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What Can We Do to Help? Understanding Policies and Practices of Schools Related to Unexcused Absences

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WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP? UNDERSTANDING POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF
SCHOOLS RELATED TO UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Shelly K. Masur

May 2024

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP? UNDERSTANDING POLICIES AND
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by

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ABSTRACT

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP? UNDERSTANDING POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF SCHOOLS RELATED TO UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

by Shelly K. Masur

School absences figure prominently in student success. It makes sense that students who are in school have a better chance of learning and growing and when they aren't there, they don't benefit from what schools have to offer. But when absences are marked unexcused the consequences could be significant, further hindering school success for students. Looking at racial dimensions of attendance could provide an important element to our understanding. This study reviews the literature on student attendance, the history of attendance policy, racial and ethnic dimensions of student attendance policy and how it is applied, and the impact of leadership on addressing disproportionate impacts of policies and practices on students of color. To accomplish this, the study employs case study method that includes a presentation and analysis of attendance and school climate data in one school district and select schools within that district that have absences marked unexcused at lower rates than the state. From the initial data, interviews with school and district staff revealed how attendance policy is applied and the type of communication students and families receive. Findings include significant alignment among the staff to be supportive of families, meet their needs, and communicate in a positive manner. This positive alignment points to key practices school districts could employ to support students and address absences being marked unexcused.

DEDICATION

This work we are about is as important a work as there is to be done. We must do it with courage, and with vision, but we must also do it with good theory, deep experiences and practice...and some grace.

W. Patrick Dolan

This dissertation is dedicated to all the people who work every day to make our public school system the best it can be. They work under difficult conditions, are the targets of frequent criticism, and are paid way less than they deserve. Yet the vast majority come to school every day with the goal of helping students learn, instilling joy, and making it possible for children to live the lives they desire. Our children, our families, our communities, and our democracy benefit every day and for that I am grateful. I, my husband, and my own children have benefited tremendously from public education and the people who make it all happen. Thank you.

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While writing a dissertation can be a singular process, when you emerge from your computer, you find a whole community that has made that focus and learnings possible. I am beyond grateful to my community that includes people listed here and others who make my life better. First, to my committee who gave their time, input, and support. Arnie, you knew when to push and when to let me forge ahead on my own, and you didn't give up even when I tried. Clea, your expertise and inspiration are the basis for this study and your feedback made it better. Anji, my other public health and education person, your point of view was critical. My work teams, past and present, thank you for your patience, encouragement, and space. You gave me endless support and encouragement with a healthy dose of time – that invaluable resource. Finland Walkers there is no way I would have made it through this program without you. You made me laugh and made me think. We enjoyed the sunset at 1 a.m. and complained as we wrote at 6 a.m. Can't wait to meet you in Paso with our regalia on. Many friends supported and encouraged me, but Beth gets the gold star for getting me back on track and for being a reader. Sisters & Mom, thanks for asking about my dissertation, for all the emojis, and for being patient when I had to go to class or write instead of play. And to my family it's hard to even know where to start. You helped me in so many ways. Julia, you gave me the teacher's perspective and reminded me why I wanted to do this. Jacob, you ran with me, encouraged me, and made me laugh. Noah, you helped me figure out statistics, talked about my spreadsheets, and told me when I couldn't do something. Josh, you kept me fed, kept me sane, and kept my technology working. I love you all and am so grateful for you.

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Chapter 1: Attendance, Racial Disparities, and the Impact on Students' Education

According to Katz (1976), in the beginning, public education in the US was intended to be a buffer for parental neglect by inculcating students with Puritan values and boosting the economic wellbeing of the colony. As the movement for common schools grew in the late 1800s and early 1900s, public education was expected to play a role in asserting the dominant culture of the U.S., including “assimilat[ing] the immigrants but also transform[ing] them into virtuous, productive American citizens” (p. 15). These foundational concepts, and attempts to disrupt them, continue to play out in curriculum wars, magnet and charter schools, and language acquisition.

Beyond expectations around the training of students, schools have also been asked and expected to remedy a variety of social ills, including poverty and the effects of systemic racism. For example, the growth of the community schools movement was, in part, born out of the desire to address societal issues, “Leonard Covello at Benjamin Franklin High School in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City focused on the school as a community center and a catalyst for community development and democratic neighborhood change” (Blank et al., 2023). Public schools in the United States have also been seen as, and expected to provide, a path out of poverty. In contrast, citing the U.S. Department in 2011, Wages (2015) pointed out that “low-income students continue to be disadvantaged, lacking a quality education with rigorous courses to prepare them for college and the services that will help them post-high school” (p. xi). Further, Saporito and Sohoni (2007) found that despite these stated aspirations, schools reflected external structures and societal beliefs, particularly when it comes to poverty and race. The authors found greater concentrations of poverty in

neighborhood schools than would be predicted by their neighborhood boundaries, that mixed-income neighborhoods further increased concentrations of poverty in schools, and “the difference in poverty concentration between schools and attendance boundaries is much greater for non-white [*sic*] than white [*sic*] students” (p. 1246).

Racial disparities in education manifest themselves in a variety of ways familiar to educational researchers and practitioners, among them, attendance, grades, graduation rates, and suspensions (Chang & Balfanz, 2016; Orfield et al., 2004). Reflecting systems designed to meet the needs of the dominant White culture while failing to recognize the community cultural capital brought by students of color, and low-income students, the public education system as a whole continues to struggle with seeing itself as a vehicle of equity while perpetuating structures that devalue students who don’t fit the mold of the dominant culture (Tyack, 1992). To successfully educate students of color, in particular Black and Latinx and other racially marginalized students, schools should examine practices and policies that support low-income students, students of color, and dismantle racist systems (Duchesneau, 2020).

In many ways the expectations of public schools go beyond the capacity of schools to meet them. Despite these pressures, schools have the opportunity to understand their role in perpetuating systems that have historically discriminated and excluded children of different races (Buenavista, 2010; Donato, 1997; Gonzalez, 1990, as cited in Pedraza & Rivera, 2005; Levine & Levine, 2014; Liu et al., 2015). By taking action to understand how their policies and practices are reflective of, and perpetuate systems designed for the dominant culture,

they could also make the needed changes to better support students and become more equity focused.

Importance of Attendance and Racial Dimensions of Attendance

Beyond the importance of attendance generally for student success (Balfanz et al., 2007; Ehrlich et al., 2018), over the past 20 years an examination of frequency of missing school, or the study of *chronic absence*, has come to further clarify, define, and understand the value of attendance for all students (Chang & Romero, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Chronic absence, defined as missing ten percent or more of the school days, has risen to prominence due to extensive research that has considered the impacts for students of all backgrounds and effectively raised awareness about the importance of school attendance (Applied Survey Research [ASR], 2011; Balfanz et al., 2007; Ginsburg et al., 2014). California school data show consistently higher rates of chronic absence among Black, American Indian/Alaska Native and Pacific Islander students with Latinx students consistently having higher rates than White and Asian students. As such, those groups of students experience greater impacts from absences and potentially from policies and practices that contribute to those absences.

Absence, Unexcused Absence, and Truancy

Chronic absence has remained agnostic to whether an absence is excused or unexcused. While excessive excused absences do contribute to poor outcomes for students as described above, and chronic absence remains significant, the consequences of having an absence marked unexcused for students and their families in California is even greater. Teachers are not required to provide make up work to students whose absences are marked unexcused. Too many unexcused absences could result in exclusion from school activities or sports.

Further, in California having three or more absences marked unexcused classifies that student as truant. Continued truancy could lead to interactions with the court system, fines, and in the most extreme situations jail time (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.). Using publicly available data, McNeely et al. (2023) conducted an analysis of schools across California to understand who was marked excused or unexcused. The results showed that students of color, particularly Black and Latinx students were more likely to have an absence marked unexcused, regardless of socio-economic status. Further understanding how schools understand and focus on absences, particularly those labeled unexcused, could provide insight into promising practices that other schools could consider adopting.

Significance of the Problem

The study sought to understand the practices and policies in a Kindergarten through 8th grade school district that generally had higher attendance rates than the State and lower rates of absences marked unexcused for all groups of students. By recognizing and delineating these policies and practices, the results could provide a model for schools that wish to address absenteeism, or any racial dimensions of absences labeled unexcused.

Attendance has been shown to affect multiple dimensions of student success, including social emotional preparedness, reading at grade level, academic achievement, and high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; ASR, 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008; Ehrlich et al., 2018). Conversely absences marked unexcused could lead to consequences for students that include lack of access to make up work, exclusion from student activities, referrals to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB), or in some cases contact with the court system (Ricks & Esthappan, 2018). These outcomes could all have detrimental effects

on students for a variety of reasons (Monahan et al., 2014). The magnitude of these impacts provides an urgency in understanding how schools and districts are addressing attendance, labeling absences unexcused, and any disproportionate racial outcomes as a result of these actions.

While attendance has often been examined through the lens of the student and the family, i.e., identifying characteristics of the students and families, such as racial identity or socioeconomic status (ASR, 2011; Schoeneberger, 2012), more research is needed to understand the role that schools play in decreasing absences, in particular, marking absences unexcused. Some of the research focuses on solutions, which remain student-centered, include raising awareness about the importance of attendance among families (Rogers et al., 2017). Other research addresses both behavioral aspects of school attendance and actions taken by the schools (Balfanz et al., 2007).

Although McNeely et al. (2023) demonstrated racial disparity in unexcused absences in 85% of schools in California, other than a review of websites and school handbooks in selected schools, the authors did not go beyond the data to understand the policies and practices of the schools in the 15% that did not have disparities. They recommended further study in this area. Given the implications of unexcused absences, from lost academic opportunity to potential interaction with law enforcement (McNeely et al., 2021), students, families, schools, and communities could benefit from eliminating racial disparities and ensuring school attendance.

Systemic racism and the dominant culture reflected in schools has affected schooling for students of color and low-income students in multiple ways. If we hope to address and

combat the effects and structures of the dominant culture and systemic racism, and the impacts on marking students unexcused, understanding how schools are realizing some ways to do so could provide models for other schools to implement and more opportunity for students to succeed.

Research Questions, Methodology, and Site Selection

The research questions sought to understand both what is happening in the district and schools and how it happens.

Research Questions

- RQ1: What are the school climate survey results of selected low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
- RQ2: What are the attendance policies and practices of low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
- RQ3: How are the attendance policies and practices communicated to families and students?

After understanding rates of absences and differences in the district and by school site, Research Question 1 asked whether schools with lower rates of absences marked unexcused have higher school climate favorability which was used along with Research Questions 2 and 3 to understand how the relatively low rates of absences and absences marked unexcused for all racial/ethnic groups could be explained.

Methodology

The study used a case study design. It employed descriptive statistics to answer Research Question 1 using quantitative district-provided data. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews and document review to answer Research Questions 2 and 3. The interviews were semi-structured, and documents were reviewed to both confirm results and to understand style and substance of communication. Without conducting a tone analysis, communication was described as friendly or supportive, neutral, or punitive. The qualitative results were then coded to develop themes and make assertions regarding the content. Findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Site Selection and Sample

The study was conducted in a Northern California school district that largely met the definition of a *bright spot* provided by McNeely et al. (2023). A review of school attendance data from the 2021-22 school year in Data Quest showed this district met the first two criteria for a bright spot. It also had a diverse student population both racially and socio-economically. Demographics and attendance data by racial group are shown in Table 1. The district's average number of days absent was 11.4, just under the 11.7 threshold set by McNeely et al., and 24.5% of absences were marked unexcused, under the 33.8% used by the researchers. The final criterion McNeely et al. used, no more than 2/10 of a standard deviation between any racial group and White students, was not used to select the district.

Table 1*Student Demographic & Absence Data for the School District in 2021-2022 School Year*

Ethnicity	Black	Asian	Hispanic or Latinx	Filipino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or more	Native American	Not reported
% of Population	2.6%	19.6%	36.8%	24.3%	1%	10.2%	5.0%	.2%	.3%
Number of Students	162	1223	2292	1513	60	636	309	14	19
Average # of Days Absent	15	8	14	11	15	12	11	N/A	N/A
% Absences marked unexcused	33%	18%	29%	17%	25%	29%	21%	N/A	N/A

I was personally familiar with the district and some of the district administrators, which facilitated initial communication and entry to the field. After an initial discussion with the superintendent about the scope and goal of the study, the superintendent agreed to allow me to conduct research in the district.

The specific school sites were selected by examining attendance and racial group data for each school in the district to determine what, if any, differences occurred among the schools with regards to absence rates, absences marked unexcused, and among racial groups.

Differences among school sites were noted and included in Chapter 4. To be included in the study schools had to have an overall absence rate equal to or less than the district average of 25%, absences marked unexcused at equal to or lower than the district average for all racial groups, and be considered a low SES school by having 50% or more of the students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. Three elementary schools met these criteria with one exception where one group had a rate of absences marked unexcused of 26%. One middle school that served a large proportion of the students in the selected elementary schools and

met the socio-economic criteria was added to ensure that the full range of grades in the district was represented in the sample.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examined policies and practices of one district and selected schools within that district. The sample varied in rates of absences marked unexcused and differences among different racial/ethnic groups. Neighborhood and family characteristics that may impact absences in general, and absences that are considered unexcused, were beyond the scope of the study. Because it was a case study, results may not be generalizable to other schools or districts with different student demographics or different patterns of racial differences. External validity or to what extent could the results be generalized to other schools and districts, required an understanding of the demographics of the students. The district had a lower percentage of White and Latinx students than the average across the state and a higher percentage of Filipino students than the average across the state. Within the county, the demographics were similarly disparate. Therefore, generalizing to districts with higher percentages of White, Latinx, or Black students should be approached with caution. Still, the policies and practices found to contribute to low rates of absences marked unexcused may apply to other schools and districts.

Researchers must also consider internal validity. Johnson (1997) described three types of internal validity for qualitative research: descriptive or the “factual accuracy” (p. 1); interpretive or whether the researcher accurately interpreted the data; and theoretical which referred to the appropriate selection of the theory to explain the results. Ensuring internal validity requires diligent reflection by the researcher. To address factual accuracy in

interviews, the study included transcription and interviews coded by themes. Interpretive validity is most subject to researcher bias and according to Johnson can be addressed through participant feedback. As such, the results of data collection and findings along with a summary of the interpretation were shared with participants. In addition to addressing potential validity issues, this approach also supports and reflects Veck and Hall's (2020) exhortation to focus on more inclusive research in education. Finally, theoretical validity can be addressed through *theory triangulation*, or examining multiple theories or data points to explain the topic being studied. Additionally, the study triangulates among quantitative and qualitative data to understand areas of convergence and divergence.

Assumptions, Background, and Role of the Researcher in the Study

As a White woman, former school board member, former CEO of a statewide education non-profit connected to the California Department of Education (CDE), a product of public education, and a parent of children who are products of public education, I brought my positionality and personal experiences to the study. As a school board member, I set policy for the district. In particular, I chaired the Policy Committee of our district for close to ten years, which gave me a particular lens on policy and how I saw the role of the school board in a district. Being a school board member and a former CEO that worked closely with school districts across the state and with the Superintendent of Public Instruction may have introduced a power dynamic into some of the interviews as well as into district inquiries at the outset of the study. However, knowing the superintendents I contacted also facilitated communication and came with a level of trust based on prior contact.

I attended multiple public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade and did miss school due to various family reasons which, in this current environment, would be considered unexcused. My lens also included how my own children were treated when they received unexcused absence notices. Overall, I have experienced all the previous descriptions as a White woman. Therefore, my perspective came from living in the dominant culture which required me to consider that lens and reflect on it throughout the course of the study.

These experiences could also impact the lens through which I viewed both the quantitative and qualitative data as well as my selection of the school sites and understanding of their workings. This may include any racialized or cultural expectations and how I have “com[e] to know, know, and experience[e] the world” (Milner, 2007, p. 338).

Initial Definitions

- *Average Daily Attendance (ADA)*: The CDE defines it as “the total days of student attendance divided by the total number of days of student instruction” (CDE, n.d.).
With over 1,000 school districts in California, only 118 did not receive their funding based on ADA at the time of the study.
- *Bright Spot*: One that has higher than average levels of attendance, less than 11.7 days absent, lower than average levels of unexcused absences, less than 33% of all absences, and disparity is less than 2/10 of a standard deviation between White students and comparison racial/ethnic group of students (McNeely et al., 2023).
- *Chronic absence*: Missing ten percent or more of the school days in a school year.
- *Community School*: “Both a place and set of partnerships between the school and other community resources...[with] an integrated focus on academics, health and

- social services, youth and community development along with community engagement” (Coalition for Community Schools, 2020).
- *Education Code (Ed Code)*: State laws that govern all K-12 education in California. The laws are passed by the legislature and signed by the Governor. School boards and County Offices of Education are responsible for ensuring compliance with Ed Code. In California if an action is not expressly prohibited by Ed Code school districts are able to take action at the local level.
 - *Excused absence*: Valid reason to be absent from school as defined by policy.
 - *Racial disparities*: The imbalances and incongruities between the treatment of racial groups, including economic status, income, housing options, societal treatment, safety, and myriad other aspects of life and society (Howard University School of Law, 2023).
 - *School Attendance Review Board (SARB)*: A state-mandated group of adults representing “youth-serving agencies, help truant or recalcitrant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources” (CDE, n.d.).
 - *School climate*: As defined by Wang & Degol (2016) school climate has four dimensions “academic, community, safety, and institutional environment” (p. 322) and “represents virtually every aspect of the school experience” (p. 315). Schools can use one of a variety of surveys to measure student, staff, and family perceptions of school climate. In this study, the school district uses the Panorama Survey.

- *School to prison pipeline*: Punitive school policies and procedures that result in students increasing contact with law enforcement and likelihood of incarceration (Wald & Losen, 2003).
- *Systemic racism*: Policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization, and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).
- *Truant*: Three or more absences marked unexcused or being late by 30 minutes or more without a school-accepted excuse.
- *Unexcused absence*: Missing school for reasons not accepted by the school as defined by policy.

Summary

The study's focus on absences marked unexcused offers an additional lens through which educators can understand how their practices can improve student outcomes. The following chapters will examine the literature, describe the study's methodology, present findings for the research questions, and provide a discussion and analysis of the findings.

The literature review covers the importance of attendance, including the impacts of the pandemic, the history and racial dimensions of attendance, modern attendance policies, the role of leadership, and theoretical approaches to the study. The methodology chapter covers site selection, how I entered the field, a description of the research methods, data sources, methods of analysis and an exploration of ethics and reliability. In Chapter 4 I provide findings for the research questions which cover district and school data for absences marked

unexcused, selection of the schools for further study, description of the policies and practices as well as communication methods. These findings were gleaned from interviews and document review. In the final chapter I provide an interpretation and implications of the findings by aligning the results with themes in the literature. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further study and suggestions for educators.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

School Attendance: A Complex and Compelling Issue

Over the past decade school attendance has received sharper attention thanks to research dating back almost 20 years showing its impact on student learning and success (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; ASR, 2011; Chang & Romero, 2008). Additionally, research has examined racial dimensions of attendance and on the characterization of absences as excused or unexcused (McNeely et al., 2021, 2023). This chapter explores the literature related to school attendance. It begins by highlighting the importance of attendance and the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student attendance. Next it explores the history of compulsory attendance in public education and the historical racial dimensions of public education and attendance. The chapter then reviews modern attendance policies, including the impacts of labeling absences as excused or unexcused, as well as racial disparities in those domains. These explorations lead to a description the role of leadership in addressing policy impacts on students, particularly as they apply to race/ethnicity, and a discussion of theories that guide the study. The chapter closes with a summary and discussion of gaps in the literature that warrant further study.

The Importance of School Attendance

Intuitively parents and educators can understand the importance of school attendance. It makes sense that when students are in classrooms, they are more likely to learn and gain the skills and knowledge needed. Without exposure to the curricular content, students would have a more difficult time gaining academic knowledge and developing the social skills that come from being a part of a school community. Not only does it seem right, but researchers

have also documented the importance of school attendance using the proxy of NAEP scores. Ginsburg et al. (2014) analyzed scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress comparing them with student self-reported school absence. Their findings showed:

Students reporting missing 3 or more days of school in the prior month had lower average NAEP scores in reading and math than students with fewer absences. In fourth grade, the absentee students scored an average 12 points lower on the reading assessment than those with no absences — more than a full grade level on the NAEP achievement scale. In eighth grade, absentee students scored an average 18 points lower on the math assessment. (p. 3)

Similarly, Gottfried (2010) found “positive and statistically significant relationships between student attendance and academic achievement for both elementary and middle school students” (p. 1). Attendance also matters for high school graduation – another measure used to assess student success. Allensworth and Easton (2007) showed freshman attendance to be the most sensitive predictor of future high school graduation and that strong teacher relationships and relevant coursework were the strongest predictors of attendance. Further studies across the country have shown lower graduation rates among students of color, particularly Black students (Orfield et al., 2004), which could relate to data showing higher rates of chronic absence among students of color (Chang & Balfanz, 2016; California School Dashboard [CSD], n.d.).

