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## Attendance Matters! A Policy Advocacy Document

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A THREE - PART DISSERTATION:

Part I: Do After-School Performing Arts Programs Impact Student Attendance?

Part II: Attendance Matters! We Must Decrease Student Truancy and Absenteeism.

Part III: Attendance Matters! A Policy Advocacy Document.

Robert Gabriel Hubbard

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

April 2019

A THREE - PART DISSERTATION:

Part I: Do After-School Performing Arts Programs Impact Student Attendance?

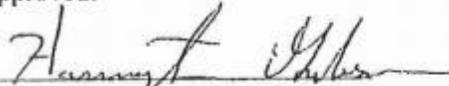
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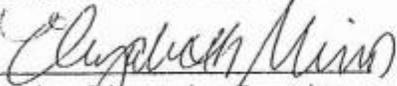
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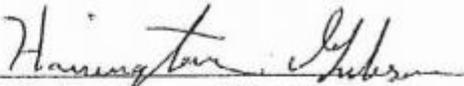
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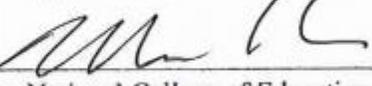
  
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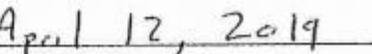
  
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## Document Origination Statement for Digital Commons @ NLU

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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## **ABSTRACT**

This three-part dissertation concentrates on student attendance. It is clear that we have a student attendance problem in our nation, particularly in urban school districts. There have been other studies, discussions, and debates on how to improve student attendance, but identifying a single policy, program, incentive, and/or intervention to positively impact absenteeism is difficult. Student absenteeism has and will continue to be a national problem. Many factors play a role in student attendance, to a certain degree, some are controllable and others are extremely difficult to affect.

This Part III of the dissertation is a Policy Advocacy for absenteeism at the local level. Reflecting on my experience as a student, teacher, and administrator, student attendance is key baseline data to a successful school. After a deep dive of district attendance policies, the recommendation is that school districts' attendance and truancy policies include supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. Additionally, that a district's retention policy includes recommendations for retention based on a combination of academic data and student attendance data.

The overarching challenge is for school districts to be able to proactively manage student attendance to ensure children are in school on a regular basis.

Creating a culture of collaboration for student attendance, shared responsibility, and trust are key to address our national student attendance crisis.

## **PREFACE**

As a minority male who attended public schools with low student attendance; and, more importantly, as a school leader, leveraging resources to combat low student attendance, it is extremely important to me to find effective practices that reduce absenteeism. As a child attending inner city public schools, my dream was not to be an educator, but to be a tax accountant. Numbers were and continue to be my passion. In order to make some extra money in undergraduate school, I started to tutor students for the SAT and ACT. The passion that developed inside of me from help others learn was unmeasurable. I never wanted to be an educator, but somehow the calling to serve others was too loud for me to ignore.

As a servant leader in public education, it is my responsibility to provide all students with a quality education by moving teaching and learning forward. This three-part dissertation focuses on combating student absenteeism. In order to improve student attendance, my past experiences confirm that one must be able to explain the strength and the direction of the relationships between student attendance and the targeted incentives. I believe after-school performing arts programs are key to improving student attendance.

In 2012, I was selected as the principal of a low performing Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade school with unacceptable student attendance. I took what I had learned from the previous two schools I led and developed an action plan to transform the school into a high performing Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, & Mathematics (STEAM) school. Within three years, the school had seen significant double digit growth in their academic data, nearly a 5% increase in their student attendance data, and significant double digit decreases in the number of student infractions.

My past experiences as an administrator in schools with historically low student performance, low student attendance, high chronically truant students, and high absenteeism has shown me the importance of student attendance. People do not go to places that they do not like. If student attendance is low, then perhaps it is because students do not like the school or maybe because no one at the school has established a meaningful relationship with them or maybe those children are not being challenged academically. Regardless of the rationale, low student attendance plus high chronic truancy equals low student performance for a school district.

My professional journey has shown me that there is a positive correlation between student attendance and after-school performing arts programs. I conducted a program evaluation to test my hypothesis and yield research based to support my personal experiences.

Part I of this dissertation lays the groundwork to develop research-based data supporting a positive correlation between student attendance and after-school performing arts programs.

Part II of this dissertation uses Wagner's 4C's to develop an "As Is..." and "To Be..." change plan for a district by focusing on their student attendance. The purpose of the change plan is to drastically decrease student truancy and absenteeism in a district in order to increase student instructional time.

Part III of this dissertation advocates for absenteeism policy change. As a young male growing up in a single family household, within a low-income minority urban community, the only option available to me was public education. From Kindergarten to twelfth grade, I attended at least seven different public schools in an urban city, and, none of the schools provided me with supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. At no fault of the schools I had attended, there was just no clear attendance policy to help drive their practices.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a marathon runner, crossing the finish line of this dissertation was by far the hardest race I have ever completed. It was a race against myself. A race without limits, time, or direction, but I was determined to find my way and complete the race. My confidence, work ethic, professional responsibilities, and family obligations were stretched beyond all limitations.

Crossing the finish line of this doctoral race was a result of the love, support, and encouragement of many people.

If it weren't for my loving family, supportive friends, and my amazing mentors, I could not have completed this journey. Their patience and support helped me more than they'll ever know.

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my beautiful children, Ximena and Octavio. During these years, I thank you for putting up with my limited availability and long work hours. I thank you for giving me the space to complete this work. Your patience and understanding during this time was greatly appreciated; know that you are loved.

To all of my family members, thank you for believing in me!

To all of my mentors, thank you for your words of wisdom, for being an active listener, and for pushing me forward!

## **DEDICATION**

*To the fiery spirit of my beloved grandmother,*

*Dolores Galloges Tevenal Talavera Diaz!*

*Thank you for giving me the strength to always believe...*

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## **SECTION I: VISION STATEMENT**

Student attendance is the baseline data to a successful school. A student's attendance is also a key factor to his/her overall academic prosperity. My professional involvement in education now has lasted seventeen years. I daresay from that vantage point that local, state, and federal student attendance policies have been and continue to be an issue. I have not been able to find a local, state, and federal attendance policies that provide holistic methods to combat low student attendance.

However, as I reflect on my time as a child growing up in a single family household, within a low-income minority urban community, there was also a clear need for more effective student attendance policies. The only option available to me as a child was public education. From Kindergarten to Twelfth grade, I had attended at least seven different public schools in an urban city, and, none of the schools provided me with supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. At no fault of the schools I had attended, there was just no clear attendance policy to help drive their practices.

As a high school mathematics teacher at the school I graduated from, I felt it was my professional responsibility to focus on student attendance. As an administrator, I knew my teachers could not educate an empty seat. Therefore, my first 90-day administrator plan always includes a strong emphasis on improving student attendance with supportive services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.

