it is key to eliminating those barriers keeping parents out of the school and working diligently to ensure everyone finds their appropriate place within the school community.

During student interviews, 15 of the 30 students reported that their parents volunteered at Rural #5035 Middle School. This statistic is inconsistent with the answers of the entire student population from the student voice survey. According to Table 6, roughly 30% of the parents volunteer at Rural #5035 Middle School (Item 2). The COVID-19 pandemic could have impacted the number of parents volunteering in the school now, but historically speaking, parental involvement has been lacking at Rural #5035 Middle School.

The student's point of view of parent involvement differs from that of the researcher. The student's interpretation of parent involvement is volunteering as a sports team coach or working the concession stand at events. The researcher was looking for more involvement in fiscal, curricular, or instructional decision-making committees. Once the researcher realized what the students' viewed as "parental involvement," the researcher further explained the true meaning of parental involvement. Once that was clear, only five of the 30 students interviewed had parents who served on committees or in site-based decision-making council capacities. It was apparent that many of the students' parents did not participate in school committees or activities. Many parents simply attended sporting events and served their time working the concession stand.

Sixth Grade

Several surprising statistics are presented in the sixth-grade students' answers regarding their parent engagement at Rural #5035 Middle School. In rural Appalachia, many would consider transportation a barrier for families, so if a student

misses the bus, it does not hinder them from coming to school. With the lowest average score of 1.72, 148 (80.0%) of the sixth graders reported they disagree or strongly disagree that transportation keeps them from attending school (Table 7, Item 9). Although most of the students report it is not an issue for them, district leadership must understand there are still some pockets of students who rely on district transportation as a pathway to and from school. Investing and long-term planning for the transportation fleet allows district leaders to be financially responsible and eliminate barriers that lead to chronic absenteeism in the most at-risk students.

Table 7

Parent-Engagement Items – 6th grade (N=185)

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	My parents attend events hosted by the school.	50 (27.0%)	50 (27.0%)	53 (28.7%)	23 (12.4%)	9 (4.9%)	3.59 (1.15)
2.	My parents help with homework and/or projects	113 (61.1%)	51 (27.6%)	16 (8.7%)	4 (2.2%)	1 (0.5%)	4.46 (0.79)
3.	My parents volunteer for RURAL #5035 MS activities.	25 (13.5%)	44 (23.8%)	59 (31.9%)	47 (25.4%)	10 (5.4%)	3.15 (1.11)
4.	My parents contact the teacher if I am failing.	69 (37.3%)	56 (30.3%)	42 (22.7%)	14 (7.6%)	4 (2.2%)	3.93 (1.05)
5.	If I don't feel like coming to school, my parents allow to stay home	4 (2.2%)	9 (4.9%)	38 (20.6%)	51 (27.6%)	83 (44.9%)	1.92 (1.02)
6.	Good grades and attendance are important to me and my family.	99 (53.5%)	53 (28.7%)	25 (13.5%)	6 (3.2%)	2 (1.1%)	4.30 (0.90)
7.	My parents check my grades and attendance once a week on IC.	72 (38.9%)	50 (27.0%)	45 (24.3%)	11 (6.0%)	7 (3.8%)	3.91 (1.10)
8.	The school contacts my family when I am tardy or absent.	34 (18.4%)	45 (24.3%)	63 (34.1%)	31 (16.8%)	12 (6.5%)	3.31 (1.15)
9.	If I miss the bus, I have to stay home due to no other form of transportation.	4 (2.2%)	9 (4.9%)	24 (13.0%)	42 (22.7%)	106 (57.3%)	1.72 (1.01)
10.	My parents receive notification when I do something GREAT.	35 (18.9%)	26 (14.1%)	66 (35.7%)	34 (18.4%)	24 (13.0%)	3.08 (1.27)

11. My parents have been contacted by someone from RURAL #5035 MS this year.	66 (35.7%)	56 (30.3%)	34 (18.4%)	13 (7.0%)	16 (8.7%)	3.77 (1.25)
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The second-lowest average item within the parent engagement domain is that students are allowed to stay home if they do not feel like coming to school. According to Table 7, 134 (72.5%) sixth graders reported they disagree or strongly disagree with this statement denoting that their parents would not allow them to stay home if they did not want to come to school (Item 5). With this solid response, it is evident that the parents expect their students to attend school daily, and just like the sixth graders, the seventh-grade students understand their parents' attendance expectations.

Every parent wants to know when their child does something special, but unfortunately, it seems parents only hear from schools when it is something negative. In Table 7, Item 10 states that parents are notified when their student does something great reveals, and only 71 (33.0%) of the sixth graders responded with a strongly agree or agree to this item. To build a strong rapport between the school and home, sharing positive interactions or news with parents that staff has observed of their students fosters trust and allows talking points to form between home and school. If school staff is only calling with negative news or discipline issues, the parent or guardian will immediately become defensive.

Seventh Grade

Another surprising statistic within the parental engagement domain falls within the area of transportation. With a mean of 1.72, 167 (83.8%) seventh graders answered that they disagree or strongly disagree that transportation is an issue should

they miss the school bus (Table 8, Item 9). With districts across the state facing bus driver shortages daily, school leaders can be encouraged knowing transportation is not an obstacle causing absenteeism within their school.

Ensuring expectations are communicated and partnerships developed between home and school enhances the importance for all stakeholders to be present and engaged in school every day. Comparable to their peers in the sixth grade, the seventh-grade students report that they are not allowed to stay home if they do not feel like coming to school. With 65.5% (131), seventh-grade students reported they disagreed or strongly disagreed with item number five (Table 7, Item5). This statistic is 7.0% lower than their sixth-grade peers and 0.8% lower than their eighth-grade peers. With the lowest percentage among the three grades, more seventh-grade parents agreed to allow them to stay home if they did not feel like coming to school.

The parent engagement domain within the school's climate and culture is vital to its success. Students are used to seeing their parents or guardians volunteer in elementary school, so middle school leadership needs to embrace them. However, only 49 seventh graders' parents volunteer at Rural #5035 Middle School (Table 8, Item 3). Seventh-grade parents are not involved. School leaders must find a way to create an environment where solid trust and rapport are present, parents feel welcome, and all parents are equally represented to ensure a sense of community is being established.

