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CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM: EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES THAT  
IMPACT STUDENTS' ATTENDANCE IN NORTHERN MAINE RURAL SCHOOLS

By

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BS (University of Maine at Presque Isle) 1992  
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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of  
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies  
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## Dedication

*for Heather, Noah, Ainsley, and Grant*

*“Families are the compass that guides us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and  
our comfort when we occasionally falter.” - Brad Henry*

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## **Abstract**

Educational success relies heavily upon consistent school attendance (Rogers & Feller, 2018). In Maine, a student is identified as chronically absent when 10% or more of the days enrolled in school are missed due to excused or unexcused absences (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Chronic absenteeism impacts millions of students across America each year. National data identified that approximately five to seven and a half million school-aged students miss a month or more of school each year (Chang & Davis, 2015). This qualitative interpretative phenomenological study (IPA) was designed to fill some of the gaps in the literature on chronic absenteeism where much of the existing research is quantitative in nature and conducted in urban settings. This study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the lived experiences of seven parents and guardians from a rural Northern Maine school to identify potential challenges and obstacles that impact student attendance. Using the theoretical framework, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems. The seven key findings were identified from an analysis of the interview transcripts included: 1) the challenges of living in Northern Maine, 2) family challenges, 3) adverse childhood experiences, 4) challenges at school, 5) the obstacles created by illness, 6) the impact of COVID-19, and 7) obstacles created by attendance misconceptions. These findings revealed several consistent obstacles and challenges perceived by the parents and guardians which impacted their children's school attendance, but each experience described was found to be unique in terms of how their children reacted to the stress created by the study's findings.

Recommendations for future research include learning about students' unique lived experiences through the perceptions of the students themselves as well as further research on many of the obstacles and challenges identified in this study.

*Keywords: chronic absenteeism, truancy, rural, school attendance, Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), and adverse childhood experiences (ACES)*

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Chronic absenteeism within American schools has negatively impacted millions of students and their educational development to the point that policymakers have described this phenomenon as the “Absenteeism Crisis” (Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018). According to Chang and Davis (2015), national data illustrates that approximately five to seven and a half million school-aged students miss a month or more of school each year. Additional federal research data has identified that approximately one in seven students who attend public schools have a high rate of absenteeism (Conry & Richards, 2018). Closely examining chronic absenteeism data further, the incredible number of school days missed overall due to chronic absenteeism is “approximately 100 million to 150 million missed days of instruction across the nation” (Gottfried, 2017a. p.129).

The definition of chronic absenteeism in schools varies from state to state (Jordan & Miller, 2017). The Maine Department of Education identifies that a student is considered chronically absent when the student has missed 10% or more of the days enrolled in school (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Excused and unexcused absences are both counted towards defining a student’s chronically absent status (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Rogers and Feller (2018) highlighted that students’ educational success relies heavily upon consistent school attendance. Regular school attendance is important to allow students to receive consistent instruction, allow targeted interventions to occur, support student social/emotional development, and track student progress.

School attendance became a focal point when President Obama signed into law The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December of 2015, replacing No Child Left Behind

(U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Under ESSA, school attendance became one of several indicators that states could select for their schools to build school improvement accountability plans. (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Many states, including the state of Maine, adopted chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school accountability (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Maine schools have worked to improve school attendance over the years, but schools are relatively new to working with chronic absenteeism under ESSA (Maine Department of Education, 2019). The Maine Department of Education (2019) reported that Maine schools would benefit from investigating the unique challenges that prevent students from attending school consistently and creating a plan to facilitate the improvement of school attendance (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Schools working to improve school attendance across the nation are in search of interventions that will make a difference with the families and students whom they serve (Minero, 2019). Maine schools have taken on the challenge of exploring chronic absenteeism to improve the unique attendance obstacles that challenge consistent school attendance among Maine students.

This qualitative study focused on exploring the obstacles and challenges that impact chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine schools. The importance and need for this chronic absenteeism study were identified within the statement of the problem, the purpose statement, and the accompanying guiding research question. The study's conceptual framework was identified along with the research approach of the study. This chapter will begin with an identification of terminology that will be used throughout the study, will introduce the key components of the study, and will conclude with a discussion of the rationale and significance of the study.



### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES):** Potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood between the ages of birth and 17 years of age (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

**Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST):** Created by Bronfenbrenner he theorized that human development is molded by biological, social, and environmental factors that can change over time (Lenhoff & Rogodzinski, 2018).

**Challenge:** Merriam-Webster has several definitions for the word challenge, but for this study, the word challenge will be defined as a stimulating task or problem (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

**Chronic absenteeism:** The Maine Department of Education identifies that a student is considered chronically absent when they miss ten percent or more of the days enrolled in school regardless of the absence is excused or unexcused (Maine Department of Education, 2019).

**Economically Disadvantaged:** Economically disadvantaged refers to students who take part in the free/reduced-price lunch program due to low family income or whose parents do not have a high school diploma (Zapata, 2021).

**Every Student Succeeds Act:** The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law by President Obama in December of 2015, replacing No Child Left Behind and holding schools accountable for meeting the needs of learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):** "A qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1).

**Learning Environment:** The learning environment in this study refers to the physical structure, contexts, cultures, and other related aspects that impact student learning.

**Obstacle:** According to Merriam-Webster, an obstacle is something that impedes progress or achievement (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

**Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST):** Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems accepts Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (EST) approach as life experiences in different environmental contexts impact development, but additionally recognizes the importance of how an individual perceives these impacting experiences (Spencer et al. 1997).

**Phenomenological research:** A phenomenological approach is designed to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, such as chronic absenteeism, by examining the experience of the participants of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

**Rural:** According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), "rural encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area."

**School Accountability:** School Accountability refers to the process of examining student performance measures such as chronic absenteeism or academic performance when evaluating schools.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This qualitative study explored the challenges and obstacles that prevent students who live in rural Northern Maine from attending school consistently. Despite a thorough review of the current literature on chronic absenteeism, research is limited when exploring chronic absenteeism in rural schools. Edwards and Sullivan (2014) stated that even though a considerable number of the United States' population resides in rural areas, a vast majority of existing chronic

absenteeism research has focused on urban schools. Many researchers explored chronic absenteeism through a quantitative lens and a vast majority of available data is based on urban studies (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Robinson et al. 2018; Gottfried, 2015; Ehrlich et al. 2016; Lim et al. 2019). Interventions designed to curb school absenteeism in urban schools have been piloted and examined and may prove successful in rural schools, but a deeper understanding of chronic absenteeism is needed in rural America (Minero, 2019). Learning of the unique obstacles that prevent students from attending rural schools consistently should help stakeholders finetune their learning environments and create individualized interventions to help reduce attendance barriers. Based on a review of current literature, limited research exists in rural chronic absenteeism, and additional research is needed to further explore the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism in rural schools (Harte, 2017; Edwards & Sullivan, 2014; and Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Exploring the lived experience of rural Northern Maine high school students and their families who struggle with chronic absenteeism may offer a fresh perspective for those who work to improve school attendance.

Students' educational success relies heavily upon regularly attending school (Rogers & Feller, 2018). Jordan and Miller's (2017) study indicated that starting as early as Pre-K and Kindergarten, students with too many absences are associated with higher rates of retention, lower reading achievement rates, and social skills that are less developed compared to peers who consistently attend school. Regardless of a child's geographical location or income status of the family, the child who misses the most school early in their school career typically has the most academic ground to gain compared to peers who have a sound foundation for school attendance (Jordan & Miller 2017). The high chronic absenteeism rate at this study's research site correlates directly with low academic achievement rates based on Maine state assessments (Maine

Department of Education, 2019B). Despite measures taken by rural Northern Maine schools to improve chronic absenteeism, especially through the requirements of ESSA, this phenomenon continues to challenge many families to consistently send their children to school. Additional work with consistent school attendance students who live in rural areas would contribute to the currently established research on school attendance. This research will look to illuminate challenges of chronic absenteeism in rural environments as a deeper understanding of this phenomenon is sought.

This qualitative study focused on chronic absenteeism in a public-school site located in rural Northern Maine. Maine state data has identified a high rate of chronic absenteeism at this research site which played a role in the selection of the research site. The Maine Department of Education's Data Warehouse identified this Northern Maine school's chronic absenteeism rate of 24.3% during the 2016-2017 school year, and a chronic absenteeism rate of 17.5% in 2017-2018 (Maine Department of Education, 2018). Parents or guardians of high school-aged students, who are currently or at one time identified as chronically absent were asked to participate in an interview process designed to gather a deeper description and understanding of the lived perception of those who experience school chronic absenteeism. This study has the potential to create a description of the chronic absenteeism phenomenon that is unique to this rural school environment. With a clearer picture of chronic absenteeism in this rural Northern Maine school, it may be possible to create interventions that are designed to meet the specific needs of this research's sample population and also add to the literature which might assist other rural schools across the country having similar problems.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore the obstacles and challenges that hinder students who live in rural Northern Maine from consistently attending school. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of parents and guardians of students identified as chronically absent who may be challenged to get their children to school consistently. Through the interpretative phenomenology methodology, a researcher can gain a deeper understanding of a study that explores the lived experiences of human beings (Qutoshi, 2018). Exploring the lived experiences of parents or guardians who experience the obstacles and challenges of chronic absenteeism with their child should provide a deeper understanding and description of the chronic absenteeism phenomenon unique to the research participants of this study. In Northern Maine schools, to create effective attendance interventions, a deeper understanding is needed from the perspective of those who live through the challenges that are associated with consistently attending these schools. Gathered evidence from this study highlighting any existing obstacles and challenges that impede consistent school attendance could be used by rural Northern Maine schools to improve the quality of the learning environment leading to improved academic success and consistent school attendance.

### **Research Question/Design**

This study aimed to gather a deep and clear understanding of the challenges and obstacles that prevent consistent school attendance for students who live in rural Northern Maine communities. One guiding question was used throughout the research process to identify the challenges of attending school consistently that impact low-income students enrolled in rural public schools. The following research question will be used to guide this study:

**How do parents/guardians of high school students with chronic absenteeism describe the obstacles and challenges which prevent their children from consistently attending a rural Northern Maine school?**

This driving research question will guide this study towards identifying gaps in current chronic absenteeism literature that could lead to solutions to the current challenges and obstacles that are unique for this population of students who struggle to consistently attend public education.

**Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

Student chronic absenteeism is a phenomenon that needs a deeper understanding and a clearer picture drawn for those who are responsible for improving school learning environments to increase consistent school attendance. Grant and Osanloo (2014) discussed that a conceptual framework of one's research provides a logical organization of connected ideas that provides an understanding of how each concept is related within the research. Three elements that comprise one's conceptional framework that help to offer a logical structure within the conceptual framework include personal interest, topical research, and the theoretical framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The following paragraphs will summarize the study's conceptual framework by highlighting the personal interest, topical research and the theoretical framework.

**Personal Interest**

Chronic school absenteeism has been identified as an early warning sign that a student may be headed for some difficult times with potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure (Bafle, 2017). Improving the chronic absenteeism rate has become both a personal and professional challenge while serving as an administrator in a Northern Maine school. The researcher believes that some interventions designed to curb chronic absenteeism have been based upon on assumptions instead of the true impacting conditions connected to the

family, school, and other environmental factors that challenge regular school attendance. According to Kelley (2019), educators and parents who have clarity in the obstacles and challenges that prevent students from attending school consistently can better create interventions focused on improving school attendance. Clarity of the existing challenges and obstacles that leads students and parents to struggle with school chronic absenteeism in rural schools fully aligns and supports the researcher's intent and purpose of this qualitative study.

### **Topical Research**

The review of the relevant literature on chronic absenteeism revealed a considerable amount of data highlighting the challenges and obstacles of chronic absenteeism existing in schools across the nation. During the exploration of relevant chronic absenteeism research, it was discovered that a clear majority of the research was based on urban studies. Supporting the researcher's conclusion, Mineo (2019) identified that high rates of absenteeism can be a problem in rural and urban schools, but there is a considerable amount of research focused on urban studies compared to rural ones. Rural studies on school chronic absenteeism are needed to provide educational stakeholders of rural schools new thinking as they work to improve chronic absenteeism. Another interesting aspect gleaned during an examination of chronic absenteeism research literature is that a considerable amount of existing research is based on a quantitative approach (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Manzuoli et al. 2019; Lim et al. 2019; Ehrlich et al. 2016). The researcher believes that there is considerable room in the conversation of chronic absenteeism from a qualitative approach to investigate the obstacles and challenges that limit students in rural locations from attending school consistently. Exploring the lived experiences of students and families who experience chronic absenteeism will add considerably to current school attendance research. This qualitative research will contribute to a growing field of work

on school chronic absenteeism, as the researcher takes a specific look at those students who live in rural communities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To organize this study, Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) was selected as the study's theoretical framework (Spencer et al. 1997). Spencer's PVEST served as a solid framework for this study on chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine in two significant ways. First, the research participants reflected upon their experiences with chronic absenteeism and any challenges or obstacles they experienced in the rural Northern Maine microsystems and macrosystems that have impacted consistent school attendance. This perspective may be quite different from others who experience the chronic absenteeism phenomenon outside of the Northern Maine region. Secondly, the stressors experienced by the research participants causing the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism could offer a new perspective to explore by those who work to improve school attendance. Ravitch and Riggan (2016), stated that PVEST "serves to improve one's appreciation of the 'how' of development" which gets to the heart of the purpose and research question within this phenomenological study (p. 143).

Spencer's PVEST provided this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research with a supporting framework leading to the collection of chronic absenteeism evidence to support this study's research question. This study used an interview process designed to have families reflect upon the five stages of PVEST to collect the unique lived experiences that impact consistent school attendance. By asking parents or guardians to reflect and respond to their own unique experiences of relative stress and coping mechanisms with their child attending school, PVEST can expose how families with similar socio-economic backgrounds from a rural



Northern Maine community develop their unique sense of identity depending upon their perceptions and individual meaning-making. The model explored risk contributors such as the family and socio-economic status. Research participants responded to questions exploring experiences impacting school attendance and coping strategies implemented by parents/guardians and their children. The PVEST model included reactive coping strategies that could be adaptive or maladaptive responses to stress by the research participants (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). Spencer et al. (1997) explained how both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies are intended to be corrective problem-solving strategies as the individual reacts to stressful experiences. The frequency of implementing positive or negative coping strategies leads to an emergent identity or how an individual perceives themselves (Graves, 2014). Emergent identities impact an individual's decision-making and perceptions creating life stage outcomes (Spencer et al. 1997). By understanding each stage of the PVEST model, the researcher believes that a clearer description of the chronic absenteeism phenomenon can be made. The PVEST theoretical framework supported this study's problem, purpose, significance, and may lead towards a deeper understanding of the study's research question.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

Inherent in qualitative studies, preexisting assumptions of the researcher and several limitations may exist that need to be considered within this IPA study on school chronic absenteeism. The biases that the researcher brought to the study come from personal and professional experiences with rural Northern Maine. The researcher's family of the researcher strongly influenced consistent school attendance as it was an opportunity for upward mobility from an economically disadvantaged background. Serving both as a teacher and school administrator in rural Northern Maine schools, the researcher improved school attendance to

provide children with as many opportunities as possible to be successful. The researcher assumed that attending school consistently provides more opportunities for future success in life. When assuming that all parents want what is best for their children, attending school may not necessarily be held in the same regard with some people compared to the researcher's own beliefs. The researcher believed that consistent school attendance should be held in high regard by all and have difficulty deciphering why others struggle with this concept. Reflectively, it was of great importance that the researcher remembered these formed biases and assumptions throughout the work on this chronic absenteeism study as the researcher strived to learn more about this challenging phenomenon.

The IPA methodology requires life experience data to be gathered from research participants and then interpreted by the researcher. The researcher assumes a central role in the exploration, analysis, and interpretation of the life experiences of the research participants (Tuffour, 2017). According to Tuffour (2017), researcher bias is a limitation of IPA studies as the researcher is the main instrument in collecting and interpreting data. Smith, et al. (2009) stated that bracketing or suspending judgment of preconceived notions of the phenomenon is crucial during the data collection and analysis process of an IPA study. The process of bracketing is a key research method of phenomenology that demonstrates the validity of data collection and the analysis process (Chan et al. 2013). Each research participant's description of their life experiences will be attended closely and will receive the utmost focus as their story is shared. Throughout the process of data collection and through the researcher's reflective process, the use of the hermeneutic circle model will be used. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the hermeneutic circle model as a process of acknowledging personal preconceptions before interviewing, engaging and listening intently to the story of the research participant, and after the interview,

the researcher will reflect upon the conversation again during a sense-making process that will impact the researcher's prior preconceptions. It is assumed that each research participant's life experiences become a part of the whole within the researcher's description of the phenomenon (Smith et al. 2009).

Participant bias is another limitation of this qualitative study. Tuffour (2017) explained that while the researcher is trying to make sense of the phenomenon, the research participant is taking part in their process of sense-making regarding the study. It will be important to reduce participant bias of this small sampling of the research participants by establishing an interview process that will create a positive and engaging interaction that allows a comfortable flow of the research participant's story (Smith et al. 2009). The small sample size of this study is consistent with the phenomenological approach to gain a detailed description of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained that a researcher's ability to provide an in-depth look into the phenomenon diminishes with each new research participant added to the sample in a qualitative study. Therefore, it is the intent of this study to explore the lived experiences of a smaller number of participants with deeper insight into each participant, rather than generalized knowledge. IPA requires rich data gathered by granting participants the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences (Smith et al. 2009). The selection of research candidates will be important to capture an in-depth description of chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine students and their families.

The research site of this study was located within the district where the researcher held an administrative position and to some extent could be considered a limitation; however, to minimize the limitations several steps were taken during the selection of research participants. The researcher served as the district's middle school principal for several years. The parents

involved in this study on chronic absenteeism did not have children currently attending the school that the researcher led. Because the selected research site has multiple communities attending, the goal was to create a pool of research volunteers of parents or guardians whose children did not attend the middle school where the researcher was an administrator. It was important to have research participants speak freely during the interview process and the purposeful selection of students and families that are no longer impacted by researcher's leadership was extremely important during the collecting data process.

A final limitation of this study was the research gathered through the interview process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent lived experiences of chronic absenteeism of a student and family may look different compared to interviews conducted before COVID-19 or after the pandemic was over. The findings of this study may highlight new characteristics of chronic absenteeism that could potentially include themes such as student disengagement from remote learning practices, challenges associated with a lack of home technology, or possibly a lack of home support for at-home learning. Emerging themes and interpretations made from those experiencing chronic absenteeism may be influenced by the way the coronavirus impacted Northern Maine.

### **Rationale and Significance**

The rationale behind this study was to provide a new perspective that is built upon the experiences shared by parents or guardians whose children experience chronic absenteeism in a rural school in Northern Maine. This study was designed based on gaps in the research where extensive quantitative studies exist for urban student chronic absenteeism and many interventions have been created to improve school attendance in these highly populated schools. A fresh look from the lived experiences may significantly offer new thinking for rurally located

schools as they develop improvement measures designed to help those who struggle to attend school consistently. According to the Maine Department of Education (2019), schools would benefit from investigating the unique challenges that prevent students from attending school consistently and creating a plan that facilitate the improvement. London, Sanchez, and Castrechini (2016) said it best when they explained that research of chronically absent students may vary quite significantly in different locations as well as the individual characteristics of chronically absent students. Identified obstacles and challenges that may lead some urban students towards chronic absenteeism may differ considerably from the obstacles and challenges impacting students in rural settings. This study may offer an opportunity to enhance a deeper understanding of chronic absenteeism by taking a rural approach filling a void created by the many urban studies on this topic.

This study could be a significant piece of research for the rural schools in the Northern Maine region. It will provide a qualitative look into the rural lives of families and students who struggle to attend school consistently. This study aims to learn from those who experience chronic absenteeism as rurally located parents and guardians describe their lived experiences with this phenomenon. An exploration of these lived experiences will create a clearer description of the phenomenon and will lead to a deeper understanding of those who are charged to make improvements to rural school environments. Improving the clarity of the obstacles and challenges that lead to chronic absenteeism in rural schools will benefit all stakeholders who are seeking any means to improve school attendance. This study hopes to provide new thinking that will lead rural schools to reflect upon chronic absenteeism through the eyes of those who live it to create a more prescriptive intervention to reduce chronic absenteeism. Despite this study

exploring a specific geographical area, the researcher believes that this study may benefit future chronic absenteeism research of rural American children.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study adds to current research on school chronic absenteeism, particularly in rural communities. The work of this study will add to existing research in chronic absenteeism as it explores this phenomenon with a rural lens. There is much need for this research for all rural schools, not only those located in Northern Maine. Rurally located schools continue to seek answers and sound interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism within their learning environments. Students' educational success relies heavily upon consistent school attendance (Rogers & Feller, 2018). This interpretative phenomenological analysis body of research will look to create a clearer picture of chronic absenteeism in rural schools through the eyes of the parents and guardians who struggle to work through the obstacles and challenges that prevent their child from attending school consistently.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Kelly (2019) explained that chronic absenteeism was once a hidden problem that typically went unchecked, but with recent federal school improvement legislation, many states are focusing efforts to curb this national problem. National data illustrates that approximately five to seven and a half million school-aged students miss a month or more of school a year (Chang & Davis, 2015). Federal research data identified that approximately one in seven students who attend public schools have a high absenteeism rate (Conry & Richards, 2018). The high number of school days missed overall because of chronic absenteeism is “approximately 100 million to 150 million missed days of instruction across the nation” (Gottfried, 2017A. p.129). There is no state, big or small, in the nation that is not impacted by chronic absenteeism as a fifth of America’s schools report 20% or more of their learners are chronically absent (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Students’ educational success relies heavily upon consistent school attendance (Rogers & Feller, 2018). States are currently working on improving chronic absenteeism by identifying which students are most at risk leading educators to create and target interventions to improve students’ attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The review of the research on chronic absenteeism informed the researcher in several ways. There is a difference in the volume of research on chronic absenteeism between rural and urban settings (Mineo, 2019). Edwards and Sullivan (2014) explained that even though a considerable number of the United States’ population resides in rural areas, a vast majority of existing chronic absenteeism research has focused on urban schools. Many studies of the urban chronic absenteeism research can be transferred into many rural school settings to improve school attendance, but some may not quite fit some of the unique rural learning communities

(Minero, 2019). Despite the disparity in available research, the following paragraphs will explore the obstacles and challenges that impact chronic absenteeism through a review of the research.

### **Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Framework**

The phrase “Absenteeism Crisis” has been coined by policymakers to describe America’s current state of students missing school (Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law by President Obama in December of 2015, replacing No Child Left Behind and holding schools accountable for meeting the needs of learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). School attendance was added as an indicator that states could select when creating their required school improvement plan under ESSA (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Many states, including the rural state of Maine, worked to obtain compliance with ESSA and adopted chronic absenteeism as a new indicator to help determine school accountability (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Chronic absenteeism is defined as when a student is absent for 10% or more of the days enrolled, excused, and unexcused (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Schools have worked to improve school attendance over the years but are relatively new to working with chronic absenteeism under ESSA (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Schools would benefit from investigating the unique challenges that prevent students from attending school consistently and creating a plan to facilitate the improvement of school attendance (Maine Department of Education, 2019).

The various factors that impact consistent school attendance could be unlimited without a clear conceptual framework guiding the design of this qualitative study. Identifying a conceptual framework to support the significance of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study required a review of several theories that were put into practice in prior relative research experiences. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), the conceptual framework of one's



research offers a logical organization of connected ideas that provides an understanding of how each concept is related within the research. Ravitch and Riggan (2016) identify three elements that comprise one's conceptual framework. The three elements that help to offer a logical structure within the conceptual framework include personal interest, topical research, and the theoretical framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The following paragraphs will highlight the conceptual framework of this study and will describe how each element within this study is connected.

### **Personal Interest**

This literature review highlighted how chronic absenteeism impacts students' academic growth and development. Chronic absenteeism data demonstrate strong correlations between poor school attendance and limited academic success (Conry & Richards, 2018; Jordan & Miller, 2017; Gottfried, 2015; Gershenson et al., 2017). According to Mette et al. (2016), childhood poverty in rural areas is consistently higher than in urban areas which bring unique educational challenges within these communities. In addition to lower test scores, chronically absent students have a higher rate of tobacco and alcohol usage, a high drop-out rate, and are less likely to be employed as an adult (Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018).

Chronic school absenteeism has been identified as an early warning sign that a student may be headed for some difficult times with potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure (Bafile, 2017). The state of Maine also recognized that chronic absenteeism is impacting learning within the state and under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), selected chronic absenteeism as an indicator that Maine schools must address when they create yearly school improvement plans (Maine Department of Education, 2019). School administrators and stakeholders in the rural communities of Northern Maine need to make a change within their

schools to help curb chronic absenteeism and create improved learning opportunities for all students.

The student population at the study's research site is atypical when compared to a vast majority of the documented research on chronic absenteeism. These students are not from an urban area; they reside nearly five hours from the closest metropolitan region. A vast majority of these students are Caucasian with less than 5% of the population considered a minority group. More than half of these students qualify to receive free and reduced school meals annually. When examining data gathered from the Maine Department of Education's Data Warehouse, a school in this district had a chronic absenteeism rate of 24.32% during the 2016-17 school year and a chronic absenteeism rate of 17.5% in 2017-18 (Maine Department of Education, 2018). This state data correlates with academic state data that mirrors low academic growth for those who are chronically absent. This research site has attempted to improve school attendance but current interventions to curb chronic absenteeism have so far proven only slightly effective with only minimal improvements made in school attendance. With a clearer understanding of the unique lived experiences of the sample population and the influencing variables that create attendance obstacles and challenges, improved interventions and supports could be created to alleviate obstacles and reduce challenges that prevent consistent school attendance.

Improving the chronic absenteeism rate has become both a personal and professional challenge while serving as an administrator in a Northern Maine school. The researcher believed that some interventions to curb chronic absenteeism were based on assumptions instead of the true impacting conditions that are connected to the family, school, and other environmental factors that challenge regular school attendance. When prior attendance interventions were created, were certain key constructs not realized due to limited understanding of the lived

experiences of students? Establishing a body of research that is based on lived experiences could shine a light on current flawed chronic absenteeism thinking. Qualitative data on chronic absenteeism would lend a voice to improving the process to identify effective attendance interventions to meet the needs of our students who struggle with consistent school attendance. According to Kelley (2019), educators and parents who have clarity in the obstacles and challenges that prevent students from attending school consistently can better create interventions focused on improving school attendance. Clarity of the existing challenges and obstacles that leads students and parents to struggle with school chronic absenteeism in rural schools fully aligns and supports the intent and purpose of this qualitative study.

### **Topical Research**

Subtle differences exist through each region of the country regarding chronic absenteeism and this uniqueness requires some different thinking when it comes to working to establishing consistent school attendance (Brookins, 2016; Mette, et al. 2016; Brenner, 2016; Fishman, 2015; and Riley, 2019). The researcher believed the identified population of this study was unique and varied considerably from much of the literature reviewed on chronic absenteeism. A majority of the chronic absenteeism research examined focused on urban areas that typically have a very different population than the one that exists in Northern Maine. There is considerable research on students living in poverty who struggle to attend school, but most of this research has been done in urban settings. The research of the literature uncovered few interventions that have been piloted or studied that were designed specifically for improving attendance for low-income and rurally located students. Additional work may be needed in this field of study as educators and families work to improve school attendance specifically for students who are rurally located. This researcher believed that by studying a student population found in rural Northern Maine

offers benefits to educational stakeholders and families who struggle to get students to school consistently in economically challenged and rural locations. New research in the field of chronic absenteeism may lead to the development of effective interventions that rural schools could use within their ESSA plans, but more importantly, consistently getting students to school.