Beyond the importance of attendance generally, over the past 20 plus years an examination of frequency of missing school, or the study of *chronic absence*, has come to further clarify, define, and understand the value of attendance for all students (Chang & Romero, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Chronic absence, currently defined as missing ten percent or more of the school days, rose to prominence due to extensive research that

considered the impacts for students of all backgrounds and effectively raised awareness about the importance of school attendance (ASR, 2011; Balfanz et al., 2007; Ginsberg et al., 2014).

Chang and Romero (2008) found that starting as early as preschool, attendance patterns began to take shape and those children who were chronically absent from early education programs tended to continue to be chronically absent. Even as early as preschool, academic progress could be affected by too many absences. Ansari and Purtell (2018) demonstrated that three- and four-year old children enrolled in Head Start programs and who were chronically absent, not only exhibited fewer gains in math and literacy but also missed out on the documented benefits of a Head Start program, erasing the gains that could have been realized by attending regularly. Further, Ehrlich et al. (2018) found chronically absent pre-kindergartners were less likely to show academic and social readiness for kindergarten, that chronically absent pre-kindergarten students continued to be chronically absent in the elementary grades, and that those students required reading intervention by third grade. Third grade reading scores have been shown to have a correlation with future high school success and graduation (Lesnick et al., 2010). Only 17% of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade read at grade level by third grade (ASR, 2011). The impacts appeared to accrue more dramatically for children living in poverty as “the negative impact of a similar increase in kindergarten absences is 75 percent larger for a low SES compared to an average SES child” (Ready, 2010).

Attendance patterns tend to continue into middle and high school further exacerbating barriers to student success, often leading to disengagement and dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2007; Schoeneberger, 2012). For example, a study of urban high schools in

Philadelphia found that “Eighth-grade attendance is a powerful predictor of nonpromotion [sic] in ninth grade. Each additional percentage point increase in attendance decreases the odds of repeating ninth grade by 5%” (Neild & Balfanz, 2006, p. 131). Research has also shown that non-promotion could lead to disengagement and failure to graduate from high school leading to a lifetime of lower earnings and increased likelihood of incarceration (Levin et al., 2007).

COVID-19 Impacts on Attendance

Since the beginning of the pandemic school attendance, or lack thereof, grew in significance and in number. Attendance Works (2023) examined the issue, finding that two-thirds of students attended a school where “one in five students in their school was missing almost four weeks of school” (para. 1) according to 2021-22 data from the US Department of Education. This contrasts with pre-pandemic levels where 25% of students attended such a school and equates to 6.5 million more students, or more than the entire public school student population of California, chronically absent than before the pandemic. Gee et al. (2023) reported chronic absenteeism in California more than doubled from 14% in 2020-21 school year to 30% in the 2021-22 school year. On a more positive note, the California School Dashboard showed attendance in the 2022-23 school year did improve over the prior two years. While not yet equal to or lower than pre-pandemic levels, a total of 24.3% students were chronically absent during the 2022-23 school year. This decrease is promising but with almost one-quarter of the students still missing 10 or more days of schooling, the lost learning and access to other services schools can provide, adds up to significant short- and long-term impacts.

Truancy and Unexcused Absences: History of Public Education, Attendance, and Race

The history of excused and unexcused absences as well as truancy starts with the history of compulsory school attendance. Setting a foundation for the modern American public education system, initial attendance laws were enacted in the 1600s by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. To counter perceived parental neglect, the laws focused on the role of the school in raising children with Puritan values and ready to contribute to the economic well-being of the colony (Katz, 1976). Massachusetts continued to lead in its commitment to education by enacting the first official compulsory attendance law in 1852 with the stated goal of combatting child labor. Joining several other states, California first required school attendance for students eight to fourteen in 1874 (California School News Report, n.d.). By 1918 all states enacted some form of compulsory attendance law (Lleras-Muney, 2002). These laws were being passed while the role of schools in society was being debated. As U.S. society was becoming more urban and more diverse, the argument for *common schools* became more intense:

...free publicly supported common schools would unite Christian morality with democratic patriotism; the common school would stamp out the evils of ignorance, crime, vice, and aristocratic privilege; and finally, the common school would not only assimilate the immigrants but also transform them into virtuous, productive American citizens. (Katz, 1976, p. 15)

This commitment to assimilation and morality may have contributed to the dominant culture widely seen in U.S. schools, laying the groundwork for curriculum, school rules and policies, discipline and structure that reflect the original Puritanical views. An educated populace was also seen as critical to democracy and voting. Until the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, only 16 states allowed women to vote, and while Black men had the

right to vote beginning in 1870, they were systematically prevented from voting, as such, the focus remained on White males.

Applying a critical race theory lens to this history may explain historical disinvestment, poor academic outcomes, and general lack of attention, at best, or intentional exclusion at worst for students of color. Critical race theory originated with "...a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 26). The authors posited that critical race theory put forth the tenet that racism is "the way society does business" and that "white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes...for the dominant group" (p. 32). Therefore, it is possible to argue that systemic disinvestment in schools that serve majority students of color was an attempt to maintain power for the dominant or White culture.

Schools typically reflect the dominant culture, and as discussed, grew out of a foundation that focused on that maintenance of that culture. However, given that attendance decisions come out of policies developed by people, and regularly individuals make decisions about whether an absence follows that policy, we must consider that all people have a race lens. Bonilla-Silva (2021) posited that in racialized societies individuals reflect the "*social* nature" (p. 2) of race. Further, the author argued this racial bias is embedded in actual ways people have been organized in schools and neighborhoods, for example. Bonilla-Silva further pointed to the decisions White people make regarding housing, schools, and friends, even when they believe they are being race neutral, that result from living in a White dominant society. Although deciding whether an absence is excused or unexcused does rely on policy,

the California legislature has granted much broader discretion to schools, leaving more room to apply a racialized lens, intentionally or not.

Historically, compulsory attendance laws seem to have been ineffective due to a reliance on the “push-out method of school policy enforcement rather than addressing the underlying issues of truancy and developing ways to keep students in school” (Trujillo, 2006, p. 70). Further, when applying a race lens to historical enforcement, Lleras-Muney (2002) found little to no effect of compulsory attendance on Black male educational attainment while finding significant positive effects on White males. Lleras-Muney speculated that “...blacks [*sic*] were very likely to be exempted by law owing to the lack of schools and school resources (also because blacks [*sic*] were more likely to be poor)” (p. 416). This history reflects a chronic disinvestment in the education of Black children and could be seen in full force during the Great Depression, when the U.S Chamber of Commerce argued the country could not afford universal public education. Those *deserving* could still access education. As a result, massive funding cuts and school closures affected racial minorities particularly hard. “In the mostly rural South, 95 percent of Black Americans of high school age were no longer in school” (Encyclopedia, n.d.).

Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*, legally mandated Black-White segregation meant Black schools not only received lower funding, but also had fewer required school days. For example, Liu et al. (2015) noted that in Alabama in 1931, the state required Black schools to operate for 127 days while it required White schools to run for 159 days. In studying total years of education to examine blood pressure, Liu et al. found that “Because of this, historical racial differences in school term length systematically disadvantaged blacks [*sic*]

and adjustment for years of schooling completed does not fully account for this disadvantage”. Additionally, in the rural South, Black students attended a lower percentage of days (76%) as compared to White students (86%) and were often excused due to pressure from White landowners (Levine & Levine, 2014).

Similarly in California, Mexican-origin children were segregated from White children, albeit through individual decisions of administrators, based on beliefs about mental competence, language ability, and hygiene (Gonzalez, 1990, as cited in Pedraza & Rivera, 2005). Additionally, attendance was not prioritized for Mexican-origin children. Donato (1997) noted that attendance for Mexican migrant children in Texas was 33% versus 75% for White children. Further, school administrators attributed this lack of attendance to “poverty, indifference to education, lack of suitable clothing, and discrimination” (p. 31), while others argued that poor school conditions were the cause of poor attendance. In Colorado the sugar beet industry relied on Mexican migrant workers and the Colorado White House Conference on Child Health and Protection found that in the 1930s schools were not enforcing compulsory attendance laws for these students by asserting that the students were employed by their parents and were helping support the family (Donato, 1997). In La Habra, California schools closed early so children could work in the nut groves.

The literature on the experiences of different groups of students with origins in Asian continent countries is more limited when it comes to describing attendance. Iftikar and Museus (2019) explored the use of critical theory in examining the experiences of different groups of Asian students and posited that the act of lumping all groups of people with Asian origins into one group furthers racialization and White supremacy by erasing the varied

experiences, languages and cultures of this diverse group of people. Further they pointed to the importance of using critical theory to understand the experiences of Asian students in particular, and how the *model minority* myth may have contributed to covering inequities and advancing White supremacy. Teranishi (2002) asserted that “policy makers need to reevaluate how they include and treat APAs because of the great deal of diversity (ethnicity, class, immigrant status, language, and religious background, to name only a few) that has been masked by aggregated racial perspectives” (p. 152). Buenavista (2010), for example examined the experiences of Filipino students, discussing the impact of colonization and exposure to White American culture and pointed to the high dropout rates of Filipinos in California due to a *push out* approach.

As the data compiled in this study shows, California has been disaggregating some groups of Asians and differences do exist in attendance among the different groups, but further study is warranted to understand how schools can meet the different needs of different groups of students.

Modern Attendance Policies

An historical change in the approach to truancy merits further examination. At what point did the change occur such that truancy enforcement applied more to Black students than White students? In California, the school funding system may have had an impact on stricter enforcement of attendance. The majority of California schools rely on state funding, especially those that serve a higher concentration of low-income students and students of color. California’s current school funding system attempts an equity-focus, in that the State directs additional funding to school districts serving low-income students, English learner

students, and foster students on top of the base amount. First the base amount a district receives based on average daily attendance (ADA) is calculated, with the additional funding calculated as a percentage of the base amount. As such, districts that rely on state funding lose money when students don't attend. Therefore, one could make the argument that school districts are incentivized to ensure students attend. However, some disagreement remains about whether this policy has incentivized districts to ensure all students attend. Frequent discussions about addressing ADA and its connection to school funding, especially among attendance advocates, go back and forth (personal communications). The debate centers on what actions schools would take if not incentivized by extra funding. However, the California School Dashboard currently shows chronic absence and attendance data still reveal racial disparities in attendance, making the monetary incentive argument difficult to sustain.

Another area to examine in understanding differential application of truancy and the historical change may be the criminalization of young people and people of color during the *just say no* and the subsequent *zero-tolerance* and *three strikes* periods of the Reagan and Clinton presidencies. The increased criminalization and incarceration of Black men during these periods resulted in significant increases in the prison population. A 2004 report found that "African Americans make up 6.5% of the population, but they make up nearly 30% of the prison population, 36% of second strikers, and 45% of third strikers" (Ehlers et al., 2004, p. 2). Further the authors found that Latinx males were incarcerated at a higher rate than the White population. Mirroring the prison population increase, the Juvenile Court Statistics Report (Puzzanchera & Sickmund, 2008) found that "Between 1995 and 2007, the number of

petitioned truancy cases processed by juvenile courts increased 67% (from 34,100 to 57,000)” (p.72). This may also reflect the oft cited association between truancy and other crimes (Garry, 1996). Having this lens may mean that compared to White young people, young people of color who are seen outside of school during the school day may be more likely to interact with law enforcement furthering the criminalization narrative. Weber (2020) posited that students pushed into the juvenile justice system due to truancy may begin to see themselves as delinquent and “may increasingly behave in accordance with this self-image” (p. 13). Further adults “may treat them more harshly (known as the ‘labeling’ effect)” (p. 14).

This perception may also be reflected in schools which, until very recently, incorporated zero-tolerance policies for certain infractions, which seemed to be applied unequally. Simson (2014) examined racial disparities in school discipline first describing the scope of the problem. The author described several studies over many years which found Black boys were more likely to be suspended, referred to the office, and suspended when sent to the office (Losen, 2011; Skiba, 2014, as cited in Simson, 2014). Similarly, Peguero & Shekarkhar (2011) found that while Latinx students were not more likely to “misbehave” than White students, “third-generation Latino and Latina students are more likely to be punished”. Regarding Asian students, Nguyen et al. (2019) disaggregated data for the different groups and found that Pacific Islander students were almost twice as likely as White students to be disciplined.

Excused Vs. Unexcused Absences

In general, measuring chronic absence is agnostic to the characterization of an absence, or whether it is considered excused or unexcused. However, in California, as well as across

the country, whether an absence is considered excused or unexcused could have serious consequences for students, as multiple absences marked unexcused may result in a student being classified as truant. Considered a status offense, truancy laws can only be applied to minors. Current California law requires attendance for children ages six to eighteen (CDE, n.d.). Updates to the original compulsory attendance law included excused and unexcused absences, allowable reasons for both, consequences of unexcused absences, truancy, and more recently tracking chronic absence.

Long the purview of district attorneys, police, and juvenile justice, the CDE via a legislative definition in 2012 defines truancy as “a student missing more than 30 minutes of instruction without an excuse [unexcused] three times during the school year” (CDE, n.d.). When this happens, that student “must be classified as a truant and reported to the proper school authority”. In most cases the first time a student is reported truant, families receive a warning notice with a series of actions, including meeting with school staff. However, if the student repeats this pattern, reporting could spur a series of actions that may be detrimental to both students and families. In addition to not receiving credit for schoolwork and being kept out of school activities, these actions may include prosecution of the parents and referral of the student “to a probation officer or district attorney mediation program” (CDE, n.d.). Given the potentially serious nature of the consequences, the well-documented *school to prison pipeline* (Wald & Losen, 2003) and its disproportionate effect on Black and Latinx students, it is critical to ask questions about race and how it is associated with truancy, unexcused absences, and the futures of the affected children.

Studies of the racial dimensions of unexcused absences do show differences. A 2021 study by McNeely et al. found that Black students were overrepresented in unexcused absences with 24% of absences considered unexcused while only 13% of absences for White students were considered unexcused. The authors also found that Latinx students and Asian students were “approximately 50% more likely than White students to have their school absences designated unexcused” (p.11). Further, in 2023 McNeely et al. examined publicly available data in California and found 85% of schools showed racial disparities in unexcused absences for Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Native American students, with Black students experiencing the largest disparity. Given the potential for harmful consequences, understanding how a specific district addresses unexcused absences could contribute to the literature and provide guidance for other districts.

As such, this paper considered rates of unexcused absences in an identified district and whether there were racial or SES differences in the district and within specific schools. Further it looked at school climate and related data to understand whether there was a relationship among these data. Finally, it considered the stated absence policies and practices of the district and selected schools as well as how those were communicated to families and students.

Racial Disparities in School Attendance

The California School Dashboard tracks chronic absence or missing ten percent or more of school for any reason. Levels are coded by color with red being the lowest performance, followed by orange, yellow, green and blue at the highest performance. For 2019, data showed that Black students were most likely to be chronically absent, showing up in the red

category. Hispanic [*sic*], Filipino Pacific Islander and two or more races similarly had higher levels of chronic absence (orange) while Asian and White students still had high levels (yellow) but the lowest of all subgroups. The 2022 data showed all student groups, except Asian and Filipino, in the “very high” category (CSD, n.d.). Other studies have documented higher levels of chronic absence in high poverty schools (Balfanz et al., 2007). As noted, measuring chronic absence does not measure whether an absence is marked excused versus unexcused. It only considers whether a child attends school, not whether the schools deem the absence excused versus unexcused.

McNeely et al. (2023) examined racial disparities in absences marked unexcused by analyzing excused versus unexcused absence data in California to understand whether some groups of students were more likely than others to be marked unexcused. The authors found data from the CDE that showed racial disparities in assigning unexcused absences for Black, Hispanic [*sic*] American Indian, and Pacific Islander students, with “Black students...substantially more likely than all other racial and ethnic groups to have their absences unexcused” (p. 12). Further the authors found that although students of color were more likely to live in poverty, socio-economic status cannot explain disparities. If that were the case:

... Black and White students who were socioeconomically disadvantaged would have similar proportions of absences unexcused... [however] large disparities in unexcused absenteeism persisted within each socioeconomic strata in the 2021-22 school year for Black, Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Hispanic students compared to White students. [Further] racial and racial and ethnic disparities in labeling absences cannot be solely explained by socioeconomic disadvantage (p. 14).

Understanding what happens when schools refer a student to the courts could help show the potentially serious consequences of these disparities. Unfortunately, California’s data

showing referrals to the courts due to truancy, and subsequent actions that result from referrals are fragmented. Hockenberry and Puzzancherra (2018) provided alternative ways to understand the issues. The authors found that across the country over 60,000 young people were referred to the courts for truancy, the majority of whom were youth of color. Further, Weber (2020) studied truancy data in South Carolina, where the data are more connected and found that “juvenile justice system involvement is not associated with positive impacts on youth’s school attendance and may in fact negatively affect students’ school success” (p. 16).

McNeely et al. (2021) extensively analyzed school district absence policies regarding excused versus unexcused absences to explore juvenile court involvement. The authors found multiple instances of policies that could be considered racialized, including three districts that assigned unexcused absences for suspensions, which have been shown (Simson, 2014) to affect Black students more frequently. Further the authors found that Black, American Indian, and Latinx students were more likely to be marked unexcused for an absence and more likely to be petitioned to the court for unexcused absences.

Because repeated unexcused absences could result in contact with the juvenile justice system, the consequences of unexcused absences could be serious and contribute to the *school-to-prison pipeline*. Already, according to The Sentencing Project, Black Americans were incarcerated at five times the rate of White Americans (Nellis, 2022), limiting opportunities for obtaining a stable job and housing and limiting lifetime earnings (Clear, 2009; Pager, 2007; Western, 2006). In 2011 Latinx youth were 76% more likely to be incarcerated than White young people; however, in a positive trend, in 2021 they were only 16% more likely to be incarcerated (Rovner, 2023). Therefore, understanding the impact of

policies and practices that may have a disparate impact by race on student unexcused absences, and the practices of schools that have lower rates of absences marked unexcused for all racial and ethnic groups will contribute to changing school policy and practice which may help break the *school to prison pipeline* and increase opportunities for students who live with the impacts of “the racialization process that exists in the United States [that] permeates all social structures, policies and daily interactions” (Aviles de Bradley, 2015, p. 839).

As is the case with many school infractions, truancy has been viewed through the lens of the courts, legal systems, and punishments. Students who are truant could be fined or required to perform community service. Their parents could similarly be fined or jailed. As noted, data connecting truancy to court appearances and subsequent actions remains fragmented making direct analysis very difficult. However, given the higher numbers of Black and Latinx students marked unexcused, common sense dictates that schools refer more students of color through the system. While processes for review of cases through the SARB exist, the law enforcement lens remains. The particular danger with this approach, beyond that fact that it misses opportunities to address other needs, was described by Sweeten (2006). Sweeten found that “First time court appearance during high school increases the chances of dropping out of high school independent of involvement in delinquency. Furthermore, the effect of court appearance is particularly detrimental to less delinquent youths” (p. 1). While Sweeten’s study focused on arrests and other activities considered delinquent, regardless of race or poverty status, “court appearance increased the odds of dropout by a factor of 3.8 for youths involved in one delinquent act” (p. 474). Because these contacts could be of such significance, it is imperative that educators take into account the

results of their actions and it is why this research sought to understand how and why some schools were taking action to avoid these outcomes for their students and students of color while other schools did not.

Actions Taken to Address Absence and Truancy

Like other states, California has taken steps towards less punitive approaches to truancy. According to Ricks and Esthappan (2018), California no longer allows punishment for truancy, however, the state does still allow Valid Court Order exceptions which enables “states to incarcerate children in need of services if their conduct was in violation of a valid court order. Such an order could be as simple as a statement by a judge requiring a child to attend school regularly” (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, n.d.). As previously detailed, this exception could lead to detrimental effects for the children.