Table 8*Parent-Engagement Items – 7th grade (N=200)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	My parents attend events hosted by the school.	31 (15.5%)	57 (28.5%)	64 (32.0%)	32 (16.0%)	16 (8.0%)	3.28 (1.15)
2.	My parents help with homework and/or projects	122 (61.0%)	56 (28.0%)	14 (7.0%)	5 (2.5%)	3 (1.5%)	4.45 (0.85)
3.	My parents volunteer for RURAL #5035 MS activities.	12 (6.0%)	37 (18.5%)	79 (39.5%)	43 (21.5%)	29 (14.5%)	2.80 (1.09)
4.	My parents contact the teacher if I am failing.	57 (28.5%)	64 (32.0%)	59 (29.5%)	18 (9.0%)	2 (1.0%)	3.78 (0.99)
5.	If I don't feel like coming to school, my parents allow to stay home	5 (2.5%)	14 (7.0%)	50 (25.0%)	52 (26.0%)	79 (39.5%)	2.07 (1.07)
6.	Good grades and attendance are important to me and my family.	87 (43.5%)	68 (34.0%)	33 (16.5%)	9 (4.5%)	3 (1.5%)	4.14 (0.95)
7.	My parents check my grades and attendance once a week on IC.	64 (32.0%)	63 (31.5%)	50 (25.0%)	13 (6.5%)	10 (5.0%)	3.79 (1.11)
8.	The school contacts my family when I am tardy or absent.	31 (15.5%)	65 (32.5%)	59 (29.5%)	31 (15.5%)	14 (7.0%)	3.34 (1.13)
9.	If I miss the bus, I have to stay home due to no other form of transportation.	3 (1.5%)	6 (3.0%)	24 (12.0%)	66 (33.0%)	101 (50.5%)	1.72 (0.90)
10.	My parents receive notification when I do something GREAT.	17 (8.5%)	38 (19.0%)	66 (33.0%)	51 (25.5%)	28 (14.0%)	2.83 (1.15)
11.	My parents have been contacted by someone from RURAL #5035 MS this year.	63 (31.5%)	60 (30.0%)	43 (21.5%)	22 (11.0%)	12 (6.0%)	3.70 (1.19)

Eighth Grade

Interestingly, the eighth-grade students reported that they, too, did not have transportation issues at home if they missed the bus. Only 18 (8%) of the eighth-grade students reported that if they missed the bus, they still had a way to get to school (Table 9, Item 9). Although still surprisingly low, this statistic has shown a slight increase at each grade level. This critical trend needs to be monitored, as it could

create an attendance obstacle for the older students. Recognizing barriers, such as transportation, that exist for specific groups will help school leaders understand the demographics of their families and students. Knowing where your students come from and their everyday needs help set them up for success in and out of the classroom.

Comparable to the sixth and seventh grade, the eighth-grade students' second favorable result in the parental engagement portion of the survey stating if they did not feel like coming to school, their parents would allow them to stay home. According to Table 9, 148 (66.3%) reported they disagree or strongly disagree with their parents allowing them to stay home if they do not feel like coming. Hence, there is no evidence that parents allow students to miss school (Item 5). However, the researcher notes that this statistic is slightly higher than the other two grades. So, school leaders need to engage with parents through parent-teacher organizations and communicate weekly through email or mobile device apps to ensure all stakeholders understand the importance of school attendance.

The third lowest mean in the parent engagement domain of the survey for the eighth grade revolves around parent volunteers. Table 9 states that the mean for eighth-grade parent volunteers is 2.8% (Item 3). With only 63 (28.2%) students stating their parents volunteered at Rural #5035 Middle School, there must be an underlying reason why parents do not want to help within the school setting. Determining what is holding parents back from actively engaging in events and activities at a school is a significant feat. Still, school leaders must find ways to identify parents' strengths and utilize those strengths within the school community. When parents feel they contribute to the school and their work is appreciated, they are more likely to offer their services.

Although the statistics are similar at each grade level, it is evident that there is a slight increase at each grade level that could be concerning for school leadership. The evidence in the data provides school leaders with specific areas to address or monitor, which will ensure barriers are not created or encouraged, which might

escalate chronic absenteeism. If leaders disregard these obstacles, absences will accumulate and negatively impact students' academics.

Table 9

Parent-Engagement Items – 8th grade (N=223)

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M(SD)
1.	My parents attend events hosted by the school.	26 (11.7%)	65 (29.2%)	74 (33.2%)	33 (14.8%)	25 (11.2%)	3.15 (1.16)
2.	My parents help with homework and/or projects	124 (55.6%)	71 (31.8%)	17 (7.6%)	7 (3.1%)	4 (1.8%)	4.36 (0.89)
3.	My parents volunteer for RURAL #5035 MIDDLE SCHOOL activities.	15 (6.7%)	48 (21.5%)	68 (30.5%)	62 (27.8%)	30 (13.5%)	2.80 (1.13)
4.	My parents contact the teacher if I am failing.	58 (26.0%)	78 (35.0%)	53 (23.8%)	26 (11.7%)	8 (3.6%)	3.68 (1.09)
5.	If I don't feel like coming to school, my parents allow to stay home	5 (2.2%)	17 (7.6%)	53 (23.8%)	71 (31.8%)	77 (34.5%)	2.11 (1.04)
6.	Good grades and attendance are important to me and my family.	103 (46.2%)	76 (34.1%)	34 (15.3%)	7 (3.1%)	3 (1.4%)	4.21 (0.91)
7.	My parents check my grades and attendance once a week on IC.	69 (30.9%)	77 (34.5%)	46 (20.6%)	18 (8.1%)	13 (5.8%)	3.77 (1.15)
8.	The school contacts my family when I am tardy or absent.	37 (16.6%)	80 (35.9%)	68 (30.5%)	29 (13.0%)	9 (4.0%)	3.48 (1.04)
9.	If I miss the bus, I have to stay home due to no other form of transportation.	5 (2.2%)	13 (5.8%)	36 (16.1%)	79 (35.4%)	90 (40.4%)	1.94 (1.00)
10.	My parents receive notification when I do something GREAT.	16 (7.2%)	50 (22.4%)	71 (31.8%)	45 (20.2%)	41 (18.4%)	2.80 (1.19)
11.	My parents have been contacted by someone from RURAL #5035 MIDDLE SCHOOL this year.	66 (29.6%)	73 (32.7%)	56 (25.1%)	16 (7.2%)	12 (5.4%)	3.74 (1.12)

School Safety Data

School safety is always at the forefront of all stakeholders' minds and the essential issue that must be addressed immediately by school leadership when a

concern arises. From the general processes and procedures to addressing the mental health of all stakeholders, a safe school environment is critical for focusing on the needs of the whole child and providing a desire to present at school. The student voice survey addressed the general safety of the building, mental health issues, and bullying. These prominent factors can mentally or physically harm students, so it is vital to understand the students' perspective on school safety at Rural #5035 Middle School.