Unfortunately, the endless discussions, studies, and debates on how to increase student attendance are not yielding significant policies, programs, incentives, and/or interventions to positively impact absenteeism. Many argue the fact that a huge number of variables, some are controllable and others are extremely difficult to govern, contribute to poor student attendance

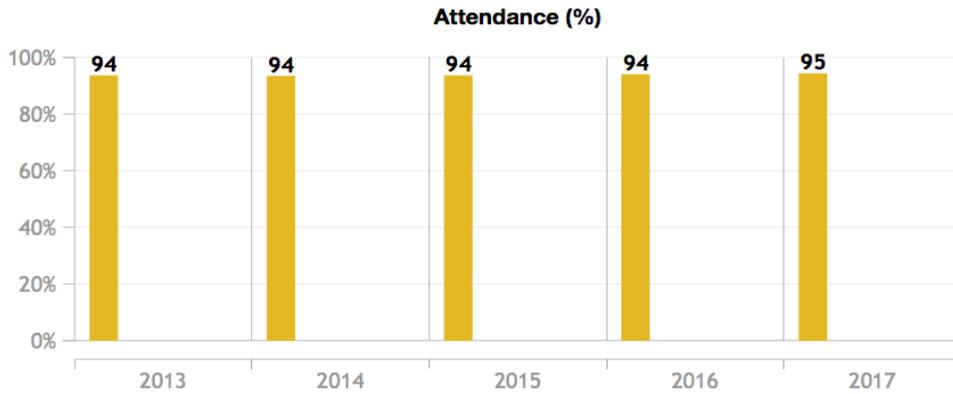
policies. Bimler and Kirkland (2001) found that there may be as many as 10 variables that predict student absenteeism and truancy. These variables include: home-based behavioral issues; school conditions; family background; psychological issues; peer issues; school-based behavioral issues; even lack of motivation or interest in school (Bimler and Kirkland, 2001). More recently, in 2008, a contemporary review of literature suggests that absenteeism is linked to psychiatric conditions, classification and proximal variables, physical conditions, contextual risk factors, and cross-cultural variables (Kearney, 2008).

Nonetheless, it is inexplicable that nearly 500 school districts within the United States, during the 2013 - 2014 school year, had at least 30 percent of students missing 15 or more days of school (Blad, 2016). Within the same year, the U.S. Department of Education found that half of the 6.5 million students who are chronically absent nationwide are recognized in just 4 percent of school districts; these districts have significant concentrations of poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Illinois School Code Section 26-2a only defines Truant, Valid Cause, Chronic or Habitual Truant, Truant Minor, Dropout, and Religion in relation to student attendance. There is no direction for school districts on minimal requirements to track and/or monitor student attendance. After reviewing the Illinois School Code Section 26-2a and multiple districts' attendance/truancy policies, it was evident that absenteeism policies need to be revisited. This analysis compounded with my experience around absenteeism as a student, teacher, and administrator is why the critical issue of student attendance is the driving force of this policy advocacy. I have had the pleasure and honor to serve as the principal of three schools. Unfortunately, each of these schools had years of high absenteeism and/or flat student average daily attendance. The historical attendance data for District L makes it an exemplary school for this policy advocacy.

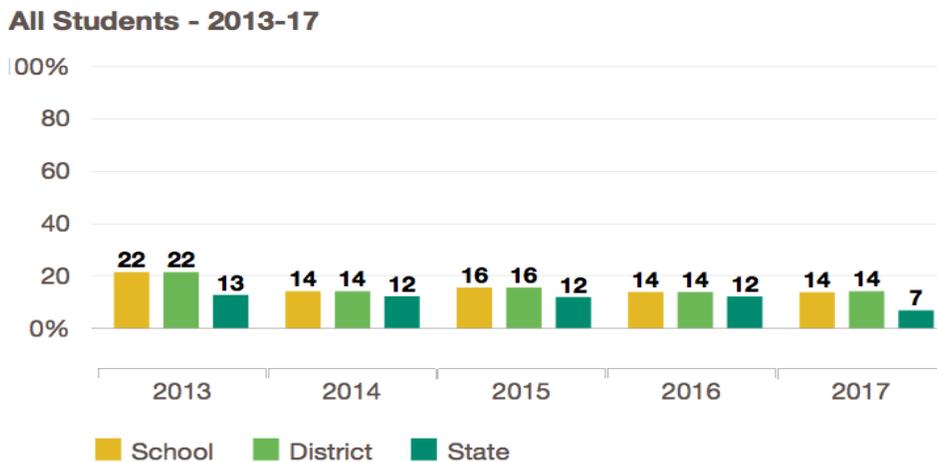
For five years, District L has averaged an average daily student attendance of 94% each year, with the exception of 2017 where the attendance was 95% (Illinois Report Card, 2017).

**Figure 1: Student Attendance**



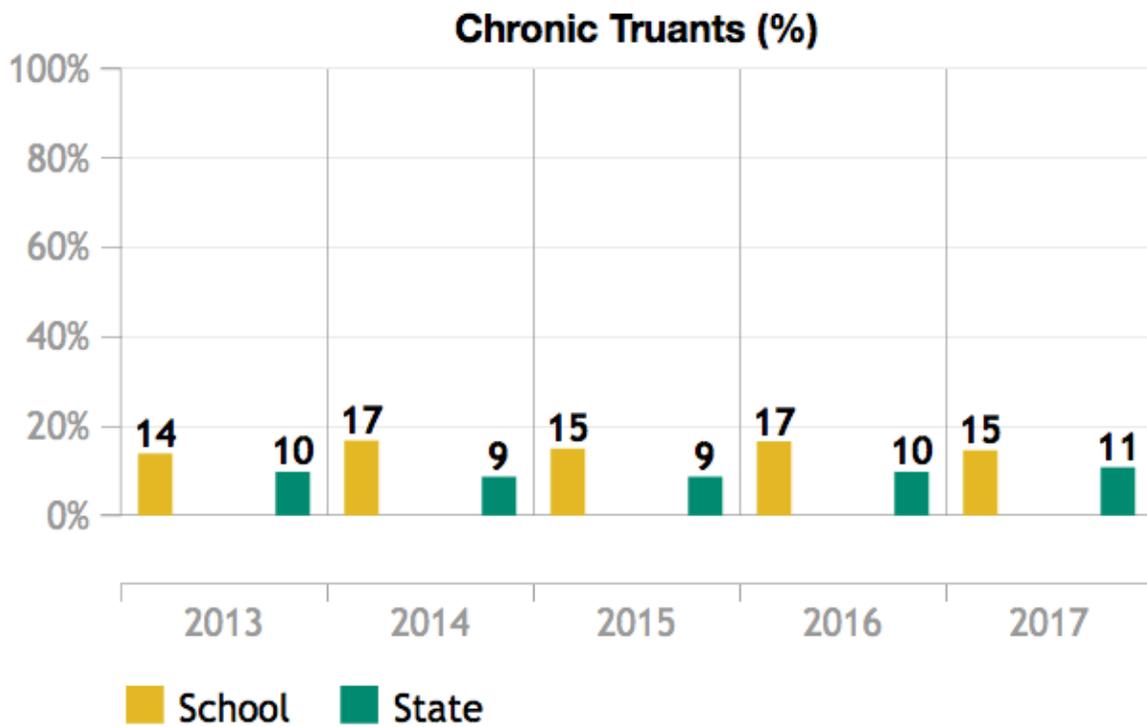
Despite this relatively high student attendance rate, Figure 2 shows how the mobility rate has fluctuated over the same time period. There is significant research to show that student mobility is a key academic indicator to identifying vulnerable students and their ability to be on-track to graduate. The mobility rate of a district is the percentage of students who transfer in/out of the district between the first school day of October and the last school day of the year, not including graduates.

