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# Understanding truancy as a precursor to dropout in a rural environment

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Understanding Truancy as a Precursor to Dropout in a Rural Environment

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A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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In

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## **Abstract**

Truancy is the most predictive factor of dropout when controlling for low expectations and poor grades (Whelage & Rutter, 1986). Previous studies have found that students who participate in truancy have fewer positive relationships in the school, with both peers and teachers, (Lund, 2014), have less guardian involvement (Lund, 2014; Studsrod & Bru, 2011), and have less of ability regulating their emotions (Kim & Page, 2012). It has also been identified that the transition from middle school to high school is a tipping point for truancy and dropout behavior (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Very few studies have specifically focused on a rural environment, therefore this study specifically looks at a rural environment. Freshmen students who participate in truancy, as well as those who do not, were interviewed and filled out a BRIEF-2, which looks at executive functioning, including emotion regulation. Questionnaires and parent versions of the BRIEF-2 were sent home for guardians to complete. Using qualitative methods, this study found that students who participate in truancy in a rural environment have fewer positive relationships with teachers and more negative relationships with peers within the school. While both students and parents report that parents care and ask about their student's education, parents of the students in the truant group either are not or cannot be available to their students as often as parents of the students within the control group. Students within the control group were often more likely to have difficulty regulating their emotions. In order to combat the difficulties that students who participate in truancy face, several suggestions for intervention implementation are discussed within the full document. Finally, this study intended to have two groups of truant students (2-4 unexcused absences and 10 or more); however, within this specific rural environment, it was difficult to find freshmen with large

numbers of unexcused absences. Administration shared that they have many more juniors with unexcused absences than freshmen. Therefore, it is possible that the tipping point in a rural environment is later than an urban environment and could coincide with receiving a driver's license.

## **Understanding Truancy as a Precursor to Dropout in a Rural Environment**

### **Literature Review**

Truancy, or intentional unauthorized absence from compulsory school (Longe, 2011), has resisted legal, therapeutic, and educational efforts for its eradication for over a century (Neal, 1909). Truancy not only limits the amount of instruction a child receives, but it teaches children that rules can be broken, often without serious consequence, and it exposes children to unknown risks when they are out of school. In addition to these reasons, truancy has also been studied because it been found to be the best predictor of school dropout when controlling for low expectations and poor grades (Whelage & Rutter, 1986).

Several factors in middle school have been identified as predictors of drop out. In order to prevent drop out as early as possible, McKee and Caldarella (2016) looked at risk factors in middle school and how they related to risk factors in high school. The researchers focused on this population of students, as the transition from middle school to high school appears to be a tipping point for drop out (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). There is more freedom for choosing classes, greater diversity in teachers, and an increase in the need for peer relationships, which can have a positive or a negative impact depending on the individual student. Focusing on the transitioning population, McKee and Caldarella (2016) conducted regression statistics using 12 indicators of middle school performance and how each related to ninth grade attendance, GPAs, and course completion, which the researchers claimed to be predictive of high school dropout. The regression analyses revealed that students' attendance, middle school performance, middle school GPA, grades, and ACT math scores were highly predictive of ninth grade performance. Thus, the researchers identified

characteristics that provide the academic community with an earlier warning system for students at-risk for dropping out.

Lund (2014) interviewed students with social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities in Norway who had dropped out and then returned to school in order to determine why they left. As a result of the interviews, Lund found that most often students left because of non-supportive classroom environments and/or family conflicts. The students experienced a relational disconnect at school; they reported they were often the victim of bullying by both peers and teachers. At home, the students in this study often felt that their parents were preoccupied with their own problems rather than their child's. In other words, the students felt as if both school and home were non-supportive environments.

Peer relationships largely influence students' perceptions of school. As stated above, a negative school experience, such as bullying or being ignored, can contribute to dropout (Lund, 2014). Furthermore, a student with school-obstructive peers, or friends who do not study, skip class regularly, or dropped out of school, is highly likely to skip classes, exhibit truant behavior, and have an intention to quit school (Studsrod & Bru, 2011). Likewise, a student with friends who achieve with a normal or high ability is likely to view school in a more positive light, and even an improved motivation for continued education.

Student-teacher relationships also greatly influence a student's perception of school (Lund, 2014). Specifically, in one of the interviews administered by Lund, a student reported an unsupportive teaching incident. The student stated that he rarely talked in class, but once decided to raise his hand. The teacher responded, "Tom, our troublesome little

boy, has finally decided to participate and show us his worldly wisdom” (p. 100). This student experienced humiliation at the hands of his teacher. When adults within the school embarrass their students, in either a one-on-one or large group setting, or show them that they do not believe in the student, school becomes an unsupportive learning environment. School can become unappealing, thus contributing to truancy and drop out behavior.