Table 10*School Safety Survey Items – Student Voice Survey (N=608)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS staff handle safety concerns quickly.	159 (26.2%)	240 (39.5%)	144 (23.7%)	54 (8.8%)	11 (1.8%)	3.79 (0.99)
2.	RURAL #5035 MS faculty and staff are concerned about the mental health of their students.	129 (21.2%)	221 (36.4%)	167 (27.5%)	64 (10.5%)	27 (4.4%)	3.59 (1.07)
3.	I feel safe at RURAL #5035 MS.	187 (30.8%)	266 (43.8%)	116 (19.1%)	30 (4.9%)	9 (1.5%)	3.97 (0.91)
4.	Bullying is a problem at RURAL #5035 MS.	92 (15.1%)	104 (17.1%)	176 (29.0%)	158 (29.0%)	151 (24.8%)	2.60 (1.25)
5.	Students are taught ways to stop bullying.	116 (19.1%)	227 (37.3%)	161 (26.5%)	73 (12.0%)	31 (5.1%)	3.53 (1.09)
6.	I have personally witnessed a student being bullied at school.	61 (10.0%)	114 (18.8%)	103 (17.0%)	179 (29.4%)	78 (12.8%)	2.60 (1.31)
7.	If a student is bullied at school, there is a safe way to report to an adult.	181 (29.8%)	275 (45.2%)	107 (17.6%)	34 (5.6%)	11 (1.8%)	3.96 (0.93)
8.	Social media bullying is a problem for students at RURAL #5035 MS.	56 (9.2%)	79 (13.0%)	183 (30.1%)	185 (30.4%)	105 (17.3%)	2.66 (1.18)
9.	When a student reports bullying, adults at RURAL #5035 MS will do something to help.	178 (29.3%)	255 (41.9%)	123 (20.2%)	34 (5.6%)	18 (3.0%)	3.89 (0.99)
10.	I have experienced bullying at school or on social media.	66 (10.9%)	101 (16.6%)	153 (25.2%)	153 (25.2%)	172 (28.3%)	2.57 (1.34)

11.	There are areas in school I do not feel safe.	45 (7.4%)	77 (12.7%)	200 (32.9%)	180 (29.6%)	180 (29.6%)	2.35 (1.23)
12.	I have missed school due to bullying.	11 (1.8%)	30 (4.9%)	163 (26.8%)	365 (60.0%)	365 (60.0%)	1.62 (0.94)

The survey provided awareness into the students' perspective on school safety. 413 students reported that they believe Rural #5035 Middle School is a caring and safe place to attend school (Table 2, Item 1), and 452 stated they feel safe while at Rural #5035 Middle School (Table 10, Item 3). These substantial numbers indicate that students feel safe at Rural #5035 Middle School. While security is an issue at many schools across the nation, according to the data present in the student voice survey, safety is not a worry for the students at Rural #5035 Middle School.

As discussed earlier, Rural #5035 Middle School students feel safe while in school, and over 65% of them believe that safety issues are addressed quickly by the faculty and staff of Rural #5035 Middle School (Table 10, Item 1). Although the staff is addressing safety issues, it was evident in the personal interviews that there are areas in the school where students feel unsafe. Twenty-two of the 30 students reported that they do not feel safe in the bathrooms and gym locker rooms at Rural #5035 Middle School. The students state it is not only for fear of being hurt but also for fear of being in situations where students are caught vaping or selling vapes. These actions cause a great deal of stress and anxiety. All 22 students said, "there were days they completely avoided the bathroom altogether." The mental and physical stress this is placing on the students is not beneficial to their well-being.

Vapes and joules are the most used tobacco produced by teens in the U.S, and the statement from these students supports the excessive number of students reporting their peers using vapes in these unsupervised areas of the school.

Between the fear of specific areas of school and anxieties that come with bullying and safety issues, excuses continue to multiply as to why students do not want to come to school. Bullying has become a phenomenon in most school settings, and Rural #5035 Middle School is no exception. The middle school years are always an awkward, transitional time in a child's life. This claim supports why students are trying to find their place in the school setting. Approximately 28% of Rural #5035 Middle School students report they have witnessed a student being bullied at school (Table 10, Item 10), and roughly 32% believe that bullying is an issue at their school (Table 10, Item 4). Although lower than the national average, these two statistics display a problem of bullying within Rural #5035 Middle School halls.

There is a significant difference between the percentage of students believing bullying is a problem at Rural #5035 Middle School compared to the verbalization reported through the interview process. In the overall student voice survey, 32.1% of the entire student population considered bullying a problem (Table 10, Item 4), but 70% of the 30 students interviewed reported bullying as a problem within Rural #5035 Middle School. 80% of the 7th and 8th-grade students interviewed stated that they personally have experienced physical, verbal, or cyberbullying this school year at Rural #5035 Middle School. Again, this does not correlate with what the overall student body reported.

Physical, verbal, emotional, and cyberbullying are the various forms of bullying taking place daily in school. Students expressed they had experienced some form of bullying from another student at Rural #5035 Middle School during the interview process. These incidences included verbally or physically assaulting another student, circulating lies or rumors about them in person or online, posting pictures without permission on various social media sites, and even alienating individuals from events or activities with their peers. Although all types of bullying are detrimental to a student, cyberbullying has increased due to increased technology over the last few years.

Only three sixth-graders report cyberbullying, and all their cyberbullying experiences are through online gaming. However, five seventh and seven eighth graders report they have experienced cyberbullying through text messaging, Instagram, and Snap Chat. As students' progress through middle school, these statistics demonstrate that bullying occurrences increase. Cyberbullying is an issue at all grade levels and challenging to discipline since often these incidents occur off school premises. School districts must have explicit acceptable use policies regarding electronic devices and the district's expectations of proper use by students.

Sixth Grade

With school safety on the minds of all stakeholders, leadership needs to hear their voices and the issues they view as positive and negative. The highest averaged item focuses on students feeling safe at Rural #5035 Middle School. With an average response of 4.16, the sixth-grade students personally feel protected and secure at

Rural #5035 Middle School (Table 11, Item 9). Students' strong perception of safety will impact their academic and attendance success and their mental well-being. Meeting the real needs of the students will create an environment where they want to be in school for all the right reasons.

In the school safety domain, the sixth-grade students reported that the Rural #5035 Middle School staff addressed bullying quickly when brought to their attention. With a mean of 4.16 and the second-highest scoring item, this item proves that when adults are aware of situations occurring in the school, they quickly work to resolve the issue (Table 11, Item 9). Knowing the staff does not tolerate this type of behavior provides another sense of security for the students.

The one item from the survey that did not correlate with the interview results was the one focusing on areas in the school where you feel safe. With a 2.44 average response, one would believe there were no areas of safety concern for the sixth graders (Table 11, Item 10). However, all 10 students interviewed stated that the bathrooms, gym locker rooms, and hallways were areas of concern for them. With these areas often unmonitored and less structured, students expressed severe anxiety about entering these portions of the school and what might happen to them. When anxiety builds, students begin to worry that those same uneasy feelings will trickle over into other areas of the school. The school administration can alleviate this problem quickly and would alleviate another addition to the mounting excuses that lead to chronic absenteeism.

