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Truancy: An Opportunity for Early Intervention

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Report

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Dedication

For my parents, Ben and Nikki, who raised my siblings and me with the values of kindness, discipline, respect and responsibility. Your unwavering love and support have allowed me to follow my dreams and know the importance of what I do for others.

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I am very grateful for the support of my committee members, Cynthia Osborne and Michele Deitch. I would like to especially thank Michele Deitch for her instruction and guidance on the subject of juvenile justice. My experiences in your two courses have opened my eyes to a critical subject worthy of much more attention, and your passion and high standards have inspired and pushed me to care and do more. Many lives are better because of your dedication.

Abstract

Truancy: An Opportunity for Early Intervention

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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Truancy, an unexcused absence from school, is a common, but worrisome reality for many of America's school children. Truancy results in missed academic instruction for the student and missed state funding for schools based on average daily attendance figures. More importantly, chronic truancy can serve as one of the first indicators that a student is in need of support, whether it is academic, economic, family, or personal (such as mental or physical health), before the onset of more serious delinquency. However, this early warning flag is often ignored or mismanaged, such as when truancy is criminalized and truant students and their parents receive tickets for the offense, including a large fee and early involvement with the juvenile justice system. Responses like this can further burden students and their families and cannot effectively address truancy, unless the root causes of truancy are addressed.

States and school districts across the nation continue to implement programs and policies in an attempt to successfully prevent, reduce and manage truancy. Yet, information and consensus regarding the components of successful programs or policies are lacking. Without this information, jurisdictions are utilizing or attempting to

implement a broad range of interventions and responses with very little attention being paid to evaluations to understand what to implement or to determine what works for youth and why. As a result, many truancy responses are just best guesses about what might work for youth, and some are even counterproductive. Failing to effectively address truancy fails youth in the short and long-term as future prospects are reduced.

More information is known about what works and what does not with regard to truancy than many jurisdictions may realize. This report seeks to increase understanding of truancy and its causes, highlight the success (or lack thereof) of programs and policies, and demonstrate the wide variety of programs currently being implemented. Equipped with better information, jurisdictions can make better decisions to improve outcomes for students and their communities.

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Chapter 1: Overview

When youth miss school, they miss out. They miss out on academic instruction and engagement, and they also stand to miss out on a successful future as they become more prone to delinquency, drug use, violence and entrance into the juvenile justice system. Truancy is one of the earliest signs that a student is in need of help, and the results of missing this early warning sign and the opportunity to engage and support students can be devastating.

Truancy is a status offense, defined as conduct that would not be a crime if committed by an adult (other status offenses include behavior such as running away from home or curfew violations). However, a juvenile who goes through traditional adjudication could be placed on probation and even locked up for a violation of probation related to truancy. For example, in Texas, a petition can be filed alleging Conduct Indicating a Need for Supervision (CINS) in the Juvenile Court. If the juvenile is formally adjudicated on the CINS petition and is also placed on probation, the juvenile can be detained for up to six days for violations of the CINS probation. There is also the possibility of detention for failure to attend a truancy hearing, though this appears to be less common. Truancy takes students out of the learning environment and puts them at risk for a host of negative outcomes, in both the short- and long-term.

The detrimental effects of truancy on the future prospects of adolescents are well documented, and are examined further in this report. As an early indicator of future problems, truancy is a priority area requiring critical efforts from parents, school officials, community members and policymakers to alter the path toward reduced

educational attainment, increased delinquency and involvement in the juvenile justice system. By providing a multi-faceted analysis of truancy and interventions and policy responses, this report serves as a resource for those who are interested in understanding truancy and engaging with useful literature and examples of model programs to make a difference in the lives of students and their communities.

This report begins with a literature review defining truancy and how it is measured, examining research on the primary causes of truancy, and exploring the effects of truancy on juveniles. The report then turns to a review of effective principles and models to address this problem and increase school attendance rates, including an analysis of the main components of successful programs, information on examples of programs that work, as well as details on the wide variety of un-evaluated programs being currently implemented. The next chapter examines legal and policy responses to truancy, such as the ticketing of students, and then moves to a chapter discussing the significance of the information presented. The report concludes with recommendations and possible next steps for state-level policymakers and school district officials to move this important field forward.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

DEFINING AND MEASURING TRUANCY

Truancy is defined differently in statutes, policies, regulations and school codes of conducts across the U.S. In its simplest form, truancy is any unexcused absence from school. School attendance laws in each state determine the specific age limitations and number and type of unexcused absences that constitute official truancy. In 2006, the National Center for School Engagement shared a generic definition of truancy to serve as a starting point for state agencies working to settle on a single definition, “If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered to be an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant.”¹

Still, jurisdictions do not share a common definition. For example, in Texas, truancy is defined in two different statutes using almost identical language. This competing jurisdiction and competing statutory authority can lead to problems in identifying whether the behavior is criminal or not, and which court should handle it. The Texas Family Code statute for Conduct Indicating a Need for Supervision, § 51.03(b)(2), defines truancy as “...the absence of a child on 10 or more days or parts of days within a six-month period in the same school year or on three or more days or parts of days within a four-week period.”² Within the statute, a “child” is defined as a person at least 10 years of age who is alleged to have engaged in the conduct before turning 18 years old.

¹ National Center for School Engagement, “Guidelines for a National Definition of Truancy and Calculating Rates,” August 2006, <http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/GuidelinesforaNationalDefinitionofTruancyandCalculatingRates.pdf>.

² Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 51.03 (West 2011).

Students who violate this provision of the Texas Family Code are under the exclusive original jurisdiction of the juvenile court.³

A truant is also defined in the Texas Education Code statute for Failure to Attend School, § 25.094, as a student who “...fails to attend school on 10 or more days or parts of days within a six-month period in the same school year or on three or more days or parts of days within a four-week period.”⁴ Students who violate this provision of the Texas Education Code are referred to county court, justice of the peace court, or municipal court for a Class C misdemeanor.

While school officials and policymakers understand that truancy is a significant problem and a common behavior for America’s youth, it is difficult to precisely quantify the problem due to the lack of a uniform definition or national collection and publication of data. Individual school districts or states collect data, but there are no official national figures publicly available. Some studies have attempted to measure national truancy rates, including a 2003 national survey of U.S. adolescents that found 11% of 8th-grade students, 16% of 10th-grade students, and 35% of 12th-grade students reported recent truancy (within the prior 4 weeks).⁵ The School Survey on Crime and Safety for the 2006-07 school year found lower reported rates among 12-18-year-old students who reporting skipping classes in the four weeks prior to the survey (1.4% of 8th-graders, 7.5% of 10th-graders, and 13% of 12th-graders).⁶ This survey confirmed the findings of

³ Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 51.04 (West 2011).

