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SCHOOL DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES TO UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

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SCHOOL DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES TO UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

by

Zachary R. Boswell

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SCHOOL DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES TO UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

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by

Zachary R. Boswell

DEDICATION

To my wife, Erin, who is way out of my league.

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Thank you to my wife, who has supported me every time I've gone back to school and who was gracious during all of my nights away at class. Thank you to my wife's friends, especially Heather, who kept her company on Monday nights. Thanks to my parents, who always told me I could accomplish any of my goals. To Sheila Harrison and Troy Brown, thank you for working with my school schedule for the past three years. Dr. Ronn Hallett and Dr. Linda Skrla, I appreciate the time you have invested in our cohort and the support you have given me through this process. Thank you to Nicole, Veronica, and Elizavet, my tablemates, for all of the collaboration and for keeping me accountable.

School Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences

Abstract

by Zachary R. Boswell

University of the Pacific
2018

The purpose of this qualitative document analysis research study was to explore how public high schools in California create local unexcused absence and truancy policies in similar and different ways. The study used Lipsky's "street-level bureaucracy" and the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force's definition of "zero tolerance policies" in the conceptual framework. Forty-two California public high school handbooks were qualitatively coded and analyzed for the extent to which their disciplinary responses to unexcused absences were aligned with the ideals of zero tolerance. Schools were purposefully selected to maximize contrasts between specific student demographic groups and school enrollment sizes. The demographic groups included schools with: high/low minoritized enrollment, high/low ELL enrollment, and high/low enrollment of students with low socioeconomic statuses. School truancy rates were also included as a descriptor in the analysis.

The findings from this study revealed that schools with higher enrollment sizes tended to employ disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that were more aligned

with zero tolerance policies than schools with lower enrollment sizes. Schools with low minoritized enrollment, low ELL enrollment, and low levels of poverty also tended to rely more heavily on zero tolerance responses to unexcused absences. Truancy rates tended to decrease as zero tolerance policies increased, although there was no evidence that the policies themselves were responsible for the increase in attendance. Few examples of comprehensive truancy prevention and intervention programs were found in this study. Schools that did not rely on zero tolerance did not tend to have innovative programs to address the underlying issues of student truancy. The study ends with a discussion on the ways in which strict zero tolerance policies at schools with most students in the social majority are likely perpetuating the issue of students from marginalized backgrounds being disciplined at higher rates than other students. There is also discussion regarding the fact that harsh zero tolerance policies have the potential to put students who need the most help in a further disadvantaged position.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Student unexcused absences in the United States is an area on which educators and researchers have focused for many years (Trujillo, 2006). In California public schools, the nation's largest public school system, there are over 2 million students per year who are classified as "truant" (California Department of Education, 2015). In California, a student attaining "truancy" status means that the student has had at least three unexcused absences in a school year. The California Education Code states that absences are unexcused if the student missed school for anything other than illness, medical appointments, court appointments, religious holidays, funerals, and a few other specific scenarios (CA Ed. Code §48205). One strategy used by some school districts in response to students' unexcused absences is to punish students for their absences that the school deems to be "unexcused," per the school's interpretation of California Education Code §48205. While the Education Code is fairly clear on what constitutes excused and unexcused absences, there is a vast amount of discretion given to individual schools when deciding how to respond to unexcused absences.

There is little research available on the different policies of schools in California regarding their disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the policies regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at public high schools in California. This was achieved through a

policy analysis of individual California public high school handbooks and attendance policies. The enrollment size, population of minoritized students, population of English learner students, and percentage of students with a low socioeconomic status in each of the schools in the study were used in the analysis of these policies.

Background

Student absenteeism and truancy are complex issues. It has been estimated that across the United States, approximately 16% of 10th grade students are labeled as truant, and approximately 5% of students are labeled as habitually truant (missing 10% of the school year or more) (Henry, 2007). A study in 2013 found that, within one month, approximately 11% of adolescent students reported “skipping” school, which would constitute an unexcused absence (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon 2013). Others have estimated that approximately 9% of students are absent in a given school day in the United States (Gage, Sugai, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013).

Part of the difficulty in analyzing the effects of unexcused absences is the fact that there are multiple terms used to describe the issue, and that these terms describe issues that are similar, but are not the same. In general, “absenteeism” is the term to describe the overarching issue of students missing school. Students with legitimate medical issues and students who skip school without an excuse are both dealing with absenteeism. “Truancy”, on the other hand, is the issue of students missing school without a “valid” excuse multiple times in a given school year. In the same scenario above, only the student who is skipping school would be dealing with “truancy.” Some research has shown that the effects of being absent with an excuse are similar to the effects of having unexcused absences, although they are not exactly the same issue (Vaughn, et al., 2013).

Absenteeism and truancy statistics are often discussed and presented together, as truancy (unexcused absences) is a subset of the issue of absenteeism.

Adding to the complexity are terms like “habitual” or “chronic” truancy, which denote various levels of unexcused absences in a school year. One final aspect that makes interpreting research in this area complicated is the fact that the federal government allows each state to set their own truancy laws, so states have different requirements for students to be labeled as “truant.”

While the terms used to describe absenteeism and truancy can be challenging to work with and interpret, there is clear and consistent evidence that missing school has negative impacts on student achievement (Balfanz & Brynes, 2006; Ginsburg, Jordan & Chang, 2014; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro, 2008; Roby, 2004; Schoeneberger, 2012). Every day a substantial number of students miss class throughout the United States. As this continues to be an issue year after year, it is important to ask ourselves whether or not the policies that are currently in place are having a positive effect on the issue of students’ unexcused absences.

This study has added to the conversation around students’ unexcused absences by analyzing the ways in which public high school policies regarding unexcused absences are similar and different to one another. This study looked specifically at the state of California – the largest public school system in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a).

Absenteeism in California

The California Attorney General gathers statistics on a yearly basis on elementary truancy and absentee data. In the 2015 report, it was estimated that approximately 8% of

students are absent in any given school day (Harris, 2015). California public schools have more students in K-12 public education than any other state in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). In 2013, California had over six million students enrolled in K-12 public education (NCES, 2013a). This was over one million more than were enrolled in Texas, the second most populous state in terms of public school enrollment (NCES, 2013a). During the 2014-2015 school year (the most recent data available), 31.43% of students enrolled in California's public school system were reported as "truant" during the school year – this is over 2 million students (California Department of Education, 2015). By the California Education Code definition of "truancy," this means that, at a minimum, each one of these students had at least three unexcused absences during the school year (CA Ed. Code §48205).

Unexcused absences are not harmless. There is a direct correlation between students' attendance and their academic performance (Balfanz & Brynes, 2006; Ginsburg, Jordan & Chang, 2014; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro, 2008; Roby, 2004; Schoeneberger, 2012). Students who miss school are more likely to become involved in risk-taking behaviors than students who do not miss school (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008; Guttmacher, Weitzman, Kapadia, & Weinberg, 2002; Henry, 2010; Sánchez-Martínez, & Nebot, 2010). The risk increases as a student's number of absences increase (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon 2013). Students who are truant are far more likely to drop out of high school, which increases their likelihood of living in poverty and decreases their life expectancy (Carlson, & McChesne, 2015; Olshansky, Antonucci, Berkman, Binstock, Boersch-Supan, Cacioppo, & Rowe, 2012; Trujillo, 2006)

Description of the Research Problem

There has been little research conducted on the policies of schools in California regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The purpose of this research study was to investigate the policies regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at public high schools in California. Schools have a great deal of discretion in creating their own systems of punishing truant students – as is explored in the following sections of this study. Lipsky’s theory of “street-level bureaucracy” will be used to frame the study, as Lipsky argued for the importance of studying how bureaucratic policies are actually implemented by the agents of the bureaucracy who interact with the public (Lipsky, 1980). In the case of unexcused absence policies, the local implementation of California Education Code can be vastly different between local schools and/or districts.

With millions of students attaining “truancy” status every year in California, it is imperative that schools consider the effectiveness of their individual unexcused absence policies, and the benefits and drawbacks of different types of disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. If policies are having negative effects on students and their chances at finishing school, then we need to look to modifying our policies. Zero tolerance policies with harsh consequences for student behavior have recently been highlighted by a number of researchers as ineffective at achieving better student behavior, and are believed by many to increase the likelihood of students entering the justice system (Fuentes, 2012; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Skiba, 2013; Wald & Losen, 2003). With the available research on the detrimental effects of zero tolerance policies on students, it is important to understand the level to which zero tolerance policies are being used to address student unexcused absences and truancy. My study looked specifically at whether or not schools with different truancy rates, enrollment

sizes, socioeconomic statuses, minoritized (students who are African American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or Pacific Islander) enrollment and English learner populations have any significant differences in their use of zero tolerance policies to address student unexcused absences.

A policy analysis in particular was important, as school/district policy is what guides the decision-making of school administrators. If it is possible that the policies in many of our districts are increasing the likelihood that our students will drop out and/or end up in prison, then it is imperative that we investigate alternative strategies to respond to students' unexcused absences. This policy analysis has informed the conversation regarding the staggering truancy numbers in California. Because each state in the United States makes their own truancy policies, and the California public school system is the largest in the nation, focusing the study on California public schools/districts allowed my results to inform the largest group possible.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how high school sites create local unexcused absence and truancy policies in similar and different ways.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

The following research questions guided this study: How are high school policies reflective of California state policies? How does the approach to truancy policy relate to student characteristics such as socio-economic status, English learner status, and ethnicity? How does the policy approach differ depending upon a school's truancy rates? How are local school policies approaching truancy in ways that either reinforce or move away from zero tolerance?

Significance

There is a wealth of research available on best practices for working with students who have unexcused absences. There is also significant research regarding the impact of zero tolerance policies on students. There is a lack of research, however, on the individual school policies regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that are in place across California. As Lipsky argued in his “street-level bureaucracy” work, each person who enforces the mandates of a bureaucracy when interacting with the public will do so in his/her own way. Lipsky stated that in order to deal with bureaucratic demands and the demands of the public, street-level bureaucrats often create systems and policies that serve their own needs, rather than the needs of the citizens. This study sought to identify the different ways in which local school districts and administrators have decided to enforce California’s education code regarding truancy and unexcused absences. This research has contributed to the current conversation by illuminating the policies of districts throughout California, and analyzing those policies through the framework detailed below. The enrollment size, population of minoritized students, population of English learner students, and percentage of students with a low socioeconomic status in each of the schools in the study were used in the analysis of these policies.

Conceptual Framework

This study used a conceptual framework developed from Lipsky’s work regarding “Street-Level Bureaucracy” and from the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force’s definition of “Zero Tolerance Policies.” Lipsky argued for the importance of looking at how bureaucratic policies are actually implemented when street-level bureaucrats interact with the public. In this case, I looked at how local schools and

districts create policies to enforce the California Education Code mandates concerning unexcused absences and truancy.

According to the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force's definition, zero tolerance policies mandate "the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). While zero tolerance is often a term applied to violent or dangerous offenses, zero tolerance policies have, in some schools, extended to non-violent offenses as well (Stone & Stone, 2012).

The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force definition of "zero tolerance" was used as a method of coding the data from my document analysis. The data was coded, using a weighted code system, to determine the extent to which the school policies were "zero tolerance," as defined by the American Psychological Association. I broke the zero tolerance definition into five separate parts by which my document analysis was coded:

1. Predetermined Consequences – The consequences of breaking the policy are determined before the policy is broken
2. Severity – The consequences of breaking the policy are severe in nature
3. Punitive Nature – The consequences of breaking the policy are meant to punish the student who breaks the policy
4. Disregard for Gravity of Behavior – The consequences of breaking the policy are put into place regardless of the seriousness of the infraction

5. Disregard for Mitigating Circumstances – The consequences of breaking the policy are put into place without any consideration of why the policy was broken

By qualitatively coding the language in school/district policies using this framework, I was able to create and use a rubric to rate each policy in the five zero tolerance categories (See Appendix A). This allowed me to compare the policies to factors at the school such as enrollment size, truancy rate, socioeconomic status, English learner population, and minoritized enrollment.

In addition to using the framework above, I also gathered data regarding unique practices that were taking place in public high schools throughout California. One comprehensive study of 193 schools throughout the nation found 12 types of disciplinary responses to truancy issues throughout the United States, which included time in office, loss of privileges, parent contact, detention, instruction, in school suspension, out of school suspension, expulsion, bus suspension, restitution and “other” (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012). As I gathered data from public high school disciplinary and attendance policies, I also collected data regarding unique practices taking place in various public high schools.

Description of the Study

Research questions regarding student truancy issues have been studied under a quantitative lens (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012). There has been little research on the language of the school/district disciplinary policies regarding school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences in California, particularly from a qualitative perspective.

A qualitative research methodology was determined to be the most appropriate to gather data to investigate the research questions from my study. One goal of interpretivist qualitative research is to use words as data in order to better understand the experience of a particular group of people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Document analysis was selected as a means of collecting data to inform my research questions. An advantage to collecting data from documents is that, unlike with participant interviews or observations, the presence of the researcher does not impact the data in any way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While interviewees might be resistant to provide completely truthful responses to an interviewer, and those being observed may alter their behavior in front of an observer, documents remain the same regardless of who is collecting data. Because school and district policy are at the center of this research, document analysis was determined to be an essential aspect of collecting data in order to investigate the research questions in this study.

Chapter Summary

Analyzing high school unexcused absence policies in California through Lipsky's "street-level bureaucracy" work and the zero tolerance definition conceptual framework has enabled me to look into the school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that exist in California high schools. The descriptor data used in this study – minoritized enrollment, English learner enrollment, low socioeconomic status enrollment, and total enrollment size – allowed me to look at trends between zero tolerance discipline policies and the descriptor data.

Chapter 2 includes a synthesis of relevant literature regarding student absenteeism, truancy, and zero tolerance policies in education. Also included is a review

of the California Education Codes related to absences and truancy, and a discussion on the level of discretion given to each school site and/or district in enforcing the California Education Code as related to student absences.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology that was used in this document analysis study, and the rationale for why this methodology was appropriate to inform the research questions. The use of Michael Lipsky's "street-level bureaucracy" and the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force's definition of "zero tolerance policies" in the conceptual framework for this research is discussed in Chapter 3 as well.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study of forty -two California public high school handbooks and their implementation of zero tolerance policies in their disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of these findings, including a discussion of how the findings relate to the research on zero tolerance policies and student absenteeism/truancy. Recommendations for policy and practice and recommendations for future research are also presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Related Literature

The consequences of missing school have been well researched and documented. This chapter presents the relevant literature regarding student absenteeism and truancy. One of the difficulties in researching the issue lies in the fact that there are many terms used to categorize student absenteeism – terms that are sometimes used interchangeably or that overlap in meaning. This chapter will define terms as they are commonly used in relationship to absenteeism and unexcused absences in schools. While this study is particularly concerned with unexcused absence policies in public high schools in California, much of the relevant research takes a broader look at the issues. For example – research relating to absenteeism does not necessarily target truancy (high numbers of unexcused absences), but the findings will still apply to students who are truant, as truancy is a subsection of absenteeism.

This chapter discusses the relationship between unexcused absences and academic performance, and the relationship between unexcused absences and negative student behaviors. This chapter also looks at the connection between unexcused absences and ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and English Language Learner (ELL) status. The specific California Education Codes governing unexcused absences are also presented and explained, along with relevant statistics regarding unexcused absences in California. In addition, the connection between unexcused absence policies and zero tolerance

policies is discussed, including a history of how zero tolerance policies moved from addressing drugs and violence in schools to addressing issues such as unexcused absences and disrespectful behavior.

This study used Lipsky's work regarding "street-level bureaucracy," as well as the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force's definition of "zero tolerance" as a conceptual framework from which to analyze local school unexcused absence policies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of this conceptual framework and the current gaps in the literature that this study has sought to inform.