Table 11*School Safety Survey Items – 6th Grade (N=187)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS staff handle safety concerns quickly.	71 (38.4%)	63 (34.1%)	38 (20.5%)	11 (6.0%)	2 (1.1%)	4.03 (0.96)
2.	RURAL #5035 MS faculty and staff are concerned about the mental health of their students.	61 (33.0%)	64 (34.6%)	36 (19.5%)	16 (8.7%)	8 (4.3%)	3.83 (1.11)
3.	I feel safe at RURAL #5035 MS.	82 (44.3%)	64 (35.7%)	26 (14.1%)	7 (3.8%)	4 (2.2%)	4.16 (0.95)
4.	Bullying is a problem at RURAL #5035 MS.	29 (15.7%)	28 (15.1%)	48 (26.0%)	47 (25.4%)	33 (17.8%)	2.85 (1.32)
5.	Students are taught ways to stop bullying.	48 (26.0%)	69 (37.3%)	44 (23.8%)	15 (8.1%)	9 (4.9%)	3.71 (1.09)
6.	I have personally witnessed a student being bullied at school.	16 (8.7%)	30 (16.2%)	22 (11.9%)	55 (29.7%)	62 (33.5%)	2.37 (1.32)
7.	If a student is bullied at school, there is a safe way to report to an adult.	72 (38.9%)	74 (40.0%)	28 (15.1%)	6 (3.2%)	5 (2.7%)	4.09 (0.95)
8.	Social media bullying is a problem for students at RURAL #5035 MS.	17 (9.2%)	19 (10.3%)	49 (26.5%)	59 (31.9%)	41 (22.2%)	2.52 (1.21)
9.	When a student reports bullying, adults at RURAL #5035 MS will do something to help.	76 (41.1%)	76 (41.1%)	26 (14.1%)	1 (0.5%)	6 (3.2%)	4.16 (0.92)
10.	I have experienced bullying at school or on social media.	22 (11.9%)	27 (14.6%)	28 (15.1%)	42 (22.7%)	66 (35.7%)	2.44 (1.41)
11.	There are areas in school I do not feel safe.	16 (8.7%)	26 (14.1%)	36 (19.5%)	52 (28.1%)	55 (29.7%)	2.44 (1.28)
12.	I have missed school due to bullying.	3 (1.6%)	7 (3.8%)	8 (4.3%)	46 (24.9%)	121 (65.4%)	1.51 (0.87)

Seventh Grade

The seventh graders mirror some of the same results as their sixth-grade peers, but their responses are not as positive as the sixth graders. Seventy-four% of the seventh grade reported there was a safe way to report bullying to an adult at Rural

#5035 MS (Table 12, Item 7). The sixth grade percentage was 78.9%, so there is a slight decrease in the seventh grade's trust or rapport in the reporting system of bullying. During the interview process, students confirmed there is an online reporting system they can use for bullying or terroristic threats. However, they stated they felt more comfortable telling either an adult in their home or someone at the school most of the time. School leaders and parents must effectively understand how to convey the importance of reporting bullying to students, so students understand they have support and backing both at school and at home.

Similar to their sixth-grade peers, the seventh-grader reports feeling safe at school. With 148 students (78%) confirming they feel safe at school, the seventh-grade students show slightly lower numbers than their sixth-grade peers. Through the interview discussion, it became clear that students view school safety in terms of violent acts such as assaults, weapons, or sexual violence. With violent acts a rarity at Rural #5035 Middle School, this statistic could be skewed since students do not consider bullying and cyberbullying as an act of violence. Research states that bullying and cyberbullying are part of school safety and significantly impact student mental health, so they cannot be dismissed or set aside. Students need to understand the significant impact of bullying on students and school safety.

Table 12*School Safety Survey Items – 7th Grade (N=200)*

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS staff handle safety concerns quickly.	41 (20.5%)	87 (43.5%)	46 (23.0%)	23 (11.5%)	3 (1.5%)	3.70 (0.97)
2.	RURAL #5035 MS faculty and staff are concerned about the mental health of their students.	44 (22.0%)	62 (31.0%)	66 (33.0%)	24 (12.0%)	4 (2.0%)	3.59 (1.02)
3.	I feel safe at RURAL #5035 MS.	53 (26.5%)	95 (47.5%)	42 (21.0%)	10 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.96 (0.82)
4.	Bullying is a problem at RURAL #5035 MS.	35 (17.5%)	40 (20.0%)	56 (28.0%)	47 (23.5%)	22 (11.0%)	3.10 (1.25)
5.	Students are taught ways to stop bullying.	34 (17.0%)	64 (32.0%)	65 (32.5%)	26 (13.0%)	11 (5.5%)	3.42 (1.09)
6.	I have personally witnessed a student being bullied at school.	21 (10.5%)	41 (20.5%)	37 (18.5%)	51 (25.5%)	50 (25.0%)	2.66 (1.33)
7.	If a student is bullied at school, there is a safe way to report to an adult.	63 (31.5%)	85 (42.5%)	36 (18.0%)	13 (6.5%)	3 (1.5%)	3.96 (0.94)
8.	Social media bullying is a problem for students at RURAL #5035 MS.	21 (10.5%)	27 (13.5%)	64 (32.0%)	54 (27.0%)	34 (17.0%)	2.74 (1.20)
9.	When a student reports bullying, adults at RURAL #5035 MS will do something to help.	61 (30.5%)	78 (39.0%)	42 (21.0%)	16 (8.0%)	3 (1.5%)	3.89 (0.98)
10.	I have experienced bullying at school or on social media.	23 (11.5%)	40 (20.0%)	38 (19.0%)	46 (23.0%)	53 (26.5%)	2.67 (1.36)
11.	There are areas in school I do not feel safe.	12 (6.0%)	24 (12.0%)	37 (18.5%)	64 (32.0%)	63 (31.5%)	2.29 (1.20)
12.	I have missed school due to bullying.	4 (2.0%)	14 (7.0%)	16 (8.0%)	51 (25.5%)	115 (57.5%)	1.71 (1.02)

The last significant data point from Table 12 is the 36 (18%) seventh grade students who report there are areas in the school where they do not feel safe. Just like their sixth-grade counterparts, their responses on the survey do not match the interview responses. The 10 students interviewed explicitly stated there are areas in the school they avoid due to the fact that students will go there just for fights and

vaping. Their responses included “fear of getting in trouble for vaping even if they are not” and “getting caught in a fight or picked on while trying to use the restroom.” These concerns echo the same concerns as their sixth-grade friends, so the data reported on the student voice survey does not accurately reflect 100% of the perspective of the students interviewed.

Eighth Grade

During the interview process, the eighth-grade students were the most honest and open students in the whole process. Most wanted to share the positive, but all were willing to share their concerns and issues that needed addressing to help improve Rural #5035 Middle School. The one item with the most positive response from the eighth grade was reporting bullying to an adult. Roughly 73% of the eighth graders responded that they strongly agreed or agreed to having an adult to report bullying to (Table 13, Item 7). This statistic continued to decrease from the responses of sixth and seventh graders but was still positive. One interesting fact that was picked up during interviews was that students mainly reported bullying situations to their parents but were aware of how to report online using the tip line or to a teacher or administrator in the building.

Like their sixth and seventh-grade peers, the eighth-grade students display a strong feeling of security at Rural #5035 Middle School. According to Table 13, 70.4% of eighth-grade students feel safe at school (Item 3). However, in their interviews, they were adamant that they avoid the restrooms, locker rooms, and even

the cafeteria due to bullying, vaping, and fighting. The disagreement in the statistics is concerning as students may not feel safe reporting their fears publicly.