⁴ Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 25.094 (West 2011).

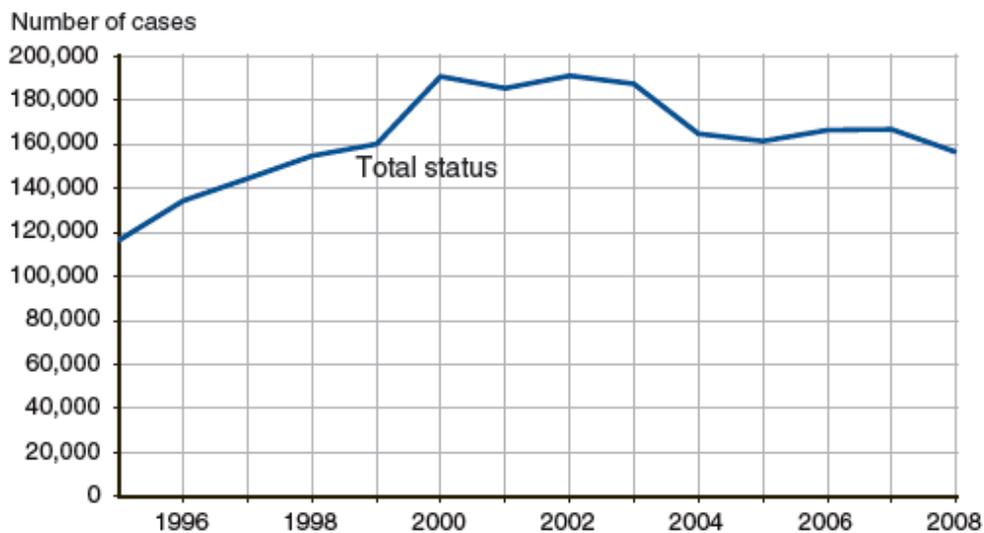
⁵ Henry, Kimberly L., “Who’s skipping school: Characteristics of truant in 8th and 10th grade,” *Journal of School Health*, January 2007; 77: 29–35.

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, “School Survey on Crime and Safety,” 2007, http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/tables/scs_2007_tab_23.asp.

the 2003 survey that urban students reporting the most skipping, followed by suburban students and then rural. Additionally, the survey found that roughly twice as many public school students reported skipping than private school students (5.7% compared to 2.8%, respectively).⁷

However, for jurisdictions where absences elevate to the level of a status offense violation (defined differently in statutes across the U.S.), national status offense figures are tracked. Status offenses include running away, truancy, curfew violations, ungovernability, liquor, and miscellaneous offenses. As Figure 1 below indicates, the total caseload for formally handled status offenses between 1995 and 2008 increased 34 percent, from 116,300 cases to 156,300.

Figure 1: National formally handled status offense caseload, 1995-2008.

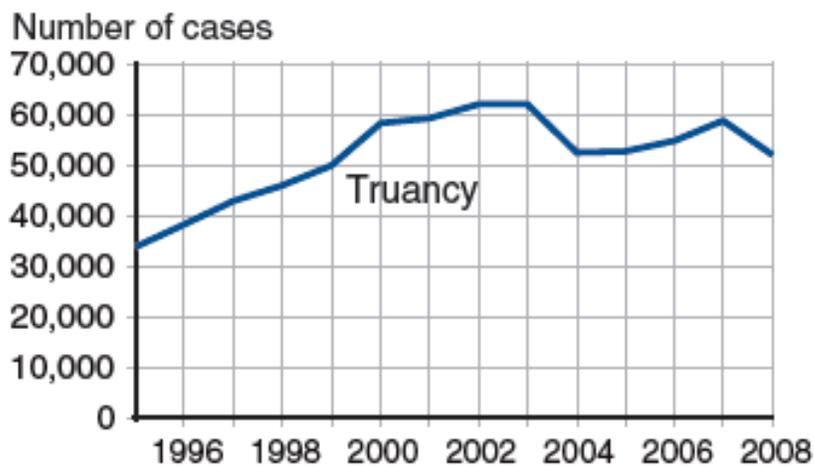


Source: National Center for Juvenile Justice & Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Juvenile Court Statistics 2008," July 2011, 72, <http://www.ncjj.org/pdf/jcsreports/jcs2008.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid.

Truancy represented 29 percent of national status offense cases in 1995, and made up 33 percent of cases in 2008. As Figure 2 below demonstrates, between those years, the number of petitioned truancy cases handled by juvenile courts increased 54 percent, from 34,000 cases to 52,000. Not all cases of truancy meet the legal definition of truancy or are referred to the juvenile court system, so this figure does not represent a comprehensive account of all truant students, but it is the most reliable figure available for looking at the prevalence rates for this offense.

Figure 2: National petitioned truancy cases, 1995-2008.



Source: National Center for Juvenile Justice & Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, “Juvenile Court Statistics 2008,” July 2011, 72, <http://www.ncjj.org/pdf/jcsreports/jcs2008.pdf>.

The “Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act” of Title IV, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires State Education Agencies to establish a uniform information reporting system that includes information such as truancy rates. The requirement to report school-by-school truancy rates to the U.S. Department of

Education began for the 2005-06 school year. However, the definitions are still determined by individual jurisdictions and the information collected does not appear to be available publicly. Schools must also report truancy figures to the state in order to receive state funds for Average Daily Attendance (ADA), where funding is based on the number of school days attended compared to total school days in the regular school year. In addition to supporting the accurate tracking and reporting of attendance, ADA provides monetary incentives for schools to get students to school on time and to keep them in school.

CAUSES OF TRUANCY

An effective truancy abatement program not only sanctions those students who are referred to court, but also addresses the underlying causes of truancy. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program, there are four categories into which the main explanations for truancy can be divided: family, school, economic, and student.⁸

Family correlates of truancy include a lack of guidance or parental supervision, domestic violence, poverty, drug or alcohol abuse in the home, lack of awareness of attendance laws, and differing attitudes toward education. The 2003 national survey found parental education and the existence of large amounts of unsupervised time after school to be two of the four "most salient predictors of recent truancy"⁹ revealed by the survey results.

⁸ M.L. Baker, J.N. Sigmon, and M.E. Nugent, "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Bulletin, September 2001.

⁹ Henry, 2007.