Absenteeism/Truancy Definitions in the Literature

One of the challenges in investigating the issue of students' unexcused absences is that the literature is inconsistent in how terms are used and defined. States have a good deal of freedom in setting their own truancy policies (Truancy prevention.org, 2016), and the federal government does not have an overarching policy on unexcused absences (Gottfried, 2014). The following is a list of terms and the definitions that will be used for the purposes of this research study.

Absenteeism

Absenteeism is the overarching issue of students missing school. The term does not differentiate between excused or unexcused absences.

Truant

The term "truant" can mean two things, but it always refers to one or more unexcused absence. A student can be called "truant" for one day or one class period. For example, a person might say, "She was truant to second period." However, the term is also used to describe a student who has an unacceptable number or unexcused absences

(as determined by the state). For example, students in California are officially labeled as “truants” after they miss three school days without a valid excuse. Thus, truancy is a sub-issue of absenteeism.

Chronic Absenteeism/Truancy

Generally speaking, chronic truancy or chronic absenteeism is used to describe a situation where a student has an excessive number of absences. While the literature uses this term inconsistently, the word chronic typically indicates missing at least 10% of the school year. Therefore, a chronic truant would have around 10% of the school year missed due to unexcused absences. Someone who has chronic absenteeism would typically be a person who has missed 10% of the school year as well, although the absences would not necessarily be unexcused. All truants are dealing with absenteeism, but not all students dealing with absenteeism are truants. Sometimes the word “habitual” is used as a synonym for “chronic” when discussing absenteeism and truancy.

Truancy in the California Education Code

Truancy is typically referred to in the literature when referencing students who are habitually absent from school without permission or for an “unexcused” reason. California Education Code requires students to be labeled as “truant” after three unexcused absences (CA Ed. Code §48260a). In California, excused absences include missing school for illness, medical appointments, court appointments, funerals, religious holidays, and various other specific scenarios. Absences that occur when students miss class for reasons such as car trouble, oversleeping, or simply “cutting” class are considered “unexcused” (CA Ed. Code §48205). Absenteeism typically refers to students who are habitually absent from school, regardless of whether or not the student is labeled

as truant (as in the case of a student who has many excused absences). Much of the research on truancy and absenteeism overlaps, as students who are “truant,” are, by definition, struggling with “absenteeism.” Students are only labeled as truant if they have an excess number of unexcused absences – excused absences do not factor into truancy labels. For example, a student with four unexcused absences in California will be labeled as a “truant,” while a student with 30 excused absences will not. There is research, however, to suggest that both absenteeism and truancy have very similar effects on students, although the effects may be intensified for students who miss school without a valid excuse (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008).

Prevalence of Absenteeism

It has been approximated that across the United States, approximately 16% of 10th grade students are occasionally truant, and approximately 5% of students are habitually truant (Henry, 2007). A study in 2013 found that, within one month, approximately 11% of adolescent students reported “skipping” school (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). Others have estimated that approximately 9% of students are absent in a given school day in the United States (Gage, Sugai, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013). In California, the largest public school system in the nation (NCESa, 2013), the Attorney General gathers statistics on a yearly basis on elementary truancy data; in the 2015 report, it was estimated that approximately 8% of students are absent in any given school day (Harris, 2015).

Effects of Absenteeism on Academic Performance

Student attendance has been shown to have a significant impact on student performance throughout elementary and high school levels – although there is evidence

to suggest that this correlation is strongest in the 9th grade (Roby, 2004). Students who demonstrate high rates of absenteeism during their first year of high school have been shown to be as much as six times more likely to be behind grade level or to have dropped out of school altogether by the next school year (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Based on evidence from longitudinal student data – student attendance rates are a strong indicator for eventual dropout or completion of high school (Schoeneberger, 2012). Dropping out of high school has significant and long-lasting effects on a student. Students who drop out of high school are statistically twice as likely to live in poverty after high school and over two and a half times more likely than high school graduates to live off of welfare (Trujillo, 2006).

Attendance has a higher impact on marginalized/minoritized groups than it does on those in the dominant culture. Poor attendance increases the effects of the achievement gap (Balfanz & Brynes, 2006; Ginsburg, Jordan & Chang, 2014). In early grades, students from low SES families are more likely to be chronically absent than other students (Ginsburg, Jordan & Chang, 2014; Ready, 2010). However, low SES students show higher rates of growth while they are at school than their other classmates, and absences have a less significant impact on students from higher SES families (Ready, 2010). Students in high poverty schools have a significantly better chance of closing the achievement gap when they attend school every day (Balfanz & Brynes, 2006). In other words, the students who have the most to lose from missing school are the students who are missing school the most. Chronic absences (more than 10% of the school year) in kindergarten alone are a predictor of lower academic success in future years, and this is even more pronounced for children in Latino families (Chang & Romero, 2008).

While the issue is more pronounced within marginalized/minoritized groups, absences from school are detrimental to all groups. There is significant evidence that absences are directly correlated to dropout rates and failure in high school (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Rumberger, 1995). Similarly, better attendance is correlated with improved grades and test scores. There is a direct correlation between one's attendance rate and one's GPA and test scores (Gottfried, 2010; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Steward, Steward, Blair & Hill, 2008). Students in elementary school who are frequently absent (10-18 days) have been found to regress in reading and math scores (Gottfried, 2014). One study even showed that children will significantly outscore their siblings living in the same home on standardized tests when the other sibling has more absences (Gottfried, 2011). Perhaps most concerning of all, chronic absenteeism has even been shown to decrease a student's eagerness or drive to learn when they are at school (Gottfried, 2014).

The research is divided regarding the impact of unexcused absences versus excused absences. Some studies have shown that unexcused absences lead to lower test scores than excused absences (Gottfried, 2009). Other research indicates that any absences will lead to lower test scores, regardless of the reason (Moonie, Sterling, Figgs, & Castro, 2008).

Truancy and college attendance are linked as well. Student grades in high school and students' plans for attending college have been shown to be indicators of student truancy rates (Henry, 2007). A high school student's likelihood of attending a four-year college has also been shown to correlate significantly with their attendance rate – as truancy increases, likelihood of four-year college attendance decreases (Barry, Chaney, &

Chaney, 2011). For students who do make it to college, there remains a correlation between attendance and academic performance, with lower attendance leading to lower academic performance in college (Schmulian & Coetzee, 2012).

Absenteeism and Risk-Taking Behaviors

Absenteeism affects more than just a student's academic performance. Adolescent absenteeism and truancy are correlated with a variety of negative student behaviors. These negative correlations increase as a student's absences increase – meaning that students with higher rates of absenteeism and/or truancy are more likely to engage in negative behaviors (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon 2013). One study in particular found that “In months when a youth was truant from school, he or she was 2.42 times more likely to be arrested compared to months when the adolescent was not truant from school” (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014, p.1116). In other words, any amount of absenteeism makes a student more likely to engage in negative behaviors than a student with zero absences. While unexcused absences and truancy are the focus of this study, it is also important to the discussion to note that students who have “permission” to miss school (excused absences) are more likely than those who do not miss school to suffer from the negative effects of absenteeism (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon 2013).

Absenteeism and Sexual Activity

One risk taking behavior that is connected with student absenteeism and truancy is sexual activity among middle and high school students. Students who are truant are more likely than other students to become sexually active in middle school (Houck, Hadley, Tolou-Shams, & Brown, 2012). High school students who were habitually absent

or truant also reported significantly higher levels of sexual activity than other students (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008; Guttmacher, Weitzman, Kapadia, & Weinberg, 2002). Not surprisingly, this increase in sexual activity among truant students also leads to a higher risk of teen pregnancy (Zhou, Abel, & Puradiredja, 2016).

Absenteeism and Substance Abuse

There is also a significant connection between substance abuse and student absenteeism and truancy. Students who are truant are more likely than their other classmates to use tobacco (Guttmacher, Weitzman, Kapadia, & Weinberg, 2002) and illegal drugs (Henry, 2010). A positive correlation between student marijuana use and truancy has been made dating back to at least the 1970s (Eaton, Brener, & Kann, 2008; Kandel, Treiman, Faust, & Single, 1976; Pérez, Sánchez-Martínez, & Nebot, 2010). While a variety of factors are believed to lead to student drug use, truancy has been shown to be a better predictor of drug use than sexual activity or low GPA among adolescents (Hallfors, Vevea, Iritani, Cho, Khatapoush, & Saxe, 2002). Henry (2010) also found that, beyond a simple correlation between students who are truant and students who use drugs, there was evidence to suggest that a significant amount of students who were truant were either illegally drinking alcohol or engaging in illegal drug use during the school day in which they were skipping class.

Truancy and Ethnicity, SES Status and ELL Status

There is evidence to suggest that truancy is experienced in different ways by students depending upon factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and English Learner status – although the literature often points to the complexity and difficulty of

separating out co-occurring factors such as family history, special education enrollment, drug use, and age (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett & Willson, 2007).

Ethnicity

African American students in particular have been shown to have higher levels of truancy than their European American counterparts (Weden & Zabin, 2005). Schools with an African American majority population have lower student attendance (and teacher attendance) rates than “average” high schools that are not racially isolated (Brady, Balmer & Phenix, 2007). Rates of truancy and absenteeism have been reported by school administrators to be a much higher issue in schools where the majority of students are black – when compared with schools where the majority of students are white – and students in “black majority” schools were found to be twice as likely to drop out before the 10th grade when compared with “white majority” schools (So, 1992). Hispanic youth have been found in some research to have higher rates of truancy than European American students or African American students – although it is possible the African American students were under-represented in this research because of missing the survey due to long absences (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron & Abdon, 2013). One study found that chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and first grade was less prevalent in Caucasian and Asian-American homes than in other ethnicities (Ready, 2010). Some research suggests that student age is a mitigating factor in looking at the relationship between truancy and ethnicity. Henry (2007) found that while student ethnicity did not predict truancy rates in 8th grade, black students had a significantly higher probability of recent truancy than white students by 10th grade.

Low Socioeconomic Status

While there are clearly a variety of factors that influence and lead to student truancy issues, student poverty has specifically been identified as having an association with unexcused absences. Zhang, Katsivannis, Barrett and Wilson (2007) found that a “relatively high percentage” of students first referred to the juvenile justice system for truancy came from families who made less than \$15,000 per year (p. 252). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that, while students from impoverished families tended to live closer to their schools, these students also tended to have higher rates of absenteeism. Factors such as personal and family health, combined with poverty, can also influence a student’s truancy (Echeverria, Velez-Valle, Janevic, & Prystowsky, 2014).

ELL Status

In a study of chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and first grade, it was determined that students with chronic absenteeism were more likely to be English Language Learners (Ready, 2010). More research needs to be conducted to specifically look at the correlation between English Language Learners and absenteeism (Gottfried, 2015).

Marginalized Groups and Truancy Referrals to Juvenile Justice

When truant students are referred to the juvenile justice system, it appears that “the system” is failing to offer effective interventions for many different groups (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett & Willson, 2007; Zhang, Willson, Katsiyannis, Barrett, Song, & Wu, 2010). Studies that have looked specifically at first referrals to the juvenile justice system (the reason a juvenile has been entered into the system for the first time) show that females of European decent are the most likely to be referred for “truancy” (Zhang,

Katsiyannis, Barrett & Willson, 2007). To clarify – other juveniles who enter the system for other reasons before being referred for “truancy” are not counted in these numbers. The first time offenders who are more likely to be re-entered into the juvenile justice system (for any reason – truancy included) are “male, minoritized group members, younger at the time of first offense, have been placed in special education, have a history of drug use, or have a criminal history in the family” (Zang, Katsiyannis, Barrett & Willson, 2007, p. 251). In other words, being referred to the juvenile justice system for truancy seems to work well for females of European descent who are not impoverished, not in special education, not using drugs, and do not have a family history of criminality. These students do not typically end up back in the system. Others who enter the system for truancy, however, have a much higher likelihood of ending up back in the system – for truancy or for other reasons. This does not speak well of our country’s ability to deal with truant students once they are referred to the juvenile justice system.

Absenteeism and Truancy in California Public Schools

California public schools have more students in K-12 public education than any other state in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics a, 2013). In 2013, California had over six million students enrolled in K-12 public education, which equates to approximately one out of every ten public school students in the United States (NCES, 2013a). This was over one million more than were enrolled in Texas, the second most populous state in terms of public school enrollment (NCES, 2013a). During the 2014-2015 school year (the most recent data available), 31.43% of students enrolled in California’s public school system were reported as “truant” at least one time during the year – this is over 2 million students (California Department of Education, 2015).

The conversation around truancy and absenteeism in California is crucial because of the sheer size of California's public school population. California public schools serve vastly diverse populations and geographic locations throughout the state. While the same education code governs public schooling in all of these areas, individual schools and districts have a great deal of discretion in their implementation of the California Education Code policies regarding truancy and absenteeism.

California Education Code 48260.5 states that schools "shall" do the following when students are truant by the definition of the state:

The school shall notify the parent that the student is that the pupil is truant, that the parent or guardian is obligated to compel the attendance of the pupil at school that parents or guardians who fail to meet this obligation may be guilty of an infraction and subject to prosecution...that alternative educational programs are available in the district, that the parent or guardian has the right to meet with appropriate school personnel to discuss solutions to the pupil's truancy that the pupil may be subject to prosecution...that the pupil may be subject to suspension, restriction, or delay of the pupil's driving privilege pursuant to Section 13202.7 of the Vehicle Code, and that it is recommended that the parent or guardian accompany the pupil to school and attend classes with the pupil for one day (CA Ed. Code §48260.5).

These are the mandates given to each school district in California. While districts have an incredible amount of authority and discretion in doling out or participating in punishments for truants and their parents (fines, arrests, jail time, etc.), they are only responsible at a minimum for informing the parent that their student is truant. This means that in one district, the most severe punishment for repeated truancy may be that a parent of a truant student receives frequent letters regarding their student's truancy. In another district, the same offense could result in fines, placement of the student in an alternative education setting, and even jail time for the parent/guardian. There is little research on the individual school districts' disciplinary responses to unexcused absences in California,

and therefore there is little research on the differences in school policies by truancy rates, ethnic makeup, English learner enrollment or socioeconomic makeup.

In order to fully understand the issue of truancy in California, it is important to have a basic understanding of the California laws governing truancy. Each state in the United States has the authority to set their own laws regarding school attendance and truancy (TruancyPrevention.org, 2016). The California Department of Education considers a student to be truant when the student has been absent (or over 30 minutes tardy) three times in a given school year without a valid excuse (CA Ed. Code §48260a). Valid excuses are explained in California Education Code 48205, which states the following:

A pupil shall be excused from school when the absence is

- (1) Due to his or her illness.
- (2) Due to quarantine under the direction of a county or city health officer.
- (3) For the purpose of having medical, dental, optometrical, or chiropractic services rendered.
- (4) For the purpose of attending the funeral services of a member of his or her immediate family, so long as the absence is not more than one day if the service is conducted in California and not more than three days if the service is conducted outside California.
- (5) For the purpose of jury duty in the manner provided for by law.
- (6) Due to the illness or medical appointment during school hours of a child of whom the pupil is the custodial parent.
- (7) For justifiable personal reasons, including, but not limited to, an appearance in court, attendance at a funeral service, observance of a holiday or ceremony of his or her religion, attendance at religious retreats, attendance at an employment conference, or attendance at an educational conference on the legislative or judicial process offered by a nonprofit organization when the pupil's absence is requested in writing by the parent or guardian and approved by the principal or a

designated representative pursuant to uniform standards established by the governing board.

(8) For the purpose of serving as a member of a precinct board for an election pursuant to Section 12302 of the Elections Code.