**Figure 2: Mobility Rate**



Illinois law defines “chronic truant” as a student who misses 5 percent of school days within an academic year without a valid excuse. To put that in terms of days, that would be equivalent to 9 school days out of the standard 180 day school year. “Chronic truants are at risk of academic and behavioral problems. Research shows that chronic truancy has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youth and to significant negative behavior and characteristics in adults” (Illinois Report Card, 2017, p. 2). Figure 3 shows a comparison of the percentage of students in the district and the state who have been classified as chronically truant over the past five years to see changes in the student population over time. Each year, District L has averaged a higher percentage of students identified as chronic truants than the state. As shown in Figure 3, for the 2016 - 17 school year, the difference was a significant 4%.

**Figure 3: Chronic Truant**



The data shows that the average day attendance can stay the same regardless of fluctuations in chronic truancy or absenteeism. However, if this policy advocacy can aide District L in shining a light on absenteeism and require leadership to allocate resources to tackle the absenteeism epidemic, then those students will receive more direct instruction from certified educators.

My policy advocacy initiative attempts to focus physical and financial resources on improving student attendance. My recommendations are also informed by my analysis of other districts' effective efforts to address student absenteeism. I am recommending that District L's Attendance & Truancy Policy and its Retention Policy be aligned to address absenteeism. This policy advocacy recommends the following for each policy:

- Attendance and Truancy Policy: to include supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.
- Retention Policy: to include recommendation for retention based on a combination of academic data and student attendance data.

The overarching goal of this policy advocacy is to update District L's Attendance & Truancy Policy and Retention Policy to combat absenteeism. Additionally, I have two milestones/objectives for this policy advocacy and they are as follows:

- To develop a tiered intervention plan for truancy and absenteeism.
- To develop a marketing plan around attendance for students, parents, and staff to take ownership of student attendance.

By focusing this policy advocacy on aligning District L's policies for chronic truancy, absenteeism, and retention, the hope is that resources will be utilized to increase the number of days a student is in attendance to access the curriculum, engage in student discourse, collaborate with peers, develop problem solving skills, receive direct instruction from a certified teacher, and work on team building skills. There is endless value to decrease the number of days a child misses from school.

## SECTION II: ANALYSIS OF NEED

For this section of the Policy Advocacy, five areas were analyzed to see how they support the recommendation that the district’s Attendance & Truancy Policy and its’ Retention Policy be aligned to address absenteeism. This analysis of need looks into the district’s educational, economic, social, political, and moral/ethical needs in relation to student absenteeism.

### *Educational Analysis*

District L has a stagnant average daily student attendance rate, but in 2017, their attendance increased by 1%. However, their chronic truancy rate suggests high absenteeism, which may be a contributing factor to their overall low academic performance as shown in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

**Figure 4: Success by Student Group**

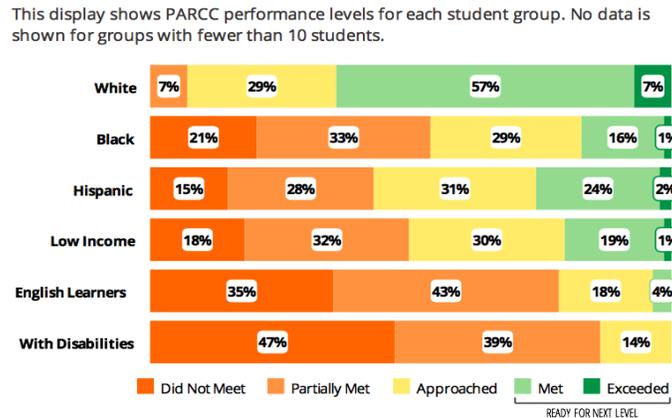


Figure 4 shows that in the 2016 - 2017 school year, 64% of White students in the district Met/Exceeded the PARCC standards and are ready for the next level of math and reading instruction. However, only 17% of Black students and 26% of Hispanic students in the district are ready for the next level of math and reading instruction. Furthermore, 20% of low income, 4% of English Learners, and 0% of special education students Met/Exceeded PARCC standards and are ready for the next level of math and reading instruction (Illinois Report Card, 2017).

**Figure 5: PARCC ELA**

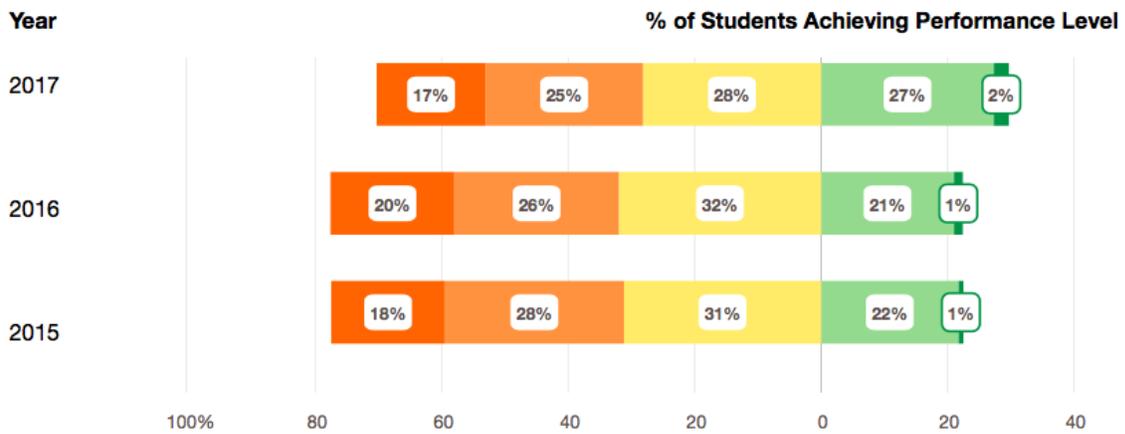


Figure 5 displays the percentage of students in the district who achieved scores in the five PARCC performance levels for English Language Arts. In school year 2015, the district had 23% of its students who Met/Exceeded English Language Arts state standards and that percentage dropped to 22% in the 2016 school year. However, in 2017 the percentage increased to 29%; this is also the year their attendance rate increased by 1%. In all three school years, the district underperformed the state average by double digits for the percentage of students who are ready for next level English Language Arts instruction (Illinois Report Card, 2017).