Home life is also highly predictive of a student’s perception of school (Lund, 2014). McNeal (2014) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study in order to look at parent involvement and what that means for students over time. Data was collected from students, parents, teachers, and principals when the students were in eighth and tenth grade. The findings indicate that while parent-school involvement strategies positively impact the student, parent-child involvement interventions have a distinctly greater effect on student attitudes, behaviors, and achievement. Specifically, discussions between the parent and student about school have the most positive influence on these areas. Results indicate that parent-child involvement is likely to increase achievement, as well as improve academic expectations and reduce truancy. Therefore, parents who are sensitive, involved, offer encouragement and guidance, and provide their students with clear expectations prevent their students from leaving school (Lund, 2014). Likewise, parents who are uninvolved, highly preoccupied by their own problems, and have poor communication with their children are more likely to have students who participate in truant behaviors or drop out. Furthermore, Van Breda (2015) found that parental disengagement is a major cause for all types of adolescent behavior problems, which includes truancy. Disengagement includes unfavorable attitudes towards school, lack of communication with teachers, no inquiries about homework, and non-existent discussion about school related activities.

Parents of truants are often poor role models of academic learning, have not been successful in school themselves, and are unable to help and support their children to succeed in academics. The authors also state that some parents of truants wish for their children to succeed academically; however, they fail to create a supportive environment at home for their children to feel emotionally secure.

Many differences can be found between those who truant and those who do not have any unexcused absences, as noted above. Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, and Willson (2007) also found that there are differences between those who truant often and those who truant once or twice. Throughout the state of South Carolina, the researchers collected data from the juvenile justice department. Using several statistical methods, including chi-squares, regressions, and t-tests, they compared first time truants to repeat offenders, as well as to those who committed non-truancy offenses. They found that those who did not truant often were often White, female, and less likely to have abused drugs. Whereas, those who reoffended, either by truancy or a non-truant offense, were more likely to be male, be a minority group member, use drugs, receive special education services, and have a family history of criminality.

Chen, Culhane, Metraux, Park, and Venable (2016) conducted a study to look at the trends of student attendance overtime. Specifically, they looked at seventh through ninth graders (58,000 students) in an urban school district. Like Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, and Willson (2007), Chen and colleagues (2016) found that differences exist between students who participate in truancy. They found that truant students could be categorized into five subgroups. The majority of students fell in the Very-Low (37%) and Low (43.4%) subgroups. Those in the Declining (3.3%) group had more unexcused

absences at the beginning of the year, and their attendance improved as the year progressed. Those in the Rising (12.8%) group had fewer unexcused absences at the beginning of the year, and as the year progressed, their unexcused absences increased. The remainder of the truant students fell in the Chronic (3.3%) group; these students participated in high numbers of unexcused absences consistently throughout the year. The five subgroups support that differences exist among those who participate in truancy.

Another aspect of truancy that has been identified is emotion dysregulation. Emotion regulation is “the ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior” (Dawson & Guare, 2010; p.2). Kim and Page (2012) looked at the interaction of externalizing behavior problems in school and emotion regulation in relation to elementary school truants. Teachers filled out the *Child Behavior Checklist-Teacher’s Report Form*, and parents filled out both *The Security Scales* (a child-parent emotional bond checklist) and the *Emotion Regulation Checklist*. Using correlational and multiple regressions, the researchers found that elementary school truants were significantly associated with aggressive behavior, social problems, and rule-breaking behavior. Furthermore, children with low scores of emotion regulation were at greater risk to partake in aggressive behavior. To be more specific, children with a high risk for aggressive behavior had poor emotional security and poor emotion regulation; whereas children with the lowest risk for aggressive behavior had a high emotional security and emotion regulation. Overall, emotional dysregulation and school behavior problems are connected in such a way that affects truancy.

Though there are many similarities among truants in urban environments versus those in rural environments, there are differences as well. Looking at a rural population in

the Appalachian South, Hunt and Hopko (2009) used the *Child Behavior Checklist – Youth Self-Report* and the *Family Environment Scale Real Form* and found that truancy is often related to symptoms of depression and withdrawal. Though Dembo, Wareham, Schmeidler, and Winters (2016) were not specifically investigating rural environment, their findings supported Hunt and Hopko's results that mental and truancy are connected. Dembo, Wareham, Schmeidler, and Winters (2016) found mental health concerns for truant students; however, the researchers specified that truants did not skip school due to their mental health concerns, but truant youths possessed mental health concerns. According to Skedgell and Kearney (2016), there are more internalizing concerns for students with moderate numbers of unexcused absences (15-60% of absences). Interestingly, those who are truant less often (<15% of absences) and those who are truant more often (>60% of absences) display fewer mental health concerns.

Hunt & Hopko (2009) also found several characteristics unique to rural populations. They found that rural high schoolers reported a slightly lower rate of truancy than urban samples. In addition, results indicate a greater likelihood of truancy if the student refrains from participating in extracurricular activities in rural populations. Currently, the vast majority of studies involving truancy focus on urban populations, some exclusively. With the Hunt and Hopko (2009) study, it is evident there are differences between the environments; however, little research has been strictly conducted in rural environments.

### **Purpose of Study**

Few studies have combined multiple aspects of truancy into one study; furthermore, few have also compared this group of individuals to a control group. Therefore, the goal

of this study is to examine truancy as a precursor to drop out through multiple perspectives while comparing students who truant often to those who never truant and those who sometimes truant. The following hypotheses and research questions guided the study:

*Research Questions:*

1. Will students who have never been truant have different types of future goals than those who have been truant?
2. Will students who truant for any amount of time have education goals and career goals that match?
3. Who are students spending time with while truanting?

*Hypotheses:*

1. Those who do not truant will report the most positive relationships with teachers.
2. Those who do not truant will report the most positive relationships with other students at school.
3. Students who do not truant will express more guardian involvement in their academics than those who are truant.
4. Truants will have less emotion regulation than those who do not truant.