(9) For the purpose of spending time with a member of the pupil's immediate family, who is an active duty member of the uniformed services, as defined in Section 49701, and has been called to duty for, is on leave from, or has immediately returned from, deployment to a combat zone or combat support position. Absences granted pursuant to this paragraph shall be granted for a period of time to be determined at the discretion of the superintendent of the school district. (CA Education Code §48205a)

As is shown above, schools have some discretion in whether or not they consider an absence to be excusable. For instance, the term “justifiable personal reasons” in 48205(a).7 may be interpreted in different ways by different schools. Different schools may also have significantly different levels of commitment to verifying absences for reasons such as an out of state funeral (for which students are given three “excused” days).

Because parents in California are mandated by law to send their children to school between the ages of 6 and 18, those who fail to send their students to school face legal action (CA Ed. Code §48200). School districts are obligated by law to inform the parent when their child has been labeled as a truant, to inform the parents of possible consequences of student truancy, and to recommend that a parent attend school with their truant student for a school day (CA Ed. Code §48260.5). Students who are truant can be arrested, fined, or given community service hours (CA Ed. Code §48264; CA Ed. Code §48264.5). Parents of truant students can also face legal action, such as criminal charges and fines (CA Ed. Code §48292; CA Ed. Code §48293). In extreme cases where a truant student is sent to a continuation school for truancy purposes, and the parent still does not

compel the student to attend school, the parent can be charged with a misdemeanor and can face up to 25 days in jail (CA Ed. Code §48454).

While the statutes governing truancy allow for these significant and severe penalties to be imposed on students and their families, student absenteeism is still a major issue in California. With over 31% of students in California public schools classified as truant (CDE, 2014), it is clear that schools' responses to student truancy has been ineffective in deterring millions of students from missing school without a valid excuse multiple times each year. Furthermore, there is little research that has taken a qualitative look at the language of specific discipline policies related to unexcused absences in districts throughout California and compared the policies to important factors such as truancy rates, socioeconomic factors, ethnic factors, and percentage of English language learner students in the school or district.

Connection Between Zero Tolerance and Unexcused Absences

Even with all of our knowledge regarding the consequences of truancy, schools struggle with issues of student truancy and absenteeism. It has been approximated that hundreds of thousands of students have unexcused absences each school day in the United States (Baker, Sigmon, Nugent, & Department of Justice, 2001). In the past few decades, one method of addressing a variety of school disciplinary issues has been the use of "zero tolerance" policies.

History of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools

The history of zero tolerance policies in schools across the United States dates back approximately 30 years, to the Reagan Administration's highly publicized "War on Drugs." Initially, "zero tolerance" was introduced to schools in the United States through

the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act of 1986, and the Safe and Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (Fuentes, 2012; Jones, 2013). Zero tolerance policies were implemented in schools as a reaction to fears about school safety during an era where it was perceived that school violence was on the rise – even as research has shown a decrease in incidents of school violence since the mid-1990s (Fuentes, 2012). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force defines “zero tolerance policy” (as applied to school discipline) in the following way: “the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852).

In recent years, zero tolerance policies have become widespread in schools, and are no longer exclusively focused on violent offenses or drug offences as they were at their inception (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Some schools, for example, have adopted zero tolerance policies for infractions such as “disrespect” or “noncompliance” (Jones, 2013). Even as evidence has shown that alternative methods of dealing with negative student behavior can be more effective than suspension and expulsion, schools continue to rely heavily on suspension and expulsion for dealing with students (Teasly, 2014). This is particularly concerning when considering the fact that “the most frequent disciplinary events with which schools wrestle are minor disruptive behaviors such as tardiness, class absence, disrespect, and noncompliance” (Skibba, 2000, p. 6). While the zero tolerance policies are in place largely to combat violence or drug offences, the reality is that most schools only deal with serious offenses occasionally.

Effects of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools

There is evidence that zero tolerance policies have increased the “school to prison pipeline” (a term used to define the phenomenon of student disciplinary issues in school directly leading to future imprisonment), and that the use of these policies in schools have failed students and can be at odds with what we know about the adolescent developmental process (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gage, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013; Skiba, 2014). There is a clear connection between the fact that minoritized students are disciplined at higher rates in schools than other students, and the fact that minorities make up the largest percentage of the prison population in the United States (Wald & Losen, 2003). Students who are suspended at any given time are more likely to be arrested during the term of their suspension than when they are in school, adding to the likelihood that minoritized students (who are suspended at higher rates) will end up incarcerated (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014).

Because minoritized students are suspended and expelled under zero tolerance policies at a greater frequency than other students, this contributes to the disproportionate number of minorities in the justice system (Fuentes, 2012; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Skiba, 2013). Student suspension rates have doubled since the 1970s (Wald & Losen, 2003), and some believe that these policies have in fact made school campuses more dangerous rather than less dangerous (Aull, 2012). Because there is a lack of evidence that the zero tolerance have made any significant change in school safety, many have called for the removal of these policies from the education system (Aull, 2012; Fuentes, 2012; Jones, 2013; Skiba, 2000).

Zero Tolerance Policies and Unexcused Absences

Zero tolerance policies were initially used in school discipline as a response to drugs and violence, but these policies are now used in many schools to address unexcused absences as well (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Fuentes, 2012; Jones, 2013). Highly punitive zero tolerance policies have not proven to be effective in addressing student truancy, but there are still many school sites that employ these harsh disciplinary methods (Teasley, 2004; Teasly, 2014). One case study examined a zero-tolerance truancy policy at a high school, and found that it resulted in poorer academic performance for the lowest-levels of students on campus (Gage, Sugai, Lunde, & DeLoreto, 2013). As logic would suggest, holding a student out of class (suspension) for frequent unexcused absences creates a situation where the student is even further behind than when the school “intervened” to address the truant behavior (Teasly, 2014). A meta-analysis of school responses to unexcused absences in 9th grade suggested that rather than preventing truancy, disciplinary responses that exclude students from school may actually increase student truancy in the long-term, particularly when groups of students all struggling with truancy issues are placed together in detention or Saturday school (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012).

Some believe that the reason punitive policies have failed to adequately address student truancy is due to the fact that implementing punitive measures on students blames the individual student for his or her truancy (Teasly, 2004). While there is little, if any, research that zero tolerance policies have improved attendance rates, there are examples of alternative programs successfully addressing student truancy on some level. One program in California, for example, involved local law enforcement and support agencies

in getting stakeholders together to discuss truancy issues multiple times before a student was sent to another school. With eleven schools participating, nine schools saw a reduction in unexcused absences and an increase in actual attendance after the first year of implementation (Pobanz, Furlong, Casas & Brown, 1999). The ACT program in Arizona – which involves community resources and action planning – was shown to be effective in lowering truancy rates in schools (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). Another program out of Colorado used a variety of strategic community resources and team members to address student truancy, and also reported dramatic progress in addressing student truancy (Trujillo, 2006).

While there are a variety of success stories that have been reported throughout the nation, there is little research that looks specifically at the policies in place in districts throughout California.

Conceptual Framework

This study used Lipsky's work regarding "street-level bureaucracy" and a conceptual framework developed from the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force's definition of "Zero Tolerance Policies."

Lipsky and Street-Level Bureaucrats

Lipsky used the term "street-level bureaucrat" in his work to refer to the individuals who are tasked with enforcing bureaucratic policies with the actual members of the public on the "ground level." His argument is that "the actions of most public service workers actually constitute the services 'delivered' by government" (1980, p. 3). This would include, for example, a police officer who is tasked with enforcing the laws created by legislators. He argued that these street-level bureaucrats have a great deal of

discretion, and that people will enforce the same policies in different ways, based upon what they feel to be a manageable way of handling their work load and responsibilities. Lipsky also argued that street-level bureaucrats enforce policies in ways with which they are familiar, as they are sometimes unaware of any alternatives they could take: “street-level bureaucrats also affirm their judgments because they depend upon the routines that offer a measure of security and because they are unfamiliar with alternative procedures which might free them to act differently” (Lipsky, 1971, p. 406).

In the case of my study, I explored the ways in which public high school sites in California create unexcused absence and truancy policies in similar and different ways in order to enforce the California Education Code. I also looked specifically at how these high schools use “zero tolerance” in their unexcused absence and truancy policies.

Lipsky’s Framework in Education Research

Lipsky’s street-level bureaucracy has been used occasionally in the research to make sense of the decisions made by teachers and administrators in school systems. Teaching has been described as particularly relevant to Lipsky’s work, as teachers are both the recipient of bureaucratic regulations, and are also the implementers of bureaucratic regulations on the street-level (Sebastião, Campos, Merlini, & Chambino, 2012). Special education teachers specifically have been researched using Lipsky’s framework. They fit the model of a “street-level bureaucrat” well, as they often have intense bureaucratic regulations, limited resources to accomplish their goals, and a great deal of discretion in how to interpret special education laws (Timberlake, 2014). Lipsky’s theory has been used to describe teachers’ individual decision making in allowing special education students various levels of access to general education curriculum (Timberlake,

2014). These types of discretionary decisions have been shown to have both positive and negative effects within school systems, as “gatekeepers” can be flexible in the best interests of students, but can also allow personal biases to result in discriminatory practices (Bareris & Buchowicz, 2015, p. 63).

The role of school psychologists, who are also an integral part of delivering special education services to students with disabilities, has also been examined using Lipsky’s framework. Similar to the research with special education teachers, school psychologists were found to have great discretion in how they chose to implement the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for the individual students on their caseloads (Summers & Semrud-Clikeman, 2000).

Central office administrators in Oakland, California were also studied using Lipsky’s framework. Honig studied the role of central office administrators who were tasked with working with community members and community organizations outside of the school district (2006). Honig found that the traditional street-level bureaucracy pattern was found with these employees who were charged with community outreach and community partnership tasks. Over time, the increasing job demands hindered their efforts, and they developed practices that served to manage their workload, and were not necessarily effective in accomplishing their assigned goals.

Little, if any research has been published using Lipsky’s framework to consider the level of discretion that exists with individual school district policy makers in their interpretation and enforcement of the California Education Code, either with regard to student attendance or any other policies.

Zero Tolerance Policies

According to the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force definition, zero tolerance policies mandate “the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force definition of “zero tolerance” was used as a method of coding the data for my policy analysis. The school handbook policies were coded based upon a zero tolerance rubric that was developed from the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force definition of zero tolerance policies (See Appendix A). This rubric used a weighted system, from 0 to 3, to identify levels of zero tolerance that existed within the school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The rubric also included an “other” category in order to capture unique practices that were taking place in California public high schools. The following five elements of the zero tolerance definition were used in this analysis for the coding process:

1. **Predetermined Consequences** – The consequences of breaking the policy are determined before the policy is broken
2. **Severity** – The consequences of breaking the policy are severe in nature
3. **Punitive Nature** – The consequences of breaking the policy are meant to punish the student who breaks the policy
4. **Disregard for Gravity of Behavior** – The consequences of breaking the policy are put into place regardless of the seriousness of the infraction

5. Disregard for Mitigating Circumstances – The consequences of breaking the policy are put into place without any consideration of why the policy was broken

Using the weighted coding system based upon these five elements of the zero tolerance definition, I was able to analyze the policies using school the following descriptors; truancy rates, students' socioeconomic statuses, English learner population, and minoritized enrollment. I was also able to code and capture data regarding unique practices that were taking place in California public high schools with regard to schools' responses to unexcused absences.

Gaps in the Research

There has been little research that takes a comprehensive look at the variety of school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences throughout public high schools in California. One comprehensive, quantitative study that has been conducted on school disciplinary responses to truancy found that the most common disciplinary actions taken are detention, in school suspension, Saturday school, and out of school suspension (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012). This quantitative study was conducted throughout 193 schools in different parts of the nation. My research looked specifically at the policies regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at public high schools in California.

As has been noted previously – research is available that indicates that zero tolerance policies related to unexcused absences are likely to have more negative than positive effects on students. This literature also shows an emerging body of research on effective alternatives to zero tolerance policies in schools. There is little, if any, research

that has examined the school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences throughout California, or that has examined the extent to which these policies fall into the category of “zero tolerance.”

Each school district has a vast amount of discretion when it comes to determining how students will be punished for their unexcused absences. Lipsky (1980) asserted that the discretion given to low-level bureaucrats (teachers, policemen, government office workers, etc.) puts them in a position of considerable power over their “nonvoluntary clients,” and that the decisions made by these “street-level-bureaucrats” are not necessarily in the best interest of the client. Lipsky also noted the differences between the intention of bureaucratic policies and their actual implementation at the “street” level. In a public high school, for example, administrators have a great deal of discretion in doling out punishment for unexcused absences, as the California Education code provides a broad range of possibilities. While it may not have been the intent of the California Education Code to allow students to be harmed by unexcused absence policies, this research study has revealed a number of extremely severe and punitive measures that some public high schools are taking in response to students’ unexcused absences.

Zero tolerance policies are popular in the current political climate (Aull, 2012), and they may be more easy to enforce for administrators than other types of policies, but that does not make them the best option for students. The goal of my research has been to shed light upon the types of disciplinary responses to unexcused absences in use throughout the state of California. This study has contributed to the conversation surrounding zero tolerance policies, and has also revealed some schools using possible

alternative responses that may “free” other schools to “act differently” (Lipsky, 1971) and create policies that better serve the needs of their students.

Conclusion

If the research shows that zero tolerance policies addressing unexcused absences through exclusion from school (like suspension and/or expulsion) potentially leads to students becoming more truant, and if we know that students who miss school are less likely to perform well academically and are more likely to drop out of school, it is imperative that we consider alternatives to zero tolerance policies. This research has shown that many schools are still relying on policies that have been shown to lead to high school dropout, which in turn has been shown to lead to lower standards of living and even lower life expectancy (Carlson & McChesne, 2015; Olshansky, Antonucci, Berkman, Binstock, Boersch-Supan, Cacioppo, & Rowe, 2012).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify the school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences throughout school districts in California. The research questions for this study were as follows: How are high school policies reflective of California state policies? How does the approach to truancy policy relate to student characteristics such as socio-economic status, English learner status, and ethnicity? How does the policy approach differ depending upon a school's truancy rates? How are local school policies approaching truancy in ways that either reinforce or move away from zero tolerance? The research was framed using Lipsky's work regarding "street-level bureaucracy," and the work of the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force.

This chapter outlines the methodology and data collection that was used in the study. Because this was a document analysis study, the "participants" were the individual school sites and/or districts from which the policies were taken. An explanation of how these sites were selected has been included in this chapter as well.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a "basic" qualitative design. One goal of basic qualitative research can be to seek to better understand a particular group of people and their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2106). Additionally, interpretivist qualitative research uses words as data in order to better understand the experience of a particular group of people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The basic qualitative research design using document analysis was determined to be the best method of bringing a greater level of understanding to school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at high schools in California. One advantage to collecting data from documents is that, unlike with participant interviews or observations, the presence of the researcher does not impact the data in any way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Empirical quantitative research has been published in this area, with recommendations for best practices in school disciplinary responses to truancy (Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2008; Stone & Stone, 2011; Teasly, 2004). Qualitative research was necessary to gain a greater understanding of the policies that exist within individual school settings, and to determine the extent to which the policies are “zero tolerance.”

This study has contributed to the current research by allowing for a greater understanding of the unexcused absence policies at high schools throughout California. This was achieved by gathering data through qualitative methods and identifying trends in the data. There was little qualitative research that had been conducted in this manner with regard to schools’ unexcused absence or truancy policies in California.

Site Selections

This study sought to obtain enough data to get a comprehensive look at school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences throughout California. In order to achieve this goal, the research included many school districts throughout the state. Because there are over 1,000 school districts and high schools in California, it was necessary to strategically select schools/districts for the study.

