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If You Build It, They Will Come: A Successful Truancy Intervention Program in a Small High School

John N. Marvul[1]

Abstract

To assess whether a 5-month program involving attendance monitoring, sports participation, and a moral character class would reduce absenteeism, 40 students in a small transitional high school were randomly assigned to intervention and control groups and assessed pre- and postintervention on educational expectations, attitude toward education, and emotional, cognitive, behavioral engagement, and attendance. Findings indicated significant differences between intervention and control groups on all predictor variables. Absenteeism was significantly and negatively related to all predictor variables. The program successfully reduced absenteeism, increased educational expectations, attitude toward education and engagement.

Keywords

attendance, absenteeism, school engagement, at-risk youth, sports, moral character

[1]New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
John N. Marvul, 50 Brighton 1st Road, Apt. 2D, Brooklyn, New York, NY 11235, USA
Email: johnmarvul@yahoo.com

Graduation rates among urban minority students are a major national issue. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; Garofano & Sable, 2008), the average freshman graduation rate for the 100 largest school districts in the United States is 69.5%; for the New York City public schools in which the study took place, the average freshman graduation rate is 45.9%. Among those 100 largest districts that have more than 90% of their students eligible for Title I, typical freshman graduation rates range from 51.3% (Milwaukee) to 64.5% (Memphis). Moreover, although status dropout rates have declined over the past three decades, as of 2007, fewer than three quarters (73.4%) of American students graduate from high school; dropout rates for Hispanics is triple that for Whites (21% to 7% per year between 9th and 12th grade) and African American students are nearly twice as likely to drop out (12%; Planty et al., 2009). Boys are much more likely to drop out of high school than girls (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to develop and evaluate a program designed to improve attendance and to eliminate acts of truancy by the overwhelming majority of disadvantaged minority boys at a small alternative high school for at-risk students. The major research question of this study is whether the intervention program improved attendance at the school. In addition, the study addressed questions about how attitude toward education, educational expectations, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioral engagement influenced school attendance among male minority students in an alternative high school.

Researchers have contended that there is no lone variable to blame, but, rather, it is the combination of factors that has relevance, including, (a) severely low income levels, (b) family composition, (c) levels of parental education, (d) race and ethnicity, (e) community inputs, (f) language barriers, (g) peer influence, (h) teacher quality, (i) school culture, (j) oppositional defiance, (k) mobility, (l) stereotype threat, and (m) institutional racism (Atkinson, 2005; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Edward & Malcolm, 2002; Leroy & Symes, 2001; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Institutional racism has been implicated in the "school to prison pipeline," where zero-tolerance policies have led to the pushing out of minority boys from schools (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Truants, dropouts, and push outs will eventually burden society economically, criminally, and culturally (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Garry, 1996; Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991). The male student population in urban neighborhood schools is the most susceptible to truant behaviors (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Blum, Beuhring, & Rhinehart, 2000; Pappas, 1996). Many of the students in this study were already in the

school-to-prison pipeline; they missed classes because they had to report to their parole officers.

Researchers have shown that chronic absenteeism is a precursor to dropping out of school (Kelly, Barr, & Westherby, 2005; Lee, 2002; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Rumberger, 1995). Given that 90% of the jobs generated in the next decade require at least a high school diploma, inner-city minority dropout students do not have much of a chance to lead economically productive lives (Hauser et al., 2000).

Schools need to reconnect with these students; if schools do not, the outcomes are negative for students individually and for the larger society. Most of the research has indicated that connecting with schools starts with student–teacher relationships (Ancess & Wichterle, 2001; Blum et al., 2000; Delpit, 1988; Heilbrunn, 2003). If young people perceive that adults at school care about them both personally and as students, probabilities will increase that they will engage, connect, and bond to the school. Their attendance is likely to improve and their unacceptable behaviors may diminish. Minority children who have close relationships with adults at school tend to achieve academically and socially. For them, attachment fosters achievement. Unfortunately, the opposite is true for those who do not (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002).

However, numerous scholars (Brendtro et al., 2002; Bridgeland, Dijulio, & Morison, 2006; Burgess, Gardiner, & Propper, 2002; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Schulz, 2001) contend that caring teachers alone are not enough to make children attend school more often, are not enough to prevent students from being tardy, or from cutting classes. They point out that attendance problems, achievement gaps, high dropout rates, and deficit behaviors are the result of dysfunctional family environments, alienated peer groups, and negative neighborhood influences. They contend that schools have little to do with these failures.

