National Center for Mental Health Promotion
and Youth Violence Prevention

Prevention Brief

Reducing Truancy

Compulsory school attendance is a reflection of the importance our nation places on education as well as a recognition that regular attendance is necessary if education is to effectively prepare a child for adulthood. Truancy and chronic absenteeism which are often steppingstones to dropping-out of school before graduation have consequences for children, the adults these children will become, and the society in which they live. Truancy reduction programs that promote consistent attendance by addressing the underlying causes of truancy can also improve academic achievement while reducing problem behaviors, including substance abuse and delinquency.

Definitions and Extent of Truancy

Although the age at which children can legally leave school differs by state, every state requires that children attend school—or substitute an authorized equivalent, such as home schooling. These state mandates are accompanied by regulations describing how state education and juvenile justice agencies should respond to truancy. It should be noted that the number of days absent to be considered truant varies by jurisdiction. While the school often has first responsibility for responding to truancy (often in the form of a call to parents), truancy ultimately involves the possibility of action by juvenile or family courts, sometimes in the form of detention for the children and fines or jail for the parents (although the latter seems to be extremely unusual). The juvenile justice system usually only becomes involved in cases of "habitual truancy," which is usually defined in terms of a specific number of consecutive unexcused absences from school or a total number of unexcused absences over a semester or school year. The majority of students who meet this definition are probably not called before a judge or other court officer.

Reliable national or state data on truancy are difficult to find. State and district attendance records often do not differentiate truancy from excused absences. Schools sometimes do not, or cannot, take the time to ascertain whether an absence is excused or unexcused, creating a third category (sometimes called unverified absences). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires states to report truancy rates by school beginning with the 2005–2006 school year. Attendance rates will also play a role in measuring whether a school has fulfilled NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress requirements. At the time of this writing (early 2007), NCLB attendance data are not yet available.

The attendance data that is available is incomplete.
- A study using data from a large national survey of drug use found that about 11 percent of 8th grade students and about 16 percent of 10th grade students reported having been truant at least once in the previous four weeks (Henry, 2007).
- Another national survey found that the percentage of students who did not go to school at least once during the 30 days prior to the survey because they felt unsafe rose from 4.4 percent in 1993 to 6 percent in 2005 (YRBS, 2007). These data do not indicate how many of these students were considered truant by their schools.
- A survey conducted in 1996–1997 found that principals considered tardiness, absenteeism and class cutting, and physical conflicts to be the three most serious discipline issues in their schools (Heaviside et al., 1998).

While consistent definitions of truancy limit the ability to collect consistent, meaningful national data, some information is available on individual school districts. A newspaper report claimed that

5 percent of the students in the Los Angeles Unified School District are absent without excuse each day (Schuster, 1995). An unpublished study found that almost 20 percent of the students in Denver's public schools met the state definition of truant (i.e., each had at least 10 unexcused absences during a single school year) (MacGillivary and Erickson, 2006).

Consequences and Causes of Truancy

A review of the research literature review commissioned by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found correlates between truancy and four categories of risk factors: (1) family factors (lack of supervision, poverty, alcohol or drug abuse, lack of awareness of attendance laws, attitude toward education); (2) school factors (school size, attitudes of students, staff, teachers, inflexibility toward meeting different learning styles, inconsistent procedures for dealing with chronic absenteeism); (3) economic factors (employed students, single parent home, high mobility, parents with multiple jobs, lack of transportation); and (4) student factors (drug and alcohol abuse, lack of understanding of attendance laws, lack of social competence, mental and physical health problems) (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001). The broad range of risk factors related to truancy has important implications for programs and activities (discussed below).

Truancy has a number of unfortunate consequences—not just for students, but for schools and communities. It is not surprising that truancy affects academic achievement. A National Center for School Engagement literature review (Heilbrunn, 2007) found that truants have lower grades, need to repeat grades, drop out of school, are expelled from school, or just do not graduate from high school, at higher rates than students with fewer unexcused absences. The review reported that there is evidence that at least some schools and districts expel or otherwise "push out" students who are both truant and low-achieving. This removal can raise the school's overall level of academic achievement (as measured by grades, grade promotion, and graduation rates). The review also pointed out that some researchers claim that not enforcing truancy laws can be a form of classroom management, as students who are consistency truant sometimes have behavioral issues that disrupt classrooms, making it difficult for teachers to teach and other student to learn and causing administrators to spend time on disciplinary issues.

The research literature also concludes that truancy is a risk factor for other problems, including substance abuse, delinquency, gang activity, serious criminal behavior (such as car theft and burglary), and dropping out of school (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001). Other research found that truancy itself can lead to (or reinforce existing) risk behaviors, given that children who are not in school are unsupervised and removed from the influence of positive peers and adults (Heilbrunn, 2007). There are a number of studies showing that effective truancy reduction programs can produce a marked decline in delinquency and crimes committed by school age youth (Heilbrunn, 2007).