In selecting school sites, purposeful sampling of six types of high schools was used, in order to maximize any significant contrasts in the zero-tolerance policies that

were used at different types of schools with regard to unexcused absences. Schools with various enrollment sizes were purposefully selected within the six categories, in order to account for any significant differences due to school size. The school categories were as follows: High Ethnic Minoritized (over 60% non-white population), Low Ethnic Minoritized (under 20% non-white population), High Socioeconomic Disadvantaged (over 60% impoverished families), Low Socioeconomic Disadvantaged Districts (less than 20% impoverished families), High English Learner Population (over 30% of students tagged as English Learners), and Low English Learner Population (less than 10% of students tagged as English Learners). The purpose for the changes in percentages was to isolate the top one fifth and lower one fifth of schools in each category in California. These numbers were determined by looking at demographic statistics for students in each county through information publically available through the CDE (California Department of Education, 2016). Through this method, I identified 36 schools for analysis. My goal was to obtain at least 40 public high school handbooks. To get to 40, I decided to take two schools from counties with high average daily attendance, and two schools from counties with low daily attendance. I also decided to include two schools in neighboring districts to my own, taking my total handbook analysis to forty - two handbooks.

In order to make the descriptor data as accurate as possible, I included demographic data that applied to each school, even if it was not why the school was initially selected. For instance, if a school was selected because it was a high ELL population school, I also went back through the data to find out if the school also fit into any of the other categories regarding low SES student enrollment and minoritized

enrollment. If the ELL school descriptor applied to a school, but another descriptor applied as well, I made sure to include every relevant descriptor that applied to each school.

To incorporate the enrollment size of the school into the analysis, schools were also separated into six categories based upon enrollment size. The model I used to group schools was based upon one of the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) models for enrollment-based divisions for playoffs in high school athletics. The CIF enrollment based model I used assigns “Division VI” to schools with less than 200 students, and “Division V” to schools with 201-600 students. The remaining schools are divided evenly by four based upon enrollment, and assigned to Division I, Division II, Division III, or Division IV, accordingly (CIF, 2017). When I looked at the high schools in California, 882 schools fell into Division 1-4 based upon this model. Divided four ways, this left approximately 220 schools in each of the top four divisions. I assigned Division I to the top 221, Division II to the second 221, Division III to the next 220, and Division IV to the remaining 220 schools. Using the most current enrollment data available from California Department of Education, I determined the cutoff points for each Division to be as follows: Division I: 2283 students and above. Division II: 2282-1826 students. Division III: 1825-1296 students. Division 4: 1296-601 students. There were 219 schools that fell into Division 5 (201-600 students), and 151 schools that fell into Division 6 (1-200 students).

There are over 1,000 school districts in California. A purposeful sample in each of the six categories was gathered, in order to purposefully maximize contrast between types of schools. The aim of this study was to add qualitative research regarding school

disciplinary responses to unexcused absences in California. This research included comprehensive public high schools only, excluding private schools, charter schools, and continuation or other alternative school settings. Private schools are not bound by the same California Education Codes as their public school counterparts, and continuation school policies are tailored specifically to address students who have been unsuccessful in comprehensive schools. Many charter schools have an application process, and do not represent a true collection of public school students.

Document Analysis

Document analysis in a qualitative study is a research method that involves reading public or private documents and interpreting their meaning, particularly in order to understand or make meaning out of a phenomenon (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In recent years, document analysis has been used by some researchers as the sole means of gathering data in a study (Bowen, 2009). There are benefits to this method of research, such as the fact that there is no interference from the observer and that there is a stability and “exactness” to the data being collected (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using public records, as was my process in this study, is one of the most common forms of document analysis. Collecting information from documents has been described as “not much different from using interviews or observations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 175). Document analysis can be a very efficient method of collecting research information, particularly when the documents can be gathered from online sources (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Rights of Human Subjects

Throughout the research study, the rights of human subjects were respected. The document analysis in this study ran little risk of compromising the rights of human subjects, due to the nature of document analysis. This document analysis did not involve human subjects. The documents that were analyzed did not contain personal or confidential information about any person. All of the documents were public documents that are mandated by the state to be shared with students and parents at each school district. The documents were obtained by locating them on local school and/or district websites. The demographic information that was used to separate schools into six categories as part of the purposeful selection process was publically available through the California Department of Education.

Data Collection

California Ed. Code requires that districts set forth rules for governing schools and students (CA Ed Code §35291), and that districts inform students of these rules at the beginning of the school year (CA Ed Code §48980). These notices may be provided by mail, in person, or electronically (CA Ed Code §48981). An internet search for “student handbook” showed that many districts kept these rules on their website for ease of access, which was also my experience as a high school administrator.

The document analysis in this study focused on documents that specifically outlined school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at public high schools in California. This was accomplished primarily through reviewing student handbooks for each school. Some schools also had separate sections on their websites for “discipline policies” and “attendance policies.” In these cases, whatever documents that dealt with

unexcused absences at the particular school were used. First, I identified within the appropriate documents the school policies regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. These policies were coded based upon a zero tolerance rubric that was developed from the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force definition of zero tolerance policies (See Appendix A). This rubric used a weighted system, from 0 to 3, to identify levels of zero tolerance that existed within the school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences.

As a secondary method of coding the data, the passages were also coded with the individual, unweighted rubric code. For example, a no-severity policy would have been assigned a “0” using the weighted system, and also a “not present” child code, where a severe policy would have been assigned a “3” in the weighted system and a “central to the policy” child code. This allowed me to look at the data in two ways. First, I was able to compare the relative weights of different codes. Second, I was able to isolate out all of the policies that included a particular rubric code. For example, I was able to look at data only for policies that had a “punitive nature” code of “central to the policy” tagged in their handbook in at least one place.

The rubric also included an “other” category in order to capture unique practices that were taking place in California public high schools. The rubric split the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force definition of “zero tolerance” into five parts, and coded the data from the school handbooks based upon these five parts of the definition. The five components to a zero tolerance policy, as defined by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, are as follows:

1. Predetermined Consequences – The consequences of breaking the policy are determined before the policy is broken
2. Severity – The consequences of breaking the policy are severe in nature
3. Punitive Nature – The consequences of breaking the policy are meant to punish the student who breaks the policy
4. Disregard for Gravity of Behavior – The consequences of breaking the policy are put into place regardless of the seriousness of the infraction
5. Disregard for mitigating Circumstances – The consequences of breaking the policy are put into place without any consideration of why the policy was broken

The document analysis for each selected site began by obtaining an electronic copy of the student handbook and/or attendance policies. The search terms “unexcused,” “cut,” “absence,” and “truancy/truant” began the initial coding process. If it was determined that other terms were relevant to the specific school or district, those terms were added to the search function on an individual basis. For instance, many handbooks referenced “Saturday School” as a consequence for unexcused absences. When this was the case, it was important to gather information regarding what the consequences of “Saturday School” actually meant for students. All sections of each handbook that dealt with unexcused absences or truancy were reviewed and coded.

Using Dedoose, I coded each excerpt from the handbooks that described the policies that were in place to respond to unexcused absences. I attached text from each handbook to the specific rubric elements that were developed, or to the “other” category when something unique stood out that did not fit within the zero tolerance rubric. Using

Dedoose, each handbook was attached to the previously gathered demographic descriptor data from the school.

Data Analysis

The documents were coded using the Zero Tolerance Rubric discussed in previous sections. The data analysis used in this research study is best characterized as a “Directed Approach” to content analysis, where coding categories are pre-determined due to an existing framework (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, I was looking for disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that fit into one or more of the following five categories: Predetermined Consequences, Severity, Punitive Nature, Disregard for Gravity of Behavior, and Disregard for Mitigating Circumstances. I recorded the weighted codes for each section of each handbook dealing with disciplinary responses to unexcused absences based upon the zero tolerance rubric. This analysis was completed through using the qualitative data analysis software program Dedoose. The Dedoose program allowed me to code each section of each handbook that dealt with disciplinary responses to unexcused absences based upon the zero tolerance rubric. Dedoose also allowed me to attach the appropriate school demographic information to each handbook, including high/low minoritized enrollment, high/low ELL enrollment, and high/low student SES enrollment. Because I was also purposefully selecting schools with varying student enrollment numbers, I was also able to analyze the data with the enrollment category descriptor taken into account.

After coding the disciplinary responses to unexcused absences from all of the forty -two handbooks used in this study, I then looked for any trends in the data with regard to the seven previously discussed categories: high ethnic minoritized schools, low

ethnic minoritized schools, high socioeconomic disadvantaged schools, low socioeconomic disadvantaged schools, high English learner population schools, low English learner population schools, and school enrollment size.

Trustworthiness

Document analysis is a less conventional means of qualitative analysis, even as it has been increasing in use over that past few years (Bowen, 2009). Traditional methods of analyzing trustworthiness were reconsidered to fit this type of study. Lincoln and Guba suggested using the terms credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as an alternative to the traditionally positivist terminology of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (1986). Credibility in my study was addressed through the use of “persistent observation,” as my study incorporated numerous school districts that are governed by the California Education Code.

Regarding transferability, my study included “thick descriptive data,” in order that others who wish to consider the applicability of my findings in alternative contexts may be able to do so. It is the goal of this study that the results are able to inform districts in California regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. While the results may also be able to inform districts in other states in a general sense, it is not a goal of this study to do so, particularly because each state has their own separate laws governing their education systems.

My study was dependable in that it could be replicated by any researcher choosing to do so. I exclusively used information that was available to the public, and I sorted the information by demographic data that were also available in the public domain. Furthermore, my study design allows for those in other states to replicate the

study, should they choose to do so. Although the laws in other states are different from those in California, a researcher could still analyze education policy and determine the extent to which disciplinary responses to unexcused absences fit within the zero tolerance framework I have used in this study.

Confirmability or objectivity was present in my study to the extent that could be expected in any qualitative study. All researchers have a worldview, and one of the main perspectives in this study has been my belief, based upon the available research, that zero tolerance policies are harmful to students in the education system who are already struggling to succeed in school. As noted in my literature review, these policies have been shown to have particularly harmful effects on students from marginalized groups (Fuentes, 2012; Monahan, VanDerheim, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Skiba, 2013). While it does not seem to me that this impacted the results of my research, it is important to acknowledge. Whether or not I personally agree with zero tolerance policies did not impact my findings regarding the presence of zero tolerance policies that existed within unexcused absences policies in schools.

One of the advantages of using document analysis as an observation method was that the analysis of the data was fairly straightforward and objective. The document stays the same regardless of who analyzes it and what framework they are using. The use of document analysis enhanced the trustworthiness of this research study.

Chapter Summary

Lipsky's work highlights the importance of understanding the ways in which bureaucratic policies are actually implemented with members of the public. The way a policy is implemented on the "street level" is the real way the bureaucracy impacts the

lives of citizens. This study investigated the varying ways in which California public high schools have chosen to enforce the California Education Code concerning unexcused absences. This research adds to the conversation regarding the problem of unexcused absences in California, the largest public school system in the United States. It is important to consider the ways in which schools with different ethnic, socioeconomic, and/or English learner populations are enforcing the education code. It is also important to consider the role of school size in understanding public high school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. It is particularly relevant to the current conversation to consider the extent to which schools are employing zero tolerance policies, as research has suggested the increase in zero tolerance policies in schools has had disproportionately negative effects on students from marginalized populations (Fuentes, 2012; Monahan, VanDerhei Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Skiba, 2013).

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 4 outlines the results from the data analysis of forty -two public non-charter high schools throughout California. The research questions that guided this study were as follows: How are high school policies reflective of California state policies? How does the approach to truancy policy relate to student characteristics such as socio-economic status, English learner status, and ethnicity? How does the policy approach differ depending upon a school's truancy rates? How are local school policies approaching truancy in ways that either reinforce or move away from zero tolerance?

The findings of this study revealed significant trends in public high school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. These trends show that schools with higher populations are much more likely to implement zero tolerance policies with regard to unexcused absences. Smaller schools are more likely to allow for administration to take mitigating circumstances and the gravity of the attendance behavior into account when administering discipline to students. Additionally, the findings revealed that schools with high populations of minoritized, ELL, impoverished students were less likely to have zero tolerance discipline policies in place with regard to unexcused absences, while schools with low minoritized populations, low ELL populations, and low poverty were more likely to have zero tolerance discipline policies in place for unexcused absences.

The forty -two public high school handbooks that were analyzed were chosen with the intent of highlighting significant differences in schools with contrasting characteristics. After coding each handbook using the five elements of the zero tolerance rubric developed for this study based upon the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force’s definition of “zero tolerance,” I was then able to link the documents and codes to the descriptor information for each school. The coding and linking of descriptor data was all completed using the Dedoose research software online. Each school was tagged based upon their enrollment size, and their status as a high/low poverty school, high/low minoritized school, and/or high/low ELL school. Each school’s truancy rate was also used as a descriptor.

Zero Tolerance Policies and School Enrollment Size

When selecting handbooks for this study, schools along a spectrum of enrollment size were purposefully selected in order to see if school size impacted the level of zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. Schools were split into six “divisions,” based upon an athletic model used by the California Interscholastic Federation to determine playoff divisions. Using this system, came up with the following enrollment divisions to guide my selection process, shown in Table 1:

Table 1. School Enrollment Size by Division.

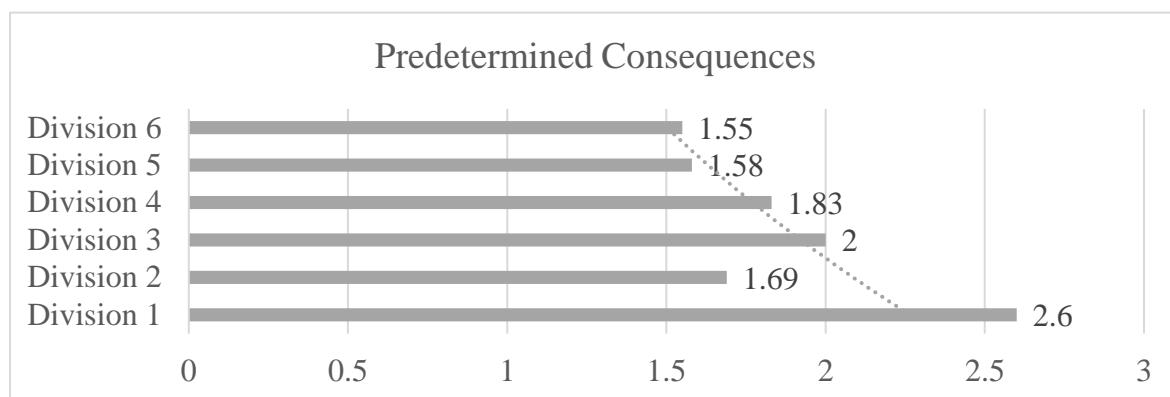
Division	Number of Students Enrolled
1	2283+
2	1826-2282
3	1296-1825
4	601-1296
5	201-600
6	1-200

For each of the six demographic categories used in this study (high/low poverty, high/low ELL, high/low minoritized enrollment), at least one handbook was selected from each of the 6 divisions. Each handbook was coded using a weighted system based upon the zero tolerance rubric that was developed from the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force's definition of "zero tolerance policy" (See Appendix A). A weight of "0" indicated that there were none of the particular zero tolerance elements in the disciplinary policy. A weight of "3" indicated that the zero tolerance element was central to the disciplinary policy. I ran a code by descriptor analysis after coding the handbooks, using the "school size" descriptor and the weighted zero tolerance element codes. The real names of the schools in this study are used throughout Chapter Four and Chapter Five, as all of the information gathered was publically available through the California Department of Education and through individual school and/or district websites.

Predetermined Consequences and School Size

The findings show that as the enrollment size of the school increases, the trend is for the language in the handbooks regarding predetermined consequences to become increasingly more "zero tolerance" in nature, with respect to disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. Table 2 displays the weighted "predetermined consequences" codes, separated by school size, including a trend line:

Table 2. Predetermined Consequences and School Size.



