Improving Student Attendance With School, Family, and Community Partnerships

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ABSTRACT Researchers and policy makers have questioned the efficacy of family-involvement interventions. They believe that more studies are needed to compare outcomes of students whose families received a partnership intervention with those who did not. The author used data from the state of Ohio to compare student attendance in elementary schools that developed school-wide programs of school, family, and community partnerships with the attendance of students in schools that did not develop the programs. Analyses showed that in schools working to implement school, family, and community partnerships, student attendance improved an average of .5%, whereas in comparison schools, rates of student attendance declined slightly from 1 year to the next. Further analysis suggested that school outreach to families was the driving mechanism that caused this effect. Keywords: improving student attendance; school, family, and community partnerships; school-wide approach

In the present education climate, policy makers have placed a heavy emphasis on getting more children to pass or score proficiently on standardized tests. That attention to test taking can be attributed, at least partially, to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which places sanctions on schools with chronic student failure and poor achievement-test results. Although the NCLB spotlight has shined brightest on standardized testing, NCLB also holds schools accountable for high levels of student attendance. The latter benchmark of school performance, however, has received far less attention from educators and researchers.

In this study, I focus on student attendance in elementary schools as the primary outcome, by using a quasi-experimental design to identify factors that help explain changes in average daily attendance from 1 year to the next. Of particular interest is whether schools that implemented a school-wide program of school, family, and community partnerships demonstrated increased student attendance, compared with similar schools that were not using this approach.

Importance of Attendance

Researchers have demonstrated important correlations between student attendance and academic success. They also have found that students with better attendance than their classmates exhibit superior performance on standardized achievement tests (Lamdin, 1996; Nicholes, 2003) and that schools with higher rates of daily attendance tend to generate students who perform better on achievement tests than do schools with lower daily attendance rates (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Rees, & Ehrenberg, 1991; Roby, 2004). Also, high rates of student absenteeism are associated with increased risk of students dropping out of school (Rumberger, 1995;

Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). In many cases, attendance patterns as early as elementary school have differentiated dropouts from graduates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992).

Researchers also found that when students attend school more often, they are less likely to engage in delinquent or destructive behaviors. Wang, Blomberg, and Li (2005) compared a sample of delinquent students to a matched sample of nondelinquent students and found that, after controlling for various individual and school factors, poor student attendance was among the characteristics that discriminated the two groups. In addition, missing school has been associated with negative and risky student behaviors, such as tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drug use (Hallfors et al., 2002). Keeping students in class may help protect them from engaging in delinquent behaviors and facilitate learning through increased exposure to instruction.

Despite the evidence demonstrating the important association between school attendance and students' academic and behavioral outcomes, researchers have examined few interventions for effects on student attendance. Programs that were associated with improved student attendance include (a) creating smaller schools or learning communities (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998), (b) connecting students to school business partners (Scales et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), and (c) increasing school-home communications (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Helm & Burkett, 1989).

Partnerships for Improving Attendance

In most schools, efforts to include family and community members in students' education tend to be uncoordinated, and teacher outreach to families is often conducted with little or no support from the school community. Also, because educators receive little or no formal training in establishing school, family, and community partnerships, these types of practices tend to be based on trial and error, rather than as part of an organized strategy to help meet student goals (Epstein, 2001, 2005; Shumow & Harris, 2000). The result is that some families are likely to have more positive home- school relationships than others, depending on the parents' own initiative or the particular teachers to whom students are assigned.

The existing inequity in family and community involvement matters for students. Researchers have established that those contexts have significant influences on students' school outcomes. In their review of studies on family involvement, Henderson and Mapp (2002) concluded, "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: Families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life" (p. 7). Researchers also show that children having parents who (a) provide high expectations and aspirations, (b) help with and check their children's homework, (c) attend school Parent-Teacher Association and Parent-Teacher Organization meetings, and (d) talk with their children about school tend to have higher grades, superior performance on achievement tests, and lower levels of truancy and absenteeism than do children without such parents (Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; McNeal, 1999; Muller, 1993). The more that family members engage in their children's education, the more likely that these students will navigate school successfully.

Several factors influence the extent to which family members are involved in students' education. Among the factors are parent beliefs, family socioeconomic status, and parents' own childhood experiences (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lareau, 2000; Sheldon, 2002; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). In addition, schools and teachers can have a powerful influence on family involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Van Voorhis, 2003). Clearly, schools can influence, and should take responsibility for, increasing family and community involvement in students' schooling.