Another interesting aspect gleaned during an examination of chronic absenteeism research literature is that a considerable amount of evidence harvested in the research is based on a quantitative approach (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Manzuoli et al. 2019; Lim et al. 2019; Ehrlich et al. 2016). The researcher believes that there is considerable room in the conversation of chronic absenteeism from a qualitative approach to investigate the obstacles and challenges that limit students in rural locations from attending school consistently. Exploring the lived experiences of students and families who experience chronic absenteeism added considerably to current school attendance research. This phenomenological study included (a) An exploration of the unique backgrounds and cultures that exist for rural families and schools through parent/guardian interviews from a rural school. (b) An in-depth look into the identified obstacles and challenges that hinder consistent school attendance by rural Maine high school students. (c) An exploration of how parents, guardians, and high school students respond and react to the obstacles and challenges presented. Poor school attendance for rurally located students may not fully be extinguished, but a meticulous exploration into this subgroup may provide answers and potential new thinking that may move our work in chronic absenteeism forward. Taking a specific look at students who lived in rural communities, it is the hope that this qualitative research contributed to a growing field of work on chronic absenteeism.

## Theoretical Framework

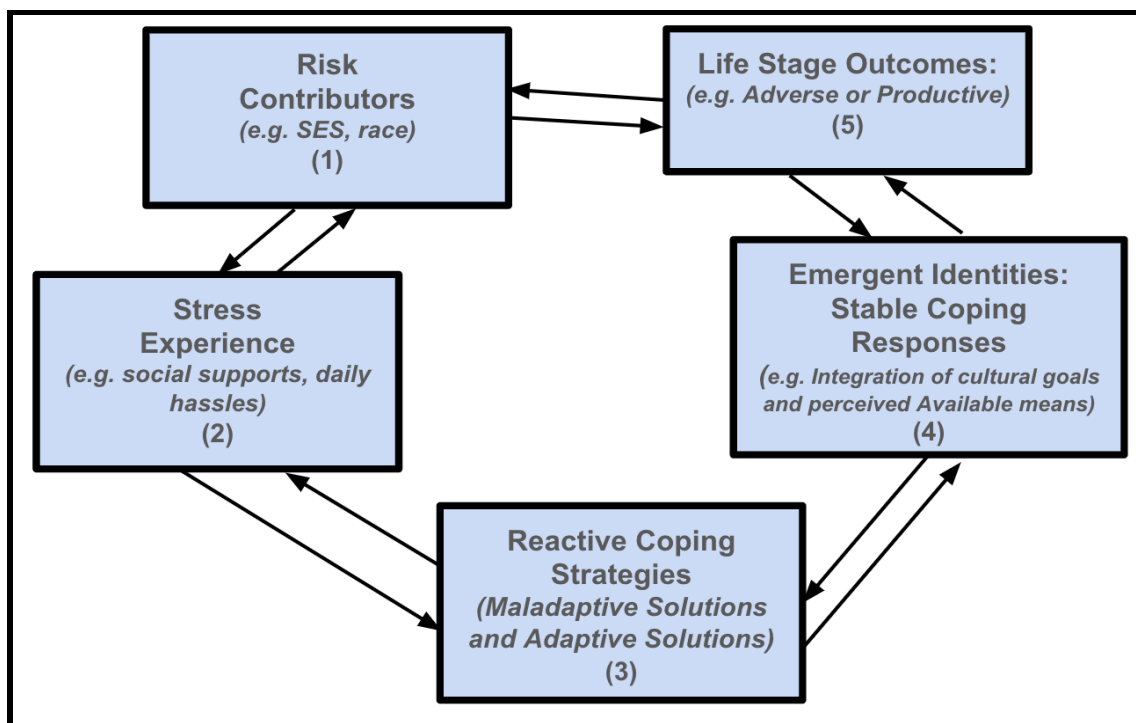
The exploration for a theoretical framework was to guide this phenomenological study led the researcher to discover Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). Spencer et al. (1997) used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) and introduced and compared the self-organizational perceptions of the research participants to create PVEST. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory highlighted how human development is molded by biological, social, and environmental factors that change over time (Lenhoff & Rogodzinski, 2018). According to Anfara and Mertz (2015), the cornerstone of Bronfenbrenner's theory examines the continuously changing properties within one's setting that influence and impact the individual's behaviors. Bronfenbrenner argued that an individual's development is a function based on one's interaction with their family, school, and neighborhood, or what is referred to in the theory as a microsystem (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The individual is influenced and changed by the many different variables that make up the person's surroundings in the microsystem and interact with and are influenced by larger encompassing systems such as the mesosystem and exosystem (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). According to Ozaki et al. (2020), EST allows for the exploration of multiple environments (i.e., school, home, and rural community) that shape an individual's development which was the key to this study's research on chronic absenteeism.

Bronfenbrenner's theory shows where the research participants develop but "how" the individual develops is where PVEST thrives through the infusion of the self-organization theory into the ecological systems theory (Ozaki et al. 2020). Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems accepts the EST approach as life experiences in different environmental contexts impact development but additionally recognizes the importance of how an individual

perceives these impacting experiences (Spencer et al. 1997). Spencer et al. (1997) believed that the self-organizing theory explores how individuals develop a sense of who they are with the goal of responding to stress experiences that may threaten one's self-perception. For example, individuals who grow up in high-poverty environments do not all perceive or respond to negative events in their microsystem similarly as there exists a considerable range of life outcomes (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). According to Spencer et al. (1997), the processing of life experiences impacts how much one feels valued and influences how one gives meaning to the different aspects of one's self. Blending EST with a phenomenological approach provides a critical integration that creates a method for capturing the research participant's ability to understand stereotypes, societal expectations, and biases that will be key during the data collection process of this study (Spencer et al. 1997). Ravitch and Riggan (2016) stated that PVEST "serves to improve one's appreciation of the "how" of development" which gets to the heart of the purpose and research questions within this phenomenological study (p. 143).

Spencer highlighted two factors that impact an individual's development of a sense of self in using PVEST. The first factor includes the phenomenological experiences of the individual's personal and identity characteristics in the context of their microsystem and macrosystem (Spencer et al. 1997). The second factor, or PVEST, includes the various environments that the individual experiences to provide feedback about who the individual is, should be, and could be (Spencer et al. 1997). According to Spencer et al. (1997), stressful situations require a response, and how individuals respond and cope with stressful situations may change how they perceive themselves. The stressful situations in PVEST represent the obstacles and challenges that the research participants share as they describe their lived experiences with chronic absenteeism. In addition to learning about the challenges and obstacles that prevent

consistent school attendance, the research will gain additional evidence regarding the adaptive and maladaptive solutions that the research participants implemented to cope with their lived experiences.



**Figure 2.1 Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (Spencer et al. 1997)**

Spencer's PVEST provided this research with a supporting framework that led to the collection of chronic absenteeism evidence to support this study's research question. The interview process was designed to have parents and guardians reflect upon the stages of PVEST to collect the unique lived experiences that impact consistent school attendance. By asking parents and guardians to reflect and respond to their own unique experiences of relative stress and coping mechanisms when attending school, PVEST exposed how students with similar backgrounds from a rural Northern Maine community developed their unique sense of identity depending upon their perceptions and individual meaning-making. The model explored risk contributors that included the family and socio-economic status. Research participants responded to questions exploring perceived stressful experiences impacting school

attendance and coping strategies implemented by students. The PVEST model includes reactive coping strategies that could be adaptive or maladaptive responses to stress by the research participants (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). Spencer et al. (1997) explained how both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies are intended to be corrective problem-solving strategies as the individual reacts to the stressful experiences. The frequency of implementing positive or negative coping strategies leads to an emergent identity or how an individual perceives themselves (Graves, 2014). According to Spencer et al. (1997), emergent identities impact an individual's decision-making and perceptions creating life stage outcomes. An understanding of each stage of the PVEST model led to a clearer description of the phenomenon by the researcher. Exploring the lived experiences of chronic absenteeism through the lens of PVEST provided supportive data and evidence that reached the core of this study. The PVEST theoretical framework fully supported the study's problem, purpose, significance, as well as the research question.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

An exploration of the literature on chronic absenteeism has brought some consistent themes to the surface. These themes of chronic absenteeism will be highlighted in the review of the literature and viewed through multiple lenses to further explore the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism. The review of the literature will begin by setting the stage for this study by exploring the history of schools in rural America to get a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of rural schools. The history of school absenteeism will also be explored to understand how chronic absenteeism in America has become the phenomenon that it is today. Next, a focus on the obstacles and challenges that impact chronic absenteeism and what research has determined as potential solutions to improve school attendance consistency. Finally, the review of the



literature will compare and contrast rural and urban chronic absenteeism. The literature on chronic absenteeism identifies several challenges and obstacles that impact chronic absenteeism, but do these obstacles exist in urban and rural settings? Comparing and contrasting rural versus urban chronic absenteeism will potentially offer some insight into how chronic absenteeism impacts these geographically unique areas. The exploration of relevant literature on school chronic absenteeism provided the researcher a deeper look into the phenomenon that helped identify obstacles and challenges within the chronic absenteeism field of study that was used to support the study's purpose, problem statement, and research question.

Five recurring challenges and obstacles of chronic absenteeism continued to resurface throughout the literature review process and included the following themes (a) The misconception of parents regarding school attendance can negatively impact consistent school attendance (London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016; Robinson, Lee, Dearing & Rogers, 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018). (b) Challenges with home and school communications with chronically absent students' families need to be restructured to address and improve chronic absenteeism concerns and develop stronger home and school relationships (Cook, Dodge, Gifford, & Schulting, 2017; Gottfried, 2017B; Lasky-Fink, Robinson, Chang, & Rogers, 2019; Robinson, Lee, Dearing & Rogers, 2018; Susman-Stillman, Englund, Storm, & Bailey, 2018). (c) Data supports that attendance challenges exist with our youngest students and that interventions need to occur with our youngest students' parents or guardians (Ehrlich et al. 2016; Gottfried, 2015; Jordan & Miller, 2017; London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016). (d) Poverty is an obstacle of chronic absenteeism and the needs of low-income families must be examined to help address and improve consistent school attendance (Cook et al. 2017; Gottfried, 2017A; Jordan & Miller, 2017; Mette et al. 2016; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018). (e) Are urban studies on chronic

absenteeism transferable to meet the intervention needs of rural schools that struggle with chronic absenteeism? (Gottfried, 2017B; Lasky-Fink et al. 2019; Mette et al. 2016; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018). These recurring elements of chronic absenteeism was explored to solidify a need for continued research that will lead to improvements with consistent school attendance for rurally located students.

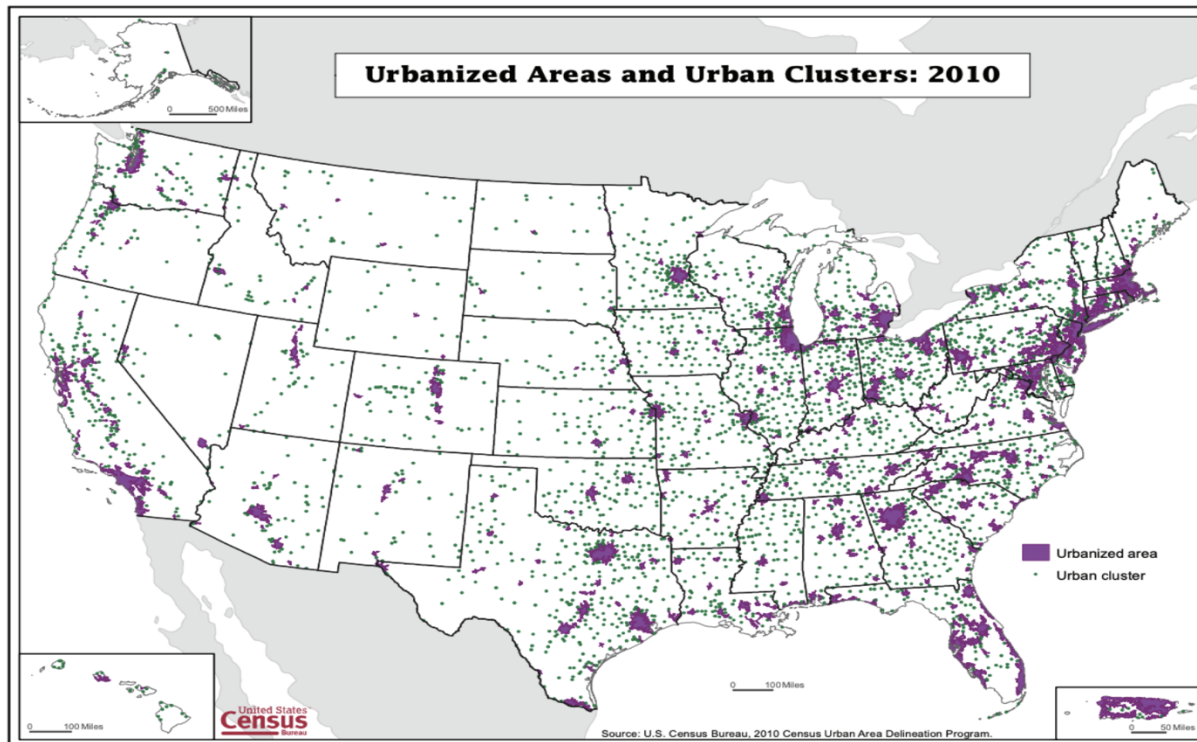
### **An Overview of Rural Schools in America**

When thinking of rural American schools, for many, this may evoke various visions of schools located in the middle of farmlands or vast scenic views. The term “rural” can mean different things to different people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). For this study, it is important to include an overview of rural schools in America to support the purpose of the study, the statement of the problem statement, and the driving research questions. For this study’s purpose, it is essential to know what elements and conditions impact American rural schools creating the unique qualities associated with rural schools. The following paragraphs will explore rural American schools to provide further support for this study on school chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural “as what is not urban - that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left” (Ratcliffe et al. 2016. p.1). In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau states that rural include all territory, housing, and population not included within urban areas (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), approximately 60 million Americans live rurally in the United States or one in five Americans. Only three percent of the land area of the United States is identified as urban, but urban areas are home to approximately 80% of the country’s population (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). Rural America consists of 97% of the country’s landmass but only about 20% of the population (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). The

graphic titled Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters illustrates urban zoning based on data gathered in 2010 by the U.S. Census Bureau.

#### Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters: 2010



**Figure 2.2 Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters: 2010**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2017, about half of all public school districts in America were considered rural, representing approximately 12 million students or 25% of the total public-school population in the U.S. Public Schools (Nicosia, 2017). From the one-room schoolhouses built by early settlers in America to the industrial revolution that changed education to the modern-day rural school, a considerable amount of transformation has occurred due to national legislation and challenges faced due to the limitations that accompany rural environments (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006). As early as the 1800s, it was thought that eliminating smaller rural schools into larger ones similarly found in urban areas would be beneficial and legislation around this thinking was developed (Bard et al. 2006). One-size-fits-all educational policies crafted to best fit urban and suburban schools can challenge and

complicate the ability of rural schools to adequately create responses that meet the needs of students in these more isolated communities (Mette et al. 2016). Fishman (2015) shared that most state and federal policies on education ignore the advantages of rural schools and force rural schools to operate similarly to those located in urban areas. The National Rural Education Association highlighted that sheer size and greater political influence for non-rural education have resulted in educational policies and inequitable school funding negatively impacting rural schools (Nicosia, 2017). The rural school is challenged to meet the needs of their learners due to limitations caused by unfavorable educational policies and limited funding and some turn to consolidation to make ends meet (Bard et al. 2006).

In addition to school funding and educational policies, rural schools across the country have struggled to adapt to the economic circumstances that impacted America during the late 20th and 21st centuries (Mette et al. 2016). According to Mette et al. (2016), a great number of rural communities have traditionally relied quite heavily upon one industry such as forestry, fishing, mining, or agriculture to support their economy. Advances in technology have led to the restructuring of these economy-supporting industries that created an impacting outward migration of rural residence as fewer jobs were available (Bard et al. 2006). The economic downturn in the 1970s and 1980s impacted rural schools and further emphasized school consolidation (Bard et al. 2006). As a result, rural schools lost students and education costs increased considerably (Mette et al. 2016). Bard believed that rural school graduates became urban graduates as the declining economy challenged rural schools to survive.

The compounding trends of a struggling economy combined with outward migration have led to a higher concentration of rural individuals experiencing poverty (Mette et al. 2016). Educators in rural schools confront the challenges of poverty that impact education within their

economically disadvantaged learning environments (Weeks, n.d.). To meet the needs of the expanding learning gaps, rural schools can be further challenged to hire strong and certified teachers to help rural students make the desired academic growth needed (Weeks, n.d.). Despite the rural community's effort to overcome the obstacle of poverty, it has been proven difficult to reverse these trends as continued outward migration impacts the rebuilding of the rural economy which keeps poverty impacting the rural community (Mette et al. 2016).

Despite the challenges and obstacles that the previous paragraphs have shared, several aspects of rural education have positively impacted the nation's educational community (Fishman, 2015). Weeks (n.d.) believed that the perception that all rural schools are inferior is incorrect as schools with a predominance of community-centeredness do very well. There are several best practices in education today that were developed out of necessity long ago within the rural school such as multigrade classrooms, close links between school and community, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and interdisciplinary studies (Weeks, n.d.). Rural education has recently shown promise in distance learning and blended learning efforts as these learning environments strive to find improved learning opportunities for their students (Fishman, 2015). Fishman (2015) noted that teachers and educational entrepreneurs associated with rural schools continue to redefine these learning environments for their students. Rural educators continue to replace a lack of opportunity with innovative and creative ways as they work to expand and improve learning opportunities for students who attend rural schools.

### **History of School Attendance Policies**

Compulsory school attendance policies have not always existed to outline the need for children to be in school. American compulsory school attendance laws began in 1852 in Massachusetts (Rauscher, 2015). Only 31 states had compulsory school attendance guidelines for

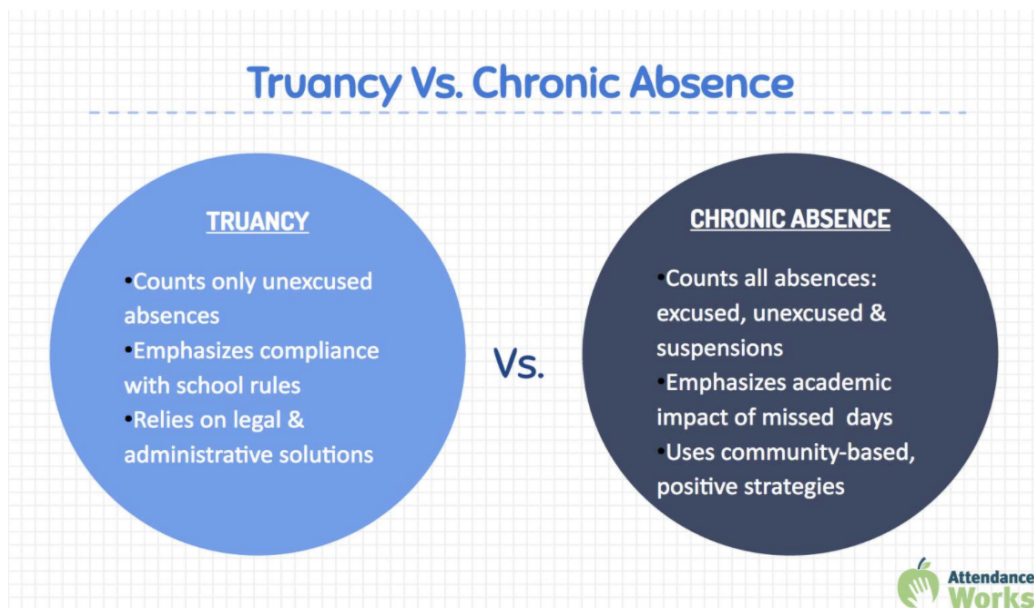
students from ages 8 to 14 by 1900 (The American Board, 2015). Each state had some form of compulsory education law in 1918 that required students to complete elementary school (Rauscher, 2015). According to Rauscher (2015), early compulsory school attendance laws were primarily directed at high-poverty families who did not send their children to school. Required school attendance and the compulsory school attendance laws adopted by each state were significantly influenced by labor unions that were focused on keeping children from working and negatively impacting the adult earning wage (Ensign, 2010). The US Supreme Court in 1944 ruled in *Prince v. Massachusetts* that the state had the right to hold parents responsible to abide by the child labor laws and that parents' authority could not preempt that of the state (Morgan, 2000). This decision by the US Supreme Court ruled that parents could no longer move their children into the labor force and were required to comply with the attendance laws that their state had adopted (Morgan, 2000). Schools throughout the country adopted truancy policies to meet the requirements of the law for students to attend school (Morgan, 2000).

### **Chronic Absenteeism and School Truancy**

There is a significant difference between truancy and chronic absenteeism. Both concepts deal with student absences from school but are uniquely different (See Figure 3). The truancy policy challenges schools to work with families and students to meet the requirements outlined in their state's truancy law, mainly focusing on unexcused absences (Conry & Richards, 2018). If a truant student fails to follow a plan created to improve school attendance and continues to be unexcused from school, then legal action will be taken (Conry & Richards, 2018). Legal sanctions may include referral to court, fines, enrollment in programs designed to improve truancy, and even jail time (Conry & Richards, 2018). Based on the Maine truancy law, students could accumulate several excused absences for the school year and never be addressed for

excessive school absences (Maine Department of Education, 2020). States that select chronic absenteeism as a school accountability indicator under ESSA are required to address students' poor attendance both excused and unexcused (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Chronic absenteeism interventions throughout the country are currently being explored and piloted to find what will work within their schools and perspective populations to curb poor school attendance (Cook et al. 2017; Gershenson et al. 2017; Rogers & Feller, 2018).

Conry and Richards (2018) examined school chronic absenteeism and truancy laws across the country. They found that states differed from each other and that some established truancy policies tended to subject certain disadvantaged subgroups to severe truancy policies. This study also identified that states without truancy policies spent more money on education and have higher proportions of non-economically disadvantaged, white, and English-speaking students (Conry & Richards, 2018). Consistently defining chronic absenteeism from state to state is just one step towards an improving school attendance process (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Jordan and Miller (2017) highlighted that ESSA is forcing states to similar definitions of school absences and consistent ways of measuring data associated with school attendance. Suppose states moved towards similar practices when working with school attendance. In that case, it is possible that a clear picture of chronic absenteeism can be made nationwide as newer and more effective attendance interventions are created to help reduce poor school attendance (Jordan & Miller, 2017). New research and interventions may help specific subgroups who struggle with consistent school attendance such as in the case of this research.



**Figure 3 - Truancy vs. Chronic Absence (Attendance Works, 2018)**

### **Challenges and Obstacles that Impact Consistent School Attendance**

The review of the literature on chronic absenteeism highlighted several obstacles and challenges that impacted consistent school attendance. Challenges such as parents' misconceptions of school attendance, limited early interventions regarding school attendance, and poor communication between school and home will be discussed during the review of the literature. The review of the literature will also explore the obstacles of chronic absenteeism such as poverty, poor school experiences, and limited resources that place some students in a potential collision with future chronic absenteeism. The obstacles and challenges of chronic absenteeism will be the focal point in the next sections.

#### ***The Obstacle of Poverty and Chronic Absenteeism***

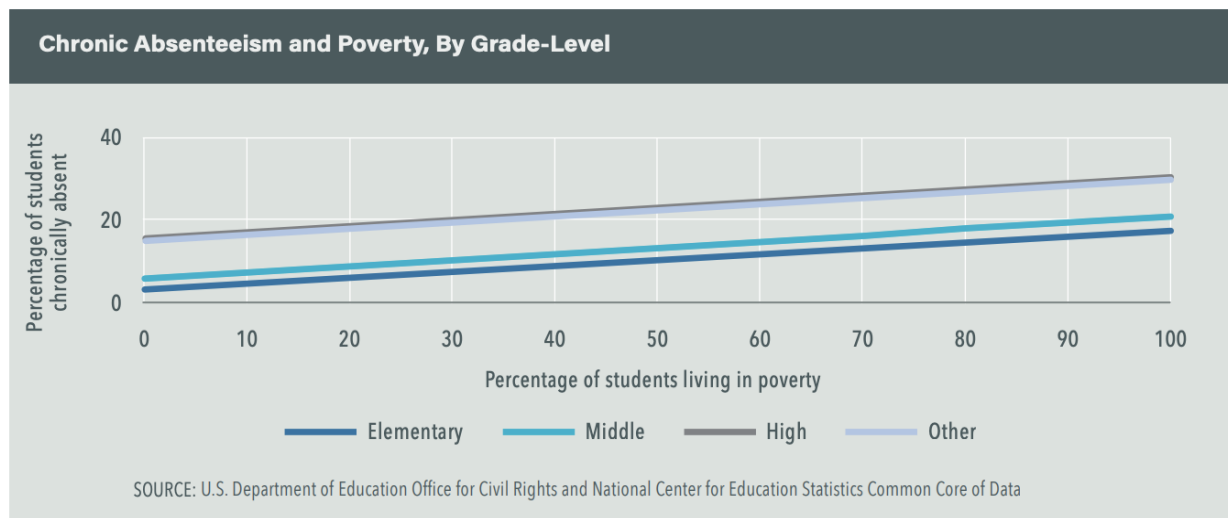
School officials who are charged with improving school attendance must learn the needs of their students within their learning environment and should pay particular attention to the obstacles that exist for students who live in poverty regardless of urban or rural location to create any meaningful attendance plan. Prior research has identified that a high percentage of students



who are consistently absent from school are from lower socioeconomic status (Gottfried, 2017A). According to Gottfried (2015), children from financially challenged families and communities are four times more likely to miss 10% or more days of school compared to their higher-income peers. School attendance obstacles of lower-income students will be different from those of their affluent peers. Low-income families who experience a fluctuation of income that moves them up and down the poverty line have additional compounding factors that can negatively impact a child's school attendance as this income volatility can cause chaos in the home environment, a lack of routine, sleep issues along with other disruptions that impact school attendance (Gennetian et al. 2018).

A study by Susman-Stillman, Englund, Storm, and Bailey (2018) highlighted that low-income students whose parents worked part-time had lower rates of school attendance at 83% or 22 days missing a year compared to parents who worked full-time their children had an attendance rate of 93% or nine days missing per year. Research has identified that children who live in poverty often have additional risk factors such as a lack of access to healthcare and unstable living conditions that also lead to increased school absences (Jordan & Miller, 2017). The educational level of low-income parents also plays a role in their children's attendance as parents who did not earn a high school degree had a school attendance rate of 87% while parents who earned an associate's degree had better attendance rates of 97% (Susman-Stillman, et al. 2018). Identifying the differences in students' backgrounds might require additional attention to resources when looking to curb school attendance (Gottfried, 2017A). In addition, the composition of each school's student body is different and each will need to examine the obstacles that prevent the students who are members of their learning environment from attending school consistently. Figure 4 takes a look at chronic absenteeism and students living in

poverty. Jordan and Miller's (2017) data found in Figure 4 highlights the correlation between students living in poverty and the growing rate of chronic absenteeism.



**Figure 4 - Chronic Absenteeism and Poverty, By Grade-Level (Jordan & Miller, 2017)**

Academic success can be difficult to attain for students who live in poverty and are challenged to attend school consistently. The literature review revealed several chronic absenteeism research articles identifying those low-income students who miss school consistently lose ground academically (Jordan & Miller, 2017; Gennetian et al. 2018; Ehrlich, Gwynne, Allensworth, & Serah, 2016). Gershenson, Jacksnowitz, and Brannegan (2017). One study concluded that greater harm may come to socioeconomically disadvantaged students who consistently miss school as their households may be less able to compensate for lost instructional time than their more affluent peers (Gershenson et al. 2017). When chronically absent students return to school the whole class may be impacted by the time dedicated by teachers to catch these students up (Gottfried, 2017A). Time must be dedicated in the classroom for chronically absent students to bridge gaps in their learning while other students' learning may become compromised as they wait for their attendance challenged peers (Gottfried, 2017A). Research

highlights that the earlier in a child's academic career in which chronic absenteeism begins the greater the learning gap is created for the child (Ehrlich, Gwynne, Allensworth, & Serah, 2016).

