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My career mission pertains to developing programs and conducting research that promote linkages among educational, health, and family systems and the prevention of health risk. Over the past several years, I developed particular expertise in working across systems of care in collaboration with interdisciplinary teams to promote the health of children. Many of the obstacles that impact children's positive development can be offset through universal and selective prevention efforts, implemented early in the pre-school and elementary school years. The lines of research I am working to develop involve health-promoting efforts to inoculate children from adverse life events. These lines of research involve efforts to link various systems in which children function (i.e., the family, the school, the hospital, and the community) to support their positive development in a comprehensive manner. Specifically, my main lines of research include conducting outcome evaluations of school-based health promotion programs (i.e., nutrition, literacy and attendance promotion).

In the area of nutrition education, my research interests have focused on the ability of these types of programs to impact children's and parents' nutrition knowledge and dietary behaviors. In 1998, I received grant funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education to implement and evaluate a nutrition education program in an elementary school in West Philadelphia. The outcome evaluation was conducted with children in kindergarten through 5th grades. This year, I extended this line of research, by focusing more closely on the impact of a program aimed at targeting children's dietary behaviors during school lunch. Results demonstrated the program was effective in improving children's knowledge and eating behaviors. Additionally, the program was socially valid and implemented with acceptable integrity. This work demonstrates how school psychologists can assume the role of a health promotion specialist by working across settings and involving multiple stakeholders to impact the positive development of children.

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In addition to the line of research related to nutrition education, I am a member of a research team investigating efforts to promote literacy development in preschool and elementary school children. The promotion of literacy is another way to protect children from adverse life events (in this case, school failure, dropout, and the myriad problems associated with not completing high school). The Reading Partners Program is a universal prevention program for preschoolers and a selective prevention program for kindergarten students. This program aims to promote the resilience of children at risk for the significant problems associated with reading difficulties, while simultaneously (1) providing job training to paraprofessionals, (2) promoting attachment relationships between children at risk for school difficulties and a supportive, caring adult in the school, and (3) encouraging parental involvement in literacy at home. Currently, we are investigating the impact of the Reading Partners Program on variables associated with emergent literacy, paraprofessional self-efficacy, teacher-parent relationships, and children's reading self-efficacy and feelings toward school.

Through my involvement with Reading Partners, I became aware of significant attendance problems among a number of the children enrolled in the program. In many instances, these children were recommended for retention due to the large number of missed school days and academic difficulties. In the next 3-5 years, I am interested in adapting the community partner model, central to the Reading Partners Program, to target attendance promotion. The next step in my research agenda will focus on examining factors that contribute to attendance problems among young children in urban school districts. An understanding of these factors will contribute to the ultimate goal of developing, implementing and evaluating an attendance promotion program, which would involve training paraprofessionals from the community and pairing them with parents of children in

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kindergarten and first grades with significant attendance problems. The community partners would work with the parents to identify obstacles preventing children's consistent attendance and problem solving with the parents and supporting them to help their young children get to school. In addition to promoting attendance, the community partners would form caring, trusting relationships with the children, improving the child's attachment to an adult at school. These next steps are described in further detail in the attached research proposal.

Abstract

Young children are absent from school for numerous reasons including: poor health, psychological difficulties (e.g., school refusal), and family factors. Attendance promotion is an important area for study because attendance has been shown to be positively associated with school performance (Hangley & McClanahan, 2002). A key strategy for promoting school attendance is involving parents actively in the education of their children (Collins, Moles, & Cross, 1982). One way to strengthen the connection between families and schools is to enlist the support of a paraprofessional community partner, trained in school-home collaboration, who can serve as a liaison between the two systems (Dowrick, Power, Manz, Ginsburg-Block, Leff, & Kim-Rupnow, 2001). The purpose of the current research proposal is to develop a partnership-based attendance promotion program for young children at risk for high rates of absenteeism. A paraprofessional community member, trained as a home-school liaison, will help improve the continuity between families and schools by helping to develop and implement individualized family-school involvement plans (IF-SIP) for children with attendance difficulties. These plans will serve to identify and reduce barriers that make it difficult for young children to attend school consistently and to reinforce children's improved attendance. Kindergarten and first grade students, with high rates of absenteeism will be identified for participation in this study. The goals of this research project are as follows: (1) to understand factors contributing to attendance problems among young children in urban school districts using a population-focused approach; (2) to fully incorporate community partners into the research team to serve as home-school liaisons to promote child attendance; (3) to develop and pilot test systematic procedures for the IF-SIPs using conjoint behavioral consultation procedures.

