Opportunities to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism in Fayette County Public Schools

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Executive Summary

This policy brief is focused on chronic absenteeism in Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) in Kentucky. There are many possible solutions solving chronic absenteeism however, this policy brief will focus on school climates. FCPS is the second largest district in Kentucky, fixing classroom environments falls within FCPS's jurisdiction, and the classroom environment can be improved directly on student feedback. Chronic absenteeism, defined as a student who misses 10% of days enrolled in school, is an issue at FCPS, as 30% of students were chronically absent in the 2022-2023 school year.[1] Chronic absenteeism can lead to behavioral problems, socioeconomic issues, and socioemotional issues later in school and adult life.[2][3]

The background of chronic absenteeism policy has layers of federal, state, and local stake holders. The federal policies in place for student absenteeism started with changes of federal law, in the early 20th century, that made states make laws enforcing children to attend school. Congress passed the next notable legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in 2001. This bill focused on average attendance rates rather than chronic absenteeism. This act required schools to track truancy data and make the information public. The NCLB never mentioned chronic absenteeism within the writing of the act. The latest federal action was Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 that elevated chronic absenteeism as a national issue. Regarding the state level, the most recent action by Kentucky was HB 611. This bill targeted unexcused absences rather than chronic absenteeism. The Kentucky Department of Education has resources on their website for teachers and families to help curb chronic absenteeism. Each school in Kentucky gets funding via the KDE. This funding is also based on student attendance or average daily attendance (ADA).[4] This method of funding ideally would push schools to encourage students to attend class. This has resulted in local action taken place by FCPS ranging from attendance websites, action on chronically absent students, and guides on chronic absenteeism for students, teachers, and families.

The possible solutions to improve classroom environments I developed were student feedback surveys, improvement to building infrastructure, and improvement to physical well-being of

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[1] ———. "Chronic Absenteeism," September 4, 2024. Accessed September 17, 2024. https://www.education.ky.gov/school/Pages/Chronic-Absenteeism.aspx.

[2] Simon, Odelia, Karen Nylund-Gibson, Michael Gottfried, and Rebeca Mireles-Rios. "Elementary Absenteeism Over Time: A Latent Class Growth Analysis Predicting Fifth and Eighth Grade Outcomes." Learning and Individual Differences 78 (February 1, 2020): 101822. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2020.101822.

[3] Gottfried, Michael A. "Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes." Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR) 19, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 53–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2014.962696.

[4] "KSBA Answers," n.d. https://www.ksba.org/protected/ArticleView.aspx?iid=6YA30P2&dasi=1B#:~:text=Most%20state%20funding%20for%20districts,part%20of%20a%20school%20day.

students. Each of these possible solutions has tradeoffs based on selected criteria. This criterion includes effectiveness, cost effectiveness, technical considerations, ethical considerations, and political considerations. The surveys have low cost with a moderate level of effectiveness. This solution also the best ease of access with little technical considerations. The building improvement has little consideration for ethical and political issues. The well-being of students will have more ethical and political considerations. However, this solution may have the highest effectiveness directly to students.

Purpose

With this analysis, I am addressing chronic absenteeism in Kentucky public school districts, specifically Fayette County (Lexington). Classroom climate will be the focus of possible policy solutions that combat chronic absenteeism.

Problem Definition

Chronic absenteeism can result in lifelong challenges of social interaction, job opportunity, and overall education. Chronic absence is defined as a registered student missing more than 10% of school days in a given school year.[5] Of the 687,294 students enrolled in Kentucky during the 2022-23 school year, 198,524 (28%) were chronically absent.[6] Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) had a chronic absence rate of 29.5%, above the state average. As the second largest school district in Kentucky, FCPS educates 41,115 students, this equates to 12,129 students being chronically absent. The two figures below provide a visual overview of chronic absence rates across the nation and Kentucky school districts.[7]

[5] Flethcer, Robbie, ed. "Kentucky School Report Card." KY School Report Card, 2023. Accessed September 17, 2024.
https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/school_overview/students/enrollment?year=2023.
[6] ———. "Chronic Absenteeism," September 4, 2024. Accessed September 17, 2024.
https://www.education.ky.gov/school/Pages/Chronic-Absenteeism.aspx.
[7] ———. "Tracking State Trends in Chronic Absenteeism - FutureEd." FutureEd, September 16, 2024.
https://www.future-ed.org/tracking-state-trends-in-chronic-absenteeism/.