The National Network of Partnership Schools Program

I examined whether implementing the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) program affected student attendance in schools located across Ohio. Membership in NNPS is open to all schools and is renewed annually through the completion and return of an end-of-year survey (UPDATE). As members of NNPS, schools receive tools and guidelines for establishing, maintaining, and improving school-wide partnership programs that reach out to the families of all students.

The guidance that NNPS provides to schools is based on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence and a framework of six types of involvement (Epstein, 2001). The author argued that schools, families, and communities are important contexts for children's learning and that greater coordination among these environments benefits children's education and development. Furthermore, actions by school personnel, parents, students, and community members can reduce or increase the dissonance between and among these environments. Schools join NNPS to reach out to all families and to develop stronger connections among the home, school, and community contexts.

NNPS members advocate that school action teams use Epstein's (2001) framework of six types of involvement to create comprehensive school, family, and community partnerships linked to specific school- improvement goals (Epstein, 2001; Epstein, et al., 2002). Schools should conduct partnership activities for each type of involvement: (a) parenting-helping all families establish supportive home environments for children; (b) communicating-establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress; (c) volunteering-recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or other locations; (d) learning at home-providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials; (e) decision making-having family members serve as representatives and leaders on school committees; and (f) collaborating with the community-identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs.

NNPS also asks action teams to confront challenges associated with involving families in their children's education. Because research shows that variation exists in the involvement of parents according to (a) education level of the child, (b) educational attainment of the parents, and (c) family structure (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Lareau, 2000), NNPS encourages schools to examine their partnership practices and to assess the degree to which they reach out to all the families of their students. For example, schools are expected to (a) provide families from all racial and ethnic and education backgrounds with information in words and forms that they understand, (b) offer volunteer opportunities for parents to help at school and in other locations, and (c) include parent representatives from all groups on school decision-making boards and committees (Epstein et al., 2002). By addressing those and other challenges, schools can help create greater equity in family involvement among their students. As a first step in establishing a partnership program, schools must form an action team for partnership (ATP). The ATP members include teachers, school administrators, parents, community members, and, at the high school level, students. The ATP is responsible for organizing and implementing each school's involvement activities. Moreover, the school ATP is encouraged to link family- and community involvement activities to specific goals, consistent with and supportive of those set by the school improvement team or school council. Establishing an ATP with the same goals as the school-improvement team allows partnership activities to work with other programs at the school.

Researchers have connected measures of program quality with various family and student outcomes. Schools with higher quality partnership programs report greater parent volunteerism and attendance at school events,

more parents involved in the decision- making process, and more widespread use of homework that requires student-parent interaction than do schools with lower quality programs (Sheldon, 2005; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). Also, schools in which the partnership program improved from 1 year to the next reported declines in the rates of disciplinary actions for students (e.g., fewer students sent to the principal's office and fewer detentions and suspensions; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Finally, elementary schools in the NNPS with greater family and community outreach had higher percentages of students passing standardized achievement tests than did nonparticipating elementary schools (Sheldon, 2003). The results of those studies suggest that the development of strong partnership programs in schools can affect academic and nonacademic outcomes.

Most of the studies involving NNPS schools have included correlational data and longitudinal research designs, indicating whether better implementation of school, family, and community partnership activities was associated with improved student outcomes. Such studies, although important and instructive, cannot determine conclusively whether implementation of the NNPS program helps improve student outcomes; more rigorous studies employing comparative designs are needed.

Method

Sample and Procedure

I compared schools in the NNPS during the 2000-2001 school year1 with a matched sample of schools that did not implement the NNPS model. Both groups of schools were located in Ohio. The UPDATE survey required by NNPS requests that the school action team reports on characteristics of their partnership program, such as school- wide support for the program, action team organization and membership, and implementation of involvement activities.

I also obtained data from the Ohio State Department of Education Web site for all elementary schools in Ohio (N = 1,942). These data include (a) percentage of fourth-grade students who passed mathematics-achievement tests in 2000, (b) percentage of fourth- grade students who passed reading-achievement tests in 2000, (c) number of students enrolled at the school in 2001, (d) average daily attendance at the school in 2000, and (e) funding allocations for the 2001 school year.