The OJJDP literature review also concluded that truancy does not just effect young people but also the adults they will become. Adults who were chronically truant from school when young are at elevated risk for a host of problems, including poor physical and mental health, poverty and welfare, incarceration, and raising children who themselves exhibit problem behaviors (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001).

Truancy has long-term economic consequences for both schools and communities. State aid is often distributed to schools or districts based on their average daily attendance. Truancy can thus affect a school's bottom line (Smink and Zorn, 2005). Several municipalities have had remarkable success at increasing state aid to their school through truancy reduction programs (Heilbrunn, 2007). The use of attendance as an indicator of a school's effectiveness under NCLB has implications for the distribution of federal resources to schools and districts. And given that truancy is a risk factor for dropping out of school, it has a long-term effect on public finance. One study estimated that each individual who does not complete high school costs a lifetime average

of $200,000 in public monies over and above similar costs for high school graduates. These excess public costs include lost tax revenues and the costs of social services and incarceration (Heilbrunn, 2003).

Traditional Approaches to Truancy Reduction

The most basic traditional response by schools to truancy was to call or meet with parents after students did not provide the proper documentation (the almost proverbial "note from home") after being absent. Some schools called parents if a child did not show up at school to make sure the student was not "playing hooky." Police departments would sometimes question students of school age who were found not in school during school hours, bringing them either home or to the school (a practice made more difficult in recent years by open campuses and the amount of serious crime requiring police attention).

In the past, schools often suspended or even expelled habitually truant students. Little thought was given to preventing truancy by means other than the threat of suspension—the logic of which went relatively unquestioned until the last decade. Suspending or expelling truants essentially rewards their desire to avoid school, causes them to fall behind in their school work, and does little to encourage more consistent attendance.

Schools can take habitual truants to juvenile or family court. Six hundred twenty-nine of every 1,000 truants petitioned to the courts are adjudicated as status offenders. (A status offense is an act that becomes an offense by virtue of the person's age. For example, it is illegal for minors to not be in school, buy alcohol, or run away from home. None of this is the case for adults.) Of the adjudicated youth, 491 are placed on probation, 65 are placed in group or foster homes, 55 receive other sanctions, and 17 are released (Puzzanchera et al., 2000).
In many states, parents can be fined or jailed if their children are habitually truant, which has not proven effective. Parents are rarely called into court unless a young child is involved (Smink and Heilbrunn, 2005). Schools can be reluctant to file truancy petitions against children or parents because of the time school staff will need to spend in court (Smink and Heilbrunn, 2005). Police are similarly disinclined to initiate prosecution of children or their parents. Only 10 percent of the truancy cases formally handled by courts from 1985–2000 were referred by police departments (Puzzanchera et al., 2000).

There are good reasons why courts hesitate to jail parents or place children in foster care or detention for truancy. Removing the parent from the home (or the child from the school) can be counterproductive in terms of attendance. What evidence exists shows that the threat of such sanctions—and the sanctions themselves—do not reduce truancy (Walls, 2003). There is also no evidence that placing youth in detention deters truancy (Smink and Heilbrunn, 2005; Heilbrunn, 2004).

In the last two decades, school districts, juvenile and family courts, and police departments have begun to take more sophisticated approaches to truancy, approaches that seek to prevent rather than punish truancy, that question the logic of out-of-school suspensions, and that respond to all four categories of truancy-related risk factors (family, school, economic, and student factors). These new approaches are discussed below.

Effective Approaches to Truancy Reduction

The research indicates that truancy can be reduced by programs and activities designed to improve the overall school environment (and its safety), attach children and their families to the school, and enable schools to respond to the different learning styles and cultures of children. Children are less likely to avoid school if they feel safe, comfortable, cared-for and engaged in a productive and rewarding activity (i.e., effective education). The National Dropout Prevention

Center/Network (Smink and Reimer, 2005) recommends the following strategies that fall into these categories as effective in reducing truancy:

- Systemic renewal
- School-community collaboration
- Safe learning environments
- Family engagement
- Early childhood education
- Early literacy development
- Mentoring/tutoring
- Service learning
- Alternative schooling
- After-school opportunities
- Professional development
- Active learning
- Educational technology
- Individualized instruction
- Career and technical education

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratories (Railsback, 2004) adds a number of other programs and practices to this menu, including the following:

- Personalized learning
- Smaller schools or learning communities within schools (such as learning academies focused on particular topics, house plans, or magnet schools)
- Mentoring
- Student advisory programs
- Interventions targeted at improving educational effectiveness in the classroom

There are also interventions specifically designed to reduce truancy. These include the following types of activities and programs:

Attendance policies are school and district regulations concerning student attendance requirements, excused and unexcused absences, and the consequences for truancy. A review of the research on attendance policies reveals that the most effective attendance policies are those that promote attendance rather than punish absence (especially through out-of-school expulsion). Policies should be clear and consistent across the entire school district. Students, parents, and staff must understand these policies, and especially the difference between excused absences and truancy (Railsback, 2004).