National Chronic Absence

Legend

Percentage Chronically Absent
- ☐ 0.17 - 0.21
- ☐ 0.22 - 0.26
- ☐ 0.27 - 0.33
- ☐ 0.34 - 0.45

Chronically Absent Population
- · 23940 - 74000
- • 74001 - 300000
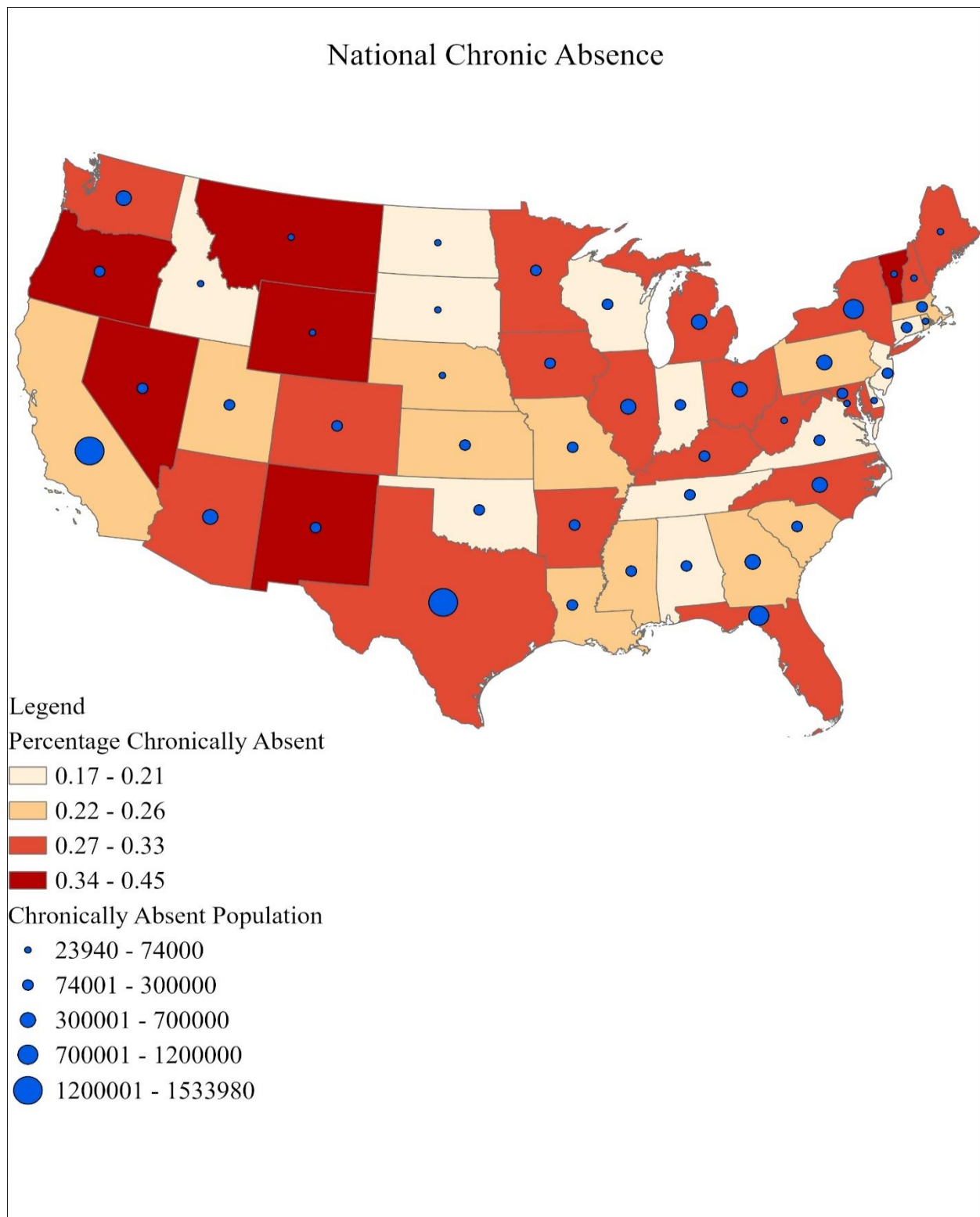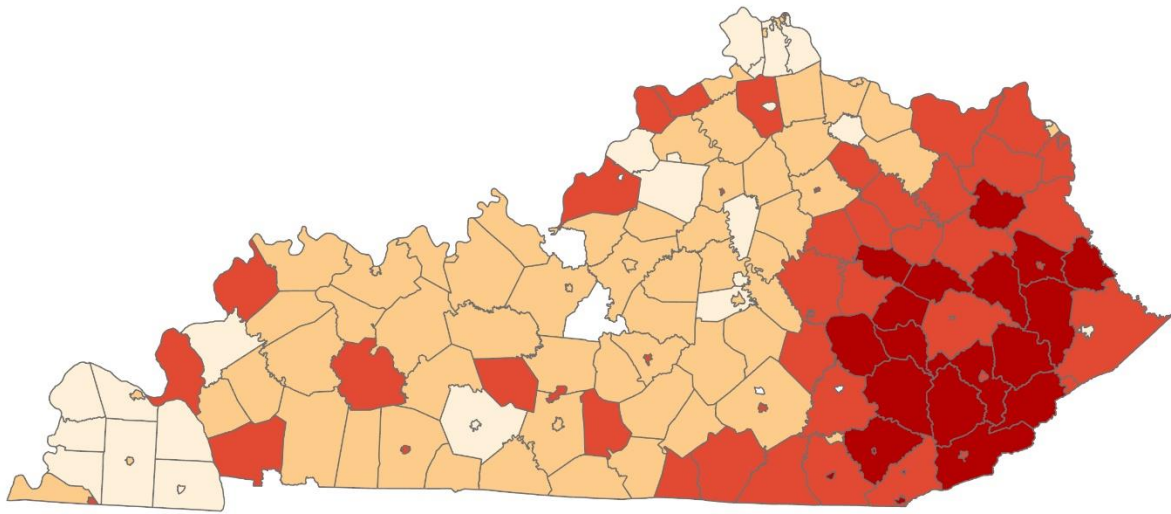- ● 300001 - 700000
- ● 700001 - 1200000
- ⬤ 1200001 - 1533980