**Figure 6: PARCC Mathematics**

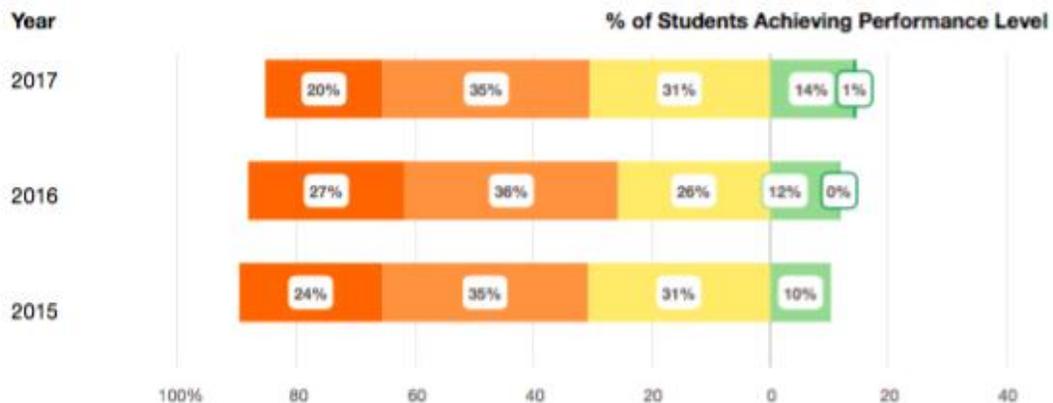


Figure 6 displays the percentage of students in the district who achieved scores in the 5 PARCC performance level categories for Mathematics. In school year 2015, the district had 10% of its students who Met/Exceeded Mathematics state standards and that percentage increased to 12% in the 2016 school year. The district experienced three consecutive years of academic growth in Mathematics. In 2017, the percentage of students who Met/Exceeded Mathematics increased by 3%; this is also the year their attendance rate increased by 1%. Similarly, to English Language Arts, in all three school years, the district underperformed the state average by double digits for the percentage of students who are ready for next level Mathematics instruction (Illinois Report Card, 2017).

This policy advocacy is to help improve student attendance which in turns increases student educational accomplishments. By increasing student attendance and decreasing chronic truancy/absenteeism for the district, then in turn, we are also increasing a student's instructional time. The data shows that District L had a 1% increase in student attendance and a 2% drop in the chronic truancy rate which coincides with increases in both reading and mathematical scores. Further research is needed to look at absenteeism and truancy data by demographic characteristics. Increased student attendance is not the sole answer, many additional factors influence academic growth, but student attendance is a key player in academic improvements. Unless educators are purposely trying to harm a child, increased instructional time will have lasting impacts on academic growth. However, to tackle the district's attendance issue, not only is strategic collaboration with key stakeholders needed, but an alignment of the policies governing attendance, truancy, and retention is also crucial.

## Economic Analysis

District L averages over 1,000 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten to Eighth Grade. Located in the suburbs of a major Midwest metropolitan city, the student body is made up of 1.5% White, 53.5% Black, 43.3% Hispanic, and 1.6% Two or More Races. Within the district, 90.1% of the students are Low Income with 16.7% of students classified as English Learners and 11.3% of the students receive special education services (Illinois Report Card, 2018).

In 2018, District L had three consecutive years of decreasing their chronically truant student rate by 3%. Diving deeper into the data, that means 30 out of 170 students attended school more than 167 days each year from 2015 - 2018. The district had a total of 51 certified teachers and a 45.2% teacher retention rate for the 2017 - 18 school year. The certified teachers were made up of 49.1% White, 37.2% Black, and 13.7% Hispanic for the 2017 - 18 school year. In terms of certified teachers' gender for 2017 - 18, 21.5% were Male and 78.5% Female (Illinois Report Card, 2018).

In the 2016 - 2017 school year, District L had the following expenditures by function compared to the state (Illinois Report Card, 2018):

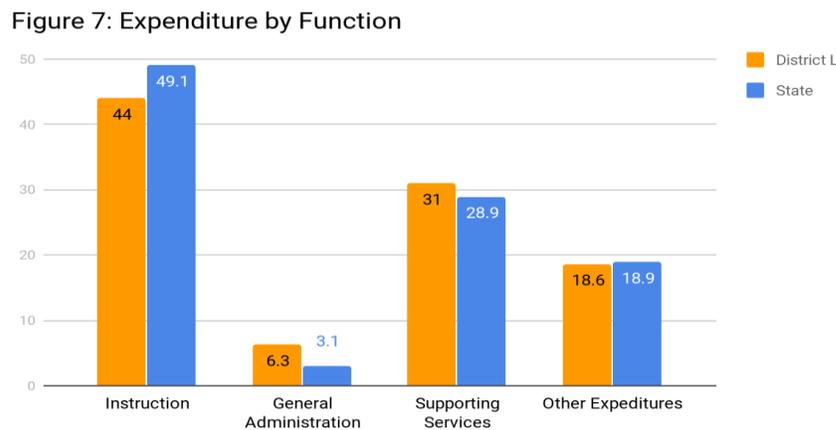


Figure 7 outlines how the district spent their funds in comparison to the state. District L underspends the state on Instruction and Other Expenditures, but District L outspends the state

on General Administration and Supportive Services.

In 2017 - 2018, the Illinois State Board of Education used the Evidence Based Funding for Student Success Act to prioritize distribution of new funding to the most poorly funded districts and to students with the most needs. The Evidence Based Funding formula calculates the cost of providing a high-quality education to students, the cost of adequacy, and assesses how far districts currently are from reaching their identified adequacy amount (Illinois ASBO, 2018).

Under the new Evidence-Based Funding Model, District L's financial capacity to meet Adequacy Target is 55%. According to the state, the definition of adequacy target is the minimum amount required to provide a high quality education (Illinois Report Card, 2018).