School correlates of truancy include factors such as the size of the school, the attitude of the teachers, the attitude of other students and administrators, and inflexibility in meeting the diverse cultural and learning styles of students. In addition to those issues surrounding the school climate, this category can also include inconsistent procedures in place for dealing with chronic absenteeism and a lack of meaningful consequences for truant students. School disengagement, marked by poor academic achievement and low educational aspirations, was found to be a significant predictor of recent truancy.¹⁰

Economic factors could affect either the student or his or her family. This could include employed older siblings or parents with multiple jobs who are unable to bring the student to school. It also includes single parent homes, a lack of transportation or childcare, and highly mobile families.

Finally, the last category refers to traits of the students themselves. This includes drug and alcohol abuse, lack of understanding of attendance laws, lack of social competence, mental health difficulties, and poor physical health. The 2003 national survey confirmed drug use as a significant predictor of recent truancy.¹¹

The division of the causes of truancy into these four categories (family, school, economic and student) is important. The different categories underscore the need for multi-faceted programs to deal with the many possible triggers of truancy in children. A program that addresses only one or two of the categories may prove ineffective, as it is

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

unable to reach those students who are impacted by one of the other categories. It would be impractical and too resource-intensive to fully address all four categories for each student, but schools and communities can develop programs that involve families, create positive school environments with clear and fair policies, provide basic economic support like clothing and meals to children in need, and focus on the mental and physical well-being of the students themselves.

EFFECTS OF TRUANCY

Research shows that chronic truancy is linked to delinquent behavior and can increase a youth's chance of academic failure, the onset of drug use, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Findings from the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention (OJJDP)'s Study Group on Very Young Offenders indicate "chronic truancy in elementary school is linked to serious delinquent behavior at age 12 and under."¹² The Council on State Government's report, *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement*, found that disciplinary actions in school, including suspension or expulsion, significantly increased the likelihood that a youth will repeat a grade, not graduate, and/or become involved in the juvenile justice system.¹³ Furthermore, a report from the Casey Foundation, *No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration*, documents the harm that juvenile incarceration can cause youth; such incarceration is a possibility for certain adjudications and situations regarding truancy.¹⁴

¹² Baker, 2001.

¹³ The Council of State Governments Justice Center and Public Policy Research Institute, "Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement," 2011.

¹⁴ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration," The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011.

A study published in 2009 utilized data from the Rochester Youth Development Study and discrete-time survival analyses to investigate the impact of truancy on the initiation of marijuana use. The analysis found: “Truancy was a significant predictor of the initiation of marijuana use during each subsequent 6-month period. The effect was more robust in earlier compared with later adolescence.”¹⁵ Further, the study found these effects continued even when possible risk factors shared by truancy and drug use, such as commitment to school and prior delinquency, were controlled for. The authors identified reduced social control (students were disengaged from pro-social entities like school) and the “unsupervised, unmonitored time afforded by truancy” as contributing factors in the relationship between truancy and the initiation of marijuana use. Another discrete time survival analysis using data from the Denver Youth Survey found truancy to be a predictor of the onset of alcohol and tobacco use, in addition to marijuana.¹⁶

Additionally, truancy is linked to poor outcomes that follow juveniles into adulthood. In a journal article by Hibbett, Fogelman and Manor, “Occupational outcomes of truancy,” truancy was linked to “lower status occupations, less stable career patterns and more unemployment.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Kimberly L. Henry et al., “A Discrete-Time Survival Analysis of the Relationship Between Truancy and the Onset of Marijuana Use,” *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, January 2009; 70(1): 5-15.

¹⁶ Kimberly L. Henry & DH Huizinga, “Truancy’s effect on the onset of drug use among urban adolescents placed at risk,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, April 2007; 40(4), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17367732>.

¹⁷ Hibbett A, Fogelman K, Manor O, “Occupational outcomes of truancy,” *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, February 1990; 60 (Pt 1): 23-36, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2344431>.

Chapter 3: Analysis of Programs

RESEARCH ON TRUANCY PROGRAMS

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) published a study in 2009 analyzing 200 studies evaluating the effects of truancy and dropout programs on at-risk students.¹⁸ However, WSIPP found that just 22 out of the 200 studies met WSIPP’s criteria for rigor.¹⁹ WSIPP noted that “Overall, the state of knowledge about the effectiveness of truancy and dropout programs is lacking. Most programs are not evaluated, and those that are evaluated generally use research designs and methodologies that do not permit us to draw conclusions about causality.”²⁰ The WSIPP study was limited by these shortcomings, but it did not fail altogether. The research base for understanding truancy and effective abatement programs is far from comprehensive, and many programs – and program components – remain unevaluated, but there is enough information available for conclusions about effectiveness to be drawn.

A 2010 analysis of 16 studies evaluating truancy interventions published in peer-reviewed academic journals found: “The substantial methodological shortcomings, inconsistent definitions, and lack of replication demonstrate a need for more and better evaluation studies to provide a more definitive knowledge base to guide effective truancy

¹⁸ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, “What Works? Targeted Truancy and Dropout Programs in Middle and High School,” June 2009, <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/09-06-2201.pdf>.

¹⁹ For this analysis, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy used specific criteria to determine whether a study could be included, including evaluation design and methodology (evaluations needed to compare outcomes of participants with a similar group that did not participate, studies with excessive or biased attrition were excluded, etc.), as well as program focus and setting (only programs that fit within the requirements of the law and could be implemented were included, among other considerations).

²⁰ Ibid.

interventions for practitioners.”²¹ While there is still valuable information to be gleaned from examining truancy interventions and meta-analysis, the key takeaway is that the overall knowledge base on the subject needs to be strengthened. More and better evaluations, along with consistent terminology, would help to bolster the quality of information available to practitioners to make informed decisions.

COMPONENTS OF MODEL PROGRAMS

Student Advocacy, a non-profit educational organization, analyzed 32 different truancy resources in 2008 to prepare a report on strengthening school attendance policies and practices to address educational neglect and truancy. Student Advocacy’s research included reference to key truancy resources and studies, including:

- Chang, Hedy and Romero, Mariajose, “Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades,” National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, September 2008.
- Epstein, Joyce and Sheldon, Steven, “Present and Accounted for: Improving Student Attendance through Family and Community Involvement,” *Journal of Educational Research*, 95(5) 2002.
- National Center for School Engagement, “Truancy Prevention in Action: Best Practices and Model Truancy Programs,” Executive Summary, Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, July 2005.

²¹ Richard D. Stephen, Janet P. Ford and Chris Flaherty, “Truancy Interventions: A Review of the Research Literature,” *Research on Social Work Practice*, March 2012, volume 20, no. 2, 161-171.