Current literature consistently reports that chronic absenteeism is significantly prevalent among students in low socioeconomic households (Cook et al. 2017; Ehrlich et al. 2016; Gennetian et al. 2018; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018). The challenging extraction of evidence during the literature review was to find evidence to support chronic absenteeism of low-income families who are rurally located as most existing research analyzed studied low-income students living in urban areas. Many of the case studies that were reviewed during the literature review of interventions used to curb poor school attendance with low-income families took place in urban and suburban areas where larger statistics could be generated to create a greater significance out of any generated data (Gennetian et al. 2018; Robinson et al. 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Additional work with consistent school attendance of economically disadvantaged students who live in rural areas would contribute to the currently established research on school attendance.

### ***Chronic Absenteeism Challenged by Poor Communication***

The literature consistently points to the need to improve chronic absenteeism through positive communication with parents or guardians regarding school attendance (Cook et al. 2017; Gottfried, 2017b; Lasky-Fink et al. 2019; London et al. 2016). Efforts at improving school attendance need to be made by the school to engage families in their children's education (Cook et al. 2017; Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Smythe-Leistico and Page (2018) suggest that schools need to concentrate their efforts to improve the youngest students' attendance by focusing on family and community engagement. The parents serve as major decision-makers and can significantly influence the number of days their child will miss school. Early identification of school attendance obstacles such as rural isolation, socioeconomic

challenges, and school misconceptions of parents can lead to early communication that targets to eliminate obstacles to consistent school attendance (Robinson, Chang, & Rogers, 2019; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018).

Improved school and home communications may improve the level of mistrust identified during the literature review of chronic absenteeism. One study completed by Susman-Stillman et al. (2018) shared previous research in which low-income, urban families reported lower levels of trust and the ability to connect to schools which causes them to be more cautious when developing relationships. Families may have limited social networks to rely on concerning attendance due to this challenge to connect (Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). The research is quite evident that a parent's perception of their child's education is an important factor in a child's school attendance (Lasky-Fink et al. 2019; Rogers & Feller, 2018; Smyth-Leistico & Page, 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Learning a parent's perception of education can be challenging because educators question if this is an example of misunderstandings with education or is it a form of educational neglect? Educational neglect is identified when there is a lack of parental involvement in their child's learning and is electing to consistently allow their child to miss school (Wert et al. 2018). It is critical to identify what obstacles and challenges exist that prevent students from attending school consistently and then examine possible solutions to remove or reduce the obstacles and challenges to improve a child's school attendance through solid communication (Wert et al. 2018). Efforts to improve and strengthen home and school communication appear to be an important step in developing a trusting relationship that will lead to improved school attendance.

The literature review uncovered multiple studies where researchers of chronic absenteeism examined various ways to improve communication with families to curb school

attendance issues. The piloted interventions were not specifically designed for low-income or rurally located schools, but could likely address some of the specific needs of families that lived in a rural community (Rogers & Feller, 2018; Robinson, Lee, Dearing & Rogers, 2018; Lasky-Fink et al. 2019; and Smythe-Leistico, & Page (2018). Communication interventions that stood out during this literature review included improving truancy notifications through simplification of wording (Lasky-Fink, Robinson, Chang, & Rogers, 2019), using text messages to mitigate chronic absenteeism (Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018), and the Early Truancy Prevention Program that is designed to identify a family's barrier that causes poor school attendance and then communicates with parents to reduce or eliminate these barriers (Cook et al. 2017). Each of these interventions will be discussed in deeper detail later in the literature review as these interventions have some great potential when working with low-income families who are rurally located.

### ***Parents Misconceptions Create School Attendance Challenges and Obstacles***

The general belief in society is that parents want what is best for their child, but there is a tremendous significance placed on how a parent values the importance of school as this belief can impact consistent school attendance. There is growing research that suggests that parents of younger students who have poor attendance may have a perception of school that is much different from school professionals (Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Students who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged households may have a higher chance of having parents who undervalue daily attendance compared to a child that comes from a more affluent home (Robinson et al. 2018). Kohn (1989) shared that parent roles are impacted by personal experiences that may negatively impact the value of schooling. The research examined did not highlight the potential connection between poor childhood experiences with a school that may

have created a negative or different belief system for parents, but it was implied within the research.

Other misconceptions parents had regarding school emerged through the research of chronic absenteeism of children from low-income families. Research suggests that parents may significantly overestimate their child's school attendance when parents are presented with their child's actual attendance record (Rogers & Feller, 2018). Rogers and Feller's (2018) research also identified that parents of chronically absent students tend to underestimate their child's attendance compared to the attendance of their peers. Researchers identified that parents' perception of issues with the teacher and concerns with bussing issues also lead to inconsistencies with school attendance (Susman-Stillman, Englund, Storm, & Bailey, 2018). Some of these parents may feel excluded from school and may have feelings of lower levels of trust and connection to their child's school (Robinson et al., 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). This same study identified that many low-income parents do not fully understand the significance of early preschool education and believe that consistent school attendance is more important later in their child's education (Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). The lack of value that a parent places on early education establishes a foundation for a lack of consistent school attendance early and throughout their child's educational career (Robinson et al. 2018).

Robinson et al. (2018) highlighted in their study that one behavioral strategy that has shown to be effective when attempting to change a parent's belief regarding their child's education is to work on correcting mistaken beliefs. Studies have been conducted to reduce parental misconceptions to improve school attendance (Robinson et al. 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018; Smyth-Leistico & Page, 2018). Stakeholders who are charged to improve school

attendance should explore the beliefs of their parents and guardians to see if this is an impacting obstacle that hinders consistent school attendance in their schools.

### **Data Supports that Chronic Absenteeism Challenges Begin Early**

The importance of creating interventions to improve school attendance for the youngest students was a consistent theme throughout the investigation of chronic absenteeism in low-income and rural locations. It is important for those who work in the school environment regardless of their socioeconomic population or size of the community to understand patterns of absences and the cumulative effects of chronic absenteeism of the youngest students over time (London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016). Gottfried (2015) concluded that “chronic absenteeism has detrimental effects for students and their classmates as early as in elementary school” (p.26). Currently, many schools are responding to truancy issues with students later in their educational careers, but the foundation of chronic absenteeism begins with our youngest students (Gottfried, 2015; Jordan & Miller, 2017; London et al. 2016; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Research supports that students who are chronically absent during their preschool years are more likely to continue to miss school in the early elementary years (Ehrlich et al. 2016). Working with parents to create a solid base of consistent school attendance needs to be established in the early years of primary school to build upon later in a child’s academic career. Table 2.1 illustrates the findings of Ehrlich et al. (2016) as they compared and correlated Preschool attendance with kindergarten and second-grade attendance. Table 2.1 highlights the need for needs for interventions designed to improve absenteeism for the youngest students to improve attendance patterns later in these students’ academic careers (Ehrlich et al. 2016).

Chronic absenteeism in the youngest of students affects achievement and development as early as four and five years old as evidence from research studies support. (Ehrlich et al. 2016;

Jordan & Miller, 2017; Gottfried, 2015). A study on preschool attendance highlighted that the more a student misses school between preschool and second grade the lower their reading fluency is at the end of second grade (Ehrlich et al. 2016). Jordan and Miller's (2017) study indicated findings that students with too many absences in PreK and kindergarten are "associated with weaker reading skills, higher retention rates, and lagging development of the social skills needed to persist in school" (p. 5). Regardless of a child's geographical location or income status of the family, the child who misses the most school early in their school career typically has the most academic ground to gain compared to peers who have a sound foundation for school attendance (Jordan & Miller 2017). Chronic absenteeism stakeholders need to foster necessary early interactions with parents and guardians to get our youngest students to attend school consistently and develop a healthy routine.

<b>Table 2.1</b>		
<b>HML Model Results for 2nd Grade DIBELS Score</b>		
<b>Preschool Abence Rate</b>	<b>Percentage Chronically Absent in Kindergarten</b>	<b>Percentage Chronically Absent in 2ND Grade</b>
<b>0&lt;3.3%</b>	3.90%	2.40%
<b>3.3&lt;6.6%</b>	6.60%	3.00%
<b>6.6&lt;10%</b>	12.50%	5.70%
<b>10&lt;15%</b>	22.80%	11.10%
<b>15&lt;20%</b>	36.50%	18.60%
<b>20+</b>	58.50%	31.00%

(Ehrlich, Gwynne,  
Allensworth, & Serah, 2016)





### **Chronic Absenteeism: Rural versus Urban**

Both rural and urban America has struggled with chronic absenteeism in recent years. According to a 2015-16 U.S. Departments of Education report, more than seven million students missed 15 days or more of school (Mineo, 2019). Chronic absenteeism within American schools has negatively impacted millions of students and their educational development to the point that policymakers have described this phenomenon as the “Absenteeism Crisis” (Gottfried & Ehrlich, 2018). According to Chang and Davis (2015), national data illustrates that approximately five to seven and a half million school-aged students miss a month or more of school each year. Additional federal research data has identified that approximately one in seven students who attend public schools have a high rate of absenteeism (Conry & Richards, 2018). Closely examining chronic absenteeism data further, the incredible number of school days missed overall due to chronic absenteeism is “approximately 100 million to 150 million missed days of instruction across the nation” (Gottfried, 2017A. p.129). The research identifies a national concern with chronic absenteeism that includes all schools regardless of rural or urban locations.

Mineo (2019) pointed out that the high rates of absenteeism can be a problem in rural and urban schools but there is a considerable amount of research focused on urban studies compared to rural ones. Mineo’s article fully supports my review of the literature as many urban studies, mostly quantitative, were quickly found and a considerable amount of time was spent in search of evidence for rural studies. The review of the literature revealed several case studies of interventions used to curb poor school attendance in American urban and suburban areas where larger statistics could be generated to create a greater significance out of any generated data (Gennetian et al. 2018; Robinson, et al. 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Even though 20% of American students attend rural schools, small rural schools have been overlooked when

researching chronic absenteeism (Mineo, 2019). According to Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2018), the USDA Economic Research Service in 2012 reported that educational attainment is quite different between rural and urban areas. According to this data, 30% of urban adults obtain a college degree compared to 17.5% of rural adults who received a college degree (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). Despite chronic absenteeism impacting both urban and rural areas, it does appear that rural America has some distinct differences compared to those who live in urban areas.

Traditions and trends in rural America also may play a role that affects students at school and may hinder school attendance compared to urban areas. Many rural communities that once relied on a single industry such as logging or agriculture have been negatively impacted by technological advancements and cheap labor leading to a negative economic change (Mette et al. 2016). According to Mette et al. (2016), due to isolation from urban areas, challenges exist that may limit low-income support due to the community's remote rural location, leaving families challenged to meet their basic needs. Even when services are available, some families may refuse to receive such services as free and reduced school lunches due to social stigma within the community (Mette et al. 2016). This social stigma can impact students' school day, leading towards an unwelcome school climate. Challenged school climates have higher chronic absenteeism rates than schools with a more moderate school climate (Eck et al. 2017). The cycle seems to continue for poor, rural communities as students who are academically high achieving tend to out-migrate due to a negative perception of their rural community's economy (Mette et al. 2016).

Students and their families in rural locations face distinctly different obstacles than their urban counterparts (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). Rural families experience different

environmental factors that influence thinking towards consistent school attendance (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). According to Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2018), rural families have less access to resources outside the family and social support networks because of geographical isolation. Mineo (2019) highlighted that rural students experience greater obstacles than their urban counterparts ranging from limited resources to teacher shortages. Learning what environmental factors or obstacles prevent rural students from consistently attending school will add to the growing research on chronic absenteeism. Additional work with consistent school attendance of economically disadvantaged students who live in rural areas would contribute to the currently established research on school attendance.

### **Interventions Designed to Improve Chronic Absenteeism Obstacle and Challenges**

Schools working to improve school attendance across the nation search for interventions that will make a difference with the families and students they serve. Few interventions have been piloted or studied that were explicitly designed for improving the attendance of rurally located students. Most interventions reviewed during the analysis of the chronic absenteeism literature could easily be adjusted to positively impact rural schools, but most interventions reviewed were attempted in urban areas. A great deal of chronic absenteeism research focused on urban poverty and while many ideas have been gathered regarding low-income school attendance little has been uncovered with improving rurally located low-income students' attendance. If attendance interventions could reduce low-income students' chronic absenteeism by ten absences or more, evidence supports that these students could reduce their achievement gap by five to ten percent (Gershenson, Jacksnowitz, & Brannegan, 2017).

Improving school attendance through interventions designed to strengthen home and school communications was a consistent theme discovered throughout the literature review.

Schools must closely examine how they connect to parents, what messages they convey to highlight the importance of school attendance, and discover what barriers exist that prevent consistent school attendance (Smyth-Leistico & Page, 2018). Smyth-Leistico and Page (2018) piloted an intervention that looked to reduce chronic absenteeism in kindergarten students through the use of two-way text communication. The pilot's goal was to focus on providing useful information to the home and establishing the parent as the most important resource when it comes to getting students to school consistently (Smyth-Leistico & Page, 2018). Success in this text message pilot was observed as parents received important information regarding school attendance and improvements in attendance were observed (Smyth-Leistico & Page, 2018). According to Smyth-Leistico and Page (2018), text communication intervention is not a stand-alone intervention but one that could be combined with other supports designed at improving attendance.

The parent's perception is a key component to their child's school attendance and a study by Lasky-Fink, Robinson, Chang, and Rogers (2019) examined parents' beliefs and misconceptions. Examining how school communication is perceived by the parent or guardian is important to verify the delivered clarity of school attendance messages (Lasky-Fink et al. 2019). The pilot study by Lasky-Fink et al. (2019) improved school attendance by two percent when they simplified the language within messages sent home emphasizing the importance of school attendance and the negative possibilities for not attending school regularly (Lasky-Fink et al. 2019). This pilot examined what was deemed effective truancy notices and discovered that the most effective written communication used 60% fewer words than a typical notice, highlighted the role of a parent in school attendance, and shared that poor school attendance has significant negative academic implications (Lasky-Fink et al. 2019). It was discovered that by targeting a

parent's belief system through a simplified approach of communication, improvements in school attendance were made (Lasky-Fink et al., 2019; Rogers & Feller, 2018). Working to improve communication between home and school to reduce the challenges of attending school regularly can be considered a form of personalized intervention (Rogers & Feller, 2018). The chronic absenteeism research is clear that each child's situation is unique and that parents' beliefs and perceptions of school and attendance will vary. Requiring schools to know their families intimately to work collaboratively through effective communication would likely improve school attendance.

Targeting school climates that complicate regular school attendance is an important strategy to explore when addressing chronic absenteeism. Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt, and Johnson's (2017) study highlighted that school climates set the stage within a school regarding what kind of attendance rates occur within schools. This study concluded that students who had unfavorable perceptions of their school climate tended to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism within their school (Eck et al. 2017). The creation of challenging school climates can occur within the school for a variety of reasons. Looking at low-income, rural America we too often see smaller school communities that are forced to close and consolidate as populations dwindle, resources become scarce, and the cost-effectiveness of maintaining small schools is questioned (Mette et al. 2016). Blending multiple schools will create a school culture that is likely to be quite different from a student's original school. How these students perceive their new learning environment may decide if the child attends school regularly or if there are challenges to attend due to newly created obstacles or challenges (Mette et al. 2016). Obstacles and challenges must be identified through communication (Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). When an obstacle or challenge is discovered, it is important to develop strategies and interventions

designed to remove or eliminate the barriers that will hopefully lead to an improved school climate (Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). The child and parent's perceptions of the school climate must be positive as evidence suggests that school climates that are considered challenging have higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Eck et al. 2017).

### **Summary**

The scholarly review and exploration of the relevant studies on the phenomenon of school chronic absenteeism provided considerable insight that offered this researcher direction on how to progress with this study on chronic absenteeism. According to Edwards and Sullivan (2014), despite a considerable number of the United States' population residing in rural areas, a vast majority of existing chronic absenteeism research has focused on urban schools. The work in the realm of chronic absenteeism has been extensive and well done in many specific areas but with minimal explorations into the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism in rural America (Edwards & Sullivan 2014). In addition to limits in rural research on chronic absenteeism, peer-reviewed journals and case studies mostly took a quantitative approach when exploring chronic absenteeism both nationally and locally to gather specific evidence from various subgroups as teams worked to curb school absenteeism. The researcher identified that additional research was needed in the field to explore what evidence supports school chronic absenteeism that focuses on a rural population. The exploration of the relevant literature on chronic absenteeism molded this study into qualitative, with a phenomenological approach to explore chronically absent students who lived in rural Northern Maine.

Four overarching themes that create obstacles and challenges hindering consistent school attendance emerged from the review of relevant literature on school chronic absenteeism. Obstacles and challenges that disrupted consistent school attendance based on a review of the

literature included (a) parents misconceptions create school attendance challenges, (b) chronic absenteeism challenges begin early, (c) chronic absenteeism is impacted by limited resources for those living in poverty and who are rurally located, and (d) chronic absenteeism is challenged by poor communication between home and school. Several studies that highlighted chronic absenteeism interventions at urban schools were also explored to address one or more of the obstacles or challenges identified. Despite these emerging challenges and obstacles, Schulting (2017) claimed that there is no single solution or program that will completely solve all attendance issues in any school. With the exploration of relevant literature in the field of school chronic absenteeism, the researcher selected Spencer's PVEST as a theoretical framework to guide the study. The PVEST framework guided the study to identify the obstacles and challenges that hinder consistent school attendance and how the students of the research participants respond to the stress existing in their lives. Poor school attendance for rurally located students may not fully be extinguished, but a meticulous examination into this subgroup may provide answers and potential new thinking that may move our work in chronic absenteeism forward.

### **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study explored the challenges and obstacles that cause chronic absenteeism for students living in rural Northern Maine. Chronic absenteeism is a national concern that has schools across the country exploring and developing interventions to address poor school attendance (Cook et al. 2017). Conry and Richards (2018) shared that truancy is addressed differently from state to state. For Northern Maine schools to create effective attendance interventions, a deeper understanding was needed from the perspective of those who live through the challenges that are associated with consistently attending rural Northern Maine schools. Gathered evidence that can highlight any existing obstacles and challenges that impede consistent school attendance can be used by rural Northern Maine schools to improve the learning environment's quality, leading to reduced chronic absenteeism rates.

This study used phenomenological research to explore the obstacles that impact chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine schools. A phenomenological approach is designed to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, such as chronic absenteeism, by examining the experience of the participants of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). According to Stone (1979), phenomenological research aims to gain the perceptions of those being studied through the examination of an individual's fundamental consciousness. Qutoshi (2018) explained that using a phenomenological approach will broaden the mind and will help improve the way one thinks about the phenomenon. Phenomenological research requires a deep and prolonged interaction with a small sample of subjects who live and experience the phenomenon of interest to develop relationships of meaning and patterns (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The core of the phenomenological approach interacts and examines the lived experience of the research



participants and it is these life experiences that will reveal a deeper understanding of the identified research questions that are driving this study.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the strategy of inquiry used in this study to gain a richer knowledge base of those who experience the challenges of attending school routinely. An IPA research approach, according to Alase (2017), provides a researcher the innermost opportunity to investigate the “lived experiences” of the participants. The interpretative phenomenological analysis allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences and allows the participants to outline their life experiences while allowing the researcher to make personal and professional connections to the participants’ experiences (Alase, 2017). The interpretative process requires the researcher to glean meaning from the lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Qutoshi (2018) explained that through the interpretative phenomenology methodology a researcher can gain a deeper understanding within a study that investigates the lived experiences of human beings. To learn more about chronic absenteeism of students who live in rural Northern Maine, the IPA methodology provided the necessary structure and organization to capture the lived experience of the participants to enhance a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The interpretative phenomenological analysis explored the lived experiences of those who experience the study’s phenomenon and has been determined by the researcher as the best strategy to address this research’s statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and guiding research questions.

### **Site Information and Demographics/Setting**

This study was dependent upon data found only within rural, Northern Maine school systems. The selected research site was a high school located in a rural agricultural community found in Northern Maine. The Northern Maine school selected as the research site had a student

body of approximately 430 students whose grade levels range from ninth to twelfth grade. Based on 2019 school lunch data, 68.09% of the research site's students were eligible for free and reduced lunch (Maine Department of Education, 2019). Based on two recent years of attendance data, the research site had a high rate of chronically absent students. State data gathered from the Maine Department of Education's Data Warehouse identified this Northern Maine school's chronic absenteeism rate of 24.3% during the 2016-2017 school year and a chronic absenteeism rate of 17.5% in 2017-2018 (Maine Department of Education, 2018). The research site's population aligned with the parameters of this qualitative study. This selected setting was appropriate to conduct this examination of chronic absenteeism of students who are identified as and who live in rural, Northern Maine.

### **Participants/Sampling Method**

The research participants of this study were parents or guardians of freshmen and sophomore students from a rural Northern Maine high school whose children were identified as chronically absent based on the research site's attendance data. According to the Maine Department of Education (2019), "Students become identified as chronically absent when a student is absent for ten percent or more of the days enrolled, excused and unexcused". The parents and guardians participated in the study to learn more about the phenomena of chronic absenteeism of students who attend rural Northern Maine schools. Seven families took part in a qualitative investigation that used an interview protocol to glean information from parents or guardians of chronically absent students. The interview protocol was a semi-structured model (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with open-ended questions. Probing secondary questions were designed to capture additional insight into chronic absenteeism at this rural Northern Maine high

school. The interview questions were designed to support the research question identified earlier that will drive this investigation.

The researcher believed that there were several advantages to creating a research pool from families of only ninth and tenth-grade students. According to Maine Legislative Statutes (2020), students in Maine must be enrolled in school until their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. Under this same Maine statute, and as long as specific requirements are met by the student and parents, a student can be waived from attending school when this individual graduates from their freshmen year and has reached 15 years of age (Maine Legislative Statutes, 2020). According to the research site's attendance data, the freshman and sophomore classes both have a high rate of chronic absenteeism and would support the sample pool for this study. Depending upon the time frame to complete this study on chronic absenteeism and due to the younger age of this population of students, the selected research volunteer's children potentially would not graduate or be old enough to drop out of school. Any new knowledge gained from learning about the lived experiences of families who struggle with chronic absenteeism with students currently required to attend school could potentially be used to support the families of this study as they move forwards during their final years of high school.

The identified pool of chronically absent freshmen and sophomore candidates was narrowed to reduce potential limitations based on the researcher's leadership connection within the district. Serving as the middle school principal for several years within the district, many parents and guardians in the pool of potential research candidates may know the researcher as a prior school administrator. The research site receives students from several surrounding schools, and their children would not typically attend the school that the researcher led. The goal in the formation of the research pool was to select families whose children attended other surrounding

community elementary schools who attend the identified research site. Additionally, parents and guardians were not invited to participate in this study if any children of the family attended the school that was led by the researcher at the time of the study. The researcher believed that parents and guardians would be more accurate with their account of their lived experiences with chronic absenteeism during the interview process knowing that they do not have a child rostered in the educational environment that the researcher leads.

### **Sampling Strategy to Determine Participants**

A purposeful sampling strategy for this study was determined to create a volunteer pool of potential research candidates to take part in this qualitative study of chronic absenteeism. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) highlighted the importance of purposeful sampling and is key to a successful research study to identify and defend a researcher's selection process to identify research participants. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained that purposeful sampling by the conductor of the study is most appropriate to interact and glean a clear description from information-rich cases in qualitative research. According to Creswell and Gutterman (2019), the key to purposeful sampling is for the researcher to intentionally select participants based on their understanding of the phenomenon. Selecting parents and guardians of students who have been identified as chronically absent to participate in this study was purposeful to create a sampling that offered a deep description of life experiences with the challenges of attending school regularly. The selection process began by examining the research site's attendance data to identify a large pool of potential research candidates. Attendance data was secured in the district's data management system and could only be accessed by specific staff and administration. The district's administration and guidance department played a role in accessing

the district's data management system and creating a pool of qualifying candidates for this study.

Phenomenological research requires intentionally selecting small samples of participants with prolonged engagement to develop patterns of the phenomenon and to harvest a clear description of the lived experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). According to Smith and Osborn (2008), the sample size of a phenomenological study can vary and there is no correct answer when assembling the number of research participants. The IPA methodology does not have an exact sample size that has been agreed upon, but according to Smith et al. (2009), the size of the sample for a doctoral dissertation is typically in the range of four to ten interviews. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted that the primary concern of the IPA approach is the detailed account of the experiences of the individual. Quality is the focus and not the quantity of the interviews in phenomenology (Smith et al. 2009). Smith et al. (2009) explained that because of the deep complexities of many human phenomena, a focus on a small number of cases usually benefits IPA studies. After a review of other dissertations that used the IPA methodology, the goal of seven to eight research participants was this study's target sample size (Yoshihara, 2018; Blake 2018).

According to Smith et al. (2009), one of the most important things at the beginning of the interview process is to establish a good rapport with the research participants. Smith et al. (2009) explained that research participants need to be comfortable and know they can trust the researcher during the interview process. The researcher worked to establish a positive working relationship with parents and guardians before and throughout the research process. It was important for the accuracy of data collection to ensure that the researcher's role as a former principal does not negatively impact data collection for this study and taking these outlined

strategies to select sampling of research participants may ensure that this goal occurred. This purposeful sampling process produced an interview opportunity that generated chronic absenteeism evidence supporting the research question driving this study.

### **Instrumentation & Data Collection Procedures**

The objective of the qualitative IPA was to explore the lived experiences of our research participants to learn more about the obstacles that cause chronic absenteeism of students living in rural Northern Maine. A new perspective of this phenomenon may lead to enhancements made within the school environment to improve school attendance. This qualitative investigation used an established interview protocol based on the work of Seidman (1998), to glean information from research participants. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained that in-depth individual interviews potentially can provide rich descriptions of the life experiences of research candidates. Interview questions were the key data collection tool during this study and it was paramount that a well-developed research instrument was created to gather the intended information. Questions of the interview process were designed to align with this study's research questions (Montoya, 2016). Based on Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guidance, the established interview protocol was a semi-structured model with several open-ended questions to provide data to support the study's research questions. The researcher used exploring follow-up secondary questions to capture additional insight into chronic absenteeism from the research participants (Seidman, 1998).

A parent or guardian who had a high school freshman or sophomore who were identified as chronically absent was interviewed to gather their life experience with chronic absenteeism. Parents and guardians were asked to respond to open-ended questions during the interview process. Matrices were constructed to highlight the relationship between the research

questions and the interview questions of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The following research question was designed to drive this study's exploration of the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism: How do parents/guardians of high school students with chronic absenteeism describe the obstacles and challenges which prevent their children from consistently attending a rural Northern Maine school?

Technology played a significant role throughout the data collection process. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the goal was that all interviews would be conducted using the video platform, Zoom. With permission from the research candidate, the interview sessions were recorded to allow the researcher to review the conversation for accuracy of data extrapolation. If key research participants' participation in the study become hindered due to limitations or discomfort with technology, the University of New England's Health and Human Safety Committee granted the researcher permission to interview candidates in person as long as established COVID-19 protocols were adhered to during the interview to capture data-rich life events. In-person interviews were transcribed by the application, Otter Voice Notes, while the researcher used the transcription tool found within the Zoom platform for interviews that were not conducted virtually. Both in-person and virtual interviews were conducted in a comfortable and quiet atmosphere where the interviewee felt safe and comfortable to share their personal experiences with the phenomenon, chronic absenteeism.