Schools and districts have also been examining their practices and policies. One study found that rewriting truancy notices that were: (a) shorter, (b) written at a fifth-grade reading level, (c) promoted parental efficacy, and (d) discussed potential negative impacts of missing schools, resulted in increased effectiveness in promoting attendance (Lasky-Fink et al., 2019). California has also invested significant monies in various student success approaches including full-service community schools, increased coordination and funding for mental health services, and changed practices at the SARB, which oversees school attendance cases, to be more supportive. Schools have also been undertaking such approaches as restorative justice practices to try and address the conditions of learning and student relationships.

While there is clearly work underway and a renewed focus on student wellbeing and school structures due to the pandemic, disparities still exist and districts must continue to

consider how they are making the students and families on their campuses feel welcome, supported, and engaged. Further areas to study include reviewing school climate survey data, school site staffing and training, and communication methods and approaches. For example, McNeely et al. (2023) reviewed websites of schools from low-income communities which also had high concentrations of Black and Latinx families and from high-income communities with higher concentrations of White families. They found that those schools serving low-income families had more punitive attendance policies as well as less staff discretion in how they applied unexcused versus excused absences.

Research has shown that schools with more positive perceptions of school climate (Hopson & Lee, 2011), more supportive communication and policies (Lasky-Fink et al., 2019), and policies designed to reflect the needs of specific groups of students (McNeely et al., 2021) have led to better attendance and lower truancy rates. Therefore, understanding what combination of these conditions existed in schools with low unexcused absence rates and low racial differences in absences marked unexcused could contribute to existing literature and provide some guidance for schools that wish to address these issues.

Importance of Leadership in Addressing Racial Differences

There is a role for school leaders in setting the tone for their schools, providing staff training and direction, and allocating funding to meet student needs and to support families who have difficulties that affect student attendance. Reflecting the findings of Allensworth and Easton (2007), Snodgrass (personal communication, August 11, 2015) encouraged principals to ask the following questions when considering how to reduce truancy: “Is our school a place where kids want to be? Does our school look and feel friendly and

comforting? Are we supporting the whole child? Are we supporting the whole family?” (p. 1).

Research has shown the impact of superintendent leadership on student success (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The authors’ meta-analysis found a statistically significant impact of superintendent leadership on student achievement, and that “effective superintendents focus on creating goal-oriented districts” (p. 3). Further, in setting goals they were collaborative and involved both the board and all relevant staff, and that the board was aligned and supported those goals. An additional finding was that sites that had *defined autonomy* were most successful – meaning that school level leaders were guided by clear goals but had the autonomy to achieve the goals in a way that met site needs. Given the strong relationship between attendance and student achievement described in this chapter, and the authors’ finding that, to have an impact, superintendents must focus on goals that are likely to impact student achievement, it is possible to see that these results could also apply to the focus on attendance. Although the meta-analysis included over 2,700 school districts and over three million students, no reference was made to the demographic makeup of the students in the reviewed studies. Therefore, the impact of race was unknown.

To understand the role of leadership on student absence and on marking students unexcused, it is important to continue understand practices using a critical race lens, starting with digging deeper into the data to learn not only the characteristics of the schools without racial disparities, but those with racial disparities in unexcused absences. In addition to understanding communication, policies, and school climate, it was important to learn what underlying factors may exist. For example, demographics of the staff may play a role. A

recent study (Blazar, 2021) found that upper-elementary teachers of color impacted the social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for the students in both the short- and long-term. This may also impact attendance in general and absences marked excused versus unexcused in specific. While not within the scope of this study, identifying other underlying factors could be important to offering descriptions of the schools that are showing lower rates of absences marked unexcused for all racial and ethnic groups.

Diem and Welton (2020) put forth the importance of anti-racist leadership in their book *Anti-Racist Educational Leadership and Policy: Addressing Racism in Public Education*. They examined the role of the school leader in addressing the multiple dimensions of systemic racism in schools including school discipline, which, as discussed, contributed to the issues raised in this paper. Using a racial lens, the authors discussed multiple interventions that schools used to try to move from harsh disciplinary approaches to more inclusive, including Response to Intervention, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, and Social Emotional Learning. They put forth the idea that these efforts still used a racial frame in requiring students to adapt to expected school cultural norms rather than understanding the needs of the students and noted that “[w]hile these alternatives have reduced the number of suspensions, they have not mitigated racial disparities in discipline” (p. 128). The authors offered three suggestions for moving from a color-blind approach to bringing an anti-racist approach: “Promote youth voice in educational policy and practice; hire more educators of color; and address not just implicit racial bias, but anti-Blackness” (p. 131). Additionally, Yoon (2012) urged school staff to understand whiteness at work and how it impacted their ability to “unlearn habits that impeded the practice of just and equitable

education” (p. 589). By incorporating different voices, reflecting the student population and different experiences, as well as intentionally addressing biases White people and society at large hold, school leaders could better meet the needs of students and build more inclusive policies and practices.

Theoretical Approach

The nature of this study required consideration of the way schools do business and how that might serve the dominant group. By examining the structures that perpetuate the dominant culture and how schools may have affected change to respond to those structures may provide insight for other schools that wish to make similar changes.

Because this study examined schools that exhibit different outcomes than the majority of schools in California, it is worth understanding how, if at all, the schools applied emancipatory leadership accompanied by critical policymaking. Corson (1998) described these intertwined approaches by first summarizing Bhaskar’s (1986) *conception of discovery* and noting that:

Action to sustain wanted structures, or to replace unwanted with wanted structures (emancipation), is a morally binding response ..., because to fail to sustain wanted structural influences is to ignore the real interests of actors, and to leave unwanted structures in place is to ignore real forms of oppression that are known to exist (p. 61).

Further Corson noted that this required a devolution of decision making to those affected by the “structural factors that oppress them” (p. 62) and laid out four stages of critical policymaking, including: “(a) identifying the real problem, (b) adopting trial policies, (c) testing the policies, and (d) final adoption of a policy that has been validated by the affected people” (1998, p. 62). For the purposes of this study, this approach to policymaking would

reflect a significant difference in how most schools and districts in California operate. But critical policymaking reflects literature showing the importance of engaging students and families holistically to reflect needs and create strong communities that engage and keep kids in school (Balfanz et al., 2007; Blazar, 2021; Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021; Lasky-Fink et al., 2019).

Summary and Gaps in the Literature

School attendance matters for student success in and out of school. The well-documented importance of being in school whether or not the absences are marked excused made a difference in the short- and long-term (ASR, 2011; Balfanz et al., 2007; Ginsburg et al., 2014). However, absences that are deemed unexcused could have a bigger impact on students – especially when students accumulate enough to be considered truant. Truancy often fed into the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for students of color (Wald & Losen, 2003). McNeely et al. (2023) studied rates of unexcused absences in California to understand if there was a difference by race. The authors found that Black students were more likely to be marked unexcused as were Native American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students.

To date the literature has focused on actions schools have taken to combat chronic absence, including communication with families and student supports (Hopson & Lee, 2011; Lasky-Fink et al., 2019). However, little has been written about the policies and practices of schools with low rates of unexcused absences. Additionally, questions about how schools operate to address the issue of unexcused absences through the lens of racial equity remain unanswered.

Chapter 3: Description of Methodology, Research Design and Procedures

This chapter describes the methods used to understand the practices and policies of selected schools related to attendance and marking absences excused or unexcused. The study employed a case study design. An initial analysis of attendance data to select specific schools provided the frame for the three research questions where school climate data answered Research Question 1 and helped inform the focus of questions two and three.

Restatement of research questions and method of analysis

- RQ1: What are the school climate survey results of selected low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
 - Method: Descriptive statistics
- RQ2: What are the attendance policies and practices of low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
 - Method: Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, websites, policy documents, handbooks, and any other related printed materials
- RQ3: How are the attendance policies and practices communicated to families and students?
 - Method: Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, written school structures, e.g. family engagement methods, student and family supports, district office communication, principal communication

Site Selection

The selected district was a K-8 school district in Northern California. In 2021-22 the district enrolled 5,103 students in fourteen schools. Overall, the district had 49% of its students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. Table 2 shows a demographic breakdown of the student body.

Table 2

Student Demographic Data for the School District

Ethnicity	Black	Asian	Hispanic or Latinx	Filipino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or more	Native American	Not reported
% of Population	2.6%	19.6%	36.8%	24.3%	1%	10.2%	5.0%	.2%	.3%
Number of Students	162	1223	2292	1513	60	636	309	14	19

These demographics somewhat mirrored the county in which they are located except for White students, where the enrollment was significantly lower than the county as a whole. As compared to state data, the district had a higher percentage of Filipino students and lower percentages of Latinx and White students. Students in the district primarily resided in one city, the largest in the county, with portions of three other smaller cities represented. According to U.S. Census Bureau, in 2020 the largest city had over 50% of its population who were born outside of the U.S., 60% of homes were owner-occupied with a per capita income of \$46,581, over \$30,000 lower than the per capita income in the county (2021).

Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California Schools (McNeely et al., 2023) defined *bright spots* or schools that met three criteria: 1) above-average levels of attendance (defined as fewer than 11.7 days absent in SY 2021-22), 2) below-average levels of unexcused absenteeism (below 33.8%), and 3) if the disparity between the racial or ethnic

group and White students was smaller than two-tenths of a standard deviation. The authors only found 15% of schools in California that met that definition.

While the definition in the article was one selected by the authors for purposes of categorizing schools, it was useful to identify a district that may have fallen into that category for study. A review of the district's attendance data in Data Quest (2021-22) showed the selected district met the first two of the three bright spot criteria with their attendance data showing higher average levels of attendance (11.4 days absent) and lower levels of absences marked unexcused (24.5%) than the state average as seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Absence Data for the School District

Ethnicity	Black	Asian	Hispanic or Latinx	Filipino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or more
Average # of Days Absent	15	8	14	11	15	12	11
% Absences marked unexcused	33%	18%	29%	17%	25%	29%	21%

From the initial selection of the district, an examination of individual school site data revealed three elementary schools (grades TK or K to 5) that both had a student population of more than 50% who qualified for free- or reduced-price, or were Title I schools, and less than 25% of absences were marked unexcused for any student population, with one exception where the one student group had absences marked unexcused at 26%. The student demographics for each of the selected schools can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Student Demographic Data for the Selected Schools

Ethnicity	Black	Asian	Filipino	Hispanic or Latinx	Pacific Islander	White	Two or more
School 1	3%	13%	38%	33%	2%	10%	6%
School 2	<1%	9%	29%	43%	2%	12%	4%
School 3	1%	17%	28%	32%	<1%	16%	4%
School 4	1%	21%	23%	38%	2%	9%	4%

Because the district also included three middle schools, and middle school students have more agency in school attendance, it was important to include one middle school in the study. While none of the middle schools met the criteria of the elementary schools, two middle schools were Title I schools with similar unexcused absence rates for different populations of students. After a discussion with the superintendent, one school was identified that was a feeder school for two of the elementary schools. As such, that school was selected for inclusion in the study and is included in Table 4.

Entering the Field

I came to this research as a former school board member who was quite active in the California School Boards Association. In addition, I ran a statewide non-profit that partnered with the CDE. Through both of these roles I connected with and/or provided support for hundreds of districts across the state. As such, I was able to connect easily with different superintendents as I was reviewing districts for potential inclusion. However, given my positionality and that I was somewhat known, there may have been a power dynamic that was not identified. Conversely, as a known quantity, there was also a level of trust with the superintendents.

Once the district was identified based on the previously referenced criteria, I e-mailed the superintendent of the district to describe the study and request approval to further study the district. In a fortunate coincidence, the superintendent was someone who I have known for several years so I did not need to do an initial introduction. After an initial description of the study, I met with the superintendent to answer questions and describe the impacts on sites. Just prior to our meeting I shared proposed research questions for their understanding. I clarified the district would not be identified in the study and the site impacts would be minimal. Site impacts included short, 30-minute, interviews with selected site staff who were involved in attendance procedures. Similarly, selected district staff would participate in 30-minute interviews. We discussed that both site and district staff may be asked to provide any relevant documents, like written notices of truancy. After the meeting the superintendent agreed to support the study of the district and work with me to introduce me to staff.

Following IRB approval and successful dissertation proposal defense in Spring 2023, I connected again with the superintendent in June 2023 to provide an update, share revised research questions, and the data collection plan. I also set up an initial interview with the superintendent (See Appendix A for list of questions). At that interview we also discussed other appropriate people to interview.

Following the interview with the superintendent they sent an email to two district staff who were relevant to the research topic. In the email the superintendent introduced me, as the researcher and provided a general description of the study. Both people who the superintendent contacted agreed to an interview. At my request, the superintendent also sent emails to the four school principals at the selected sites in January 2024, with an introduction

to the study and to me. The principals each agreed to an interview. All interviewees received a notice of consent prior to the interview. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. I also took notes during each interview.

The interviews were semi-structured interviews with moderately open-ended questions (Gournelos, 2019) which allowed for a better understanding of the views of the interviewees. The sample size for the interviews was small, a limitation of the study. However, given the narrow nature of the research questions, there is no reason to believe that the interviewees misrepresented the policies and practices that were the subject of the interviews. Given the small size, I was able to ask post-interview follow-up questions through email regarding specific practices identified during the data analysis. Missing from the study were the voices of counselors and clerks who principals all referred to as playing a key role in supporting attendance. However, given the consistency in answers from the various interviewees, I believe the policies and procedures have been adequately described.

Research Methodology

This study was a case study of a district that had rates of absences marked unexcused lower than the state as a whole and lower than the state for each racial/ethnic group. Simons (2009) identifies three methods of data collection in case study research interviews, observation, and document analysis. For this study I used interviews and document review of selected school sites and the district as a whole. After selecting the district, the first step was to analyze the attendance data for each school and the district as whole. That first step narrowed down the number of schools to four schools that would provide findings to help understand the three research questions. Following the selection of school sites, and to

answer Research Question 1, I requested and was provided with results of the Panorama surveys. The district uses multiple Panorama modules, including the school climate survey administered to students, families, and staff. This module was initially the primary source of information. However, after reviewing the modules and the literature, I also used the school belonging and school safety modules administered to students. Results for Research Question 1 are presented in bar charts in Chapter 4.

The next step in the research was to understand the practices and policies of the schools that were selected based on their demographics and absence data. To accomplish this section of the research I conducted semi-structured interviews of the principals of the four selected schools and three current and one former district staff. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes, conducted by Zoom, recorded, and transcribed and stored in a password protected file. I also took notes during the interview which were also stored in a password protected file. Each interviewee was provided a notice of consent prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, I confirmed receipt of consent notice, provided an overview of the study, and gave the interviewee a chance to ask questions. A list of questions I asked is provided in Appendix A. At the end of each interview, I also asked “What else should I have asked or what else would you want me to know?”

In addition to the interviews, I conducted a document review which consisted of reviewing each schools’ website and the district website to understand the information regarding attendance or lack thereof on each. Simons (2009) describes the value of document review as “clues to understanding the culture of organizations, the values underlying policies, and the beliefs and attitudes of the writer” (p. 28). The documents reviewed were used to

both understand the policies and the values of the district and the school sites to determine the approach to policies and practices. From the websites I downloaded and reviewed relevant documents. I also requested and was provided documents by the district and schools. These documents included board policy and administrative regulations, truancy notices, family handbooks, notes from ELAC meetings, Title I school compact, principal newsletters, and daily bulletins. The interviews and documents were then coded to identify themes which appear in Chapter 4.

Research Question 1, which used descriptive statistics, contributed to the case study methodology and provided information regarding the specific schools selected for the study.

Sources of Information/Data

The primary source for attendance data was DataQuest. As described by the CDE, it is:

California Department of Education's web-based data reporting system for publicly reporting information about California students, teachers, and schools. DataQuest provides access to a wide variety of reports, including school performance, test results, student enrollment, English learner, graduation and dropout, school staffing, course enrollment, and student misconduct data. (n.d.)

DataQuest provides data on absences, excused and unexcused by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English learner status and enrollment in special education by school, grade, and district. By conducting an analysis of absences marked unexcused, the data from DataQuest provided an understanding of which students are marked unexcused and whether there were racial differences within the elementary school district. The study used attendance data from the 2021-22 school years as the most recent reliable data available during the commencement of the study.

To answer Research Question 1, I requested and was provided the district's Panorama survey data for each of the selected school sites. Panorama offers school districts flexible modules to measure a variety of concepts. For students the district administered surveys in the fall and the spring. In the fall it used the Panorama survey modules designed to measure a student assessment of learning, school climate, school safety, and sense of belonging. The spring survey measured grit, learning strategies, social awareness, and supportive relationships. Panorama's website included a brief focused on reliability and validity. First released in 2014, survey authors described a survey that is meant to provide "educator focused", accurate, actionable data through a survey that allows districts to customize the modules (Panorama Education, 2021). Based on the literature (Hendron & Kearney, 2016; Van Eck et al, 2017), for the students I used the fall survey and included data on school climate, school safety, and sense of belonging.

I also reviewed family and staff results for school climate. I theorized that when families believe the school has a positive climate, they would be more likely to feel connected to the school and more likely to work with the school, for example feel comfortable contacting the school regarding attendance. For staff, I theorized that staff that work in a positive climate are more likely to feel respected and connected to students, thereby more likely to address individual issues. While I did not locate literature connected to these specific concepts, Hendron and Kearney (2016) suggested working with families to connect with them in a variety of ways may help reduce truancy. Because the sample sizes for families and staff were small, it was important to consider whether the results represented the population or whether the sample size was adequate to generalize. For the staff, the results were likely

representative given the relatively small size of each staff, however, the percentage of the staff participating, their demographics, and their roles were unknown. For family surveys, the percentage of families responding was quite small for each school with the results provided in Figure 9 in Chapter 4. Further, the demographic makeup of the respondents was unknown, meaning there was no data to understand whether the families who responded represent the demographics of the schools. As a result, these small sample sizes could have meant results were due to chance and could have resulted in cognitive bias whereby it was assumed the results were representative of the greater population even if they were not.

As noted, qualitative data was obtained by interviewing school staff, consisting of three district office staff, one former district office staff, and four principals. To maintain anonymity interviewees were referred to as District Staff A, B, and C, Former District Staff D, and Principals, A, B, C, and D. Interviews of district office staff were conducted in July and October 2023 while principal interviews were conducted in January and February 2024 and former district staff in February 2024. Additional data collection included reviewing the websites of selected schools and the district, review of board policies posted online, documents provided by principals and district staff, including truancy letters, principal newsletters, school handbooks, and other written communication. These data were collected remotely during the 2023-24 school year.

The research required close coordination with school district leadership, in this case, the superintendent initially served as a conduit to the rest of the district. Additionally, because the attendance and school climate data available were from a prior year, the subjects of interviews as well as current websites may not reflect the same circumstances in effect when

those data were collected. Known as *parallel sampling*, subjects were from the same school district population but may or may not be the same people as those who were present when those data were collected.

Data Analysis Procedures

The procedures for data analysis are described in the following sections and include descriptive statistics and deductive and inductive coding that led to the themes and assertions described in Chapter 4.

Quantitative Procedures.

Descriptive Statistics. According to the website Child Care & Early Education Research Connections (n.d.), descriptive statistics offer the researcher a way of providing basic information about variables in a dataset and/or a way to provide information about the relationship between variables in a dataset but not to infer any causation or probability. These descriptions include looking at measures of central tendency, association, or variability. This concurs with Moore et al. (2021) who said that statistics are the science of learning from data and “Data are numerical or quantitative descriptions of objects that we want to study” (p. 76).

To answer Research Question 1, the study used quantitative data from the school climate surveys administered to students, staff, and families. School climate has been associated, positively and negatively, with absences although no specific research has been conducted on its association with absences marked unexcused (Hopson & Lee, 2011; Van Eck et al., 2017). The district used Panorama surveys which were provided to the researcher. As noted, Panorama student surveys measured school climate, school safety and school belonging as well as student engagement and “pedagogical effectiveness” (Panorama Education, 2021).