- Center for Mental Health in Schools, “School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in the Right Direction?” School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, October 2006.
- Virginia Department of Education, Office of Student Services, “Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools,” August 2005.

Drawing on the research studied, Student Advocacy identified five key components to programs that effectively deal with attendance policies and practices.²² The first component is educating the parents about school attendance requirements. Particularly with younger students, parental involvement is a large factor in truancy, and model programs ensure parents are informed of the laws and are brought into the discussion regarding their student and what can be done to improve the situation.

The second component of a model program is effective policies and practices to monitor attendance. In order to successfully implement a truancy abatement program, all involved parties need to be aware of the policies in place and continuously keep up with the required steps. Along those lines, the third component is a clear definition of excessive absences and consequences. Schools need a clear idea of the intervention steps that should be taken before that threshold is reached and at what point intervention should begin.

The last two components of effective programs are a two-stage response to excessive absences. The first stage response involves schools investigating the underlying

²² Student Advocacy, “Strengthening School Attendance Policies/Practices to Address Educational Neglect and Truancy,” November 2008, <http://studentadvocacy.net/AttendanceMemoFinal4-6-09.pdf>.

problems leading to a student's absences and responding through both school and community-based services, such as conducting the necessary evaluation for possible special education services or providing referrals to counselors, psychologists, doctors, conflict-resolution programs, charitable agencies, mentoring (see section below for further information on mentoring), and tutoring.

The second stage response becomes relevant when the first stage fails to adequately reduce absences and the student reaches the threshold for truancy. At this point, successful programs seek additional help through a more structured program, and may involve agencies such as the Department of Family and Protective Services, Probation, or the court system.

PROGRAMS THAT WORK

As previously mentioned, a 2009 study by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) analyzed 200 truancy and dropout studies.²³ Of the 22 studies that met the researchers' criteria for rigor, WSIPP found that breaking the studied programs down by their central focus indicated that alternative educational programs (like schools-within –schools) and mentoring programs tended to be effective. Alternative education programs were shown to reduce dropout rates, increase presence at school (enrollment and attendance), increase achievement (test scores and grades), and increase graduation rates.²⁴ Mentoring was shown to reduce dropout rates and increase presence at school, but it did not have a statistically significant impact on achievement and there was not enough evaluations measuring graduation rates to draw a conclusion regarding the effect on

²³ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

graduation.²⁵ One program in particular analyzed by WSIPP, Career Academies - detailed further below, achieved positive impacts on dropping out, achievement, presence at school and graduation.²⁶

As previously discussed, mentoring is often used in successful truancy abatement programs during the initial response to excessive absences. Research supports this intervention as one part of a comprehensive approach to reducing truancy. Mentoring can increase students' interpersonal skills, and the consistent interaction with a supportive adult in a mutually trusting relationship can help youth develop a sense of support and positive self-worth that they can then take to other relationships. Through this positive relationship, students feel a greater sense of social acceptance and perceive higher levels of social support.²⁷ Individuals who feel more supported tend to have better self-concepts, which are associated with better adolescent adjustment.²⁸

Both community-based mentoring and school-based mentoring have been shown to improve children's relationships with their parents and their peers, but school-based mentoring appears to have the greatest effect on outcomes related to school. One study found that students in grades four through nine who met regularly with mentors were significantly less likely to start skipping school relative to their non-mentored peers, and for those who had already begun skipping school, teachers reported fewer unexcused

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ J.E. Rhodes, "A Theoretical Model of Youth Mentoring," *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 2005.

²⁸ D. Oyserman, "Adolescent Identity and Delinquency in Interpersonal Context." *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, vol. 23, 1993.

absences for those students with mentors.²⁹ Another study found that youth who met with a mentor several times a week had lower dropout rates than youth in a control group who did not have mentors.³⁰

Both the OJJDP and the California Department of Education recommend involving community resources to address excessive absenteeism, such as youth organizations that offer mentoring.³¹ A model framework in Kentucky aimed at reducing the need for detaining status offenders stresses the importance of natural community supports, including mentors, that can be turned to for advice, emotional support and aid as part of a multi-dimensional approach for students in need of support.³² Additionally, evaluations of a truancy reduction program in Memphis, Tennessee that pairs truant students with mentors in lieu of court proceedings show truancy rates have decreased for those students participating in the program.³³ The following are a few examples of specific programs that have been formally evaluated.

Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program

Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program (BMRP) is a two-year school-based intervention for at-risk youth that helps reduce juvenile delinquency,

²⁹ Carla Herrera et al., “Making a Difference in Schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study,” *Public/Private Ventures*, August 2007, 52, 67.

³⁰ Ellen K. Slicker and Douglas J. Palmer. “Mentoring at-risk high school students: Evaluation of a school-based program,” *The School Counselor*, vol. 40, 1993.

³¹ California Department of Education, “School Attendance Improvement Handbook,” Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office, 2000, 37-38.

³² Kari Collins and Michelle Kilgore, “Reclaiming Futures in Kentucky,” Kentucky Youth Advocates, Reclaiming Futures National Program Office, 2011, 2.

³³ Operation: Safe Community, “The D.A.’s Mentoring-based Truancy Reduction Program.” www.memphiscrime.org/mentor.

substance use and school failure.³⁴ The program includes monitoring of students (including attendance, tardiness, disciplinary actions), rewards for appropriate behavior, and a focus on increased communication between students, teachers and families. Students meet regularly with staff members to review their behavior and learn about the consequences of their actions, and good evaluations and positive behavior is rewarded. Program staff and teachers keep parents informed of any issues that arise.

Evaluations of the program show positive effects in both the short- and long-term. After participating, students had higher grades and attendance than control group students. A one-year follow-up showed less self-reported delinquency, drug abuse, school-based problems (20% less suspension, absenteeism, tardiness, academic failure), as well as unemployment (45% less) compared to control students. A five-year follow-up study showed less county court records compared to control students.

