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# Attendance Rates of Special Populations in One Rural County

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ATTENDANCE RATES OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN  
ONE RURAL COUNTY

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of  
Education Specialist in  
School Psychology

By

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May 2012

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## ABSTRACT

### Attendance Rates of Special Populations in One Rural County

The purpose of this current study is to determine if a difference exists in the attendance rates for special education students and low socioeconomic status students when compared to their peers who do not have these designations. The attendance data from one rural county school district for the years of 2007-2011 were examined to determine if a difference in the attendance rates did exist. Results from this research revealed that students receiving special education services were absent significantly more than their general education peers. However, students of low socioeconomic status were not absent any more than their peers who were not considered to be of low socioeconomic status.

## CHAPTER ONE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 1897, West Virginia first made non-attendance in school a legal issue with the creation of a compulsory attendance law (Blumenfeld, 2009). Since that time, West Virginia educators have struggled to find effective ways to address chronic attendance problems. Currently, WV Code Chapter 18 Education, Article 8 states: “compulsory school attendance requires that: compulsory school attendance begins with the school year in which the sixth birthday is reached prior to September 1 of such year or upon enrolling in a publicly supported kindergarten program and, subject to subdivision (3) of this subsection, continues to the sixteenth birthday or for as long as the student continues to be enrolled in a school system after the sixteenth birthday.” West Virginia Code ch.18, § 8-4 (2010) “requires school officials to serve written notice to the parent, guardian or custodian of the student that the attendance of the student at school is required and that within ten days of receipt of the notice the parent, guardian or custodian, accompanied by the student, shall report in person to the school the student attends for a conference with the principal or other designated representative of the school in order to discuss and correct the circumstances causing the inexcusable absences of the student.” These meetings are commonly referred to within the school districts as compulsory attendance 2 (CA2) meetings. In previous years, contact with the parent or guardian was required after 10 unexcused days. Under the current Code, however, parental contact is required after five unexcused days.

Chronic absence is defined by the national policy group Attendance Counts as missing 10 percent of school or more (Sparks, 2010b). An average of one in 10 pupils in

grades K-12 nationwide is considered chronically absent (Sparks, 2010a). If students attend a 180- day school year, that is 18 days a year. However, in West Virginia where we seldom meet the 180 day mark because of snow days, 18 days can be particularly detrimental. Balfanz, Herzog and Mac Iver (2007) found that, when attendance drops below 80%, students graduate only 25% of the time. High school dropouts show steadily increasing chronic absenteeism for years before they actually leave school (Sparks, 2010b). Missing 36 days in a single school year is a red flag that a student or his or her family is not invested in the education process. West Virginia Legislatures in Code ch.18, § 8-4 has recognized the importance of students' attendance with the following statement:

Absenteeism is proven to be the highest predictor of course failure. Truant students face low self-confidence in their ability to succeed in school because their absences cause them to fall behind their classmates, and the students find dropping out easier than catching up.

Schools often attempt to address chronic absenteeism problems with disciplinary exclusions, which further exacerbate absences and disengagement from school (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Wilson, 2007). When schools attempt to treat chronic absenteeism with an incentive of further school exclusion it is unlikely that they will see improvement. Chronic absenteeism in elementary school is linked to serious delinquent behavior in children under the age of twelve (Zhang, et al., 2007). Students with chronic absenteeism engage in more serious forms of delinquency including higher rates of substance abuse, gang activity, and later involvement in adult criminal activity (Muller, Giacomazzi & Stoddard, 2006). The consequences of chronic absenteeism could be a



decline in the economy and culture of the nation and should be viewed as the serious problem that it is (McCray, 2006).