## **Method**

*Population*

The population of interest consists of freshmen students in high schools within the Kaskaskia Special Education District #801 (KSED), which is located within the Southern Illinois area. There were two groups of students within the study: a control group of six students with no unexcused absences and an experimental group of six students with two

to four unexcused absences. Student attendance was monitored throughout the first semester of their freshman year. Students without any unexcused absences were found with the help of administrative staff. All participants were Freshmen in high school and between the ages of 14 and 16. The truant group consisted of three male and three female students, and the control group consisted of two male and four female students. Parental consent forms went home both with students and in the mail in order to obtain permission for both parent and student involvement.

### *The Student Interview*

Students then participated in a one-on-one interview with the researcher while at school during school hours for about 15 minutes. Questions were strategically arranged in order to build rapport and gain information regarding different aspects of truancy, such as their guardian's involvement, their relationships with peers and teachers, and their truant behavior. Several questions focused on student behavior during truancy and parental reaction to the event, as well as high school and career goals. The open-ended questions were purposefully designed to obtain a clear depiction of their behavior. Specific items from the interview can be found in Appendix A of this document. While still with the interviewer, the students then completed a self-report rating scale, the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF-2), which evaluates at emotion regulation. The students took home the parent version of the same rating scale to be filled out by their guardian, as well as a short questionnaire regarding parental involvement.

### *The Parent Perspective*

Students took home a short questionnaire for parents or guardians to complete at their convenience in order to determine if there are differences between the parent's

perspective of their involvement in their student's education of both the truant and non-truant groups. Students were asked to return the paperwork within one week. Questions regarding parent involvement can be found in Appendix B.

#### *Emotion Regulation – Student & Parent Perspectives*

In order to assess their emotion regulation, BRIEF-2 was filled out after the interview by students and sent home to parents to be filled out. The BRIEF-2 is a scale that assesses Executive Function with a scale specifically targeting emotion regulation, which can be broken down into two scales: emotional control and shift. Therefore, t-tests were used to determine if there is a difference between the student perspective and the parent perspective of the students' abilities to regulate their emotions depending whether they participate in or refrain from truant behavior.

### **Results**

To answer the research questions, *will students who have never been truant have different types of future goals than those who have been truant and will students who truant have education and career goals that match*, all students reported that they intended to receive their high school diploma. All students also had goals for their future after school. In the control group, all students had goals that required at least a four-year education after high school. Two students reported they wanted to become a veterinarian, one physician's assistant, one registered nurse, one state police officer after college, and one corrections officer. In the truant group, one student reported they wished to become a certified nursing assistant, two registered nurses, and three stated military options. Education and career goals were not out of proportion with students' attendance at school.

To answer the final research question, that *who are students spending time with while truanting*, all students who participated in truancy reported they either spent time at home alone or with parents. The truant students reported they missed the bus, did not want to go to school, or they did not feel good, either physically or mentally. One student reported that he is sometimes sore from weight lifting, and he decides to stay home to rest. Because these students are too young to legally drive a vehicle and most likely walking would be out of the question due to large distances between destinations, most had to stay home. It should be of note that two of the students reported that their parents were home with them and did not bring their student school. Furthermore, one student reported that he believed he had more unexcused absences, however his mother sometimes calls in for him.

Students also reported participating in several behaviors while being truant. While at home, the truant students slept, played video games, ate, played on their phone, and watched television. Four of the six students in the truant group also reported cleaning while staying home. While students were not asked about inappropriate behaviors they may or may not have participated in, no student reported any questionable or illegal behaviors. Also, participants in the truant groups did not partake in any activities with peers during their truancy.

To test hypothesis one, that *those who do no truant will report the most positive relationships with teachers*, four of the six students in the control group responded that most or all of their teachers knew them personally, while four of the six students in the truant group reported that none of their teachers knew them personally. In fact, one student in the control group reported about 10 to 15 teachers in the building knew him personally,

which included all of his current teachers. When asked if they could go to their teachers for help, again the control group said they could go to any of their teachers. Half of the truant group stated they could go to one teacher, two reported two or three teachers, and one student reported they might be able to go to all his or her teachers. Answers between the two groups were similar when it came to characteristics of favorite and least favorite teachers. They all liked teachers who were encouraging, energetic, understanding, have less of a focus on homework, and uses different methods to teach topics. One student explicitly shared that when takes an interest in the class and the students in the room, the teacher tends to be more liked. They all disliked strict teachers who offered little help with little explanation. One student specifically stated that some non-preferred teachers can be very crabby and they often take it out on the class.

To test hypothesis two, that *those who do not truant will report the most positive relationships with other students at school*, both the control group and the truant group both look for similar characteristics in the friendships. Words used to describe their friends were caring, encouraging, and always there. There were some similarities in the activities the students participate in with friends as well. For instance, students in each group named video games and homework as activities they partake in with friends. The control group specifically listed more school-related activities, like extracurricular activities, participating in sports, or attending school sporting events. In fact, one student in the control group only sees her friends during extracurricular activities as she is involved in so many activities, she rarely gets to see her friends outside of the school related groups. The truant group listed things like walking around town, swimming, and playing on their phones.