Additionally, this program has had a preliminary review by the Promising Practices Network (PPN). PPN, operated by the RAND Corporation, is a group of individuals and organizations working to provide quality evidence-based information about what works to improve the lives of children, families, and communities. PPN reviews programs and uses evidence and methodological criteria in order to determine an evidence level ranking. A reviewed program can either be not listed on the site, rated as “screened” or “other reviewed programs” if a formal evaluation is ongoing, rated as “promising” if the program has positive effects and some weaknesses, or “promising” if the program has statistically significant positive effects and a strong research

³⁴ Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado Boulder, Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program – Blueprints for Violence Prevention, <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/promisingprograms/BPP02.html>.

methodology. PPN’s preliminary review of Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program suggests the program may be effective at improving the outcomes of behavior problems, juvenile justice, physical health, and substance use and dependence.³⁵ BMRP was rated as “other reviewed programs,” and a full evaluation of the program by PPN is currently in progress.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America

Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) is a community-based program that pairs non-related mentors with children to help them realize their potential and promote positive development.³⁶ The traditional BBBS model, which can be adjusted based on the needs of a community, includes volunteer mentors spending about three to five hours a week with a child between the ages of 6 and 18 for a minimum of one year. More recent BBS programs focus on school-based mentoring programs where all contact takes place within a school. Participating youth are screened to ensure the child and parent are prepared for the program, and mentor participants must pass rigorous screening and training. The Promising Practices Network rated BBBS as a “proven” program, the highest rating available for evaluated programs.³⁷ Among other positive outcomes, a study of BBS found that participating youth were an overall 52 percent less likely to skip a day of school compared to a control group. The effect was more significant for participating girls, who skipped 84 percent fewer days of school than their control group peers.

³⁵ Promising Practices Network, Programs that Work: Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program, <http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid=166>.

³⁶ Promising Practices Network, Programs that Work: Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, <http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid=125>.

³⁷ The rating of “proven” was received for the indicators: Youths not using alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs, Children and youth not engaging in violent behavior or displaying serious conduct problems and Students performing at grade level or meeting state curriculum standards.

Career Academies

Career Academies were highlighted by Washington State Institute for Public Policy as an effective intervention that achieved positive impacts on dropping out, presence at school, achievement, and graduation.³⁸ High schools establish small learning communities within the school (usually 30-60 students per grade) and combine academic and technical curriculum around a career theme tailored to the individual student. The schools establish partnerships with community-based employers to provide relevant instructional opportunities, and the program serves both at-risk and achieving students. WSIPP reported that 6,000 to 8,000 Academies are currently in operation in the U.S. WSIPP found Career Academies had statistically significant weighted average effect sizes on dropout rates, presence at school, achievement, and graduation. Career Academies have a robust evaluation history, using scientific research methodology, including program replication, which allows for a thorough analysis.

Communities In Schools

Communities In Schools, Inc. (CIS) was created in 1977 to promote school retention and graduation, recognizing that at-risk youth have academic and non-academic needs and that social services need to be better coordinated.³⁹ CIS operates within schools and coordinates with agencies and businesses to provide services to youth and their families. The CIS model works to fulfill five key needs:

- A personal one-on-one relationship with a caring adult.

³⁸ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2009, 7.

³⁹ Promising Practices Network, Programs that Work: Communities In Schools, <http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid=65>.

- A safe place to learn and grow.
- A healthy start and a healthy future.
- A marketable skill to use upon graduation.
- A chance to give back to peers and the community.

Among other positive outcomes, an evaluation of CIS found that 50 percent of participants (with available records) improved or maintained their school attendance during the first year of CIS programming, compared to the year prior. The evaluation showed that 68 percent of students with 10 or more days of absence improved their attendance, and 70 percent of students with at least 21 days of absence improved their attendance.

Communities In Schools received a rating of “promising” by the Promising Practices Network for the indicators of cognitive development and school performance. All of the CIS outcome findings were from one multi-site study without a comparison group and PPN requires more research in order to determine if CIS meets the requirements of a “proven” program.

The Effective Learning Program

The Effective Learning Program (ELP) is a two-year school-based program that began at Ballard High School in Louisville, Kentucky.⁴⁰ The program used small, close-knit classes (student-teacher ratio of 15:1) led by ELP teachers, teacher-led discussions,

⁴⁰ Promising Practices Network, Programs that Work: The Effective Learning Program, <http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid=266>.

and increased communication between teachers, parents and administrators, in order to support positive youth development and increased graduation rates. Teachers, counselors and parents identified youth for participation based on those who were at-risk for school-based problems (poor attendance, grades, learning disabilities). In addition to other positive outcomes, an evaluation of ELP showed that after completion of the two-year program, participating youth had significantly fewer days of absence than youth who were eligible (low academics and high absences), but did not participate. The Effective Learning Program was given a “proven” rating by the Promising Practice Network for the outcome indicators of Cognitive Development and School Performance.

EXAMPLES OF CURRENT TRUANCY PROGRAMS

A number of programs are being implemented around the U.S. to deal with reducing truancy and accompanying delinquency. The following programs provide an illustrative look at the wide range of programmatic approaches being used in this area. These programs have not been formally evaluated, but are included to demonstrate the types and variety of programs being implemented in this area.

Attendance Mentors and Wake Up! NYC

New York City has taken an effective two-pronged approach to reducing truancy and tardiness – attendance mentors and a phone message campaign entitled “Wake Up! NYC.”⁴¹ Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced in November of 2011 that the city would be more than doubling the number of chronically truant public students in elementary

⁴¹ Anna M. Phillips, “Truant Students Are Heeding Their Wake-Up Calls,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/schoolbook/2011/11/10/truant-students-are-heeding-their-wake-up-calls/>.

through high school that are paired with an attendance mentor (from 1,450 to 4,000) to encourage students to wake up and get to school. Bloomberg's anti-truancy task force found that those who were paired with a mentor were present for 16 more days of school than the year prior. "We've shown this is a problem that can be overcome or at least ameliorated," said Mayor Bloomberg.⁴²

However, New York City also adopted a second approach as an alternative to its mentoring program. Despite improvements with high school students paired with mentors, severely chronically absent middle school students who had been paired were actually less likely to improve than those without mentors – the mayor's office had predicted middle students would be the most challenging. The city is also expanding its popular phone message campaign, Wake Up! NYC. The campaign sends morning alerts recorded by celebrities. It began by targeting 6,500 truant students, and is now sent to 39,000 students owing to its popularity.⁴³

D.C. Anti-Truancy Program

In February of 2012, Washington, D.C. launched an anti-truancy program aimed at combating the reported 20 percent of District students who miss 15 days of school or more each year.⁴⁴ The program, targeted toward middle and high school students, comes with a budget of \$500,000 to be put towards radio commercials and transit ads, in addition to case management for severely truant students and raffles to help reward good attendance. The focus is on positive messages encouraging attendance and highlighting

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mike Conneen, "D.C. launching anti-truancy program," *WJLA*, February 12, 2012, <http://www.wjla.com/articles/2012/02/d-c-launching-anti-truancy-program-72472.html>.

the value of staying in school. As Deputy Mayor for Education De'Shawn Wright notes, "We ask kids to sign up for text messages, send them reminders to wake up for school on time, sending them encouraging messages throughout the year, constantly promoting the message of school promotion."⁴⁵