Although exogenous variables are powerful influences on students' attendance, public school personnel have no choice other than to view them as challenges to be overcome. To adopt a defeatist attitude and blame the students, the community, the parents, and/or the peer group is racist and a form of blaming the victim (Ryan, 1976). Other studies (Ferguson, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 2003) pointed to the chronic failure of schools to address the needs of minority and disadvantaged students as the main reason these children fail to attend regularly and eventually wind up unsuccessful academically. According to Conchas (2001), "high dropout rates, nonattendance, and truancy are the result of unpleasant and under resourced learning environments" (p. 476).

Poverty is the source of most of the problems. Many of the male Hispanics must work to help and support their families. This fact, unfortunately, has had serious implications for the school as well as for them. Chronic absenteeism, much of it due to work issues, retards learning and adds to the educational achievement gap between those who have and those who do not (Atkinson, 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Burgess et al., 2002; Schulz, 2001). Clearly, preventing children from dropping out of school is a serious American issue and echoes as a rationale for this study.

Programs needed to be in place so these students want to come to school. They need to be taught in relevant ways (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). They need to feel an attachment both to the school and to an adult who would listen to them and give them advice (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). They must perceive that the adults who are entrusted with their care are authentic, hard working, and passionate about what they do (Heilbrunn, 2003). Kerka (2003) believed that "if there are differences in what at-risk youth need, they are likely to include intensive, longer-term support and a greater number of range of services" (p. 1).

The research on truancy and attendance interventions does not offer step-by-step guidelines that all could use successfully in any size school in any city and in any neighborhood in this country. However, scholars (Miller, 2003; Reimer & Smink, 2005) have posited that only through a combination of different types of interventions can any of these deficits be reduced. Furthermore, only through a multimodal approach involving students, school, family, and community can any serious behavior reversals ever be accomplished (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). Clearly, there is no simple formula for reduction in absenteeism; what is agreed upon is that not coming to school, coming late, or cutting classes are all symptoms of lack of connection to the school. These behaviors are part of a vicious cycle and the habits formed are difficult to break (Blum & Libbey, 2004). The major research question this researcher seeks to answer is, does the combination of daily phone calls before school, student participation in a morals issues class, and the sponsoring of club football and basketball teams increase student engagement in school and attendance among low-income minority high school students?

The theoretical basis of this research is the assumption that monitoring of students' attendance, inclusion of the family in the promotion of the students education, providing incentives for positive participation in school-related activities, offering students an opportunity to reflect on the consequences of their behaviors, and demonstrating that the school cares about the student will create greater engagement in the school by students that will be reflected

in student attendance. The school initiative involves a process of social exchange (Blau, 1986) in which the school proffers an increased investment in the students through the development of programs designed to meet physical, social, moral, and intellectual needs. In exchange, families are asked to increase their participation through encouraging their child to attend school and reinforce that encouragement through monitoring. The participating students exchange compliance with attendance regulations, conformance to school behavioral standards, and positive participation in classroom and school activities.

The equation is that the school contracts to invest increased levels of need-based services for the student in exchange for increased levels of student participation and compliance. Because of the alienation of students from the school and their expectations that such promises of increased investment by the school would be abrogated, they were initially suspicious; initial compliance tended to be contingent on the behavior of school personnel. Social exchange requires a certain amount of trust between parties. That trust had to be built up between students and school personnel. As students would perceive school authorities as honoring their commitments to the bargain, student trust and school engagement would increase and truancy rates would be lowered. The possibility is that exogenous variables, such as peer pressure, family needs, and participation in criminal activities could influence students' participation in the exchange process. However, the school can help the students find a way up and a way out and give them a hope for a brighter future. Such an offer is not 1inconsequential.

The Intervention

This particular intervention used three techniques: daily phone calls to the home before school, participation in a moral issues class, and sponsoring of club football and basketball teams. Research literature has shown that these interventions have been successful in other venues.

Daily Telephone Calls

Many researchers (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) have reported that increasing parent involvement through daily telephone calls increases student attendance. Employing a school staff member as the contact person for family members to work with has been identified as critical to gaining parental trust, which,

in turn, has had positive effects on truancy (Cox, 2006; Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Shargel & Smink, 2001). Holbert, Wu, and Stark (2002) reported an 11% increase in attendance for truants through the use of phone calls. Numerous programs have been nationally recognized as effective with increasing attendance and decreasing truancy (National Center for Student Engagement [NCSE], 2004). Studies have shown that these programs increased attendance and reduced deviant behaviors. In some cases, absences were cut by 50% in one school year. In a large-scale study, the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program (TRDP) was implemented in school districts throughout America as part of a joint program between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs and the U.S. Department Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools (Catalano, Arthur, Hawkins, Berglund, & Olson, 1998; Finley, 2006). Researchers concluded that communication between school and home, personal knowledge of those homes, and addressing family needs all helped improve attendance, decrease delinquency, and improved attachment to school. Another successful program that used phoning homes as an intervention for truancy was the School Tardiness and Attendance Review Team Program (START; Atkinson, 2005; Shaw, 2005). The data from this START program suggested that those exposed to the intervention had a 50% decrease in the number of days absent per month and a 40% decrease in the number of times they were tardy each month. Furthermore, this program reduced absenteeism of the chronically truant by 40% and tardiness by 45%.