The reasons for chronic absenteeism are multiple and complicated. Several studies have been completed in an attempt to find what is at the core of ever-increasing attendance problems. Research into the issues of school non-attendance, truancy, and dropping out has traditionally examined social, family, and personal variables that place students at risk for such behaviors (Wilkins, 2008). Most research concurs with McCray's (2006) findings that truancy can be traced to four causes: unsupportive school environments, lack of community support, chaotic family life, and personal, academic or social deficits. West Virginia does not begin to address compulsory attendance until the age of six or upon enrolling in a publicly supported kindergarten program. Outside of high school, kindergarten and first grade have the highest absenteeism; parents often allow their kindergartener or first grader to stay home because they are unaware of the increased academic standards (Sparks, 2010a). When students are chronically absent during these years they often miss the important foundational instruction time that is occurring during that period. We can also view a student's decision not to attend school regularly as a behavioral indicator of a student's growing disengagement from school (Balfanz, et.al., 2007).

Attendance issues are especially acute among students from low-income families (Sparks, 2010b). In 2009, more than one in five poor kindergartners was chronically absent compared with 8 percent of youngsters living above the poverty line (Sparks, 2010a). Sparks (2010b) indicated that the lower the family income, the higher rate of absenteeism. In Baltimore's high-poverty neighborhoods, the percentage of students who

miss more than a month of school is 55% (Balfanz, et.al., 2007). Students in high-poverty environments who have chronic attendance problems from the sixth to ninth grades typically have a 25 percent chance at best of graduating from high school (Balfanz, 2011). According to Balfanz, et. al. (2007), “Middle school students in high-poverty neighborhoods are often recruited into roles that interfere with school attendance (e.g., as they are recruited by their families to be caregivers, by drug gangs to be cheap labor, or by peers to be colleagues on out-of-school adventures).” In their study, Zhang, et al. (2007), found that compared to other first referrals to the juvenile justice system, those referred for truancy tend to be more financially impoverished, with a relatively higher percentage from families making less than \$15,000 per year.

Students who are chronically absent have fewer opportunities to learn, so they have lower achievement potential than their peers who have good attendance (McCray, 2006). Sparks (2010a) reported that pupils who missed 10 percent of school or more scored significantly lower in reading, math and general knowledge tests at the end of first grade. McCray (2006) indicated that just missing 30 hours of instruction time negatively affects a student’s achievement levels. Students with better attendance than their classmates exhibit superior performance on standardized achievement tests; and 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 (Sheldon, 2007). Baltimore, Maryland school district released a report showing that students with high absences scored 15 to 20 percentage points lower on state assessments than peers with better attendance (Sparks, 2010a). Low-achieving students who displayed a significant rise in absenteeism at the start of the middle grades were much more likely than other

low-achieving students to never graduate (Balfanz, et.al., 2007). Although some studies are available addressing the connection between chronic absenteeism and achievement, a search of academic journals did not reveal any research addressing attendance of students designated as special education.

Chronic absenteeism is considered an important predictor of delinquent behavior and is one of the top 10 educational problems in the United States (Zhang, et.al. 2007). In recognition that chronic absenteeism is linked to other delinquent behaviors, court systems have come to play an imperative role in seeking solutions to attendance problems. Attendance courts address students who habitually violate school board regulations concerning mandatory school attendance and to increase student attendance rates through judicial intervention (Muller, et al., 2006). Muller, et al. (2006) concluded that attendance court programs appear to be an effective short-term intervention to reduce the average number of student absences. However, they caution that attendance court should not be seen as a magic bullet because some students with poor attendance habits remain unchanged.

Several school-based intervention models are available to school districts. Programs designed to reduce student absenteeism fall in four categories: tough sanctions, academic enrichment programs, computerized attendance monitoring, and multiagency collaborative interventions (Muller, et.al, 2006). Most of the model interventions across the country include parental involvement, ensure that sanctions are firm and consistent, establish ongoing truancy programs and involve the community and social service agencies (McCray, 2006). McCray (2006) specified the importance of tutoring in order to make up for any deficits that chronic truancy has caused. Teachers are the key to the

success of any intervention program as they are the most likely people to be counting absences. Teachers using data-based decision making models can flag a student whose attendance has dropped below 90 percent and assign them to a small group-targeted intervention (Balfanz, 2011).