Saved by the Bell

Fort Bend County, Texas has seen success with a truancy reduction program called "Saved by the Bell."⁴⁶ Begun in 2008, the program is funded by a Texas Criminal Justice Division grant from the Governor's Office. The program takes a case management approach, working one-on-one with individual students to address truancy and ultimately reduce delinquency. Specifically, Saved by the Bell places a truancy officer at schools with the highest truancy. This officer checks on participating students to ensure that they are present in class. The average age is 16 and the length of the program is around 6 months. If a student has an unexcused absence, the officer goes to the student's home and works to address the underlying causes or special circumstances of each student's truancy. For example, a truancy officer purchased clothing for a student who did not come to school because he had none. This identification, monitoring, and problem-solving approach has been very successful at reducing truancy and disciplinary referrals in Fort Bend County. In 2010, the Texas Public Policy Foundation reported that Saved by the Bell "... has reduced the number of disciplinary referrals by 89 percent

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Fort Bend County, Texas – Official Website, "Truancy Reduction Program," <http://www.co.fort-bend.tx.us/getSitePage.asp?sitePage=34243>.

compared to the prior year when participating youths were not in the program.”⁴⁷ Programs such as this can become cost-effective for the school districts since they pay for themselves through increases in state school funding based on average daily attendance. Simply put, if jurisdictions spend money encouraging school attendance, if successful, they can recoup or even increase their funding through increased attendance rates and accompanying funding.

Suspend Kids to School Grant Program

Citing the research that zero-tolerance school discipline can create schools that fail to promote safety or academic success, Waco Independent School District (WISD) in Texas has created a program called “Suspend Kids to School” in partnership with the Criminal Justice Division in the Office of the Governor. The program seeks to reduce the number of students receiving citations or tickets from law enforcement for school-based violations of the student code of conduct, as well as Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP) referrals, particularly discretionary removals. DAEPs are alternative educational environments for students who commit certain mandatory or discretionary disciplinary or criminal offenses. They aim to remove disruptive students from the classroom, and some DAEPs can be held on school campuses, while others are independent. WISD works with community partners and contracted resources to provide alternatives to ticketing or DAEP removals, including “...parent and student educational diversion, student court, peer mediation, peer-to-peer mentoring, Safe School Ambassadors©, and training for staff on how to increase student engagement and reduce

⁴⁷ Marc Levin, “Innovative and Cost-Effective Approaches to Reduce Crime, Restore Victims, and Preserve Families,” Texas Public Policy Foundation, March 2012, 13, <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2010-03-RR01-JuvenileJustice-ml.pdf>.

classroom conflict through the use of language and strategies that de-escalate and build cooperation.”⁴⁸ Finding alternate means of dealing with truancy is just one element of this comprehensive school discipline program, which has reported anecdotal success with its programming thus far.

Travis County Truancy Court

Travis County Truancy Court in Texas is a partnership between Austin Independent School District (AISD), the Travis County Juvenile Probation Department (TCJPD), and the Travis County District Attorney’s Office to provide intervention to chronic truants through the student’s home school. Truancy Court operates in four Austin Independent School District middle schools and thus does not represent the full youth population. Truancy Court provides “supervision, referrals to community services, and a regular review of the student’s progress towards reduced truancy.”⁴⁹ It began in 2002 with a general agreement that ticketing and fining students and their parents was an ineffective method of dealing with truancy. The program started with a small group of students and has gradually expanded to serve four schools within AISD. Truancy Court is an alternative to formal adjudication and all students who sign a contract to participate (in lieu of formal adjudication) must successfully complete all program requirements to have all related charges against them dismissed.

A 2010 program evaluation published by TCJPD suggests significant drops in deferred prosecution and probation for participating students compared to a comparison

⁴⁸ Waco Independent School District, “Suspend Kids to School Grant: Report to Board of Trustees,” June 16, 2011 (document sent via personal communication, not available online).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

school that does not participate in Truancy Court. The number of youth being tracked is small and it is unclear how representative the comparison school is, but the numbers suggest this is a preferred method compared to formal adjudication. A limitation of the program is that it is still a court and does not keep juveniles out of the system entirely. Further, Truancy Court is not given additional resources to be problem-solving in terms of addressing the root causes of truancy for juveniles. However, the Court can make community service referrals for participating students.

Other U.S. jurisdictions have also begun using similar truancy court models in recent years. For example, Delaware's truancy court was created in 1996, on a non-pilot basis, to serve as a point of convergence for wrap-around programs and interventions that deal with the root causes of truancy, including mental illness, child abuse or neglect, substance abuse and academic needs.⁵⁰ The process includes the truant child, the parent, a judge trained in dealing with truancy, a social worker, behavioral health providers who support drug testing and referrals, educational advocates and partners, as well as informal community supports. In its annual report, Delaware's Truancy Court is praised for its "...remedial, non-punitive approach to improving school attendance, as opposed to the more disciplinary measures of enforcing the law and mandating change seen in traditional court settings."⁵¹ Statewide filings with Truancy Court were down 29 percent for the 2008-2009 year compared with 2007-2008. In terms of outcome evaluations, it appears that the metric evaluated is the percentage of cases closed in compliance with the Court or resolved in other ways. In 2008-2009, 47 percent of cases closed were closed in

⁵⁰ State of Delaware Justice of the Peace Court, "Truancy Court: Annual Report 2008-2009," <http://courts.delaware.gov/forms/download.aspx?id=44618>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

compliance with the Court; the other outcomes included teacher dismissals, student relocations within the state, student relocations outside the state, and about 6.4 percent of cases closed as non-compliant-unsuccessful outcome.⁵²

TruantToday

TruantToday is a messaging service offering a business solution to the problem of truancy.⁵³ The company, founded by high school student-entrepreneurs in California, alerts parents instantly by text and e-mail message when a student misses class. The goal is to provide real-time information to parents in order to get students back in class the same day, helping to reduce truancy, increase academic performance, and recoup state and federal funding to school districts that can lose up to \$50 each day per student absence. One of the company's founders noted that public schools in San Diego County alone lost at least \$102 million in funding for the 2009-10 academic term due to absences. The company charges schools annually on a sliding scale, from \$10 to \$1 per student based on size. At present the company has three paying customers and is running free trials in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York.

OTHER PROGRAMS

Electronic Chips in Brazil

Some programs are more controversial than others. For example, 20,000 children in Brazil up to age 14 have had electronic chips implanted into their school uniforms in

⁵² Ibid., 8.

