

About Policy and Practice Trends for Reducing Truancy

School attendance is a predictor and precursor of academic success. We have explored this matter in some detail in a Center report entitled: *School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in the Right Direction?*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/Briefs/school%20attendance%20problems.pdf>

The purpose of this brief document is to highlight some recent trends specifically related to *truancy* concerns.

The Problem

Much of the literature on attendance focuses on elementary school, which is where initial patterns of absences are established and where family involvement plays a critical role. By sixth grade and beyond, truancy has become a significant and growing problem. After leaving the house, too many students either fail to show up at school or disappear from school during the day. Available evidence suggests that hundreds of thousands of youth are truant each day (e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001).

Dembo and Guddedge (2009) note that “truancy is usefully conceived as midpoint along a continuum that begins with absenteeism and recurrent tardiness and ends with suspension or expulsion.” Truancy is related to poor school performance, family problems, delinquency, a range of psychosocial and mental health problems, and dropping out.

It is important to recognize that truancy often is a group phenomenon. Many students who cut school hang out together and, as a group, support truancy and a variety of risky behaviors. Gangs provide an extreme and rather intractable example (Sharkey, et al., 2011). Students who are not doing well at school often seek out gang membership; those who are in gangs generally do poorly at school and engage in delinquent behaviors.

Policy and Practice Trends

Truancy interventions follow the tendency of schools to wait for problems to become serious and chronic and then react. Moreover, rather than focus on the causes, intervention efforts have been dominated by behavior modification and disciplinary measures.

One major policy and practice trend has been to designate the behavior as delinquency and punish it accordingly. Another has been to view truancy as a pathway to dropping out and to raise the age of compulsory attendance in hopes of reducing truancy and dropout rates.

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Criminalization of Truancy

Viewing truancy as a criminal behavior has generated strategies such as issuing citations, police round-ups, formal adjudications, and assignments to “correctional” programs. Research does not support the effectiveness of any of these as ways to decrease truancy *and* re-engage students in their schooling.

Data suggesting otherwise warrants careful analysis. For example, data from the Truancy Intake Center in Tampa indicated a decline in the number of truant youth brought in over a two year period. However, Dembo and Gulledge (2009) point out that street officers indicated the reduction in truant apprehension was because of “increased sophistication of truants by congregating places that decrease the likelihood of detection (e.g., staying in their home or in the home of another truant youth, not walking around in their neighborhood or other public sidewalks or streets.)”

There seems to be a trend toward rethinking the criminalization of truancy. For example: the Los Angeles Unified School District has moved from truancy sweeps, \$250 tickets, and mandatory court appearances that could lead to jail time for parents to an approach focused on helping students get to and remain in school. This is seen as more consistent with the district’s commitment to support the goals of reducing the cycle of student push out and increasing attendance and graduation (Blume, 2011). At the same time, it should be noted that some teachers and administrators are worried about losing disciplinary measures that they believe are necessary for countering truancy.

When you’re dealing with real-life issues dragging you down and making you late to school, that last thing you need when you get there is to run into police treating you like a criminal and making you feel like there’s no point to trying anymore.

Student quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* (10/21/11)

Impact of Raising the Age for Compulsory School Attendance

The view that truancy is a pathway to dropping out appears to have bolstered the current policy trend to raise the age of compulsory attendance. In their review, Landis and Reschly (2011) caution that raising the age for compulsory school attendance does not address reasons why students dropout (or are truant) and does nothing to provide necessary supports to make school more attractive and enable student success. As to outcomes of the policy, they report that “in Texas, dropout and completion rates remained almost the same.... In Kansas, dropout rates fell by approximately a percentage point, completion rate remained the same, and truancy rates increased by 33%.”

As the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2010) stresses:

“Regardless of whether or not the compulsory attendance age is raised, schools need to be inviting places where learning is personally relevant, curriculum is meaningful,

teachers take a vested interest in every child, and systems are put in place to ensure that school are places where students want to learning. Just raising the age in and of itself, will not result in better outcomes for students.”

What Factors Should Be Addressed by Truancy Reduction Efforts?

Reviewers agree that there is a paucity of sound research to support truancy interventions (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Nevertheless, reviews have suggested promising practices and discussed lessons learned.

For example: Dembo and Gulledge (2009) report on a review of promising truancy reduction programs prepared by the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children. That review suggests the following as critical intervention elements:

- (a) parent or guardian involvement
- (b) a continuum of services to include meaningful incentives, consequences, and support
- (c) collaboration with community resources, including law enforcement, mental health services, mentoring, and social services;
- (d) school administrative support and commitment to keeping youth in the educational mainstream
- (e) ongoing evaluation.

An evaluation of seven truancy demonstration programs by the National Center for School Engagement (2006) reported the following as lessons learned:

- (a) there is a need for truancy services to become part of existing student support services, which fosters greater acceptance and impact;
- (b) early intervention pays off, especially if it involves home visits and outreach to parents of children with few unexcused absences;
- (c) there is an importance for community organizations to join schools to improve school attendance.

From the broad perspective of addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students, truancy and all school attendance problems provide another indication of the need to move forward in new directions for providing student and learning supports. Ideas for developing more sophisticated approaches can be adapted from current efforts to address truancy. But, policy and practice must now evolve so schools, families, and communities are working together to develop approaches that reflect the complexity of truancy and other attendance problems. The complexity demands moving to more comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated solutions. Focusing only on “What’s wrong with that kid!” often is tantamount to blaming the victim and contributes to policies and practices that are not making significant inroads with respect to addressing student and school problems. The problems are multifaceted; solutions must be comprehensive and holistically oriented (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008a, b).

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