Family surveys asked questions about school climate, school safety and barriers to engagement while staff surveys asked about leadership effectiveness, professional learning, and school communication. The questions were asked using a Likert-type scale response from “not at all” to “all” or “never” to “always”. For example, in both the third through fifth grade survey and the sixth through twelfth grade survey a question was “If you walked into class upset, how many of your teachers would be concerned. Students’ response options were “None of my teachers”, “A few of my teachers”, “About half of my teachers”, “Most of my teachers”, “All of my teachers” (see Appendix C). Each construct consisted of multiple questions, generally between four and six. The reports included the favorable, neutral, and unfavorable response percentages for each question. They then reported a percent favorable average for each construct which was calculated by adding up all the favorable percentages to get a total which was then divided by the number of questions. For example, if question 1 had 33% favorable, question 2 had 41%, question 3, 36% and question 4, 24%, those would total 134 divided by 4 for a favorability rating of 34%. The study used the construct averages and did similar reporting of the statistics for the surveys as for the attendance data. The data were reported in percentages and shown in tables and bar charts in Chapter 4.

Qualitative Procedures.

After the initial collection of data using interviews and document review, a set of codes were developed. Stake (2010) defined coding as “sorting all data sets according to topics, themes and issues important to the study” (p. 151). DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011) described different ways to approach coding, including *structural* and *data-driven*. Structural coding results from the goals and research questions while data-driven coding derives codes from

the raw data. Given the nature of the study, both approaches were utilized for developing the codes, which both Stake and DeCuir-Gunby et al. note, is an iterative process that develops over the course of the research.

Saldaña (personal communication, March 3, 2022) noted codes condense the data in a way that identifies patterns. These codes then are organized into categories of codes that “look and feel alike” (Saldaña, personal communication, March 3, 2022). Throughout the process codes lead to categories and themes. This requires continual examination of the data to ultimately discover assertions. As described by Saldaña, the process moves from the “specific to the abstract and real to general” (personal communication, March 3, 2022). The study used the in vivo coding method and categorized results in the themes described in Chapter 4. As previously noted, codes led to themes, which were analyzed to result in assertions.

Collected data were stored in a research log that consisted of files that reflected each of the research questions accompanied by sub-files related to categorized data for different school sites. Files were maintained in Dropbox, a cloud storage platform, which was password protected. Interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom and transcribed using the Zoom transcript.

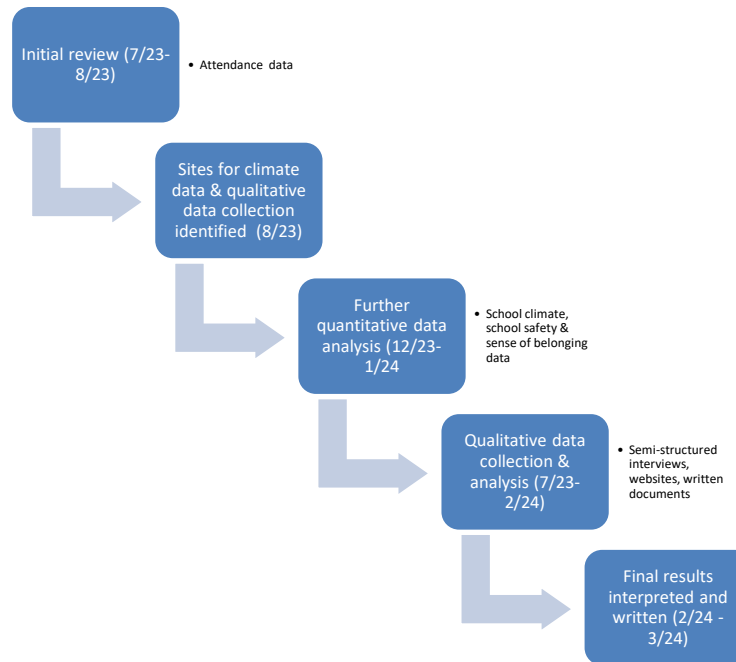
Using the iterative process described by Stake (2010), after initial data review, which consisted of attendance and demographic data, school climate survey data for student, staff and families, accompanied by website and document review, initial themes were identified. Those themes helped guide the interview questions which resulted in further refinement of

the themes. The most frequent themes were used to report on the results of Research Questions 2 and 3.

Figure 1 shows the flow of data collection and analysis through the end of the study.

Figure 1

Dissertation Process



This process allowed for the research to evolve over the length of the study so that the results helped shape the final questions and provided clear themes as reported in Chapter 4. Table 5 provides each research question, the sources of data used to answer the question, and how the data were used to answer each question.

Table 5

Sources of Data and How They Answer the Question by Research Question

Research question	Sources of data	How the data answer the question?
RQ1: What are the school climate survey characteristics of schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?	DataQuest and Panorama school climate survey	Using descriptive statistics, the data are reported in bar graphs and charts and show differences and similarities among the schools as compared to each other and the unexcused absence data.
RQ2: What are the attendance policies and practices of low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?	Semi-structured interviews of district staff and school staff; reviews of documents, policies, websites, and other written communication.	Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were coded and analyzed to identify categories, themes and assertions that resulted in an understanding of the policies and practices primarily as reported through the interviews.
RQ3: How are the attendance policies and practices communicated to families and students?	Interviews of district and school staff; reviews of websites, documents, policies, and other written documentation.	Interviews were transcribed. Data were coded and analyzed to identify categories, themes and assertions about the communication style and methods of the district and schools.

Ethics, Reliability, and Validity

“All research is concerned with producing valid reliable knowledge in and ethical manner” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 237). Ensuring the results of the study could contribute to the general body of knowledge on the topic of marking students excused or unexcused as well as absences was my aim. Therefore, it was important to understand these concepts in the context of qualitative research. Different from quantitative research, qualitative research relies on “assumptions of reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 237), therefore care must be taken to conduct the research ethically to produce results that could be considered valid and reliable.

Ethical Practices

This study was approved by the San Jose State University Institutional Review Board which approved the interview questions and protocol. Participants received a notice of

consent to participate prior to the interview via email. Subjects confirmed receipt at each interview. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was provided. While the interviewees names and schools were known to the researcher, all data were stored in password protected files. In reporting the data, names and schools were assigned pseudonyms, including for district staff, in order to protect the anonymity of the district and the interview subjects.

Reliability and Validity

The importance of reliability and validity lie in the concept that the research offers contributions to the field that scholars can replicate, has been conducted rigorously, and that it provides new insights that seem valid given previous knowledge. However, there is debate among scholars about what constitutes reliability and validity in qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) offered a variety of perspectives on the debate and submitted the concept of *reader or user generalizability* or the ability of the study consumer to apply it to applicable situations as one approach to external validity. This requires the researcher to provide enough detail in methods and data presentation so readers can determine if the study pertains to a relevant situation. For this study, the research used publicly available data to understand the characteristics of absences marked unexcused. Subsequent quantitative data, school climate survey results were provided by the school district. Aggregate school climate and other Panorama survey results were presented publicly to the school board, but individual site data were not available publicly. The qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews, publicly accessible websites, and forms, documents, and letters provided by the district. The qualitative results were presented using *rich, thick description*

or a “description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 257). The study provided extensive quotes from interviewees and from documents used to form conclusions as well as data on the students and district to understand the composition and size.

Reliability in its most simple form means that the results make sense. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested *triangulation* or using multiple sources of data or different data collection methods to determine results, as one way to achieve reliability. This study used interviews at both the district and school level as well as documents and websites to understand alignment and consistency, which were present across the settings. Finally, the results were shared with the interviewees to ensure the research accurately reflected their responses. Interviewees did not raise any concerns regarding the results.

Summary

This was a case study design that sought to answer questions about schools in a district with relatively low rates of absences marked unexcused for all racial and ethnic groups. It sought to understand whether these low rates related to school climate data as well as the policies and practices that impacted these rates. Data were collected from a subset of selected schools in the district after reviewing publicly available data on absences and demographics. By using semi-structured interviews and document review, that revealed themes, the results adhered to generally accepted constructs in reliability, validity, and ethics in qualitative research.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter provides the findings of the research. The purpose of the study was to understand the policies and practices of individual schools and their district related to unexcused absences. The chapter includes the following sections: (a) a restatement of the research questions, (b) a brief review of the case study design utilized for this study, and (c) the findings of the research. Further analysis of findings along with implications and applications are presented in Chapter 5.

Restatement of Research Questions

- RQ1: What are the school climate survey characteristics of schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
 - Method: Descriptive statistics
- RQ2: What are the attendance policies and practices of low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
 - Method: Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, websites, policy documents, handbooks, and any other related printed materials
- RQ3: How are the attendance policies and practices communicated to families and students from the school and district level?
 - Method: Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, written school structures, e.g. family engagement methods, student and family supports, district office communication, principal communication

Restatement of Research Design

The study used a case study approach that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data. In this study quantitative data provided the information for site selection at the school and district level and used unexcused absence data by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and disability status. Those data were used to narrow down the number of schools studied. To inform the research questions, data from school climate surveys was analyzed. Qualitative data included staff interviews and document review, including websites, board policy, school newsletters, and other available material.

Description of the District

The district was a kindergarten through eighth grade district in Northern California. The district enrolled 5,103 students in fourteen schools during the 2021-22 school year. In that year, the district had 49% of its students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. Table 6 shows a demographic breakdown of the student body.

Table 6

Student Demographic Data for the School District

Race/ Ethnicity	Black	Asian	Hispanic or Latinx	Filipino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or more	Native American	Not reported
% of Population	2.6%	19.6%	36.8%	24.3%	1%	10.2%	5.0%	.2%	.3%
Number of Students	162	1223	2292	1513	60	636	309	14	19

Of the district's fourteen schools, six had a student population with fewer than 50% of the students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. The mix of race and ethnicity varied fairly widely across the school sites. The two largest racial/ethnic groups in the district Hispanic/Latinx and Filipino also varied across school sites. The school with the largest

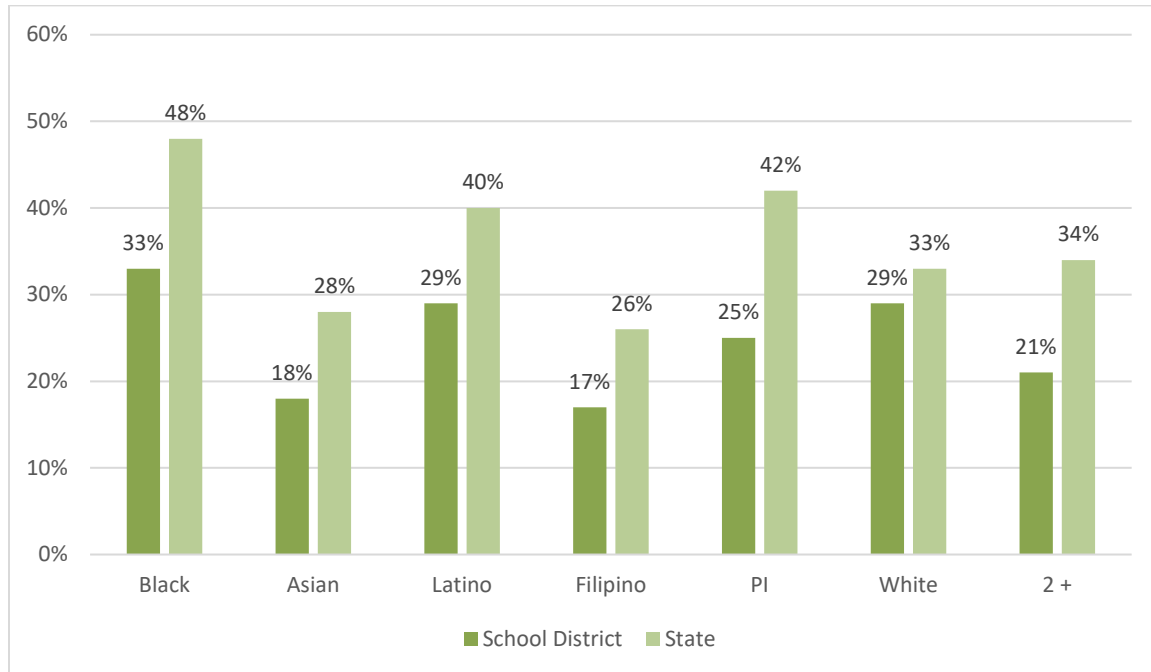
percentage of its students Hispanic/Latinx had 56% and the school with the lowest percentage of Hispanic/Latinx had just 12%. The range for Filipino students was 16% at the school with the lowest and 39% at the highest. Given the small number of Native American and not reported students, they were not included in any further presentation of the data. The district chronic absenteeism rate was 19% which was also lower than the state's rate of 31% for 2021-22. However, as one interviewee pointed out, significantly higher than in 2018-19's rate of 8%.

Beyond selection of the district, it was important to select schools that reflected the positive results and provided a window into how the district policies and practices influenced these results.

In school year 2021-22 the average percent of students marked unexcused was 25%, with Black students being marked unexcused at the highest rate of 33% or 1.49 standard deviations above the district mean. The lowest percent of students marked unexcused were Asian students at 18% or 1.34 standard deviations below the mean. English learners, student with disabilities and socio-economically disadvantaged students all hovered near the district average at 26%, 23%, and 25% respectively. Figure 2 shows the percent of students marked unexcused for each subgroup as compared to state rates.

Figure 2

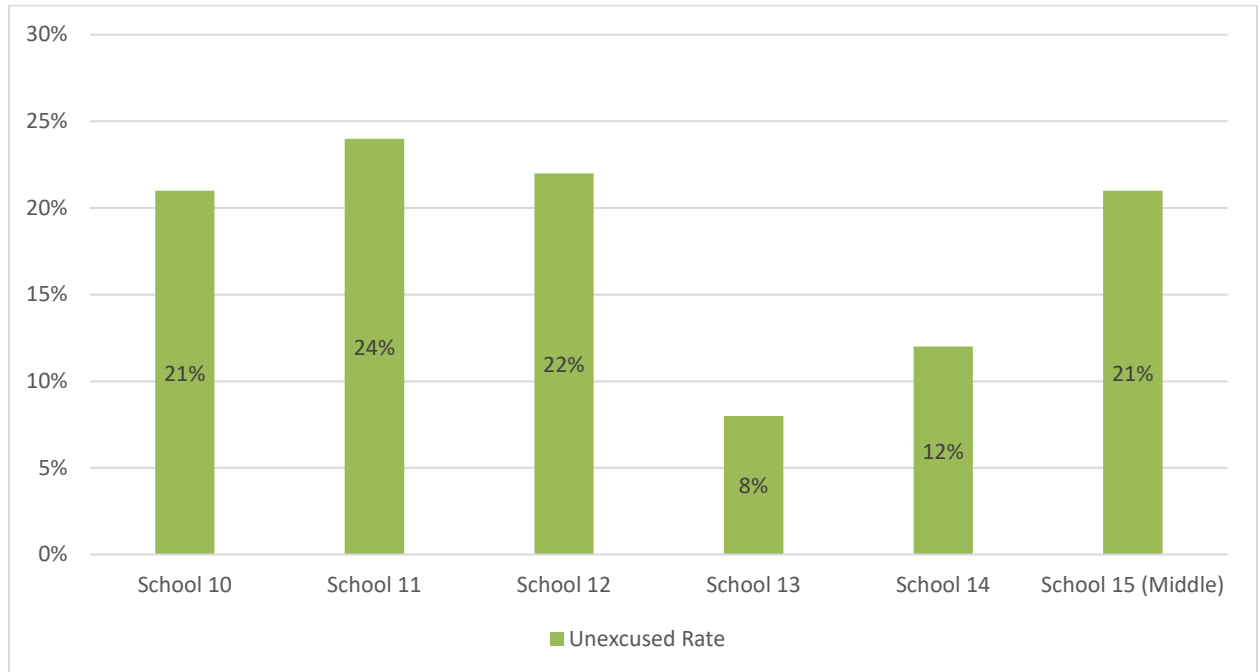
Percent of Absences Marked Unexcused in the District vs. the State



Data Quest provided the percent of absences marked unexcused for each of the categories listed in Figure 3 as compared to the state. As Figure 3 shows, the district was consistently lower than the state. The range was from 17% marked unexcused for Filipino students (27% for the State) to 33% (48% for the State) for Black students. For ethnicity the lowest and highest all fell within eight percentage points of the district mean of 25% of all absences marked unexcused. The standard deviation was 5.65% and all the absences marked unexcused fell within 1.49 standard deviations of the mean. There was one note when reviewing the data. The total number of Black and Pacific Islander students was relatively small, 162 and 60 respectively, which may cause more sensitivity year over year in the percent of absences marked unexcused as compared to other groups of students, and results for those groups of students were not included in any data outside of the district data. The

Figure 3

Percent of Students Marked Unexcused at Higher-SES Schools



next smallest group was two or more races at 271. However, generally, the rates of absences marked unexcused for the Black and Pacific Islander students as compared to other race or ethnicities did mirror state data. Asian, Filipino and Latinx all made up the largest student groups with all over 1,000 students. Table 6 in the previous section shows the total number and percent of each group of students by race and ethnicity as reported in Data Quest.

When looking by grade Table 7 shows the breakdown of absences marked unexcused by each grade level. With fifth grade as the outlier at 29%, the majority, five out of nine, of the grades were either 25% or 26% with third and seventh at 27% and eighth grade at 28%. The district average was 25% so the rates were all within four percentage points of the average.

Table 7

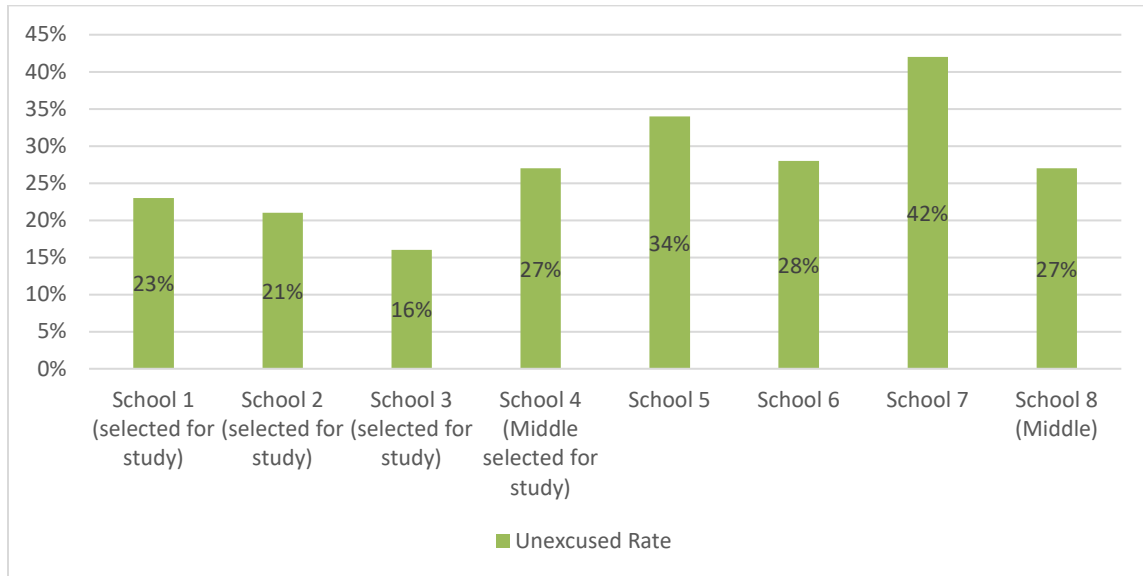
District Percent of Absences Marked Unexcused by Grade Level

Grade level	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Unexcused absences	25%	25%	26%	27%	25%	29%	26%	27%	28%

Finally, to select schools for further study, a determination was made to look at schools with higher poverty rates. The district average for students eligible for free- or reduced-price meals was just over 49% and ranged from a low of 34% to a high of 66% at different schools. First, an examination of the schools in the district showed some variation among schools with both high and low SES, as defined by over- or under-50% free- or reduced-lunch eligible. Although this study looked at schools with higher rates of students living in poverty, for comparison, Figure 4 shows the rates at schools with under 50% of students eligible for of free- or reduced-rate lunch.