⁵³ Jessica Bruder, "High School Entrepreneurs Promise to Save Millions for Schools," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2011, <http://boss.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/04/high-school-entrepreneurs-promise-to-save-millions-for-schools/?src=dayp>.

an attempt to combat truancy. The so-called “intelligent uniforms” include chips that send an SMS text message to parents when they pass through sensors at the school entrance. If a student is more than 20 minutes late for class, a different message is sent to parents, alerting them that the child has still not arrived at school.⁵⁴ While the electronic chips are being used outside of the U.S., this example demonstrates the wide range of programmatic approaches being used in an effort to reduce truancy.

Ohio Attendance Incentive Program

Alternately, one Ohio high school is offering money to get students to come to school. The Dohn Community High School in Cincinnati has launched a \$40,000 attendance incentive program. The school will give students “...Visa gift cards for showing up everyday for school, being on time for class and not getting into trouble. Seniors would get \$25 while underclassmen would get \$10” weekly.⁵⁵ A school official noted that poverty is very high at this school and the teachers cannot teach the students unless they are in class.⁵⁶

Negative Outcomes: Alternative Schools

Alternative schools are those with separate buildings and specialized academics and services for at-risk students (distinct from alternative educational programs that take place within schools). The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) study found that alternative schools actually had a small negative effect on dropping out (the

⁵⁴ *BBC*, “Brazilian schools microchip T-shirts to cut truancy,” March 22, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17484532>.

⁵⁵ *CBS Cleveland*, “Cincinnati High School Paying Students to Come to School,” February 13, 2012, <http://cleveland.cbslocal.com/2012/02/13/cincinnati-high-school-paying-students-to-come-to-school/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

percentage of students dropping out was 35 percent, compared to a rate of 31 percent in traditional schools) and no impact on presence at school, achievement or graduation rates.⁵⁷ These schools tend to utilize an alternative curriculum, such as academic remediation, and psychosocial services, such as counseling and case management. The primary distinctions between alternative schools (which had a negative effect), and alternative education programs (which improved four indicators for students), are that alternative education programs provide specialized instruction within a traditional school (same rules and norms as for other students), and these programs often have a particular focus, such as career training or computer-assisted learning. The study noted that further research is needed to better understand this finding.⁵⁸

Negative Outcomes: New Beginnings of Texas

A local company called New Beginnings of Texas was contracted by the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) to reduce absenteeism and bring in additional state funding from increased attendance, but the program it created ended up increasing absences. Moreover, the company is now part of a federal corruption investigation for bribing a judge for a vote on an unrelated contract.⁵⁹ The company had been working with EPISD since 2002 on truancy and gang interventions and was given a \$925,000 annual contract (the County Attorney's Office had proposed doing it for an estimated \$50,000, less than 6 percent of the final contract) to create a district-wide program for truancy. While New Beginnings did not have legal authority to hand out sanctions to

⁵⁷ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2009, 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Zahira Torres, "New Beginnings anti-truancy program failed to deliver on promises made to EPISD," *El Paso Times*, April 28, 2012, http://www.elpasotimes.com/news/ci_20501515/new-beginnings-anti-truancy-program-failed-deliver-promises-made-episid?source=most_viewed.

truant students, staff would hold mock court hearings as a “bluff” to students. District administrators, parents, and justice of the peace courts become concerned about this mock court and had misgivings about some cases not being handled according to state law. There were also concerns about students being threatened with deportation orders to return to Mexico and threats that students under 18 years of age would be dropped from school rolls for lack of attendance. The district attendance rates went steadily down from 95.4 percent in 2004-05 to 95.1 percent in 2006-07. The district’s former pupil services director was ultimately able to convince the school board trustees to create an in-house truancy program and terminate the contract with New Beginnings in 2007.

Chapter 4: Legal and Policy Responses to Truancy

TICKETS FOR TRUANCY

Despite the many successful intervention program models available, most states and school districts continue to treat the truancy issue simply as a delinquency/criminal problem. As part of a zero-tolerance approach to school discipline, many schools are employing police, rather than teachers or counselors, to deal with student misbehavior, and utilizing court tickets as one response. Ticketing students and their parents has been used as a truancy response with mixed results and reactions. Jurisdictions implementing ticketing for truancy see it as a means of punishment to correct behavior and encourage students to attend class. Those opposed to the use of tickets argue that it is criminalizing minor misbehavior that would be better solved within the school, and that tickets fail to address the causes of truancy and can further burden families.

Schools throughout Texas are utilizing the court system to manage student behavior. Students can receive a “Class C” misdemeanor for truancy, as well as other instances of misbehavior, such as writing on a desk and class disruption like talking in class, profanity, and fights. A Class C misdemeanor is the lowest classification of criminal offenses and can come with a fine of up to \$500. A BBC article on the subject found that utilizing the court system in this way was a popular policy in Texas, and that “young people who do not fulfill the terms of their Class C ticket can find themselves landing much deeper inside the criminal justice system.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰Nina Robinson, “Misbehaving pupils ending up in court,” *BBC News*, April 10, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17664075>.

ISSUING FINES TO PARENTS

In March 2012, a proposed day curfew truancy ordinance in Kansas City, Missouri that "...would have ticketed parents up to \$100 if their son or daughter were caught skipping school" failed to pass out of committee.⁶¹ In addition to concerns from homeschoolers, opponents noted the proposal was too punitive when other options could be explored to deal with truancy.

After concerns were noted about the day curfew proposal, Kansas City law officers and educators agreed on an alternate method for dealing with truancy.⁶² A proposed amended ordinance would allow schools to deliver attendance records to the city prosecutor's officer, rather than require law enforcement to track down the truant student. Police would be able to issue tickets with fines up to \$500 and parents would be summoned to court. The change would shift the burden from prosecutors to prove that an absent student who missed school is not receiving an education elsewhere, to the parent. City Councilman Scott Wagner said, "After all this effort, I think we've got something that will work for everyone and still provide the teeth police and schools have asked for ... We can send a message to parents that we expect kids to be in school."⁶³

Fining parents for their children's truancy is one method being used by jurisdictions looking for increased parental accountability in order to deal with truancy. However, the effectiveness of this approach does not appear to have been evaluated.

⁶¹ , Chris Oberholtz et al., "Proposed controversial daytime curfew doesn't make it out of committee," *KCTV 5 News*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.kctv5.com/story/17208506/daytime-curfew-proposal-running-into-resistance-from-some-parents>.

⁶² Joe Robertson, "Attendance records, not curfew, seen as anti-truancy tactic," *The Kansas City Star*, April 27, 2012, <http://www.kansascity.com/2012/04/27/3580945/attendance-records-not-curfew.html>.

