



## SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT Student Research Brief

### *Truancy at the Elementary Level*

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#### Introduction

Truancy is a growing problem with an estimated 50,000 of Tennessee's K-12 students absent on an average school day (OEA Report, 2004, p. 1). Truancy has been linked to higher incidents of criminal behavior, lower academic achievement, substance use, and lower socioeconomic status as an adult (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004; Teasley, 2004; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barret & Willson, 2007). Effective truancy prevention programs have several characteristics in common and usually include parental involvement, community involvement, meaningful sanctions for non-compliance with mandated attendance laws, and a collaborative approach (Teasley, 2004; Kearney, 2003; McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). School districts, administrators, law enforcement, and social workers who employ this multi-dimensional paradigm have had greater success in reducing chronic truancy. Programs such as Education Pays in which this multi-dimensional approach is instituted may be the key to reducing truancy.

#### Summary of Primary Findings

The literature implied that a collaborative approach is the key to reducing absenteeism and that intervention at the elementary level may help to eliminate truancy in high school. At the elementary level parental involvement is considered an important factor in reducing truancy. Most programs at this level promote a team effort that includes the administrators, teachers, students, parents, the school social workers, and the community which may include the courts. But an increasing trend at the high school level is to treat truancy as a deviant behavior and deal with it from a law enforcement standpoint. Programs such as Education Pays have been shown to increase school attendance while compulsory attendance laws that are enforced primarily

through the criminal justice system do not address the issues facing the student's family and therefore have a lower rate of success.

#### Implications for Social Work Practice

Truancy is not a new issue in the United States. What is new is the NCLB Act and its requirements to boost school attendance and lower dropout rates in order to meet the law's Annual Yearly Progress goals. As a result of this law, many school districts hired school social workers for truancy prevention. The increasing trend to use social workers as attendance police instead of holistic practitioners creates negative connotations toward the profession. Also leading to stress on the profession are the ill-defined range of services that school social workers are expected to provide and the large case loads, which are much higher than the recommended case load for other social workers. Children are truant for a variety of reasons that are usually categorized as "family issues". These family issues can include abuse/neglect, low-income families, alcohol or drug use, no transportation, family illness, behavioral problems, mobility of family, and emotional or mental health issues. High case loads do not allow time for these issues to be assessed and this creates an ethical dilemma between duty to the school district and duty to the student.

**DATA AT A GLANCE**  
**NUMBER OF STUDENTS**  
**ABSENT**  
**IN GRADES**  
**K-12**  
**IN TENNESSEE**  
**ON AN AVERAGE**  
**SCHOOL DAY**  
**IS**  
**50,000**  
**(OEA REPORT, 2004, P. 1)**

#### 10 Recommendations for Practice with Systems of All Sizes

Based on the literature and personal observation in the field the following recommendations are made:

1. A uniform statewide definition of school social work roles
2. Set proper staff-student ratios and caseloads
3. Fund additional school social workers to meet the new staff-student ratios

### Exhibit 3: Five Principles of Effective Truancy Programs

1. **Involve parents in all truancy prevention activities** - By fostering parental involvement in the school, administrators can increase communication and trust between the parent and the school. Personal contact with parents is an important component to handling truancy problems.
2. **Ensure that students face firm sanctions for truancy** - Schools must communicate to students and families that truancy will not be tolerated. Sanctions should be firm and timely.
3. **Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility** - Schools can create incentive programs both for parents and children. Positive incentives may include participation in publicly funded activities or parenting education classes. Negative sanctions like fines and imprisonment may also be necessary for promoting parental responsibility.
4. **Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in school** - Truancy is often a symptom of a much larger problem. Schools should address the underlying needs of each child to ensure that truancy is not a reoccurring behavior. Students may also need alternative learning environments including school-to-work opportunities, community service, or vocational programs.
5. **Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts** - Relationships between school officials and law enforcement agencies ensure that violations of compulsory education laws are prosecuted. Police departments, juvenile courts, and probation officers can become important allies in addressing truancy.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Manual to Combat Truancy*, July 1996.

4. Hire attendance officers based on enrollment for a 1 to 1,000 ratio who will be a part of a team approach to truancy
5. Create a uniform computerized data collection system to track referrals
6. Provide social work training to administrators and teachers as part of their required continuing education
7. Partner with local business and community leaders to provide mentors for parents and students with attendance issues
8. Make parental involvement a priority at all levels of education (hold parent sessions on weekends, after work hours)
9. Require school social workers at Alternative Schools funded by the local school boards
10. Require school social worker to be a part of the team at IEP meetings

#### Conclusion

Truancy issues affect not only the present but also the future of the student involved. Chronic truancy has been linked to lower academic achievement which could lead to criminal activity, unemployability as an adult, and substance abuse. Intervention programs that create a team approach are more effective in reducing truancy than court ordered ones. And if these interventions are implemented at the elementary level the results may also succeed in lowering the drop out rate at the high school level. Reserchers in the future may want to focus on early intervention programs that have been effective in reducing truancy so more punitive initiatives are not needed in high school.

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#### About the Author

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