When asking about the other peers within the school, more differences were noted between the two groups. The control group used positive words to describe their peers, like nice, encouraging, helpful, and dedicated. The most negative word that came from the control group was lazy. The truant group listed smart and friendly as positive words; however, they also listed words like mean, untrustworthy, snotty, and weird. One student in the truant group described her peers as disrespectful and rude, explaining that they often judge her too soon due to rumors and her sister's reputation. Five out of the six students in the control group reported they had no negative relationships with peers at school; whereas the four out the six students in the truant group reported that they do have negative relationships at school.

To test hypothesis three, that *students who do not truant will express more guardian involvement in their academics than those who are truant*, all students reported that their parents ask about school work. In the control group, one student reported their parents' questions "never stop," and another reported that his parent asks about homework about three times a day. Several students from both groups also reported their parents offering to help with their school work. All students also reported that their parent cares if they receive an education. That being said, two students in the truant group expressed that their parent would support an alternative path to obtaining their education (i.e. GED or homeschool). One student in the truant group, stated that he knows his parents care if he stays in school because they "yell at him to get to school" when he runs late or skips. When asked if their parents attend regularly scheduled parent teacher conferences, five out of six parents of the control group attend, whereas four of the six parents in the truant group do

not attend. Some students noted their parent typically works during the conference times, so they are unable to attend.

The truant students were also asked how their parents feel when they participate in truant behavior; likewise, those in the control group were asked how their parents would feel if they were to participate truant behavior. The reactions of the students in the control group were almost disbelief at the possibility, as most of them laughed nervously stating they would be in big trouble. Of the students who had participated in truant behavior, three of the six had not been disciplined. Two students reported their parents were mad and/or frustrated. One student in particular stated that his parent was surprised and frustrated to find him at home; however, his parent did not discipline him or take him to school. The final student in the truant group stated that the absences were due to doctors' appointments, and the student never brought notes to school. When specified how his or her parent would react if he or she were to purposefully miss school, the student had a very similar reaction as the control group.

The guardians filled out a questionnaire regarding their parent involvement. Five of the six questionnaires in the control group were returned, and three of the six in the truant group were returned. In the control group, all parents had answered the same way. They all reported regular communication with their student's teachers, all attend the regularly scheduled parent teacher conferences, none have been called in for a meeting, all check about homework, and all were able to list their student's classes. Of the truant group, two of the three have regular communication with teachers, one attends parent teacher conferences, one has been called in for a meeting, all check in with homework, and they could list their student's classes.

To test hypothesis four, that *truants will have less emotion regulation than those who do not truant*, students and parents filled out the BRIEF-2 in order to compare the overall executive function of emotion regulation, as well as the subscales of emotional control and shift. The small sample sizes do not suggest inferential statistical analysis. According to the BRIEF-2 manual, scores below 60 are Average, 60-64 are Mildly Elevated, 65-69 are Potentially Clinically Elevated, and 70 and above are Clinically Significant. The following results suggest that students who truant are more likely to have difficulties with emotion regulation.

When looking specifically at the results of the student reported emotion regulation index, which are provided in the table below, two of the scores in the truant group fell in the Average range, two in the Mildly Elevated range, and two in the Clinically Significant range. In the control group, four students rated themselves to be in the Average range, one in the Mildly Elevated range, and one in the Potentially Clinically Elevated range.

**Table 1: BRIEF-2 Self Report Emotion Regulation Index Scores**

TRUANT GROUP		CONTROL GROUP			
	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>		<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1.	72	Clinically Significant		38	Average
2.	64	Mildly Elevated		64	Mildly Elevated
3.	73	Clinically Significant		67	Potentially Clinically Elevated
4.	64	Mildly Elevated		51	Average
5.	53	Average		51	Average
6.	57	Average		47	Average
	M = 65	SD = 7.72		M = 47	SD = 12.07

The results of the emotional control subscale are provided in the table below. Each group had four students who endorsed characteristics of Average emotional control. Two in the truant group were Mildly Elevated and two in the control group were Potentially Clinically Elevated.

**Table 2: BRIEF-2 Self Report Emotional Control Scores**

	TRUANT GROUP		CONTROL GROUP	
	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1.	50	Average	40	Average
2.	55	Average	68	Potentially Clinically Elevated
3.	64	Mildly Elevated	68	Potentially Clinically Elevated
4.	64	Mildly Elevated	50	Average
5.	50	Average	41	Average
6.	50	Average	57	Average
	M = 55.5	SD = 6.25	M = 54	SD = 11.42

The results of the shift subscale are provided below. Half of the students who have participated in truancy rated themselves to be in the Clinically Significant range. One student rated him or herself within the Potentially Clinically Significant range and another was within the Mildly Elevated range. One student in the truant range rated him or herself to be in the Average range; whereas five of the six students in the control group endorsed characteristics of shift in the Average range. One student within the control group rated him or herself to be within the Mildly Elevated range.