Moral Education

Studies of moral issues education focusing on the six pillars of moral character of respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, care, citizenship, and fairness have shown positive results. Briefly, respect refers to treating others as inherently worthwhile; responsibility refers to the ability to assume that actions have consequences and that one must be accountable for those consequences; trustworthiness refers to the matching of actions and words, whereby one's verbal commitments are reflected in one's behavior; care is the ability to perceive and act on the needs of others; citizenship is the capacity to act in the interests of the larger community and society; and, fairness involves concepts of distributive justice whereby one does to others has one would have done to oneself.

Several moral education programs have been evaluated and have shown positive results among low-income minority children in Florida (Dietsch, Bayha, & Zheng, 2005) and in a robust nationwide study of the Positive

Action Program using experimental and control group designs, (Allred & Flay, 2003) that showed a 45% decrease in absenteeism, a 13% reduction in truancy, and a 43% improvement in self-concept in the intervention group. Similarly, an evaluation of the Aggression Replacement Training (ART) which involved enhancement of interpersonal skills, training to control anger, and training to understand the rights and needs of others showed promise (Goldstein & Glick, 1995). The student participants were gang members whose school attendance rates were poor. By the third quarter of the intervention, the students showed a statistically significant improvement in attendance.

Lasater et al. (2001) evaluated the Social Responsibility Training (SRT) program which is an intervention curricula designed to prevent at-risk youth from becoming truants and eventually dropping out of school. The program was designed to eliminate risk factors for deviant behaviors while building up protective factors. Parents are required to be involved. SRT teaches life skills, moral reasoning, and judgment thinking; all accomplished through daily class lessons. Findings indicated that over a 3-year period, the rate of leaving school decreased from 7.5% to 5.3% and truancy declined significantly.

The NCSE (2007) has identified numerous programs that are highly effective for improving school attendance and reducing truancy. All of the school-based programs used intervention and comparison groups when they were studied. All of these programs instituted some form of moral issues education as one of their strategic interventions. Sixteen of the 18 programs studied and evaluated demonstrated significant increases in attendance and reduction of truancy.

Club Sports

A critical aspect of this study is involving chronically truant students in club sports. Boys who participate in sports do better in school, have better attendance, do not drop out, and have a better chance to get through college (Dane, 1991). Nonathletic students were found to be absent from school twice as many days as those students who participated in sports programs; the dropout rate and the deviant behavior referrals showed statistical significance with nonathletic students having higher dropout rates and more referrals (Whitley, 1995). Moreover, data collected by the NCES (1995) indicated that students who participated in physical sports activities had better attendance than their nonparticipating peers.

Participation in extracurricular activities has been positively associated with attendance rates (Cousins, 2006). Among Hispanic youth, students participating in extracurricular activities were 2.30 times more likely to be

present at school than those not participating in athletic activities (Davales, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999). If competent and organized people run athletic activities that involve competition, then these activities can be a training ground for acceptable behaviors (Fullinwilder, 2006; Lopez & Moore, 2006). In the High School and Beyond studies, two longitudinal surveys conducted by the NCES (Marsh, 1993; McNeal, 1995), found that sports participation had a positive influence on school attendance and that participating in athletic activities significantly reduces the student's likelihood of dropping out.

Research Method

The Setting

The study was conducted in an inner-city alternative high school for at-risk students that had 100 students on register for 6 hr 40 min per day, 5 days a week. The school operates as a transitional educational facility because its function is to allow students to earn regular course credits while they receive social skills training that is provided by both the resident agency and the teaching staff. After 1.5 years, the students should be ready to go back to a traditional school. The alternative high school staff at this school is composed of four teachers, one paraprofessional, and a 3-day-a-week resource room teacher.

The Population

All students have been assigned to the school because of severe truancy in their regular schools. Eighty percent of the students on register have been described as living on or below the poverty level. Many of the students who are enrolled at this site have alcohol and drug problems. This is evidenced by the register of the outpatient substance abuse clinic located adjacent to the school that serves almost 100% of the male Hispanic student population and more than 70% of the male Black population. Furthermore, the court advocacy program at the site of the study has indicated that 15 of the 25 male Hispanics and 16 of 27 Black boys have legal issues with the courts and the Department of Corrections.