Fg.1 (US Census Bureau, "TIGER/Line Shapefiles.") (Bdimarco, "Tracking State Trends in Chronic Absenteeism - FutureEd.")

Kentucky Counties Chronic Absence

Legend

PERCENT CHRONICALLY ABSENT

☐ 6.47 - 21.20
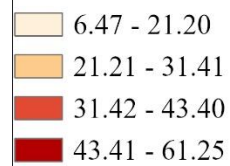
☐ 21.21 - 31.41

☐ 31.42 - 43.40

☐ 43.41 - 61.25

Fg.2 (US Census Bureau, "TIGER/Line Shapefiles.") (Flethcer, "Kentucky School Report Card.")

Students become chronically absent due to a variety of reasons. National level research shows that school climate, socioeconomic status, parental opinions, and much more are associated with chronic absence for students.[89] A key point I will be targeting is the school climate at each stage of K-12. School climate can be defined as "a multi–faceted construct that reflects students' perceptions of their interactions with peers, teachers, and school administrators including shared beliefs, values, and attitudes related to school." (Van Eck et al., "How School Climate Relates to Chronic Absence: A Multi–Level Latent Profile Analysis.") The authors completed a multi-level analysis via survey data from over 25,000 students in over 106 schools. Their data was divided into two separate types of schools, one being climate-challenged and the other marginally challenged. Challenged schools were schools being reported more commonly as negative or moderate climates by students whereas marginal schools had more positive climates surveyed by students. The results found were that students from challenged schools were more chronically absent. Furthermore, students who stated that their schools had moderate or negative climates were more absent than their peers who stated their climate was positive in both types of schools.[10]

An article by Michael Gottfried notes that students who are chronically absent have greater chances for unemployment, weaker socioemotional development, lower socioeconomic status, increased health risk behaviors, educational decline, and more.[11] These negative outcomes were found to be more extreme in students with more extreme chronic absenteeism. Moreover, the article found that students that were chronically absent were less willing to learn and the approaches to learning were more negative.