As indicated in the graph, smaller schools (600 or fewer students) tend to employ policies that have fewer predetermined consequences for unexcused absences, where large schools (2283 students and higher) have significantly more stringent predetermined consequences outlined in their student handbooks. Kern Valley, a school in the “Division 5” range, outlines very broad categories of what can happen to students who are truant/absent in two sections of their handbook:

Truancy, Tardiness, and Absence. Truancy, tardiness and other absence from assigned school activities are not cause for suspension; alternatives to suspension should be considered.

In another section of the handbook, the policy states:

Students with excessive absences will be reported to the appropriate authorities. Failure to comply with California school attendance laws can involve parents in court action.

These excerpts are representative of the types of policies that do not employ predetermined consequences. All schools in California are required to report their student trancies, so the statement that students will be reported to the appropriate authorities is a compliance piece, not a disciplinary measure on the part of the school. The statement that “alternatives to suspension should be considered” indicates that consequences will be

given, but that the administration is not bound by predetermined consequences when making a decision.

The largest schools in this research study, those with enrollment over 2283 students, tend to have predetermined consequences that are much more central to the discipline policy, and are therefore more aligned with the philosophy of zero tolerance. Calexico High School, a Division 1 school, has various excerpts from their student handbook that outline the predetermined consequences for students with unexcused absences. These include:

Saturday School will be mandated and assigned for unexcused full day absences.

After every 15 unexcused tardies and/or unexcused period absences, students will receive a disciplinary referral and will be assigned a two hour workshop of “assigned training.” Assigned trainings will be held during Friday Night School and begin at 3:15pm and end at 5:15pm. Assigned trainings focus on specific skills that promote academic and social achievement. Students may be retrieved by a school employee for assigned trainings. After a student has been assigned six trainings, a Student Study Team (SST) meeting will be held. During the SST meeting, a behavior contract will be signed by the student, their parent(s) and all others in attendance.

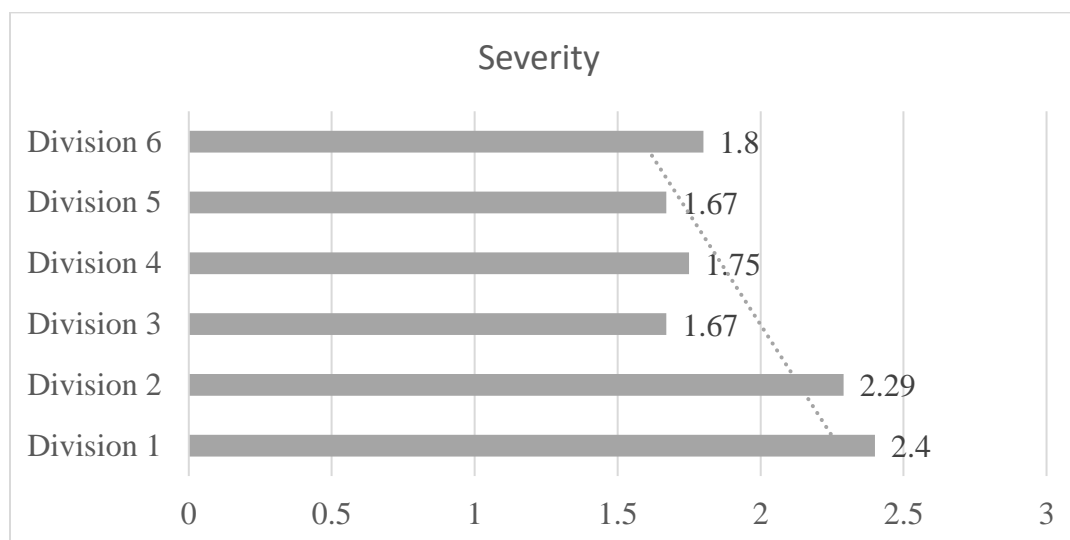
These policies exhibit a more rigidly defined set of consequences for students with unexcused absences, which are commonly found in large schools like Calexico High. Not only are the consequences themselves strictly defined, but also the procedures and times for enforcing the consequences are predetermined.

Severity and School Size

When analyzing the “school size” descriptor with the weighted application of the “severity” code, I found that as schools increase in size, the trend is for the severity of the discipline policies to increase as well. This trend was not as strong as the trend regarding

school size and predetermined consequences, but it is still a noticeable trend. Table 3 below illustrates the weighted codes for severity, separated by school size:

Table 3. Severity and School Size.



These results show a significant gap existing between the top two enrollment sizes and the four smallest enrollment sizes. There is not a consistent increase in the severity of disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. Instead, the findings indicate a separation between enrollment sizes 3-6, which have fairly similarly weighted severity code application, and sizes 1 and 2, which also have similarly weighted code applications. The overall trend is that larger schools have more severe disciplinary measures for unexcused absences.

Baker High, a Division 6 school, uses the following language in their student handbook:

Unexcused absences, excessive excused absences and excessive tardies may all warrant the necessity of sending an attendance notification letter.

The Baker High Handbook also states:

Students with excessive absences will be reported to the appropriate authorities. Failure to comply with California school attendance laws can involve parents in court action.

As was discussed earlier, the statement that students will be “reported to the appropriate authorities” is merely a compliance measure that every district must adhere to, and is not a disciplinary measure decided upon by the school. Making contact with a parent due to unexcused absences is also required by the California Education Code. These notifications are the minimum that a school is required to do for students with three or more unexcused absences, and are not considered severe measures for this study.

The increase in the severity of disciplinary responses to unexcused absences within higher enrollment schools is demonstrated by policies such as the policy from Los Alamitos, a Division 1 school:

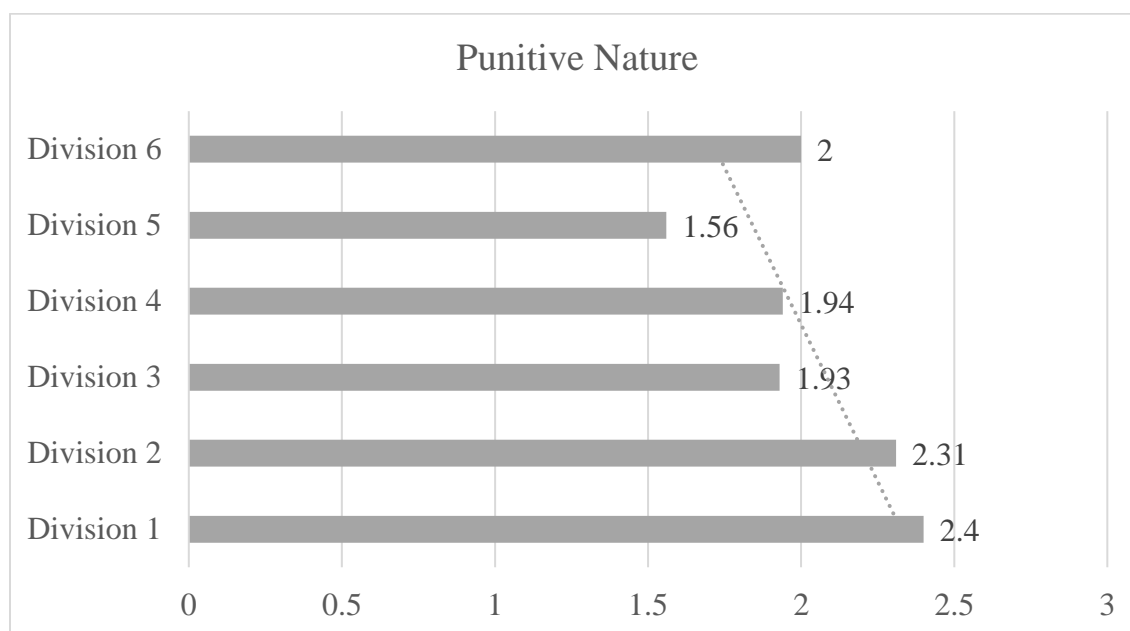
Any truancy during a school day will result in Saturday School...PLEASE KEEP IN MIND: Students with multiple truanies and tardies who do not attend assigned Saturday School will remain on the Loss of Activities List. All students must clear all Saturday Schools resulting from tardies and truanies by attending Saturday School, participating in Campus Beautification in order to participate in senior activities including but not limited to: Parking Passes, Off-Campus Lunch Pass, Campus Dances, Winter Formal, Prom, any contest, nomination, or Graduation Activities.

This excerpt exemplifies the type of disciplinary policy that makes the severity of the consequence a central part of the disciplinary response to unexcused absences. The loss of participation in important events, such as high school graduation, is intended to be a severe consequence in this policy. It is clear that the intent of the policy is to give severe consequences to students who have unexcused absences.

Punitive Nature and School Size

The school size indicator and weighted code of “punitive nature” revealed a similar trend in the data, with an interesting exception in the smallest school division size. The general trend remains consistent with “Predetermined Consequences” and “Severity,” in that schools tend to employ more punitive measures as they increase in size. However, the Division 6 schools in this study were shown to have policies that were more punitive on average than those schools in Divisions 5, 4, or 3. There was also a fair amount of overlap in the coding for “Severity” and the coding for “Punitive Nature,” as it was shown that many schools that employ severe policies are doing so in order to punish students for their failure to attend school. The graph below displays the trends regarding punitive nature and school size:

Table 4. Punitive Nature and School Size.



The schools in this data analysis that were the least likely to employ punitive disciplinary responses to unexcused absences were those in Division 5, which were schools with between 201 and 600 students. As was found with the coding for other categories, some schools use the most minimally punitive consequences as set forth by the California Education Code. For example, Calipatria High School, a Division 5 school in this study, says the following in their student handbook:

Upon his/her third truancy within the same school year, a student may be referred to, and required to attend, an attendance review board, a truancy mediation program established by the district attorney or the probation officer, or a comparable program deemed acceptable by the Superintendent or designee...A habitual truant may be referred to a school attendance review board or to the probation department. (Ed Code §48263).

The school cites the possible actions that can occur based upon California Education Code, but the school does not add additionally punitive measures to their own disciplinary response to unexcused absences.

Extremely punitive policies add elements on top of the state requirements, such as the policy found in the Division 2 school A.B. Miller High School. This school uses a system in conjunction with the city and the district office, where students could be ticketed by campus police officers if they are truant. The policy in the handbook reads:

Municipal ordinance 15-16 of the Fontana City Code is currently in effect. It provides that it will be illegal for juveniles to loiter, wander, or be in or upon the public streets, highways, roads, alleys, parks, playgrounds, public eating establishments, vacant lots, or any unsupervised place between 7:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. on school days unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. The campuses of other schools inside or outside of FUSD during the regular school day are off limits to ABM students. Students may also be cited if on the ABM campus but are truant from their assigned class. Juveniles who violate this ordinance will be given a citation to appear in juvenile court with a parent or guardian. Penalties can include fines and/or community service and suspension of the juvenile's driving privilege.

Another example of a highly punitive policy, taken from the Division 6 school Big Valley High School, removes students from all school sponsored activities until their attendance reaches 95%. The policy reads:

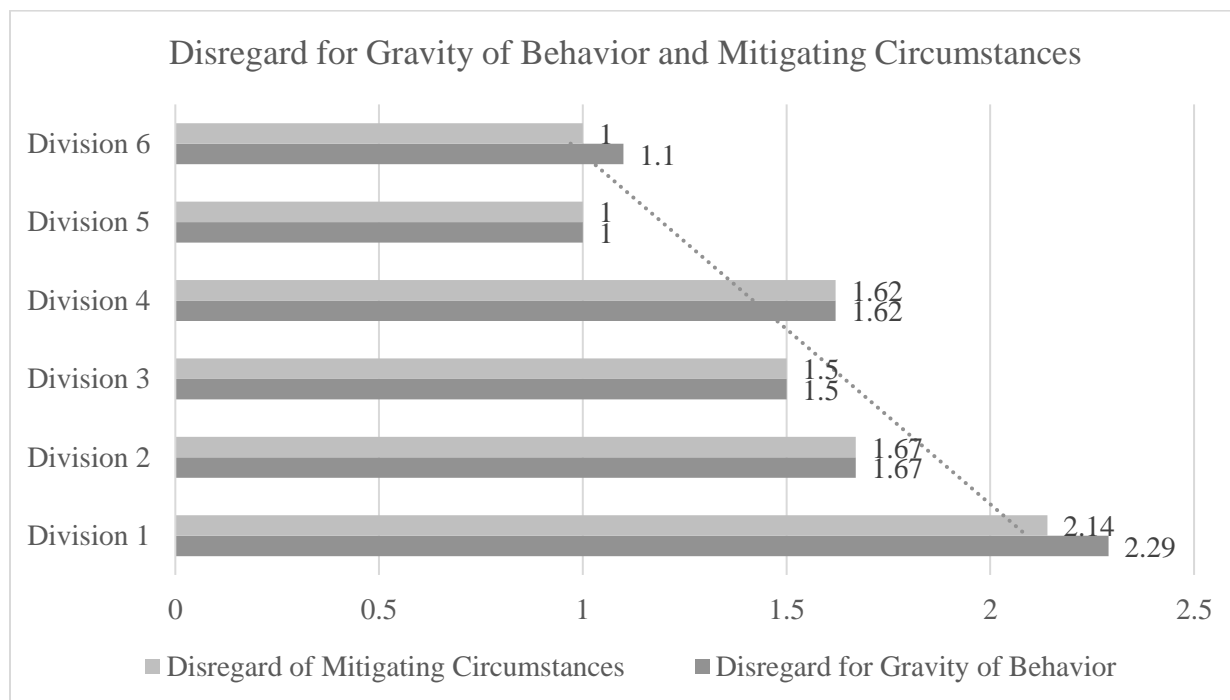
Students on the “No-Go List” are excluded from participating in any school dances, sporting events and other school sponsored extra-curricular activities. Students will be placed on the “NO-GO LIST” for the following reasons... Students placed on an attendance contract (SART) will be placed on the NO-GO LIST until attendance improves to 95%.

In contrast to the policies that notify parents of the possibility of action due to their students’ unexcused absences, policies such as these outline a method for ensuring that students receive tickets and financial penalties for their absences, or are taken away from all of the positive events at the school outside of the legally mandated school day. These types of policies are intentionally punitive.

Disregard for Gravity of Behavior and Mitigating Circumstances and School Size

The findings indicate that there is a significant trend between the enrollment size of a school and their disregard for the gravity of behavior and/or the mitigating circumstances within the schools’ disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The larger a school becomes, the less likely it is that their policy will make room for administrative discretion based upon the gravity of the student behavior or the mitigating circumstances that have led to the unexcused absences. Because the data were so similar within these two categories, and because there existed a strong overlap in the coding for the two categories, they are presented together in Table 5:

Table 5. School Size and Disregard for Gravity of Behavior / Mitigating Circumstances.



During the coding process, one of the steps that was taken was to identify unique ideas that some schools were using regarding disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. With regard to mitigating circumstances and gravity of behavior, some of the excerpts from the smaller schools in the study were very telling. Mendocino High School, a small, Division 6 school, provides an opportunity for students and parents to meet with the principals to appeal the circumstances surrounding the disciplinary actions taken regarding a student's unexcused absences:

Teachers may fail a student who has 5 unexcused absences during a semester from a class. Each teacher who uses the 5-day unexcused absence policy must present students with a written attendance/grading policy within 10 school days of the beginning of a semester. Students who have unusual circumstances for their absences may petition to receive credit. The petition will include the reasons for the absences and the rationale for granting credit. The petition must be filed before the end of the semester under question and must be approved by the principal and teacher of the course.

While the severity and the punitive nature of this policy are somewhat high, with students potentially failing classes after 5 unexcused absences, it is clear within the policy that these are not “zero tolerance” policies, but procedures that allow for administration to modify the disciplinary consequences of the unexcused absences depending upon the administrative discretion. This is a great contrast to the common types of policies found in the higher enrollment schools in the study.

Madera South, a Division 1 school in this study, has a policy with specific language indicating that any four unexcused absences (periods or full days) within a nine-week period will disqualify students for participation in any extracurricular activities.