Intervention Procedures

The intervention included three major components: (a) monitoring of attendance and parent notification when a student was absent, tardy, or truant; (b)

participation in a moral character class; and, (c) participation in club sports teams. The intervention was patterned after one instituted by the Oregon Council of Hispanic Achievement (2004) that received a positive evaluation by Railsback (2004). It made a full assessment of students' situations and incorporated academics, behavior, and home-family to determine what contributed to nonattendance. The program emphasized parent relationships and communication between school and families. A detailed explanation of the research methods can be found in Marvul (2010).

Athletic teams. One of the interventions was a class that involved sports or athletic activities, but it also included instruction in sports psychology and philosophy. The researcher taught this class and participated as a coach for the athletic activities. The researcher has a background in public school sports as a former high school football coach in the New York City Public School Athletic League. A flag football club was formed from members of the intervention group. Also, there were five-man, full-court basketball teams or clubs formed from the experimental group. Three games were played against other sites in the alternative high school.

There are no gymnasiums in the alternative school playing ball was considered both healthy and enriching. The sports intervention class held practices for both sports clubs after school and across the street in a public playground. There were 12 practice sessions for the basketball team. Each game required three practice sessions.

The flag football club had nine practice sessions. The flag football club played three games against teams from other sites in the alternative high school. Maximum practice time for all club teams was 1 hr. Acting as a coach, the researcher broke down practice sessions into 5- to 15-min programs. These intervals included the following: warm-ups, calisthenics, drills, simulated play calling and execution, scrimmaging, and wind sprints. The games were played on three Saturday mornings at 10.00 a.m., and the location was at the high school football field where the researcher was a former coach.

The researcher was the teacher for the sports class for 3 days per week. The time frame for course instruction was 50 min for each class session. The Bridge Back to Life Agency took over this class for the other 2 days. They taught a family-group curriculum during the 2 days and two periods that they had this class. In all, the class had five 50-min periods, one per day, and spread out over a week. To successfully complete the requirements for a passing grade in the class, participants had to do the course work required by both the agency and the school. The control group, however, had elective classes in personal fitness and health issues and computer research.

Attendance intervention. At the end of Week 2, an attendance outreach intervention began. Approximately 6.00 a.m. every school day, telephone calls were made by the researcher to the homes of those students in the study. The conversations that took place may have been about absences, tardiness, class cutting, and unacceptable behaviors; however, parents were also told about their child's triumphs at school and about upcoming events that could positively influence their children's lives. Most importantly, parents were asked to become partners in getting their students to attend school daily, getting them to refrain from skipping classes, and getting them to be on time every day. The early morning outreach were intended to convey to the families that the school was concerned about the welfare of their children and wanted to be involved in helping them acquire success. Morning calls were done efficiently and took less than 4 min. Some calls were longer when necessary but others were very short. Parents and guardians were called daily and at times when they could be reached.

The moral character class. The curriculum for this course was based on the state of North Carolina's version of character education (North Carolina Public School System, 2006); however, much of the coursework and course material was at the discretion of the instructor. Moral Character class members discussed the differences between right and wrong and how they are interpreted by various cultures. The class came to a consensus on what it believed were universal rights. Essentially, they were studying the six pillars of moral character. They wrote journals that responded to everyday moral dilemmas, prepared 10 min oral presentations on moral issues that interested them, and discussed situations that raised ethical and moral concerns.

The class evolved into a course on the styles of leadership. The researcher intended to forge a consensus with the students that the best form of leadership was moral leadership. The lessons learned in this class were reflective. It was the intent of the researcher to have the participants in this class run their lives as ethical and moral humans. Students were reminded daily about the morality of the decisions they made and the actions they took. The researcher intended to have students think of themselves as potential moral leaders in whatever they decided to do in life. The slogan for this class was "moral leadership begins today." An important moral act communicated to the students is the responsibility to come to school and be the best student they could be.

The control group. The comparison group participated in two elective classes. They were called personal fitness and health issues and computer research. These courses are routinely offered at the alternative site-based high school. Both classes ended at the same time as the intervention groups

did. The fitness and health class emphasized the skills and knowledge needed to live a healthy and productive lifestyle. The computer research class taught skills that would be valuable in the real world workplace and for higher education needs.

All participants in the control group had the same number of interviews, observations, and surveys as the intervention group. They neither did take part in any athletic activities, dinners, and award banquets, nor did any of their homes receive early morning phone calls.

The Sample

The sample included 40 truant male students who were randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions. All of the participants were classified as at-risk for school failure.

During late summer when school was not in session, a list of the potential candidates was compiled. The researcher telephoned the homes of the potential participants and briefly explained to parents or guardians both the process and the intent of the study. The researcher extended an invitation to the parents or guardians to attend an informal meeting so that the study could be explained. The researcher randomly assigned students from this pool to either the intervention or control groups. The intervention group was known as the Sports and Moral Character group whereas the comparison group was known as the Fitness/Health and Computer Research group.