These results match those that I learned during interviews with Raine Minichan and Chris Young from the Fayette County Public Schools Department of Pupil Personnel (DPP). In my interview with Raine Minichan I learned more about the current outcomes of chronically absent students in FCPS. Students who got support later in their academic career still showed signs lacking developmental skills. To see positive effects from the support services being offered it can take years. Raine also mentioned that older students, 6th-12th, tend to have harder times recovering lost developmental skills. [12] For example, if a student obtained the resources they need, there may never be enough resources to meet the age educational needs of the student. Once a student becomes chronically absent, catching up to their peers becomes an uphill challenge. I spoke to

[8] "Physical Environment | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)," n.d. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/environment/physical-environment.

[9] Tinkler, Barri. "A Review of Literature on Hispanic/Latino Parent Involvement in K-12 Education.," March 25, 2002. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED469134.

[10] ———. "How School Climate Relates to Chronic Absence: A Multi–level Latent Profile Analysis." Journal of School Psychology 61 (April 1, 2017): 89–102. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.10.001.

[11] Gottfried, Michael A. "Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes." Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR) 19, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 53–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2014.962696.

[12] Raine Minichan (FCPS DPP Admin), Chronic Absence Interview, Harrison Siegel, Online, 11/3/2023,

Chris as well about the effects on a student once they become chronically absent.[13] Chris also gave me the example of a student falling behind in the first grade. By the time the student is in third grade they haven't obtained the basic math or reading skills needed. By the time the student is in fifth grade, they are behind on all educational and most social skills. Once the student is in the sixth grade, there is little chance they will catch up and need additional help or schooling. This is just one basic example of what chronic absence can do to a student. The effects can span across many facets of life including future job placement, social ability, safety, and more. When speaking to Chris my final question was what can schools do individually to help curb chronic absenteeism? Chris mentioned the programs in place in Fayette County which have been effective, but Chris made a point that data collection, school perception, and individual school decisions could be used to better tackle chronic absenteeism.

Policy Background

Chronic absenteeism policy can be separated into three levels of policy action: national, state, and local. Each level of policy has its own unique history and outcomes.

There is a descriptive difference between truancy and chronic absenteeism that resulted in the United States originally focusing on just truancy. While truancy is only unexcused absences, chronic absenteeism includes any type of missed day, excused or not. The first piece of federal legislation passed to combat low attendance in schools was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB focused on improving student attendance across the nation and pushed states and school districts to act. This agenda of anti-truancy led to many changes at the state and local levels: harsher court sentences for truancy, more data collection on truancy, and even prison time could be given in cases that were determined as child neglect. NCLB also held schools accountable for their truancy rates and what tactics they used to improve attendance rates.[14] This wasn't the end of federal policy action. In 2015, Congress passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which replaced NCLB. This was the first federal policy that specified a focus to reducing chronic absenteeism. ESSA resulted in mandatory chronic absenteeism data collection. Once this law was passed, the federal government has not passed any laws regarding the issue. Instead, the federal government reviews state laws and standards.

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[13] Chris Young (FCPS DPP Admin), Chronic Absence Interview, Harrison Siegel, Online, 11/14,2023
[14] Burr, Lauren, Mark Ziegler-Thayer, and Jenny Scala. "No Child Left Behind." Advancing Evidence Impriving Lives. Advancing Evidence Impriving Lives (AIR), January 2023. Accessed September 23, 2024. https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Attendance-Legislation-in-the-US-Jan-2023.pdf.

In Kentucky, there has been recent and historical policy on school attendance. Originating in 1942, the Kentucky General Assembly passed its first truancy law.[15] There have since been several laws engaging with truancy rules, school district rules, and compulsory attendance rules. KRS 159.010 requires children to attend school until they are 18. This statute also makes parents liable if they do not send their kids to school. This statute provides Kentucky school districts the opportunity to enforce their own truancy polices. The most recent bill that focuses on truancy was House Bill 611, which passed and has gone into effect since April 2024.[16] This bill changes the rules of truancy to 15 days of unexcused absences as the limit before the student, or the parents in case of K-5th grade students, must appear in front of a judge to determine what the source of the absences are. There have been no state statutes aimed towards chronic absenteeism. It is important to note the difference between truancy and chronic absenteeism as stated earlier. This new HB 611 bill only targets unexcused absences rather than all absences leaving out the chronically absence definition. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) does have resources for families and educators to help curb chronic absenteeism. The materials for families include information for helping children cope with anxiety, information about when it is okay to keep children home from school, and infographics on why attendance matters. The materials for educators are far vaster with materials such as templates for communications, templates for fact sheets, awareness posters, and more. However, all the family materials and most of the educator materials are left up to the interpreter and may not have an impact. The tools that are available are not made to be mandatory in combating chronic absenteeism.