Their student handbook states:

Unexcused absences will result in loss of school privileges (LOP List) ...A student who is on the Non-Privilege List may not participate in privileged activities. Nine (9) weeks prior to the day of the event the following criteria are considered for a student to be placed on LOP... Absences = Four (4) or more full day or single period unexcused absences in the given time period

Policies such as these that were found in this study do not indicate any room for administration to consider the gravity of the behavior or mitigating circumstances when enacting the discipline for unexcused absences. Manteca High School, a Division 3 school, uses similarly inflexible language in their handbook with regard to the consequences for not serving Saturday School Hours that are assigned as a result of unexcused absences:

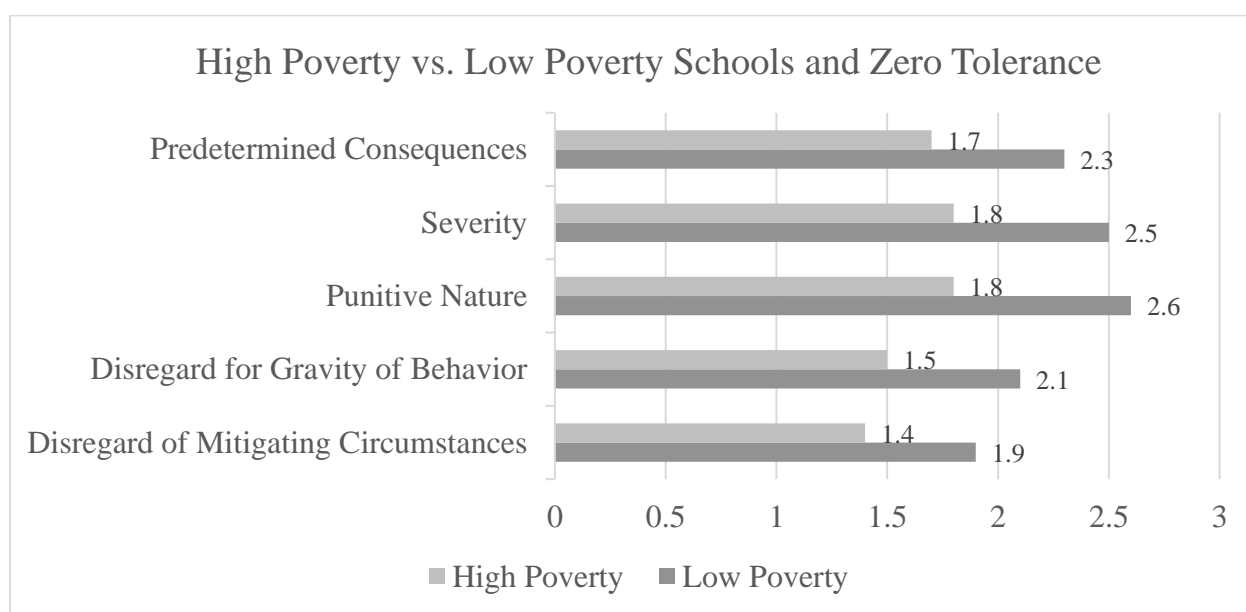
Students who fail to complete all assigned Saturday Schools, detention, and work detail will not be allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony, attend grad night, or prom.

As with the previous excerpt, the Manteca High Student Handbook does not provide language allowing for mitigating circumstances or the gravity of the behavior to be taken into account before these disciplinary measures are taken against students.

Socioeconomic Status and Zero Tolerance Policies for Unexcused Absences

I identified a trend between students' socioeconomic status and their schools' zero tolerance policies with regard to unexcused absences. Table 6 shows the weighted zero tolerance codes for both high poverty and low poverty schools:

Table 6. High Poverty vs. Low Poverty Schools and Zero Tolerance.



I found that the handbooks from schools in more impoverished communities tended to be lower on the zero tolerance policy rubric than schools with fewer students in poverty. Desert Mirage, a school with 98% of students on free/reduced lunch, has the following policy outlined in their handbook:

Absences in category 7d truancy should result in immediate consequences for the student with the specific goal to deter further trancies. Methods which are authorized as means to discourage or prevent a repetition of truancy include, but are not limited to:

- g1. Pupil counseling
- g2. Parent conferences
- g3. Make-up time (detention - before or after school)
- g4. Make-up work (extra homework or special project assignment)
- g5. Screening for possible transfer to opportunity or continuation classes
- g6. Referral to family counseling, mental health or child protective services

This type of disciplinary response to unexcused absences was common in the schools that had high numbers of students on free/reduced lunch. The policy does not commit specifically to any disciplinary action, and the consequences are not very severe (no loss of privileges or suspension out of school). Some of the responses are a bit punitive (extra work/detention), but the focus is largely on providing resources to the student/family in response to the unexcused absences. The policy is written in a way to allow for administrative discretion as necessary, based upon mitigating circumstances and/or gravity of student behavior.

San Lorenzo Valley High School, with 14% of students receiving free/reduced lunch, has a policy more commonly found in schools with fewer students in poverty.

Their policy states:

Attendance/behavior infractions that result in time owed must be cleared or the hours will follow the student into the next school year. Seniors need to have time completed in order to attend senior events and activities

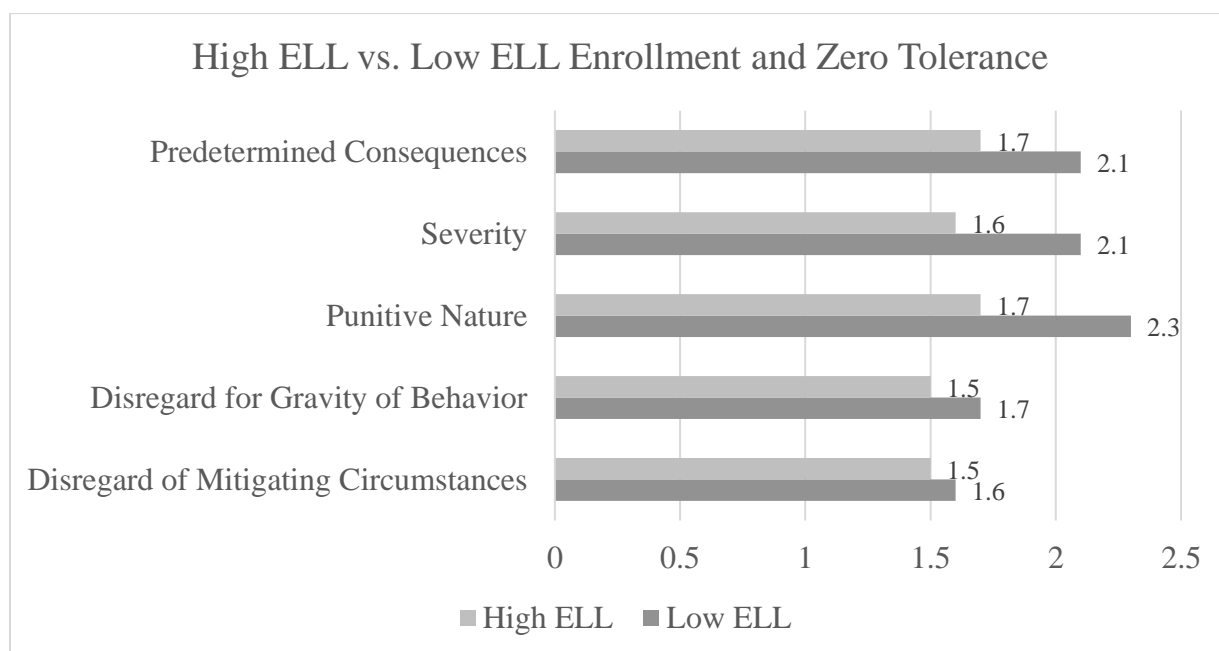
This policy states that students are given “time-owed” when they have an unexcused absence, and that the time-owed carries over from year to year and impacts students’ eligibility to participate in extracurricular events. Under this policy, students who are seniors are still being given consequences for their actions when they were freshmen,

regardless of whether or not their attendance/behavior has improved. This type of policy is much more punitive and severe, has predetermined consequences for every unexcused absence, and leaves administration little room to take mitigating circumstances or the gravity of the students' behavior into account when enforcing discipline policies.

ELL Population and Zero Tolerance Policies for Unexcused Absences

There was also an identifiable trend with respect to ELL populations and zero tolerance discipline policies for unexcused absences, although the trend was not as strong as with school enrollment size or socioeconomic status. Table 7 shows the weighted zero tolerance code averages for schools with high ELL populations, and schools with low ELL populations:

Table 7. High ELL vs. Low ELL Enrollment and Zero Tolerance.



Schools with low numbers of students tagged as English Language Learners tended to have policies in place that were higher on the zero tolerance rubric than schools with high ELL numbers. This trend was stronger for predetermined consequences, severity, and punitive nature. Disregard for Gravity of Behavior and Disregard for Mitigating Circumstances were only slightly higher on the zero tolerance rubric in Low ELL schools.

Nearly 38% of the students at Southwest Senior High are tagged as English Language Learners. The disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at Southwest Senior High are outlined in the handbook under a section titled “cutting class,” where the consequences are listed (see Table 8):

Table 8. Southwest Senior High Consequences for Cutting Class.

Offense/Level 1-2	Offense/Level 2-3	Offense/Level 3-4
Counsel/warn student, call home, notify case manager (SPED)	Call home, Behavior/Attendance contract, notify school Psych. (SPED)	Call home, Behavior/Attendance contract, notify school Psych. (SPED)

The consequences are somewhat predetermined, but they are fairly low-level and focus on getting key people involved rather than on punitive or severe disciplinary measures.

An example of a policy with strong predetermined consequences that also allows for administrative discretion is the policy at Placer High, which outlines disciplinary responses for up to seven unexcused absences (see Table 9):

Table 9. Placer High Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences.

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #1</i></p> <p>A. Classroom penalties as determined by each teacher. B. Assistant Principal office meets with student - Warning issued.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #2</i></p> <p>A. Classroom penalties as determined by each teacher. B. Assistant Principal conference with student - Detention assigned. C. Assistant Principal will contact parent/guardian</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #3</i></p> <p>A. Classroom penalties as determined by each teacher. B. SARB #1 Letter mailed to parents. C. Assistant Principal conference with student - Detention assigned.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #4/Truant</i></p> <p>A. SARB #2 Letter mailed to parents. B. Parent conference with Assistant Principal to discuss support programs.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #5/Habitual Truant</i></p> <p>A. SARB # 3 Letter mailed to parents B. Student is placed on Letter of Agreement. C. Student may receive additional discipline</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #6</i></p> <p>A. SARB #4 Letter mailed to parents B. Student will be referred to SAM hearing with Placer County Judge and Placer County Probation.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cut #7</i></p> <p>A. Student will be cited and referred to SARB/Probation</p>

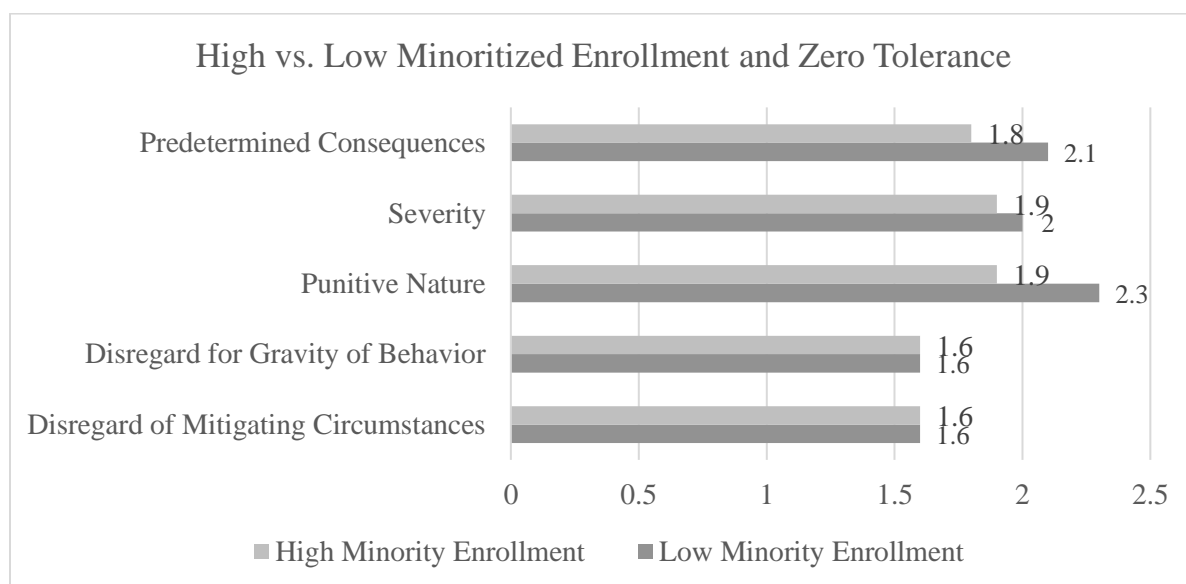
Policies such as the one in place at Placer High have clear, predetermined consequences, but still leave some room for administration to take mitigating circumstances or gravity of behavior into account with phrases like “student may receive additional discipline.” Additional discipline is not guaranteed or predetermined in a policy like this.

Minoritized Population and Zero Tolerance Policies for Unexcused Absences

Less of a trend was found with minoritized population than with school enrollment size, socioeconomic status, or ELL population. The data show a trend for schools with high minoritized populations to have slightly lower-scoring policies on the

zero tolerance rubric with regard to predetermined consequences, severity and punitive nature. No difference was discovered between high/low minoritized populations in disregard for gravity of behavior and disregard for mitigating circumstances, as is seen in the following chart:

Table 10. High vs. Low Minoritized Enrollment and Zero Tolerance



Moreno Valley High School, which has a minoritized enrollment of 95.7%, is an example of a high minoritized enrollment school with unexcused absence policies that are reflective of the previous table. Their handbook includes the following table to guide disciplinary responses to unexcused absences (see table 11):

Table 11. Moreno Valley High School Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences.

1 st Consequence	2 nd Consequence	3 rd Consequence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saturday School • Detention(s) • Administrative Removal from one or more school activities • May contact SRO • Behavior Intervention Room • <u>MAY NOT SUSPEND</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saturday School • Detention(s) • Administrative Removal from one or more school activities • May contact SRO • Behavior Intervention Room • <u>MAY NOT SUSPEND</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saturday School • Detention(s) • Administrative Removal from one or more school activities • May contact SRO • Behavior Intervention Room • <u>MAY NOT SUSPEND</u>

These disciplinary responses to unexcused absences are somewhat predetermined, punitive and severe, but they also allow for administrative discretion in dealing the student. A loss of school activities may be considered much more severe to a student than a detention, for example. While there are predetermined disciplinary responses, the administrator is given a list to choose from as he/she sees fit for the situation. It is also clear in this policy that suspension is not to be used as a disciplinary response to unexcused absences.

Corona del Mar High School is a school with a Caucasian population of over 79%. Their disciplinary responses to unexcused absences are much more closely aligned with the ideals of zero tolerance than Moreno Valley. The comprehensive guide to unexcused absence discipline even used the word “Pre-Determined” in the title. The term “L.O.P.” that is used in the table is defined later in the handbook as follows: “L.O.P. = Loss of Privileges include but not limited to: dances, rallies, field trips, special events, sports, parking passes, AP course registration etc.” The full table of disciplinary responses to unexcused absences at Corona del Mar is found in Table 12:

Table 12. Corona del Mar Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences.