Figure 4

Percent of Absences Marked Unexcused at Lower-SES Schools

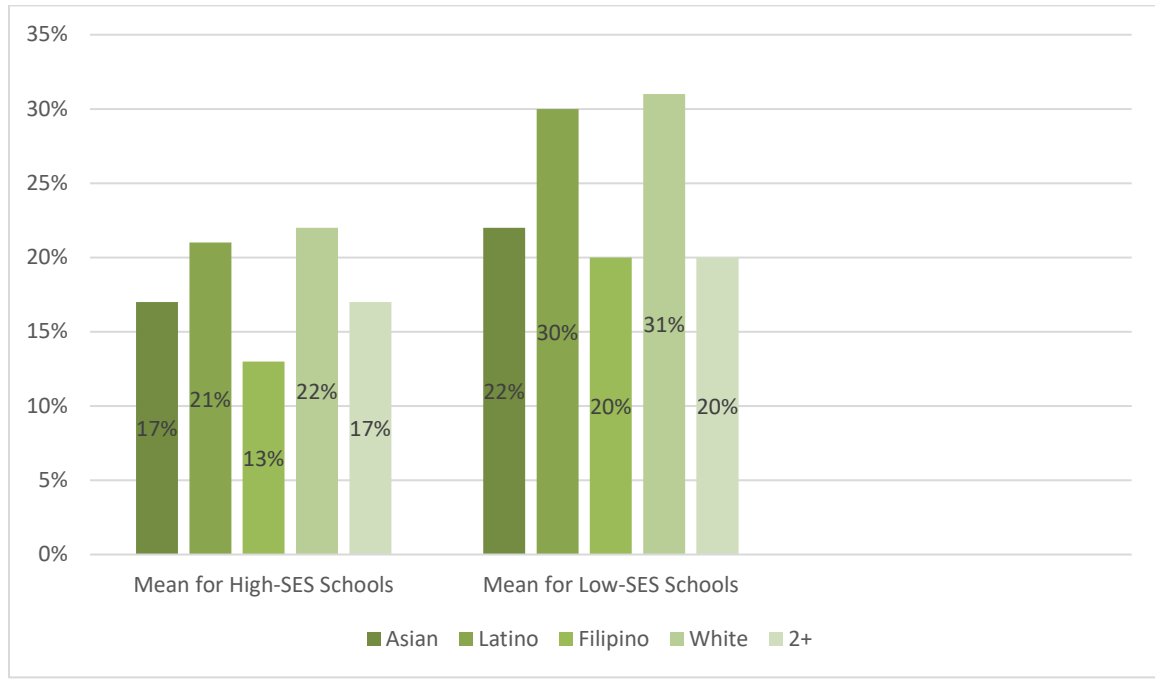


The rates of absences marked unexcused at the higher SES schools were all below the district mean and were generally similar to the rates of low-SES schools, with two outliers, School 13 and School 14, at 8% and 12% respectively.

Figure 5 shows the rates at all schools with over 50% free- or reduced-price lunch eligible students. Among the schools with a poverty rate of over 50%, the range was fairly wide, with a high of 42% of absences marked unexcused to a low of 16% of absences marked unexcused. In the selected schools, the range had a high of 27% of all absences marked unexcused to a low of 16% of absences marked unexcused, a difference of eleven percentage points.

Figure 5

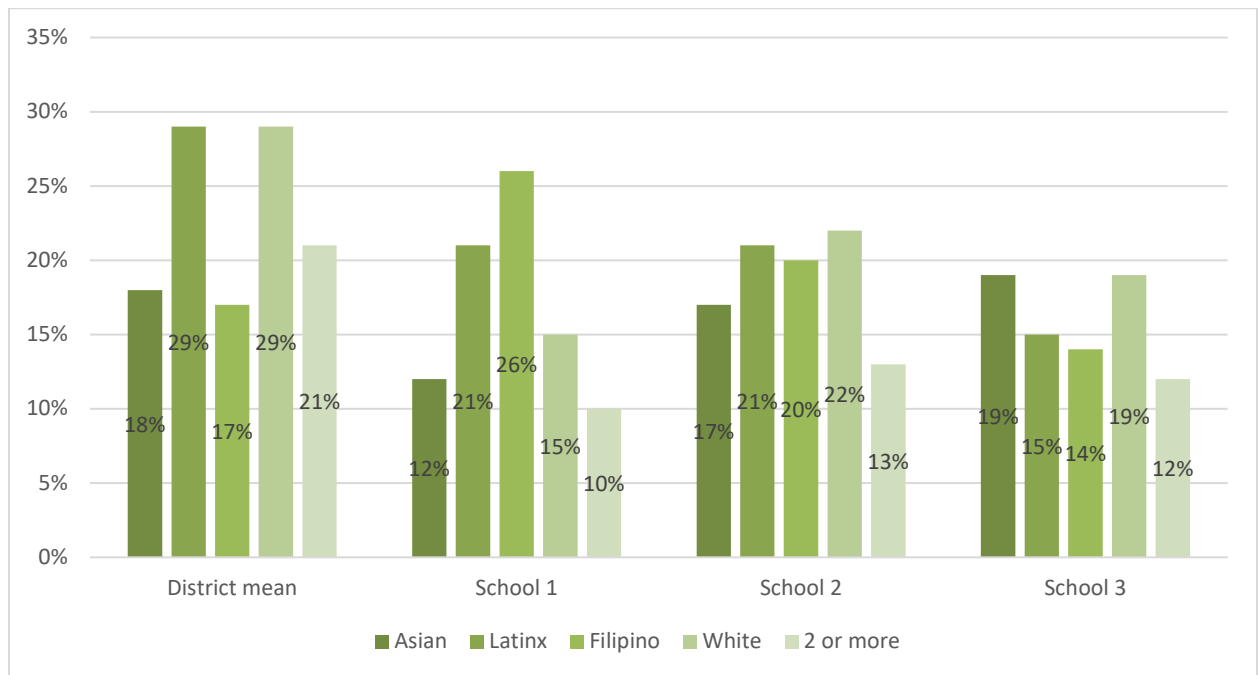
Mean Absences Marked Unexcused by Race/Ethnicity for High-SES & Low-SES School



To understand how racial/ethnic differences might appear across higher-SES school versus low SES schools, Figure 6 shows the mean percent of absences marked unexcused by race and ethnicity for all high-SES schools and low-SES schools.

Figure 6

Rates of Absences Marked Unexcused by Race/Ethnicity at Selected Elementary Schools vs. District Mean



As Figure 6 demonstrates, the mean for each race and ethnicity at high-SES schools was lower than the mean for every race and ethnicity at low-SES schools in the district. For example, the mean for Latinx students at high-SES schools was 21% while it was 30% at low-SES schools. Of note, Black and Pacific Islander students were not included as only one school had a large enough population on which to report data. In addition, one low-SES school did not have a large enough White population to be included in the mean score. The difference between means was largest between Latinx and White students attending High-SES versus low-SES schools with both groups showing a difference of nine percentage points between high-SES and low-SES. Additionally, White students had the highest mean of any racial/ethnic group (22%) in high-SES schools and in low-SES schools (31%). This was

notable as at the state level White students had the third lowest rate of absence marked unexcused with Asian and Filipino students having lower rates at the state level.

Overall, the findings showed that the rates of absences marked unexcused did vary from school to school across the district when breaking it down by the factors identified, including race and ethnicity and socio-economic status of the schools. The three selected elementary schools all had more than 50% of the students eligible for free- or reduced-lunch and had unexcused absence rates that were lower than or equal to the district average for each group of students identified with the exception of one group of students at one school, with that group being marked unexcused at the rate of 26% at that school. The middle school was chosen because it had greater than 50% of its students eligible for free- or reduced-lunch and the majority of students from two of the elementary schools attended the middle school. Overall rates for the four schools, named schools 1, 2, 3, and 4 school are shown in Figure 5. Z-scores were calculated for each school's overall percentage of absences marked unexcused using the district's overall percentage of absences marked unexcused as the mean. The scores are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Z Scores for Selected Schools

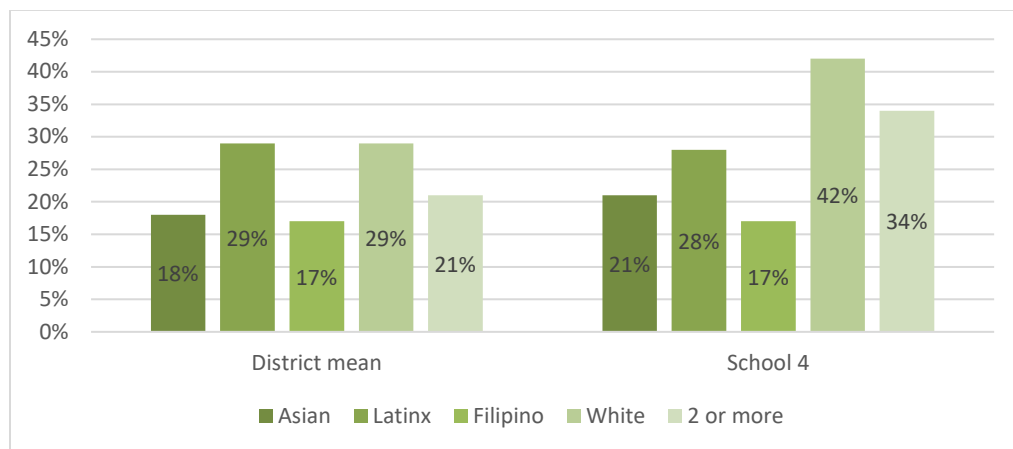
School	Raw Score (Absences Marked Unexcused %)	Z Score
School 1	23%	-.28
School 2	21%	-.63
School 3	16%	-1.52
School 4	27%	.43

As Table 8 shows, Schools 1, 2, and 3 were all below the district mean while School 4 was above the district mean.

Further consideration for school site selection was an examination of racial/ethnic dimensions in unexcused absences. With the exception of School 4, the middle school, all schools had rates of absences marked unexcused below 25%, the district average. Additionally, the rates of absences marked unexcused for groups of students, with the exception of Filipino at School 1 and 4 and White at School 4, were below the mean for each racial and ethnic group at low-SES schools. Rates for each group at each school are shown in Figure 7. The rates for Black or Pacific Islander students are not shown due to a low population of those students. While not shown in race and ethnic breakdown of the school sites, in an interview with the former superintendent, they described the White population as primarily coming from families that were new immigrants from Middle Eastern countries so may not be reflective of the population of White students at the state level.

Figure 7

Rates of Absences Marked Unexcused in School 4 by Race/Ethnicity vs. District Mean



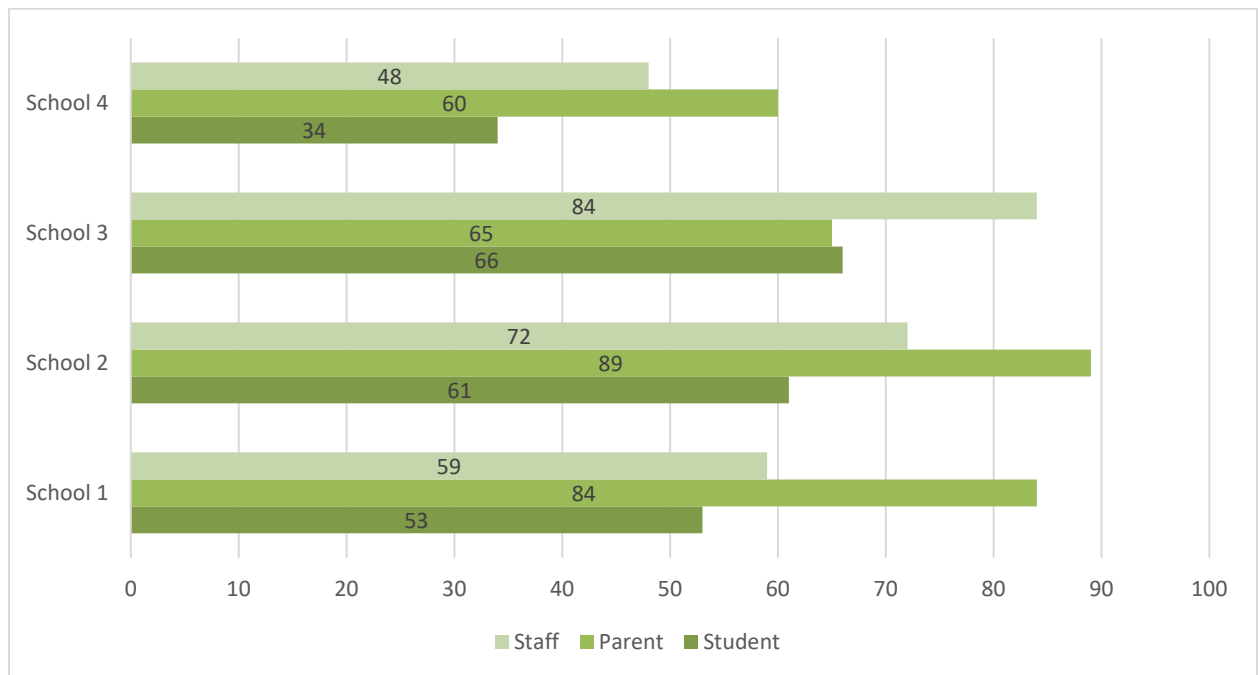
As demonstrated each racial/ethnic group in each school had absences marked unexcused lower than the district mean for the same racial/ethnic group. School 2 had very little

variation in absences marked unexcused among Asian, Latinx, Filipino and White with all between 17% and 22%, and the highest percent of absences marked unexcused being White students. Two or more races at School 2 had the lowest percent of absences marked unexcused at 13%. School 3 had lower rates overall and low variation with two or more races at 12% and Asian and White the highest percentage at 19%. School 1 had the greatest variation with two or more at 10% and Filipino students marked unexcused most frequently at 26%, just above the district average and three percentage points above the school average.

The middle school, School 4 had a higher percentage of absences marked unexcused and wider variation than the elementary schools. The rates are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Overall Favorable School Climate Ratings by School & Respondent Group



For Latinx and Filipino students, the rates of absences marked unexcused were equal to or lower than the district mean of their race or ethnicity while the other groups of students were higher than the district mean. The rates at the school varied with Filipino students at the lowest at 17%, while White students were the highest at 42%, followed by two or more at 34%. The rates at School 4 were quite different than rates as at the state level where Whites tended to have the lowest rate of absences marked unexcused while Latinx students tended to be among the highest rates of absences marked unexcused.

Results and Findings

This section examines the results and findings for each of the research questions.

RQ1: What Are the School Climate Survey Characteristics of Schools with Rates of Absences Marked Unexcused at or Below the District Mean for All Groups of Students?

As previously discussed, a review of the unexcused absence data resulted in the selection of four schools for further examination, three elementary schools and one middle school. The district as a whole did consider school climate important. This was reflected at the highest level with the school board including school climate as one of its five goals provide a positive school climate for students, staff, and families which includes safe, secure, accessible, and efficient classrooms, facilities, and grounds.

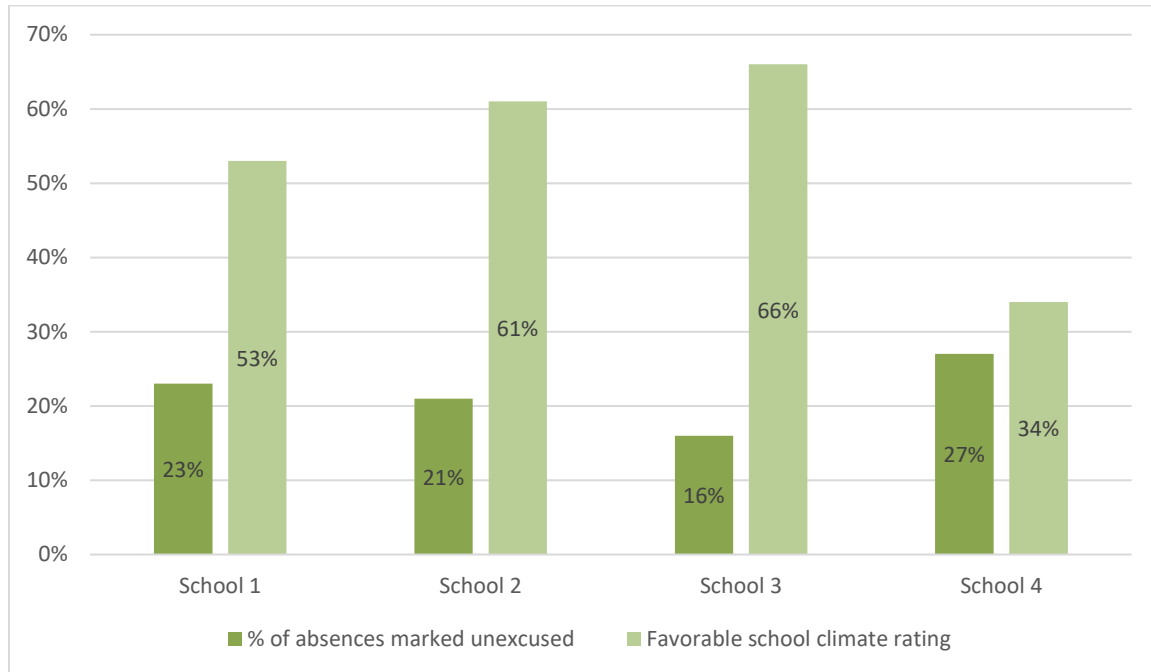
The school district used the Panorama survey to measure school climate for all schools and for families, staff, and students. The Panorama survey is a tool used by districts across the country that was developed by a team at Harvard. It is privately owned and school districts contract with Panorama for surveys and survey analysis.

Description of Survey. For each school the school district provided the results of the Panorama Surveys related to various constructs used by the district. For the purposes of this study, the district provided survey results for those concepts it felt were relevant to attendance and life skills in general. Among other constructs, the district provided the results of measures of school safety, school climate, and sense of belonging. The questions asked for each of these are presented in Appendix 2 and were downloaded from Panorama Education (2021).

The average score for each domain for each school reflected the percent of people who responded “favorably” as determined by Panorama Education (2021). The average was calculated by the total percent favorable for each question divided by the total number of questions. Each question received a favorable score based on the percent who responded in the favorable realm of each question. For example, the staff question “Overall how positive is the working environment your school” was rated from “not at all positive” to “extremely positive” with responses “quite positive” and “extremely positive” considered favorable. Therefore, the favorable number was the percent of staff who responded with one of those two responses. School climate averages for students, parents, and staff are presented in Figure 9. Schools 1 to 3 are elementary schools and School 4 is a middle school.

Figure 9

Percent of Absences Marked Unexcused & Favorable School Climate Rating by School



For all but one school, School 3, the family perception of a positive school climate was the highest, with staff having the next average highest perception of school climate and students the lowest. School 3 also differed in the level of perception of a positive school climate by students and staff, with students' perception of school climate slightly higher than families but lower than the staff.

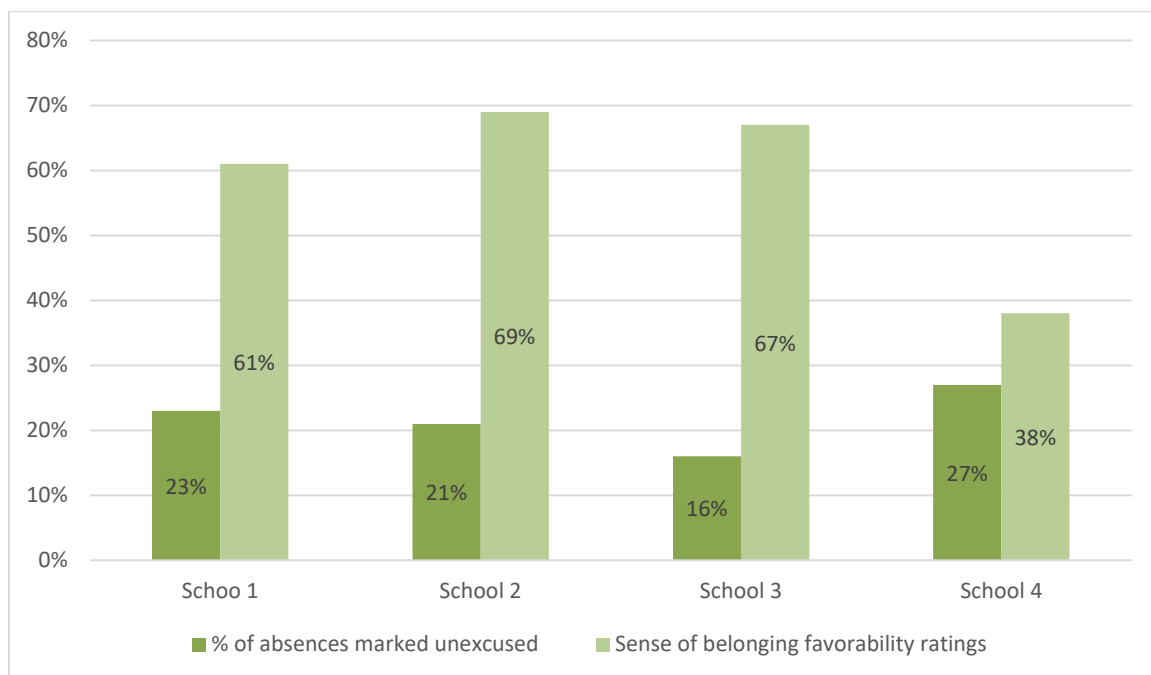
A caveat regarding family response data was the very low number and percent of family members that responded at each school. For School 1, 12% of family members responded, School 2 had 8% of family members respond, School 3 had 2% and School 4 had 8%. No demographics of the family were shown in the results, so those were unknown. Similarly, the demographics of the staff responses were unknown. It was harder to determine the percent of

staff that took the survey as it was unknown whether it was just teachers or classified staff that completed the survey.