This sample was representative of the student body at large, split approximately 50–50 between Black and Hispanic students, with a small number of Native American and other students, with the "Other" students being of mixed race. The ethnic and racial distribution of the sample subdivided by intervention and control are presented in Table 1. Although there were fewer Blacks and more Hispanics in the intervention group than the control group, the ethnic distribution of the sample was not significant ($\chi^2[_{\text{Black vs. Other}}] = 2.51$, 1 *df*, *ns*).

Instrumentation: The Student Survey

Study participants were administered the Student Engagement Survey (NCSE, 2007). The survey instrument focuses on three domains of student behavior all of which have direct correlations to school engagement. Behavioral engagement is related to obeying rules, participating in school activities, and the absence of disruptive behavior. Cognitive engagement refers to motivation, effort, and psychological investment in learning.

Table 1. Racial/Ethnic Background of Study Participants by Group

	Group					
	Intervention		Control		Total	
Racial/ethnic background	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Black	7	35.0	12	60.0	19	47.5
Hispanic	11	55.0	7	35.0	18	45.0
Native American	0	0.0	1	5.0	1	2.5
Other	2	1.0	0	0.0	2	5.0
Total	20	5.0	20	5.0	40	10.0

Note: χ^2 (Black vs. Other) = 2.51, 1 *df*, *ns*.

Emotional is related to attitudes toward school and teachers, identification with school, and feelings of belonging.

The NCSE survey has three interrelated behavioral domains and each of the scales in the survey has been proven to be reliable with acceptable Cronbach's alphas. In other studies that had samples from 39 to 57 participants, the alphas averaged the following: .90 for emotional engagement (21 items), .90 for cognitive engagement (15 items), and .69 for behavioral engagement (13 items; NCSE, 2006). As some of the engagement items had 5-point Likert-type response modes and others had four, items were standardized and then summed.

Klem and Connell (2004) reported the following results: first, those students who were engaged in school were 44% more likely to do well and 23% less likely to do poorly in attendance and performance patterns; second, students considered below average on engagement were 30% more likely to do poorly on student outcomes. In another study, the use of the Student Engagement Survey rendered three behavioral domains of importance. These domains, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, all correlated with students' connections to school (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). These findings suggest that the engagement variables validly predict student school related behaviors.

In the study, coefficient alphas were computed for attitude toward education (6 items, $\alpha = .85$) and educational expectations (2 items, $\alpha = .60$). In addition, coefficient alphas were computed for emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. All alphas were above .90. The attitude toward education scale was the mean item score (total score / 6) and the educational expectations score was the sum of two items.

Data Collection Procedures

The two groups were selected at the outset of the fall-winter term. During late summer, the school secretary mailed consent and assent forms to the homes of the participant pool. They explained the study and clarified important matters that had relevance to the project. Each letter sent to a home contained a return envelope with the school's address on it. Upon receipt of the forms, the researcher telephoned the homes of the potential candidates and explained the intent and process of the study to parents or guardians. All parents or guardians were informed about the protection of names and identities. The researcher emphasized to all participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Once the researcher obtained written parental consent and written student assent, the survey was administered to the 40 students who had agreed to participate in the study. The 40 participants took the postsurvey at the same time in the middle of January, which was near the end of the fall semester. The pretest and posttest time difference was 5 months.

The researcher tracked daily, weekly, and monthly attendance rates and class attendance/truancy through individual teachers' reports and through the school's attendance officer at the main office. This way both groups were monitored as follows: which students were missing school for the day, which students had skipped a class, and which students were coming late. Daily attendance rates were tracked both through on-site resources and through the program's main office. Included in these data were figures for tardiness, class cutting, and discipline issues.

Although the control group did not receive the additional benefits that the experimental group did, the researcher decided that if the results of the experiment were positive, the program would be implemented schoolwide in the following year. This would allow those students who participated in the control group an opportunity to reap the putative benefits of the research.

Results

The major research question of the study is to what extent did the intervention change attitudes toward schooling and attendance? As data were collected on both samples prior to and following the intervention, intervention and control groups were compared on pretest educational expectations, attitude toward education, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement, and absences; no significant differences were found between the two groups. Because of the multivariate nature of this research question, a discriminant

Table 2. Comparison of Intervention and Control Groups on Posttest Educational Expectations, Emotional, Cognitive, and Behavioral Engagement, and Absences

	Group				
	Intervention		Control		
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	Wilks's Λ
Absences	7.35	2.37	21.85	4.77	.20**
Attitude toward education	4.20	0.53	3.47	1.04	.83**
Educational expectations	6.00	1.86	4.65	2.08	.89*
Emotional engagement	9.61	6.86	–9.61	15.62	.60**
Cognitive engagement	5.66	5.92	–5.66	11.60	.72**
Behavioral engagement	5.21	4.12	–5.21	9.31	.65**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

analysis was run comparing the intervention group with the control group on the aforementioned variables assessed at postintervention. Table 2 contains the means, standard deviations, and univariate *F* ratios for the discriminating power of each of the above named variables included in the analysis.