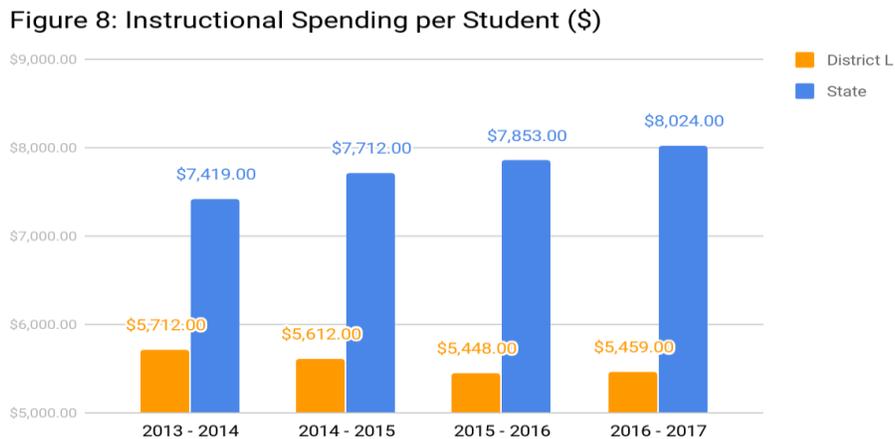
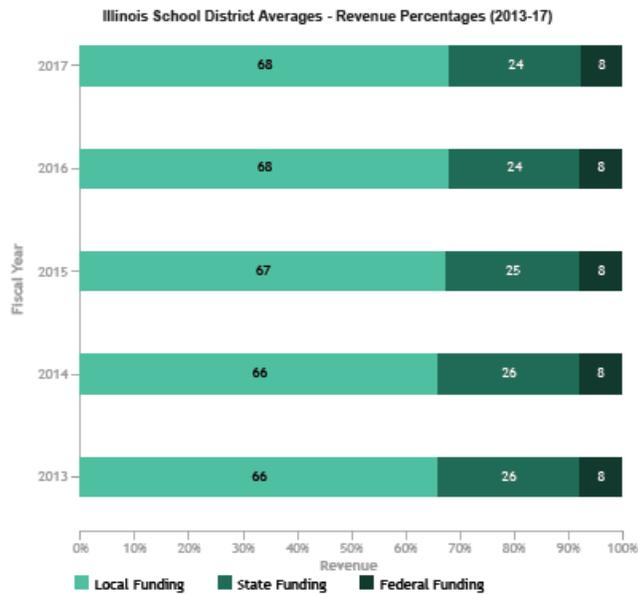
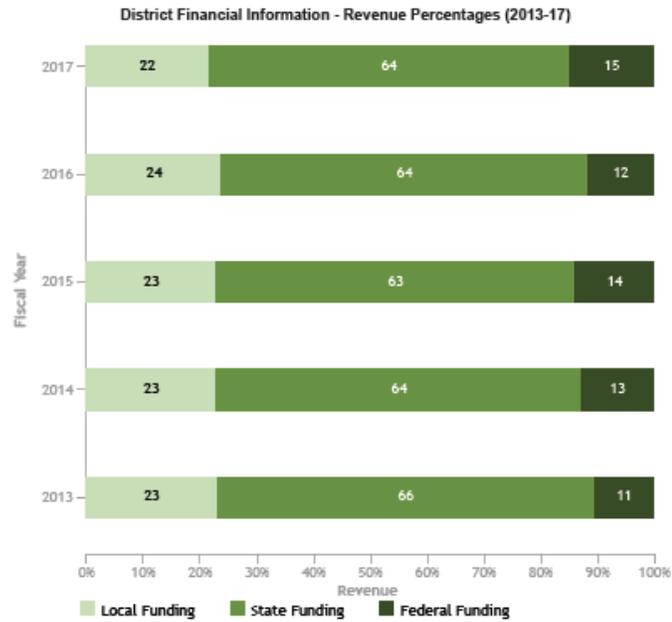


Figure 8 shows the comparison of average instructional spending per pupil between District L and the state. The expenditures in Figure 8 only include the activities that directly deal with the teaching of students or the interaction between teachers and students (Illinois Report Card, 2018). For four consecutive years, the district has spent less than the state per pupil. In Illinois, it is important to remember that the amount of money a district spends per pupil is often greatly dependent upon the local tax base.

The charts in Figure 9 show trend data of the percentage of revenues District L and the state receives from the three primary funding sources: local, state, and federal (Illinois Report Card, 2018).

**Figure 9: Revenue Percentages**



For the past five school years, District L has received a majority of its funding from the state and federal funds. However, as a state, Illinois School Districts on average receive the vast majority of their funds from local funding sources (Illinois Report Card, 2018). The redistributive financial resources for this policy advocacy depend on administrative approval to support attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. As a Title I district, the leadership team can advocate for student support services funding to institutionalize their attendance policy and initiatives to support student academic learning. Furthermore, a district's state and federal funding is also dependent on the number of students that are enrolled by the 20<sup>th</sup> day of school. Hence, the importance of student attendance to ensure district's receive adequate funding to provide a quality education for all students.

### *Social Analysis*

Schools need to be proactive when combating attendance. Absenteeism must be addressed before it becomes problematic. Research from the Baltimore Education Research Consortium shows that “high absence rates have negative consequences not only for individual students, but also for classroom instruction and school climate” (Olson, 2014, p. 1). Olson also found that if a student misses fewer than 2 days in September, then they will continue to average fewer than 2 days absent each month (2014).

In 2008, Chang and Romero showed how absenteeism and its ill effects start in the primary grades. Their study found that 1 in 10 Kindergarten and First graders miss at least 20 days of school in a school year (Chang & Romero, 2008). Chang and Romero's report also addresses what is known as the impact of chronic early absences. For example, they discuss how chronic absenteeism in Kindergarten has an immediate impact on a student's academic performance. Their report also points out that the long-term consequences of absenteeism in

kindergarten students are even more significant for low income students (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Student attendance has been a social problem for decades. A school's attendance statistics can mask significant levels of chronic absenteeism. For example, a school has 300 students and an average daily attendance rate of 95%. At this rate, 15 students are absent on any given day and 285 students are in attendance. However, it is unrealistic that the same 15 students are absent for all 175 days because if this was the case, those 15 students would be unenrolled. Rather, it is more realistic and quite possible that the 15 students missing each day occurs because the school has 60 students who are taking turns being absent. The sum of the absences for any of the 60 students could easily equal more than 20 days absent in a school year. In summary, even a school with a high daily attendance of 95%, could easily have a high chronically absenteeism rate of double digit percentage of the student population.

The Baltimore Education Research Consortium found that chronic absenteeism in 6th grade is a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school (2011). If you combine high absences with poverty, then those students are even more likely to not graduate from high school. This combination is a huge problem for a large number of today's children.

For District L, with its 90.1% low income student population and high chronic absenteeism, research shows that students within the district are four times more likely to be absent for unstable housing, unreliable transportation, and lack of access to health care (Chang & Romero, 2008).

The good news is that more and more school districts are now looking at the right data to improve student attendance. Addressing our Nation's attendance challenge requires a change in an organization's mindset. District L needs to continue to develop a culture that takes ownership

of student attendance with all stakeholders. In order to address the student attendance epidemic in this country, schools must engage both parents and students in positive ways. Additionally, local and federal agencies must provide adequate funding to provide supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. Without a holistic system buy-in from the district, staff, parents, and students, then this policy will not yield significant positive results for student attendance.

### *Political Analysis*

Currently, District L has been moving towards a culture that does promote student attendance. However, even though the district sees the value of student attendance, the district continues to not focus resources on tackling truancy and/or absenteeism. Additionally, the political culture shift that is needed by the staff to take ownership of student attendance has not fully developed.

Changing a school culture takes three to four years. In order to successfully build an environment where all stakeholders take ownership for student attendance, District L's administration needs to provide policies and funding that supports attendance services for at least four consecutive years. Next, the leadership team needs to identify and utilize the key stakeholders in the school and community to see how they influence student attendance. Finally, the leadership team would need to develop strategies to engage the key stakeholders in order to build ownership to advance the policy change around student attendance. A key question the leadership team at District L needs to answer is, "How does a leader build a shared vision of success that is coherent and is truly owned and inspiring to others?" (Wagner, 2006, p. 98). District L's administrative team will be able to use their answer to this question to get all students to believe that they can improve their attendance rate. A shared vision of high

expectations for student attendance where all stakeholders support takes time, consistency, and resources to develop.

The administrative team needs to remember that as they add to the district's procedures and protocols, they must also analyze what can be taken away as a means to not burn out the staff. This comes down to power in terms of what should and should not be eliminated for this policy implementation. People, and more importantly, groups of people normally feel that when you take something from them, that you are challenging their authority/power. Through open two-way communication, the administrative team can aide in shifting the mindsets of all stakeholders and gain their support to take ownership of absenteeism. This is the major political consideration for this policy advocacy to be implemented with fidelity.