Table 13

School Safety Survey Items – 8th Grade (N=238)

	ITEM	SA	A	N	D	SD	M (SD)
1.	RURAL #5035 MS staff handle safety concerns quickly.	47 (21.1%)	90 (40.4%)	60 (26.9%)	20 (9.0%)	6 (2.7%)	3.68 (0.99)
2.	RURAL #5035 MS faculty and staff are concerned about the mental health of their students.	24 (10.8%)	95 (42.6%)	65 (29.2%)	24 (10.8%)	15 (6.7%)	3.40 (1.04)
3.	I feel safe at RURAL #5035 MS.	52 (23.3%)	105 (47.1%)	48 (21.5%)	13 (5.8%)	5 (2.2%)	3.83 (0.93)
4.	Bullying is a problem at RURAL #5035 MS.	28 (12.6%)	36 (16.1%)	72 (32.3%)	64 (28.7%)	23 (10.3%)	2.92 (1.17)
5.	Students are taught ways to stop bullying.	34 (15.3%)	94 (42.2%)	52 (23.3%)	32 (14.4%)	11 (4.9%)	3.48 (1.07)
6.	I have personally witnessed a student being bullied at school.	24 (10.8%)	43 (19.3%)	44 (19.7%)	73 (32.7%)	39 (17.5%)	2.73 (1.26)
7.	If a student is bullied at school, there is a safe way to report to an adult.	46 (20.6%)	116 (52.0%)	43 (19.3%)	15 (6.7%)	3 (1.4%)	3.84 (0.88)
8.	Social media bullying is a problem for students at RURAL #5035 MS.	18 (8.1%)	33 (14.8%)	70 (31.4%)	72 (32.3%)	30 (13.5%)	2.72 (1.12)
9.	When a student reports bullying, adults at RURAL #5035 MS will do something to help.	41 (18.4%)	101 (45.3%)	55 (24.7%)	17 (7.6%)	9 (4.0%)	3.66 (0.99)
10.	I have experienced bullying at school or on social media.	21 (9.4%)	34 (15.3%)	50 (22.4%)	65 (29.2%)	53 (23.8%)	2.57 (1.26)
11.	There are areas in school I do not feel safe.	17 (7.6%)	27 (12.1%)	33 (14.8%)	84 (37.7%)	62 (27.8%)	2.34 (1.22)
12.	I have missed school due to bullying.	4 (1.8%)	9 (4.0%)	15 (6.73%)	66 (29.6%)	129 (57.9%)	1.62 (0.91)

The last issue that is surprising relates to the fact that the students feel safe at Rural #5035 Middle School, and there are areas in the school where students do not feel safe. In the eighth grade, 65% of the students stated disagreed or strongly disagreed with the fact that there were areas in the school they did not feel safe (Table 13, Item 11). Again, the student's definition of safety could be causing the contradiction, but there is a significant concern for safety in these unsupervised areas of the school.

Issues such as vaping in bathroom stalls, fighting in the bathroom, and bullying in the hallways cause anxiety and stress among many students. From drug use to ostracism, our middle schoolers are faced with issues today that fall into the school safety realm and trigger mental health issues. If school leaders allow these problems to go unaddressed, they can lead to more severe behavior problems in the school culture and more extensive reasons why students do not want to come to school. If leaders can remove these obstacles that create worries for those high anxiety kids, it will positively impact their school culture.

Summary

The overall data from the student voice survey presents a generally positive picture of Rural #5035 Middle School. Students appear pleased with their school's overall teacher-student relationships, parental engagement, and school safety. However, as the data points were drilled down, it is evident that specific issues exist within the three overall themes. Students do not feel a sense of care and acceptance by staff. Students report that an overwhelming percentage of their parents are

uninvolved, and many reports seeing or experiencing bullying incidents. Another upsetting data point was students feeling unsafe in specific areas in the school.

Disaggregating the data provides specific details in each of the main themes to help alleviate the hurdles students use to miss school.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Actions, and Implications

This chapter focuses on the actions and implications of the data obtained from the sixth, seventh and eighth-grade students at Rural #5035 Middle School. The statistics for each domain of the student voice survey allowed the researcher to understand better how the students viewed their relationships with faculty and staff, parental engagement participation, and school safety. Actions, recommendations, and implications will be discussed so school and district leadership gain insight and understanding into improving the school climate and culture, thus positively impacting the student's attendance, and reducing chronic absenteeism.

Summary of Findings

The student voice survey data and personal interview results demonstrated there are issues within the climate and culture of Rural #5035 Middle School, which ultimately lead to barriers and obstacles that are the leading causes of chronic absenteeism. Whether their absences are excused or unexcused, chronic absenteeism is one of the leading causes of students being at risk academically. Instructional leaders across the nation have become data-driven decision-makers and must utilize attendance data the same way as academic data.

Parental engagement will positively impact student academic performance and school attendance. Awareness and communication are essential, so schools must intentionally ensure that parents are vital participants within the school community. Understanding that personal experiences keep parents from engaging, school

administrators must be willing to reach out to parents and plug them into the school community by utilizing their strengths.

Teacher-Student Relationship

Within the domain of teacher-student relationships, the overall student body presents the idea that they have a great rapport with the faculty and staff of Rural #5035 Middle School. With 79.1% of the students reporting there is an adult in the building they can talk to if needed, there is evidence that students trust the faculty and are willing to confide in them should they need to do so. However, the student body reports that when they miss school, the teachers rarely ask how they are when they return to school. This type of reaction from staff creates a disconnect between staff and students, providing another motive to miss school. School leadership must emphasize the importance of building rapport with students and noticing when students are absent and letting them know they miss them when they are gone.

Suppose teachers do not mention missing a student or asking a student how they feel when they return. In that case, they are displaying an impression that demonstrates a lack of empathy and perception of disengagement from their students' lives—creating solid connections within a school community work to alleviate some of the anxiety within the middle school setting. Teacher-student conversations about life interests, activities, or needs help foster an environment where students are not afraid to divulge personal information to staff should a problem arise.

As district and school leaders grapple with solving the climate and culture issues that impact student absenteeism, they must ultimately understand that the

disconnectedness between stakeholders and teenage anxiety or bullying are justifications for why students miss school. When students and staff are working towards the same mission and vision for the school, they create an opportunity where the school environment is desirable for all stakeholders.

Purposeful conversations and a feeling of acceptance provide students with the craving to be successful for their teachers and school. Research proved that COVID-19 significantly impacted students' attendance, so now is the time for faculty and staff to utilize relationship-building skills to help "re-engage students by helping them feel connected to the classroom environment and help them move from absent to present" (Shelby & Porter, 2021, p. 77). Allowing students to ask for items and share stories within classrooms provides a sense of community and an opportunity for everyone to share and learn about each other. Companionship and unity will create a sense of belongingness for everyone.