**Table 3: BRIEF-2 Self-Report Shift Scores**

TRUANT GROUP			CONTROL GROUP	
	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1.	86	Clinically Significant	39	Average
2.	69	Potentially Clinically Significant	58	Average
3.	78	Clinically Significant	64	Mildly Elevated
4.	73	Clinically Significant	50	Average
5.	55	Average	58	Average
6.	62	Mildly Elevated	39	Average
	M = 70.5	SD = 10.15	M = 51.67	SD = 9.60

The results of the parent form of the BRIEF-2 regarding their child's emotion regulation can be found in the table below. Half of the forms were returned for the students in the truant group and five of the six were returned for the students in the control group. Of those that were returned in the truant group, one parent rated their student to be in the Average range, another was within the Mildly Elevated range, and the final student fell within the Potentially Clinically Elevated range. Of those that were returned in the control group, all students scores fell within the Average range.

**Table 4: BRIEF-2 Parent Form Emotion Regulation Index Scores**

TRUANT GROUP			CONTROL GROUP	
	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1.	-	-	44	Average
2.	-	-	-	-

3.	68	Potentially Clinically Elevated	56	Average
4.	-	-	44	Average
5.	49	Average	59	Average
6.	64	Mildly Elevated	41	Average
M = 60.33		SD = 8.18	M = 48.8	SD = 7.25

The results of the parent perspective of emotional control can be found below. For the truant group, one student was rated to be in the Average range, one student was rated to be in the Mildly Elevated range, and the final student was rated to be in the Clinically Significant range. For the control group, four students were rated to be in the Average range; the final student was found to be in the Mildly Elevated range.

**Table 5: BRIEF-2 Parent Form Emotional Control Scores**

TRUANT GROUP			CONTROL GROUP	
	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1.	-	-	43	Average
2.	-	-	-	-
3.	71	Clinically Significant	60	Mildly Elevated
4.	-	-	41	Average
5.	48	Average	55	Average
6.	64	Mildly Elevated	43	Average
M = 61		SD = 9.63	M = 48.4	SD = 7.63

The results of the parent perspective of shift can be found below. In the truant group, one of the students fell within the Average range. The other two students were rated

to be within the Mildly Elevated range. For the control group, four of the five students were rated to be in the Average range. The final student was rated to be within the Mildly Elevated range.

**Table 6: BRIEF-2 Parent Form Shift Scores**

	TRUANT GROUP		CONTROL GROUP	
	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>	<u>Score</u>	<u>Classification</u>
1.	-	-	47	Average
2.	-	-	-	-
3.	61	Mildly Elevated	51	Average
4.	-	-	47	Average
5.	51	Average	63	Mildly Elevated
6.	63	Mildly Elevated	40	Average
	M = 58.33	SD = 5.25	M = 49.6	SD = 7.58

### Discussion

Lund (2014) stated that students who dropped out have a relational disconnect at school, with both peers and teachers. It seems that students who participate in truancy in rural environments have fewer positive relationships with teachers at school. All students in this study had positive peer relationships within the school; however, those within the truant group expressed more negative peer relationships. Several students within the non-truant group had zero negative relationships at school. Furthermore, when students would participate in truant behavior, they did so alone. While truant students and their friends might be participating in less school-related activities when spending time together, they

are not participating in the truant behavior together. Each student who participated in truancy, stayed home alone. Therefore, while it is true that a student with friends who do not study and skip class are likely to do the same (Studsrod & Bru, 2011), the students in this study are not convincing or pressuring each other to skip school together.

Negative relationships in school and in life are impossible to completely eliminate. There will always be people who butt heads and do not get along, however, there are ways to combat bullying behavior and increase positive, or at least, neutral relationships at school. Behavior problems, like bullying, can start as young as preschool age, and prevalence can be as low 3% in the general public or as high as 30% in low-income areas (Qi & Kaiser, 2003). Therefore, it is important to start bullying programs as soon as students enter school. One such program is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; a program with proven efficacy (Hong, 2009). This preventative and intervention method takes a holistic approach. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program involves parents, intervenes with victims and their perpetrator, holds regular classroom lessons to increase student education about bullying, and implements school-wide rules. Staff are trained, attend meetings, and can serve on a bullying prevention committee. The school-wide holistic program can enhance students' interactions and improve their perceptions of peers. Furthermore, programs like UK's Peer Support Schemes talk about peer interactions, like bullying, in an educational way (Houlston, Smith, & Jessel, 2011). It creates positive relationships amongst students, and victims of bullying in the program showed higher perceived support from friends and high self-esteem than those not in the program. Therefore, with carefully chosen programs, schools can improve their students' relationships with one another.

While each student in the truancy group stated they could go to at least one teacher if he or she needed help, the control group stated they could ask any of their teachers for help. Furthermore, the majority of the truant students felt as if none their teachers knew anything about them personally. Again, this is comparable to the control group who stated most, if not all, of their teachers know them personally. Their relationships with teachers further exasperates the problems of relational disconnect truant students experience at school (Lund, 2014).

Teachers are expected to make each and every student feel safe and supported, both emotionally and academically. However, teachers are human, and times can prove difficult when students are non-responsive or fail to put forth effort. Teachers get tired and experience burn out. Therefore, supporting teachers' well-being would be beneficial not only to the teachers but to the students who require unwavering support. Teacher wellness programs do just that. They can be set up as individualized or group programs. According to Curry and O'Brien (2012), wellness programs should incorporate several individualized goals: physical health and nutrition, leisure, relationships, school- and/or work-based pursuits, and an area of the individuals' choice. Kipps-Vaughan, Ponsart, and Gilligan (2012) recommend wellness programs to include teaching positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, and coping strategies that the teachers can take with them to use on their own. These techniques can help combat teacher burnout and enhance their relationships with their students.