As shown in Table 2, all six of variables included in the equation significantly discriminated between the intervention and control groups, with absenteeism leading the way ($\Lambda = .20$, $F_{[1,38]} = 148.20$, $p < .01$); between-group differences accounted for 80% of the variance. The intervention group averaged 7.35 ($SD = 2.37$) absences in the postintervention period compared with 21.85 ($SD = 4.77$) for the control group. In other words, students in the control group were three times more likely to be absent than members of the intervention group. The intervention group showed more positive attitudes toward education ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.53$) compared with the control group ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.04$, $\Lambda = .83$, $F_{[1,38]} = 7.81$, $p < .01$), with between-group differences accounting for 17% of the variance in attitude toward education. The intervention group also had higher educational expectations than the control group ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.86$ compared with $M = 4.65$, $SD = 2.08$, $\Lambda = .89$, $F_{[1,38]} = 4.66$, $p < .05$). All three engagement indicators demonstrated higher levels of engagement in the intervention group compared with the control group (emotional, $\Lambda = .60$, $F_{[1,38]} = 25.38$; cognitive, $\Lambda = .72$, $F_{[1,38]} = 15.11$; behavioral, $\Lambda = .65$ $F_{[1,38]} = 20.92$, ps $< .01$), which between group differences accounting for 40%, 28%, and 35% of the variance, respectively. The six variables in the equation accounted for 83% of the total variance between control and experimental groups (canonical $r = .91$).

Table 3. Results of Classification Analysis

	Predicted group membership		
Actual group	Intervention	Control	Total
Intervention			
n	20	0	20
%	100.0	0.0	100.0
Control			
n	1	19	20
%	5.0	95.0	100.0

In a discriminant analysis, each participant is given a discriminant score based upon his scores on each discriminating variable. On the basis of discriminant scores, a prediction can be made by assigning group membership on the basis of the discriminant score. Then the predicted group assignments can be compared with the actual group assignments to see how powerful the set of predictor variables in identifying group membership. Table 3 contains the results of the classification analysis based on the assignment of discriminant scores. The data in Table 3 indicate that all 20 members of the intervention group were correctly predicted based on discriminant scores; 19 of the 20 members of the control group were correctly predicted, with one member of the control group incorrectly assigned to the intervention group based on the discriminant scores. This resulted indicated a correct assignment rate at 97.5% which is extremely high. The results of the discriminant analysis suggest that the intervention increased school attendance in the intervention group by improving their attitudes toward education, increasing their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement in school, and raising their educational expectations.

The findings indicated that members of the intervention group showed significant posttest differences in educational attitudes and expectations compared with the control group. The question we now ask is what are the relationships between educational attitudes and expectations and attendance? As one of the goals of the program was to change attitudes toward school and raise educational expectations, data are presented for the total sample, the intervention group, and the control group. Spearman correlations were computed comparing educational attitudes and expectations with absences prior to and following the intervention. Spearman correlations were chosen over Pearson correlations because an analysis of the data indicated the presence of

Table 4. Correlations Between Educational Attitudes and Absences for Total Sample, Intervention Group and Control Group

	Educational attitudes			
	Attitude toward education		Educational expectations	
Absences	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Total sample ($N = 40$)				
Preintervention	.02	–.01	–.07	–.28
Postintervention	–.31	–.38*	–.25	–.54**
Intervention group ($n = 20$)				
Preintervention	.09	.07	–.05	–.46*
Postintervention	–.54*	–.35	–.50*	–.70**
Control group ($n = 20$)				
Preintervention	–.16	–.20	–.13	–.32
Postintervention	–.07	–.05	–.24	–.32

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

outliers on some of the variables. Therefore, because of the small sample size and the presence of outliers, rank order correlations would minimize the effects of outliers. The results are presented in Table 4.

Although it would be hypothesized that, in general, students with negative attitudes toward education and low educational expectations would tend to have higher levels of absenteeism, the correlations in Table 4 demonstrate more complex relationships. For the total sample, significant negative relationships were found between number of absences postintervention and posttest attitude toward education ($r = –.38$, $p < .05$) and educational expectations ($r = –.54$, $p < .01$). No significant relationship was found when the sample was disaggregated for the control group, although all eight correlations were negative. For the intervention group, a significant negative relationship existed between preintervention attitude toward education ($r = –.54$, $p < .01$), preintervention educational expectations ($r = –.50$, $p < .05$), and postintervention absences. These findings suggest that program effects tended to be stronger with those students who had a more positive attitude toward education prior to the intervention. Both pretest and posttest assessments of educational expectations predicted postintervention absences for the intervention group. Pretest educational expectations correlated at –.46 ($p < .05$), and

posttest educational expectations correlated at –.70 ($p < .01$). Findings seem to indicate that as educational expectations increase, absenteeism declines, especially postintervention. Given that pretest educational expectations were not predictive of preintervention absences, but predictive of postintervention absences, the findings suggest that one of the effects of the program was to bring postintervention absences in line with educational expectations.