### **Data Analysis**

The study's statement of the problem, purpose statement, and research questions guided the researcher's process of interpreting collected research data (Merriam, 2014). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) described that data analysis begins with organizing large amounts of data and then reducing it in a meaningful way. Smith et al. (2009) explained that within the current literature

on IPA, there is no single method prescribed for working with the data. Smith et al. (2009) proposed a step-by-step protocol to assist and to make the data analysis of IPA manageable for the novice researcher. The following protocol, borrowed from Smith et al. (2009), was used during the data analysis process of this study:

Step 1: Reading and re-reading.

Step 2: Initial noting.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes.

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes.

Step 5: Moving to the next case.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases.

Data analysis of this study occurred immediately after the interview by reviewing field notes and coding created interview transcripts to identify large overarching themes. The construction of overarching categories began with the first interview and will adjust with each new collection of data (Merriam, 2014). The IPA methodology required the researcher to focus on the life experiences and to describe what all of the research participants have in common (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Interpretations of chronic absenteeism based on the life experiences shared by the research participants were made by the researcher. “Phenomenology studies is not just a description of the life experiences shared, but it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher interprets the meaning of the lived experience” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016. P. 49). This phenomenological study gathered the life experiences of chronic absenteeism shared by the research participants and strived to answer the study’s guiding research question.



### **Limitations of the Research Design**

Several limitations existed within the interpretative phenomenological analysis study on chronic absenteeism that was identified and a plan established to mitigate these limitations. The IPA methodology requires life experience data to be gathered from research participants and then interpreted by the researcher. The researcher assumes a central role in the exploring, analyzing, and interpreting the life experiences of the research participants (Tuffour, 2017). According to Tuffour (2017), researcher bias is a limitation of IPA studies as the researcher is the main instrument in the collecting and interpreting data. Smith, et al. (2009) explained that bracketing or suspending judgment of preconceived notions of the phenomenon is crucial during the data collection and analysis process of an IPA study. The bracketing process is a key research method of phenomenology that demonstrates the validity of data collection and the analysis process (Chan et al. 2013). Each research participant's description of their life experiences was attended closely and received the utmost focus as their story was shared. Throughout the process of data collection and through the researcher's reflective process, the use of the hermeneutic circle model was used. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the hermeneutic circle model as a process of acknowledging personal preconceptions before interviewing, engaging and listening intently to the story of the research participant, and after the interview, the researcher will reflect upon the conversation again during a sense-making process that will impact the researcher's prior preconceptions. It is assumed that each research participant's life experiences become a part of the whole within the researcher's description of the phenomenon (Smith et al. 2009). According to Chan et al. (2013), bracketing is not easy. Based on the research of Chan et al. (2013), the following bracketing strategies were selected and will be employed by the researcher during this study's data collection and data analysis process:

Strategy 1: Researcher begins research with an assessment of his understanding regarding chronic absenteeism

Strategy 2: Through reflexivity, the research will identify areas of potential bias of chronic absenteeism and will note these preconceptions in a journal to reflect upon during the research process

Strategy 3: Research participants will be engaged in the bracketing process during the interview process

Strategy 4: The creation of a thorough research plan before data collection begins

Strategy 5: Open-ended questions will be used during the interview process

Strategy 6: The researcher will maintain curiosity in what they may learn by allowing the research participants to speak freely

Strategy 7: Develop new learning from research participants through the semi-structured interview process

Participant bias was another limitation of this qualitative study. Tuffour (2017) explained that while the researcher is trying to make sense of the phenomenon, the research participant is taking part in their process of sense-making regarding the study. It was important to reduce participant bias of this small sampling of the research participants by establishing an interview process that created a positive and engaging interaction that allowed a comfortable flow of the research participant's story (Smith et al. 2009). The small sample size of this study is consistent with the phenomenological approach to gain a detailed description of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained that a researcher's ability to provide an in-depth look into the phenomenon diminishes with each new research participant added to the sample in a qualitative study. Therefore, it is the intent of this

study to explore the lived experiences of a smaller number of participants with deeper insight into each participant, rather than generalized knowledge. IPA requires rich data that is gathered by granting participants the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences (Smith et al. 2009). The selection of research candidates will be important to capture an in-depth description of chronic absenteeism from parents and guardians of chronically absent children who live in rural Northern Maine.

Serving as an elementary administrator in the same district of the high school research participants could be a limitation of this study. The researcher's role within the district must not influence the lived experiences shared by the research participants. During the selection process of the research participants, the goal in developing the pool of research candidates was to select families whose children attended the research site but did not attend the elementary school where the researcher served as a building administrator. Additionally, parents and guardians were not invited to take part in this study if any children of the family currently attend the school that the researcher leads. It was important to collect accurate lived experiences from the study's research volunteers. It was believed that having a child in the school that the research leads may result in less accurate information.

Individuals who were not included to take part in this research are a limitation to this study. Despite the researcher's reasons for using high school freshmen and sophomores in a specific rural, Northern Maine school district, those not included can be considered a limitation of the research. Would the shared lived experiences of seniors in another rural Northern Maine district highlight different findings compared to the results of this study? The limits of the research in terms of who was not part of the study must be considered a limitation of the research.

A final limitation of this study was that research gathered through the interview process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent lived experiences of chronic absenteeism of a student and family may look different compared to interviews conducted before COVID-19 or after the pandemic is over. The findings of this study may highlight new characteristics of chronic absenteeism that could potentially include themes such as student disengagement from remote learning practices, challenges associated with a lack of home technology, or possibly a lack of home support for at-home learning. Emerging themes and interpretations made from those experiencing chronic absenteeism may be influenced by the way the coronavirus impacts northern Maine.

### **Credibility**

The quality and rigor of phenomenological studies have been called into question and it was the goal for the authenticity and trustworthiness of this study to reflect the world being described (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The data collected during the interview process was reviewed and reflected upon to capture and portray the shared life experiences of the phenomenon accurately through the interpretive process. This reflective practice with the research was captured through a process known as journaling. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) explained that journaling allows the research to keep an orderly record of research activities and creates an opportunity for the researcher to record one's insights, reflections, questions, and much more. Journal notes taken during and after the interview process was reflected upon during the data analysis phase of the study to accurately portray the collected life experiences of those who struggle with chronic absenteeism.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), multiple sources should be used to help the researcher check the interpretation of the data through triangulation. Triangulation is a process of

checking the validity of qualitative research by using multiple data sources in an investigation to create an understanding (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). Triangulation was used in this study on chronic absenteeism through extracting evidence from multiple interviews that leads to the interpretation of common themes within the study. Evidence and artifacts were collected and used during the exploration of this study. These artifacts and gathered evidence have been made available in the appendices of this document to enhance the credibility of this study.

### **Member Checking Procedures**

In addition to triangulation, research participants were asked to examine the accuracy of the study's findings. Creswell and Gutterman (2019) refer to the process of having participants check the findings of the study as member checking. Finally, Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) suggest meeting the notion of objectivity or confirmability within qualitative research field notes and transcripts should be included to allow the reader to assess the findings of the study. To create a trail for public judgment, research artifacts was be shared within the body of the research that includes interview transcripts, memos, and reflective thoughts through the data gathering process. Efforts were made by the researcher throughout the exploration of chronic absenteeism to use these strategies to protect the integrity of this qualitative study.

### **Transferability**

This study was intentionally designed to include a small sample size of research participants who meet the study's chronic absenteeism criteria. The specific characteristic of the research participant will be a limitation of this study on chronic absenteeism. Each study participant's child attended the same rurally located school in Northern Maine and is considered chronically absent by Maine state law. This process intended to learn from the lived experiences of families who struggle to attend school consistently and determine what rural Northern Maine

schools can do differently to reduce chronic absenteeism among their economically disadvantaged students. Due to the nature of this specific study, the location and description of the lived experiences may reveal different experiences compared to those from an alternate location or population. This study is designed based on gaps in the research where extensive studies exist for urban studies on student chronic absenteeism while few focused on the rural locations as outlined in the literature review. Despite this study exploring a specific geographical area, transferability existed within the confines of the rural and economically disadvantaged students who are chronically absent from school. This study may benefit future chronic absenteeism research of economically disadvantaged and rural, American children.

### **Dependability**

This phenomenological research used Yardley's four principles criteria to assess the quality of this study. The four principles were used to determine the validity and quality of this body of work include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Smith et al. 2009). Sensitivity to context throughout the study was a central focus during the collection of data during the interview process. Smith et al. (2009) explained that an IPA study is only as good as the data collected and much care and sensitivity should be used from the interview to the sense-making of the lived experience to the final written description. A commitment to rigor was demonstrated through thoroughness throughout the study, from a carefully selected sample of participants to the researcher's attentiveness during each interview and meticulously selected excerpts to support emerging themes (Smith et al. 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), transparency and coherence are evident in research when each detail of the research process is articulated clearly. A goal of this study was to provide the future readers of this study with several forms of clarity that included a text rich with

descriptions and tables highlighting important features of the study. Finally, Yardley's final principle, impact and importance is the real test of the validity of the conducted research (Smith et al. 2009). This study on chronic absenteeism shares a perspective on chronic absenteeism that was unique from previous studies offered a valuable perspective of those who experience chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability within qualitative research can be a challenging accomplishment as the researcher created a clear notion of objectivity in their research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Tracing data from interpretation to its origin, samples of interview transcripts, and coding procedures is available for public exploration. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) described that creating an audit trail will lead to a demonstration of the reliability of the study. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of an independent audit that includes a collection of evidence that starts at the beginning of the study and ends with the final report. The evidence included interview questions, initial notes, research questions, annotated transcripts, and early drafts of the study. Smith et al. (2009) explained that the hermeneutic circle process helps the researcher to understand the phenomenon by exploring the "relationship between the part and the whole; to understand the parts, you look to the whole" (p.27). The researcher incorporated journaling research strategies such as the hermeneutic circle model and triangulation to create a credible and objective study of chronic absenteeism from rural Northern Maine students.

### **Ethical Issues in the Proposed Study**

This study followed The Belmont Report's "Ethical principles and guidelines for research of human subjects" (Protections, 2016). Research participants will be made aware of the purpose of this qualitative IPA study before deciding to take part in the research process. Creswell and

Guterman (2019) highlighted that research participants may be asked to share private and personal information, and that will require a significant level of trust. Each research volunteer was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and the life experiences shared during the interview process. The confidentiality of the participant was treated with the utmost importance and care. The researcher remained fully aware of the ethical responsibilities towards the research participants (Smith et al. 2012). An informed consent form was prepared for the candidates that included the purpose of the research, research procedures used to collect data, risks, privacy protections, and benefits of the research (Appendix A). Informed consent was obtained from each participant before any collection of research data. Data collected from the study's research participants was secured upon the researcher's password-protected laptop. The protocols and procedures established by the University of New England's Institutional Review Board guiding research practices were strictly adhered to throughout this qualitative study.

### **Summary**

This chapter highlighted the key structures of this study's methodological approach to learning about the existing obstacles and challenges that hinder students from rural Northern Maine schools consistently and what these schools can do differently with this phenomenon. The interpretative phenomenological analysis method began by collecting a small sample of chronically absent students and their parents and guardians to volunteer to take part in the study. Merriam and Tisdale (2015) explained that to get at the essence of the lived experience, the interview is the primary method of data collection. Based on this guidance from Merriam and Tisdale, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed to collect data to meet the study's research questions. The data from the interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and broken down into overarching themes. Specific research strategies were implemented to strive towards



research that supports the trustworthiness and the authenticity of this study. The interpreted lived experiences of the research participants are shared with supporting artifacts such as transcripts and fieldnotes to allow the public to judge the accuracy of the findings. The final research description of the phenomenon could be used to potentially change the learning environment designed to reduce the number of chronically absent students. The interpretive phenomenological analysis approach was designed for this research on chronic absenteeism should provide the necessary framework to support this study's statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and guiding research questions.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to explore the obstacles and challenges that cause chronic absenteeism of students who live in rural Northern Maine. Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) served as the theoretical framework for this study. PVEST was selected to provide the necessary structure to explore how the study's research participants were impacted by chronic absenteeism based on their environments (i.e. home, school, and the rural Northern Maine community) and how the research participants and their families responded to various elements of stress resulting in their children not attending school consistently. PVEST explored how individuals develop a sense of who they are as they respond to stress experiences that may threaten one's self-perception. This study used the lens of the five stages of PVEST to collect the unique lived experiences that impact consistent school attendance.

In conjunction with this study's theoretical framework, the research was guided by a single research question:

How do parents/guardians of high school students with chronic absenteeism describe the obstacles and challenges which prevent their children from consistently attending a rural Northern Maine school?

This driving research question in tandem with the theoretical framework, PVEST, guided the findings of this study. Through this process, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the chronic absenteeism phenomenon that could lead to possible strategies to mitigate the identified challenges and obstacles unique for this population in rural Northern Maine. This chapter

presents the results of these lived experiences and key findings of seven parents and guardians of students who were identified as chronically absent from school.

### **Analysis Method**

The use of the interpretative phenomenology analysis methodology provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the research participants (Qutoshi, 2018). The interpretative process required the researcher to glean meaning from the lived experiences shared during the interview process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). To ensure the validity of this study during the data collection and data analysis phases, the researcher employed and applied multiple research-based strategies during the data collection and analysis process on the seven interview transcripts. The use of the study's theoretical framework, bracketing (Chan et al. 2013), and a protocol to interpret the data (Smith et al. 2009) will be summarized in the following paragraphs.

### **Data Collection**

Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological System Theory (PVEST) was used throughout the data collection process of this study. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to explore the five distinct stages of PVEST as research was collected to better understand how parents and guardians of high school students who are chronically absent describe the obstacles and challenges which prevent their children from consistently attending a rural Northern Maine school. The interview questions were designed to extrapolate data from the following five stages of Spencer's PVEST (Spencer, 1995): 1) Key risk contributors, 2) Stress, engagement/experiences, 3) Reactive coping methods including maladaptive solutions and adaptive solutions, 4) Stable coping responses: Emergent identities, and 5) Life stage outcomes: Adverse and productive coping products. The overarching themes emerged from the seven

research participants' lived experiences that were explored through the lens of PVEST, from the researcher's note-taking, and the study's established data interpreting and reflective protocols.

### **Bracketing**

Before each analysis of collected data from interviews, the researcher used a process known as bracketing to mitigate researcher bias and to improve the trustworthiness of data collected during the analysis phase of this study. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to mitigate any preconception that might cast doubt on the research process (Chan et al. 2013). Establishing and adhering to bracketing protocols was important to this study as the researcher was a school administrator within the same district of the research site. This IPA study required the researcher to make interpretations of the meaning of the research participant's lived experiences of chronic absenteeism and each interpretation was filtered through the study's bracketing strategies. The researcher documented in the study's reflective journal potential personal chronic absenteeism bias that the researcher would reflect upon before the interview process and during the analysis of the data. The study adopted the following bracketing strategies based on the research of Chan et al. (2013) and can be found in the researcher's reflective journal. The seven bracketing strategies involved the following steps: 1) The researcher began the research process with an assessment of his understanding of chronic absenteeism. 2) Through reflexivity, the researcher identified areas of potential bias of chronic absenteeism and noted these preconceptions in a journal that were reflected upon during the research process. 3) Research participants engaged in the bracketing process during the interview process. 4) The creation of a thorough research plan was established before data collection began. 5) Open-ended questions were used during the interview process. 6) The research participants were allowed to

speak freely to enhance the researcher's curiosity. 7) The researcher developed new learning from research participants through the semi-structured interview process.

### **Interpreting the Data**

The researcher followed a step-by-step protocol proposed by Smith et al. (2009) designed to assist the researcher in making sense of the data. Once the transcription of the interview was completed by the researcher, the interview transcripts were read and then reread. Initial noting took place during the second and third reread to explore emergent themes. Field notes and coding created by the researcher through a thorough review of the interview's transcripts helped identify large overarching themes from the lived experiences of the study's participants. The construction of overarching categories started with the first interview and continued to adjust with each new collection of data as recommended by Merriam (2014). The researcher used the lens of PVEST to help organize the data to answer the guiding research question and to support the purpose of the study. Interpreting the data involved the researcher describing each participant's perceptions individually and then synthesizing the data under each of the study's seven emergent themes.

### **Establishing Emergent Themes**

The researcher used the five stages of PVEST to categorize the lived experiences shared by each of the research participants during the interview process. Findings deemed significant by the researcher were placed in one of the five stages of PVEST to help organize the data during the analysis process. The emergent themes were then extrapolated from the five stages based on the step-by-step reflective protocol described by Smith et al. (2009). Seven emergent themes were identified through the analysis process of this study. The emergent themes include: 1) Challenges living in rural Northern Maine, 2) Family challenges, 3) Adverse childhood experiences (ACES), 4) Challenges at school, 5) The illness obstacle, 6) The impact of COVID-

19, and 7) Obstacles created by attendance misconceptions. The following section of chapter four will identify in detail the seven themes established by this study.

### **Presentation of Results and Findings**

Seven overarching themes emerged despite the seven uniquely different interviews of the parents and guardians who took part in this study on chronic absenteeism. The emerging themes represent the obstacles and challenges that impacted the high school children of the research participants from attending school consistently. In the following paragraphs and tables, the researcher will introduce the seven research participants and present their lived experiences to support each of the study's emergent themes. PVEST tables designed to collect the study's data will be reviewed as a transition to explore each of the study's findings in detail occurs. The study's findings include: 1) Challenges living in rural Northern Maine, 2) Family challenges, 3) Adverse childhood experiences (ACES), 4) Challenges at school, 5) The illness obstacle, 6) The impact of COVID-19, and 7) Obstacles created by attendance misconceptions.

### **The Research Participants**

This study was recruited seven research participants who volunteered to share their lived experiences to deepen an understanding of the chronic absentee phenomenon. Out of the seven participants, four study volunteers were parents and three participants were guardians of high school freshmen or sophomores who the research site administration identified as chronically absent. Five of the participants requested that interviews take place in person with the study's COVID protocols in place. Only two study volunteers preferred to be interviewed via Zoom. Each participant agreed to and signed a Consent of Participation in Research form shared and reviewed by the researcher. The participants were asked the same questions along with any

needed clarifying questions. A breakdown of the research participant's demographics for this study is identified in table two below.

**Table 2. Study Participants**

<b>Study's Research Participants Assigned Number</b>	<b>Parent or Guardian</b>	<b>Relationship to Chronically Absent Student</b>	<b>Student's Grade Level at the time of the Interview</b>	<b>Chronic Absenteeism Status (Improving or currently chronic)</b>	<b>Interview Occurred in Person or via Zoom</b>
1	Parent	Parent	9th Grade	Improving	Zoom
2	Parent	Parent	9th Grade	Currently Chronic	In-Person
3	Guardian	Sibling	10th Grade	Improving	In-Person
4	Parent	Parent	9th Grade	Improving	Zoom
5	Guardian	Grandparents	9th Grade	Currently Chronic	In-Person
6	Guardian	Grandparent	9th Grade	Currently Chronic	In-Person
7	Parent	Parent	10th Grade	Improving	In-Person

### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 was a parent of a child with a serious illness that required regular and expensive treatments. Living in rural Maine presented challenges to this family when it involved needed surgeries and health care for their child as the closest medical facility that can treat their child was approximately three hours away. Chronic absenteeism had been a concern throughout the school years for participant 1's child as several days were missed a year due to travel, recovery from surgeries, and other health-related concerns. Participant 1 described how overwhelmed her child became when homework piled up which led to avoidance of school. Participant 1 stated, "It's stressful for him. There's all this work because he's been out. It's so overwhelming. He doesn't know where to begin. Sometimes, the tears happen." In

addition to this, challenges created by the pandemic impacted Participant 1's child's attendance when the school was taught remotely. Poor internet connectivity also limited the interaction with learning. Participant 1 admitted that due to the many medical issues with their child they would take family vacations to help reduce stress and in the past they did not follow the school schedule causing their child to miss even more school. Participant 1 regrets taking family vacations during the school year and claimed that they underestimated the amount of learning that was missed during their child's time away.

## **Participant 2**

Participant 2 was a parent who described a challenging divorce when her children were in elementary school forcing the family to move to Northern Maine for extended family support. The neighborhood where they relocated was described as drug-infested and had many concerning individuals walking about near their home. One of Participant 2's children was sexually assaulted and moved back to live with the other parent who was located in another state. The move, divorce, sexual assault on a sibling, and a questionable neighborhood have greatly impacted one child who refused to engage in school. Participant 2 described the chronic absenteeism challenges as one that started small in middle school that gradually grew into a refusal to attend high school. COVID-19 was described as a significant factor that had negatively impacted chronic absenteeism for this child. Participant 2 shared, "I guess my child's perception is that she doesn't feel that school is necessary." During the pandemic, Participant 2's child developed the philosophy that school is not needed beyond grade eight as millions of children across the globe do not attend past eighth grade. Participant 2's child also claimed to attend school during remote learning only to be discovered that Participant's 2 child did not attend and missed a considerable amount of school. Excuses of poor internet and technology



issues were reasons given preventing student engage with learning. Despite any attempts at reasoning and working with the school to be creative with the child's education, Participant 2's child refused to attend school.

### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 is the sibling of a chronically absent student. Participant 3 became the guardian early in adulthood when their mother could no longer care for the younger child due to substance abuse. Parent drug addiction is the key reason Participant 3 has been her sibling's guardian during middle school and early high school years. Participant 3 stated, "There was no encouragement from her parents to attend school. Going to school wasn't that important to them as they were more focused on their addiction." Drugs still plague Participant 3 and her sibling's life as their mom and her drug-addicted friends pay uninvited visits to the home of participant 3. Some of these visits are unwelcomed as mom may be under the influence, or mom's friends are searching for their mom and her drugs. Participant 3 stated that their mother had overdosed twice recently at the time of the interview. Participant 3 shared that much of her sibling's elementary years elapsed before her sister was released from her mother's neglectful care and placed in a safe and stable environment that she provided. Early consistent school attendance never became a routine as the mother never made it a priority. With no consistent school routine established early on, it became a battle for Participant 3 to get her sibling to school consistently. Despite established home rules designed to foster school attendance, it was a daily struggle to get the child to school consistently. The only motivator that Participant 3 found to work was the threat and thought that friends and peers would move on to the next grade level without the chronically absent child. This chronically absent child had no plans for the future

during the time of the interview, only school engagement with the school revolved around her friends, and the sibling had no interest or investment in their own education.

#### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 was a single mom who became pregnant in high school and struggled to graduate herself. Participant 4 relied heavily on family and friends to assist with the challenges of being a single mother when her child was younger. Dad lived roughly an hour away in another rural community and his work schedule could only offer support on weekends. Participant 4 described chronic absenteeism starting back in elementary school as some undesirable events took place. Mom described a bullying event at school that was never resolved between her child and peers. Her child would cry or pretend to be sick each day not wanting to attend school to avoid those who were perceived as unkind. Her child also struggled with a bus driver who was described as mean and intimidating to the point where mom brought her child to school every day. Participant 4 stated that challenges with math led her child to consistently avoid school. School chronic absenteeism began early and continued to grow to where it was at the time of the interview. Mom shared, “We fight. We fight and I'm yelling that you gotta go to school. Then he ends up literally crying.” Mom stated that she would just give in to the crying and pleas to stay home due to frustration. Participant 4's perception included a lack of support from the school and she couldn't help her child with math challenges that fueled additional frustrations. Mom had been encouraged as some new interaction with the school seemed to be paying off as her child appeared to have established an interest in the school's audio and visual performance curriculum. Participant 4's child currently has plans in the field of art and music and this recent engagement with his interest seems to have the student looking forward to school.

## Participant 5

Participant 5 are grandparents who served as guardians to their grandchild for several years on and off. The single parent to the grandchild is addicted to heroin and has struggled with addiction since high school. The grandchild has been in the care of Maine's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). DHHS has awarded custody of this chronically absent student multiple times to different individuals that were short stays minus participant 5. Participant 5 stated, "The goal is to reunify the grandchild with the parent, but the addiction continues to get in the way." Two traumatic events were described by Participant 5 during the interview that included severe neglect by the parent towards the children during a time when the drug addiction was out of control and when DHHS in a very public setting removed the children taking them into custody. Chronic absenteeism has occurred when the child was reunified with the parent. The grandparents describe the relationship between parent and child as "more of a friendship instead of taking on a parent and child role". With the guardians, there are rules including bedtime and curfews unlike at the parent's home where the child was allowed to stay up all night and then found it challenging to attend school the next day. Participant 5 stated that the parent was not engaged in school unless threatened by reports made to the Maine Department of Health and Human Services when the child did not attend school. Participant 5 continued to share that the grandchild was the one who decided if she would attend school or not. The grandchild had verbalized that a reason she missed school was due to "concerns that the parent will overdose." The grandparents also shared that the student had spoken of significant challenges with math and was very overwhelmed. The grandchild chose to avoid school instead of facing the learning challenge. The grandchild had admitted to lying to the parent by stating that classes could be connected remotely as was done during the COVID pandemic, but the

school was not offering this option. The grandparents described their grandchild as an individual who “lacks self-esteem and confidence” after referring to friends as “the reject group”. The chronically absent student did have a career goal and realized that education is the ticket towards this goal, but still was challenged to attend school consistently. The school had worked with the family offering various options, but at the time of the interview, these options had yet to be determined.

### **Participant 6**

Participant 6 was a single grandparent who was the sole guardian of a grandchild. The grandparent stated that the child’s mother was pregnant at 15 and lived with the grandparent until three years of age. The grandparent took control of guardianship when the child’s parent’s addiction to methamphetamine and heroin took hold and negatively impacted the grandchild. The grandparent described that the grandchild between three and six observed drug use and sexual abuse towards the child’s single parent. For the next seven years, the grandparent worked to shield the child from additional drug-related challenges that the parent was experiencing. The grandparent described a horrific event when the parent broke into the home while under the influence wanting to see the teenage child. The child and grandparent did not want the interaction to take place resulting in a physical altercation where the grandparent was assaulted several times. The child fled the house to the neighbors where law enforcement was notified. Since then, the parent had been in jail and moved to different homeless shelters in southern Maine. The grandparent stated, “My grandchild is fearful of her mom and has developed mental health issues that include a sleep disorder.” The student claimed to be afraid to attend school because she was worried that the parent will go there. Participant 6 shared, “My grandchild had refused to counsel with a therapist and to work with the pediatrician.” The

chronically absent student had refused to take medication to help with the sleeping disorder due to the fear of becoming an addict. The grandparent worked tirelessly with the school to help get the grandchild into school, but to this point, all efforts have not had the desired outcome.

### **Participant 7**

Participant 7 was a divorced parent who described their family's challenges with chronic absenteeism as one that comes and goes. The parent highlighted challenges with consistent school attendance beginning in middle school. Participant 7 stated, "My child has experienced peer issues that may or may not be bullying and chooses not to go to school to avoid interacting with challenging peers." At first, the child pretended to be sick and was able to stay home on some days that the child needed to avoid particular students. Eventually, the parent understood what was happening with the child's attendance and reached out to the school. The parent claimed, "Things improved, but from time to time, there was still a request to stay home occasionally." The parent shared that the child was fully engaged with a particular extracurricular activity and rarely missed a day when that activity took place. When the extracurricular activity was not offered it was a fight to get the child to complete all school work and attend school consistently. The child would fall behind with homework and become overwhelmed requiring interventions in place by the school and home to help the child recover. The parent stated that the interaction with the school administration had been great as they have worked together to get the child to attend school consistently. Participant 7 stated, "One area of concern is that my son does not see the importance of learning some of the materials presented in class." The parent felt that the child was not engaged with most learning activities and that if improved communication was established between the teacher and students highlighting the importance of new learning would be beneficial for this student.