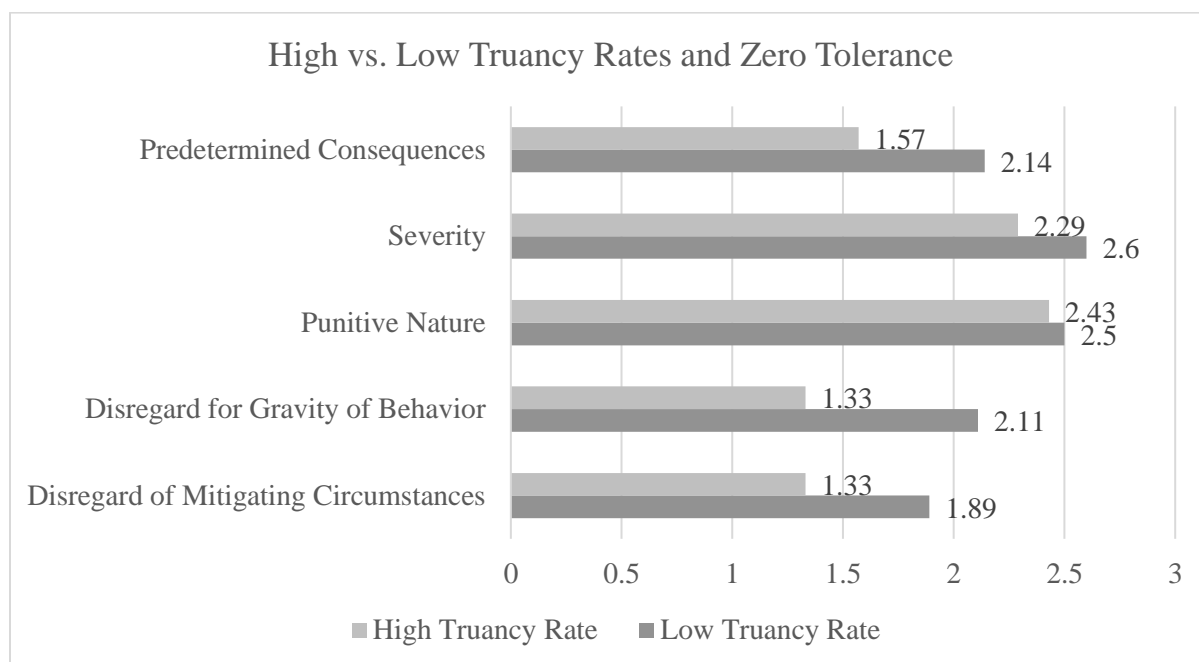
Corona del Mar Unverified Absence Policy & Pre-determined Progressive Interventions			
Cut (Single Period) Total	School Action	Intervention	District Action
1-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 hrs. detention 7:00am – 8:00am or 3:00 – 4:00pm (non-negotiable, consecutive days). • Failure to serve automatically places student on L.O.P. list until completed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detention issued by attendance office. • Student meets with Administration representative. • Intervention entered in Aeries database. 	XXX
11-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 hrs. detention 7:00am – 8:00am or 3:00 – 4:00pm (non-negotiable, consecutive days). • Failure to serve automatically places student on contract L.O.P. list until completed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detention issued by attendance office. • Student meets with counselor, parent contact. • Student meets with Administration representative. • Intervention entered in Aeries database. 	XXX
20-36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 hrs. detention 3:00pm - 4:00pm (non-negotiable, consecutive days). Student <i>will miss</i> after school school-related events such as sports, dance, theatre, cheer etc. • Automatically placed on L.O.P. list for a minimum one-month review period and will miss any school events during that month. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *SARB Letter 1 issued to family @ 36 cuts. • Parents are contacted. • Student may meet with mental health intern to discuss truancy. • Administration meets with student, parents, counselor at the end of the month review period. • Intervention entered in Aeries database. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student/family enters the NMUSD SARB database and system.
37-45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 hrs. detention 3:00pm - 4:00pm (non-negotiable, consecutive days). • Placed on the L.O.P. list for the remainder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SARB Letter 2 issued to family @ 45 cuts. • Administration meets with student, parents, and counselor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student/family information updated in the NMUSD SARB database and system.

In contrast to policies that allow for administrative discretion, the Corona del Mar High School Handbook uses words such as “non-negotiable,” and “automatically” throughout the consequence list. Their handbook also puts the words “will miss” in bold to emphasize the predetermined nature of the consequences. This policy even states, within the “Loss of Privileges” definition, that after a single period unexcused absence students can be prevented from enrolling in Advanced Placement courses or attending school trips. These are particularly severe measures as they are depriving students not only of extracurricular activities, but also of appropriate levels of curriculum and instruction during the school day.

Truancy Rate and Zero Tolerance Policies for Unexcused Absences

A school’s truancy rate is the percentage of students enrolled that are reported as “truant,” based upon the definition provided in the California Education Code. Any student who has three or more unexcused absences (whole day or single period, over 30 minutes), is labeled as “truant.” Table 13 shows the weighted zero tolerance discipline policy codes of schools with high truancy rates, compared with the weighted codes for schools with low truancy rates:

Table 13. High vs. Low Truancy Rates and Zero Tolerance.



The data show that schools with low truancy rates tend to have disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that score higher on the zero tolerance rubric. Schools with high rates of truancy tend to have discipline policies that are less aligned with zero tolerance. This gap is particularly evident with respect to Disregard for Gravity of Behavior, and Disregard for Mitigating Circumstances. In these two categories, schools with low truancy rates are much more likely to have policies in place that do not take mitigating circumstances or gravity of behavior into account when responding to unexcused absences.

Unique Practices

In addition to finding data to inform the research questions, it was also determined that it would be valuable to discuss findings from any of the forty-two student handbooks that were deemed to be “unique” disciplinary responses to unexcused

absences. There were indeed some schools that had unique practices in place. However, they were almost exclusively unique means of punishing students as opposed to unique means of supporting students or unique attempts at moving away from zero tolerance discipline policies.

Friday School. One of the measures taken by Acalanes High School stood out as a practice that was unique to that particular school. Acalanes High uses Friday School as a means to discipline students for their unexcused absences. The parameters of Friday School are set forth in the student handbook:

Friday School is held on Friday after school and can be 1, 2 or 3 hours depending on the infraction. Students may be referred to detention or Friday School for disruptive conduct, forging notes, cutting class, being frequently tardy, or as determined by the administration of Acalanes High School. During detention or Friday School, students should be engaged in homework or reading assignments. Students who are late or disruptive will be excused and will be subject to suspension. Failure to attend detention results in Friday School. Failure to attend Friday School may result in a one-day suspension.

Having Friday School is a unique practice, although it appears to be similar to the practice of Saturday School that is a common practice among public high schools in California. Acalanes also has Saturday School, so this appears to be an additional measure taken by the school to deal with issues such as unexcused absences.

Truancy tickets. The California Education Code allows for parents to be ticketed as one possible consequence for student truancy. A unique practice from my research that emerged were the use of “Truancy Tickets,” where the school and the city give immediate tickets for students who are out of school unexcused. This is different from the California Education Code that outlines how parents might receive a ticket if their students are consistently truant. Inglewood High, one of the few schools in this study to utilize truancy tickets, describes the practice in their handbook:

Students arriving after 8:30 a.m. may be issued truancy tickets in the amount of \$150.00 or more. Daily tardy sweeps will be implemented through the day and again truancy tickets may be issued to students late or out of class

A.B Miller High School, which was referenced as school with strong zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences in Chapter 4, was another school that mentioned ticketing students for truancy. Inglewood High, however, is the only school from this study that has a specific procedure outlined to “sweep” students who are outside of class and issue a financial penalty for their unexcused absences.

Variable credit policy. Tulelake High School was found to be utilizing an approach to unexcused absences with regard to students’ transcript credits. Various schools from this study employ policies that assign a failing grade to students after a specified number of unexcused absences, but Tulelake’s policy is unique in that it removed credits from a student one at a time based upon their number of unexcused absences. Their policy states:

All students enrolled in a regular high school earn units of credit in each class, each semester, with a passing grade and course participation. Credits are based on positive attendance. A student will lose one (1) academic credit on the eighth (8) unexcused absences in a semester, an additional credit on the twelfth (12) unexcused absences, the sixteenth (16) unexcused absences, the twentieth (20) unexcused absences and the twenty-fourth (24) unexcused absence.

Under this system, a student could theoretically earn an “A” in the course, but receive only partial credit for the class depending upon their number of unexcused absences. This variable credit policy was the only one of its kind that was found in the forty -two handbooks used in this study.

High school citizenship grade. Crawford High School uses a citizenship grade in each class as a method of addressing unexcused absences and other student behaviors. Their citizenship grades (E, G, S, N, U) are weighted just like grades in a standard GPA.

Students must have a 2.0 in citizenship (average of an “S”) with no U citizenship grades in order to participate in school activities. Citizenship grades are automatically lowered when students have unexcused absences to a class. One unexcused absence drops students to an “S,” two drops students to an “N,” and three or more drops students to a “U.” Students get new citizenship grades each quarter.

Petition due to unusual circumstances. Mendocino High School has fairly severe and punitive disciplinary consequences for unexcused absences, but they also have a unique system that allows for the teachers and administration to take mitigating circumstances into account when giving students consequences. While teachers are allowed to fail students who have five or more unexcused absences in a semester to their class, they also have a petition system in place for students with unusual circumstances.

Their policy states the following:

Students who have unusual circumstances for their absences may petition to receive credit. The petition will include the reasons for the absences and the rationale for granting credit. The petition must be filed before the end of the semester under question and must be approved by the principal and teacher of the course.

A formal system for students to petition the predetermined, severe, punitive consequences set forth in the student handbook was found to be unique in this study. Mendocino high school only has approximately 180 students, and it appears that their system is much better set up to meet the needs of individual students as opposed to many of the large schools in this study that are focused on overall efficiency, rather than individualized service to students.

Consequences over four years. Two schools in this study- Los Alamitos High School and San Lorenzo High School, have a uniquely punitive measure built into their

disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. At these schools, students are given Saturday School Hours or Time Owed that keep students from participating in school activities, and also follow the students through all four years of high school. For instance, the Los Alamitos handbook states:

PLEASE KEEP IN MIND...

Saturday School hours do not reset at the start of the year or at the beginning of second semester. Saturday School hours accumulate and carry over from semester to semester and year to year.

In these unique policies, students are punished for their actions for up to four years. Because Saturday School Hours and Time Owed are to be cleared at Saturday School or detention, it is even conceivable for students to acquire more Saturday School Hours or Time Owed than they could conceivably serve back in the rest of their high school careers. This would eliminate students from the possibility of ever participating in extracurricular activities even years after their unexcused absences took place.

Lack of Truancy Prevention and Intervention Programs

One of the goals in this study, as discussed in the previous section, was to capture any unique practices with respect to California Public High School disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. There is research to suggest that comprehensive prevention and intervention programs can be highly effective at improving truancy rates in schools (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Pobanz, Furlong, Casas & Brown, 1999; Trujillo, 2006). There were a lack of truancy intervention and prevention programs in my findings. Schools that relied less heavily on zero tolerance policies were more likely to take students' individual circumstances into account when assigning consequences, but they did not have clearly outlined interventions or prevention programs in place of zero tolerance policies.

Chapter Summary

This study revealed significant trends regarding California public high school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. My findings show that as schools increase in enrollment size, they also tend to rely more exclusively on zero tolerance policies with regard to unexcused absences. The smaller schools in my findings were much more likely to allow for the gravity of a student's behavior and a student's mitigating circumstances to be taken into account when administration is determining consequences for unexcused absences.

My findings identified similar trends in the data with regard to minoritized enrollment, ELL enrollment, and low SES enrollment at public high schools in California. Schools with high minoritized enrollment, high ELL enrollment, and high levels of poverty were less likely to employ strict zero tolerance policies in response to students' unexcused absences. California public high schools with low minoritized enrollment, low ELL enrollment, and low levels of poverty were more likely to use disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that scored at high levels on the zero tolerance rubric used in this study.

Finally, my findings revealed that schools using stricter zero tolerance policies do tend to have lower truancy rates than schools that are not using strict zero tolerance policies (although there is no evidence that the unexcused absence policies are responsible for this correlation) My research also found a lack of substantial intervention or prevention programs to address the underlying issues of students dealing with truancy. Even schools with unique responses to unexcused absences mostly focused on innovative ways to punish students for missing school. There is a discussion in Chapter Five on the

ways in which the reliance on zero tolerance policies to combat truancy is likely contributing to the disproportionate levels of discipline given to students in marginalized groups, particularly at schools with strict zero tolerance policies and where the majority of the student body is not part of a marginalized group.

Chapter 5: Analysis of the Data

The California Education Code is extremely broad in its list of possible disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. Consequences range from parents and students being arrested and fined to parents and students receiving a letter in the mail. It is not surprising, then, that this study has uncovered vastly different local disciplinary responses to unexcused absences throughout the state of California. This chapter interprets the trends that emerged from the qualitative coding of the forty-two student handbooks in this study. Particular focus is given to Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy, and its connection with the trends found in this research.

The purpose of this study was to explore how high school sites create local unexcused absence and truancy policies in similar and different ways. The research questions that guided this study were: How are high school policies reflective of California state policies? How does the approach to truancy policy relate to student characteristics such as socio-economic status, English learner status, and ethnicity? How does the policy approach differ depending upon a school's truancy rates? How are local school policies approaching truancy in ways that either reinforce or move away from zero tolerance?

Street-Level Bureaucracy and Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences

The most significant finding from this study came out of the decision to select schools within different enrollment size categories when identifying schools that fell into the six focus categories (high/low poverty, high/low minoritized enrollment, high/low

ELL enrollment). Because schools were tagged with a 1-6 “size” descriptor (using a California Interscholastic Federation playoff model for athletic divisions), I was able to analyze the weighted zero tolerance codes from the handbooks with relation to the size of the school. Table 14 shows the average weighted code values given in each of the five categories from the zero tolerance rubric, broken down by size:

Table 14. Weighted Zero Tolerance Codes by Enrollment Division.

	Division 1	Division 2	Division 3	Division 4	Division 5	Division 6
Predetermined Consequences	2.6	1.69	2	1.83	1.58	1.55
Severity	2.4	2.29	1.67	1.75	1.67	1.8
Punitive Nature	2.4	2.31	1.93	1.94	1.56	2
Disregard for Gravity of Behavior	2.29	1.67	1.5	1.62	1	1.1
Disregard for Mitigating Circumstances	2.14	1.67	1.5	1.62	1	1

The table illustrates a significant finding from the study. As schools grow in enrollment size, they develop disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that increasingly reinforce the ideals of zero tolerance. Particularly when compared with the smallest schools in the study, large schools have more predetermined consequences, punishments that are more severe and punitive, and less flexibility to take the gravity of a students’ behavior or mitigating circumstances into account when administering

discipline to students. Smaller schools – even those with somewhat severe or punitive consequences – tended to have an avenue by which the gravity of a student’s behavior or mitigating circumstances could be taken into account.

Lipsky (1980) discussed the ways those in public service develop habits or policies based upon a shortage of time and resources. He wrote: “Street-level bureaucrats characteristically have very large case loads relative to their responsibilities. The actual numbers are less important than the fact that they typically cannot fulfill their mandated responsibilities with such case loads” (p. 29). Lipsky also stated that street-level bureaucrats are “constantly torn by the demands of service recipients to improve effectiveness and responsiveness and by the demands of citizen groups to improve the efficacy and efficiency of government services” (p. 4). The results of this study show Lipsky’s theory playing out throughout the school system. As schools get bigger and school leaders have increasing amounts of student discipline to process, their disciplinary responses to unexcused absences become more rigid and focused on overall efficiency, rather than individualized service to students. While small schools might have provisions in their handbooks to allow meetings with the principal to discuss mitigating circumstances, large schools have specific, severe consequences to deter unexcused absences, and their handbooks make it clear that no exceptions will be made.