#### *Moral & Ethical Analysis*

The moral and ethical facets of this policy advocacy reside with an educator's professional expectations for their obligations around student attendance. It basically comes down to the blame game. Who is to blame for poor attendance? Can a 5 year old be held accountable for truancy? Is it the moral obligation of the parent to get their child to school? Or is it the teacher's moral obligation to provide such a magical environment that a child harasses their parent daily to ensure they are on time and present each day? Is it the responsibility of the district to hold parents accountable or even retain students for poor attendance? When looking from the balcony, these questions are more complicated. For example, is it the responsibility of social service agencies, the government, or even law enforcement to hold parents accountable for their child's attendance? There is no right or wrong answer to these questions, but regardless of who is to blame, these are very difficult questions to answer.

In my 17 years in education, I have not met a parent who does not want the best for their

child, even when they lack the resources or capacity to provide the very best for their child. Additionally, I feel very confident in saying that the majority of educators in the profession go above and beyond their professional obligations to ensure the children they service are successful. Unfortunately, I cannot say with great confidence that a majority of educators are exceptional at forming learning relationships with students so that they feel supported to take risk in their learning.

As not just professionals, but as educators, it is our moral responsibility to instill within our students the need to take ownership of their learning and their attendance. Teachers must provide a learning environment that not only encourages students to attend school, but one that also holds them accountable. Furthermore, the administrative team of a district is responsible for providing their staff with the resources they need to effectively educate children. However, the administrative team and staff both have the moral obligation to also provide a school culture that fosters learning and accountability around the importance of student attendance.

It is also crucial for school districts to assist parents in understanding the importance of student attendance by providing access to resources and professional development to address their needs so that outside factors do not hinder them from getting their child to school.

### **SECTION III: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT**

Reid stressed that advocacy can be recognized when it is occurring, even though there is no clear definition on the broader concept of activities and strategies that can be used to leverage influence for a policy (2001). This policy advocates for focused physical and financial resources on improving student attendance. My vision is that District L aligns their Attendance & Truancy Policy and its Retention Policy to address absenteeism. This policy advocates for the following changes to the current policies:

- Attendance and Truancy Policy: to include supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.
- Retention Policy: to include recommendation for retention based on a combination of academic data and student attendance data.

The goal of this policy advocacy is to amend District L's Attendance & Truancy Policy and Retention Policy to combat absenteeism. Furthermore, there are several milestones/objectives that need to be implemented to ensure the new district policies are executed with fidelity:

- To develop a tiered intervention plan for truancy and absenteeism.
- To develop a marketing plan around attendance for students, parents, and staff to take ownership of student attendance.

It is virtually impossible to find research to support decreasing a student's time in front of a certified teacher will increase their academic performance. The hope is that by focusing this policy advocacy on aligning District L's chronic truancy, absenteeism, and retention policies, then student academic and behavioral achievement will prosper. For example, with increased student attendance, the district will be able to utilize available resources to increase access to the curriculum, which leads to the following: engagement in student discourse, collaboration with

peers, developing problem solving skills, receiving direct instruction from a certified teacher, and working on team building skills.

### *Stakeholders*

This policy will not be implemented with fidelity without the district's leadership team's full support and annual earmarked financial resources. The leadership team is the beating heart of a culture that actively and passionately supports student attendance. However, the importance of the entire school staff cannot be underestimated. They are the body that carries out the attendance policy and they transform the policy into daily practices to aide students and parents in taking ownership of absenteeism and truancy. The custodian is just as crucial as the teacher to ensure a climate and culture that radiates the importance of student daily attendance.

Outside of the school, parents, students, and community agencies are essential contributors to the successful implementation of this policy. They are the food and nutrients that fuel the body and heart. Parents need to be provided access to resources that address their individual family needs and educated about the importance of student attendance. Armed with resources and knowledge, parents can support the school. More importantly, positive and supportive relationships need to be established with students so they know they can confide in the school to help them overcome attendance barriers. Lastly, when a school is flourishing, the surrounding community prospers. Community agencies will have capital to provide support to the school's initiatives. As students yield positive growth academically and behaviorally, then more resources are poured into the local community and home values increase.

### *Validity of Policy*

The district's current Board Policies reflect Illinois School Code. However, they do not address supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.

The current policies also fail to include a recommendation for retention based on a combination of academic data and student attendance data.

In order to check the validity of the goals and objectives of this policy advocacy, I referenced Fowler's evaluative questions to gage the legitimacy of this policy. The following questions from Fowler's list were addressed:

- Is the proposed policy consistent with the district's vision statement? (Fowler, 2004).

This policy aligns with the vision statement of yielding successful citizens. If students are not in attendance, then a school cannot ensure that they are provided with the instruction they need to be successful in their future endeavors.

Additionally, when children are not in school, they are more likely to engage in unsupervised activities that can be detrimental to their future.

- Is it consistent with the district's priorities? (Fowler, 2004).

The top goal/priority of the district is to ensure students are college and career ready. Improved student attendance has been linked to improved academic growth. One key difference between undergraduate and K-12 education is the heavy emphasis placed on student attendance. In K-12 education, children are required to attend school each day, but in undergraduate school attendance is not mandatory or just not monitored. Even in the same university, the amount of emphasis placed on attendance varies greatly from professor to professor.

However, in order for a student to be successful in undergraduate, research has shown that high attendance in primary grades is crucial. Therefore, this attendance policy is consistent with the district's priorities because attendance is an important indicator for success in college.

- Is it consistent with the district's assessed needs? (Fowler, 2004).

For the past couple of years, the district has been focusing resources to increase their Student Average Daily Attendance, while decreasing their Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Rates. This policy will provide Board support to continue these efforts while ensuring the administrative team allocates financial resources to provide supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.

## SECTION IV: POLICY ARGUMENT

Change is difficult! In order for people or an organization to adopt change in a policy, they must first see their individual benefit, then the benefit to the overall organization. This policy advocacy is a strategic inflection point for District L. However, prior to proposing a mindset shift in the culture with this policy change, I must analyze the pros and cons of the merit for this advocated attendance policy, considering public and professional opinions, research findings, and other relevant facts. This step is essential to ensure all perspectives are considered and that the policy is unbiased.

### *Policy Pros*

As a young minority male student, it became clearly evident to me how much I could learn if I was present and took ownership of my learning. As an educator, I immediately realized that I only had a job if students were in attendance for me to teach. To build my students' capacity and ownership of their education, they needed to know I cared about them, about their attendance, and that I would hold them accountable for their academics and attendance.

There needs to be a compelling argument for a clear policy for absenteeism that provides services for prevention, intervention, retention, and/or community resources. More importantly, for maximum implementation of the policy, there needs to be ownership by the administration, staff, parents, and students.

Chronic absenteeism is widespread in the United States. Annually, an estimated 5 to 7.5 million students in the United States are chronically absent (Brown, 2015). The Economic Policy Institute issued a report in 2018 stating that 19.2% of 8th-graders within 137 schools were chronically absent in 2015; this percentage has been “relatively stable” across grade levels for 12 years (Riddell, 2018).