Ideally, researchers studying the effects of school, family, and community partnership programs on student attendance would use random assignment of schools to NNPS. Because random assignment was not possible, however, finding a matching sample of schools provides an important alternative for controlling important school differences and for testing effects of the NNPS program on students. In this case, I identified a sample of schools that was equivalent, to the extent possible, to the NNPS schools in terms of student achievement in mathematics and reading in 2000, student enrollment in 2001, and student attendance in 2000.

NNPS sample. Seventy-six elementary schools were NNPS members in 2001; however, UPDATE and Ohio data were available for only 69 elementary schools. The NNPS elementary schools were located in varied settings, including large urban (29.4%), small urban (23.5%), suburban (23.5%), and rural (23.5%) communities. The schools served many students from low-income families. Most of the schools (80.9%) received either targeted or school-wide Title I funding. The NNPS schools served a student population that was, on average, 69.9% White, 24.8% African American, and 5.4% Hispanic. The schools had been members of NNPS an average of 3 to 4 years (3.7 years); the range was from 1 to 5 years.

Control sample. I identified a matched sample of 69 non NNPS schools by using a statistical program that

examined data from the remaining (non-NNPS) Ohio schools (n = 1,866). The program matched each NNPS school with a non-NNPS school with the use of (a) student performance on mathematics and reading achievement tests in 2000, (b) student enrollment at the school in 2001, and (c) average daily attendance at the school in 2000. The program employed an iterative process to determine the best match for each school on those characteristics.

Finally, because Ohio offered limited information on the schools, I used Common Core Data (CCD) to obtain additional background data on the NNPS and comparison schools. CCD provided additional information, including the schools' racial composition, percentage of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches, Title I status, and pupil-teacher ratio.

Data

Dependent Variables

Student daily attendance. I obtained data for each school from the state of Ohio on the average daily attendance rates for the 2000 and 2001 school years.

Independent Variables

School-funding allocation. For each school, the state of Ohio provided the percentage of total per-pupil funding in 2001, allocated to instruction, building operations, administration, pupil support, and staff support.

Title I status. I used CCD to identify schools that received Title I funding. I coded schools receiving Title I funding as "1," and those not receive funding as "2."

Pupil-teacher ratio. CCD provided information on the number of students at a school for each full-time equivalent teacher.

Overall partnership program quality. Schools in NNPS reported on the overall quality of their partnership program in 2001, on a single item requesting that respondents rate their program as (1) in a planning year, (2) a start-up program, (3) a fair or average program, (4) a good program, (5) a very good program, or (6) an excellent program. Accompanying each rating was an in-depth portrait of the way that a school at that level would describe itself.

Program organization. NNPS schools reported the degree to which the program of school, family, and community partnerships was implemented at the school during the 2001 school year. That measure was the sum of 14 yes (1) or no (0) items (a = .79) on aspects of program organization. Items included, "We have an Action Team for School, Family, and Community Partnerships with 6 or more members,""We wrote a One-Year Action Plan for partnerships for the 2000-01 school year," and "We identified a budget to implement activities to involve families." Higher scores on the variable indicated that the schools' ATPs, guided by NNPS, carried out additional activities to set up the organization and structures needed to involve families and communities in students' learning.

Program outreach. NNPS schools reported the degree to which their programs met eight challenges to family and community involvement in the 2001 school year. ATP members rated the extent to which they were working to involve all families and the community on a 4 point, Likert-type scale, ranging from (0) not working on this to (3) solved this challenge. Items included, "Get information from workshops or meetings to all families who could

not attend,’"Communicate clearly with ALL families, including those who do not read or speak English well,” and “Ensure that all major groups of families are involved in the decision-making process with representatives on school committees.” I used the average of the eight items (alpha = .76) in the scale.

Results

Analyses comparing NNPS elementary schools to all elementary schools in Ohio indicated that the two groups were similar with respect to student performance on standardized tests and student attendance. Similarly, independent sample t test analyses suggested that the program creating a matched sample of elementary schools was largely successful. The NNPS and comparison groups were statistically no different from one another on prior reading or mathematics achievement or on school size. Schools in NNPS, however, had slightly lower rates of daily student attendance in 2000 than did schools in the comparison groups, t(136) = 2.055, p

A comparison of the NNPS and non-NNPS schools on other factors suggested that the two groups were similar in many other aspects (Table 1). Both groups spent approximately the same percentage of their total per-pupil budget on instruction, building operations, administration, and staff support. In addition, NNPS and comparison schools were equally likely to receive Title I funds. Some differences, however, existed between NNPS and non-NNPS samples. NNPS schools tended to have higher percentages of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches, 49.64% versus 39.75%, t(120) = 2.26, p