## Exploring the Data

The research participant's interview transcripts were explored through the lens of PVEST as work towards developing the study's overarching themes occurred. The five stages of Spencer's (1995) PVEST include: 1) Key risk contributors, 2) Stress, engagement/experiences, 3) Reactive coping methods including maladaptive solutions and adaptive solutions, 4) Stable coping responses: emergent identities, and 5) Life stage outcomes: adverse and productive coping products. Tables two through six outlines the key PVEST findings of this research on chronic absenteeism for each participant within each of the five stages. Each table that follows highlights one of the five stages of PVEST and shares the research participants lived experiences in that specific stage of the study's theoretical framework. This data is boiled down even further into the identified emergent themes found in table seven. A breakdown of the study's findings is specifically outlined in the following tables.

**Table 3. PVEST - Key Risk Contributors**

<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Participant 4</b>	<b>Participant 5</b>	<b>Participant 6</b>	<b>Participant 7</b>
Significant Illness  Rural Concerns: Travel/ Poor internet service	Divorce  Single parent  Challenging Neighborhood  ACEs - Sibling experienced sexual assault  Rural concern: Poor internet service  SES	Drug Abuse by parents  Parents who do not value education  School attendance was never established early  SES	Parents had own struggles to attend school  Divorced (single parent)  SES	The parent had poor HS school experience  Parents drug addiction  Single parent  Parental neglect  SES  Bounced between guardian and parent	Drug riddled neighborhood  The parent is an addict  Single working grand-parent  Violence witnessed and experienced  Mental health concerns  SES	Poor peer relationships  Potential bullying

**Table 4. PVEST - Stress Engagement/Experiences**

<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Participant 4</b>	<b>Participant 5</b>	<b>Participant 6</b>	<b>Participant 7</b>
Gets behind in school work  Becomes over-whelmed	Challenges of divorce  The child does not see the value of school  COVID forced family inside  Sibling has moved away to live with another parent	Trust issues  Fights with guardians to attend school daily  Worried about being left behind by peers	The parent cannot help student school (academically and with early childhood bullying)  Challenges of being a single Parent  Works weekends relied on ex-spouse and other family members to assist  Student struggles with math considerably	When the parent is “using” cannot care for children  Guardians take over care for the parent  Guardians/parent fight regarding the welfare of children  Child worry about the wellbeing of parent  DHHS reunification  Mom is not engaged with school	Sleep disorder  Grandchild lives in fear  Grandchild afraid to become a drug user  Grandfather blames self for grand-child’s failures	The child fakes being ill to avoid school  Child will avoid peer issues by not going to school

**Table 5. PVEST - Reactive Coping Method (Maladaptive or Adaptive Solutions)**

<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Participant 4</b>	<b>Participant 5</b>	<b>Participant 6</b>	<b>Participant 7</b>
<p>Misses additional school</p> <p>Parent &amp; The school creates a plan to get caught up</p>	<p>Developed extreme sleep patterns (up all night and sleeps during school hours)</p> <p>Makes excuses why she/he cannot attend</p> <p>Excuses have changed over the weeks and years</p>	<p>Refuses to attend</p> <p>Will not work with school or guardians to establish interventions to improve school attendance</p> <p>The student does not value school</p>	<p>Parent fights with her child \to go to school almost daily.</p> <p>Sometimes parent gives in due to fatigue of fighting</p> <p>Blames some of child's lack of success based on parent's limitations with school</p> <p>Child's fear of parent getting in trouble with truancy motivates child to get to school</p>	<p>Child misses school</p> <p>The child takes care of self and parent</p> <p>Few rules guide child at parent's late bedtime results in sleeping in</p> <p>The parent receives drug counseling and then relapses</p> <p>Child worries about parent overdosing</p> <p>Does not react to truancy letters sent by the school</p>	<p>Does not attend school.</p> <p>Stays up all night and sleeps through the day.</p> <p>Refuses help from therapy, counseling, or prescribed medication</p> <p>Hangs out with "Bad kids"</p>	<p>Misses School</p> <p>Falls behind</p> <p>Cannot see the importance of some learning</p>

**Table 6. PVEST - Stable Coping Response: Emergent Identities**

<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Participant 4</b>	<b>Participant 5</b>	<b>Participant 6</b>	<b>Participant 7</b>
<p>Attempts to stay on track with work.</p> <p>Seeks parental help when needed.</p>	<p>Has a goal of owning a clothing store</p> <p>Does not attempt to take part in any interventions to get student to school</p>	<p>Grandparents and older siblings encourage student to attendance</p> <p>Attempting to surround students with "good people"</p> <p>Connects with friends with cell phone</p>	<p>Mom transport's child daily to school</p> <p>The parent has tried working with the school with attendance and bullying</p>	<p>Guardians get child to school</p> <p>Binge watches TV with mom</p> <p>When in school student has friends</p> <p>When in school, student is engaged in learning</p>	<p>Likes to draw and engage in art</p> <p>Grandchild will attempt to attend school from time to time</p> <p>Has a goal of attending college for art</p>	<p>Child talks with parent about concerns</p> <p>Child attends school consistently during basketball season</p> <p>Child works to get caught up with studies</p>



**Table 7. PVEST - Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive**

<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Participant 4</b>	<b>Participant 5</b>	<b>Participant 6</b>	<b>Participant 7</b>
Has goals of a blue-collar job with good insurance.  Productive	The lack of connection and engagement to school does not seem like it will be repaired soon.  The student believes that he/she can reach goal of the clothing store owner  Adverse	Currently attending school but only because she is afraid to be left behind by classmates.  No current plans for the future  Adverse and productive	Child currently engaged in school  Attendance remains inconsistent from time to time  Is engaged in school with art and other hands-on opportunities  Has plans that require education  Currently Productive	The child does not attend school regularly  Currently has a future goal but has not engaged in school to reach the goal  Adverse	Likely will drop out of school  Mental health issues appear to be increasing  Adverse	Does not attend school consistently when he needs to avoid  Needs to begin thinking of a backup plan if NBA doesn't work out  Mostly productive

The PVEST findings were divided into seven emergent themes connected to the study's purpose and research question, identifying the challenges and obstacles parents and guardians described as preventing their high school child from attending school consistently. The obstacles and challenges were identified from the first two stages of PVEST, key risk contributors and stress engagement/experiences. The final three PVEST stages, reactive coping method, stable coping response, and life stage outcomes, provided “the rest of the story” that identified how each student and their family uniquely reacted and responded to the obstacles and challenges preventing consistent school attendance. The latter three stages of PVEST highlighted how the student and family responded to the obstacles and challenges presented. The seven emergent themes were identified as a result of the researcher's coding process completed from an analysis of the interview transcripts and through the PVEST lens. Through an immersion of the data, the researcher identified similarities and differences and worked to arrange the collected data into a systematic order of themes of the research participant's shared lived experiences. Table eight

highlights the emergent themes the researcher established through an exploration of the study's collected data. Each theme is described in detail in the following paragraphs highlighting key lived experiences shared by the research participants during the interview process.

**Table 8. Emergent Themes**

<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>P1 Parent</b>	<b>P2 Parent</b>	<b>P3 Guardian</b>	<b>P4 Parent</b>	<b>P5 Guardian</b>	<b>P6 Guardian</b>	<b>P7 Parent</b>
<b>Challenges living in rural, Northern Maine</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X(2)</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>Family Challenges</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X(5)</b>	<b>X(3)</b>	<b>X(3)</b>
<b>Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>	<b>X(3)</b>	
<b>Challenges at School</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X(4)</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X(4)</b>
<b>The Illness Obstacle</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>The COVID Impact</b>	<b>X(2)</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>The Obstacles Created by Attendance Misconceptions</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>

### **Challenges living in rural, Northern Maine**

During the interview process, several examples identified challenges and obstacles of living in Northern Maine that impacted consistent school attendance. Five out of the seven participants highlighted one or two challenges that impacted school attendance due to living in rural Northern Maine. The concerns varied from participant to participant; however, each participant expressed how their location attributed to their child's inability to attend school regularly. The research participants shared several concerns about how their rural location's limited resources impacted consistent school attendance. Identified limited resources included poor to no internet connectivity, limited public transportation, the concentration of drugs and drug usage in the area, and the distance away from the school attended.

Connectivity to the internet was an element that impacted research participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 that resulted in missed days of school primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 1 shared:

We looked into having broadband hooked up to our house but we learned that we would need to have 13 telephone poles installed between our house and the last house. We were told that it costs about \$1,000 a pole. So that's \$130,000 for only the poles needed to get internet access at our house.

The five participants shared that their cell phone data was relied heavily upon for their children to connect when the school transitioned to online learning during the pandemic. The poor internet connectivity also became an excuse for missing school as a parent and a guardian described their child stating that the internet was not working and couldn't attend school remotely, but when examined it was discovered that their children could have attended and that internet connectivity did not play a role in their child missing school. Participant 1 identified a challenge as considerable care was taken to balance cell data between school and personal usage and was relieved when their school began distributing internet hotspots to help support at-home learning. Participant 1 stated, "We did not have internet except on our phones. We were always looking for who had the most data left to see who could turn on their hotspot so our child could log in."

Four participants highlighted one significant challenge of living in rural Northern Maine was the level of drug usage in the community. Each of the four participants describes regularly observing individuals moving about their neighborhood whom they believed was under the influence, looking for their next fix, or working to transport drugs. Participant 6 shared the following perception of this individual's neighborhood, "I see a lot of funny-looking characters

walking the street. It never used to be like that. They might be meth-heads as they are thin and carrying a backpack. Definitely, a lot of strangers.” No participant in this study identified that the questionable characters in their neighborhood were a direct reason for their child to miss school, but it was a noteworthy conclusion made by the four research volunteers.

Participants 3, 5, and 6 described that they became guardians due the parents of the children they care for were engaging in drug usage. The three guardians interviewed described how easy access to various illegal substances in the Northern Maine community has impacted the lives of the children under their care resulting in challenges to consistently attend school. Participant 3 stated, “People like to visit when they think my mom or sister is there. They are into stuff and believe that they can get their next fix from one of them.” Each of these parents who abused substances have had to relocate from the community for various reasons such as imprisonment, drug rehabilitation, and one is homeless and moves between homeless shelters in central Maine. Participant 6 stated, “My daughter is in the southern part of the state in a homeless shelter. They send her from one homeless shelter to another and I don't think she's doing that much better.” The chronically absent high school sophomore and freshman impacted by events associated with addicted parents struggle to attend school due to various obstacles and challenges including high anxiety, sleep disorders, and a lack of an established and consistent school routine. These participants expressed how their efforts to aid in raising their grandchildren or sibling presents some difficulty as they are challenged to get the children they care for to school consistently.

The final challenge that highlights the difficulty of residing in rural, Northern Maine is the lack of access to public transportation. For example, participants 1 and 4 explained the challenges created by a lack of regional transportation that has impacted their children from

attending school. Participant 1 lives approximately fifteen miles away from school and if the high school student misses the school bus, transportation is not readily available to bring the student to school. Participant 1 explained, “When he misses the bus, we cannot get him to school because we are working and do not have the transportation to get him there. When we can take him in it is almost a 30-mile round trip.” Participant 4 has an ex-spouse who lives nearly 40 miles from school. At times, the ex-spouse cannot transport the student nor can the other parent make the nearly 80-mile trek needed to get their high school freshmen to school. Participant four stated, “Sometimes when the roads are bad and he is with dad almost 40 miles away it can be challenging to get him to school due to the road conditions due to the ruralness of his dad’s location.”

Living in rural Northern Maine can provide some families with unique challenges and obstacles to overcome. According to this study’s research participants, limited public transportation, poor internet connectivity, and high drug challenges impact this region and impacted consistent school attendance. Despite the shared lived experiences highlighting the obstacles and challenges impacting school attendance, each family shared a fondness for their rural Northern Maine community. Participant 1 shared, “Despite the nearest hospital that can treat our son’s illness being located almost three hours away, my family loves the area and the people found in Northern Maine. Moving is not an option.” The following section will explore this study’s second theme, family challenges, and how unique family dynamics impacted consistent school attendance of the research participant’s chronically absent child.

### **Family Challenges**

Challenges and obstacles within the family dynamics were highlighted as an impact on consistent school attendance during the shared lived experiences of each parent and guardian

who took part in the study. Divorce, family members raising grandchildren and siblings, and limited or challenged parenting skills were shared in high frequency after a careful analysis of the collected data. The following paragraphs will identify the prominent characteristics of the emergent theme, family challenges.

The challenges placed on a family due to the divorce of parents negatively impacted consistent school attendance for three families who took part in the study. Participants 2, 4, and 7 spoke about divorce and each described a difference in philosophies when working with their children and their education. Participants 4 and 7 of the study described the challenges of being a single parent and feeling that their ex-spouse does not support them especially when it comes to school. Participant 4 stated, “My ex-husband doesn't have much to do with the whole school thing. He doesn't take part in that.” Participant 4 receives little support to no support from an ex-spouse including transporting their freshmen to school when visiting the other home. Participant 4 shared, “His dad works a lot and cannot transport him back and forth. At times this can be challenging especially during our Maine winters.” This lack of support has been a struggle to reduce the number of unexcused absences. Participant 7 shared that there were challenges early during the divorce that created some anxieties with their child that impacted school attendance, but strides of improvement were made as the newer family dynamics became more accepted by the child.

Participants 3, 5, and 6 were challenged to raise the children of family members who did not establish a routine for attending school due to challenges with substance abuse. The biological parents focused more on their indulgence in drug usage and failed to establish a structure that supported consistent school attendance. Each of these guardians discussed the challenges of enforcing their own home rules with children who had very little prior home

structure. All three chronically absent students challenged the rules of their guardians leading to struggles for each guardian. Participant 5 stated, “It's almost like [our grandchild] doesn't want to be here because we have rules. The mom acts more like a friend with few to no rules than a parent with our grandchild.” In addition to working to establish a home structure, Participants 3 and 5 have worked unsuccessfully to establish a healthy relationship between the child and the biological parent. For example, Participant 5 worked to foster and encourage the relationships between children and the parent only to experience little success. Participant 3 stated, “At times we are encouraged with mom’s improvement, but then momentum stops and mom falls under the influence again losing ground in reestablishing her relationship with her daughter.”

Participant 5 highlighted the challenges of multiple parent and child reunification attempts that have resulted in their grandchild returning to their home. The following is a shared account of the challenges of reunification shared by Participant 5:

“We are all for reunification. The courts had appointed the children a guardian ad litem and the lawyer is supposed to look out for what's in their best interest. Our grandchild told the lawyer that they wanted to stay with us and wanted to limit their visits with mom and dad. We are not the parents and the judge just said no. A DHHS lady told us, as long as they have a bed to sleep in, and a roof over their head, and some food. That's all they require as they attempt to reunite children with their parents, but each time our grandchild returns to our home we find it more challenging to have her follow our rules.”

Participant 5 shared how the parent continued to struggle with addiction despite multiple attempts designed to address the addiction. Participant 3 explained, “Early on we tried to help with reunification but we realized that mom didn’t want help as her addiction is in the way. She

comes to the house to visit and sometimes she is under the influence.” Participant 6’s grandchild refused to engage in the development of a relationship with the parent through fear as the parent’s erratic behavior over the years causes the child great anxiety just thinking of seeing the parent. Participant 6 stated, “My grandchild is sometimes scared to go to school because she is concerned that her mom may try to see her at school.” Participants 3 and 5 described that attendance is consistent when in their care but drops off significantly when the parent is in the picture.

The research participants appeared to be open about sharing the challenges they each experienced as parents. Six of the seven research participants questioned and even blamed their parenting skills for a portion of their child’s challenge to attend school consistently. Participants 2 and 4 have similar parenting styles as they both are single parents who struggle for support from their ex-spouses and rely heavily on their families. Participants 2 and 4 described their frustration and how they would eventually give in to the wishes of their children when it involved not attending school. Participants 2 and 4 shared that it was a daily battle to get their child to school. Participant 4 shared some pent-up frustration by stating, “We fight and I’m yelling, You gotta go to school! He ends up literally crying and then I’m like, you know what? Just stay home!” Participant 4 continued by explaining, “I know I’m not supposed to do that, but some days it’s like, I can’t do it. I’m just like, whatever. I don’t care anymore. I know that’s a poor attitude, but every day it gets sickening.” Participant 7 expressed some level of frustration with the child’s continuation of pretending to be ill to avoid attending classes. Participant 7 stated, “Most of the time, he gets up in the morning and says I’m not feeling good. I don’t want to go to school. My stomach hurts. We let him stay home after some coaxing to try going to school.” Participant 7 elaborated by sharing that the family appreciates the



progress made by the high school sophomore who was caught up with school work. Participant 7 continued by sharing that there was a significant emphasis placed by the family on remaining caught up and attending school daily. Participant 3, guardian of a sibling, highlighted that their parents never made school a priority and the routine of school for the sibling was not established until late elementary. This guardian had stressed the difficulty of getting the sibling to school consistently as it was a constant daily fight to get to school. Participant 3 placed a significant amount of blame on a lack of trust that was developed between child and parent as multiple times the parents promised to pick up their child from school only to become under the influence during the day and failing to be there at the end of the day. Participant 5 appeared to have a sound structure in place, but adherence to the house rules seems to deteriorate each time their grandchild transitions from parent back to the grandparent home. Participant 6 admittedly stated that firmer rules should have been established early. Participant 6 reflected that if the electronics were taken away at night the grandchild may not have the sleep disorder that negatively impacted regular school attendance.

Each of the research participants shared a family challenge that played a role in their child's chronic absenteeism. From grandparents raising their grandchildren to the struggles of divorce, these obstacles and challenges played a role that impacted the children discussed in this study resulting in missed days in school. The obstacles and challenges within these and other families may be similar, but the response by the family and student may be unique from others. A family dynamic may impact a child in a way to miss school while others with similar experiences may react differently to their family challenge. The next theme will explore the shared experiences of adverse childhood experiences that impacted consistent school attendance.

## **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACES) played a role in the shared lived experiences for four of the seven families in this study. ACES is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood between the ages of birth and 17 years of age (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Four research participants described how one or more traumatic childhood events significantly impacted the child under their care. The experience with the traumatic events has led to high-stress family relationships. These high-stress family relationships were probably one of the most impacting characteristics shared during the interview process that considerably influenced the lack of consistent school attendance with four of the research participants. ACES-induced high-stress families situations include three families ravished by substance abuse that intertwines with neglect, observed physical violence of a parent towards a guardian grandparent, imprisonment of a parent, a parent homeless as they struggle with substance abuse, and a sibling who was sexually assaulted by a family member. Participant 5 stated, “Our grandchild lives a stressful life as she worries about her parent overdosing.” Participant 6 shared, “My granddaughter is so afraid that her mother will return that it has impacted her mental health in many ways!” Each of these adverse childhood experiences has set the stage for many family challenges that would include challenges and obstacles to overcome when attempting to get their child to attend school consistently. The next section will explore how ACES had an impact on chronic absenteeism based on the lived experiences of the research participants.

## ***Substance Abuse***

Substance abuse and addiction by a parent significantly impacted the life experiences shared by multiple research participants. Three out of the seven research participants shared

during the interview process that substance abuse was the main reason for their guardianship and each described how the child had experienced trauma that impacted consistent school attendance. Research participants 3 and 5 stated that the parent used drugs openly in front of their children from an early age. Participant 5 described the following horrific event observed by their five-year-old grandchild who witnessed the drug abuse and addiction of a parent, “One night it fully exploded as our grandchild’s mom broke a needle off in herself. She [the mom] called the cops freaking out because she thought she was gonna die. The cops called us.” Participant 5 continued, “When we got there, our five-year-old grandchild was next to her baby sister who was in her crib. She would feed her sister through the bars of her crib next to piles of dirty diapers in the crib.” Participant 5 shared that despite their grandchild’s young age of five at the time of this event, the grandchild can recall this event that occurred approximately ten years prior. Participant 3 highlighted that the sibling in their care grew up watching their parents’ addiction and stated, “She [the chronically absent student] grew up aware of her mom’s drug habits.” and “she knows that our parents are choosing drugs over life.” Participant 3 stated, “Due to parental addiction, school never became a routine for [sibling] until much later in elementary school.” Participant 3 further described how the sibling witnessed other adults in search of illegal substances arriving at their house knowing that the parents may be in possession.

Participant 6 shared during the interview that the grandchild did not know of the parent’s addiction as it was hidden early on and described the grandchild’s disappointment when learning the truth. Participant 6 stated, “[Grandchild] loved doing stuff with her mom. It was so hard for her when she found out that her mom was doing drugs.” Participant 6 shared that the grandchild rarely sees the parent as drug addiction has forced the parent out of the area.

Participant 6 explained, “They send her from one homeless shelter to another and I don't think she's doing that much better.”

Participants 3, 5, and 6 discussed how drug abuse by a parent has negatively impacted each high school student in this study and ultimately impacts consistent school attendance. Participant 3 shared that her sibling struggled with trust especially with adults. Participant 3 stated,

She just grew up not trusting and still has a hard time trusting. She grew up with promises made and not being kept due to her parent's addiction. The promises that they [drug-addicted parents] made they never followed through. And they would never follow through. They would tell her that they would pick her up after school and no one would ever show up, ever. Not once.

Participant 5 described a child who was fearful of taking medicine to assist with struggles with anxiety, depression, and a sleeping disorder. Participant 5 shared the following thoughts, “The doctor prescribed my grandchild some medications. She won't take it because she thinks it's like doing drugs. She thinks this drug, these pills is how her mother first got started on drugs, with the pills.”

Participants 3, 5, and 6 describe that their high school students live in fear of their parents or of their parents overdosing. Participant 3 shared, “Mom was found in the bathroom of a restaurant passed out from an overdose. They brought her back, but we worry that it is just a matter of time.” Participant 5 shared how they believe their grandchild will miss school to “help mom” as there are concerns that mom might relapse and overdose. Participant 6 describes the parent as “a Meth-monster” who the grandchild “is scared of” and “has high anxieties” because of the fear that the parent will come to school while the grandchild is there.

### *Physical and Sexual Abuse*

Participants 2 and 6 believed that their child's adverse childhood experiences with physical and sexual abuse had impacted consistent school attendance. Participant 2's child was impacted by the sexual abuse of a sibling. As a result, the sibling relocated from the home to another state to live with the other parent. Participant 2 stated that the siblings were also great friends and that the research participant is "unsure how this has emotionally impacted my child, but her behaviors changed, even more, when [the sibling] moved out of the house". The sibling attended school with the chronically absent student and was described by the parent as "the one who made attending school manageable" for the sibling. This adverse childhood experience had directly impacted consistent school attendance according to Participant 2.

Participant 6 shared that his grandchild witnessed both the physical and sexual abuse of a parent by an individual who lived with them when the child was four years of age. Participant 6 shared the following account of the event that occurred with his grandchild and grandchild's parent:

The police were called later that night. He had locked them both [grandchild and parent] in the bathroom. He raped my daughter that night. I found out they had been fighting, even my granddaughter was hitting him. They finally got a cell phone and called the police. He took their cell phone so they could not call the police. Even our four years old granddaughter was hitting him. She remembers hitting him. That's all she remembers about it. Man, it was awful. Yeah, and she got her cell phone back and called the police and he went to jail. I thought he would come back except he didn't come back.

Participant 6 believes that this event has greatly impacted his grandchild leading to anxieties and a sleep disorder that has significantly impacted consistent school attendance.

Participant 6 described how his grandchild was fearful of the parent coming to school trying to see the high school freshman. This fear prevented the child from falling asleep at night and also had been used for a reason to avoid attending school. Participant 6 believed that this fear stems from an event when the parent who was described as “high on meth” broke into the home to see, at that time, the middle school-aged child. The following graphic event was shared by Participant 6:

My grandchild is scared of her mom. Yeah, her mom came over high on meth. She broke into my house by breaking through the basement window. Her mom went right through the glass. My granddaughter was pretending to be sleeping while she's talking to her, you know. Eventually, my grandchild got to the bathroom and locked herself in. Her mom made a funny laugh after a while. She is a monster. She then attacked me. It was much like a heroin monster. It was like a rabid animal. I can remember getting on the stairway trying to get her out of the house. It took all my strength just to stop her. It was all I could do to push her down the steps. She actually pushed me up the steps. I couldn't believe the strength coming out of her. Wow! Somebody told me that sometimes the meth and stuff give a person extra strength. I believe it because I felt it. I got her down to the bottom of the stairs and she grabbed the back of my head, ripped out a big clump of hair. She grabbed my eyes at the bottom of the stairs trying to gouge them out. My grandchild snuck out the back entrance and ran to the neighbor's house. One of those guys called the police. My grandchild's parent went to jail.

Participant 6 attributed the child's mental health challenges to the ACES experience which include a sleep disorder and high anxiety experienced.

Various family challenges were shared by all of the seven participants in this study. The family challenge theme is one of two themes in this study that each research participant shared a life experience that was organized within the establishment of this theme. The family challenges and obstacles associated with ACES are quite powerful and can impact many aspects of life for the family. Attending school consistently is a related outcome due to the high level of stress that these events have burdened families. The four families that shared their traumatic experiences with ACES have struggled with the events that have impacted their families for multiple years. It appears that work will continue within each family as they continue to move forward with their lives and work towards a more consistent approach to school attendance. The next section will transition into the third theme of the study highlighting the lived experiences of the research participants describing challenges at school as an obstacle and challenge hindering their child from attending school consistently.

### **Challenges at School**

The research participants highlighted several challenges and obstacles at school that negatively affected the consistent school attendance of their high school freshman or sophomore. Some of the obstacles and challenges identified were shared by other study participants while other lived experiences were unique to the chronically absent student. Shared obstacles and challenges faced at school included a lack of engagement with school, the student does not see the connection between learning and real-world application, and a considerable dislike by the student towards a specific subject such as mathematics. Other individual challenges shared by parents or guardians included bullying, unkind staff members, and the child

being only engaged with school during a specific sports season. The following paragraphs will highlight the lived experiences shared by the study's participants that focus on challenges experienced at school.

Five of the seven research participants shared that their child experiences a lack of engagement or lack of connection with the school. Three guardians and parents stated that many times when their child wants to attend school it is typically related to peers and friendships. Despite the many extra-curricular activities and clubs that the school has to offer, the guardians stated that their children had no interest in taking part. Three families shared that their high school student knows what careers they are currently interested in, but the connection and engagement in school is nonexistent. According to study participants 2 and 4, their children's lack of interest plays a big role in the challenges of getting them to school daily.

Participants 2, 3, and 7 shared how their children complain that they do not see the connection between new learning and how the new learning will be used in real life. Participant 7 shared the following concern of his high school sophomore: "[Child] has a rough time understanding why they have to learn a lot of stuff they learn. He perceives many new things he learns as completely unnecessary and will make all kinds of comments about useless learning." Participant 7 continued by stating, "[Child] will say, you know, we learned this in social studies today and where the hell am I ever gonna use that again?" Participant 7 summarized that teachers are not communicating the importance of the new learning that they expect their students to know. Participants 2, 3, and 7 questioned why teachers didn't make the connection for students with new learning and how the new learning could be used. Participants 2 and 7 stated that a lack of engagement with their child takes place when they believe they are wasting their time learning useless information. Participant 2's child firmly believed that new



learning offered at the high school is a waste of time as the individual holds the philosophy that everything that was needed to be learned was done so by grade eight. This student references a documentary that covered third-world schools where few children get an education beyond the eighth grade. The student shared this documentary with the parent highlighting her new stance on high school education. Multiple parents and guardians in this study stated that if their child was engaged with school and made the connection with new learning they believed their child would attend school more consistently. Participant 7 supports this belief by saying, “He [His child] sees the importance when it benefits him and if there's no benefit to him, then he doesn't think it's that important.”