Another way to increase the positive relationships at school, both with peers and teachers, is to encourage the involvement in an extracurricular activity. Hunt and Hopko (2009) found that students who participate in truant behaviors are less likely to be involved

in school related activities. Therefore, encouraging participation in clubs and sports could increase student engagement and decrease truancy in rural environments. New clubs to fit student interest can be created. Schools can even set a goal for themselves to have a particular percentage of student involvement.

Lund (2014) stated that both school and home were non-supportive learning environments for truant students; however, parents of all participants in this study want their students to succeed and receive an education. That being said, according to both student and parent report, parents of non-truant students participate in school related activities, like parent teacher conferences, more regularly than students who truant. According to the students, some were unable to attend conferences due to work schedules; however, some also chose not to attend conferences. Furthermore, two parents were at home when their student skipped school and did not bring their student to class, and half of the students reported that they were not disciplined for skipping. In addition, the lack of returned parent questionnaires within the truant group could be related to the parents' involvement in their student's school life. It is unclear, however, if only the parent is at fault. It is possible the student did not give the questionnaire to the parent or failed to return the completed forms to the school. The same possible explanations can be applied to the consent forms that were not returned to the school. Van Breda (2015) discussed that some parents of truants wish for their children to be successful; however, they fail to create supportive environments at home for their children to feel emotionally secure. The researcher discusses how most parents of truants also had unpleasant experiences with school themselves, and they do not know how to create that supportive environment. This study would also like to add to Van Breda's research by saying that some parents might

not be able to create the desired environment due to work schedules. They may be unable to be at home or school when requested in order to provide for their family.

Schools strive to create positive and welcoming environments, so both the students and their families feel safe, secure, and willing to participate. Creating a welcoming environment begins by developing a clear culturally sensitive vision for the school that relates to all families, developing and enhancing student-staff and parent-staff relationships, creating an abundance of diverse opportunities in order for parents to participate, and allocating resources specifically for facilitating parent involvement (Ouimette, Feldman & Tung, 2004). Schools could create orientation programs for parents to teach them about the school and what to expect for their child at the beginning of the big transition years, like Kindergarten, middle school, and high school. This type of orientation system should take place early in the year or before it begins and focus only on the positives, in order to avoid creating a stigma that parents will bad news at the meeting. Unfortunately, no matter how hard a school system may try, some parents will not or cannot be as involved as the school would prefer. The earliest a school can intervene with parent involvement is upon the child's registration for school. There are community-based programs that incorporate home visits in order to reach at-risk families even before the child is born (DiLauro, 2009). These programs support the family in a holistic way, offering resources and educational material in areas, like medical, verbal, cognitive, social-emotional. Thus, these programs can enhance the child's school readiness. Some examples of these programs include: Healthy Families America, The Parent-Child Home Program, and Parents as Teachers. Parents can also be reached prior to becoming a parent. McDermott (2003) discusses educating high school students, or future parents, might be

the best way to reach the population that opts out of learning opportunities (i.e. parenting classes, community programs, school orientation programs, etc.) when it comes to parenting. Lessons about bonding and parent involvement in education can be incorporated into the required health class.

Using the BRIEF-2, emotion regulation can be broken down into two scales: emotional control and shift (Gioia, Isquith, Guy, & Kenworthy, 2015). Emotional control is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thus having reactions that are proportional to the situation. Shift is the ability transition as necessary from one situation, activity, or aspect of a problem to another. There were more students within the control group who fell in the Average range by both raters in all areas except the student reported emotional control, where there were the same number of Average scores in both groups. According to the parent report, however, only one of the three returned rating scales fell in the average range, which is compared to all five that were returned in the control group. Therefore, in all areas of emotion regulation, students who participate in truancy and/or parents reported difficulty with the emotion regulation index and both subscales: emotional control and shift when compared to their non-truant peers. Therefore, students who participate in truant behavior experience more difficulty reacting appropriately and in proportion to the situation and their moods change quickly. They also have more difficulty switching classes, transitioning between different activities within one class, going home, and working on homework. When adding in the complexity of keeping calm and not becoming frustrated when shifting between a preferred activity (talking to friends in the hall, texting friends, playing video games after school, etc.) to non-preferred activities (lectures, tests, homework, etc.), these students are most likely not excited by the overall experience of

school. Kim and Page (2012) found an overall impact of emotion regulation on the truancy of third graders; it is possible they found an overall significance because of the age of the students or the larger sample size. The fact that they are participating in truancy while in third grade rather than freshmen indicates that there is significantly less development of emotion regulation as a whole.

While emotion regulation skills, like emotional control and shift, can be impacted by genetics, age, and brain development, these skills can be enhanced through programs at school. Including mindfulness and positive behavior supports in the classroom can help students keep calm, clear their mind, and focus on the tasks. Kielty, Gilligan, Staton, and Curtis (2017) found that according to student perception, mindfulness helped them to stay calm and solve problems. Likewise, teachers also reported positive results in their classrooms as a whole. Mindfulness helps people be more aware of their emotions. Positive behavior supports are set up to prevent unwanted behaviors in the classroom (Scott, Park, Swain-Bradway, & Landers, 2007). Rules and routines are carried out consistently, so the student knows what to expect and what is expected of them. As a class-wide intervention, students can learn to regulate their emotions naturally. For students who continue to struggle with emotion regulation skills, they might also benefit from small counseling groups who can help students create more individualized strategies to combat these difficulties. Dawson and Guare (2009) suggest several techniques for these individuals. For instance, the authors discuss talking to the student about expectations and coping strategies. They also recommend incorporating bibliotherapy, where the characters participate in desirable behaviors.

