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Effective truancy prevention and intervention

*A review of relevant research for the
Hennepin County School Success Project*

AUGUST 2003



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Background

The Hennepin County School Success Project asked Wilder Research Center to conduct a review of research related to effective truancy prevention programs of three types: 1) school-based interventions; 2) community-based interventions; and 3) law enforcement or court-based interventions.

In conducting the review, Wilder Research Center staff focused on articles that included a rigorous evaluation of program outcomes (results). In particular, staff sought out projects that were evaluated using a control or comparison group or long-term follow-up of attendance patterns. Of the 53 articles examined, 25 gave anecdotal descriptions of services or programs, but did not include research evidence on program effect. Those 25 articles are not extensively cited here. Instead, the emphasis is on studies that involve larger groups of students and those that do not rely mainly on anecdotal evidence of attendance improvement.

Summary

Many of the truancy intervention programs reviewed here involve a multi-pronged approach that combines school-based and community interventions. Some also involve the courts, particularly in requiring participation in diversion programs. In addition, much research has focused on factors outside of the individual truant child, such as factors that motivate youth to attend school.

What works

The following approaches have solid research evidence for their effectiveness.

- Relationship-building: Students need individualized attention at school (this may explain why smaller schools have less absenteeism) and build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Students need strong, positive relationships with teachers and other adults at school. In addition, research has found that older youth need strong and healthy relationships with peers, and that these can be a motivator for attending school.
- Contacting parents regarding absenteeism (works best with 10th grade and younger), creating meaningful incentives for parental responsibility, and including parents in all truancy prevention activities.
- Strong and clear attendance policies.
- Family counseling that recognizes and builds on the family's own strengths and resources, with the overall goal of increasing attendance. (The study that found impact included up to six months of family counseling.)
- Intensive school interventions (examples include a mix of the above strategies and also mentors, individualized plans, a team approach, and "learning circles" (efforts by teachers to provide education relevant to the cultural background of the community and to provide a controlled environment that emphasize academics and discipline).
- Establishing ongoing truancy prevention programs for school, rather than a one time effort or an effort that only targets high risk students.
- School staff that are trained, committed, and supported to provide high quality, responsive services and keep at-risk youth in the educational mainstream.
- With every approach taken, it is necessary to include ongoing, rigorous evaluation to measure the impact of the program.

Strategies with inconclusive results

- Rewards and/or incentives for attendance (i.e. fast food coupons or prizes from local businesses). Some studies found increases in the number of students with perfect attendance. Some are mixed on the benefit of this approach for chronically truant youth.
- Peer group counseling (in-school group sessions with other truant youth). Two studies found increases in school attendance for group counseling participants. However, both studies had very small samples (less than 20 participants).
- Probation officers devoted to truancy cases. This approach looks promising in reducing truancy, but the studies are limited by lack of a comparison sample of truant students who did not receive these services, and lack of clear delineation of the services youth receive through the program.

What doesn't work

- School uniforms did not have an impact on truancy (Brunsma and Rockquemore, 1998).
- Financial sanctions against families who use TANF, tying their benefits to their child's school attendance, did not have an impact on truancy.

Strategies described but not tested (anecdotal only)

- Publicizing good attendance (such as at student assemblies or on banners at school). This method appears to target mainly those students with occasional attendance problems, not chronic truancy. One survey of students found that having their names mentioned in the newspaper and on the radio was the component that youth found most influential.
- Make-up work for all absentees (whether for truancy or family trips, etc.).
- Involving truants in extracurricular activities.
- Teacher activities such as setting a good attendance example, creating a pleasant classroom environment, classroom attendance reward system, and individualizing student work.
- Mailing letters from the principal to the parents – at successive stages of a student's truancy.

- Alternative schedules to see if class changes can resolve conflicts or if an alternative program, work-study, or work during the day combined with night school would improve attendance.
- Attendance contracts signed by each student, their parents, and teachers.
- Individual, group, and family counseling of truants.
- Testing chronic truants to determine if there is a learning problem (Individualized Educational Planning assessments).
- Home visits by school or community staff that emphasize relationship building and problem solving.
- Police sweeps of frequent neighborhood hangouts.
- Media campaigns promoting the importance of school attendance and explaining relevant laws.