Marginalized Groups and Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences

One of the major focuses of this research study was on the ways in which different student demographics correlated with disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. While the trends were not as strong as with the results from the school enrollment size analysis, the findings show that student demographics do play a role in

schools' disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The findings from this research study show that schools with higher populations of minoritized students, ELL students, and students on free/reduced lunch are less likely to have policies that use zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. Schools that have fewer students in poverty, fewer ELL students, and lower minoritized enrollment are more likely to have zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences.

Previous research explains how minoritized students specifically are suspended and expelled under zero tolerance policies at disproportionate rates, and that this directly contributes to the disproportionate rate of minorities in the juvenile justice system (Fuentes, 2012; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Skiba, 2013). It may seem counterintuitive, then, that the findings from this study show that schools with high minoritized populations, for example, are less likely to employ zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. However, I believe that these results are indicative of a system that continues to disproportionately impact students from marginalized groups. It should be taken into account that schools with "low minoritized enrollment" or "low poverty" still regularly have students in their schools that are minorities or are in poverty. Edison High in Huntington Beach Unified, for example, was the school in this study with the lowest percentage of students on free/reduced lunch at 11.3%. Edison High has approximately 2,530 students enrolled. Based on these numbers, approximately 285 students at Edison High School are considered to be "low income," even as the school is tagged as a "low poverty" school for this study. Additionally, the school has over 900 minority students enrolled on campus, according to the demographic information from the California Department of Education.

Edison High School's disciplinary responses to unexcused absences fell strongly into the "zero tolerance" category on the zero tolerance rubric. Consider the following language from the Edison High School handbook, which describes the consequences if students fail to serve a Saturday School given out for unexcused absences:

Student who fail to serve Saturday School when assigned are subject to:

- 1.) In school suspension (12:15-4:15p.m.)
- 2.) Placement on the ineligibility list. Students lose the privilege of participation in ASB activities, school dances, performances, and competition until all Saturday Schools are completed. Excessive trancies may result in loss of work permits, campus-parking privileges, and/or lunch passes.
- 3.) Seniors who are placed on the ineligibility list and fail to serve discipline will lose senior privileges up to and including participating in Graduation Ceremonies

A policy this aligned with the ideals of zero tolerance may be effective to keep the majority of students from getting unexcused absences, but it could also have significant negative impacts on marginalized students on campus. A student in poverty who accrues one single unexcused absence under a policy like this would have their work permit pulled and lose their opportunity to participate in any extracurricular activities at the school, including the graduation ceremony, if they were unable to come back to school and serve detention time on Saturday. While schools with high populations of students from marginalized groups were found to be less likely to employ zero tolerance disciplinary responses for unexcused absences, students from marginalized groups are still likely being impacted disproportionately by these zero tolerance policies on other campuses.

Tuancy Rates and Zero Tolerance Disciplinary Responses to Unexcused Absences

The final trend identified was regarding public high school truancy rates and disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The data from this study show that schools with lower truancy rates tend to have unexcused absence disciplinary policies that are more in line with the philosophy of zero tolerance than those schools with higher rates of truancy (although there is no evidence that the unexcused absence policies are responsible for this correlation). This trend was particularly evident in the categories of “disregard for gravity of behavior” and “disregard for mitigating circumstances.” It appears that the schools that employ severe, punitive, predetermined consequences for unexcused absences, without regard to the reason behind the absence, tend to have lower rates of truancy. This finding speaks to a system that disproportionately impacts students who need the most support. There are a variety of complex factors that lead to schools with low poverty, low ELL enrollment, and low numbers of minoritized students having low truancy numbers. The fact that these schools also tend to have unexcused absence policies that are more aligned with the philosophy of zero tolerance does not suggest that the zero tolerance policies are the cause of higher attendance at these schools. What is clear is that these zero tolerance policies make it very difficult for students who need extra support with their school attendance to be successful. Once again, it is apparent that the system is set up to punish students who need the most help.

Lack of Truancy Prevention and Intervention Programs

One major finding from the research regarding absenteeism and truancy (as discussed in Chapter 2) is that truancy prevention and intervention programs have been proven successful in a number of schools (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Pobanz,

Furlong, Casas & Brown, 1999; Trujillo, 2006). One program, for example, brought law enforcement, support agencies and stakeholders together discuss student truancy before students were sent to another school. Nine of eleven schools showed truancy improvement in one year while implementing this program (Pobanz, Furlong, Casas & Brown, 1999). While the smaller schools in this study should be commended for moving away from zero tolerance policies, there were still few examples in any of the schools of proactive prevention and/or intervention programs in place with regard to unexcused absences. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why schools with less reliance on zero tolerance policies were shown to have higher rates of truancy. Most of these schools are not employing severe, punitive consequences, but they also do not appear to be systematically addressing the issue of student truancy. While it is easier from a bureaucratic standpoint to issue harsh consequences to try to prevent students from missing school, this does nothing to address the underlying issues behind student truancy and it punishes students who need the most help in attending school regularly.

Unique Policy Analysis

It would have been ideal to find examples of schools that were dealing with unexcused absences in uniquely positive ways, and that were thinking outside the box to help students deal with the underlying issues associated with absenteeism and truancy. Unfortunately, the research mostly revealed creative ways to continue punishing students for having unexcused absences. The one exception was the petition system, as referenced with Mendocino High School, where there was an official policy in place to allow students to present unusual circumstances to get the unexcused absence discipline consequence waived. While Mendocino still had policies that were somewhat

predetermined, severe, and punitive in place to respond to unexcused absences, the petition system they have put into place is an example of a school trying to take the needs of individual students into account. It is unfortunate that more schools in this study did not have examples of student-centered policies in place.

Returning to the Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were: How are high school policies reflective of California state policies? How does the approach to truancy policy relate to student characteristics such as socio-economic status, English learner status, and ethnicity? How does the policy approach differ depending upon a school's truancy rates? How are local school policies approaching truancy in ways that either reinforce or move away from zero tolerance? My policy analysis of forty -two California public high school handbooks has informed the research questions, and has revealed additional areas about which future research should seek to inform.

How are high school policies reflective of California state policies? The California Education Code gives enormous discretion to California schools with regard to implementing disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. The Education Code allows for discipline to be as light as sending notification letters to students and families, and as harsh as school cooperation with police to cite and even arrest parents whose children have repeated unexcused absences. The findings from my research show that unexcused absence policies throughout California public high schools vary widely in their severity, just as the Education Code varies widely in the possible consequences allowed for students' unexcused absences. This study uncovered schools that are running tardy sweeps with local law enforcement to ensure that students are fined for not going to class.

This study also uncovered schools that do not add additional consequences for unexcused absences – these schools rely on sending letters home to truant students’ parents and reporting truancy to school attendance review boards (both are mandated by the California Education Code). In California, each of these schools are complying with the California Education Code, although the penalties for unexcused absences are on opposite ends of the spectrum with regard to severity. This is a reflection of the amount of discretion given to local school and districts within the California Education Code in responding to students’ unexcused absences.

How does the approach to truancy policy relate to student characteristics such as socio-economic status, English learner status, and ethnicity? My findings revealed that there is a correlation between these student characteristics and the types of disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that are employed at California public high schools. Schools that have lower rates of poverty, lower English learner enrollment, and lower minoritized student enrollment tend to employ policies that are more aligned with the philosophy of zero tolerance. We know from the research that schools disproportionately discipline students from marginalized backgrounds. The fact that schools with mostly students from “majority” groups have stricter zero tolerance style disciplinary responses to unexcused absences raises some questions. How are students from marginalized groups at these largely “majority” schools being impacted by the use of strict zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences? What are the rates of suspension for minoritized, ELL, and low SES students at these schools compared with other students at these schools? What is the graduation rate of minoritized, ELL, and low SES students at these schools as compared with other students?

In addition to the questions above, my findings also raise questions regarding truancy prevention and intervention programs, particularly at schools that are not using zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. While the move away from zero tolerance should be regarded as positive, what are the ways in which schools without zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences are addressing the underlying issues of students with unexcused absences? What examples of effective truancy intervention and prevention programs exist at public high schools in California? Research that informs these questions will further help us to understand viable alternatives to zero tolerance policies that are effective at combating truancy.

How does the policy approach differ depending upon a school's truancy rates? Truancy rates at public high schools in California, based upon the findings from my research, tend to be lower at schools where strict zero tolerance policies are employed. There is no evidence that the strict zero tolerance policies themselves are the cause of improved attendance, and these policies do nothing to help students who are struggling the most with their attendance. A student from a low-income family who is given a truancy ticket for missing class will now be in a worse situation than they were before the school intervened. A question that is raised from these findings is: What is the impact of financial penalties for truancy on students and families dealing with poverty? It would be informative to the issue to know the impacts of these harsh penalties on students who are already in difficult living conditions.

How are local school policies approaching truancy in ways that either reinforce or move away from zero tolerance? Many schools from this study were found to have elements of zero tolerance within their disciplinary responses to unexcused

absences. Very few schools had policies with no predetermined consequences, no severity, no punitive nature, and complete administrative discretion based upon the gravity of the behavior and the mitigating circumstances. However, there was a vast range of consequences that varied greatly in their full alignment with the philosophy of zero tolerance found within the forty -two handbooks used for this study. As discussed earlier, the most significant trend was for larger schools to rely more heavily on zero tolerance style disciplinary responses to unexcused absences than small schools.

The fact that school size was so closely correlated with use of zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences relates back to the theory of “street-level bureaucracy” proposed by Lipsky. Larger schools find ways to manage their caseloads in the face of limited time and resources, and one of the ways to make caseloads easier to manage is to have rigidly defined consequences for student behavior, regardless of outside circumstances. Lipsky’s theory proved to be useful in understanding California public high school disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. A question that has been raised based upon this finding is: what are the other systems within California public high schools that can be understood and interpreted through the theory of “street-level bureaucracy?” Another way of asking this question would be: What systems exist within California public high schools that are designed to serve the needs of adults and their workloads, rather than the needs of the students? Unexcused absence policies represent only a small fraction of the policies that exist within a school. It would be informative to the conversation to consider the many different systems within schools that can be interpreted through Lipsky’s theory of “street-level bureaucracy.”

Recommendations for Future Research

This study uncovered the significant trend that public high schools with higher enrollment sizes were more likely to employ zero tolerance style policies in response to unexcused absences. This trend was realized due to the fact that different sizes of public high schools were purposefully selected in order to ensure that different types of schools were represented from each of the six focus demographic descriptors. Because school enrollment size turned out to be significant in this study, it would make sense to also look at geographical locations in relation to disciplinary responses to unexcused absences. It would further inform the research to see if this factor is as significant as school size turned out to be in this study.

Additionally, future research into the suspension data for schools with zero tolerance disciplinary policies would further inform the issue of student truancy. My research found that schools with disciplinary responses to unexcused absences that were aligned to the philosophy of zero tolerance did in fact have lower truancy rates. This does not mean, however, that all students are being served well by those policies. It also does not mean that the unexcused absence policies at these schools are causing the higher attendance rates. What we do know is that these schools are delivering severe, punitive punishments to those students that are unable to comply with the zero tolerance attendance policies. A research study that examines specific suspension data and graduation data, broken down by sub group and suspension offense, would help to further inform the issue. It would be useful to know whether or not schools with zero tolerance discipline policies and low truancy rates are suspending students at high rates, or disproportionately suspending students from marginalized groups for these attendance

related offenses. It would also be informative to the issue to find out the dropout rate of students from these schools who have received the severe, punitive consequences of the zero tolerance discipline policies.

Research questions that could be used for future research, based upon the findings from this research study, are as follows: How are students from marginalized groups who are enrolled in schools where most students are in the “majority” being impacted by the use of strict zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences? What are the rates of suspension for minoritized, ELL, and low SES students at these schools compared with other students at these schools? What is the graduation rate of minoritized, ELL, and low SES students at these schools as compared with other students? What are the ways in which schools without zero tolerance disciplinary responses to unexcused absences are addressing the underlying issues of students with unexcused absences? What examples of effective truancy intervention and prevention programs exist at public high schools in California? What is the impact of financial penalties for truancy on students and families dealing with poverty? What systems exist within California public high schools that are designed to serve the needs of adults and their workloads, rather than the needs of the students?

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study suggest that schools should consider whether or not their discipline policies, particularly concerning unexcused absences, are in place to serve the adults in power, or if they are in place to support students who are struggling to succeed. The fact that schools tend to use more severe, predetermined, punitive consequences and have less ability to consider mitigating circumstances as school size

increases shows that school systems are often putting policies into place with the purpose of managing their caseloads rather than addressing students' needs. Zero tolerance policies are not effective at meeting the needs of students who are struggling.

Research has shown that strong, proactive truancy intervention programs can be successful at helping students who are dealing with truancy, but this study has revealed that these programs are rare in public high schools throughout California. Even schools that do not rely on zero tolerance discipline policies are unlikely to have programs to address the underlying issues of student truancy. Furthermore, many schools currently have zero tolerance discipline policies in place that will be the most detrimental to the students who need the most help. Proactive prevention and interventions programs should be utilized at public high schools, rather than harsh punitive measures that put students who need the most help even further at a disadvantage in school.

Chapter Summary

Disciplinary responses to unexcused absences throughout the state of California vary widely, particularly with regard to their alignment with the philosophy of zero tolerance. The strongest trend that was revealed in this research study has been that as school enrollment increases, schools tend to become more reliant on the types of policies outlined in Lipsky's "street-level bureaucracy." As schools get bigger and school leaders have increasing amounts of student discipline to process, their disciplinary responses to unexcused absences become more rigid and focused on overall efficiency, rather than individualized service to students.

The findings also suggest that schools with lower minoritized populations, lower ELL populations, and lower numbers of impoverished students have policies that are

more aligned with zero tolerance. We know that students from marginalized groups are more likely to receive school discipline, so it is likely that the students from marginalized groups in these schools are at greater risk of receiving the severe consequences from the zero tolerance policies. If the public school system is going to meet the needs of the students who need the most support, we need to find proactive alternatives to zero tolerance policies, especially when we are responding to students' unexcused absences.

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APPENDIX A: ZERO TOLERANCE RUBRIC

	Not Present 0	Minimally Present 1	Somewhat Present 2	Central to the Policy 3
Predetermined Consequences	There are no predetermined consequences in the policy	There are predetermined consequences in the policy, but the policy allows for complete discretion when administration is determining disciplinary action	There are predetermined consequences in the policy, and the policy allows for some, but not complete, discretion when administration is determining disciplinary action	The predetermined consequences are central and pervasive in the policy. There is no allowance for discretion when administration is determining disciplinary action
Severity	The policy does not include severe consequences	There are some consequences, but they are generally not severe	There are some consequences in the policy that are somewhat severe	There is a high level of severity in the consequences
Punitive Nature	There are no punitive measures mentioned in the policy	Some components of the policy could be interpreted as minimally punitive	At least some components of the policy are somewhat punitive	The policy is designed with the specific purpose of being punitive in nature

<p>Disregard for Gravity of Behavior</p>	<p>The policy indicates that administration has complete discretion to consider the seriousness of the offense when determining disciplinary action</p>	<p>The policy allows for administration to take the seriousness of the unexcused absence into account</p>	<p>The policy allows for minimal consideration to be made regarding the seriousness of the unexcused absence when administration is determining disciplinary action</p>	<p>The policy does not allow for any consideration to be made as to the seriousness of the unexcused absence when administration is determining disciplinary action</p>
<p>Disregard of Mitigating Circumstances</p>	<p>The policy indicates that administration has complete discretion to take mitigating circumstances into account when determining disciplinary action</p>	<p>The policy allows for a great deal of consideration to be made as to why the student had an unexcused absence when administration is determining disciplinary action</p>	<p>The policy allows for some consideration to be made as to why the student had an unexcused absence when administration is determining disciplinary action</p>	<p>The consequences of the policy are put into place regardless of mitigating circumstances</p>
<p>Other (to be used to gather significant data regarding unexcused absence policies that does not fit into the rubric)</p>				