A dislike for a specific content area was mentioned throughout the study by a majority of the research participants. Three students dislike mathematics and one student avoided physical education. One parent hypothesized that important pieces of math education were missed along the way and it has been difficult for their child to recover from the missed information. This parent further stated that due to a weak foundation in math, this dislike for math will most likely continue until their child better understands this content area. Another research participant stated that their child had missed school in middle school on days that physical education was scheduled. The freshmen did not schedule physical education in their first-year schedule but must schedule this class within the next three years as it is a graduation requirement. The parent is concerned when physical education is eventually scheduled their child will look to avoid school again. Three study participants sympathized with their children as they recalled their challenges with specific classes when they were in high school. Two participants shared their struggle to help their child around middle school as the math was too challenging for the parents to grasp let alone help their child understand the challenging concepts. Participant 4 shared,

“I don't remember doing the math. One of his teachers came into my work and I explained to him that I could not help him with his math. The teacher sat there for two hours and taught me math.”

The lived experiences of parents and guardians highlighted some noteworthy challenges that occurred impacting their child's school attendance. Participant 1's child struggled in a study hall that was described so big that the freshman could not concentrate on catching up from prior missed assignments. This study hall early on was a reason her child claimed to avoid school. Participant 4 highlighted an act of bullying at school and on a bus where an unkind bus driver did little to solve the problem. The parent believed that little to nothing was done by the school to alleviate the situation. Participant 4 began driving the student to school due to this and has continued to do so for five years. Participant 4 stated this event created a lack of trust between the parent and school. Participant 7 shared that chronic absenteeism only occurs outside of basketball season. When basketball season is taking place their child never misses a day of school. Finally, Participant 3 claimed that their high school sophomore only attends school for fear of being retained and separated from friends in the class. According to Participant 3, this negative motivation typically gets the student to school, but the lack of engagement or even interest in their learning continues to lead to additional missed days of school.

This study's theme, challenges at school, is the second of two emergent themes within this study that explored life experiences from all seven research participants. Perceived challenges at school have led to missed days of school for a variety of reasons indicated by the study's participants. With knowledge of these obstacles and challenges, this research site's aim is to review and make adjustments if needed to improve consistent school attendance for those involved in this study. This study will now transition to the next theme of the study that has been titled, The Illness Obstacle, by the researcher. The following section will explore the lived

experiences shared by the research participants who identified how student illness could be an obstacle or challenge that impacts consistent school attendance.

### **The Illness Obstacle**

Participants 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7 stressed how student illnesses impacted consistent school attendance with their children. The illnesses highlighted during the lived experiences of the identified participants were each significant and challenging for anyone to overcome. The medical attention needed yearly alone might come close to logging a high enough rate to become identified as chronically absent. Illnesses identified during the interview process include a serious blood disorder, epilepsy, mental health issues, and the challenges when children fake being sick. The next section will provide details on chronic absenteeism as it relates to chronic illness.

Participants 1 and 7 described childhood illnesses that significantly impacted their children's school attendance. Participant 1 explained that the family would need to pick up their child at school due to a reaction to the blood disorder adding to additional missed time at school. Both students required hospitalization that prevented the children from attending school. Participant 1 shared that surgeries to address a blood disorder were required multiple times and this did impact a considerable amount of schooling missed. Participant 7 highlighted that their child's struggle with epilepsy prevented consistent school attendance as several hospital visits were required. Participant 1 described how it takes three hours to travel to a hospital that can treat their child's blood disorder:

Every time he would have surgery, we'd have to drive three to five hours to Bangor or Portland. He will be out of school for two weeks because he's healing. He would have regular appointments with his hematologist in central Maine and

they don't meet you on the weekend. You have to go downstate when they want to see him. If he's got a bleeding issue that they want to see, that means he's missing a whole day of school. We then spend two hours at the hospital and then it's a three-hour drive home. The appointments are always during school as our hematologist is not available on Saturday or Sunday.

Participants 1 and 7 both discussed that it took some time to learn about and to work with their child's disability. Participant 7 stated, "It was a challenge to deal with the medical needs of my child and then work to help my child catch up academically. There was so much time spent away from school that it was overwhelming for us all." While both families worked with medical specialists, their child missed a considerable amount of school. Despite all of this time receiving medical assistance was excused, the child still was identified as chronically absent. Consistent school attendance has returned for the most part for both families, but from time to time the disability can still be in the way of consistent school attendance.

The high school freshmen of participants 2 and 6 both struggle with sleeping disorders and anxieties. These sleep disorders and anxieties were credited as a result of an adverse childhood experience by research participants two and six. Participant 6 stated, "My grandchild refuses to take any medicine prescribed by her doctor because she thinks these drugs are how her mother first got addicted." Until the child is willing to receive counseling or assistance from the pediatrician, the grandparent predicts that not much will improve with the grandchild's school attendance. Participant 2 shared that the high school freshman occupies the mind at night by engaging online or viewing television. Participant 2 stated, "When the time to get ready for school arrives the student is too exhausted to attend school." The child then sleeps most of the

day while peers are attending school. Both the sleep disorder and the high anxiety experienced by these two freshmen are significantly preventing consistent school attendance.

Faking an illness is probably a situation where many parents find themselves from time to time. For research participants 4 and 7 this has been a regular occurrence that has had an impact on their children attending school consistently. Participant 4 described an overwhelming frustration with trying to determine when the teenager is sick or faking. Participant 4 shared, “Before COVID we would pull into the school’s driveway and my son says that he is feeling kinda sick. I yelled at him, Out! Out of my car right now! He continues that he really doesn’t feel good and I say, get out of my car right now!” Participant 4 continued to share her frustration by stating, “On some occasions after arguing and eventually dropping off my son at school only to have the school call to have me come back to school as my child was actually sick.” Research participants 4 and 7 both stated that there had been days when they would give in to their child’s pleas to stay home knowing that they were not ill. Participant 7 shared that once when school was over for the day, the chronically absent student would ask them to go to the recreational center or visit friends. Participant 7 would deny this request because they did not attend school. Participant 7 stated that their child, who is a sophomore, no longer requests leaving the house on a day that school is not attended as the family’s practice when sick is to remain home for the complete day.

The illness factor impacted five of the seven parents and guardians who volunteered for this study on chronic absenteeism. The lived experiences spanned across an incredible range from dangerous blood disorders to faking sick to avoid school. The impact of illness from mental health to the physical well-being of a child can be stressful life experiences that impact several aspects of the family. Through solid home and school communication, opportunities may exist

that can help alleviate some of the stress experienced due to the illness obstacles presented in this study. The next theme of the study has a connection to illness but required its own theme due to the significant role COVID-19 played during the conversations that took place during the interview process. The following section will explore how the theme, The COVID Impact, affected the attendance of six students based on the lived experiences shared by the parents and guardians who took part in this study.

### **The COVID Impact**

COVID-19 was a sizable factor during the collection and analysis of the data shared by the study's participants to have its own dedicated theme when exploring school chronic absenteeism in rural Northern Maine. If this study occurred approximately two years prior, many of these experiences would have been nonexistent in this study. COVID played an active role in school missed and added some challenging twists that still have some parents and guardians in this study feeling quite perplexed. Six of the seven research participants identified various aspects of the pandemic that impacted their child's school attendance either remotely or in person. The shared lived experiences of how COVID impacted consistent school attendance include poor internet connectivity, parents not being fully aware of the school's remote learning plan, refusal of the student to connect to learning remotely, the COVID-19 symptom factor, and children lying to parents and guardians about their online attendance. The paragraphs to follow will highlight the findings of how COVID impacted students' consistent school attendance.

Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4 each described challenges with internet connectivity in their homes in rural Northern Maine. Participants 1 and 4 were forced to use cellular data to complete online school when remote learning began as internet service was not available at their homes due to the ruralness of where they live. Participant 1 indicated that it is roughly one thousand

dollars per telephone pole to install high-speed internet to their residence and it is estimated that thirteen poles would be needed to extend the needed cable to provide this service. Participant 1 also explained, “We did not have internet except on our phones. We were always looking for who had the most data left to see who could turn on their hotspot so our child could log in.” Participants 2 and 3 both pay for internet at their home, but this internet connection according to participant two is slow and is limited in what it could support when learning at home. Participant 3 believed that their internet connection was strong enough to support at-home learning, but the sophomore at home continuously stated that the home internet did not fully support access to learning resources. According to Participant 1, the limited internet connection led to some frustrations and missed lessons as additional days were added to the child’s chronic absenteeism. The research site eventually supplied families in need of stronger connectivity with school purchased hot spots and Participant 1 took full advantage of this.

Following the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Return to School Protocols, schools across the nation including rural Northern Maine requested that students stay home if they are sick. This COVID safety protocol for schools added another dimension of potentially faking sickness according to study participants 4 and 7. When a child complained of headaches and sore throats the argument of going to school was over. Participant number 4 shared, “We were not going to be the family that sent a child to school who turned out to be COVID positive and infect classmates.” Participant 2 stated, “You know I fought for a month or two at the beginning of this COVID stuff to try to get her to stay in the house. Now I can’t get her out. So I really think that COVID has a lot to do with her constantly missing school.”

One parent described a lack of clarity with the school’s remote learning plan early on during COVID. Participant 1, whose high school freshman is new to the research site, shared

their perception of the school's remote plan, "I feel there wasn't much direction or guidance from the school. Chronic absenteeism began this year because we did not understand the school's remote learning plan. He learned that he had missed classes from playing online with friends." The remote learning practice was very different and more rigorous than their prior school districts according to Participant 1. The research site required instructors to teach their students synchronously meaning if math was taught at nine o'clock then students were required to log in to experience the instruction live online. Participant 1 stated, "My child went to a different school last year where remote learning wasn't live. More should have been done to prepare the new student for remote learning. You can't assume that these kids have done this before. No, they haven't." Participant 1 stated that their freshman accumulated several days of unexcused absences for their lack of understanding with the remote learning practice of their new school.

Some untruthful events occurred in the homes of participants 2 and 5 around remote learning participation. Participant 2 shared that their high school freshman would be on their laptop claiming to be engaged with online learning with the school only to discover days later that the child did not attend the lesson nor completed the activities connected with the learning. Participant 2 described the challenges of trying to monitor this as a parent and the frustration of learning that their child continued to accumulate unexcused attendance. The parent stated that when there was no COVID you could at least know if their child was at school or home. The online learning process was too difficult to determine if their child was engaged with learning. Participant 5 attended school online quite regularly according to her guardians. The lying began when the child stated that learning was going to take place remotely at home, but the school was in-person. Participant 5 explained, "Our grandchild tries to manipulate her mom by



saying that she can learn online, but the school currently is not offering online learning while in person.” The freshman took advantage of a parent who took the word of their child instead of exploring school correspondence. Several days of unexcused absences occurred due to lies told by the student.

Taking part in the live synchronous learning provided by the school provided challenges for some of the study participants. Participant 3 stated, “When it comes to remote learning with the school she [chronically absent student] shuts the camera off, mutes it, and doesn't take part in the class.” Many times this student would be marked absent as it appeared that the child was not in the classroom. Participant 2, like Participant 3, stated a lack of engagement when joining class, but eventually, the freshman refused to even log into the class. The refusal to log into class quickly accumulated days of unexcused absences. The other five research participants did not share the same lived experiences but noted that there were challenges that occurred quite regularly with their children being kicked out of online classes due to technical issues and they believe that their children may have missed some important instruction.

Two participants believed that COVID even further negatively impacted the challenges of getting their children to attend school consistently. Participant 2 shared that their freshman used the excuse that they have a fear of COVID exposure and refused to attend school. Both participants 2 and 5 stated that the sleep disorders have increased significantly when they were required to stay home for months. During this time at home, Participant 5 describes the already weak connections to school that existed with the grandchild seemed to deteriorate even more during the many weeks of quarantine. This guardian also believes that the grandchild's anxieties seem to have increased while in isolation. Participant 1 contracted COVID and was out of school for about a week and a half adding additional days towards his chronically absent

status. Participants 1 and 2 shared how they both believe that the COVID pandemic has resulted in their children consistently missing school.

COVID-19 impacted six of the seven high school students of the research participants within this study. The challenges and obstacles experienced within the COVID-19 theme extend from limited internet connectivity to simply not taking part in at-home learning. These challenges and obstacles have significantly impacted the regular attendance of the high school students of the parents and guardians who took part in the study. As schools become more experienced with remote learning within the COVID world, the researcher believes that additional attention is needed to better support students and their families when learning at home is required for the health and safety of all. The following portion of this study will turn its attention to the final theme of the study, The Obstacles Created with Attendance Misconceptions. An exploration of attendance misconceptions will take place as these misunderstandings were shared by four of the seven research participants.

### **The Obstacles Created with Attendance Misconceptions**

Five of the seven research participants highlighted some misconceptions and a difference of opinion when compared to societal norms that impacted consistent school attendance. The lived experiences shared have been placed into one theme by the researcher as the researcher believed that they are too small to sit alone but related enough to be combined. Misconceptions and differences in attendance philosophies were conversational pieces that presented themselves in several interviews. Participants 1, 3, and 4 hold two misconceptions that include 1) Underestimating the strong correlation between missing school and academic success and 2) Their children's struggles to attend school is related to the lack of success that the parents experienced at school. Participants 3 and 5 described a difference in philosophical beliefs that are

held by the parents when compared to the cultural norms of those who live in rural Northern Maine. Attending school consistently is not an important concept for the parents of participants 3 and 5. Participants 3 and 5, both guardians, stated that the parents of the chronically absent students just do not hold consistent school attendance in high regard. The next section will highlight the lived experiences of the research participants who shared their attendance misconceptions and school attendance philosophies.

### ***Misconceptions***

Participants 1 and 3 shared misconceptions in regards to school attendance. The views vary, but both focus on the notion that it is acceptable to miss days of school especially at the elementary level. Participant 3, the guardian of her younger sibling, stated that her parents did not value education and were not concerned about sending their child to school when she was school-aged. Participant 3 shared the following account of her parents and their thoughts on attending school, “Poor school attendance began right from the start in kindergarten. Going to school wasn’t that important to them. They didn’t instill the importance of going to school right from the beginning as she was never made to go.” Participant 3 continued by saying, “Going to school never became a routine to value and her attendance was impacted in high school because of this.” Participant 3 shared that her sibling still does not value school, but the fear of falling behind while her friends advance has motivated her to attend school more often and to stay on top of her academics. Participant 1 shared that the family took vacations during the school year every year. Participant 1 stated:

I thought in those younger years, such as Pre-K, kindergarten, or even the third and fourth grade that you could miss a day of school. It’s not like they’re moving on to the next subject the next day. When you’re younger, they have more time on one

subject and they're constantly working with it.

Participant 1 admitted after listening to the importance of consistent school attendance shared during a parent/student orientation at the research site, it became clear that the family underestimated the impact of time out of school during the medical events and scheduled family vacations. The family just didn't realize how significantly school attendance correlated with academic success. Participant 1, shared "Our child is still playing catch-up on learning missed in the past." Participant 1 also shared that with a new perspective of the importance of consistent school attendance the family will schedule family vacations around the school calendar to limit missed school time. Participant 1 believed that the school should do a better job letting parents know about how important school attendance is which is evident in the following statement, "Honestly, attendance in our prior elementary and middle school wasn't really discussed. The importance of consistent attendance for my child's learning wasn't shared. Now I know that my child missed out when we took vacations during school." Participant 3 had always valued education and attending school regularly. Participant 3 worked to get her younger sibling to school early on and that work to improve school attendance continues years later as she works with the school sophomore.

Participant 1 recognized that their high school child developed some significant learning gaps. After several conversations with the freshman's new school, the parent realized how missed time at the elementary school had significantly weakened her child's learning foundation. Participant 1 stated, "Due to [child's] extreme illness that already prevented him from attending school our family would plan vacations to relieve stress." These vacations took place during the school year. Participant 1 stated in frustration, "I wished that the school back then would have educated us on how harmful the time away from school would have impacted

[their child's] learning." Participant 1 reasoned that it was only elementary school and their child will eventually catch up with peers with missed learning.

Participants 1 and 7 both believe that missing one day of school is much more impactful than missing a day of elementary school. Participant 7 highlighted that when their sophomore misses a day of high school they witness the challenges that their child has to recover academically. Participant 1 described that when their freshman misses a day of school the teenager struggles to catch up and quickly becomes overwhelmed with the amount of homework and learning that needs to be done. The following is Participant 1's description of their freshman when a day of school is missed, "It's stressful for him. He actually uses the words. It stresses me out! When he misses a day. He feels overwhelmed. He sees the late assignments or the missing assignments and sometimes has a hard time knowing where to begin." Participant 1 stated that they work with school guidance and other school supports to help their child recover from a missed day of school.

Participants 2 and 4 admitted that one or both of the parents in the family struggled when they were in high school. Each expressed during the interview that possibly due to their own challenges in school, their children are most likely struggling for similar reasons. Participant 4 stated, "There were a lot of negative influences on me when I was in high school. I temporarily quit school. I worry that my son will continue to struggle with school, and I hope he won't make the same mistakes as me." Participant 2 shared that the chronically absent freshman is more like the dad as he struggled in school as well. Through careful reflection upon the shared lived experiences by participants two and four, it is believed by the researcher that the parents' negative experiences at school have been learned by the children and they are experiencing their own sense of hopelessness when it comes to their academics. Participants 2 and 4 shared that

they do not believe the school has mechanisms in place to help struggling students. Participants 2 and 4 were unaware of several options available at the research site designed to assist students, such as a tutoring center that reteaches math and literacy concepts during the school day and after school. Participant 4 was surprised to learn after the interview that the high school offered its own tutoring session as this individual had been searching for a tutor.

### ***Attendance Philosophies***

The expectation by a majority of the residents of rural Northern Maine is that children attend school daily. A review of this study's data made it clear that not all families hold the same school attendance philosophies as the majority of the population. Participants 3 and 5, both guardians, described the difference in the priority of school attendance between them and the parents of the children they care for. Research Participant 3 stated, "My parents did not value school attendance and did not make [student's name] go to school." School was not a priority with the parents which resulted in a lack of routine established for attending school consistently. Participant 3 highlighted that it was the extended family members that eventually brought the child to school fairly regularly, but this continues to be a challenge years later as a high school sophomore. The guardian believes that the teenager has also learned not to value the importance of school and will continue to struggle with attendance until the student either graduates or drops out of school.

Participant 5 described the challenges that the parent had in school that eventually led to dropping out of school. When the grandchild was with the parent, school attendance was not a priority. Participant 5 stated that the freshman only attends school when the student wants to attend and the parent does not encourage school engagement. Participant 5 said, "Our grandchild is the adult in the family. If she wants to go to school, she gets herself up and gets to school

without the help of her mom. Mom doesn't seem to care if [child's name] goes or not."

Participant 5 also depicted the relationship between parent and child to be more of a friendship which lends itself to all-nighters binge-watching Netflix and not attending school the next day.

Participant 5 believed that due to the parent's own negative experiences with school the parent was challenged to support consistent school attendance with the teenager significantly impacting consistent school attendance.

Schools should take note of the attendance misconceptions such as the ones shared by the research participants in this study. Five parents and guardians shared perceptions within their family that impacted school attendance. According to participants 1 and 7 improved home and school communication could reduce some of these attendance misunderstandings and work to reduce chronic absenteeism. The proceeding section of the study will summarize each identified theme with reflections of learning from the findings.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a presentation of the data collected to capture the lived experiences of how parents and guardians of high school students with chronic absenteeism describe the obstacles and challenges which prevent their children from consistently attending a rural Northern Maine school. The analysis of the study's data revealed seven findings through an exploration of the lived experiences of parents and guardians whose freshman or sophomore chronically absent high school students. As is typical in IPA qualitative studies, a comprehensive and extensive collection of samples from the research participants was used to support the study's findings as each emerging theme was explored. Seven themes emerged from the researcher's analysis of shared life experiences of the research participants that identified challenges and obstacles preventing rural Northern Maine students from attending school

consistently. To review, the seven findings included 1) Challenges living in rural Northern Maine, 2) Family challenges, 3) ACES, 4) Challenges at school, 5) The illness obstacle, 6) The impact of COVID-19, and 7) Obstacles created by attendance misconceptions.

Challenges living in rural Northern Maine highlighted several obstacles and challenges that the research participants experienced due to their unique living location. These experiences shared were tied to the obstacles and challenges of attending school consistently. Not all Northern Maine families are impacted the same way by the identified obstacles and challenges, but for five of the seven research participants these challenges of living in rural Northern Maine have impacted their child's consistent school attendance. Family challenges described the participants' perspective of the challenges and obstacles impacting family dynamics and consistent school attendance. All research participants were impacted by a family challenge that included divorce, illness, low social economics, and more. Adverse childhood experiences (ACES) impacted four of the seven research participant's families. ACES such as drug addiction, physical and sexual abuse significantly challenged these families and the child who was in their care that impacted many aspects of their lives including school attendance. Challenges at school highlighted several findings where elements within the school negatively impacted consistent school attendance. All seven research participants shared lived experiences that included challenges and obstacles such as bullying, student disengagement with school, and a dislike with a subject area are a few of the highlights from this theme preventing consistent school attendance. The illness challenge created obstacles and challenges for five of the seven research participants. The affected research participants described how physical and mental illnesses have impacted their children's health, preventing them from attending school regularly. As six of the research participants described, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted consistent school attendance



in several ways. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lived experiences of parents and guardians whose high school children struggled to attend school both remotely and when schools resumed in-person learning. The obstacle created by attendance misconceptions explored some of the thinking and philosophies that the research participant shared regarding school attendance. Four research participants shared their understandings of school attendance that included underestimating the strong correlation between missing school and their own child's academic growth. Also embedded with this theme were two parents connecting their children's struggles to attend school to the lack of success that they experienced at school.

Each unique family took a risk-sharing their life experiences with chronic absenteeism. Their stories take a private look into how seven different families struggle with consistent school attendance. School chronic absenteeism is a huge issue in rural Northern Maine as it is across the country. The findings of this study will add to the current body of chronic absenteeism literature especially for stakeholders focused on exploring rural data. This study provided the reader with a new perspective of chronic absenteeism through parents and guardians whose high school students have been identified as chronically absent. The findings highlight the obstacles and challenges that exist that hinder consistent school attendance. An understanding of the obstacles and challenges that prevent consistent school attendance by stakeholders in rural Northern Maine should provide new thinking on how to improve school chronic absenteeism more successfully.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

This study explored chronic absenteeism in a rural Northern Maine school through the lived experiences of parents and guardians. Chapter 5 identifies the findings connected to rural chronic absenteeism brought to light by the seven parents and guardians who volunteered and shared their lived experiences during the interview process. This chapter will transition into the interpretation of the findings as the researcher highlights the importance of these findings to be explored by the reader. Chapter Five highlights the implications of the research and how this study will add to the growing body of school chronic absenteeism literature. Finally, Chapter Five explores recommendations and future research possibilities designed to benefit and enhance work by stakeholders focused on improving school attendance.

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore the obstacles and challenges that hinder students who live in rural Northern Maine from consistently attending school. Exploring existing literature on chronic absenteeism, few would dispute the existing research highlighting the strong correlation between attending school consistently and the academic success of the student. Researchers such as Rogers and Feller (2018) shared how a student's educational success relies heavily upon regularly attending school. What is less obvious, but just as eye-opening during a review of the literature, is the current inequity with available chronic absenteeism literature conducted in rural areas compared to existing urban studies on school chronic absenteeism. Urban studies dominate the literature on chronic absenteeism as a high quantity and quality of research literature exists based on studies conducted in urban regions (Mineo, 2019). Edwards and Sullivan (2014) explained that despite a majority of the United States' population residing in rural areas, a vast majority of existing

chronic absenteeism research has focused on urban schools. This research study was helpful in identifying the gap between urban and rural chronic absenteeism research. The findings of this study provide evidence and additional literature designed to explore rural American school chronic absenteeism. More specifically, this study explored chronic absenteeism's unique obstacles and challenges that impacted high school students from consistently attending school in rural Northern Maine.

As a result of this study, seven findings emerged through the study's data analysis protocols. The seven themes created from the lived experiences of the seven research participants include: 1) Challenges living in rural Northern Maine, 2) Challenges within the family, 3) Adverse childhood experiences (ACES), 4) Challenges at school, 5) The illness challenge, 6) The Impact of COVID-19, and 7) The obstacles created by attendance misconceptions. Each of these obstacles and challenges either directly or indirectly impacted school attendance of the high school children based on the lived experiences shared by the parents and guardians who participated in this study. The following section of chapter five will provide a discussion based on the study's findings, including how these themes are connected to the research question, what it means, why it matters, and why we should we care. The intended audience of this presentation is the stakeholders who have an interest in improving consistent school attendance.

### **Interpretations and Importance of Findings**

The findings of this qualitative study provided evidence that supported the study's guiding research question and conceptual framework. Each theme identified through this study's analysis process provided a new perspective on how parents and guardians of chronically absent high school students describe the obstacles and challenges that prevented their children from consistently attending a rural Northern Maine School. During an exploration of the study's

collected data, the researcher made several connections between this study's findings to prior research literature within the field of school chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism findings of this study that are connected to prior research literature include a) Chronic absenteeism is challenged by poor home and school communication, b) Parent's school attendance misconceptions, c) Chronic absenteeism begins early, and d) Rural and economically disadvantaged areas have fewer resources to support consistent school attendance. The seven overarching themes established in this study intertwines with prior research in the field of chronic absenteeism. The following paragraphs will highlight how the results of this study connect with the research identified in chapter two's review of the literature in the field of school chronic absenteeism.

### **Chronic Absenteeism is Challenged by Poor Communication**

Reviewed literature consistently identified a need to improve chronic absenteeism through positive communication with parents or guardians regarding school attendance (Cook et al. 2017; Gottfried, 2017b; Lasky-Fink et al. 2019; London et al. 2016). The need for good communication between the school and home was evident after an analysis of the study's data. The family challenges, adverse childhood experiences, challenges at school, and parents' misconceptions that were shared by the research participants of this study required good and consistent lines of communication between the home and the school. Efforts at improving school attendance need to be made by the school to engage families in their children's education (Cook et al. 2017; Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Each research participant who took part in this study shared unique lived experiences that has led this researcher to believe that multiple forms of communication may be needed by the school to best meet the need of the family working through chronic absenteeism obstacles and challenges.

Schools must establish effective lines of communication with their families including opportunities to hold sensitive conversations that include personal family issues. These conversations may lead to activating available school resources to better support the student and the family. It is quite possible that due to the sensitive nature of some family challenges the school might be the last to know about a challenge or obstacle preventing consistent school attendance. According to Wert et al. (2018), it is critical to identify what obstacles and challenges exist that prevent students from attending school consistently and then examine possible solutions to remove or reduce the obstacles and challenges to improve a child's school attendance through solid communication. The sooner consistent communication supports and resources can be put into place for students to discuss their unique obstacle or challenge the sooner improvements can be made with consistent school attendance.

### **Parent's School Attendance Misconceptions**

Parental attendance misconceptions were one of the prevalent themes explored during a review of the existing literature on chronic absenteeism. Prior research is quite evident that a parent's perception of their child's education is an important factor in a child's school attendance (Lasky-Fink et al. 2019; Rogers & Feller, 2018; Smyth-Leistico & Page, 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). The school attendance misconceptions shared by this study's research participants align with existing chronic absenteeism literature. This study identified that some research participants had limited awareness of the correlation between missing school and academic success, and believed that their child's challenge to attend school consistently was directly related to the lack of success that the parents experienced when attending school. Research participants eluded that their thoughts and philosophies regarding attendance may have been formed from the thinking of a prior generation within the family. Regardless of what the

misconception is regarding school attendance, it is the school's responsibility to highlight the importance of school attendance to all members of the learning community. Again, communication plays an important role as educational stakeholders work to eliminate misunderstandings regarding attendance with their students' families. Those responsible for school attendance need to be mindful as parents or guardians with acquired misconceptions may have acquired lower levels of trust and a limited connection to their child's school (Robinson et al. 2018; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). Relationship building, consistency with communication, and communication backed with research are key components as schools work to transition family's attendance philosophies and beliefs. To improve school chronic absenteeism, the research site should explore the misconceptions shared by the research participants and work to reduce these misunderstandings through a presentation of attendance information supported by research.