Federally promoted models

The U.S. departments of Education and Justice have proposed five primary elements of a comprehensive community and educational strategy to combat truancy. However, the programs that the Department of Education put forth as models were not thoroughly evaluated for effectiveness. Studies found modest gains in attendance with small samples of students, and some evidence of drops in crime during school hours.

The five elements in the federal model:

1. Involve parents in all truancy prevention activities.
2. Ensure that students face firm sanctions for truancy.
3. Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility. (Two examples: holding back public benefits if children don't attend school, and requiring court-ordered parent education courses.)
4. Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in school.
5. Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction (for example, partnership between police and community truancy centers).

Discussion

This section describes what research evidence tells us about three types of truancy interventions: school-based interventions, community-based interventions, and law enforcement or court-based interventions.

It became clear in the course of this research review that high-quality, evidence-based research on effective truancy programming is in short supply. Most of the studies that found some impact on truancy relied on students' or parents' self-reporting, reliance on interviews and anecdotes, and/or very small sample sizes (many had 30 or fewer cases). Any substantial research that can be done in Hennepin County will be of great value to those who plan, fund, and carry out truancy reduction programs – and to the students and families who participate.

School-based interventions

Many researchers conclude that schools need to make systemic changes in order to re-engage students who have poor attendance. These systemic changes promote improvements in school climate and practices that can have a positive impact on all students. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) state that schools need to intensify interpersonal relationships between students and teachers. Another study examined the reasons why secondary students come to school and found that social reasons are a central motivation. Particularly for youth at risk of dropping out, the social aspects of school must be considered when designing programming (Kortering, Konold, and Glutting, 1998). Also, there appears to be a close link between the two outcomes of reducing truancy and preventing drop-outs.

Promising practices (Minnesota, Maryland)

Petsko (1991) conducted a study of 59 high schools in the Minneapolis area to identify variables related to school attendance rates. Her analysis (no mention of methodology in the article) found that:

1. Attendance increased when schools had an “excessive absence” policy in which students lose credit after to a specific number of class absences.
2. Attendance policies have different impact at different grade levels. For example, contacting parents worked well for students in grades 9 and 10, but had little impact in grades 11 and 12; this older group was most influenced by strong attendance policies.

Epstein and Sheldon (2002) analyzed three years' worth of school practices and subsequent attendance rates at 12 elementary schools, most in Maryland but some in California, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. This study focused on two goals: increasing school attendance for all children and decreasing the percentage of students who were chronically absent (more than 20 absences). This study relied on descriptive information and cooperative school principals, but found that the best predictors of student attendance included:

1. Rewarding students for improved attendance. This had an impact on both improved school attendance overall and the reduction of chronic absenteeism. Rewards varied and included special recognition, certificates, letters to parents, and opportunities to attend special events.
 2. Assigning a truant officer to students and families with attendance problems. This was not *perceived* to be effective by students and their families, but the long-term results show that it does actually increase attendance rates. (The data indicate that this may not be effective with chronic truants.)
 3. Conducting family workshops focused on school attendance.
 4. Referring chronically absent students to counselors.
 5. Connecting parents with school contact persons with a particular emphasis on outreach to diverse families.
 6. Making home visits. This targets chronic absenteeism only, and does not have as much effect on overall attendance rates.
- Conclusion: Having a clear attendance policy, rewarding students for attendance, assigning a truancy specialist to serious but not chronic cases, and working with parents in multiple ways are proven strategies. Also, the student's grade level and the diversity of families need to be considered in developing truancy programs.