⁶³ Ibid.

Other jurisdictions are moving in the opposite direction, working to de-criminalize truancy and reduce ticketing.

CASE STUDY: ADVOCATES CHANGE L.A. DAYTIME CURFEW LAW

Advocates in Los Angeles have worked to successfully change the criminalization policy response to truancy. The Youth Justice Coalition, Public Council Law Center, Community Rights Campaign, American Civil Liberties Union, and CADRE came together to change a daytime curfew law in the city.⁶⁴ The law had resulted in over 47,000 youth receiving tickets for truancy from police between 2005-09. According to the California Department of Education, the number of students missing school went from 5 percent to over 28 percent during this same timeframe.⁶⁵ The initial fine for this ticket was \$250 and students with families unwilling or unable to pay the initial fine could ultimately be charged \$800 or over \$1,000 with penalties. The tickets were given indiscriminately, often times to students with legitimate absences and students who were simply late to class, and mainly to youth of color who could not afford to pay the fines. Some students would not go to school at all if they knew they were going to be late because they knew the penalties for getting caught coming to school late would be severe. One ticket required a minimum of two court appearances by the youth and a parent, resulting in more missed class for the student and time away from work resulting in lost wages for the parent. L.A. advocacy groups argued that the fines were financially

⁶⁴ National Juvenile Justice Network, “Breaking Up the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” <http://www.njjn.org/our-members/past-campaigns-weve-spotlighted>.

⁶⁵ Omar Shamout, “New city law recognizes the pitfalls of fining children for being late to school,” *Southern California Public Radio*, April 10, 2012, <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2012/04/10/5496/truancy-tickets/>.

debilitating for families and that the law unfairly criminalized students and brought them into the court system instead of dealing with the root causes of their truancy.

The hard work of the advocates paid off in February of 2012, when the campaign convinced the Los Angeles City Council to unanimously change the law. The law was amended with a graduated sanction clause where first- and second-time offenders can receive a maximum of 20 hours of community service or be referred to school-based programming like counseling, tutoring or mentoring to help them get to school on time. A third offense has a \$20 fee that becomes approximately \$150 with court costs. The change came about due to an agreement being reached between advocates and the Los Angeles Police Department, and the City Council taking up the issue.

An article written in the Los Angeles Times regarding the change highlighted the importance of working effectively on truancy in order to increase educational attainment, but also because the Los Angeles Unified School District receives state money for average daily attendance and officials noted students were more likely to commit or become victims of crimes if they are absent.⁶⁶ Average daily attendance revenue can be a critical consideration in helping school districts decide to take action on reducing truancy.

Judge Michael Nash, an active supporter of the law change and the presiding judge of the Los Angeles County Juvenile Court noted, “School attendance is not a court

⁶⁶ Angel Jennings, “L.A. City Council scales back truancy law,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/23/local/la-me-0223-truancy-law-20120223>.

issue. School attendance is an issue for the student, the family, the school and the community.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The incidence of truancy might be one of the best early indicators that a student is in need of support. There are few other indicators that so clearly alert a teacher or school to this need and offer the opportunity to resolve the situation before a student is engaged in more serious delinquency. However, this early warning is too often ignored or met with a counterproductive response.

Students are failing to come to class, or come to class on time, for a variety of reasons. Whether the underlying issue is family, school, economic, personal (mental or physical health), or a combination of issues, the reality is that many responses to truancy fail to address any of its root causes. Frequently, the interventions further burden students and their families, as is the case with punitive approaches like ticketing for truancy, where youth are criminalized and enter the juvenile justice system and families are given large fines and forced to take time off of work to attend multiple court hearings.

Due to the many causes of truancy, successful interventions should be problem-solving in nature, rather than simply punitive. Programs that operate on a three-stage graduated intervention model (prevention, intervention, and sanction), or a variety of programs that each address a certain level can help meet the unique needs of students at each step, with the goal being to reduce or eliminate truancy. The key components of successful truancy models are clear, as evidenced by multiple researchers and borne out by program evaluations of successful interventions:

- Parental education about attendance requirements

- Attendance monitoring
- A clear definition of excessive absences and consequences
- A first stage response to investigate the root cause of truancy and respond with services
- A second stage response, if needed, through a structured program such as the Department of Family and Protective Services

A few common threads in successful truancy programs are: 1) attention and monitoring by adults through a positive relationship model, 2) access and referral to appropriate school or community services, and 3) open communication between students, teachers, and parents. These three factors appear to be influential in understanding and meeting the needs of truant students.

There are a number of successful truancy abatement models, and components of model programs, that have been tested and proven for state policymakers and school district representatives to consider. However, as highlighted by the sheer variety of current truancy approaches (text and e-mail messages, truancy courts, radio commercial and transit ads, mentors, phone recordings to students, money for attendance, and even electronic chips to track arrivals at schools in Brazil), policymakers are not using this information consistently, and many new approaches do not have an evaluation component. There is a critical need for more and better evaluations to determine program effectiveness, and existing information needs to be better aggregated and disseminated to key stakeholders. For youth and their communities, the stakes could not be higher.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In order to get youth back in the classroom and on track for a successful future, efforts to reduce truancy are critically needed. Truancy is an early warning sign that offers the opportunity of early intervention and improved outcomes. Many successful programs have been evaluated and researchers have highlighted the key components of successful truancy abatement programs.

The creation of this report revealed a number of areas for improvement within the field of truancy. Stakeholders at all levels can help to move the field forward by following a few key recommendations.

Federal education experts, such as the U.S. Department of Education, should work with states to create a uniform definition of truancy to support accurate, consistent measurement of truancy rates and patterns across jurisdictions. The absence of an agreed-upon national definition of truancy prevents the collection of meaningful data or accurate comparisons between different jurisdictions.

School districts, in partnership with federal education experts, should support the national collection and availability of truancy statistics. No Child Left Behind required the reporting of school-by-school truancy rates, but these figures are not based on a single definition and the results do not appear to be available publicly. Without public availability of this data, it is hard to translate truancy rate findings into action at the federal or state level.

Program implementers and researchers should support rigorous program evaluations for truancy programs. This information is necessary to determine what works and what does not. More and better evaluations will help to target energy and resources towards the most effective programs and to build the body of truancy research.

Even without the fulfillment of the above recommendations, there is still enough information available for school officials and policymakers to make informed decisions about how to deal with truancy and increase educational attainment. In doing so, schools can increase funding through ADA, in addition to helping improve the well-being of present and future students.

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