When interpreting these findings as well as the findings of school engagement, the effects of a Type II error need to be considered. The findings for the total sample strongly suggest a program effect in educational attitudes and expectations. Attitudes and expectations increased whereas postintervention absences decreased. For attitudes toward education, the total sample results are influenced by the relationships in the intervention group, where there is considerable variation between pretest and posttest, whereas in the control group, there is less variation in the correlations. Because of the small sample size, the intervention group differences tend to be somewhat erratic and maybe more strongly reflected in the total sample correlations. For example, posttest attitude toward education correlates more strongly with preintervention absences ($r = -.54$, $p < .01$) than postintervention absences ($r = -.35$, *ns*).

A similar conundrum exists for educational expectations. For the total sample, we find the same pattern for educational expectations as for attitude toward education; that is, no significant relationships with the exception of posttest educational expectations and postintervention absenteeism. For the intervention group, no significant relationship exists between preintervention absenteeism and pretest educational expectations. However, postintervention absenteeism correlates significantly both with pretest ($r = -.46$, $p < .05$) and posttest ($r = -.70$, $p < .01$) educational expectations. Again, no significant relationships are found in the control group. These findings also suggest the program effect of increasing educational expectations within the intervention group and increasing attendance rates in conformance with educational expectations. Of interest is that postintervention absenteeism was negatively influenced by pretest educational expectations ($r = -.50$, $p < .01$).

Similar analyses were conducted for the three school engagement measures: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Results are presented in Table 5. For the total sample, findings show a strong program effect, in which significant relationships are found between posttest emotional ($r = -.65$, $p < .01$), cognitive ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$), and behavioral ($r = -.57$, $p < .01$) engagement. There are no significant relationships between school engagement and preintervention absences.

Findings for the intervention group for school engagement are anomalous. Neither do posttest emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement correlate

Table 5. Spearman Correlations Between School Engagement and Absences for Total Sample, Intervention Group, and Control Group

	School engagement					
	Emotional		Cognitive		Behavioral	
Absences	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Total sample ($N = 40$)						
Preintervention	.11	.02	.05	−.04	.06	.10
Postintervention	−.28	−.65**	−.22	−.48**	−.30	−.57**
Intervention group ($n = 20$)						
Preintervention	.47*	−.11	.38	.17	.16	−.06
Postintervention	−.30	−.12	−.18	−.13	−.29	−.21
Control group ($n = 20$)						
Preintervention	−.30	−.14	−.29	−.31	−.19	.00
Postintervention	−.30	−.42	−.17	−.17	.08	−.20

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

with either preintervention or postintervention absenteeism rates nor do postintervention absentee rates correlate with any of the school engagement measures. The only significant correlation is between pretest emotional engagement and preintervention absenteeism ($r = .47$, $p < .05$); it is positive, indicating the counterintuitive notion that the greater the emotional and cognitive engagement prior to intervention, the higher the rates of absenteeism in the intervention group. This correlation may be artifactual. Within the control group, there are no significant correlations between absenteeism and school engagement.

Discussion

School disengagement, truancy, and dropping out are endemic problems in urban high schools in which the students are poor and come from minority groups. This study was conducted in a small transitional school designed to serve students who had been truant from their schools. The mission of the transitional high school was to provide educational and social services to students at-risk for dropping out prior to graduation and reintegrate them into their schools. Much of the material written about the alienation of minority boys from schools has focused on school culture as the source of these profound problems (Burgess et al., 2002; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Ferguson, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 2003). Low expectations, lack of staff

caring, and the inability of schools to meet the needs of their minority student populations have been associated with truancy and school failure. Part of the problem is that minority students never engaged in or connected to their schools because they did not feel welcomed, respected, or capable. They blamed the teachers and the school (Caraballo, 2000; Ferguson, 1998; Nieto, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). Researchers claimed (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2003; Nieto, 1998) that the experiences students have encountered in their classrooms have left them empty, have destroyed their will to succeed, and have left them alienated from the public schools. If these researchers are correct, then increased investment in students at the level of human interaction might produce results providing student alienation is not insurmountable. If teachers' expectations of such students are low, students' expectations of the school are also low. As an institution dedicated to the education of children, it is incumbent upon the institution to win back alienated students through increased investment in their lives and demonstration that the school has an interest in promoting their healthy development personally, socially, and intellectually. What the school must essentially do is institute of process of social exchange (Blau, 1986) that has broken down and has been abrogated by both the school and its client population. Although the process incurs risks, the alternative is the massive failure that characterizes so many urban school systems.