Learning communities (Midwest, urban)

Steward (1999) examined the impact of Learning Communities. Developed specifically for African American youth, Learning Communities involved active participation of students, families, community, counselors, and teachers, and the use of incentives to increase school attendance. These Learning Communities involved four teachers, known as "team leaders," who were asked to focus more classroom time on instruction and less time on discipline and correction. Teachers were asked to significantly increase their contact with parents by notifying them of classroom rules and expectations and the student's adherence to and violation of rules, and consulting with families on best ways to intervene with youth. Students who violated classroom rules were moved immediately to a separate room run by

a counselor with a masters or doctoral degree, under the supervision of African American university faculty. Students without behavioral violations received special opportunities and learning experiences and parents were notified of their student's positive classroom behavior.

Student participants were identified by their eighth-grade counselors as being at high risk for academic failure due to past absenteeism and lower grades. The study found that Learning Communities increased attendance and average grades of ninth-grade students. In fact, the greatest benefit occurred among students who were academically less prepared – those who had failed previously in school.

- Conclusion: A structured community-based and incentive-based classroom environment (that included a culturally-specific focus) was most beneficial to students who were initially behind their grade level academically. Limitations of the research include a small study size (50 students) and no follow-up study to observe longer-term effects.

Ninth-grade drop-out prevention program (Florida, rural and urban)

A mid-size school district (mix of rural and urban) tested a comprehensive school-based program aimed at reducing drop-out rates (Pearson and Banerji, 1993). The program targeted all ninth-grade students in six high schools, and the study followed a random sample of 25 percent of the students over three years. This comprehensive program with multiple forms of intervention had the greatest impact on overall school attendance, increasing the overall attendance rate from 89.6 percent of all student-days in the baseline year to 95.6 percent in the third year of the program. The program focused on: academics (including a tutorial service, ability grouping, smaller class sizes), creating a cooperative or team atmosphere for the ninth grade (such as student lockers together, establishment of ninth-grade “teams” with a teacher advisor), parent communication (including newsletter articles, study skill development, socialization activities, attendance referrals to social workers, automated home calls home for absence). Unfortunately, the study did not extrapolate which parts of the program had greatest impact on attendance.

- Conclusion: Comprehensive school-based efforts that focus on school climate, cohesiveness of the student body, and family support can increase attendance rates in grades 9 through 12.

Ninth-grade intervention program (Minnesota, urban/suburban)

The Ninth-Grade Asset Builders Program in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, is designed to decrease alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, reduce academic failure, improve attendance rates, and decrease discipline problems among ninth-grade students (Sharma and Griffin, 2003). The program utilizes a series of interventions including student leadership training, reducing class size, improving the consistency in enforcement of school rules, and improving staff coordination. The four-year evaluation study indicates a trend toward improved overall school attendance.

- **Conclusion:** Overall, the students in the program demonstrated fewer high-risk behaviors and improved academic performance. However, the improvement of school attendance fluctuated over the four years examined, ranging from 26 percent absenteeism in the baseline year to 21 percent absenteeism in Year 2 of the program. Absenteeism is recorded by the number of absent school days divided by the number of days enrolled. Continued monitoring of attendance will be important to understand the long-term impact of the program.

Other interventions

- Munoz (2001) studied interventions with at elementary students and found promise in intervention specialists, home school coordinators, individual success plans, one-on-one attention, mentors, skill-building, counseling, contracts, incentive plans, and a team approach to addressing student and family needs. Attendance increased for participants in the year studied.
- In another study, Munoz (2002) focused on a program for secondary students designed to reduce drop-outs. The method was to call students when absent, contact parents, make personal contact with youth when they are in school, and assist students with personal and family problems. In this study, the treatment group had higher attendance and a better graduation rate than the comparison group. Also, Munoz noted that the intervention gained \$112 per day in pupil reimbursement for each day of absence that was prevented.

Community-based interventions

Multi-systemic approaches (Minnesota, urban)

The Hennepin County Targeted Early Intervention program for delinquents under age 10 (Gerrard and Owen, 2003) uses a team of county staff (social worker, economic assistance worker, psychologist, and public health worker) along with a staff member from a community organization such as the YMCA or Phyllis Wheatley Community

Center to target the needs of extremely high-risk children and their families. On average, the youth attend school 89 percent of enrolled days compared to 78 percent of enrolled days for comparison youth. Although school attendance is improved, most of the TEI youth (69%) continue to be involved with the courts related to their delinquent behavior.