Hunt and Hopko (2009) specifically studied truancy in a rural environment, and their findings were echoed in this study. First, the researchers found that rural high schoolers had slightly lower rates of truancy than their urban counterparts. Originally, this study intended to include another group of students in order to compare students in rural environments who have multiple days of unexcused absences with students who have a couple days of unexcused absences, as differences have been found amongst truant students (Chen, Culhane, Metraux, Park, & Venable, 2016; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Willson, 2007). The administration at the participating schools, however, reported that extreme unexcused absence in their freshmen students were nearly absent within the KSED districts. Several administrators shared that their freshmen are “still too scared. If you want juniors, we have a bunch of those.” While the administration believed their freshmen students were too fearful to participate in extensive and repetitive truant behavior, there is another explanation to consider when keeping in mind that most previous truancy studies took place in urban and suburban environments. In urban and suburban environments, there are places for truants to go and spend their time. Students who are truant in rural environments, however, most likely have few options for entertainment if they skip school. For instance, towns in rural environments offer few places to spend their time outside of school, and houses can be surrounded by miles of farm acreage. Once a student reaches their junior year, in a rural environment, they most likely obtain their license. This could explain why suddenly, in junior year, the administration sees an increase in truant behavior. The student no longer is required to ride the bus or have a parent drop them off at school, as few students walk to school, so the student’s arrival at school is a strictly independent endeavor once he or she obtains a license.

Hunt and Hopko (2009) also found that truancy in rural environments often relates to symptoms of depression and withdrawal. During the interviews one of the six students who participated in truancy chose to share that he or she stays home due to symptoms of his or her depression. While one student does not sound like many, the question of mental health was not specifically asked. Therefore, this student may have simply been the only one to open up enough to share her story. It is also possible that because of the small sample size, this study may not capture the internalizing difficulties students who participate in truancy endure. Finally, Hunt and Hopko (2009) stated that a student is more likely to be truant in a rural environment if he or she does not participate in extracurricular activities. All of the students except one in the control group stated that they spend time with their friends while participating in sports at school. In the truant group, only one student reported participating in a sport for the school. Therefore, this study supports the finding that students who are truant are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Many questions arose while collecting data. For instance, a comparison of the demographics of truancy should be more closely reviewed in both rural, suburban, and urban environments more closely. Pinpointing the actual timing of the tipping point would be informative to preventing drop out. For instance, is the attainment of the driver's license truly the turning point for students to skip school in a rural environment? Or is that specific to the schools within Kaskaskia Special Education District #801? Widening the population base would assist not only help to discover the tipping point but also allow more opportunity to find students who are eligible to participate in the study. Therefore, it could

be possible to find students to fit all three categories, which can help determine if there is a significant difference between students who participate in truancy sometimes and those who do so often. Furthermore, having a larger population might allow for an increase in the amount of returned parent BRIEF-2, thus increasing the sample size and the likelihood for finding significance.

Another area of concern would be the extent of the role mental health is playing in rural environments. This study did not specifically look at mental health; however, because one student reported experiencing depression, and Hunt and Hopko (2009) found evidence of mental health concerns in rural environments, it would be beneficial to better understand the phenomenon. If there is truly a difference between the mental health of truants, or all students for that matter, between rural and suburban and urban environments, understanding why the differences exist would help developing and implementing preventative measures to keep students at school.

### **Conclusion**

The more we understand the truancy, the more efforts that can be made to prevent the behavior, and therefore, future dropout. As a result of previously found research and this study, students who participate in truancy have more negative peer relationships at school, fewer positive relationships at school, and parents who are less involved in their school life compared to students who do not participate in truant behavior. The truant students in this study also revealed they spent their day alone at home rather than interacting with peers. According to the self-report BRIEF-2, there is also a significant difference between the Shift scores of students who truant versus those who do not. When

specifically looking at rural truancy, truancy occurs later in adolescence and to a lesser extent than truancy in urban environments. Mental health concerns, like withdrawal and depression, may also plague rural truants more so than urban truants. Finally, truants in rural environments are much more unlikely to participate in extracurricular activities. Therefore, truants have less of a connection to peers, teachers, the school environment as a whole, and less academic involvement from parents, and they often have difficulties with emotion regulation when compared to their non-truant counterparts.