Also, comparison schools spent a greater percentage of their total budget on pupil support than did NNPS schools, t(136) = – 2.87, p

Zero-order correlations (see Table 2) confirmed the comparisons of NNPS and non-NNPS schools and indicated that the average daily attendance for these elementary schools tended to remain stable from 1 year to the next. Schools with high rates of daily student attendance in 2000 likely had high rates of attendance in 2001 (r = .808, p

Schools with a greater percentage of funds spent on pupil support in 2001 tended to have higher rates of daily student attendance in 2001 (r = .163, p

Table 2 also shows that many of the variables from the CCD correlated with student attendance. Schools with higher percentages of White students tended to have higher levels of student attendance in 2000 (r = .568, p

Effects of Partnership Programs on Student Outcomes

I conducted multiple-regression analyses to explore the effect of schools implementing the NNPS partnership model on student attendance in 2001, and change in rates of student attendance from 2000 to 2001 (see Table 3). Because the matching program created an equivalent sample of schools regarding student achievement and school size, I did not include the variables as covariates.

The regression analyses indicated that, after controlling for prior attendance, racial composition of the school, Title I status, per-pupil spending, and pupil-teacher ratio, schools implementing the NNPS partnership program had higher levels of student attendance than did the matched sample schools that were not NNPS members.2 Model 3 on Table 3 shows that schools with higher daily attendance in 2000 had higher attendance in 2001 (ss = .857, p

Regression models predicting change in students’ daily attendance from 2000 to 2001 show that NNPS schools

experienced greater improvement in student attendance during that period than did the comparison group of schools. Model C explained 53% of the variance of change in attendance, and, as expected, shows a similar pattern of results to the previous regression models. Model C illustrates that schools with higher student attendance in 2000 tended to experience less change in attendance (ss = – .649, p

I calculated effect sizes to clarify the degree to which being an NNPS school affected daily student attendance. The appropriate effect-size statistic for hierarchical multiple-regression analyses, such as those presented in this article, is Cohen's f2 . The statistic is derived by dividing the difference between the explained variance of Models 2 and 3 by 1 minus the variance of Model 3. The 2.5% increase in explained variation of daily attendance in 2001 attributable to NNPS membership resulted in an effect-size coefficient of .079. Similarly, the 3.2% increase in explained variation of change in daily attendance resulted in an effect size of .068. According to Cohen (1988), f2 coefficients of .02 represent small effects, and coefficients of .15 represent medium effects. Being a member of NNPS had a small-to-medium effect on daily student attendance in this study.

Partnership Implementation Effects on Student Attendance

Because the NNPS program was associated with improved rates of daily student attendance, I conducted further analyses with the NNPS sample to explore whether particular partnership program characteristics contributed to the gains in observed student attendance (see Table 4). Those models used program-quality indicators to predict change in student attendance from 2000 to 2001, controlling for prior rates of attendance (2000), Title I status, percentage of White students at a school, and the pupil- teacher ratio. In addition, I included the variable of whether the school had been in NNPS for more than 3 years in these models to test whether working on school, family, and community partnerships longer had an effect on rates of student attendance.

Table 4 (Model 2) shows that schools with stronger programs of school, family, and community partnerships, overall, were more likely than were schools with weaker programs to experience an increase in student attendance. After controlling for all covariates, schools with stronger overall partnership programs during the 2001 school year had significantly greater increases in student attendance than did schools with weaker partnership programs (ss = 205, p

Earlier studies of the NNPS program suggest that overall program quality is likely the combination of program organization and program outreach (Sheldon, 2002, 2005). In this study, overall program quality was related significantly to program organization and program outreach (r = .395, p

Table 4 (Model 3) shows that the more schools worked to reach out and involve all of their families in children's education, the more likely they were to experience an increase in student attendance. The analyses show that, after controlling for prior levels of attendance, Title 1 status, percentage of students who were White, and time in the network, schools that conducted more activities during the 2001 school year to help families overcome challenges that make involvement difficult had significantly greater increases in student attendance than did schools that were not working to help families overcome these challenges (ss = 204, p