FCPS has its own set of attendance policies. These polices distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, tardiness, and truancy.[17] The truancy section describes that three or more absences or tardy slips that are unexcused will result in the student being considered truant. Once a student is reported for truancy more than 2 times the student is a habitual truant student. The attendance site at FCPS has no focus on chronic absenteeism. However, the FCPS district does offer supplemental programs to combat chronic absenteeism. Students and their families can get access to programs that provide mental health help, homeless education assistance, positive behavior intervention support, and many more.[18] These student services are aimed at combating certain causes of chronic absenteeism, but there is still no direct program created by FCPS that

[15] KRS [KRS]. "KRS General Assembly." Kentucky Revised Statutes, June 30, 2005. Accessed September 17, 2024.
https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/law/statutes/statute.aspx?id=3656#:~:text=(3)%20Any%20person%2C%20other,50.
[16] "House Bill 611." Kentucky General Assembly. Kentucky General Assembly, April 2024. Accessed September 23, 2024. https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/24rs/hb611.html.
[17] "Attendance Policies - Fayette County Public Schools," n.d., https://www.fcps.net/leaders-support/departments-offices/pupil-personnel/attendance-policies#:~:text=Any%20student%20who%20has%20been,or%20more%2C%20is%20considered%20truant.
[18] "Student Support Services - Fayette County Public Schools," n.d. https://www.fcps.net/leaders-support/departments-offices/student-support-services/student-support-services.

aims to end chronic absenteeism. The largest effort has been home visits with over 3000 visits to chronically absent students in the 2022-2023 school year.[19]

All levels of current policy have different effects on chronic absenteeism in FCPS. The state and local government have the highest effects on student attendance. Kentucky as a state saw a rise in chronic absenteeism while FCPS also saw a rise.[20] These policies are ineffective. State level policies use punishment as a driving factor to increase attendance rather than target the root causes. The resources the state provides are great tools, but they are only useful if someone chooses to utilize them. The local FCPS police are similar to the state level policies. FCPS has resources available and identifies what level of absence constitutes criminal truancy. FCPS does focus on home visits and letters to families which does provide more opportunities for families. However, both the state and FCPS policies do not directly target the root causes of chronic absenteeism. Chronic Absenteeism in FCPS starts at the schools for most students.[21] If the school climate isn't properly fit for students, then attendance can drop. Since the Covid-19 pandemic the view of school has changed for many students and shaping school climates properly can help prevent more chronic absenteeism.[22]

Policy Alternatives

FCPS can combat chronic absenteeism through a multitude of policy alternatives. I have evaluated each policy alternative according to criteria including effectiveness, cost effectiveness, technical considerations, ethical considerations, and political considerations. Ethical considerations include anonymity, considerate survey writing, and equitable spending.

The first alternative FCPS could undertake is to provide students with an anonymous feedback portal for their classroom. Either an in-classroom submission or an online portal could provide students with a chance to give feedback on their classroom environment. This is different from what is currently offered. Students now are given a questionnaire that asks student's how they feel on certain issues. This policy alternative will allow students to give their own personal

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[19] Tombs, Jeremy. "80,000 Letters, 3,000 Home Visits: FCPS's Efforts to Combat Chronic Absenteeism." Https://Www.Wkyt.Com, December 13, 2023. https://www.wkyt.com/2023/12/13/80000-letters-3000-home-visits-fcpss-efforts-combat-chronic-absenteeism/.

[20] Flethcer, Robbie, ed. "Kentucky School Report Card." KY School Report Card, 2023. Accessed September 17, 2024. https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20/school_overview/students/enrollment?year=2023.