Parent Engagement

Once school leaders and staff understand the importance of the teacher-student relationship and have implemented processes and procedures to build those contacts, the next area of focus must be parent engagement. As students progress throughout their education, many parents become less involved in their child's education, hoping their student learns responsibility or is just less interested in how they are performing. Marzano Research Labs reported that strong relationships between teachers and students positively affect their academic success (Best, 2020). With solid relationships comes improved attendance and a connection where students

feel a contributing factor within the school community. Ultimately teachers and school administrators must create an environment of "trust and mutual respect" (Best, 2020).

To build the kind of relationships that are desirable for a thriving school climate and culture, Patrick et al. (2021) discuss the five best practices in fostering relationships as "expressing care, challenging the growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities" (p. 3). These practices allow each set of stakeholders to create a sense of trust and rapport where difficult conversations can happen and allow for growth academically and personally. Ultimately, the safety net created will enhance the climate and culture. The more adults within the school setting who interact with students in positive and engaging discussions daily will begin to nurture the bond needed for solid relationships.

Brannon (2007) discusses how "parent involvement greatly declines as children complete elementary school," which is supported by the data Merlin (2021) presented, showing the overwhelming decline of parent involvement from elementary to middle and high school. This rural Kentucky school district is not exempt from these same statistics. The overall student population and grade-level data show the decline of parental involvement as the students advance through middle school. Although most parents attend their child's sporting events, only 29% of the students report their parents volunteering to help at Rural #5035 Middle School. When there is a lack of engagement with parents and guardians, an environment is created where

individuals are uninformed, thus leading to another outlet for students to use as a crutch to miss school.

Most middle school principals report that parents are not involved because they believe their children do not want them to be around. However, this is not the case at all. Her report states that "kids wish their parents asked for more items and would be involved" (Brannon, 2007, p. 52). So, the critical task for administrators is to determine what needs to be addressed within their climate and culture to ensure that all parents and guardians feel they are vital members of the school community. With accountability and objectives outlined specifically for stakeholders, everyone understands what it will take to reach high standards. Establishing targeted group nights or activities will open up conversations between the school leadership and families. These lines of communication promote an environment where all stakeholders are striving to meet the vision and mission, and all stakeholders will prosper.

To ensure parents and guardians are immersed within the school community, school leaders must make sure there is a solid line of communication between home and the school. Ensuring parents are aware of activities in the school is vital to providing families with an opportunity to attend if so desired. School newsletters, social media outlets, and call-out systems (Brannon, 2007) help get the initial word out to all stakeholders. When the lines of communication with parents and guardians are opened, it is easier for school staff to have conversations when an issue arises. From struggling academically to behavioral issues, teachers who communicate openly

and transparently with parents create a link that provides an opportunity for positive or difficult conversations.

The data showed that parent involvement in the homes of Rural #5035 Middle School is significant. With 89% of the students reporting their parents are willing to help with homework and projects, parents are concerned about their student's academic performance. When families work on "reading, math, and science at home, students will show better attendance, reduced disruptive behavior, and higher academic performance" (Serum, 2019, p.16). Being engaged and involved in what is happening in their students' daily learning will enable parents to understand the school's academic, attendance, and behavior expectations. Parents are less likely to allow their students to miss school if they understand the importance of their child being present in school.

"Positive interactions between schools and parents support a child's social-emotional and cognitive development" (Lara & Saracossti, 2019, p. 1). Unfortunately, parents are unaware or unsure of the process of monitoring Infinite Campus to stay informed of their student's academic and attendance. This tool is vital information for parents to stay enlightened in school activities. Hosting parent nights where school-wide communication tools are reviewed, and parents can experience first-hand how to access the vital information is another avenue of exchange between the school and home.

Only 48% of the students reported that their families were notified by the school when they were absent. Knowledge is key. Rogers and Feller (2019) found

that parents firmly believed that the school was inaccurately reporting attendance on their child, and their child's attendance is comparable to their peers. The disengaged parents said that there was little or no notification from the schools that their child was absent, and they were not actively involved in their child's education (Rogers & Feller, 2019). If parents are unaware their child is absent from school, there is no accountability.

Utilizing the student information system, Rural #5035 Middle School can initiate a daily call-out for students absent from school. The School District of Philadelphia implemented an intervention system of notification to bring awareness to the parents regarding their child's attendance (Rogers & Feller, 2019). Through mailing letters and telephoning parents at various attendance targets, parents became more aware of their child's attendance, and schools saw a one percent decrease in their chronic absenteeism rate. In Kentucky, that one percent can lead to significant funding for schools. Keeping all stakeholders abreast of attendance expectations and issues is critical to decreasing chronic absenteeism.

Tackling the communication efforts is significant but finding out how to effectively plug parents into the school is also essential. There could be many underlying reasons parents are not involved in these activities, but negative past experiences or fear of lack of knowledge is often their excuse. Brannon (2021) discusses the fact that providing parents with an opportunity to learn "hands-on applications of what their students are learning" (p. 62) in class is an excellent way to pique interest in what is happening at school. When parents understand the lessons

and learning activities their children are experiencing, it allows them to talk with their children about their day and the learning taking place in classrooms.

Another contributing factor to chronic absenteeism is the growing number of students involved in the juvenile justice system. Fornander and Kearney (2019) indicate that uninvolved parents lead to more risky behavior by their children, thus leading to skipping school and clashes with law enforcement. Should Kentucky students find themselves in the juvenile justice system, they are offered the opportunity to participate in the three strikes you are out diversion program. This program, established within the Administrative Office of the Courts of Kentucky, provides a partnership between the three fundamental entities: school, parents, and courts.

These resources allow the gaps between schools and homes to be bridged and interaction between the most vital support network a student can have. Rupard et al. (2017) discuss how Senate Bill 200 completely revamped the Kentucky Juvenile Justice system and created diversion programs to help focus on attendance with the help of court-designated workers and the Family, Accountability, Intervention, and Response (FAIR) team. If targets are not met, repercussions will be enforced on students for their actions.

Although only eight percent of the student body reported that their parents allowed them to stay home 'if they wanted,' 23% reported being neutral on this topic. This type of response reflects parents' negativity towards education, directly reflecting their student's attitude toward education. One student conveyed, "My mom

does not care how I do in school as long as she does not have to come to school, and I pass for the year." This student displayed this same attitude in the interview, and he even noted that he has been involved in numerous behavior incidents and barely scrapes by in academic performance.

This same student reported that "most of the adults in his life felt this way about him, including the teachers and school leaders." This reflection of adults' beliefs and opinions directly affects this student's entire educational experience. It is another reason why the connection between the school and home is such an essential answer to the educational success of many students. School personnel must find ways to associate with all types of families and plug them into the appropriate resources to create a successful partnership.

School Safety

School safety has become a prevalent issue within our nation's schools, and district and school leaders must promptly address any safety issue. Swift, immediate action is the first step leaders need to take to ensure all stakeholders feel safe. When school administrators address bullying situations head-on, it displays a perception of investment in the culture and creates an outlet for victims of bullying. Various types of bullying occur within our schools, but they all have the same effect. Students who are bullied begin to suffer mentally, socially, and academically.