- **Conclusion:** A collaborative approach of county social service combined with a community-based program worker can significantly increase school attendance for extremely high-risk children.

Counseling (New Jersey)

The Atlantic County Project Helping Hand works with students (kindergarten to eighth grade) who have five to 15 unexcused absences. A truancy worker meets with the youth and family to provide short-term family counseling, usually up to eight sessions. Aftercare contact occurs at 30, 60, and 90 days after program completion. Results showed that 84 percent of students who participated had no recurrence of truancy (U.S. Department of Education, 1986). There was no comparison group for this study.

- **Conclusion:** A program that pairs a truancy worker with K-8th grade truants and their families to provide short-term family counseling appears to improve attendance (no comparison group).

Law enforcement or court-based interventions

Some studies find that the use of the court system has not been effective in reducing truancy (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

Banchy (1985) published a study of Hennepin County practices for a national school social workers conference. Banchy analyzed the effectiveness of court intervention strategies that included: a letter from the County Attorney's Office, four hours of work squad service, and placement under court observation for 30 days with warning that further truancy would result in additional work squad duty and that chronic truancy could result in out-of-home placement. Banchy found that nearly 80 percent of truant youth who received a disposition of stayed work squad, work squad, or 30 days of observation were again absent from school during the follow-up period, and one-third of youth were truant the day after they appeared in court. Interestingly, nearly half of the truants who received the County Attorney letter were never referred to court.

Taking truants to court (Oklahoma, 16 school districts)

In Oklahoma, district attorneys can file charges against parents or guardians of truant students (Scott and Friedli, 2002). The county established a uniform reporting system for all Tulsa districts so the district attorney could enforce attendance laws. In addition, the county offers “supportive training in parental skills” and operates a news media campaign that promotes the benefits of school attendance and informs parents about the laws and possible penalties. The county also has added school staff to telephone parents and employed “family outreach” police officers to visit homes of students with attendance problems. The county claims that 800 more students are on the school rolls each year, generating \$3,000 each in reimbursement, which is based on average daily attendance.

- **Conclusion:** This study claimed a reduction in truancy, but did not provide specific data on this. The county has some similar characteristics to Hennepin County. In Minnesota, reimbursement is not based on average daily attendance, so schools do not have the same financial incentive to improve attendance.

Use of probation officers (California)

The Kern County Truancy Reduction Project, located in central California, uses probation officers to visit each school about every other week to collect referrals, interview students, and conduct home visits (Van Ry and King, 1998). The project requires all schools involved (about 40 districts) to send truant children, in kindergarten through grade 8, to a Student Assistance Team before referring them to the Truancy Reduction Project. The Student Assistance Team is composed of a school administrator, teachers, and counselors. A case manager is assigned to interview the child, their teacher, the person making the referral, and the child’s parent. The team is responsible for identifying the concerns and working to address them. This can include telephone calls, letters to parents, home visits from school staff, academic and behavior interventions, or referrals to community organizations. After four or more unexcused absences or excessive excused absences, students can be referred to the Truancy Reduction Project. Students remain an “active” in this project for at least six months. It uses a family case management approach that includes: assessment or case investigation, unannounced home visits, weekly contacts with the child at school, and counseling with parents and students. Findings show that 42 percent of youth have no further unexcused absences after intervention. However, the effect of this intervention is limited by the burdensome caseload of probation workers (over 100 each).

- **Conclusion:** Probation officers devoted solely to truancy intervention can have an impact, but much depends on the personality and skill of the probation officer, caseload size, availability of resources, and cooperation of schools. This study is limited by the lack of a comparison group and lack of clarity about what services the youth actually receive.