The major implication of the findings of this study is that a program that provides respect and support for its male students, guidance, a venue to discuss and evaluate the morality of various behaviors, and participation in competitive team sports can significantly reduce student absenteeism, antisocial and antischool behaviors, and increase attitudes and commitment toward school and educational aspirations. This program instituted those changes in the face of numerous barriers including the attraction of street culture, family demands for work and caretaking, prior school failure, and the internalization of low expectations. After the peer group and the family, the school is the most powerful influence for better or worse on young people's lives. The students who attended this program were America's "throwaway children" who had been ordained to a life at the bottom of society, constrained to a life of poverty and misery, and consigned to an early death or life in prison. Although the odds are long, the program has provided them an alternative.

The findings seem to consistently point to an inverse relationship between postintervention absenteeism and posttest scores on attitude toward education, educational expectations, and emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. These findings seem to indicate that the way to reduce absenteeism is to develop a program that provides formerly truant minority male

students with support, hope, and positive reasons for attending school. They need caring adults and a supportive curriculum in their lives. This seems to be especially true for highly alienated minority male students who already have one foot in the education to prison pipe line.

If a small alternative high school located in an inner-city can establish a multimodal approach that would connect to its male minority student population, then truancy and inappropriate behaviors could be significantly reduced. When students are surrounded by so much negativity and haunted by so much mistrust, they do not believe that they are capable of achieving nor do they desire to do so. However, when students believe that what is being taught has relevance in their lives and perceive that their families and cultures are respected because of the consistency of contact, they will be less likely to take an adversarial position toward the school. In addition, the camaraderie and pride of team sport with its physical escape so often needed by those whose stress levels are high, then the three approaches for serious change exist. The students in this study were angry with the world that they believed had cheated them. If disadvantaged young boys feel that everything is being done for them so that they have a chance at success, then the odds are with the initiators of the approaches. An interview, one student in this study stated,

> When I used to cut class and leave the building, I saw that teachers that seen me leaving didn't say a thing to me. They didn't care because it was one less troublemaker in school, one less stupid Black boy to teach, and one less kid in their class. All of this made their lives easier. You know what used to be funny? These teachers would tell you that if you study hard you could be this or could be that, but they knew that this would not happen to most of us. They lied right to my face and you could tell that they was never honest. That made the whole school bad. My old school was a terrible place to go to. This place feels better, but I got to give it some time.

Three major limitations limit the generalizability of the study: first, it is a single site study; second, the sample size is small; and third, the sample is self-selected. In the first case, the alternative school in which the study took place may be unique in any number of ways in terms of organization, staff quality, student characteristics, and so forth, that may have influenced the findings. Second, the size of the sample was small, containing 40 students who were intensively studied. Third, the sample contained all volunteers. Requirements for volunteers are mandated by ethical considerations. It is

possible, even though study participants were randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, those students who were advised of the possibility of participating in the sports program, but were assigned to the control condition may have had their expectations raised followed by disappointment, increasing their alienation from school, depressing their school engagement, and increasing their absenteeism.

These three factors limit the generalizability of the findings; however, it is possible that other researchers may be able to replicate these findings in other venues. Moreover, because the three interventions, morning phone calls, sports participation, and the moral character classes, were part of a singular package, it is impossible to tell the independent impact of each facet. The findings suggest that the interventions interacted synergistically; however, there is no direct evidence. To assess their independent and interactive effects, a much larger study would have to be conducted in which the interventions would be assessed individually and in combination with the others.

The experiment in this alternative school produced dramatic positive effects in its student population. This raises two fundamental questions: first, to what extent are the effects long lasting? Second, to what extent can this program be exported to similar types of venues? The first question requires a longitudinal study that would track students over a period of 2 or 3 years. Students need to be tracked and evaluated over time to see whether the program effects are lasting. Students need to be tracked beyond school leaving for both dropouts and graduates. The second question requires replication of the study by subsequent researchers either in their own venues, or in multisite settings. In addition, studies need to explore additional variables, including grades and achievement, engagement in disruptive behaviors, suspensions, and expulsions. The education of male students from minority backgrounds is nothing less than disastrous in America. More research needs to be conducted on those school programs that encourage them to learn, to achieve, and to become successful productive human beings.

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Bio

John N. Marvul is employed by the Department of Education of the City of New York. Besides those responsibilities, he is an elected Union official for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). He graduated from Nova Southeastern University on December 31, 2009 with a Doctorate degree in education.