### **Chronic Absenteeism Begins Early**

Robinson et al. (2018) highlighted that when a parent places little value on early education this establishes a foundation for lack of consistent school attendance not only early but throughout their child's educational career. Despite the research participants being guardians or parents of high school students, each identified that poor school attendance began before high school began. Research participants in this study shared lived experiences that highlighted a lack of routine established early in their child's educational careers. The establishment of early consistent school attendance routines was impacted by several factors based on the lived experiences of the study's research participants that included adverse childhood experiences, drug use, family challenges, challenges at school, and childhood illnesses. These lived experiences support the need for the implementation of chronic absenteeism interventions not

only at the high school level but throughout a student's educational career beginning before the first day of school. Several researchers highlight that many schools are responding to truancy issues with students later in their educational careers, but the foundation of chronic absenteeism begins with our youngest students (Gottfried, 2015; Jordan & Miller, 2017; London et al. 2016; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018). The researcher believes that chronic absenteeism stakeholders need to foster necessary early interactions with parents and guardians to get our youngest students attending school consistently and developing a healthy routine of attending school consistently. A consistent attendance plan should exist from when a student begins their educational journey up until the student concludes their high school education.

### **Rural and Economically Disadvantaged**

Based on 2019 school lunch data, 68.09% of the research site's students were eligible for free and reduced lunch (Maine Department of Education, 2019). The research site and the surrounding communities that send students to this high school in rural Northern Maine have a population identified as highly economically disadvantaged. The research participant's interviews uncovered a number of obstacles and challenges that directly or indirectly impact their child's chronic absenteeism due to the economically challenged and rurally located area. The shared lived experiences of the research participants described obstacles and challenges of living in rural Northern Maine that included limited public transportation, internet connectivity, distance from a major hospital, and a high substance abuse issue. Research from Mett et al. (2016) similarly highlighted that rural isolation from urban areas creates challenges that may limit support for those who struggle with low income due to the community's remote rural location leaving families challenged to meet their basic needs including education. In addition, research by Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2018) identified that rural families have less access to

resources outside the family and social support networks because of geographical isolation. Research by Mett et al. (2016) and Rhoad-Drogalis and Justice (2018) spoke directly to many of the challenges and obstacles that research participants in this study identified. The rural isolation and limited resources in the region challenge many aspects of living in the area including attending school consistently. It is important that educational stakeholders have an understanding of what environmental obstacles and challenges prevent rural students who are economically disadvantaged from consistently attending school. This research site must take in consideration that consistent school attendance is impacted for some members of their learning environment due to the ruralness of the region and the limited resource not available for all students. Additional work with consistent school attendance of economically disadvantaged students who live in rural areas would contribute to the currently established research on school attendance.

### **Conclusion of Interpretations and Importance of Findings**

This study was designed to explore and identify obstacles and challenges that may cause chronic absenteeism at a rural research site. Each of the seven findings identified within this study impacted consistent school attendance either directly or indirectly based on the lived experiences shared by the seven parents and guardians who volunteered to participate in this study. Each of the emergent themes impacts the research participant's high school students from consistently attending school; however, each obstacle and challenge can be addressed as educational stakeholders, parents/guardians, and students can collaboratively work together to develop a pathway leading towards improved attendance. Through the use of PVEST as the study's theoretical framework, this study's findings provide evidence that a single large-scale attendance initiative is not going to effectively address the many different obstacles and challenges that cause chronic absenteeism regardless of whether in a rural or urban setting. This



study's findings combined with PVEST highlights that an individual's response to an obstacle or challenge is unique and the work to improve consistent school attendance is twofold: 1) If obstacles and challenges can be reduced or eliminated then school stakeholders should work to make these adjustments within the learning environment. 2) Many obstacles and challenges created are out of the control of educational institutions and individual work must occur with the educational stakeholders, the family, and the student to create an individual pathway that will better meet the needs of the student to improve consistent school attendance. Communication and collaborative work between the school and home appear to be key ingredients to reduce chronic student absenteeism as evidenced by a discussion of each finding in the previous section of the study.

### **Implications**

Educational stakeholders across the country in rural and urban settings are seeking solutions to curb school chronic absenteeism. According to Gottfried and Ehrlich (2018), chronic absenteeism within American schools has negatively impacted millions of students and their educational development to the point that policymakers have described this phenomenon as the "Absenteeism Crisis". Rogers and Feller (2018) stated, "Students' educational success relies heavily upon consistent school attendance". An exploration of the chronic absenteeism phenomenon must continue as educational stakeholders are charged to use any gained knowledge of the phenomenon with the intent to make meaningful school adjustments and student accommodations that focus on improving school attendance one student at a time. Exploring the seven lived experiences of the research participants in rural Northern Maine revealed to the researcher that no one plan could meet the unique needs of the high school students who were discussed during the study's interview process. Schulting (2017) claimed that there was no single

solution or program that will completely solve all attendance issues in any school and this is evident from the review of the data collected by this study. The seven high school students each have specific needs to be addressed to move towards consistent school attendance. There may be similar obstacles and challenges that students experience, such as living in poverty or adverse childhood experiences, but through the lens of PVEST, each individual will react to stressful situations differently. The researcher believes that for meaningful change to occur to improve the chronic absenteeism phenomenon, a deeper understanding must take place within the lived experiences of each chronically absent student. School officials must find a way to sit down and meet with the families of the chronically absent child to fully understand the complexities of preventing consistent school attendance and then working with the families. Not every family will sit down and share their lived experiences with school officials, but a deeper understanding of how the student is reacting to the obstacles and challenges that they face may lead to the development of individualized attendance plans that may be more effective.

This rural study took a unique look at the lived experiences of parents and guardians who reflected upon the obstacles and challenges preventing their chronically absent high school child from consistently attending school. This qualitative study provides a unique perspective compared to the many urban quantitative studies that exist within the research field of school attendance. Educational stakeholders and others who are interested in the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism will gain an insight into the themes that emerged from this study, but readers of this study must also keep in mind that these themes identified are specific to the research participants and the research site. A similar study on chronic absenteeism regardless of whether it is urban or rurally conducted may highlight different themes that emerge from the research. This study provided a look at chronic absenteeism by exploring lived experiences

through the PVEST lens that digs into the individual's reaction or response to stress as they navigate through life experiences while molding the person whom they will become. This study's PVEST framework provided a structure that supported the study's statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the single guiding research question of the study. PVEST supported an in-depth look beyond the obstacles and challenges that impacted school attendance and explored the responses by the individual to these stressors that resulted in missed school.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Chronic absenteeism is not a unique phenomenon in rural Northern Maine when compared to other regions of the country. What is unique are the individual lived experiences shared by the research participants as they described the obstacles and challenges that impacted their child from attending high school in rural Northern Maine consistently. The obstacles and challenges experienced may be similar in other rural or even urban areas of the country, but what is important is how the individual responds to the various stressors that they encounter along the way. As a result of these findings and conclusions the following recommendations are made:

- Each learning environment must become aware of the individual obstacles and challenges that hinder consistent school attendance. If obstacles and challenges can be reduced or eliminated, school stakeholders should work to make these adjustments within the learning environment.
- Many obstacles and challenges created are out of the control of educational institutions and individual work must occur with the educational stakeholders, the family, and the student to create an individual pathway that will better meet the needs of the student to improve consistent school attendance.

- An individualized approach is necessary to tailor resources and support to improve a child's attendance; however, the study's research site should explore an attendance awareness practice that is implemented once a child enters school and continues up through a student's graduation day.
- This study uncovered some misconceptions and misunderstandings that parents and guardians had regarding consistent school attendance. Home and school communication should highlight the importance of school attendance and the challenges associated with chronic absenteeism while encouraging daily attendance. Communication and collaborative work between the school and home appear to be key ingredients to reduce student chronic absenteeism.
- Through improved home/school communication and collaboration, school administrators should encourage parents and guardians to align family vacations with school calendars and existing data identifying correlations of missing school to academic success and future truancy challenges.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools created remote learning plans to support students learning from home. Schools should look to maintain these remote learning plans while continuing to make needed improvements as this resource could prove to be a valuable tool not only to assist with chronic absenteeism but to support other student learning needs.
- Educational stakeholders must focus on relationship building with the families and students within their learning environment. All families do not send their children to school with a high level of trust due to poor past experiences with the school. Additional awareness and an attempt to salvage poor relationships between home and school may

provide opportunities for significant gains with school attendance and the children's academic success.

These recommendations for actions may provide educational stakeholders some thinking towards reducing chronic absenteeism within their schools. There is no single solution to curb chronic absenteeism at any school as there is no one-size-fits-all model. What is important is that work to improve school attendance begins by learning the unique obstacles and challenges preventing individual students from attending your school consistently. As educational stakeholders learn of the unique obstacles and challenges that impact school attendance, schools need to employ sound communication and engage collaboratively with key personnel that includes the student, the family, and school personnel to create a pathway towards improved school attendance.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Exploring the lived experiences of parents and guardians with high school students who struggle to attend school consistently provided an informative look into the challenges and obstacles these rurally located families faced. This study also provided an opportunity to explore how parents and guardians perceived their children reacting to these obstacles and challenges. Future studies in the field of school chronic absenteeism may want to consider the following:

- Explore the lived experiences of high school students identified as chronically absent from the perspective of the student. A purposeful sampling strategy involving students as research participants may provide a clearer look and data-rich description of the obstacles and challenges that hinder consistent school attendance. The study might want to consider a range of students who include students new to high school and graduates of the learning environment.

- Based on the lived experiences shared by this study's research participants, it is clear that chronic absenteeism began before high school for their children. Future research should focus on the lived experiences of rurally located parents and guardians whose early elementary children are identified as chronically absent. The foundation of chronic absenteeism begins with our youngest students and earlier interventions are needed (Gottfried, 2015; Jordan & Miller, 2017; London et al. 2016; Susman-Stillman et al. 2018).
- Each school should consider exploring the unique obstacles and challenges that hinder consistent school attendance. According to the Maine Department of Education (2019), schools would benefit from investigating the unique challenges that prevent students from attending school consistently and creating a plan to facilitate the improvement of school attendance. The more a team of educators knows about the students and their families within their learning environment, the more focused interventions can be implemented designed to better meet the needs of their students and families. This study was able to provide rich detailed data to the research site to help reduce chronic absenteeism in this specific learning environment. To complete a study within one's educational institution could reveal the obstacles and challenges specific to the student body. School administrators and other educational stakeholders would be able to communicate and collaborate with the student and family about possible modifications that could be made to help lead the students towards improved success regarding consistent school attendance.
- Districts may want to consider a longitudinal study that closely monitors individual students' attendance beginning in kindergarten and ending when the student graduates

from high school. Though long in completion time, this longitudinal study would provide a school district with an incredible wealth of knowledge of attendance challenges impacting their learning environments.

- A study designed to identify and explore rural schools where chronic absenteeism rates are low or improving. Exploring rural schools that have successfully improved their attendance rates could offer other rural school stakeholders new thinking towards their own changes within their learning environments.
- In rural areas where substance abuse is problematic and directly or indirectly impacts consistent school attendance, exploring local or regional substance abuse centers may provide useful data for stakeholders responsible for improving school attendance. The study could take on a phenomenological approach as the lived experiences of those working with substance abuse patients may be able to offer a valuable perspective to help improve consistent school attendance.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to explore the obstacles and challenges that hinder students who live in rural Northern Maine from consistently attending school. This study was designed based on gaps in the research where extensive quantitative studies exist for urban student chronic absenteeism and many interventions have been created to improve school attendance in these highly populated schools. The following single research question guided this study's exploration of chronic absenteeism: How do parents/guardians of high school students with chronic absenteeism describe the obstacles and challenges which prevent their children from consistently attending a rural, Northern Maine school? This study's theoretical framework was organized through Spencer's

Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). The study employed an interview protocol that was a semi-structured model with several open-ended questions designed to support the research question and created to gather data to review through the lens of PVEST. With the study's methodology in place, the study's goal was to offer rural schools new thinking towards improving chronic absenteeism.

The seven findings that emerged from this study provided an in-depth exploration of the chronic absenteeism phenomenon for the stakeholders of the research site. School officials and stakeholders of the research site can review and reflect upon the findings of the study and potentially make necessary adjustments to their learning environment to better meet the needs of the students whose parents and guardians who took part in the study. Interested parties, regardless of urban or rural location, will find value in this study as it provides a look into chronic absenteeism from a rural location through the lived experiences of parents and guardians whose children have been identified as chronically absent. This study concludes with several takeaways; however, one final thought for educational stakeholders is that chronic absenteeism is unique to the individual student and family. It is important for educational stakeholders to address chronic absenteeism through an individualized approach to tailor resources and support to improve a student's school attendance. In order to make improvements with chronic absenteeism, rural and urban school districts must learn who their students are, what challenges they face, how the students respond to the challenges, and then work collaboratively with students and families to create a pathway that is as unique as the individual needs of the student.



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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Letter for Research Participants

Month, Day, 2021

Dear (Parent/Guardian of High School Student),

During the past two years, I have been working on my doctorate through the University of New England's Doctor of Education Program. I am seeking 7 to 8 volunteers who would be willing to assist me in conducting my research on chronic absenteeism. You would be helping me to collect research as I explore possible challenges and obstacles that prevent students who live in rural, Northern Maine from attending school consistently.

The following criteria for the study is as described:

- You must be a parent or guardian of a child who is currently a 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade high school student and enrolled at the research site that has been identified for this study.
- Your child is or has been identified as chronically absent.

*The Maine Department of Education identifies that a student is considered chronically absent when they miss ten percent or more of the days enrolled in school. Both excused and unexcused absences are both counted towards identifying a student's chronically absent status - Maine Department of Education*

If you choose to assist me by volunteering to participate, please contact me at (207)-227-5892 or via e-mail: [lcaron2@une.edu](mailto:lcaron2@une.edu)

Volunteering in this study will involve taking part in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes at a mutually agreed time using the video conferencing tool, Zoom. If Zoom is not an option for you, an in-person interview can be held with COVID-19 protocols in place. The interview will be recorded to allow me to review and transcribe our conversation. Volunteer's names and other information shared during the interview will be completely confidential and anonymous. Participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time; even once the interview has started.

During the interview, I will ask questions that will allow you to share your lived experiences related to the challenges and obstacles your family has experienced with regard to your child's chronic absenteeism at school.

If you are interested and able to assist me with my research, please reach out to me at the contact information included in this letter.

Thank you for your time and consideration.  
Sincerely,

Leland Caron  
Doctoral Candidate  
The University of New England

## Appendix B

### UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND Consent of Participation in Research

**Project Title:** Chronic Absenteeism: Exploring Challenges and Obstacles That Impact Students' Attendance in Northern Maine Rural Schools

**Principal Investigator:** Leland Caron, University of New England, doctoral candidate  
lcaron2@une.edu (207) 227-5892

#### **Introduction:**

Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your consent. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. Time is of the essence and a quick response is needed to identify which families will participate in this study and then to schedule the interviews. I am requesting a maximum of 48 hours for your decision to participate in this study on school chronic absenteeism. Remember, your participation is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

The purpose of this study is to explore possible challenges and obstacles that prevent students who live in rural, Northern Maine from attending school consistently. This qualitative study will explore the experiences of chronic absenteeism from the perspective of the family that has a high school student who is challenged to get to school consistently. It is the hope that learning of the unique obstacles and challenges through the lens of parents/guardians could help educational stakeholders to create interventions to help improve school attendance.

#### **Who will be in this study?**

This study is recruiting seven to eight volunteers who are parents or guardians of high school 9th and 10th grade students who have been identified as chronically absent. The Maine Department of Education identifies that a student is considered chronically absent when they miss ten percent or more of the days enrolled in school. Both excused and unexcused absences are both counted towards identifying a student's chronically absent status.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be invited to participate in a semi-structured interview about your experiences with your child and school chronic absenteeism. The interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be arranged at a mutually acceptable time for the participant and the researcher and be conducted via Zoom. If technology would prevent the interview from taking place, the UNE Health and Human Safety Committee has granted this study the option of an in-person interview with established COVID protocols in place. The interviews will be recorded and at a later date, transcribed in order to assist with the analysis of the data. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be asked to look at the transcription of the interview to check for accuracy.

#### **What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

You will be asked to share your lived experiences as it relates to the chronic absenteeism of your children. There is always a level of risk when sharing private and personal accounts of one's life with others. To protect your privacy and to ensure confidentiality, the researcher will not use or share any names of your family. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each research participant and will be used when labeling any

collected research evidence. Videos and audio recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of the interview's transcription.

If you feel uncomfortable about continuing with the interview, you may choose not to answer the question or you may choose to opt out of the interview process altogether.

The researcher is a mandated reporter and required by law to report any potential situations of child abuse or neglect to the Maine Department of Health and Human Services

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

There is no monetary benefit, but the findings of this study will add to the body of knowledge surrounding school chronic absenteeism. There is minimal existing literature about chronic absenteeism in Northern Maine's rural schools specifically, and the research of this study will be beneficial to school leaders who are looking to improve school chronic absenteeism.

**What will it cost me?**

There is no cost to participate in this study.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

The researcher will not disclose your family's identity or your status as a participant at any point before, during or after the study. All interviews will be conducted privately via Zoom on a date/time of the participant's choosing. If the lack of technology limits the opportunity to interview, please request an in-person interview that will take place in a mutually agreed upon time and private location where necessary COVID protocols can be applied.

- Interviews will be scheduled by the principal investigator.
- Any correspondence related to the interview or follow up interview will be generated from the principal investigator's University of New England's email address
- An assigned pseudonym will be used to protect your family's privacy

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

You will be asked to sign this consent form. This form requests permission for interviews to be video recorded if interviews are conducted online, audio recorded if face-to-face and transcribed at a later date. In order for the recordings and transcriptions to be kept anonymous, they will be assigned a pseudonym as opposed to being labelled with you or your family's name. The consent forms will be kept in a secure location in a locked office cabinet with digitally completed consent forms and collected data being stored on a secure server through use of a password protected Google Drive folder. The consent form and the data will be kept separately so as they cannot be linked. The UNE research guidelines require any personal data collected during the study to be destroyed upon the completion of the research. UNE guidelines also require that signed consent forms must be retained for three years before being destroyed.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with University.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
- If you choose to withdraw from the research, there will be no penalty to you.

**What other options do I have?**

You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researcher conducting this study is Leland Caron.
  - For more information regarding this study, please contact Leland at (207) 227-5892 or at lcaron2@une.edu.
- If you take part in this study and think you may have been hurt by the study, please contact Dr. Deborah Jameson at the University of New England at djameson1@une.edu
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary DeSilva, SC.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

You will be given a copy of this consent form.

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**Participant's Statement**

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature or Legally authorized representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

**Please select the type of interview that will be conducted:**

\_\_\_\_\_ This interview will take place via Zoom as technology is not an issue.

\_\_\_\_\_ Technology is a concern and I am requesting a live interview to assist with this study.

**Researcher's Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Chronic Absenteeism: Exploring Challenges and Obstacles That Impact Students' Attendance in Northern Maine Rural Schools

**Date of Interview:** TBD

**Interviewee:** Insert pseudonym

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I am currently enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of New England. The purpose of this interview is to explore the challenges and obstacles that impact students' attendance in northern Maine rural schools.

Before we begin, do you have any questions regarding study or your signed research consent form?

**Via Zoom:** Begin recording Zoom interview.

**In Person Interview:** Begin recording the audio of this interview with the online software, Otter Voice Meeting Notes.

If at any time during this interview you would like to stop, please inform me and we will cease immediately.

If at any time you would like to skip a question, for any reason, please let me know and we will immediately move on to the next questions.

*Collect the signed consent form at this time.*

Do I have your consent? – *Wait for a verbal response before proceeding*

Do you have any further questions about the interview or the study before I ask my first interview question?

#### **Parent/Guardian Interview:**

##### **Background**

Firstly, I would like to begin by gathering some background information.

1. How would you describe the neighborhood where you live?
2. Please describe who influences your child the most when it comes to attending school?
3. What is your earliest memory of your child not attending school regularly? Can you describe what you remember?
4. Describe how you perceive the importance of attending school daily?



5. How would you describe your child's perception of school?
6. How do you think your child perceives the importance of attending school daily?

**The lived experiences of chronic absenteeism (Obstacles/Challenges that hinder consistent school attendance)**

7. What do you see/perceive as the challenges and obstacles preventing your child from attending school consistently?
8. Interviewer will follow-up with the interviewee to clarify on specific obstacles and challenges identified by saying: "You identified XYZ as an obstacle/challenge preventing your child from attending school consistently, can you tell me more about XYZ?"
9. If you are comfortable answering this next question, has your child ever experienced an adverse childhood experience (ACEs) that impacts consistent school attendance? (*Interviewer may need to define ACE to research participant*)
10. How have you tried to overcome the challenges and obstacles that have prevented your child/children from attending school consistently?
11. From your perspective, please describe what a day looks like when your child does not attend school.
12. How do you think your child would perceive and describe what a day looks like when he/she does not attend school?
13. If the parent/guardian describes a day that may have additional obstacles or challenges that he/she did not mention earlier, researcher will follow up by asking: "You mentioned XYZ during the day that you do not attend school. Can you tell me more about XYZ and how it impacts your school attendance?"

14. When your child talks of future plans, what does he/she/they say? Does school play an important part in their future plans?

**The lived experiences of working with the school regarding chronic absenteeism**

15. Please describe your experiences when working with the school to improve your child's school attendance?

16. What could schools do differently that would help improve your child's attendance?

17. How would you describe your family's overall school experiences?

18. Is there anything we did not discuss that you would like to add to the research's evidence collection regarding school attendance and you or your child's experiences?

Once again, thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Once the transcription of today's interview is complete, I will share the transcription with you so you can check the accuracy of the interview. I will do this in writing or by your preferred method of communication. Do you have a preference?

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix D

**OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT***Timothy L. Doak, Superintendent*

75 Glenn Street

Caribou ME 04736

207-496-6311 (Phone)

207-498-3261 (Fax)

[www.rsu39.org](http://www.rsu39.org)


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August 15, 2021

Mr. Leland Caron  
 Caribou Community School  
 21 Bennett Drive  
 Caribou, Maine. 04733

**RE: Site Permission**

Dear Principal Caron and UNE Doctoral Program:

I am writing this letter to grant the superintendent of schools permission for you to conduct your research study at Caribou High School regarding the lived experiences of chronic absenteeism by our students and families.

It is understood that you will identify 7 to 8 chronically absent students and then recruit their parents/guardians to participate in your graduate course of study. With my permission, I also have an understanding that you will make all efforts in your control to protect participants, students and families, and confidentiality as described in the presented proposal.

I am looking forward to discussing with you the results of your study and hopefully, receiving a great understanding of how RSU 39 can better address the issue of chronic absenteeism.

Sincerely,

**Timothy Doak**

Mr. Timothy Doak  
 Superintendent of Schools

## Appendix E

### Researcher's Reflective Journal

**Bracketing:** According to Chan et al. (2013), bracketing is not an easy process. Based on the research of Chan et al. (2013), the following bracketing strategies were selected and will be employed by the researcher during this study's data collection and data analysis process:

**Strategy 1:** Researcher begins research with an assessment of his understanding regarding chronic absenteeism

**Strategy 2:** Through reflexivity, the research will identify areas of potential bias of chronic absenteeism and will note these preconceptions in a journal to reflect upon during the research process

**Strategy 3:** Research participants will be engaged in the bracketing process during the interview process

**Strategy 4:** The creation of a thorough research plan before data collection begins

**Strategy 5:** Open-ended questions will be used during the interview process

**Strategy 6:** The researcher will maintain curiosity in what they may learn by allowing the research participants to speak freely

**Strategy 7:** Develop new learning from research participants through the semi-structured interview process

**Potential Bias** of chronic absenteeism by the researcher to reflect upon during the interview and analysis process:

1. Chronic absenteeism may occur due to poor communication between school and home.

2. The importance of school attendance with the family may not be the same priority of those who are educational stakeholders.
3. Students who are chronically absent may have parents or guardians who had negative experiences with their own schooling.
4. Current practices with chronic absenteeism must be improved to increase consistent school attendance.

The **following protocol, borrowed from Smith** et al. (2009), will be used during the data analysis process of this study:

Step 1: Reading and re-reading.

Step 2: Initial noting.

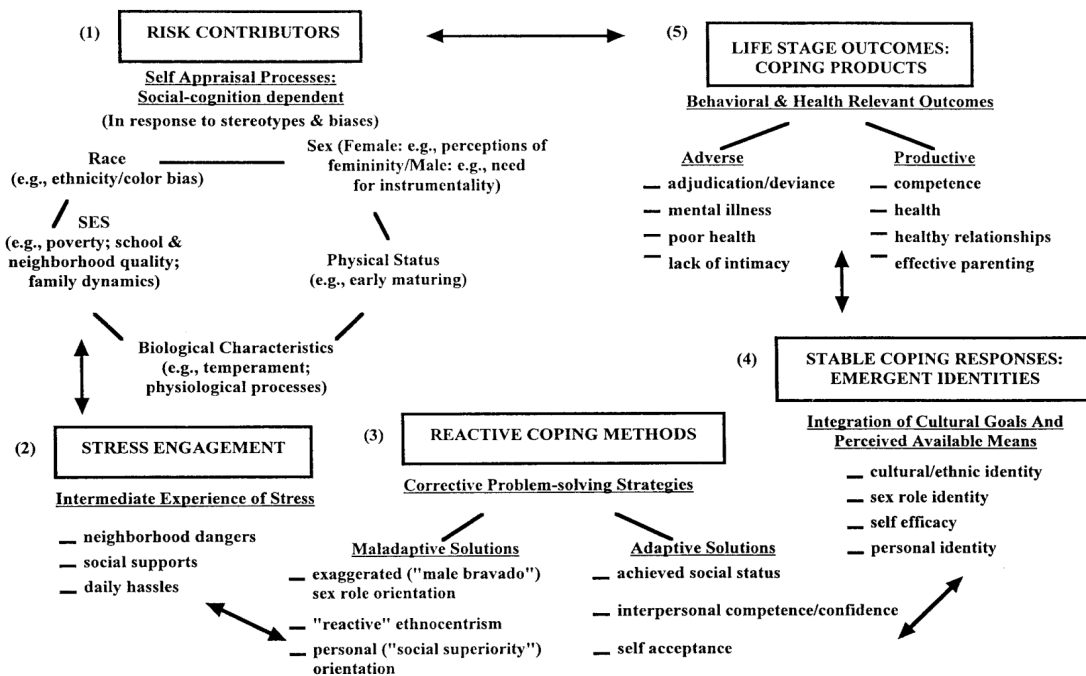
Step 3: Developing emergent themes.

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes.

Step 5: Moving to the next case.