Court diversion: family counseling (Kansas)

The Truancy Diversion Program in Kansas was developed as a community systems approach to truancy (Sheverbush and Smith, 2000). Kansas law holds parents accountable for their children's school attendance. In the Truancy Diversion Program, after five unexcused absences school officials contact parents and encourage them to make sure their children have no more unexcused absences. This sometimes includes a home visit. If unexcused absences continue, up to 10 absences, the child is reported to the county attorney's office and the parents are notified of pending legal action. The case is heard in court within two weeks. If the court determines the child to be truant, the family is given the option of participating in the diversion program. Nearly all families choose diversion (the actual percentage is not cited). The case is then transferred to a court services officer in charge of juvenile offenders. After completion of the program, all records of the charges are expunged. If the family chooses to not participate in the truancy diversion program, the student is adjudged to be "a child in need of care" and may be removed from the home and placed in the custody of the state social service agency.

The first step in the diversion program is a meeting attended by the family, school administrators and counselors, court services officer, county attorney, director of the family counseling training program, and participating therapist. The focus of the meeting is on finding solutions to the truancy problem. Family counseling, tutoring, social skills training, after-school programming, and further diagnostic testing are offered if appropriate. All parties sign a contract spelling out the plan.

Family counseling is provided by post-graduate masters-level students as trained therapists under supervision. Findings from the study show that program participants decreased unexcused absences by 90 percent. Truancy rates declined significantly. Eighty-six percent of the students whose families participated in the program remained in school and completed the diversion contract. The study states that only 4 of 338 youth have been placed outside of the home in four years.

- **Conclusion:** An intensive family counseling diversion program ordered by the court works to decrease truancy and subsequent out-of-home placement in rural Kansas.

Court diversion: repeated adjournments (Scotland)

- A randomly controlled study in Scotland (Brown, Berg, Hullin, and McGuire, 1990) tested the use of “repeated adjournments” or putting off the actual trial in an effort to get the youth to attend school without an adjudication or out-of-home placement. This study found that interviewing the parents regarding family background risk factors was not effective. Involvement with the court appeared to increase the likelihood of improved attendance for youth. However, it only improved overall attendance to above 70 percent of all student-days for the period studied, and the study does not report previous attendance rates before the program began.
- **Conclusion:** Youth in this court “diversion” program were just as likely to have improved attendance as their peers who received adjudication and were placed outside the home. However, it is difficult to transfer this program model to Minnesota, because of the differing laws and juvenile systems in Scotland.

Other court diversion activities (Kentucky, urban/rural)

Munoz (2001) and Wilhelms and Munoz (2001) studied the Truancy Court Diversion Project in Jefferson County/Louisville, Kentucky, which provided parenting classes, Saturday school, behavior contracts, drug screening, tutoring, psychological management, anger management, violence abatement classes, and referrals to community programs to address underlying issues contributing to truancy. Students were selected to participate after 15 to 25 absences. The majority were elementary students. The findings show that, at least in the short term, the intervention has moderate impact on reducing truancy. Attendance improved – a 24 percent decrease in days absent after 1 month as compared to the same month in the previous year.

- **Conclusion:** It appears that community-based diversion services work in the short-term. However, it is critical to better understand the necessary length of time and intensity of service mix that best supports long-term positive outcomes.

Sanctions for families who use TANF or AFDC (San Diego, California)

A random assignment study tested the hypothesis that secondary school attendance and graduation rates would increase for AFDC recipients compared to a control group if financial sanctions on the family’s benefits were coupled with services to truant teens (Harris, Jones, & Finnegan, 2001). This study found evidence that sanctions coupled with an intervention service did not have an impact on these youth. Rates of attendance and graduation were similar to the control group.

- **Conclusion:** Financial penalties on families receiving TANF or MFIP did not increase school attendance.

Next steps

The Hennepin County School Success Coordinating Committee can decide what next steps to take with the literature review. Three options include:

- 1) Explore in greater depth some of the specific areas approaches or topics in this overview, to look for more articles or other primary research sources.
- 2) Explore other topic areas of interest to the committee. To date, we have examined school-based interventions, community-based interventions, and court or law enforcement interventions. The other four areas of interest mentioned by the committee include:
 - Educational policy and school attendance policies
 - Attendance-taking and use of technology to track or monitor truants
 - Family interventions
 - Homeless children and school attendance
- 3) Develop a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of one or more well developed approaches currently used within school districts in Hennepin County.

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