## Appendix A

### Student Interview

1. Do you like school? Why/Why not?
2. What is your favorite subject? Least favorite?
3. What do your grades look like? Are you happy with them?
4. How many teachers do you think know anything about you personally?
5. If you had a problem, how many of your teachers could you go to for help?
6. Think about your favorite teacher, but don't tell me their name. What do they do that makes that person your favorite?
7. Think about your least favorite teacher, but don't tell me their name. What do they do that makes that person your least favorite?
8. Do you ever get in trouble at school?
9. Tell me about your friends. Do they go to this school?
10. What do you like to do together in and outside of school?
11. Thinking about the other kids at school, can you provide 3 adjectives to describe your peers.
12. Do you have any negative relationships with any peers at school? Tell me what that looks like.
13. Who do you live with?
14. Do your (guardians) ask about school? Homework? What does that conversation look like?
15. Do your (guardians) attend the regularly scheduled parent teacher conferences?
16. Has your parent ever been called to school for a meeting? Did they attend?
17. I have that you miss \_\_\_\_ (#) days of school that were unexcused, why have they been unexcused?
18. (If you skipped school), What does/would the conversation with your (guardians) look like after skipping school?
19. Do you think your parents care if you stay in school? How do you know?
20. What kinds of things do you do when you choose not to attend school?
21. Do you intend to receive your high school diploma?
22. On a scale of 1-10, how sure are you that you will graduate?
23. Would you like to attend college?
24. When you (graduate/leave school), what type of job would you like to do?

## Appendix B

### Questions for Parents

1. Do you have regular communication with your student's teachers?
2. Do you attend the annual parent teacher conferences?
3. Do you ever get called into school for meetings?
4. Do you check in with your child about homework?
5. What are your child's 3 favorite subjects?

6. What are your child's 3 least favorite subjects?

## **Appendix C**

### **Parent/Guardian Informed Consent for Student Participation**

#### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Katie Hughes, MA from James Madison University, who is currently serving as a School Psychology Intern at Kaskaskia Special Education District #801. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the influence of teachers, peers, and guardians on attendance. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her graduate thesis.

#### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to allow your child to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants at (INSERT) High School. Your child will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to the influence of teachers, peers, and guardians on their educational experience. Your child will then fill out a rating scale that focuses on behavior.

#### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require about 45 minutes of your child's time.

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your child's involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

#### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in the study; however, their participation will help to understand the influence of teachers, peers, guardians, and their emotional control has on their educational experience.

#### **Payment for participation**

There is no compensation for participating in the study.

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented at in a university classroom environment. Your child will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your child's identity. All data will be stored in a secure

location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

There is one exception to confidentiality we need to make you aware of. In certain research studies, it is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. He/she is free to choose not to participate. Should you and your child choose to participate, he/she can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your child's participation in this study, or after its completion, please contact:

Katie Hughes, MA  
School Psychology  
James Madison University  
hugheskr@dukes.jmu.edu  
tricead@jmu.edu

Dr. Ashton Trice  
School Psychology  
James Madison University  
Telephone: (540) 568-8189

### **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. David Cockley  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
James Madison University  
(540) 568-2834  
[cocklede@jmu.edu](mailto:cocklede@jmu.edu)

### **Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of my child as a participant in this study. I freely consent for my child to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

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Name of Child (Printed)

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Name of Parent/Guardian (Printed)

---

Name of Parent/Guardian (Signed)

---

Date

---

Name of Researcher (Signed)

Date

## **Appendix D**

### **Consent for Parent/Guardian Participation in Research**

#### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by the Katie Hughes, MA from James Madison University, who is currently serving as a School Psychology Intern with the Kaskaskia Special Education District #801. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the influence parents, peers, and teachers have on a student's attendance. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her graduate thesis.

#### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of a questionnaire and rating scale that will be sent to your home for you to complete. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your child's school experiences, as well as fill out a rating scale regarding your student's behavior.

#### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require 20-25 minutes

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

#### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study; however your participation will help to understand the influence of teachers, peers, guardians, and their emotional control has on your student's educational experience.

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented in a university classroom environment. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that your identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

#### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Katie Hughes, MA  
 School Psychology  
 James Madison University  
 hugheskr@dukes.jmu.edu  
 tricead@jmu.edu

Dr. Ashton Trice  
 School Psychology  
 James Madison University  
 Telephone: (540) 568-8189

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Dr. David Cockley  
 Chair, Institutional Review Board  
 James Madison University  
 (540) 568-2834  
[cocklede@jmu.edu](mailto:cocklede@jmu.edu)

### **Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Researcher (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

**Appendix E****Youth Assent Form**

IRB # 18-0034

**UNDERSTANDING TRUANCY IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT**

We are inviting you to participate in this study because you are a teenager, and we are interested in how your teachers, peers, and guardians affect you in regards to attendance. This research will take us about 45 minutes to do.

First, we are just going to talk, and I am going to ask you different questions about school, specifically about your teachers, peers, and guardians. Other than pen and paper, your answers will not be audio or video recorded. When we are done talking, you will fill out a rating scale that focuses on your behavior. There are no right or wrong answers, just tell me what fits you the best.

There is no risk to you for participating in the survey; likewise, there are also no benefits to you directly. Your participation will help us to understand how different aspects of yours and other students lives affect school life on a daily basis.

Your responses will be completely confidential. Your responses will only be seen by the researchers, and even then, the researchers will not know that they belong to you. There is one exception to confidentiality that you must be made aware of. In certain research studies, it is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any illegal and/or life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

We have asked your parents for their permission for you to do this study. Please talk this over with them before you decide whether or not to participate.

If you have any questions at any time, please ask the researcher.

If you check "yes," it means that you have decided to participate and have read everything that is on this form. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to participate in the study.

---

Signature of Subject

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

Katie Hughes, MA  
James Madison University  
hugheskr@dukes.jmu.edu

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