In 2013, a report prepared for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations stress the following:

Attendance matters for achievement, and every day counts. In all analysis, average academic achievement on NAPLAN tests declined with any absence from school and continued to decline as absence rates increased. The nature of the relationship between absence from school and achievement, across all sub-groups of students, strongly suggests that every day of attendance in school contributes towards a child's learning, and that academic outcomes are enhanced by maximizing attendance in school. There is no "safe" threshold. (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence, and Zubrick, 2013, p. v).

School is similar to the workplace. If students are chronically absent in K-12 grade, then the probability of them having a high absenteeism in the workplace is likely. Sessoms points out that chronic absenteeism in the workplace leads to poor collaboration, higher cost for the employer, increased work for co-workers, possible termination, and negative company moral (2018). Therefore, it is vital for schools to address absenteeism as soon as possible to provide children with the skills and ownership they need to be successful productive adults. I am proposing that District L focuses more on student attendance and prevention. The pro is that at risk children will be in school to grow academically and they will be guaranteed at least two meals a day.

#### *Policy Cons*

It is difficult to argue that if you increase a student's attendance rate, then they are going to learn more. However, this assumption does not address whether or not a teacher is present to teach each day. Woods and Montagno's study concluded that "teacher absenteeism has a negative effect on student achievement" (1997). While Woods and Montagno's conclusion

seems logical, they also pointed out that during the study, there was a lack of research to support their conclusion. This policy advocacy specifically focuses on student attendance; therefore, a con would be that it does not address teacher absenteeism. To truly be a holistic attendance policy the district would also need to align their staff attendance policy to address teacher absenteeism.

Local and federal governments focus heavily on a district's student attendance, so much that they tie funding to a school's Average Daily Attendance. Focusing on a school's Average Daily Attendance and aligning funding with a school's attendance are detrimental to the school, particularly a school with high levels of low income and minority students. Baker, Farrie, Johnson, Luhm, and Sciarra stress a major problem with a school's Average Daily Attendance. Baker, Farrie, Johnson, Luhm, and Sciarra points out in their annual report that a school must plan their budgets and staffing on the funding they receive from their student attendance and mid-year fluctuations in funding based on attendance result in difficult resource decisions that hinder student success (2017). When you add a high mobility rate to these two characteristics (low income and minority), the negative effect on a school's ability to provide a high quality education diminishes dramatically.

Regardless of what side of the argument one is on, there are short and long term benefits for students to understand the importance of being present daily in school to maximize their educational opportunities.

## **SECTION V: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became the United States K-12 public education policy replacing the No Child Left Behind Act in December of 2015. ESSA requires states to report chronic absenteeism. In order to adhere to the new chronic absenteeism requirements in ESSA, the state of Illinois began reporting subgroups of chronic absenteeism and chronic truancy in October 2018 on district report cards.

To ensure effective and efficient policy implementation, the School Board of Education and administrative team must be well-informed and attuned to the proposed attendance policy goals and objectives (Fowler, 2009). The School Board of Education needs to be abreast of the research and literature to make an educated decision on whether to adopt or not adopt the policy. The administrative team needs to develop the supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.

Figure 10 outlines Kotter's *Eight Steps to Transforming Your Organization* (1995) to transform the district's mindset around absenteeism to make a case for a feasible implementation of this advocated policy:

**Figure 10: Eight Steps to Transformation**

<i>Establishing a Sense of Urgency</i>	Trend data for absenteeism, mobility, and academic (growth and attainment) will be reviewed and shared with key stakeholders (board members, administration, staff, parents, students, and community agencies) to develop the sense of urgency.
<i>Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition</i>	New policies/programs often begin with an individual, but for successful paradigm shifts, the administrative team leading the coalition must grow to include at least the following stakeholders: district admin, school level admin, teacher, parent, and student. This group must be empowered to lead the change.
<i>Creating a Vision</i>	Once formulated, the coalition must develop a vision for the future that is both easily communicable and appealing to the staff, parents, and students. The coalition must remember Kotter’s perspective that “a vision says something that clarifies the direction in which an organization needs to move” (1995).
<i>Communicating the Vision</i>	The attendance policy vision must then be marketed through every vehicle possible to share the goals, objectives, and strategies to move the district’s student attendance forward. Fancy fliers, banners, and posts are great, but the supportive deeds of staff (from the principal to the custodian) are more powerful.
<i>Empowering Others to Act on the Vision</i>	The administrative team must lead the way by getting rid of the obstacles of change. For example, the district needs a system to send out automated absent / tardy calls. The attendance clerk needs to have time and the resources to monitor attendance; student attendance monitoring data should be on the weekly admin team meeting agenda. Additionally, the staff should be encouraged to try nontraditional ideas and activities to combat absenteeism.
<i>Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins</i>	Appreciate! Recognize! Encourage! (Cockerell, 2008) The administrative team must allocate time and financial resources to recognize and reward staff, parents, and students for attendance gains, both short and long term wins.
<i>Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change</i>	The change process must regularly be reinvigorated with new supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. This will only occur if the coalition team continuously monitors attendance programs and provides timely specific feedback.
<i>Institutionalizing New Approaches</i>	Change takes time, normally 4 - 5 years to become institutionalized into the organization's culture. The School Board and administrative team need to articulate the connections between the new attendance supports and the academic growth to further ingrain the practices into the school culture.

(Kotter, 1995)

**Figure 11: Attendance and Retention Policy Implementation Plan**

<i>Task to be Completed:</i>	<i>Person Responsible</i>	<i>Targeted Date</i>
Draft Attendance, Truancy, and Retention Policies	Principal	Winter 2018
Submit draft policies to district’s attorney for review	Principal	Spring 2019
Revise Attendance, Truancy, and Retention Policies based on attorney’s recommendations and submit revised policies to the Board for review and first reading	Principal	Spring 2019
Board reviews policies for second reading	Board of Education	Spring 2019
Data Deep Dive of district’s attendance data to Board	Leadership Team	Spring 2019
Policies submitted to Board for action to be approved	Board Clerk	Spring 2019
Formulation of coalition to lead change efforts for new policies	Principal	Spring 2019
Develop a vision for the policies	Coalition Team	Summer 2019
Professional Development on new policies for leadership team	Coalition Team	Summer 2019
Professional Development on rules and regulations regarding absenteeism, truancy, and retention for leadership team	Coalition Team	Summer 2019
Professional Development on new policies to develop sense of urgency for staff around supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and community resources	Leadership Team	Fall 2019
Professional Development and informational sessions on new policies to develop sense of urgency for parents around supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and community resources	Teachers	Fall 2019
Informational sessions on new policies to develop sense of urgency for students around supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and community resources	Teachers	Fall 2019
Town Hall meetings to share new policies and develop sense of urgency with community agencies around supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and community resources	Coalition Team	Fall 2019
5 week monitoring of student attendance data to identify students in need of supportive attendance services for intervention and community resources (Data deep dive will occur every 5 weeks)	Teachers led by Leadership Team	Fall 2019
Rewards and incentives for both student and teacher attendance gains begin after the first data deep dive	Teachers and Leadership Team	Fall 2019
Quarterly coalition team meeting to monitor the progress of the programs and initiatives to identify opportunities for continuous improvement.	Coalition Team	Winter 2019

The table in Figure 11 outlines the following components of the implementation plan: professional development plan, time schedules, and progress monitoring activities. In order for the implementation efforts to be successful, key stakeholders must be included and engaged throughout the entire implementation process. The administration does a deep data dive of student attendance data and attendance policies. A plan is drafted for the Board of Education to review and adopt. Then, the Coalition Team develops the vision and professional development plan to empower the teachers. Next, the students and parents are engaged as a sense of urgency is developed around student attendance in the community. Additionally, incentives and rewards are planned to celebrate attendance milestones. School staff are charged with providing intervention to students with high absences. Staff must develop a supportive service plan for truant minors and the plan must provide supportive services that include prevention, diagnostic, intervention, and remediation. Lastly, the Coalition Team will meet quarterly to monitor the progress of the programs and initiatives to identify opportunities for growth and improvement.