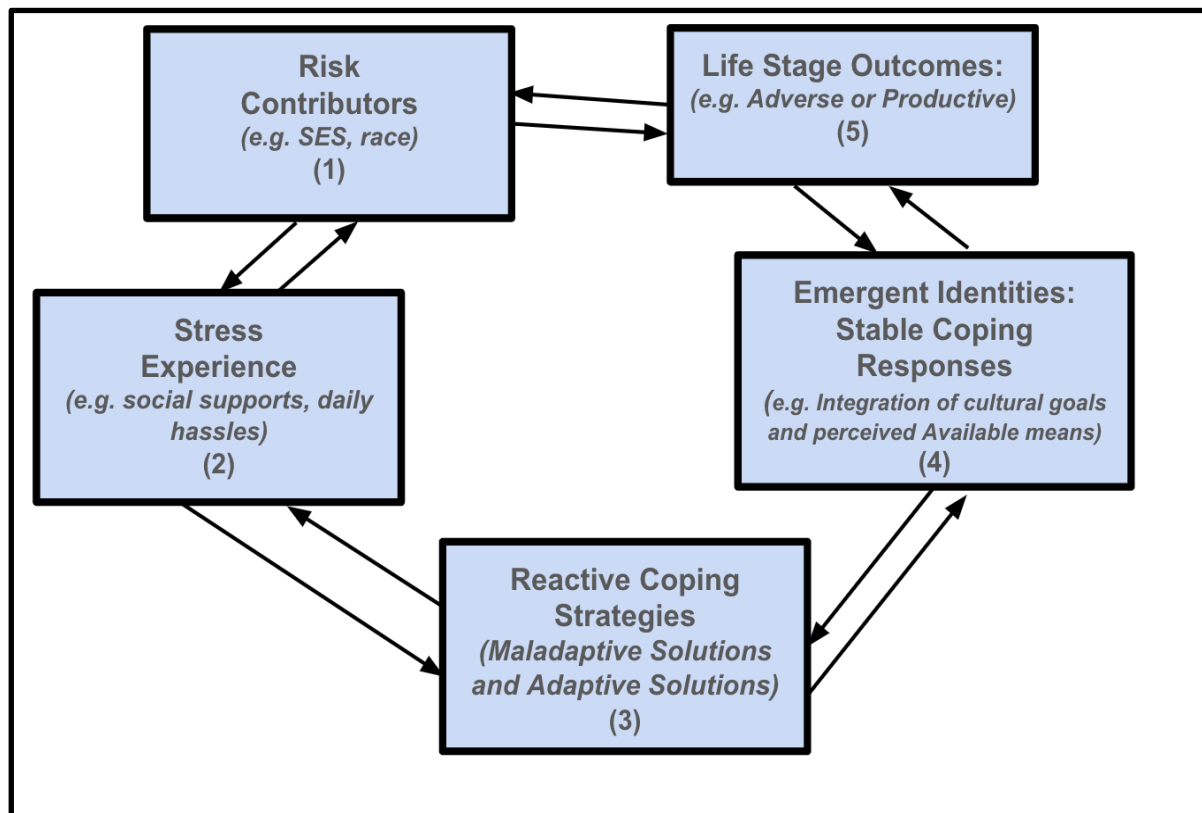
Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases.

The following theoretical framework



**Figure 1.** A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 1995).

### *Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory*



**Interview #1 Scheduled to take place on Monday, September 13th at 9:00 AM via Zoom.** *Despite a weak internet connection, the research participant used her phone as she claimed that she had unlimited data.*

**PSEUDONYM: Joan Smith/Jack**

**Interview #1** took place as scheduled. The following is a collection of emergent themes after rereading the interview transcripts and initial noting:

### Obstacles & Challenges

#### Rural location

- No internet besides phone hotspots
- \$1000 a pole...need 13 poles to get internet to the place (\$13,000)
- Distance from school
- 30 min. From school
- Major hospital 3 hours away
- No nearby neighbors

#### ACES

- Hemophilia
  - 4 surgeries (port-cath)/healing
  - Several events prevented school attendance
  - Any time hurt at school would need to leave
  - Any fever the family would need to go to the emergency room to rule out infection due to a clotting issue
  - Impacting future decisions towards college and workforce
  - Relies on parents for infusions
  - 30-minute infusion 3X a week before school
- Family Deaths
  - Lost 3 grandparents in 6 weeks
  - Grandma was a huge part of student's life
  - An emotional hit
  - Missed school to hospice in a different state
  - Funeral

#### Perception of School Attendance

- Family Vacations
- Mom didn't realize how much time the child missed school until reflecting on this study due to hemophilia
- Mom wishes that all schools stressed the importance of attendance
- In Elementary you can miss more days than in High School. Something new taught at hs each day
- Current HS highlights the importance of attendance compared to prior school
- Mom believes that transition years are most important

#### School is stressful for the student

- Gets behind and struggles to get caught up
- Overwhelmed...feels behind
- Study hall too large to concentrate
- Prior exemptions lead to learning gaps and student is not prepared for current learning

#### COVID

- The family spent time in quarantine
- Wasn't aware of the school's red plan
- Internet connection poor...had to go to dad's work

<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
Rural Location Hemophilia Death of grandparents	Gets behind in school work. Becomes overwhelmed.	Misses additional school Mom/guidance helps the student with a plan to get caught up	Attempts to stay on track with work. Seeks parental help when needed.	Has goals of a blue-collar job with good insurance.

- Mom is the biggest school influence
- A new schedule helps students...move to trimesters...limits classes.
- Friends at school excite student
- Rather learn at school instead of Red model of instruction
- Has plans for college. Needs office job to be safe...needs good insurance “million-dollar kid”
- When a student stays home due to hemophilia he tends to watch TV.
- Mom requests that the remote option continues as to when her child is homesick he can work on getting caught up.

---

**Interview # 2 Scheduled for Thursday, September 16th was postponed.**

**Rescheduled and took place on Monday, September 27th.** *This interview was scheduled to take place via Zoom, but was rescheduled for in-person due to challenges with technology. Zoom as the research volunteer claimed her internet connection was weak and she only had a phone to use and was afraid to use up her minutes based on the potential length of the interview. The interview took place at a mutually agreed upon setting adhering to COVID protocols of masking and social distancing.*

**PSEUDONYM: Mrs. Brady/Ruberta**

The following is a collection of emergent themes after rereading the interview transcripts and initial noting:

<b>Obstacles &amp; Challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Messy divorce when daughter was in elementary school in Connecticut (Mom lays blame on bio dad's laziness)</li> <li>• Does not see the need to attend school and now refuses to try any interventions put in place by the school. Says that school is not necessary (Mindset)</li> <li>• Does not see the connection of the need for education despite her goal of opening a clothing store</li> <li>• Shaky Internet...Needed help from school with hot spot</li> <li>• Undesirable drug traffic in the neighborhood</li> <li>• COVID has an impact</li> <li>• Daughter's sleep patterns</li> <li>• Lack of engagement with school</li> <li>• Sister sexually assaulted and moved. Sisters were close.</li> <li>• The daughter's excuses led to a progression from chronically absent to fully truant.</li> <li>• Mom's perception (Attendance was good before COVID as she attended school 2-3 times a week. Sees other students not attending school walking by house)</li> </ul>



Risk Contributors	Stress Experiences	Reactive Coping Strategies	Stable Coping Response	Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive
<b>Divorce</b> Moved a long distance away from father <b>Single parent</b> Challenging Neighborhood <b>Sister's experience with sexual assault</b> Rural versus the urban life they left in Connecticut <b>SES</b>	Challenges of divorce <b>Does not see the value of school</b> COVID forced family inside <b>Sister has moved back to live with dad in another state</b>	<b>Sleep patterns - up all night and sleeps during school hours</b> Makes up excuses why she cannot attend and the excuses have changed over the weeks and years to assist the child to remain out of school <b>Highlights television programs to support her refusal to attend school</b>	Has a goal of owning a clothing store <b>Does not attempt to take part in any interventions to get her to school</b>	The lack of connection and engagement to school does not seem to be repaired soon.  <b>She believes that she can reach her goal of the clothing store owner as millions of kids in 3rd world countries do not get an education beyond grade 8</b>

**Interview #3** was scheduled for Thursday, September 30th, and took place as scheduled. *This interview occurred in person due to research participation only means of technology was her phone and she requested the in-person interview adhering to COVID protocols.*

**PSEUDONYM: Miss Molly/Julie**

The following is a collection of emergent themes after rereading the interview transcripts and initial noting:

Obstacles & Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family dynamics</li> <li>• Mom and dad's drug usage</li> <li>• The school was not even a priority in the early years</li> <li>• The student has trust issues because she was lied to by her parents (little parent encouragement)</li> <li>• No longer with parents. Relies on guardians of half-sister and grandparents on her mom's side</li> <li>• Parents do not value school and the student has the same thinking</li> <li>• Attending school was never a routine</li> <li>• Promises made but rarely kept...developed a trust issue with the student and adults</li> <li>• The student is aware and witnessed parents' drug addiction</li> <li>• The student is not engaged with school but only motivated to attend via fear that peers will leave her behind as they advance and she does not.</li> <li>• The cell phone is a negative piece as it keeps her connected with friends while she is missing school</li> <li>• Technology is good, but remote learning during COVID is challenging as she refuses to turn on the camera and keeps the computer on mute.</li> <li>• Has no thoughts of future plans that she has shared with her guardians.</li> <li>• Not engaged, not interested, and not invested in education</li> </ul>

<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
<b>Drug Abuse</b> Parents who do not value education  <b>School routing on attendance was never established early</b>  SES	Trust issues <b>The student does not value school</b> Fights with guardians to attend school daily <b>Worried about being left behind by peers</b>	<b>Refuses to attend</b>  Will not work with school or guardians to establish interventions to improve school attendance  <b>Connects with friends w cell phone</b>	<b>Grandparents and half-sister encouraging attendance</b>  <b>Attempting to surround students with “good people”</b>	<b>Currently attending school but only because she is afraid to be left behind by classmates.</b>

**Interview #4 Scheduled for Thursday, October 7th.** The interview took place via Zoom. Technology was not an issue.

**PSEUDONYM: Mary Middle/Tony**

The following is a collection of emergent themes after rereading the interview transcripts and initial noting:

<b>Obstacles &amp; Challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mom struggled in school. Became pregnant in HS with the oldest son. Graduated with help from school officials.</li> <li>● Family dynamics - mom is a single mom whose ex-husband lives about 45 minutes away. She is responsible for transporting him to school without the assistance of dad.</li> <li>● Mom’s struggles with school put her in a position not to be able to help her son early on with his academics. She did seek educational help but believes she couldn’t get the help that he needed.</li> <li>● Son had a poor experience with the bus driver in elementary school. Mom brought him in every day</li> <li>● Dad lives in a rural community approximately 40 miles away and their son visits regularly. When the weather is poor, it is a struggle to drive him to school</li> <li>● Son dislikes and struggles with math</li> <li>● Perception that son was bullied early in elementary school. Despite mom’s visits to rectify the situation, mom’s view is little was done and some of the bullying continued.</li> <li>● Student's absenteeism rate has increased each year per mom</li> </ul>

<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
<p>Mom's own struggle with school</p> <p>Divorced - single mom</p> <p>SES</p>	<p>Mom cannot help son at school - academically and with bullying.</p> <p>Challenges of being a single mom</p> <p>Work weekends as a bartender and rely on ex-husband and other family members to help care for son.</p> <p>Son refuses to go to school</p>	<p>Mom fights with her son to go to school almost daily.</p> <p>Sometimes she gives in due to fatigue of fighting</p> <p>Has tried working with the school, but doesn't feel helpful</p> <p>Blames some of her son's lack of success based on her limitations with school</p>	<p>Mom transport's child to school daily due to early bus issues</p> <p>Son's fear of mom getting in trouble with truancy motivates him to get to school</p>	<p>Adaptive if the child remains engaged in courses then remain in school</p> <p>Attendance remains inconsistent</p> <p>Student struggles with math considerably</p> <p>Is engaged in school with art and other hands-on opportunities</p>

**Interview #5 Scheduled for Sunday, October 10th.** The interview was originally planned to take place via Zoom as technology was not an issue for these guardians. It was later requested for an in-person interview as both guardians wanted to take part in the interview and Mr. Hines strongly requested an in-person interview. COVID protocols were adhered to during the interview.

**PSEUDONYM: Mr. Hines and Mrs. Hines/Star**

The following is a collection of emergent themes after rereading the interview transcripts and initial noting:

**Obstacles & Challenges**

- Mom is an addict
- Grandparents have raised Star the majority of her life with no attendance issues. Attendance has become an issue approximately 2 years ago when Star was reunited with her mom
- Mom lacks parenting skills
- Mom continues to make poor decisions
- Self-esteem issues (calls her friends and self the "reject group")
- DHHS challenges
- History of neglect when mom using
- Mom and child fights typically resulting in the child returning to grandparents (sometimes long term sometimes short term)
- Rules - mom has few while grandparents have many
- The child stays up late and sleeps in (typically with mom). Binge watches programs
- The child has used the lie "I will learn remotely today" even though there are no remote learning opportunities

- Not engaged with school
- Dislikes math
- 2 traumatic events - one includes an addicted mom who couldn't care for her children when they were living with her. The second involves DHHS's removal from their long-time guardian to be reunited with mom. Consistent school attendance has been an issue since reunification.

<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
Poor HS school experience - became involved with drugs  Drug addiction  Single parent  Parental neglect  SES	Mom cannot care for children  Grandparents take over care from mom  Grandparents/mom fight regarding the welfare of grandchildren  Child worries about mom. Will stay home to "take care of her"  DHHS reunification	Child misses school  The child takes care of herself and her mom  Few rules guide child - to bed late into the night and sleep in  Mom receives drug counseling and then uses it again	Binge watches TV with mom  Sleeps in  Mom is not engaged with school  Does not react to truancy letters sent by the school	Maladaptive  The child does not attend school regularly  Currently has a future goal, but has not engaged in school to reach goal

**Interview #6 - Scheduled for Tuesday, October 19th at 5:00 PM.** The interview took place in person as the guardian does not own a computer or understands how Zoom works. He requested an in-person interview as a virtual one could not take place. COVID protocols were adhered to throughout the interview process. The interview took place on time.

**PSEUDONYM: Mr. Barker**

The following is a collection of emergent themes after rereading the interview transcripts and initial noting:

**Obstacles & Challenges**

- Early childhood trauma that involves witnessing: drug abuse, violence towards her mother, and potential sexual interaction with her mother's boyfriend
- A mother who is an addict has led to violence towards her grandfather. The daughter has witnessed this violence and is scared of mom. Mom broke into the residence.
- Mom went to jail for an attack on the family. Mom described as a heroin monster and meth-head
- Afraid to go to school. Think mom will get her there.
- Mom was possibly sexually assaulted when she was four or five by the neighbor.
- Mental health issues that involve a sleep disorder
- Granddaughter refuses therapy and counseling
- Granddaughter influenced by best friends/cousins. Both had poor school attendance and one has dropped out of school at 16.
- Grandfather is challenged to raise granddaughter alone. Knows he should shut the internet down at night, but does not

follow through.

- Mom was pregnant at 15 and dropped out of school at 16
- Raised by a single grandparent who works
- Mom lives in a homeless shelter in central Maine. Has overdosed at least 2 times.
- She dislikes School, especially math
- Afraid to become an addict like her mom if she takes helpful medication to deal with mental health
- Drugs around the neighborhood
- Grandfather gives in to the wishes of the granddaughter. Internet on and devices in place for the child to stay up all night then sleep is needed in the daytime impacting school attendance.

<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
<p>Drug riddled neighborhood</p> <p><b>Mom is addict</b></p> <p>Single working grandfather</p> <p><b>Violence witnessed experienced</b></p> <p>SES</p>	<p><b>Sleep disorder</b></p> <p>Lives in fear</p> <p><b>Afraid to become a drug user</b></p> <p>Grandfather blames self for granddaughters failures</p>	<p>Does not attend school. By staying up all night and sleeping through the day.</p> <p><b>Refuses help from therapy, counseling, or prescribed medication</b></p> <p>Hangs out with “Bad girls”</p>	<p><b>Likes to draw and engage in art</b></p> <p>Granddaughter will attempt to attend school</p> <p><b>Has a goal of attending college for art</b></p>	<p>Likely will drop out of school</p> <p><b>Mental health issues appear to be increasing</b></p>

**Interview #7 - Scheduled for Friday, October 21st.** The interview was conducted through Zoom.

<b>Obstacles &amp; Challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friend Issues</li> <li>● Dad describes “minor bullying</li> <li>● Wants to avoid dealing with issues</li> <li>● Failure to communicate the importance of learning to students (Where will you use this again)</li> <li>● Lack of school engagement except during basketball season</li> <li>● Teacher/relationships</li> <li>● School engagement</li> <li>● Overwhelmed when behind on school work.</li> </ul>

<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
Poor peer relationships <b>Minor Bullying</b>	Fakes being ill <b>Avoids Issues</b>	Misses School <b>Falls behind</b> Can't see the importance of learning	Talks with dad with son <b>Attends school consistently during basketball season</b> Works to get caught up	<b>Does not attend school consistently when he needs to avoid</b> Needs to begin thinking of a backup plan if NBA doesn't work out

### Themes extracted from Interviews

Emergent Themes	Note Worthy Themes Not Common in All
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Challenges at School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ I1 - Study hall too big- can't concentrate</li> <li>○ I2- Lack of engagement/Doesn't see the connection of most learning to real-world</li> <li>○ I2 - Lack of connection @ school</li> <li>○ I3 - Not interested or invested in school</li> <li>○ I3 - Student not engaged w/school - Fears only losing peers if the student stays back.</li> <li>○ I4 - Hates math - wants to avoid school because of math</li> <li>○ I4 - Was bullied by peers</li> <li>○ I4 - Bus driver was mean - wanted to avoid bus</li> <li>○ I4 - Mom developed a lack of trust with school when handling a bullying situation in elementary school</li> <li>○ I5 - Hangs out with friends that she refers to as "Reject group"</li> <li>○ I5 - Not engaged with school</li> <li>○ I5 - Dislikes math</li> <li>○ I6 - Dislikes math</li> <li>○ I6 - Dislikes school</li> <li>○ I7 - Peer conflicts - looks to avoid by staying home</li> <li>○ I7 - Doesn't see the connection between new learning and real world</li> <li>○ I7 - Lacks engagement</li> <li>○ I7 - Non-basketball season - grades slip &amp; attendance drops</li> </ul> </li> <li>● ACES</li> </ul>	

- Family Challenges
- I1 - child's illness adds stress - juggling work and medical needs
- I2 - Divorce
- I3 - Mom and Dad are addict
- I3 - Half-sister is her guardian
- I3 - Trust issues (parents used to lie to her)
- I4 - Single mom
- I5 - Mom is an addict
- I5 - Mom is a single mom/dad not involved
- I5 - Grand parents have been guardians for most of her life
- I5 - Mom is lacking parental skills. Wants to be a friend more than a parent.
- I5 - Neglect by mom when she is using
- I5 - Mom continues to make poor choices
- I5 - Consistency for student placement (with grandparents, removed by DHHS, reunified, fight, return to grandparents for a short time.
- I5 - Grandparents have a strict home rules which leads her to mom's lack of rules home
- I5 - Takes care of her mom when on drugs
  - Afraid to lose her mom
- I6 - Mom is an addict
- I6 - Single grandfather is guardian
- I6 - Mom lives in a homeless shelter
- I6 - Mom was pregnant at 15
- I6 - grandfather states he gives in to her
- I7 - Parents are divorced since middle school
- I7 - Sister has a serious health disorder
- I7 - Will fake sick and dad allows him to stay home.
- Rural Maine Challenges (Where we live limitations)
  - I1 - Distance from school
  - I1 - Poor internet connectivity
  - I1 - Rural. Neighbors are almost a mile away
  - I2 - Lots of drugs in the neighborhood
  - I2 - Poor internet connectivity
  - I3 - Lots of drugs in neighborhood
  - I4 - When with dad over 40 miles away from school and struggles to get to school on a snowy day
  - I4 - Lives a ways from the school
  - I6 - Drugs in the neighborhood
  - I6 - "Sketchy people" roaming through the neighborhood - possibly drug-related
  - I6 - Limited drug resources locally - from counseling to treatment

- Gets behind/Overwhelmed to catch up
  - I1 - The missed school has created learning gaps in child's learning
  - I2 - Gets overwhelmed. Doesn't know where to start
  - I4 - Gets behind due to missed school - overwhelmed
  - I6 - Doesn't know where to start
  - I7 - Misses one class then struggles to recover
- Illness
  - I1 - Significant life-threatening disease
  - I1 - Major hospital over 3 hours away
  - I2 - Sleep Issues
  - I4 - Pretends to be sick to avoid school
  - I5 - Stays up late with mom and sleeps during the day
  - I6 - Sleep disorder - refuses therapy
  - I6 - Mental health issues - afraid to use prescription medication as she does not want to be an addict like her mom
- COVID Impact Obstacles
  - I1 - Poor Internet - Cell phone data
  - I1 - Parents transferred to a new school and did not know the remote learning plan
  - I2 - Will stay home lying to mom that she will connect remotely with classes
  - I2 - During at-home learning under COVID the parent tried their best to keep their child at home, but when school was back in session, they couldn't get the child out of the house to school.
  - I3 - Refuses to take part in online learning. Will not engage during at-home learning due to COVID concerns
  - I5 - Lies to her mom that she can join her class remotely even though her school is in session and is not offering a remote option
  - I6 - Became more challenging to get to school after COVID. Sleep disorder grew.
- Parent's Challenges with School
  - I1 - Mom believes that it is ok to miss school at the elementary as she planned her family vacations during the school year.
  - I1 - Mom wished schools would start younger in informing parents regarding how much learning they miss when not in school.
  - I1 - Believes if you miss a day of high school it is way more challenging in recovering from missed learning compared to elementary school
  - I2 - Mom struggled with school engagement. Went to



<p>a big school where behaviors were tough</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ I3 - School not a priority - child did not attend early when living with parents. Parents don't value school and neither does their daughter</li> <li>○ I3 - Attending school is never a routine</li> <li>○ I4 - Mom struggled in school and has difficulty helping her son with homework.</li> <li>○ I5 - School is not a priority for mom. Mom would rather be a friend instead of a parent.</li> <li>○ I5 - Mom was challenged in high school. Began to become involved with drugs during high school years.</li> <li>○ I6 - Mom dropped out of school</li> <li>○ I6 - Cousins dropped out of school (Cousins are a big influence on child)</li> </ul>	
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	<b>Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Experiences and Engagement</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Methods or Strategies</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response: Emergent Identities</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
<b>Challenges living in rural, northern Maine</b>	P1-Distance from Hospital (3 hours) P2-Moved away from father P2-Adjusting to rural surroundings	P2 - Sibling moved to a different state to be with the other parent			
<b>Participant 1</b>			Misses additional school Mom/guidance helps the student with a plan to get caught up	Seeks parental help when needed.	Has goals of a blue-collar job with good insurance.
<b>Family Challenges</b>	P1-Death of grandparents P2- Divorce P2 - Single parent	P1-Becomes overwhelmed. P2 - Challenges of divorce	P2-Makes excuses why she cannot attend and the excuses have changed over the weeks and years		
<b>Participant 2</b>			P2-Highlights	Has a goal of	

			television programs to support her refusal to attend school	owning a clothing store	She believes that she can reach her goal of the clothing store owner as millions of kids in 3rd world countries do not get an education beyond grade 8
<b>ACEs</b>	P2-Sexual assault on student				
<b>Challenges at School</b>		P1-Gets behind in school work. P2 - Does not see the value in school		P1-Attempts to stay on track with work. P2-Chooses not take part in any school intervention	P2-The lack of connection and engagement to school does not seem to be repaired soon.
<b>Illness Obstacle</b>	P1-Hemophilia	Sleep patterns off			
<b>The COVID Impact Obstacle</b>		P2 - Was forced inside and away from school			
<b>The Obstacles Created by Attendance Misconceptions</b>					

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*Research Participants and Key PVEST Findings*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Parent or Guardian</b>	<b>Key Risk Contributors</b>	<b>Stress Engagement / Experiences</b>	<b>Reactive Coping Method (Maladaptive or Adaptive Solutions)</b>	<b>Stable Coping Response: Emergent Identities</b>	<b>Life Stage Outcomes Adverse or Productive</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	Parent	Significant Illness  Rural Location  Death of grandparents	Gets behind in school work.  Becomes overwhelmed .	Misses additional school  Parent/school creates a plan to get caught up	Attempts to stay on track with work.  Seeks parental help when needed.	Has goals of a blue-collar job with good insurance.  Productive
<b>Participant 2</b>	Parent	SES  Divorce  Single parent  Challenging Neighborhood  ACEs - Sibling experienced sexual assault  Rural concern: Poor internet service	Challenges of divorce  Child does not see the value of school  COVID forced family inside  Sibling has moved away to live with other parent	Developed extreme sleep patterns (up all night and sleeps during school hours)  Makes excuses, why she/he cannot attend (excuses have changed over the weeks and years),	Has a goal of owning a clothing store  Does not attempt to take part in any interventions to get student to school	The lack of connection and engagement to school does not seem to be repaired soon.  Student believes that he/she can reach her goal of the clothing store owner Adverse
<b>Participant 3</b>	Guardian	Drug Abuse by parents  Parents who do not value education	Trust issues  Fights with guardians to attend school daily	Refuses to attend  Will not work with school or guardians to	Grandparents and half-sister encourage the student to	Currently attending school but only because she is afraid to be left

		School attendance was never established early  SES	Worried about being left behind by peers	establish interventions to improve school attendance  The student does not value school	attendance  Attempting to surround students with “good people”  Connects with friends w cell phone	behind by classmates.  No current plans for the future  Adverse and productive
<b>Participant 4</b>	Parent	Parent had own struggles to attend school  Divorced (single parent)  SES	Mom cannot help son school (academicall y and with early childhood bullying)  Challenges of being a single Parent  Works weekends relied on ex-spouse and other family members to assist  Student struggles with math considerably	Mom fights with her son to go to school almost daily.  Sometimes she gives in due to fatigue of fighting  Blames some of her child’s lack of success based on her limitations with school  Son’s fear of mom getting in trouble with truancy motivates him to get to school	Mom transport’s child daily to school  Has tried working with the school with attendance and bullying	Child currently engaged in school  Attendance remains inconsistent from time to time  Is engaged in school with art and other hands-on opportunities  Has future plans that requires education  Currently Productive
<b>Participant 5</b>	Guardian	Parent had poor HS school experience  Parents drug addiction	When the parent is using cannot care for children  Guardians	Child misses school  The child takes care of self and her parent	Guardians get child to school Binge watches TV with mom	Adverse  The child does not attend school regularly

		<p>Single parent</p> <p>Parental neglect</p> <p>SES</p> <p>Bounced between guardian and parent</p>	<p>take over care for parent</p> <p>Guardians/parent fight regarding the welfare of children</p> <p>Child worry about his/her parent</p> <p>DHHS reunification</p> <p>Mom is not engaged with school</p>	<p>Few rules guide child at parent's - late bedtime results in sleeping in</p> <p>Mom receives drug counseling and then uses it again</p> <p>Child worries about parent overdosing</p> <p>Does not react to truancy letters sent by the school</p>	<p>When in school student has friends</p> <p>When is school student engages in learning</p>	<p>Currently has a future goal, but has not engaged in school to reach goal</p>
<b>Participant 6</b>	Guardian	<p>Drug riddled neighborhood</p> <p>Mom is an addict</p> <p>Single working grandparent</p> <p>Violence witnessed and experienced</p> <p>Mental health concerns</p> <p>SES</p>	<p>Grandchild's Sleep disorder</p> <p>Grandchild lives in fear</p> <p>Grandchild afraid to become a drug user</p> <p>Grandfather blames self for granddaughters failures</p>	<p>Does not attend school.</p> <p>Stays up all night and sleeps through the day.</p> <p>Refuses help from therapy, counseling, or prescribed medication</p> <p>Hangs out with "Bad girls"</p>	<p>Likes to draw and engage in art</p> <p>Grandchild will attempt to attend school from time to time</p> <p>Has a goal of attending college for art</p>	<p>Likely will drop out of school</p> <p>Mental health issues appear to be increasing</p> <p>Adverse</p>

<b>Participant 7</b>	Parent	Poor peer relationships  Potential bullying	Fakes being ill to avoid school  Child will avoid peer issues by not going to school	Misses School  Falls behind  Cannot see the importance of some learning	Child talks with the parent about concerns  Child attends school consistently during basketball season  Will works to get caught up	Does not attend school consistently when he needs to avoid  Needs to begin thinking of a backup plan if NBA doesn't work out  Mostly productive
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