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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

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New Approaches to Truancy Prevention in Urban Schools. ERIC Digest.

In New York City alone, it has been estimated that 150,000 of 1 million public school students are absent on a typical school day (Garry, 1996). Although the exact number is unknown, many of these absences are the result of truancy. No universal definition for truancy exists, but it is generally defined as a locally-determined number of absences from school without a legitimate excuse. Truancy is generally considered a major risk factor for dropping out of school and for delinquent behavior, including substance abuse, gang involvement, and criminal activity; these often lead to more serious problems in adult life. This digest will explore truancy in the urban context, examine the different types and reasons for truancy, and provide an overview of the new ways in which researchers and intervention programs have been addressing this problem.

THE URBAN AND MINORITY CONTEXT

No national data on truancy rates exists, but many large cities report staggeringly high rates of truancy (Baker, Sigman, & Nugent, 2001); in general, larger schools have higher rates of truancy (Puzzanchera, Stahl, Finnegan, Tierney, & Snyder, 2003). The relationship between race and truancy is not well established, but the truancy data collected by the juvenile court system reveal that whites are underrepresented in petitioned truancy cases (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Puzzanchera et al., 2003). Students with the highest truancy rates are at higher risk of dropping out of school (Baker et al., 2001), and African Americans and Latinos consistently have the highest dropout rates (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). The relationship between income and truancy is also not well established, but it is generally believed that students from lower income families have higher rates of truancy (Bell et al., 1994). The number of truancy cases is evenly divided between boys and girls, and the peak age for petitioned truancy cases is fifteen (Puzzanchera et al., 2003).

TRUANCY: A FEW TYPES AND A MULTITUDE OF REASONS

Although cutting class and truancy are not generally thought of as synonymous, researchers have found that about 40 percent of extreme truancy cases in Chicago occur because of class cutting. They have also found that truants are often in and around school and that tardiness may also account for truancy. In general, then, two types of truants exist: those who cut or miss class and those who miss full days. Because of the cyclical nature of these absences, both types of truancy require early intervention (Roderick et al., 1997).

Many reasons, which have been generalized into four categories, explain why truants do not attend school (from Baker et al., 2001, unless otherwise indicated):

* Family. These include lack of guidance or parental supervision, drug or alcohol abuse, lack of awareness of attendance laws, and differing views about education.

* School. These include factors such as school environment (school size, attitudes of

teachers, students, and administrators), an inability to engage the diverse cultural and learning styles of minority students, inconsistent attendance policies, and lack of meaningful consequences.

* Economics. These include employed students, single-parent homes, a lack of affordable transportation and child care, high mobility rates, and parents with multiple jobs.

* Student. Factors include drug and alcohol abuse, misunderstanding or ignorance of attendance laws, physical and emotional ill-health, lack of incentive (Bell et al., 1994), lack of school-engaged friends, and lack of proficiency in English (Rohrman, 1993).

Low academic achievement and weak basic skills are other major reasons for truancy, but even the highest achieving students may be labeled truants because they cut class. Warning signs are often evident in the elementary school years (Roderick et al.; Mogulescu & Segal, 2002). In many cases, the siblings of these students also have attendance problems and the use of family therapy has been strongly recommended and effective as a form of intervention (Sheverbush & Sadowski, 1994). For high school students, attendance problems begin early and worsen as the school year progresses; the transition to high school can be especially difficult. Schools that do not consistently challenge students, set and enforce high standards of behavior, and provide personal support encourage student disengagement (Roderick et al., 1997).

MULTIMODAL INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

One of the key features of truancy intervention is a collaborative, or multimodal, approach that involves some combination of community stakeholders: schools, juvenile courts, and law enforcement agencies, as well as parents, community organizations, and social services agencies (Baker et al., 2001; Bell et al., 1994; Mogulescu & Segal, 2002). This approach takes into account the many risk factors that underlie truancy. Early prevention programs that focus on elementary school children view, as do most researchers, parents as responsible for their children's failure to attend school. The Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program in Ohio invites parents to a mediation session after parental notifications fail to improve their children's attendance. During the mediation sessions stakeholders identify the reasons for truancy and agree on a plan of action. In Broward County, Florida, the Broward Truancy Intervention Program uses a computer system to track and notify parents of their children's absences. Subsequent actions include a conference with parents and, if necessary, misdemeanor charges against them.

Applying the principle that truancy is often a result of emotional, familial, and environmental factors, some middle and high school intervention programs use a continuum of increasingly intensive interagency participation to avoid court involvement. In Ramsey County, Minnesota, for example, the Truancy Intervention Program has

three stages: (1) an informational meeting on the laws and legal consequences regarding truancy; (2) the collaboration of school representatives (including counselors), the assistant county attorney, parents, and students to create an attendance contract; (3) the filing of a petition to the juvenile court.

In instances where school-based interventions have failed and the truancy case has reached the court docket, judges may issue alternatives to standard court sanctions. Such programs allow the court to target specific education and other needs of the child. In Atlanta, Georgia, the Truancy Intervention Program assigns a court-appointed volunteer attorney who supports and represents truant children of all grade levels; the court may impose supervision, counseling, and education programs. Seventy-five percent of these students avoid subsequent contact with the juvenile court (Mogulescu & Segal, 2002).

COURT INTERVENTION: A SPECIAL ROLE

The juvenile justice system is increasingly being used as a final stop and as a mechanism for intervening in truancy (Baker et al., 2001). It plays an important role in the collaborative effort to combat truancy, and in some states, such as New York, it is the first method of intervention. However, courts often do not effectively enforce truancy laws. Many families are not intimidated by courts insofar as truancy is concerned (Rohrman, 1993; American Bar Association [ABA], 2001). Removing parents from the home by sending them to jail or putting children in non-secure detention or foster care is often counterproductive, because such measures are traumatic for the families, highly cost-ineffective, and often take students out of school (Garry, 1996; Mogulescu & Segal, 2002; ABA, 2001).

The Truancy Diversion Programs in Louisville, Baltimore, and Phoenix represent a more effective use of the courts. They bring the court into the school and utilize its atmosphere of formality and consequence in a non-punitive manner. These programs work on three principles: (1) because truancy often emerges from family conditions, the courts identify and treat the underlying causes in the family; (2) because it is more productive to keep students in the school setting, the courts hold weekly mock court sessions on school premises and put families in regular contact with the judge; (3) because many people give up on truants, the court uses positive reinforcement of the participants' efforts, regardless of their failings (ABA, 2001).

Some truants continue to have problems with attendance despite these intervention efforts. The use of an alternative school that is designed specifically for truants may be a successful way to help them. The Dekalb Truancy School in Dekalb County, Georgia, for example, serves up to 75 court-referred students each semester. Students in this program have average or above-average intelligence but below-average academic skills; individualized instruction is a key feature of the program. The students also learn conflict management, problem-solving, leadership, and teamwork skills (McGiboney, 2001).

CONCLUSION

The programs featured in this digest help to reduce truancy and involvement with the juvenile court system; they are cost-effective and tailored to urban schools. However, no one program will accommodate the needs of every school and community. Urban schools, which have higher numbers of low-income and minority students, should develop truancy programs that address the social and cultural needs of these populations and maintain their efforts in a collaborative and multi-agency setting. Evaluations reveal that this collaboration requires clearly defined roles and continuing, community-wide education, as well as data-driven methods to track its effectiveness (Baker et al., 2001). The payoff has been marked improvements for families, students, schools, and communities.

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