The school and court system in Barbour County worked closely to address truancy. At the elementary level, any unexcused absence that may accumulate after the CA2 meeting resulted in a complaint being filed against the parent in magistrate court. At the middle or high school level the CA2 meeting would be held at five days of unexcused absences. When five more (a total of ten) unexcused absences would accumulate a juvenile petition would be filed against the student. The court looked at each case individually and most often resulted in one of three actions for the juveniles; placed on an improvement period, placed on juvenile probation or, for repeat offenders, placed in a residential facility. The juveniles who were placed on probation were able to remain in the physical custody with their parents; however, legal custody would be placed with Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR). This order of legal custody gives the court system the ability to remove a child from his or her home and place them in a residential facility in the case of a probation violation. When a juvenile was placed on probation, monthly Multidisciplinary Team Meetings were held to track progress. The legal counsel for the student, the DHHR worker, probation worker, board of education representative, prosecuting attorney and the student and their family, would convene monthly at the MDT meetings to discuss the progress and needs of the student. Services would be requested to help address the student's needs. Possible services may include tutoring, in home services, parenting classes, counseling, treatment for substance abuse,

etc. Because the student on probation is generally in the state's custody, the costs of services are paid for through the DHHR.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this current study is to determine if a difference exists in the attendance rates for special education students and low socioeconomic status students when compared to their peers without these designations. This research will provide insight into absenteeism in these special populations in one rural county.

### **Statement of Hypotheses**

In this research, the hypotheses are posited as follows. The null hypothesis is that no difference will be noted in the attendance of special education and low socioeconomic status students when compared to their peers who are not designated special education or low socioeconomic status. The research hypothesis is that a difference will be noted in the attendance of special education and low socioeconomic status students when compared to their peers without these designations.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The population for this study was all students enrolled in Barbour County schools during the years of 2007-2011 for a total of 12,724. To determine if a student is of low socioeconomic status, free and reduced lunch applications were reviewed. Out of the 12,724 students, 4,762 were of low socioeconomic status and 1,619 were enrolled in special education.

#### **Instrumentation**

Data were tracked with the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) at each school, and then compiled into county-wide data reports. Each report contains information about a student's attendance, socioeconomic status, and special education status.

#### **Design and Procedure**

Attendance was taken daily by the teachers and recorded using WVEIS. The data were downloaded from WVEIS and compiled into a county-wide report. Participants consisted of all students enrolled in Barbour County Schools during the 2007-2011 school years. In order to meet the requirement set forth by the legislature, Barbour used

the following procedures. At the elementary level, any unexcused absence that may accumulate after the CA2 meeting resulted in a complaint being filed against the parent in magistrate court. At the middle or high school level, the CA2 meeting would be held at five days of unexcused absences, and when five more (a total of ten) unexcused absences would accumulate, a juvenile petition would be filed against the student.

## Chapter Three: Results

A 2 X 2 between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the influence of the legislative mandates concerning attendance on special education students (special education vs. general education) and socioeconomic status (low socioeconomic status vs. not low socioeconomic status) on total absences.

### 2 X 2 ANOVA Results

2 X 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) at the .05 probability level ( $p=.05$ ) was used to determine if a statistically significant difference occurred between special education students and low socioeconomic status students and their regular education and higher socioeconomic peers when it comes to their school attendance. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics software version 20.0.

The amount of days absent for students attending Barbour County Schools served as the dependent measure in a 2 (special education status) X 2 (socioeconomic status) ANOVA. Significant main effects were found for those students who were designated as special education  $F(1, .342) = 84.782, p = .000$ . There was not a significant main effect for low socioeconomic status students  $F(1, .303) = 1.853, p = .174$ . The special education status X low socioeconomic status interaction was not significant  $F(1, .551) = .299, p = .585$ . Students who were classified special education ( $M = 16.040, SD = 18.001$ ) had significantly higher absences than those students who were not classified as special education ( $M = 12.74, SD = 14.348$ ). The same trend was not found between



socioeconomic status, such that low socioeconomic status students ( $M=12.44$ ,  $SD = 13.250$ ) and those students of higher socioeconomic status ( $M = 12.74$ ,  $SD = 14.348$ ).

Based on the 2 X 2 ANOVA results, the research hypothesis that a difference will be noted in the attendance of special education students when compared to their peers who are not designated special education or low socioeconomic status is accepted. The research hypothesis that a difference will be noted in the attendance of low socioeconomic status students when compared to their peers who are not designated special education or low socioeconomic status is rejected. The null hypothesis that a difference will not be noted in the attendance of special education students when compared to their peers who are not designated special education or low socioeconomic status is rejected. This research has failed to reject the null hypothesis that a difference will not be noted in the attendance of low socioeconomic status students when compared to their peers who are not designated special education or low socioeconomic status.

## **Chapter Four: Discussion**

Much research has been conducted concerning attendance and students of low socioeconomic status. In their study, Zhang, et al. ( 2007) found that compared to other first referrals to the juvenile justice system, those referred for truancy tend to be more financially impoverished, with a relatively higher percentage from families making less than \$15,000 per year. Although some studies are available addressing the connection between chronic absenteeism and achievement, a search of academic journals did not reveal any research addressing attendance of students designated as special education.

This study examined the issue of attendance for the populations of low socioeconomic status students and special education students in one rural school district (Barbour County) in the state of West Virginia. Recently, the West Virginia legislature, along with the court systems, has taken notice of the problem school systems are having concerning school attendance. In response to these concerns, the West Virginia Legislature in 2010 made significant changes to the attendance mandates that school systems were required to follow. Barbour County Schools, where this study was conducted, have met and exceeded these requirements in order to improve the amount of time students spend in attendance.

As previously mentioned, many studies have been conducted that have concluded that students of low socioeconomic status have greater attendance problems than that of their peers that are not designated as being low socioeconomic status. Sparks (2010b)

indicated that the lower the family income, the higher the rate of absenteeism. In Baltimore's high poverty neighborhoods, the percentage of students who miss more than a month of school is 55% (Balfanz, et.al., 2007). The economic trend in Barbour County has remained primarily consistent for years in which the data for this thesis have been collected with the exception of the last year this data were collected. The number of students classified as low socioeconomic status in Barbour County Schools are as follows: 2006-2007--30.55%; 2007-2008--38.20%; 2008-2009--38.51% ; 2009- 2010- 34.72% ; 2010-2011--20.59%. The recent decrease in the number of low socioeconomic students is likely the result of a recent increase of employment within the coal mining and healthcare industries. Results from this research revealed that this has not been the case for Barbour County Schools. Students who are of low socioeconomic status did not have any greater attendance problems than those who were not considered low socioeconomic status. The difference in findings between this rural area and its urban research counterpart concerning low socioeconomic status is likely due to the value system that exists within this rural community. Although families in this county come from disadvantaged economic conditions, they continue to value education.

This study also revealed information concerning the attendance of students who are receiving special education. Results from this study indicated that students in Barbour County Schools who are receiving special education services are absent more than their general education peers. It is suspected that those who are having the most attendance problems are within the learning disability, other health impairment, mental retardation and emotional disturbance rather than those that are considered to be in the low-incidence designations. It is hypothesized that families that have students who fall

within low incidence designations place more value on the services that the school provides their child, resulting in fewer attendance problems. These results are especially concerning when considering previous research indicating low-achieving students who displayed a significant rise in absenteeism at the start of the middle grades were much more likely than other low-achieving students to never graduate (Balfanz, et.al., 2007). Attendance for students designated as special education is especially important as they face various challenges within the classroom. As teachers maintain the quick pace required to meet the content standard objects required by the state department, students who are academically struggling often get left behind making any absences detrimental. As students continue to progress through the grades, the gap between special education students and their general education peers grows larger which can create feelings of discouragement. Their discouragement could then become another reason for the student to engage in chronic absenteeism.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Data collection procedures may have served as a limitation to this study. The attendance data were gathered by individual teachers in the absence of the researcher. Without the researcher being present, there is no definite way of knowing if every teacher recorded the absences of each student every day. Delimitations of this study include that the researcher only used one rural school district in the state of West Virginia, and participants may not fully represent the general population.

## **Implications for Future Study**

This study revealed that, despite contradictory research, a difference did not occur between low socioeconomic status students and their peers who did not share the same economic status when it comes to school attendance. It did, however, reveal that special education students are absent more than their general peers. Therefore, the current study should be replicated and expanded to include other schools within the state to gain a more comprehensive picture of attendance within these populations. Varying studies should also be completed that address special education status and attendance in order to increase knowledge in the subject area. It would likely be beneficial to study the attendance of special education students in relation to their special education eligibility category. Because it is hypothesized that this research did not follow the pattern of previous research, it is suggested that studies providing insight into the reasons for attendance discrepancies between urban and rural students with low socioeconomic status would be beneficial.

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Table 1

*Summary of 2 X 2 Analysis of Variance*

<u>Designation</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Low Socioeconomic Status	12.44	13.250
Higher Socioeconomic Status	12.74	14.348
Special Education	16.040	18.001
General Education	12.74	14.348



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Education

2010-Current Marshall University South Charleston, WV  
School Psychology  
Ed.S Candidate in School Psychology  
Graduate May 2012

2004-2007 Marshall University South Charleston, WV  
MA Counseling  
MA School Counseling.

1999-2002 Fairmont State University Fairmont, WV  
**BS Psychology/Criminal Justice**

Professional Credentials

Licensed Professional Counselor- West Virginia Counselors Association License Number 1969.  
Certified School Counselor- West Virginia Department of Education

Professional experience

2011-Current Preston County Schools Kingwood, WV  
**Student Interventionist/School Psychology Intern**  
Psychoeducational Testing  
GAS Data  
Group Counseling  
Individual Counseling  
Drop-out prevention  
Assessment  
Development of Individualized Positive Behavior Plans  
Staff Development  
Crisis Intervention  
Home Visiting  
Family Assistance  
Academic/Behavior Consultation  
Attendance

SAT Meeting Attendance  
IEP Meeting Attendance  
MDT Meeting Attendance  
Conducted Professional Trainings

2009-2011      Barbour County Schools                      Philippi, WV

**Student Interventionist/Social Worker**

Group Counseling  
Individual Counseling  
Drop-out prevention  
Assessment  
Development of Individualized Positive Behavior Plans  
Staff Development  
Crisis Intervention  
Home Visiting  
Family Assistance  
Academic/Behavior Consultation  
Attendance  
SAT Meeting Attendance  
IEP Meeting Attendance  
MDT Meeting Attendance  
Conducted Professional Trainings

2008-2010      Barbour County Health Department      Philippi, WV

**Counselor**

Individual Counseling  
Marriage Counseling  
Play Therapy  
Case Management  
Crisis Intervention

2007-Current      Fairmont State College                      Fairmont, WV

Adjunct Professor  
Instructor in Psychology Courses

2007-2008      Appalachian Community Health      Elkins, WV

**Director of Youth Crisis Shelter**

Supervision of shelter employees  
Management of budget  
Individual Counseling  
Group Counseling  
Home Assessments

Referral Review  
Multidisciplinary Team Meetings  
Crisis Intervention

2003 - 2007                      NCWVCAA Head Start                      Fairmont, WV

**Family Educator**

Home visiting

Family and community partnerships

Providing developmentally appropriate activities

Completing assessments

Assisting families with access to community services

Classroom experience

Supervision of program assistants

References available upon request