Discussion and Summary

This study contributes to family-involvement research by extending an understanding about student effects of school, family, and community partnerships and by improving the methods that researchers may use to study these effects. By comparing NNPS schools to a set of schools matched on prior achievement-test performance

and school size, and by controlling for prior attendance and other important school characteristics, I provided evidence that strong implementation of a school, family, and community partnership program can benefit students. From 1 year to the next, elementary schools in which teachers, parents, and administrators organized teams, planned family and community-involvement activities linked to school goals, and reached out to involve all families reported a significant increase in the percentage of students attending class, compared with similar schools that were not conducting these activities. The finding that school, family, and community partnership programs were associated with improved student attendance has important implications. By helping students maintain or improve regular attendance in the elementary grades, schools implementing a school-wide approach to family and community involvement may help students perform better on standardized achievement tests, decrease the likelihood of students dropping out of school, and reduce the likelihood that students use tobacco, alcohol, or illegal drugs. Schools should incorporate mechanisms to develop strong connections with students' home and community into their organizational structure.

Simply creating the basic structures for organizing school-home- community relationships, however, may not be sufficient to improve student attendance. In the extended analyses, I showed that the quality with which schools implemented the NNPS program was associated significantly with changes in student attendance over time. Of particular importance was the effort of the school action team to address challenges to parent involvement and to reach out to all families at the school. The fact that I did not find a significant relationship between the length of time in NNPS and student attendance suggests that high-quality implementation of family and community involvement programs can have immediate payoffs regarding attendance.

In addition to the contribution that this study makes to the literature on the effects of school, family, and community partnerships, it also extends the field methodologically. After reviewing parent-involvement intervention studies, Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) concluded that the majority of studies they reviewed had "weak evaluation design" (p. 568). Those authors, along with others who have reviewed family- involvement studies (Boethel, 2003; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), called for more studies of partnership interventions in which researchers used matched comparison groups that include pre- and postde-signs. In this study, I begin to address those appeals by demonstrating how researchers and evaluators may make use of publicly available data and Internet technology to identify matched samples for research on large-scale interventions.

Although I provided evidence of significant effects of school, family, and community partnerships on student attendance, these effects were not large. Calculation of effect sizes suggested that school-wide partnership programs may have a small-to-moderate effect on student attendance. Certainly, factors such as high-quality teaching, positive student-teacher relationships, and a safe and engaging school climate also could affect student attendance. Nevertheless, given the improved methodology over most research on the effects of school, family, and community partnerships, the effects that I found in this study suggest that these partnerships can have a valid effect on student attendance.

Researchers would benefit from having more information about the specific activities that schools implement to involve families and community members. That information might better explain why the implementation of the NNPS partnership model had an effect on attendance. It is possible, for example, that school action teams implemented partnership activities to improve school climate and to increase family involvement generally. Those types of activities might make school more pleasing and inviting for students and families, thereby encouraging more regular attendance.

Researchers also need information about the ways in which comparison schools work to involve families and community members in students' education. Given federal requirements for family involvement (NCLB, Sec. 1118) and the widespread support for parent involvement across school districts, the matched schools in this study likely were working to some extent to involve families in their children's education. Information about how that outreach compared with the outreach in NNPS schools would help assess the efficacy of the whole-school approach to partnerships advocated by NNPS.

Finally, studies of NNPS and the effects of family and community involvement would benefit from even larger samples of schools in the NNPS and comparison groups. If researchers examined more schools from Ohio, the results of this study would be more generalizable to the full set of schools in the state, as well as to elementary schools across the United States. Researchers also need to explore these questions about the effect of school-wide partnership programs with data from middle and high schools to determine the extent to which home-school connections affect adolescent attendance.

I suggest that elementary schools take greater responsibility for connecting with and involving family members in their students' schooling. The analyses showed that educators are more likely to perceive improvements in student attendance when they implement a guided approach to partnership program development. Of particular importance is the need for school personnel to reach out and connect with the full range of diverse families at the school. When school administrators and teachers make high-quality family and community involvement part of their overall school-improvement strategy, students are more likely attend school and increase their chances of succeeding academically.

NOTES

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1. Throughout the remainder of this article, I use only the spring semester year when I refer to school years. That is, 2000- 2001 is referred to as the 2001 school year.

2. I used Title I status as a covariate in the regression analyses rather than the percentages of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches because of the sizable amount of missing data with the latter variable. Also, the percentage of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches was correlated strongly with the racial composition of schools, raising concerns of collinearity.

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