According to research, most middle schoolers were bullied based on their "appearance, race or ethnicity" (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2019, p. 66). In the personal interviews conducted at Rural #5035 Middle School, it was prevalent that most of the

students were bullied because of their appearance. From body shaming to how a person dresses, students reported that they had seen kids picked on by others at Rural #5035 Middle School.

With strong relationships between staff, school, and home, students will be comfortable reporting bullying. Pacer (2022) reports that "41% of students believe that bullying will happen again even if reported." To ensure the school embraces a safe school climate, leadership must address such issues head-on and ensure that all parties know that bullying will not be tolerated. Student handbooks and rules should outline consequences and be reviewed with students periodically throughout the school year to remind them of their expectations.

Although Lara et al. (2017) reported that students would not report bullying situations because they are fearful of retaliation, Rural #5035 Middle School students feel comfortable reporting bullying and know how to handle bullying situations. Unfortunately, 32% of the students believe bullying is a problem at Rural #5035 Middle School and 27% report that they have experienced cyberbullying.

According to the CDC, cyberbullying has the highest rate among middle schoolers, followed by high schoolers (Pacer, 2022). From violence to false rumors, 90% of students interviewed reported that they have experienced or know someone who has experienced cyberbullying in the interview process. With students experiencing emotions of "teasing, taunting and name-calling" (Burnham & Wright, 2011, p. 4), administrators cannot sit idle when dealing with bullying situations.

The increasing amount of bullying situations is concerning for students, parents, and staff. Hase et al. (2015) discuss that males report more bullying incidents nationally than females. Although this statistic is characteristic of the reports of Rural #5035 Middle School, 50% of the girls interviewed report they have been bullied. The impact this has on students' mental health is significant and can lead to motives for students not wanting to come to school. The males report that their entire cyberbullying incidents occur through gaming systems, while females report most of their bullying occurs within social media sites.

During the interviews, 43% of the students reported they had experienced bullying at school, while 50% reported experiencing cyberbullying. These large numbers reveal that bullying is impacting the climate and culture of Rural #5035 Middle School. Mischel and Kitsantas (2018) affirm that "if a student is being bullied, they will most likely view the school climate as negative" (p. 53). When bullying behavior goes unaddressed, the school climate and culture and all stakeholders are affected. School leaders must create an atmosphere where all stakeholders understand that aggressive and bullying behavior will not be tolerated.

First and foremost, school leadership must communicate a system of support and advocacy for zero tolerance of bullying. Creating a network of corroboration within the school will promote the defense of the victims. "Teachers and peers are the main support systems available for middle school students" (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2018, p. 53). An environment where bullied students feel defended by their friends and teachers will positively affect the mental and physical well-being of the child.

Bullies are less likely to act when they do not feel authenticated. When students who experience bullying feel championed within the school environment, they do not look for reasons to miss school.

A parent's reaction to a bullying situation can impact a student's mental well-being. Harcourt et al. (2014) explain that "students who receive a high level of support from their parents display a lower level of depression symptoms" (p. 375). Whether their student is the victim or the offender, parents are an important influence in eliminating bullying in our schools. As with any program, awareness and understanding are the first steps to successful implementation. Offering parent nights where parents receive guidance on identifying, dealing with, and reporting bullying correctly provides a pathway to creating a team approach to tackling this growing issue.

Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018) discuss how limited research shows there is no significant support for a whole school bullying program but a curriculum that focuses on peer groups. This program focuses not only on the victims of bullying but also on the bullies and their friends' groups. According to Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018), bullies surround themselves with peers who mimic or support their actions. Breaking up these clusters of students in classroom and school settings will lead to fewer exchanges between the groups. School leaders who eliminate opportunities for bullies to be supported and provide opportunities for students to form their personal beliefs create an atmosphere of no tolerance for bullying.

Creating various learning groups within classroom and school settings provides opportunities for teachers and students to work collaboratively with various peers. The intentional planning by school personnel can alleviate those situations where bullies and their supporters feel empowered. Schools often track or group students based on academic abilities in middle school settings., so leveling students based on academics is critical and can be positive or detrimental. Their mental health and well-being are also crucial in the formative years of middle school.

Since "cooperative learning activities had a significant effect on bullying students' experiences" (Van Ryzing & Roseth, 2018, p. 1198), teachers need to utilize this tool in their classrooms to help expand students' knowledge academically and socially. The ultimate goal of school personnel must be to decrease bullying in all settings within the school, so being proactive and planning cooperative learning activities daily is an excellent way to expand the social aspect of learning within the school setting.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Limitations

All research projects have limitations that can be questioned. With this project, the answers to the student voice survey from the entire student body are one area of limitation. The neutral responses in the student voice survey provide an unclear response on how the student truly feels about the item in question. This response could mean they do not want to give their true feelings on the item, or the student does not know how to answer the question.

A high number of neutral responses implies that students have no real feelings about the item. With 36.4% of the student body's reflection on relationships, many students do not know how to express their feelings about a personal connection with teachers. The data point of 33.4% of students reporting a neutral response to the question of their parents receiving notification when they do something great is concerning. There is an apparent communication breakdown, but it is challenging to determine where it occurs. Parental failure to share with their students when notification is received from teachers or school or staff is neglecting to call parents for positive purposes are just two options. In the school safety domain, 200 students responded to areas in the school where they did not feel safe. Either these students do not know about the areas of the school others view as unsafe, or they do not feel safe reporting their actual responses to this statement.

Another limitation present within this study is that the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were excited to be returning to in-person learning and reported fewer issues when dealing with friend drama. If this same research project had been conducted before the pandemic, the statistics on bullying and friend drama keeping them from school would have been drastically different. Excited to be back to some normalcy, the students did not seem to report the issues of bullying and peer-to-peer drama accurately.

The definition of parental expectations is an additional limitation for this project. With students unsure of the proper designation of parental engagement, it is difficult for the researcher to determine if there are high academic and behavior

expectations in the home. Simply checking a student's Infinite Campus weekly or helping with homework or a project does not establish high expectations for the family.

Delimitations

The delimitations within this research project fall within the interview process of the research. Although the entire population was surveyed originally through the student voice survey, only 30 students were personally interviewed. These thirty students were hand-picked by the school administration due to turmoil that was created earlier in the school year with a state survey conducted within the school district.

With parents being resistant to students providing information to the school, school leaders were hesitant for researchers to interview students whose parents would not consent to the interview process. Limited access to a small number of hand-picked students for the interview provided limitations that could be considered biased towards a more favorable opinion of the school climate and culture. Although the researcher feels an accurate view of the school was portrayed by those interviewed, some responses provided in the interviews may be viewed as more positive because school leaders chose them.

Assumptions

Assumptions are routinely made in research, and the prevalent assumption in this study is the truthfulness of the student body in the student voice survey. With the significantly large number of positive answers from the student sample size, there are

contradictory data from the personal interviews that question the validity of the students' responses. Students may not have answered truthfully for fear their answers would be tracked back to them by the school administration. Another area of concern was student honesty regarding the teachers they interact with daily. Fearful, their teachers will see their responses and punish them; students may not have answered the items openly and honestly. Lastly, students could have possibly skewed their responses to be more favorable to help prevent negative reflections on their family or themselves.