Early intervention programs identify students who have started skipping school and work with these children and their families before they become habitual truants. Early intervention programs might involve calling families after an unexplained absence, explaining the importance of consistent attendance at school, and helping them solve problems that might affect their child's presence in school (e.g., transportation issues).

Some programs also seek to promote a **pro-attendance culture** in the school by, for example, rewarding students for consistent attendance, and holding events and campaigns that reinforce the importance of attendance. Some of these efforts also reach out to parents and the community through public education campaigns and events to create pro-attendance cultures in the family and community that reinforce that of the school.

Alternatives to adjudication for truancy allow students who are truant to avoid formal adjudication. Such alternatives include community truancy boards that negotiate contracts between schools and truant students (and their families) for more consistent attendance or peer or teen (youth) courts composed of other students (in some cases students who have had, and resolved, their own truancy issues).These contracts can include restrictions on student behavior

(such as confining the student to the campus during lunch hours) as well as participation by the student and/or the family in specialized services when appropriate.

Court-based truancy reduction programs are based in juvenile or family courts, but attempt to provide services to truants and their families as an alternative to adjudication (while acknowledging the possibility of adjudication as a motivation for becoming involved with these services).

Alternative education programs specially for students whose truancy results from a divergence between the school's educational practices and individual student's learning styles. These might include occupational or career education programs or advanced courses in local community colleges, depending on student interest and ability. Some evaluation studies show that targeted truancy reduction programs can work (see, for example, Smink and Reimer, 2005, and NCSE, 2005). Given the limited evaluation data, it is difficult to determine exactly what type of truancy prevention program works best (and for whom). However, two recent reports provide an overview of the common elements of programs that effectively reduce truancy and promote school attendance. One (Railsback, 2004) found that effective strategies for increasing student attendance fell into four broad categories:

1. Sound and reasonable attendance policies with consequences for missing school
2. Early interventions, especially with elementary students and their families
3. Targeted interventions for students with chronic attendance problems
4. Strategies to increase engagement and personalization with students and families that can affect attendance rates: family involvement, culturally responsive culture, smaller
5. learning community structures, mentoring, advisory programs, maximization and focus on learning time, and service learning

The second report identified critical components necessary for effective truancy prevention programs (Reimer and Dimock, 2005):
- Collaboration, including a broad-based multidisciplinary collaboration of the agencies and organizations whose involvement can affect truancy (such as schools, juvenile courts, and law enforcement agencies).
- Family involvement: True family involvement values parents "for their advice, experience, and expertise in the community, as clients of our public systems of care, and as experts in the lives of their children."
- Comprehensive approach: Effective programs address, either directly or through partnerships, all the factors that affect truancy, including transportation, mental health issues, academic issues, and school climate.
- Incentives and sanctions: Effective programs combine meaningful sanctions for truancy and meaningful incentives for attendance to change the behavior of students. For example, suspending students from school for truancy is not effective and does not promote pro-school attitudes among students.
- Supportive context: This context includes organizations, community cultures, and policies.
- Rigorous evaluation and assessment, including outcome data.

Both reviews provide evidence that effective truancy reduction programs are comprehensive and respond to the four categories of risk factors shown to be relevant to truancy (that is, family, school, economic, and student factors).

The Cost-Benefits of Reducing Truancy

Although the field of truancy reduction would benefit from more precise evaluation programs—especially evaluations clarifying the effectiveness of the individual components in multimodal

programs—it has been the focus of some compelling cost-benefit analysis. Based on a fairly rigorous estimate that, over their lifetime, a person who drops out of high school costs the public more than $200,000 in excess criminal justice, social service, and health care costs, and that habitual truancy is a major risk factor for dropping out of school, Heilbrun (2003) calculated that two different multimodal truancy reduction programs paid for themselves (that is, saved more public money than it spends) if each prevented one student from dropping out every four years. A larger program in an urban area required successfully preventing four students per year from dropping out to pay for itself (in terms of public monies saved). All three programs Heilburn studied had much better success rates than were required to break even (in terms of public expenditures versus public expenditures saved) and thus ultimately represented a savings to the taxpayers.

Additional Information on Truancy Reduction

For additional information and resources on truancy reduction, including research, resources, and descriptions of specific truancy reduction program activities, see the Truancy Reduction Resource Page in the Resource Pages section of the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention Web site (http://www.promoteprevent.org).

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