To understand whether there was a relationship between a higher overall average favorability rating on school climate and the overall percent of absences marked unexcused, Figure 10 shows the percent of each.

Figure 10

Percent of Absences Marked Unexcused & Sense of Belonging Favorability Ratings by School



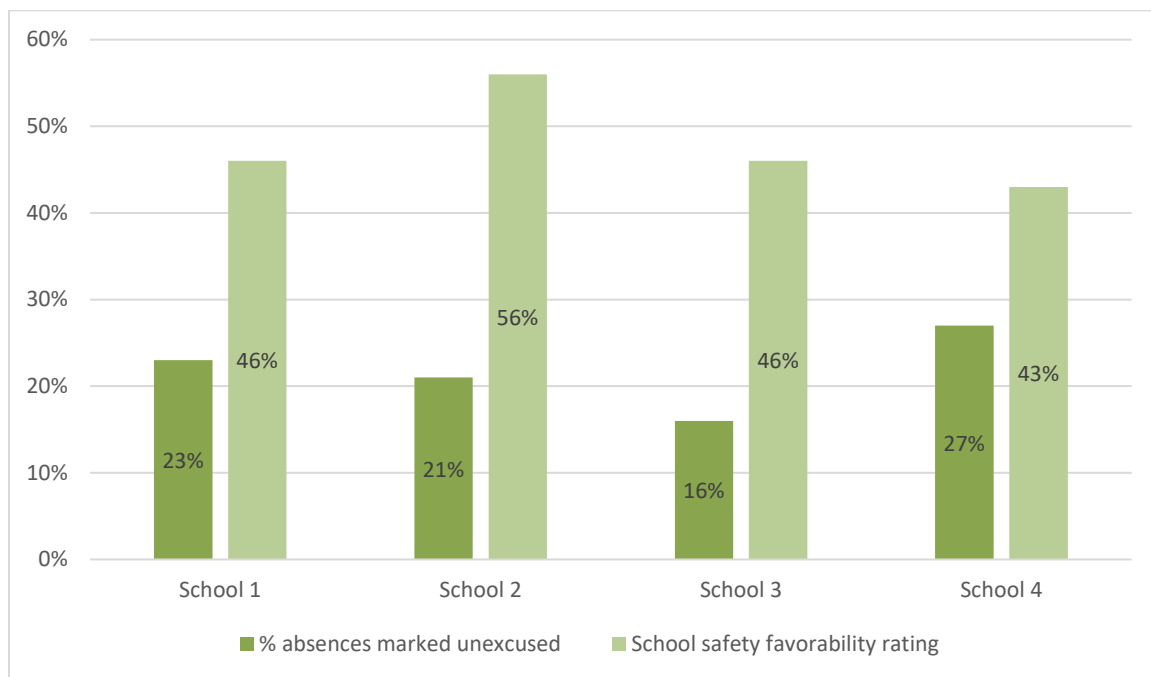
Because of the small sample size, an N of 4, a correlation analysis would not be valid. However, the school climate favorability ratings were mapped to the percent of absences marked unexcused as shown in Figure 10 with higher favorability ratings at the schools with lower rates of absences marked unexcused. School 4 had the lowest favorability rating for school climate at 38% and the highest percent of absences marked unexcused at 27% while

School 3 had the highest favorability rating for school climate at 66% and the lowest unexcused percent of absences marked unexcused at 16%. Similarly, School 2 ranked second in favorability and absences marked unexcused and School 1 was third in favorability and absences marked unexcused.

Understanding School Belonging. The district also administered the Panorama module that measured student sense of belonging at their school. In that module it asked students about respect among students and about support and connection to adults at the school among other questions (full list of questions in Appendix 2). Panorama Education (2021) reported the sense of belonging favorability ratings separately from the school climate ratings. Results for sense of belonging by school are shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Percent Absences Marked Unexcused & School Safety Favorability Rating by School



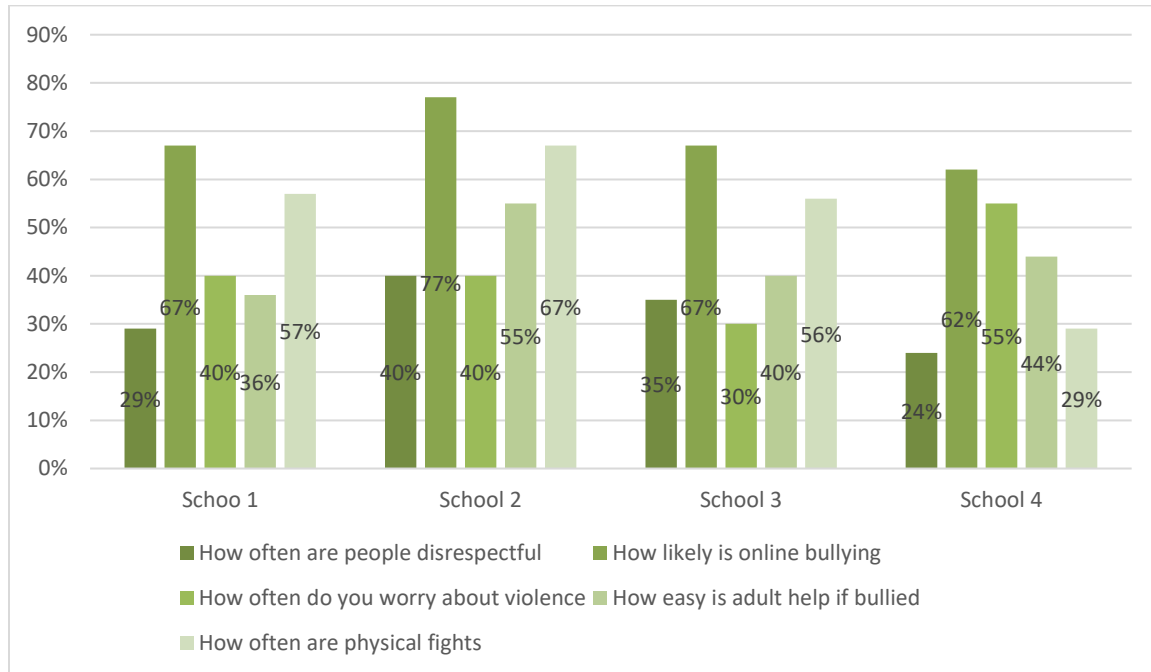
The sense of belonging favorability ratings somewhat tracked to the unexcused absences with the exception of School 2 which had a school belonging favorability rating of 69%, the highest, and the second lowest percent of absences marked unexcused while School 3 had the second highest sense of belonging rating of 66% and the lowest rate of absence marked unexcused of 16%. However, the difference on sense of belonging among the elementary schools was only 5% from the lowest to the highest. As in the school climate ratings, School 4, the middle school, had the lowest sense of belonging favorability rating and the highest percent of absences marked unexcused.

Safety at school has been another measure that has been associated with student attendance. The district used the Panorama module that assessed school safety (questions available in Appendix 2). Overall scores ranged from 56% favorable responses at School 2 to 43% favorable at School 4 with Schools 1 and 3 at 46%. The results alongside percent of absences marked unexcused are shown in Figure 11.

On this measure, the percent of absences marked unexcused did not track with the school safety rating except for the middle school. Schools 1 and 3 had identical school safety favorability ratings and the highest and lowest elementary unexcused absences respectively. School 2 was the only school where more than half of the students favorably responded to sense of school safety. With three schools having under half of the students expressing favorable feelings of school safety, the overall measure warranted further exploration of the specific questions. The truncated questions and percent favorable are shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12

School Safety Favorability Rating by Question & School



As Figure 12 shows, the averages masked wide variations in responses to the questions. The question regarding how often people were disrespectful at the school garnered the lowest or second lowest percent of favorable responses for every school. The highest number at School 2 reached just 40% and the lowest, at School 4 was only 24%. Online bullying, which could contribute to significant issues for students, including attendance (Feldman et al., 2014) showed the highest percent of favorable responses for all schools. A favorable response meant the percent of students who responded that online bullying was “not at all likely” or “not likely” which made this question the one with the highest favorability rating across all schools. Just over half of the students at School 4 worried about violence “frequently” or “almost always”, 30% worried at School 3, and 40% at Schools 1 and 2 worried “frequently” or “almost always”.

This question sought to understand any notable school climate characteristics of the selected schools. As shown, school climate, safety and belonging measures varied among the schools and aligned with the percent of absences marked unexcused only for school climate. Beyond that, results were not consistent across the various modules and showed no relationship. Generally, however, the middle school, School 4 scored lower on favorability for all domains measured. The elementary schools had a lower percent of absences that were marked unexcused and higher favorability ratings overall.

RQ2: What Are the Attendance Policies and Practices of Selected Low SES Schools with Absence Rates for All Groups of Students at or Below the District Mean?

This study examined attendance policies and practices at the selected schools and in the district by interviewing principals, district staff, reviewing websites and other school communications. Eight interviews were conducted for the study. Four interviews with district staff or former district staff, and the principals of the four schools selected for their unexcused absence data. For the purposes of identification, the following names were used: District Staff A, District Staff B, District Staff C, Former District Staff D, Principal A, Principal B, Principal C, and Principal D. The following themes emerged from the interviews.

Education Code Guided District Policy, Which Guided School Policy. Each person interviewed was asked to explain their understanding of the policies focused on absence and marking students unexcused. From a district level the staff followed Board Policy and the accompanying administrative regulations. “So we do it based on Ed Code, whether it’s a valid excused absence or unexcused absence ... it’s Ed Code and Board Policy and Board

Policy goes with Ed Code” (Interview with District Staff B). District staff cited Ed Code when describing what types of absences were considered excused by the state. The board policy staff referred to was last updated in 2017 and stated:

Absence from school shall be excused only for health reasons, family emergencies, and justifiable personal reasons, as permitted by law, Board policy, and administrative regulation. (California Legislative Information [CSI], 2023)

Student absence for religious instruction or participation in religious exercises away from school property may be considered excused subject to law and administrative regulation. (CSI, 1976)

Similarly, school staff responded to the same question by referencing district policy. “I think that the policy from the district is pretty clear, and we follow the same at our site that if someone is ill, if they have a medical appointment, if they have a funeral or there's certain religious holidays that are excused, but that pretty much everything else is unexcused” (Interview with Principal B). Each person interviewed referenced Ed Code and District policy as the guide for assigning excused versus unexcused absences.

While the district policy had not been updated since 2017, the accompanying Administrative Regulations were more current, having been updated in 2023, and listed fifteen different reasons for excused absences followed by this statement “Other reasons authorized at the discretion of the principal or designee based on the student's specific circumstances” (CSI, 2013, 2023). This update reflected Education Code updated in 2023 to reflect a broader set of reasons students may be considered excused.

Schools Paid Attention to All Absences. Throughout the interviews concern about all absences came through. Former District Staff D described the history and noted that chronic absence had been “on the radar” of the district since before the Pandemic and that they

typically had a chronic absence rate of 6% to 8%. They said, “the district was making good progress in 2018-19” and had absence as a topic at every principal meeting. It appeared this message was clear as the principals talked about a focus on attendance in general, chronic absence specifically, and truancy only when specifically asked. “We focus a lot on also the excused absences because we have kids that have missed, that are chronically absent. We have a lot of absent students” (Interview with Principal B). Similarly, Principal C noted that the district as a whole had a focus on attendance that was reflected at the sites, “Whether it's excused or unexcused, many, I would say all of us site administrators have made that one of our real focal points.” Principals described the importance of being in school, encouraging attendance, and supporting families to address any barriers. Principal A described a family where they estimated one student in the family attended school only 10% of the time the prior year, but didn't characterize the type of absences. After working with the family, the principal said the sibling now attended school at least 80% and possibly 90% of the time. While that still constituted chronic absence, it reflected a significant turnaround for the family. Principal A also talked about the various ways the school tried to help families get their students to school, including bus passes and alarm clocks. Of note, former District Staff D indicated they didn't strive for 100% attendance because “... perfect attendance ... means you don't have childcare and you are sending your kid to school sick. Because [even h]ealthy children get sick 2 to 3 times per year.”

Family Circumstances Vary, Schools Tried to Meet the Need. Despite being very clear on policy content and the importance of following policy, district staff and school principals described a nuanced approach in their practices. All interviewees talked about

family circumstances, follow up with families, and support to try to ensure students could get to school, could get to school on time, and if they were absent, have those absences marked excused.

At this school every day. the secretary and the attendance clerk and maybe the clerk in the office run a list of all the unexcused absences and make phone calls to all the families to try and figure out the reason, whether they are sick, whether it's a doctor's appointment, whether they're cutting school or if there's no valid reason. (Interview with Principal A)

Principal C described a similar approach where families first received a robocall if the absence had not been called in within one hour after school starting. They then had a clerk who followed up with personal calls to families who had “a few days” to provide the excuse for the absence. As another principal put it:

There are things that you know, as in life, there's odd things that happen every now and then, or like for us, sometimes it's the parents, the bus they were taking broke down or their car didn't start. So, we'll give that as an excused absence because it was not just, they tried, and it didn't work. (Interview with Principal B)

Principal D had a school counselor help with tracking and reaching out to families to attempt to provide support and resources to help with attendance, for example they noted that the school had provided many bus passes in the current school year. Principal C talked about trying to understand family barriers and helping connect families who are new to the community by connecting them to neighbors. The principal described their school as one where many children walk, so finding family partners who could walk not only their own child, but a neighbor's child was important. Principal A, who had the turnaround in attendance described in the previous section, also talked about what it took to make that happen, “There's a lot of support from social workers and other people and therapists and our

counselors ... I think there were some home visits that are involved and there's an individual pick up every day.”

At one school the principal described their process for ensuring tardies didn't turn into unexcused absences. They had each student stop by the office to get a sticker, so the teacher knew they had been checked in. If they came to class late without a sticker, they were told to go back to the office to check in. “We've trained them all now. So, the kids know the kids, they know exactly. I mean, it took a few weeks of training and reminders. I don't like handing kids tardy slips, I just feel that that ... it's embarrassing” (Interview with Principal C).

The message from the district supported a flexible supportive approach as well:

I feel like we follow Ed Code if the family is giving a reasonable excuse. There's also part of Ed Code where it's administrative discretion. If it's tricky, I just say, talk to your admin. And then if the admin feels like it's tricky, then they'll call me directly. But I would say for the most part, we're not, I mean, we are flexible. I don't feel though that we're extremely rigid and strict. I do feel like we are a flexible district in general with families and we're understanding and compassionate. But ... by the time they get to me, those families, I would say I'm a little, we are more rigid or more like just kind of stay by the book because we feel like it's being abused, you know, or overutilized and harming the child. (Interview with District Staff C)

District Staff C, who, like many of the staff interviewed, had seen the district shift over time reflected on the cultural shift that led to the vision of family support:

I feel like we really changed together, and I feel like our meetings are more around how do we help remove barriers and support your needs and have an honest conversation so that attendance improves. Because we want to see your child and we want to support them, but we also want to support you.

Former District Staff D spoke about urging principals to choose ten families who were not in an extreme category, and work with them on the importance of attendance.

As gleaned from the interviews, the district staff and school site staff were quite aligned in the approach to absences. While they followed district policy and Ed Code, they recognized family circumstance and life factors could get in the way of school attendance and worked to understand and address those factors before assigning unexcused absences or taking more punitive measures.

Truancy Warranted Support. When asked about truancy, interviewees similarly referenced district policy, but also described the steps they took to strike the balance between providing a high level of support and ensuring students had opportunities to learn by coming to school. As noted in Chapter 2, generally a student is considered truant after three unexcused absences. As is required by Ed Code, families in the district generally received a truancy letter after the first three unexcused absences or three unexcused tardies of more than 30 minutes. After several rounds of notification, usually three, with no improvement, principals had the option to refer students and families to the SARB. The CDE provided this definition of the SARB “SARBs, composed of representatives from various youth-serving agencies, help truant or recalcitrant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources” (CDE, n.d.). Counties or school districts can form their own SARBs. The district formed its own SARB and the week during which several of the interviews were conducted happened to be the week that the SARB was meeting. Two of the principals arrived at the interview just after the SARB meeting. While each school principal described a slightly different approach, the underlying commonalities included seeking to understand what was

keeping families from getting kids to school, finding ways to help families get their kids to school, and trying to avoid punitive practice, including referral to the SARB.

Each principal described the truancy notification process and what they did prior to referring families to the SARB. They all described reviewing the district report of absences, both those marked excused and those marked unexcused, that school sites receive monthly. Those reports provided the opportunity for principals and staff to review the absences, make any corrections, and decide whether to keep students whose absences would trigger a truancy letter on that list. The principals all said they could suppress a letter if they felt it was warranted. When asked directly, Principal D said, “Some families just need the reminder and some families, you know, get really upset and, shut down and kind of won't return phone calls and things of that nature if they feel like it's more punitive than helpful.” Principal D went on to say that in order to maintain the relationship with the family they will continue to work with the family before sending out the second truancy letter. One principal delineated their process that included a bi-weekly review of attendance:

Every two weeks we sit down, and we pull up the report of all the unexcused and excused absences. And then I start trying to figure out, okay, what's going on here? Okay, we've got some independent studies that's all accounted for. Excused absences, there was a death in the family, illnesses, doctor's appointments. There are certain things we can excuse. But if we see a pattern of kids being out all the time. And I was just at a SARB meeting this morning because we have a particular case where the child misses so much school every year and mom won't give us permission to reach out to the doctor to see what's going on so we can create a 504 plan and put some deeper supports in place. (Interview with Principal C)

The Limited Value of SARB. The principals expressed skepticism about the value of the SARB with all noting they used the SARB referral process infrequently. Even when they went in front of the SARB they continued to try to provide supports for families.

To be honest, the SARB process in my history, I've done it numerous times, they basically send them back with threats, but nothing ever goes through. So, it doesn't, that process doesn't really benefit. You might as well try and figure out what the root cause is and try and work with the family to improve that. A lot of times it's mental health, a lot of times it's wraparound support that the family needs and trying to get them that, sometimes you gotta go to SARB to do that. (Interview with Principal A)

Principal C echoed a similar sentiment:

I don't send a lot of families to SARB because I try to resolve the issue at the site level. But I've had a particular case that I've been dealing with for a few years now and I was like, it's time. It's with these particular two families this morning ... it did warrant a SARB.

Principal D put it simply, “I have referred students in the past. It didn’t have the charge I was hoping for. It really came down to the relationship between the school and the family to get that charge.”

Even when families received a SARB referral, principals described the challenge of having families actually come to the SARB meeting.

I had talked to the parent and the girl she's in fourth, fifth grade and like she's been absent a lot because she's of menstrual cramps. And I said, oh, you need to send her anyways because she can lay down ... we have warm compresses ... she can take a break every day that she needs to. And I said, did you realize she's missing this much school? ... but the parent didn't respond to the SARB nor show up for the SARB today. (Interview with Principal B)

Not showing up for a SARB meeting did not seem to trigger punitive measures in the district. Principals reported that when a family member did not show up at a SARB meeting, they could be scheduled for another meeting and/or referred to the district staff in charge of student supports. One principal noted that first response would be to find out why they weren’t able to attend and offer support. However, repeated failure to attend a SARB meeting could trigger a home visit. Even still, Principal A stated, “The family liaison may get

involved and possibly work with a social worker to figure out what the family needs to attend the meeting” (written correspondence).