Recommendations

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2016) reports that students who are chronically absent during their middle and high school years are seven times more likely to drop out of school, and students who "fear violence or bullying are at risk for chronic absenteeism" (p. 3). Approximately 20% of the student body reported there were areas in the school where they felt unsafe. However, 73% of the students interviewed said there were definite areas in the school they viewed as unsafe. Bathrooms, hallways, and locker rooms seem to be significant areas of concern for students. Students are fearful of violence or being associated with illegal activity in those unsupervised locations within the school.

As with any school setting, supervision is vital to ensure that everyone is safe. Students are less likely to act out or participate in risky behavior when adults are present within the unstructured areas of the school. Restrooms and locker rooms are areas within the school environment where adults must be present to ensure

stakeholders' safety. Bliesner and Arms (2022) refer to these areas as "specific supervision areas." These areas are where staff is aware that students can be harmed, so it is crucial that they are present and always observing.

Students reporting that these areas are a safety issue for them is something that school leaders must concentrate on when dealing with the safety aspect of the school climate and culture. Although most of the focus on school safety is centered around bullying and active shooter training, physical safety will be enhanced when the staff is present in those unstructured areas. Visibility creates mutual trust and rapport between students and staff.

The student voice survey and the interview process provided insight and understanding into the issues leading to the increase in absenteeism at Rural #5035 Middle School. Although the students report there are adults in the building they can turn to, there are issues present within Rural #5035 Middle School that create a sense of disconnectedness. The feeling of being unaccepted by staff or peers creates an outlet for students not to want to attend school. Creating engaging classroom environments and forging relationships between staff and students will promote a sense of belonging and a desire to be present and accounted for at Rural #5035 Middle School.

Communicating is essential when schools want to ensure they are building a school climate and culture where parents are significant members of the school community. Ensuring parents are aware of attendance expectations, how to access the student information system, and participate in nights where academic and school-

wide programs are reviewed and explained. With an open-door policy, schools allow parents and guardians to submerge themselves within the school community.

Transparency and interaction between the school and home build a successful partnership for students' attendance and academics.

Bullying, cyberbullying and school safety significantly influence stakeholders' perspectives of the school climate and culture. When students face bullying within the school setting, their desire to attend school drops significantly. Cyberbullying has created another harassing element for students and becomes more prominent as students progress through middle school. Although complex to discipline, schools providing resources to combat bullying and cyberbullying equips all stakeholders in how to handle these situations and help address the mental health of students.

With school safety always at the forefront of stakeholders' minds, it is critical that students feel protected no matter where they are at Rural #5035 Middle School. With proper supervision and strong relationships, school leadership provides students with a sense of protection and reassurance for all stakeholders. Quick response to bullying and safety promotes a zero-tolerance attitude for students and staff when all stakeholders are driven to create an environment where all are accepted no matter race, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation.

With chronic absenteeism increasing nationally, school leaders must identify the underlying issues causing the accumulating absences. In eastern Kentucky, school districts continue to report an excessive amount of chronically absent students, and Rural #5035 Middle School is no different. These absences are not only negatively

affecting the district's funding, but it is significantly hindering students' academic achievement. Educational leaders must create a school culture that generates a desire for students to be present and engaged in the school environment, parents to be active participants within the school community, and all stakeholders safe and confident when in attendance.

Next Steps

Through the disaggregation of the data from the student voice survey and the personal interviews, Rural #5035 Middle School would benefit from integrating a program that supports relationship building, parental engagement, and school safety needs while focusing on social-emotional well-being of the student. Implementing a program that connects student to student, student to staff, student to family, and student to community partners will foster a culture where all stakeholders are held accountable and feel a sense of belonging.

With a comprehensive program in place, the staff will support students to feel physically and emotionally safe and supported in an environment that empowers them to thrive in difficulties and hardships. The program will be embedded with an evidenced-based practice curriculum that focuses on student success and improved social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes at all levels while integrating the parents into their child's education and the school community.

In collaboration with the curriculum, a "calming space" classroom will be created for students experiencing anxieties, which leads to absences. This self-calming room will provide students with a place to report when their anxiety levels

begin to escalate. Using an evidence-based curriculum, the classroom staff would be trained to help the students work through those anxieties while keeping them in school. This safe environment will offer an intervention system for at-risk students who fall into the category of chronically absent. Addressing their attendance through this classroom while challenging them to apply the skills from their learning to situations within the school climate and culture will help them be successful in relationship building and academic achievement.

Reflection

With absences growing daily, leadership at all levels is faced with how to solve the problem of chronic absenteeism. Rural #5035 Middle Schools has an excessive amount of chronically absent students, and the COVID-19 pandemic has just escalated that issue immensely. Chronic absenteeism is not only hurting the school's funding, but it is significantly impacting students' academic achievement. School administrators need to examine the barriers identified from the student voice survey and develop an action plan to address the excessive number of absences students are accumulating.

The data of the student voice survey identified specific concerns in the areas of teacher-student relationships, parent engagement, and school safety. If the concerns for each domain are addressed and corrected, the school climate and culture will flourish, helping all stakeholders feel valued, engaged, and protected. Parental support and engagement will promote positivity within the community and help their child succeed academically. School safety can encompass many aspects of the school

environment but ultimately impact the whole student. From physically safe to social-emotional well-being, every stakeholder's true dream is a school environment that meets their needs.

Conclusion

Does the perfect school exist? No. However, school administrators will encounter a win-win situation if they address the climate and cultural barriers leading to chronic absenteeism. Being a proactive leader can be challenging, but in the end, the school and students benefit immensely. The researcher hoped school leaders would understand the significance of listening to stakeholders' voices through this project. These important voices provide the insight needed to remove the attendance barriers and improve the school climate and culture. Teacher-student relationships, parental engagement, and school safety are prevalent themes in schools nationwide. With the correct data, school leaders can be proactive and plan accordingly to ensure their school exhibits a culture that cultivates strong relationships, engaged parents, and a sense of security for all stakeholders.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What makes your favorite teacher special?
2. How do you know you are doing well or failing in a class?
3. Do you feel like you belong at Rural #5035 Middle Schools?
4. Is there one specific person you can go to with a problem here at school? Why them?
5. What makes you feel welcome at RURAL #5035 MIDDLE SCHOOL ?
6. Do your parents check your homework nightly?
7. Are your parents involved in activities with the school? Attend events?
8. Have your teachers contacted your parents this year?
9. Do you and your parents use Infinite Campus?
10. Are you allowed to stay home from school if you want?
11. What areas do you think students feel unsafe in here at school?
12. Have you experienced bullying? Seen bullying?
13. Have you experienced cyberbullying? Seen cyberbullying?
14. Do you think discipline is fair for everyone?
15. Do you ever feel unsafe here at school?

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