[21] Raine Minichan (FCPS DPP Admin), Chronic Absence Interview, Harrison Siegel, Online, 11/3/2023,

[22] Richmond Fed. "The Pandemic's Effects on Children's Education," n.d. https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/economic_brief/2023/eb_23-29.

feedback without the guidance of the district. The effectiveness of this policy is moderate as this method provides a direct way for student feedback not led by the district. Cost effectiveness is preferable with little cost to provide sheets of paper or a website forum. The technical side of this policy is simplistic; the feedback is up to the student. Guides can also be created to show students how to submit feedback on paper or online. This policy must be ethical, so to do this the feedback from students must be anonymous. This provides students with the certainty of not receiving scrutiny or special treatment from staff. Regarding political considerations, the policy itself has no political issues. However, the actions that FCPS take could be considered political based on the results from student feedback. There is evidence that the department of education sponsored surveys can be altered or skewed to adapt to theoretical approaches of problem solving.[23] It is important that this policy be carefully considered and provide students with freedom of response.

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The policy alternative above is designed to provide data on school climates based on student concern. The following two policy alternatives are designed to address certain factors that affect school climate. The factors I have chosen to address are from data provided by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.[24]

The second policy alternative for FCPS is addressing the physical environment of the classrooms and school. The physical environment of classrooms includes "level of upkeep, ambient noise, lighting, indoor air quality and/or thermal comfort of the school's physical building and its location within the community" ("Physical Environment | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE).") To properly address this aspect of classroom climate, FCPS can create a policy that requires schools to undergo physical examinations. These examinations will be measured based on criteria the district finds suitable. This policy can be highly effective at singling out physical issues at each school. The cost effectiveness of this policy is more severe. Each examination costs money and the methods of examination will determine the cost variations of this policy. Regardless of the district's choices the cost effectiveness of this policy will be more substantial than both previous policies. The technical considerations of this policy will be moderate. The examination criteria are determined by FCPS therefore the technicalities will also be determined by them. The ethical criterion of this policy is of low consideration. Political considerations are also of low consideration. A specific program that targeted the physical environment provided ecological solutions. This program, promoted by University of Wisconsin–Madison Arboretum's Earth Partnership for Schools, provided 17 states

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[23] Kohl, Diane, Sophie Recchia, and Georges Steffgen. "Measuring School Climate: An Overview of Measurement Scales." Educational Research 55, no. 4 (November 12, 2013): 411–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2013.844944.

[24] "Physical Environment | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)," n.d. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/environment/physical-environment.

and Puerto Rico with natural areas and restored school yards. This program had a variety of results, some schools failed due to lack of funding. While other schools excelled and had students engaged and at school while also altering their physical environments.[25]

The last policy FCPS could implement is based on the physical wellbeing of the students. The physical wellbeing of students includes health services, nutritional services/learning, surroundings, exercise, and anti-bullying. FCPS could create a policy to identify what each school is missing within the district. The first step to increasing the wellbeing of students is examining their needs. For example, high school students don't have a recess. FCPS could examine the 9th-12th grades and provide mandatory exercise times within the school day. This policy can be highly effective for each school in FCPS. The cost effectiveness is low as the policy will cost money to examine and fulfill each need of the schools. The needs of each school can be different therefore the technical approach may be different. This falls into line with ethical considerations. Each school must be examined with equity in mind rather than blanket policy to address every school. Lastly, political considerations are prevalent in this policy. Certain aspects of health learning, the actions of nursing staff, or the tactic of anti-bullying polices can lead to political turmoil with parents. As noted in the second policy choice, FCPS must be adherent to the community they live in to avoid political pushback. Evidence shows that student wellbeing is crucial for students' attendance. Issues such as safety, social, or mental health are the leading factors that schools can make a positive change in. Minorities have been disproportionately affected as well regarding physical wellbeing.[26]

Conclusion

In conclusion chronic absenteeism in FCPS is a notable issue with over 10,000 students being affected. Each of these 10,000 plus students have families and futures that can be positively changed. The federal, state, and local governments can make policy choices to help prevent chronic absenteeism in FCPS. To protect future generations of children, action must be taken now.

[25] Hall, R., and C. Bauer-Armstrong. "Earth Partnership for Schools: Ecological Restoration in Schools and Communities." Ecological Restoration, North America 28, no. 2 (May 7, 2010): 208–12. https://doi.org/10.3368/er.28.2.208.

[26] Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "The Relationship Between School Attendance and Health." Https://Files.Eric.Ed.Gov. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016. Accessed November 17, 2024. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592870.pdf.