Flexibility, Support, and Alignment. “I am of the belief that we should be connecting with families and trying to support them” (Interview with District Staff A). As described above, interviews with district staff and school site principals at selected schools all reflected similar themes, policy was important but couldn’t address every individual family situation. Former District Staff D provided an example of a major religious holiday, Ramadan, during which the students who observed that holiday were missing school due to the fasting requirements. Although Ed Code currently permits student absence for religious holidays, given the length of Ramadan, to address the number of absences, the district worked with the local Imam to talk with the families about how to both attend school and remain observant. All interviewees were aligned in the way they approached absences generally, how they considered and talked about unexcused absences, truancy, and the use of SARB. They demonstrated that if schools were to serve students and families well, improve attendance, and work to ensure absences could be marked excused, it required flexibility and support to meet the needs of families and of students – even when stricter measures were called for.

RQ 3: How Were the Policies and Practices Communicated to Families and Students?

Interviews with the same staff identified in RQ 2, namely District Staff A, B, and C as well as Former District Staff D, and Principals A, B, C, and D provided data for this question. Additionally, school websites, written notifications, school handbooks, and principal newsletters all added context. This study did not conduct a tone analysis but, where

possible, did make assertions about tone based on commonly used styles of communication, grouping styles into friendly or supportive, neutral, or punitive.

Direct Phone Calls from School Site Staff Aimed to Support and Encourage

Attendance. The principals all described processes by which they contacted families when students were absent without a family member providing an excuse. While most discussed the first call being a robocall when an absence had not been reported that day, they also identified either a school clerk who would follow up if the robocall failed to reach the family member. They also identified specific staff who made calls when there were regular absences, particularly if they were not marked excused:

... the first line should be the teacher checking in with the parent, “Hey, I haven't seen Joel in class for the last couple of days, is everything okay?” That's if it's not called in, right? So that's the first line of contact. Because a lot of times, the parent might be more comfortable telling the teacher there's something going on at home or something going on with the child. (Interview with Principal C)

Some principals characterized the tone of the calls based on who was making them and described the importance of calibrating who makes calls based on prior interactions with the families. “Usually, the school counselor will do the first call because it's a little bit softer” (Interview with Principal B). Principal D described a similar tone with their counselor:

And for us, our, it's our counselor who's full time here also helps me with the attendance portion and helps me red flag any students that are kind of coming up as becoming chronically absent. And so, [they] reach out as the, the good guy initially to inform families about you know, hey, like what can we do to help? What supports do you need? [And offer] resources that they may have whether it's a bus pass. We've given out quite a number of bus passes this year. (Interview with Principal D)

Aligned with the theme identified in RQ 2, regarding the variability of family circumstances, recognition of a supportive tone and thoughtful connections with families ran through all the interviews, including with district staff.

Schools Communicated Regularly About Attendance and Have Multiple Points of Contact. Principals were asked about how they communicated with families. For direct communication, principals described robocalls, text messaging systems, and emails all as ways to connect with families. Echoing the connection with the teacher described in the direct connection theme, the elementary schools all used a system that allowed teachers to email or text family members directly on a regular basis. The principals talked about the utility of that system for quick connections on attendance. For example, Principal B noted that their teachers connected regularly with families using a platform that notifies the family member by text or email that they have a message. The family member would then log in to see a message. "... we're so happy to see so, and so back or we've seen they've been absent a lot. Is there something we can do? So, trying to get like, even at a more personal level" (Interview with Principal B).

Three of the four principals had a newsletter they sent monthly in addition to the regular direct communication with families. One used a daily bulletin available online. Principal C included attendance messages in their monthly newsletter, often using Attendance Works material. Attendance Works is a national organization that "collaborates with schools, districts, states, communities and organizations to ensure that everyone recognizes that chronic absence is a serious issue that can be addressed using a positive, problem-solving approach grounded in an understanding of educational inequities" (Attendance Works, n.d.). For Principal C each month's newsletter was available online using a platform that allowed access to prior months' newsletters. One newsletter from earlier in this school year contained an Attendance Works video about the importance of attendance and included the voices of

families talking about how they see the difference for their children when they attend school. Principal C similarly shared a welcome back message for families that included an Attendance Works flyer regarding the importance of attendance. Principal D also stated they included attendance in their newsletter. While no copies were available, they also described general messages about the importance of attendance, “so even if they're missing kindergarten and it becomes a habit ... sometimes just short ones where it's just like, hey, remember to call and this is important” (Interview with Principal D). Principals also described using family nights, morning announcements, and competitions to reinforce attendance messages.

So, we celebrate attendance, right? And kids being here. We also, every month we have like a friendly competition between classrooms to see who had the highest percentage of attendance. And so that class at the end of the month, it gets like a little ice cream party or a popcorn party, and the kids really, really liked that. (Interview with Principal C)

Principal A specifically noted a family night for families with attendance issues. “One thing that we're planning, we haven't done it this year is a parent night for specifically students of our families where the students are either truant, excessive tardies, or excessive absences.”

Other School Documents, Like Family Handbooks Varied in Style. A review of other documents showed a greater variation in style as compared to the more supportive approach reflected in this chapter. The tone could have been neutral, as reflected in a school compact families are committed to ensuring that students are in school on time daily and students are committed to attending school on a daily basis. Another school handbook had a full page on attendance that started with a neutral tone, regular attendance is important for students to be

successful learners, also listing acceptable reasons for absence including religious holidays, but by the end of the section became more punitive in tone, of these recommendations are not followed and the student continues to accrue unexcused absences and tardies, SARB can turn the case over to the district attorney's office for legal action.

The school websites varied in the information provided, with only one specifically providing the number to call for absences. For all other schools, the phone number was listed, one included the name and number for the clerk, but didn't identify whether that person was the person to call for absences.

The district sent out a maximum of three truancy notices based on the number of absences marked unexcused. Truancy notices all reflected a more supportive tone, even the third notice. The first notice opens with partnership:

We need your support. [STUDENT NAME]'s absences from school are concerning, and your partnership is important. Anytime your child misses school it is a loss in a learning opportunity and can lead to other difficulties. We hope to partner with you to improve your child's attendance.

It continued with offering the school as a resource and ended by again requesting partnership. The second truancy notice opened with "We need your partnership and commitment in ensuring your child is at school every day! It is our priority to provide your child all of the support our school can offer." It did take a more serious tone by requesting the family member contact the school to schedule a meeting and referring to the first truancy notice as well as compulsory attendance requirements in Ed Code. However, it concluded with "[w]e are here to help". Even the third notice, at which time the student would be classified as a habitual truant, began with "We understand there are unexpected challenges this year, we are here to assist you! Our partnership in supporting your child's attendance is a

priority.” This letter did take a more punitive tone including notifying families that they would be referred to the SARB. Each letter was accompanied by a list of resources for families that included technical support for reporting absences, family support, a list of school counselors, suggestions for healthy habits and sleep, as well as a link to community resources.

Although the question was specific to family communication, it warranted noting that district communication with school sites appeared to be very clear. The district provided a document titled “Attendance Letter Procedures and Resources”. This document detailed the role of the district in issuing attendance/truancy letters, including timing, the person responsible, and the actions taken. It also identified opportunities for school site staff to modify based on family needs. Each document referenced was linked, along with specific actions to be taken by the school site and the actions that would trigger the school response. It provided definitions, screenshots of the web interface used by the district, and other notices related to attendance that schools could use.

Language Ability and Specific Staff Made a Difference. Many interviewees referenced the number of different languages spoken in the district. “And we have such a high population of multilingual families as well. And just like so many different languages, Turkish, Russian, Spanish, Mongolian, those are just like, of course, Farsi. So we have a lot” (Interview with Principal B). They also spoke of the value of communicating with families in their own language. In fact, Principal A raised language as critical in response to my question about what else should I have asked. “My attendance tech and my clerk speak Spanish, which is very good ... my vice principal does not ... I do ... but those are some of the

barriers ... if the vice principal needs to call but needs to wait a second for the attendance tech” (Interview with Principal A). All district communications were translated into Spanish with school sites providing written communication in additional languages as needed to reflect the school population.

In addition to language, the principals all referred to staff that both supported families and communicated with families. The principals mentioned clerks as frequently being the first point of contact with families regarding absences. The clerks made calls to families, they received calls and had the ability in some schools to make the decision about whether an absence is marked excused or unexcused. Although, in at least one instance the principal said “If it's a really clear cut one, they [the clerk] do. But if there's something that is out of the ordinary, they'll check in with me” (Principal B). District Staff A spoke to the importance of the clerks in communication “[We need to] also train our attendance clerks to better collect the data and get more information from families.” Another principal spoke about how culture contributed to communication as well, “I'm trying to change it to make it more welcoming, to let them know. I'm glad that they made it, even if they're late” (Interview with Principal B). Having specific staff like counselors and clerks who could talk with families and students, and do it in home language, when possible, was a key attribute of the schools studied. The message flowed from the district office along with funding for these critical staff.

District staff also spoke to the importance of specific staff and of language. The district engaged with multiple partners, some of whom provided staff for the district, including one partnership that provided full-time family liaisons who were also parents themselves. They

all spoke another language in addition to English, which District Staff C noted, avoided the barriers of language:

I just prefer bilingual liaisons because I was also kind of seeing a trend, right? Like why is it Latino families that are being referred? And it doesn't seem like people really clearly communicated with them about the seriousness of it or asked them or you know, questions about why?

Creating specific positions designed to support families and having staff who spoke their language within schools and across the district lent credibility to the commitment of this district to have “welcoming, safe, engaging schools”.

Summary of Findings

Understanding the policies and practices of a district and specific schools that had a low number of absences overall, a low number of absences marked unexcused, and all racial and ethnic groups equal to or less than the district mean revealed some important findings. First, schools within a district did vary in their absences but identifying schools that mirror the district’s relatively low rates overall and specifically among different racial or ethnic groups was possible and revealed some clearly aligned practices. There were three elementary schools that had rates at or below the district rates and higher than 50% population of students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch, a measure of low SES. Given that the district was a kindergarten through eighth grade district, including a middle school provided an additional window into the practices of the district. Chosen because it had two of the elementary schools feed students into its population, the middle school’s absences were higher than the elementary schools’ absences.

In the elementary schools, the positive school climate data mirrored the percent of absences marked unexcused in a positive direction. Those schools that had more positive

school climate results had lower rates of absences marked unexcused. The middle school both had higher rates of absences marked unexcused and lower positive school climate ratings. The association did not hold true for school safety or sense of belonging for any of the schools.

In answering Research Questions 2 and 3, the most significant finding was the strong alignment among the schools and with the district. Principals used the same language when referring to families, reflected the same understanding of district policy, their level of discretion in assigning excused or unexcused absences, and in how they considered the value of the SARB in meeting the needs of students and families. All spoke about meeting families' individual needs, about following district policy regarding marking absences, yet applying it with understanding. The practices and policies the principals described echoed the practices and policies described by the district. These policies and practices were generally communicated in a positive tone, even in all three truancy letters written by the district. Language support and messenger were also highlighted. This alignment of policies and practices could be the most important finding and warrants further exploration.

Chapter 5: Implications, and Recommendations

This chapter discusses the study and its findings and provides recommendations for schools and for future research. The chapter provides a summary of the study methodology, research questions, and findings and then makes a connection to the high-level themes from the literature. It concludes with recommendations for additional research and implications for practice.

Study Summary

Using case study design, this study sought to understand the practices and policies of a school district that exhibited low rates of absences marked unexcused and relatively low rates of absences marked unexcused across all racial/ethnic groups. Identification of the district started by using baseline attendance data from the CDE's Data Quest. Selection criteria were drawn from McNeely et al. (2023) and included above average levels of attendance, below average levels of absences marked unexcused, and low racial disparities in absences marked unexcused between White students and comparison racial group of less than two-tenths of a standard deviation. The selected district met the first two criteria. The largest difference from the district mean was eight percentage points or 1.49 standard deviations for any racial or ethnic group. Once the district was identified I sought and was granted permission from the superintendent to conduct this study of the district. From the district selection, I examined the school absence data to further narrow down the sites to three elementary schools and one middle school. All schools had greater than 50% of their school population eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. The elementary schools were selected based on their unexcused absence rates being lower than the district mean for all students. The middle school was

selected in consultation with the superintendent as it was a feeder school for two of the three selected elementary schools. The research questions were:

- RQ1: What are the school climate survey characteristics of schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
- RQ2: What are the attendance policies and practices of low SES-schools with rates of absences marked unexcused at or below the district mean for all groups of students?
- RQ3: How are the attendance policies and practices communicated to families and students?

Summary of Results

Using attendance data to select the three elementary schools, they were identified by exhibiting the following characteristics. The schools were low-SES, as defined by more than 50% of students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch, that also had low rates of absences marked unexcused and the rates of absences marked unexcused lower than the district mean for each racial or ethnic group. A fourth school, a middle school was included to represent the full population of the district. While overall the middle school had higher rates of absences marked unexcused, they were lower than or equal to the district for Latinx and Filipino students. The schools not selected were either under 50% of students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch or had more groups of students whose absences were marked unexcused at higher rates than the district average of 25%.

After selecting the school sites, the study then reviewed school climate, school safety, and school belonging data from the Panorama survey administered by the district. While there was an association with school climate data and lower rates of absences marked

unexcused, the school safety and school belonging data were less connected to the absence rates with variations among the schools. For school climate the results of family and staff surveys were also included. Staff surveys of favorable school climate were also associated with lower rates of absences marked unexcused while family rates were more variable. However, because each group had a low number of responses, the results could reflect selection bias.

Research Questions 2 and 3 results came through interviews and document review. The results revealed clear themes including, clear policy and procedures which guided the schools but provided flexibility in application. This flexibility allowed schools to recognize the importance of individual family circumstances. As a result, even when students were considered truant or even habitually truant, the schools continued to work to address the individual circumstances. Schools used the SARB sparingly and in a supportive way, to the extent possible. The district, however, was committed to attendance and did become more rigid in its application of policy for the most serious cases.

The communication with families was generally done in a supportive or friendly tone and offered in a variety of ways including regular newsletters from principals, direct communication with teachers and other school staff, and in-person through family nights at schools, or through home visits. Written communication with families regarding truancy reflected guidance from the literature (Lasky-Fink et al., 2019) and provided clear support resources. Additionally, guidance from the district for school sites was clear and included information and resources for the schools. Finally, having staff that communicated with in families home language was a critical piece of the puzzle.

Connections to the Literature

Throughout the review of the literature, specific concepts were identified that guided the research and were identified in the results.

The Importance and Complexity of Attendance

Multiple studies have demonstrated the impact regular attendance has on various aspects of school success, including kindergarten readiness and third grade reading (Ansari & Purtell, 2018; ASR, 2011; Ehrlich et al., 2018), academics (Ginsberg et al., 2014; Gottfried, 2010), and high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). This belief in the importance of school attendance clearly became ingrained in the district, and the interviewed staff held attendance as important to the success of the students they serve. All district staff and principals highlighted the importance of attendance. One principal noted that attendance was a focus of the superintendent, and simply said “they learn when they are in school” (Interview with Principal C). This commitment to attendance came across clearly in the interviews and, as described in Chapter 4 was an intentional process the district undertook, both to focus on attendance and to focus on the needs of families. The two concepts were interwoven throughout the interviews and reflected an understanding of the complex nature of school attendance.

These complexities were reflected in the further commitment of the district to understand, not only the numerical data, but the people reflected in the data. At the district level, staff talked about the need for granular details of the data, to understand trends, and to ensure consistency in data entry. They wanted to know about families and what was happening when they weren’t in school. Were they on vacation around holiday breaks, for example

going to their family's country of origin to visit extended family? Or how family trauma affected them "Give them some grace because their life is still filled with stressors and chaos and trauma. We're not going to compound that" (Interview with District Staff C). The compassion demonstrated by every interviewee reflected a shift from the punitive approaches to absence to knowing that most families were trying to do the best they could. Despite this attention to family needs, if the attendance issues continued, families could be put on a contract, required to meet with site staff and could eventually be sent to the SARB. District office staff noted that they needed to be involved when they felt it was a case of educational neglect.

This nuanced understanding reflected the complexity for school administrators of addressing issues faced by families and knowing both how and when to intervene. While ideally supports would resolve lack of attendance and, in particular, absences being considered unexcused, for some families these absences reflected other issues in their lives that may have resulted in lack of attention to school or lack of ability to navigate systems that would help make it possible for their child or children to attend school. This makes the attention to individual family needs and the understanding of the data critical for school districts seeking to address attendance, and in particular, how they consider absences to be excused or unexcused.

Racial and Ethnic Dimensions of Attendance

The literature demonstrated the historical disinvestment in schools that serve students of color (Lleras-Muney, 2002) as well as historical decreased attendance requirements in the policies of schools that were segregated (Donato, 1997; Liu et al., 2015) that have resulted in

direct harm to students of color as well as contributing to the maintenance of White-dominant culture in public schools. This study sought to explore the policies and practices of a district that, on the surface, did not have an overrepresentation of students of color, particularly Black and Latinx students in both chronic absence and in absences marked unexcused.

First the study reviewed the data to understand whether racial differences did exist, and if so, where? The district data showed that differences did exist in the district, among different racial groups but they all hovered around the district average of 25% of absences being marked unexcused. Mirroring state trends, Black students had the highest percent of absences marked unexcused at 33% with Asian students the lowest at 17%. After selecting the four schools, three due to lower rates of absences marked unexcused for all groups, and one middle school to represent the full range of the district, the study looked at absences by race/ethnicity for those schools. While most of the differences in absences marked unexcused reflected the state data in each school, one school, had White students marked unexcused at almost twice the rate as Filipino students, the highest percent of absences marked unexcused at the school, and much higher than the district average. Given this outlier, further understanding of the data would be useful. For example, did these differences continue in the following years or did it reflect a particular group of students impacted by the pandemic? Examining one year of data, and the first year of reliable attendance data post-pandemic did provide limited information when understanding outliers. Additional nuance was provided in the interviews that indicated many of the White students were recent immigrants who were also Muslim. The celebration of Ramadan was noted as a time when more of the White students were absent. However, a question remained about the absences being marked

unexcused given the flexibility in assigning an excused label for religious holidays as well as connections to local religious leaders that were discussed in interviews.

By examining a school district that demonstrated low rates of absences marked unexcused for all racial/ethnic groups, although differences do exist, the study considered what might be different in this district. As described, the attention to individual families seemed to be a strong contributing factor to the results shown in attendance data. This attention, reflected at all levels of the system appeared to come from strong alignment in policy and in practice. It was notable that some of the same language came from multiple principals and from the district asking families “what do you need” and “what are the barriers to getting to school”. Also notable was what was not said. Although each interviewee heard a description of the study, the reason the district was being studied, and the research that sparked this study, race or ethnicity was not mentioned as a factor in absences or absences marked unexcused. District staff did muse on the premise of the study and why the district was chosen. “It's really so many different, ethnicities that are represented in our district. And so, it's, it's kind of even the playing field across the board with absences” (Interview with District Staff A). Similarly, District Staff C said “I wonder too if it's just our makeup as well, because we are a district of color if you will. And we are just very diverse.”

The district did have a different racial composition than is typical of California, with Latinx (37%), Filipino (24%), and Asian (20%) students representing the top three groups in terms of percentage of the population, but no group as the majority. Interestingly at the state level Latinx students had the third highest proportion of absences marked unexcused while Filipino and Asian students had the lowest. In this district, like the state, Asian and Filipino

students were marked unexcused at the lowest rates and Black students were marked unexcused at the highest rates. But Black students were marked unexcused 33% of the time while White and Latinx students were marked unexcused 29% of the time with Asian and Filipino students marked absent 17% of the time at the district level, which, as noted, were all within eight percentage points of the district average. The overall racial makeup of a district warrants further consideration as does the focus on absence in general and whether the combination of those two contributed to relatively low rates of unexcused absences for all racial/ethnic groups.

Regarding monetary investment in the district, the district did receive state funding under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Districts that receive LCFF funding are state-funded districts that are allocated a base amount determined each year through a calculation at that state level. Beyond the base amount LCFF provides additional monies to districts to serve students living in poverty, students learning English as a second language, and foster students. This district used some of its LCFF dollars to invest in counselors, family liaisons, and other student supports that could have contributed to lower rates of absence overall and those marked unexcused specifically.