Promoting Attendance Among At-Risk Kindergarten and First Grade Students

Young children are absent from school for numerous reasons including: poor health, psychological difficulties (e.g., school refusal), and family factors. Attendance promotion is an important area for study because attendance has been shown to be positively associated with school performance (Hangley & McClanahan, 2002). A key strategy to promoting school attendance is involving parents actively in the education of their children (Collins, Moles, & Cross, 1982). Parent involvement measured at grades 1 and 6 has been found to be among the strongest predictors of high school completion at age 19 (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000). A potential barrier to family involvement, particularly in urban schools is the discontinuity between the culture of the school and the culture of the families in the community (Comer, 1990). When the cultures are discontinuous, it is especially challenging to establish and maintain positive home-school relationships. One way to strengthen the connection between families and schools is to enlist the support of a paraprofessional community partner, trained in school-home collaboration, who can serve as a liaison between the two systems (Dowrick, Power, Manz, Ginsburg-Block, Leff, & Kim-Rupnow, 2001).

Issues to be addressed

The purpose of the current research proposal is to develop a partnership-based attendance promotion program for young children at risk for school difficulties. A paraprofessional community member, trained as a home-school liaison, will help improve the continuity between families and schools by helping to develop and implement individualized family-school involvement plans (IF-SIP) for children with attendance difficulties. These plans will serve to identify and reduce barriers that make it difficult for young children to attend school consistently and to reinforce children's improved attendance. Kindergarten and first grade students, with high rates of absenteeism will be identified for participation in this study.

The proposed research study will be grounded in participatory action research methodology (Nastasi, 2001). Partnerships among university-based researchers from

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Northeastern University's School Psychology Program and The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's (CHOP) Community & Schools Program, paraprofessional community members, parents, and school personnel from Boston and Philadelphia would be established for the purpose of developing, implementing and evaluating the attendance program.

Advantages and Challenges of A Multisite Study Using a Partnership Model

The advantages of using a partnership model include improved ecological validity and program sustainability. Challenges of this approach include the time consuming process of developing trusting, collaborative, non-hierarchical relationships across systems, and establishing a consensus regarding acceptable and feasible research procedures. A major advantage of using multiple sites in different urban centers is to increase the potential for study findings to be generalizable. Ultimately, it is hoped that the proposed study will lay the groundwork for a larger randomized, control-group study; therefore, the involvement of multiple schools in two large, urban school districts would provide the requisite number of participants for future study. A foreseeable challenge in conducting this multisite study is the need for on-going communication across the sites to ensure systematic procedures are followed consistently. Weekly telephone conferences between the site coordinators and research assistants would help promote on-going communication.

Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: To understand factors contributing to attendance problems among young children in urban school districts using a population-focused approach to research and program development (Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Bulotsky, in press).

Objective 1: To review school records (i.e., grades, reading levels, and discipline referrals) of kindergarten and first grade students, to identify children with significant attendance problems in selected schools in Philadelphia and Boston. Significant

attendance problems will be defined as absences equaling or exceeding 10 school days per marking period for two or more marking periods.

Objective 2: To conduct focused interviews with a subset of parents (N = 20; 10 in Philadelphia, 10 in Boston) whose first grade children had significant attendance problems to understand factors underlying difficulties with consistent attendance. Additionally, school nurses, social workers and teachers (N = 15) will be interviewed to understand the multiple layers of factors related to the attendance problems.

Objective 3: To use the focus group interview data to develop a questionnaire to assess reasons why children are absent from school. Questionnaire development will be conducted in partnership with parents and school personnel to promote the ecological validity of the measure.

Objective 4: To field test the questionnaires, which will be approximately 15-20 items in length with a small sample of teachers (N = 20) and parents (N = 20) and to conduct item analyses.

Objective 5: To administer the teacher and parent versions of the absenteeism questionnaire to 120 students' parents and teachers in multiple schools in Philadelphia and Boston to validate the measure and to conduct an exploratory factor analysis and examine reliability.

Goal 2: To fully incorporate four community partners (two at each site) into the research team to serve as home-school liaisons to promote child attendance.

Objective 1: To help community partners understand factors that promote positive home-school relationships (e.g., trust, communication, beliefs about education), and the importance of developing relationships with families whose young children are consistently absent.

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Objective 2: To train community partners in interviewing and active-listening techniques and note taking to improve their communication skills in their liaison role.

Goal 3: To collaborate with the research team to develop and pilot test systematic procedures for the IF-SIP.

Objective 1: To field test a model adapted from conjoint behavioral consultation (CBC) procedures with 2 children (Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Bergan, 1996). Using data from the problem identification and problem analysis interviews, community partners, a member of the university team, and the child's caregiver will develop the IF-SIP. The community partner will work with the child, his/her caregivers, and the classroom teacher to support the plan and to reinforce consistent attendance.

Objective 2: To develop a manual describing specific IF-SIP procedures to promote replicability.

Objective 3: To pilot test the IF-SIP using a multiple baseline design across 3 participants at each site (N = 6). Procedures outlined in the manual will be followed across the two sites.

Projected One Year Budget

- Stipends for 4 community partners (2/site; \$10.00/hour; 5 hours/week) \$
18,000.00
- Stipends for families who consent to the initial interview (\$25.00/family x 20 families)
\$500.00
- Small thank you for questionnaire completion (\$2.00/participant; 160 participants)
\$320.00
- Supplies (food for meetings, copying, mileage)
\$1,000.00

In-kind contributions will be provided by Northeastern University and CHOP to support research assistant time.

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