The residence within District L's community elect the Board of Education and entrusts them to ensure the district is financially sound. The Board of Education employs a Superintendent to oversee the district who is fiduciary responsible with the taxpayers' resources. In order for the Board to adopt a policy, they must know that adopting it will be fiscally responsible for the district while maximizing the resources for the students to move teaching and learning forward. Figure 12 outlines the costs associated with the policy adoption.

**Figure 12: Policy Implementation Cost**

<b>Description of Expense</b>	<b>Total Cost</b>
District attorney fees to review policy	Approximately \$300 per hour, 8 hours maximum = \$2,400
Rewards and incentives for students and staff for attendance improvements	Approximately \$30 for bi-weekly recognition for 20 weeks, maximum = \$600
Rewards for classroom attendance goal incentives	Approximately \$100 per class for a total 3 top classes per 5 weeks, maximum $3 \times 5 \times 100 =$ \$1,500
Professional Development Costs - Substitutes for Teachers	\$105 per day, 5 days for 8 teachers, maximum = \$4,200

The total estimated cost for the adoption of the attendance, truancy, and retention policy would be \$8,700.

## SECTION VI: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

All policies need to be monitored and evaluated regularly to assess the effectiveness of the policy and programs that are used to execute the policy. Furthermore, the outcomes and results of the policy need to be aligned to those that are accountable for carrying out the policy. The following figure reflects the policy assessment plan for monitoring and evaluation.

**Figure 13: Policy Assessment Plan**

<i>Task to be Completed:</i>	<i>Person Responsible</i>	<i>Targeted Date</i>
At the beginning of each school year, students and staff will be given a survey to identify attendance rewards and incentives; the administrative team will review the data to identify rewards and incentives	Leadership Team	Fall 2019
Daily Attendance Recording	Teacher	Daily
Daily Attendance Verification with robo announcements sent to parents for absences and tardies	Attendance Clerk	Daily
Weekly Average Daily Attendance Reports and Absentee Reports of Students on Track for Chronic Absenteeism; reports will be reviewed at weekly administrator team meetings and teacher grade level meetings	Attendance Clerk	Daily
5 Week Absenteeism Report Data Deep Dive	Coalition Team	Every 5 weeks
Reoccurring rewards and incentives for student, teacher, and classroom attendance gains	Teachers and Leadership Team	Bi-Weekly
Quarterly parent meetings for students on-track to be chronically absent for the school year.	Leadership Team	Quarterly
End of the year survey for students and staff members to obtain feedback on the effectiveness of supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources.	Leadership Team	Spring 2020

The table Figure 13 outlines the Policy Assessment Plan to ensure that progress is monitored and evaluated. In order to successfully assess the progress, key stakeholders must be included and engaged throughout the entire policy assessment process. Each school year, students and staff should receive a survey to identify the attendance rewards and incentives. Throughout the school year, attendance needs to be recorded and verified on a regular basis. The coalition team will be charged with conducting absenteeism data deep dives to identify students in need of additional support for their attendance. Lastly, the leadership team should administer an end of year survey for students and staff to obtain feedback on the effectiveness of the attendance initiatives.

## **SECTION VII: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT**

Districts can take steps to alleviate obstacles that hinder students from attending school, however, they cannot address all of the impediments alone. The support of the parents, students, staff, and other local agencies is needed. A holistic approach to raise public awareness while also pressuring local, state, and federal policy changes to address absenteeism and the barriers that keep students out of school is vital. The success of change initiatives comes down to adaptive leadership. The administrative team in District L has to mobilize all stakeholders to address absenteeism so that students can thrive (Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009).

The goal of this policy advocacy is to have an Attendance and Truancy Policy that includes supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and/or community resources. In addition, to have a Retention Policy that integrates a student's attendance by allowing for recommendations for retention based on a combination of academic data and student absenteeism. This policy advocacy provides an articulated vision for systemic long-term change to a district's culture of absenteeism.

It is recommended that District L amend their current Attendance & Truancy Policy and Retention Policy to combat absenteeism. Furthermore, the following benchmarks need to be implemented to ensure the policies are executed with fidelity:

- To develop a tiered intervention plan for truancy and absenteeism.
- To develop a marketing plan around attendance for students, parents, and staff to take ownership of student attendance.

A paradigm shift of high expectations is needed to address absenteeism. Research shows that K - 12 students with the highest rates of absenteeism benefit significantly from interventions and elevated expectations, whereas students with fewer absences do not significantly increase

their attendance rate (Hobbs, Kotlaja, & Wylie, 2018). Unfortunately, either consciously or subconsciously, too many educators fail to hold all students to the same expectations. The key culture blueprint is for District L to have all students believe that they can succeed!

As a culture of ownership is developed around student attendance, then context has to be applied to that shared vision by the administrative team in order to accelerate stakeholders taking ownership. The district's leadership team needs to further develop processes to monitor and improve absenteeism. The district has already taken great steps towards tackling absenteeism in the past couple years by: establishing extended school hours with an extensive After-School Performing Arts Programs; providing ongoing professional development around core problems of absenteeism to students and parents; offering incentives to students who have registered to attend school on the first day; and offering incentives to students and staff who have high weekly attendance. The set of circumstances around the shared vision of improving student attendance, to in turn increase a student's instructional time, needs to drive all that the district does to truly move their culture forward.

To gauge the students' perspective after the first year of this policy implementation, a survey should be administered to see if the supportive attendance services for prevention, intervention, and community resources motivated them to attend school more frequently.

Low academic performance, delinquency, and many other high-risk behaviors are related to chronic absenteeism. The core values at the center of this policy are to address absenteeism so that students have increased instructional time, which in turn will hopefully lead to significant academic growth. In the end, there is strong evidence to support a culture of collaborative relationships among all stakeholders to build everyone's knowledge base of truancy/absenteeism so that their needs and concerns are heard and addressed.

In our complex world, situations are multifaceted and too complex to be approached with a singular method for policy change. Throughout time, there has been endless trials and errors to innovate and move society forward. In the end, the aim of these trials and errors is to find out the effectiveness, efficiency, and purpose of all that we do.

This attendance policy advocacy is consistent with the mission and vision of District L. However, it is not the sole answer to address absenteeism. One must always remember to continuously conduct research on the “internal influencing factors” and “external influencing factors” for student attendance to drive decision making (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

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