Attendance Policies: Considering Excused Versus Unexcused

The literature has shown that school policies can be racialized even without specific mention of race (McNeely et al., 2021) when they have a disproportionate impact on specific groups of students. The attendance policy of the district aligned with state policy, which became more inclusive and less restrictive in recent years. It also provided for more flexibility in assigning excused absences, where in past years, the reasons an absence could

be marked excused were very restrictive. School site staff and district staff understood they had flexibility in assigning excused absences and applied this flexibility accordingly. This is not to imply that school staff didn't exercise care and a commitment to school attendance. Quite the opposite, their understanding of the critical nature of attendance, the importance of working with families to ensure school attendance, and support when needed to avoid an absence being considered unexcused were all very clearly articulated throughout the interviews. Staff noted they worked to contact families when absences or tardies were being considered unexcused to move them to excused. They contacted families and provided support to help with attendance overall. And they were willing to move to more strict measures, like the district SARB, when all other attempts failed.

The work and approach described all reflected district messaging and guidance and demonstrated strong alignment across the part of the system that participated in this study. Generally, school boards and superintendents talk about district alignment frequently as an important method of ensuring clarity around following a particular practice or policy. Further examples of alignment appear in the Leadership section of this chapter but include, using similar language and processes to address attendance issues.

Actions Taken to Reduce Truancy

Based on the literature this study theorized that a more positive school climate (Hopson & Lee, 2011) more supportive communication and policies (Lasky-Fink et al., 2019), and attention to policy and actions that reflected the needs of racialized minority students (McNeely et al., 2021) would lead to better attendance and lower rates of absences marked unexcused. This study found that in the schools studied, school climate and attendance were

associated, in that the school with the lowest rate of absences marked unexcused had the most favorable school climate rating and the school with the highest rate of absences marked unexcused had the lowest favorability rating on the school climate survey. This study also found that the board policy and its accompanying administrative regulation followed current state law and allowed administrative discretion in assigning the unexcused label to an absence. This point is important because it both allows discretion in assigning absences but also risks implicit bias (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Principals described most communication as positive and indicated where a specific person, like the student's teacher or the school counselor could provide that positive or "softer" communication prior to a sterner tone. Most of the written documents, including school websites, adopted a more positive or friendly tone. The district truancy letters adopted a more positive tone referring to partnership and the importance of attendance rather than focusing on state compulsory attendance law: "We hope to partner with you to improve your child's attendance" They were written at an eighth-grade level, as estimated by Microsoft Word, sought the partnership of the family, and were accompanied by resources for families and students.

Principals and district staff continually emphasized the value of understanding the circumstances of any individual family. References to the specific circumstances of a particular family, general types of support that families received, and additional resources schools brought to the table all reflected an individualized approach adopted by the school sites studied.

Other more specific actions included planning a night specifically for families whose students were truant, providing specific resources, like car pickup every day, connection to

physical or mental health care, or in-school resources like a counselor or a place to lie down when needed. The principals all mentioned mental health as an issue that students were dealing with, needed support with, and one that contributed to absences. Limited mental health resources have posed a challenge across the country and this area was no different. In a follow up email one principal noted that recently it had become harder for families to access physical health services: “This happened to two families I was working with, and it is becoming an issue, clinics are getting tapped out and parents are waiting for months to get an appointment.” This comment raises an important point about the limitations of schools in meeting every need of every family. When schools make the effort to connect families to external resources only to find their availability limited, it could be discouraging for both families and school personnel who are trying to find solutions. These were the types of needs that spawned the full-service community school movement. The state recently committed \$4.1 billion to community schools both for planning and for implementation. This district received a community schools grant and had a district level coordinator as well as family liaisons. As a result, I did ask all principals whether they were applying to become a community school. Three of the four said they were and thought it would be helpful in a variety of ways.

One notable finding was that interviewees didn’t emphasize truancy, rather, more emphasis was placed on absences, how to address them, and supports for families. This held true even when discussing the SARB.

Importance of Leadership

Waters and Marzano (2006) thoroughly examined the impacts of superintendent leadership on student achievement, including board alignment and support of district goals, while Diem and Welton (2020) examined anti-racist leadership and its role in improving schools for all children. Although strong evidence of the value of leadership to student success exists, the study had no specific question regarding leadership. Despite that, the role of leadership in the district's low absence rates and low rates of absences marked unexcused came across clearly in the interviews and in various school and district documents. Reflecting an anti-racist approach, notably, the school board adopted an equity statement in October 2022:

[The] Governing Board believes each student should have access to the resources they need to achieve success. Our equity work includes:

- Sustaining and creating policies and practices that support all students;
- Recognizing that success should incorporate the unique needs, talents, and interests of our students;
- Reflecting regularly to ensure biases do not impact our practices or student success.

This commitment was further outlined in the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and included references to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Restorative Practices, and the creation of affinity groups for families, including Spanish-speaking and African-American [*sic*]. The oft-referenced attention to the needs of families and students, the stated leadership goals, and the understanding that the district was focused on attendance, were reflected in interviews with district staff and with principals. These may have been

contributing factors in the positive results of the district and the selected schools and should be studied further.

Principal leadership has also been linked to student achievement across a rural district in Texas and an urban California district (Alford & Sampson, 2016). Similar to the approach the principals of the selected schools revealed in interviews, Alford and Sampson (2016) concluded “These school leaders understood that while they might not be able to eliminate poverty or address all of the needs present in the community, they could influence student learning ... within a culture of care and mutual respect” (p. 203). The culture the principals described varied but included respect for students and families, care for their needs, and a commitment to meeting them to the best of their ability.

The leadership components raised an important finding of the study: the district and the four sites studied were aligned in the understanding of absence policy and the practices that follow the policy. This alignment has been assumed to be important for attendance broadly but has not been studied as it specifically relates to how schools and districts decide whether an absence is excused or unexcused. Interviewees used the same language regarding helping families, they described very similar processes, they discussed the district focus on attendance and several of the interviewees mentioned or used Attendance Works as a resource. A question for further study should be how the district became aligned. It is worth exploring whether the specific leadership characteristics described by Waters and Marzano (2006), clear goals, developed collaboratively, aligned with, and supported by the board, that provide a structure for principals to achieve at each of their sites, played a role. Further, this district had a change of leadership in the last year meaning the current superintendent was

not superintendent during the period represented by the data. However, given the continued strong alignment, another question that should be studied is maintenance of the alignment during a leadership transition. Finally, one school site had a new principal who indicated they were working on school office culture, so examining that school's attendance data in the context of the district after the change in leadership would also be important.

This district participated in the California Labor Management Initiative, a project designed to support management and labor to work collaboratively to establish and work toward goals. Rubinstein and McCarthy (2016) found that labor-management partnerships significantly contributed to student achievement. Future research that examined whether similar claims could be made about the various dimensions of attendance this study sought to review would add to the evidence of the value of a different leadership approach.

The Theory and the Reality

The literature provided two intertwined theories, emancipatory leadership and critical policymaking (Corson, 1998). In this approach the actors seek to change the structure or system and through understanding the “real” problem, trying out new policies, and adopting those policies once they have been validated by those affected. For at least part of the theory, there is evidence the district and school exhibit some of those characteristics. I would argue that in seeking to create community schools the district was working to change the system to address the real problem. This systems change was undergirded by the existing practices of the district and its schools. Rather than the more punitive language and approach described by McNeely et al. (2023), the schools focused on the real problem, family needs and the cause of the absence. Whether an absence is marked excused or unexcused, rather than

actions families have taken that would, on the surface, result in punishment, also served as an area of focus and support. The administrative regulations reflected this flexibility, and the discretion given to the sites allowed this to happen. Further the written communication tended to be more friendly and supportive or neutral on the websites, in family handbooks, and from the district.

While this study did not interview families or students, school climate, school belonging, and school safety data could provide a window into the feelings of those affected by the policies and practices of the district. Overall, the school climate data was positive with over 50% of respondents indicating favorability with one exception, School 4 only had 34% of students and 48% of staff respond favorably. In all cases 60% of families or more responded favorably to school climate. However, it is still unknown how families and students were involved in any policy or practice changes and whether, beyond this survey data any follow up discussions may have occurred. This offers another area of further study to understand the dynamics of the changes the district has made and how families and students have been involved. One opportunity may be the affinity groups the district identified in its LCAP. Another opportunity would be through the school English Language Advisory Committees (ELAC) and the District English Language Advisory Committee (DELAC). One school's ELAC agendas and minutes were posted on the website and included "Discussing and developing ways to make parents aware of the importance of regular school attendance." This could provide an opportunity to discuss existing policy and practice, understand its impact, communication about both, and ways that it might be changed to better support students and families.

Addressing Gaps in the Literature

The identified gaps included study of policies and practices of schools with low absences and low rates of those absences being marked unexcused and how schools operate with a racial equity lens to address absences, in particular those marked unexcused. This study was able to address the first gap by identifying several clear policies and practices that appeared to contribute to the relatively low rates:

- Identifying individual needs of families and students;
- Providing resources and support to address those needs;
- Communicating with families regularly about absences, and immediately to address any absences that may have been marked unexcused;
- Communicating in a supportive and friendly tone;
- Developing policies that are clear yet flexible to provide guidance to site staff;
- Within the policy framework provide site autonomy to meet the district goals; and
- Alignment with the district and among the four schools studied to create the above conditions.

The second gap, how this work embodies a racial equity lens remains less clear. The district did not have one racial group that dominated the student population and reflected a very diverse community, both racially and socio-economically. Interviewees noted the diversity more factually rather than with any judgement or negativity attached to it. As noted in this chapter, the Board set a racial equity goal which bears repeating:

- Sustaining and creating policies and practices that support all students;

- Recognizing that success should incorporate the unique needs, talents, and interests of our students;
- Reflecting regularly to ensure biases do not impact our practices or student success.

These reflections take a critical lens to policies and practices and could set the stage for the approach to critical policymaking identified in the literature, as well as embody anti-racist leadership as described by Deim and Welton (2020).

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

This study answered some key questions through the lens of one school district and a subset of schools in that district. Given the findings it also has implications for implementation of policy through school practices. Beyond that it opens the door for multiple future avenues of research that build on the findings of this study.

Future Research Recommendations

Throughout the chapter ideas for future research have been noted. The first set of future research questions relate to the quantitative data. This study reviewed one year of data in one medium school district and was able to find variations among schools within the district and identify a set of schools that met the criteria of low absence levels and a low percent of absences marked unexcused that also had comparatively low rates of absences marked unexcused among all racial/ethnic groups in the absences marked unexcused. It would add value to validate the findings in this study with a longitudinal review of the school absence data to learn if the identified policies and practices identified continued to produce the same results over time. Because school climate data were associated with a low percent of absences marked unexcused and low rates of absences marked unexcused across different

racial/ethnic groups, conducting a correlational analysis using longitudinal data to see whether these results hold true over time would also be important. Further, the sample size for families was quite small making finding any associations between absences of any type and family perception of school climate inappropriate. A study that was able to incorporate a larger sample size of families could provide some additional insight into how families' perceptions of the school contribute to the absence data. Discovering whether positive perceptions of school climate by staff contribute to these data would also be valuable. This study included staff data but could not ascertain whether the sample was representative of the staff.

Incorporating qualitative data offers more opportunities for research. Researchers could conduct a similar study in a larger school district and/or in one that has a different racial makeup, but similar school absence and absences marked unexcused characteristics. A comparative study that looks at differences among district schools could provide additional insight. I made some assertions about the contribution of the policies and practices of the district and selected schools to the low rates of absences marked unexcused and to relatively low rates for all races/ethnicities. However, not all schools have the low numbers of the identified schools, so learning whether the schools that weren't selected implement the same practices as the selected schools would add to understanding. Another valuable insight would be to know what, if any, differences in policy and practice exist between the selected low-SES schools and the higher SES schools and what differences exist between districts.

This study interviewed school principals and three current and one former district office staff. However, each of the interviewees referred to other people they relied on to support

families and intervene when absences became concerning. Studies that interview school counselors, school and attendance clerks, front office staff, community school coordinators, and family liaisons among others would add insight and nuance to the results. Studies that also consider gender and race/ethnicity of staff could shed light on any additional factors that could contribute to positive outcomes in absences and absences marked excused versus unexcused.

Implications for Practice

The results of the study offered some practice implications for other districts to consider. First, alignment of practices with policy and across the district are essential for positive outcomes. The education community often discusses alignment and its importance to student achievement which mainly refers to expectations around curriculum and teaching. However, the complexity of attendance also lends itself to ensuring alignment across the district. Second, schools and districts should consider the tone of communication and how families feel welcomed, supported, and connected. Third, when possible, invest in additional school staff that supports families and the principal in communicating with and working with families. Fourth, recognize that families all come with different lives and aspects of their lives that they bring to school and finding ways to build on their strengths and mitigate their challenges leads to better outcomes for all. Finally, acknowledge that racial equity is a critical to the success of all students and that board leadership that provides direction to staff sets the tone for the whole district.

Conclusion

Using a case study design, the study sought to understand the policies and practices of districts that had low rates of absences marked unexcused and relatively low rates for all racial/ethnic groups. After identifying a district and studying attendance data from different schools and across grade levels, four schools were selected for the case study. Once the schools were identified further examination of their school climate, school safety, and sense of belonging, data showed an association with school climate and a low percent of absences marked unexcused, but not with school safety or sense of belonging. Semi-structured interviews with district staff and school principals as well as document analysis from the district and school sites provided qualitative data. Data were coded leading to the development of themes which were reported in Chapter 4. Most notably the district was aligned and generally took a supportive and non-punitive approach that focused on meeting individual family needs. This approach extended to trying to reduce absences overall, trying to ensure absences were able to be marked excused, and very little use of the SARB to address excessive absences.

While the study is limited to one district with a unique, but diverse population, the importance of understanding the alignment, how it happened and whether it continues through leadership transitions could further contribute to the literature. Beyond the literature, it is my hope that schools and districts in California and across the country take note and incorporate the equity vision set by the board, the structure and guidance coupled with site autonomy exhibited by the district leadership, and the compassion and commitment shown

by the principals to align behind a vision that does make schools, in the words of the superintendent “welcoming, engaging and safe”.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions

Superintendent Interview Questions:

What is your expectation of procedures for unexcused absences?

What do you think should happen to students who are considered truant?

How are policies implemented for assigning types of absence and for handling truant students?

What is the level of discretion staff have for deciding whether an absence is excused or unexcused?

How does the staff learn about their level of discretion and which staff have it?

What kind of training does school staff receive about attendance and absences?

How does the district engage families in attendance? What are the messages families get about truancy?

How does the district recognize individual circumstances of different students as it relates to attendance and truancy?

Staff Interview Questions:

What is your role?

What is the district's expectation of procedures for unexcused absences?

Do you know the policies for assigning types of absences and for handling truant students?

What happens to students who are considered truant?

What is the level of discretion you have for deciding whether an absence is excused or unexcused?

What kind of training have you received (or led, depending on the role) about attendance and absences?

How do you know about your level of discretion?

How does the district engage families in attendance? What are the messages families get about truancy?

Appendix B:

Interviewee Consent Notice

CONSENT NOTICE

TITLE OF STUDY: Understanding Practices of Schools Related to Unexcused Absences

NAME OF RESEARCHERS

Shelly Masur, MPH

Doctoral student in Educational Leadership, San Jose State University

Faculty Supervisor: Arnold Danzig, PhD, Professor, San Jose State University

PURPOSE

I am conducting this study for my dissertation. I want to learn about the policies and practices of schools that a low percentage of unexcused absences and low disparities among different groups of students in unexcused absences. By studying these policies and practices, I plan to write about these policies and practices so other schools and districts can learn from them.

PROCEDURES

As a participant in this study, you agree to be interviewed by the researcher either in person or virtually.

COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for participating in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Although I will know your name, position, and school, I will not record or report any identifying information for the interview, including your name, the name of your school, or the name of the district. I will use a description of your role, for example, teacher, school office staff, principal, district office staff. I will be recording the interview and will keep the recording and my notes in a password protected cloud server on a password protected computer. I will have the recording transcribed by a professional transcription service that protects all files. Other than the service, only I or my faculty advisor will have access to our interview conversation.

YOUR RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the entire study or any part of the study without any negative effect on your relations with San Jose State University or your school or district. You also have the right to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

CONTACT INFORMATION

You can contact me by email: shelly.masur@sjsu.edu with any questions. You can also contact my faculty supervisor by email at arnold.danzig@sjsu.edu

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

Your completion of the study/participation in the interview indicates your willingness to participate. Please keep this document for your records.

Appendix C:

Panorama Questions

Student School Climate Survey 6th-12th grade

Item	Answer						
How often do your teachers seem excited to be teaching your classes?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost Always		
How fair or unfair are the rules for the students at this school?	Very unfair	Somewhat unfair	Slightly unfair	Neither fair nor unfair	Slightly fair	Somewhat fair	Very fair
How pleasant or unpleasant is the physical space at your school?	Very unpleasant	Somewhat unpleasant	Slightly unpleasant	Neither pleasant nor unpleasant	Slightly pleasant	Somewhat pleasant	Very pleasant
How positive or negative is the energy of the school?	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Slightly negative	Neither negative nor positive	Slightly positive	Somewhat positive	Very positive
At your school, how much does the behavior of other students hurt or	Hurts my learning a tremendous amount	Hurts my learning some	Hurts my learning a little bit	Neither helps nor hurts my learning	Helps my learning a little bit	Helps my learning some	Helps my learning a tremendous amount

help your learning?							
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Student School Climate Survey 3rd – 5th grade

Item	Answer						
How often do your teachers seem excited to be teaching your classes?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost Always		
How fair or unfair are the rules for the students at this school?	Very unfair	Somewhat unfair	Slightly unfair	Neither fair nor unfair	Slightly fair	Somewhat fair	Very fair
How positive or negative is the energy of the school?	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Slightly negative	Neither negative nor positive	Slightly positive	Somewhat positive	Very positive
At your school, how much does the behavior of other students hurt or help your learning?	Hurts my learning a tremendous amount	Hurts my learning some	Hurts my learning a little bit	Neither helps nor hurts my learning	Helps my learning a little bit	Helps my learning some	Helps my learning a tremendous amount

Student Sense of Belonging Survey 6th -12th grade

Item	Answer				
How well do people at your school understand you as a person?	Do not understand at all	Understand a little	Understand somewhat	Understand quite a bit	Completely understand
How connected do you feel to the adults at your school?	Not at all connected	Slightly connected	Somewhat connected	Quite connected	Extremely connected
How much respect do students in your school show you?	No respect at all	A little bit of respect	Some respect	Quite a bit of respect	A tremendous amount of respect
How much do you matter to others at this school?	Do not matter at all	Matter a little bit	Matter somewhat	Matter quite a bit	Matter a tremendous amount
Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?	Do not belong at all	Belong a little bit	Belong somewhat	Belong quite a bit	Completely belong

Student Sense of Belonging Survey 3rd-5th grade

Item	Answer				
How well do people at your school understand you as a person?	Do not understand at all	Understand a little	Understand somewhat	Understand quite a bit	Completely understand
How much support do the adults at your school give you?	No support at all	A little bit of support	Some support	Quite a bit of support	A tremendous amount of support
How much respect do students at your school show you?	No respect at all	A little bit of respect	Some respect	Quite a bit of respect	A tremendous amount of respect
Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?	Do not belong at all	Belong a little bit	Belong somewhat	Belong quite a bit	Completely belong

Student School Safety Survey 6th-12th grade

Item	Answer Choices				
How often are people disrespectful to others at your school?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometime	Frequently	Almost always
How likely is it that someone from your school will bully you online?	Not at all likely	Slightly likely	Somewhat likely	Quite likely	Extremely likely
How often do you worry about violence at your school?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always
At your school, how unfairly do the adults treat the students?	Not at all unfairly	Slightly unfairly	Somewhat unfairly	Quite unfairly	Extremely unfairly
If a student is bullied in school, how difficult is it for him/her to get help from an adult?	Not at all difficult	Slightly difficult	Somewhat difficult	Quite difficult	Extremely difficult
How often do students get into physical fights at your school?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always

Student School Safety Survey 3rd-5th grade

Item	Answer Choices				
How often are people disrespectful to others at your school?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometime	Frequently	Almost always
How likely is it that someone from your school will bully you online?	Not at all likely	Slightly likely	Somewhat likely	Quite likely	Extremely likely
How often do you worry about violence at your school?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always
If a student is bullied in school, how difficult is it for him/her to get help from an adult?	Not at all difficult	Slightly difficult	Somewhat difficult	Quite difficult	Extremely difficult
How often do students get into physical fights at your school?	Almost never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost always