

## Why Come to School? Learning from Middle School Students' Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism

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**INTRODUCTION:** Chronic absenteeism is a long known barrier to educational success and academic achievement (McClusky, Bynum & Patchin, 2004). While governing agencies have established policies and standards for attendance, schools have implemented several interventions to address chronic absenteeism (Kearney & Gracyk, 2014) and none of them have turned the tide on this growing social issue. What remains elusive is an understanding of students' awareness of absenteeism and its consequences, what factors they identify as contributing to the issue and possible solutions to improve attendance.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of middle school students regarding their attendance and precluding barriers.

**METHODS:** Seventeen students from two middle schools in Kansas participated in the study. The participants were identified by school administration as at-risk for chronic absenteeism. This study employed semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interviews were 15-30 minutes in length.

**RESULTS:** Study participants came from ethnically and economically diverse backgrounds. Their families differed in structure, parental roles and degree of extended family engagement in student lives. They perceived schooling and education as a critical resource for personal, financial, and academic success and independence. Participants identified multiple barriers that have negatively impacted their attendance. The most frequently disrupting factors to one's attendance were student concerns with mental health and illness of family members. Since schools were not located within walking distance, transportation was also emphasized as an issue for being absent.

**CONCLUSION:** Extenuating circumstances related to students' physical and mental health and expectations to provide healthcare, emotional and financial support to family members unfavorably contributed to one's status of at-risk of being chronically absent. Despite diverse and economically suppressed family backgrounds, students highly valued their education. They strived to attend the school regularly "[b]ecause it's fun and I get to learn, and I don't want to be at home because it's boring and my brother is annoying".