

TRUANCY LITERATURE REVIEW

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Truancy Literature Review

Scope of the Problem

Habitual truancy can be defined as unexcused absences from school by a minor that exceed the number of such absences allowed under State law. Each State has its own school attendance laws, which specify 1) the age at which a child must begin school, 2) the age at which a youth can legally drop out of school, and 3) the number of unexcused absences that constitute truancy under the law (National Center for School Engagement, no date). There are variations across the States in the mandatory starting age for school and the legal dropout age (Education Commission of the States, 2007), and variations across jurisdictions in the legally permissible number of unexcused absences from school (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, N.d.). In all States, however, truancy is a status offense—an act that is unlawful because of the status (in this case, age) of the person committing the act, not because of the act itself.

While truancy is widely acknowledged to be a problem nationwide, it is very difficult to find data that delineate the full extent of the problem due to data collection and reporting issues at the school, local and State levels (Heilbrunn, 2007). Data is available from petitioned truancy cases, but there are limitations to this data since most truancy cases never reach a petition status. According to one study of the Denver truancy court, only between 2 and 4 percent of students who met the State statute for truancy were subject to a court action (MacGillivray and Erickson, 2006). Nonetheless, trends in petitioned truancy cases suggest the breadth of the truancy problem. Between 1995 and 2005, the number of petitioned truancy cases increased from 32,800 to 52,400, an increase of 60 percent (Puzzanchera and Sickmund, 2008). In 2005, truancy cases made up 35 percent of all petitioned status offense cases, compared with 28 percent in 1995 (Puzzanchera and Sickmund, 2008). Of these truancy cases, 35 percent involved girls (Puzzanchera, 2007), and for females, petitioned truancy cases outnumbered all other status offenses (Puzzanchera and Sickmund, 2008). While truancy cases increased in this time frame for all age groups, the largest relative increases were seen for 16- and 17-year-olds. Based on self-report data from the Monitoring the Future survey, 11 percent of eighth graders and 16 percent of 10th graders reported recent truancy (Henry, 2007).

Not only is reliable truancy data difficult to find, other data help obscure the scope of the problem (Balfanz et al., 2008; Levy and Henry, 2007; Nauer, White, and Yerneni, 2008). For instance, average attendance rates across school districts may mask significant truancy rates at particular schools. This is true for New York City: at 96 of the 366 middle schools, more than 30 percent of youth were chronically absent during the 2007–08 school year, but the average schoolwide attendance rates for each grade during the same year were at least 90 percent, a target rate viewed by many schools as acceptable (Nauer, White, and Yerneni, 2008). Similarly obscured is the significance of truancy statistics for secondary schools; since dropouts in upper grades are not enrolled in any school, they are excluded from truancy calculations (Heilbrunn, 2007; Levy and Henry, 2007). When one considers that only two thirds of ninth graders will graduate, it becomes clear to what degree this statistical absence can skew truancy calculations (Heilbrunn, 2007; Levy and Henry, 2007; MacGillivray, 2006). The exclusion of dropouts from

truancy statistics also obscures the significant differences between graduation rates for whites and minorities (Seeley and MacGillivray, 2006).

Chronic truancy and absence* often start early. Nauer, White, and Yerneni (2008), for instance, reported that 20 percent of elementary school students (90,000) in New York City schools missed at least a month of school during the 2007–08 school year. There were five districts where 30 percent or more of the elementary school students were chronically absent. Data from the Baltimore Education Research Project showed that more than one third of the first grade cohort was chronically absent (that is, missed one or more months of schooling in one year) during at least one of the first five years in school (Balfanz et al., 2008). An analysis by the National Center for Children in Poverty found that more than 11 percent of kindergarteners and almost 9 percent of first graders were chronically absent, rates that are likely conservative given reporting patterns among schools (Chang and Romero, 2008). This early pattern lays the groundwork for the poor graduation rates from high school: “Recent research in Chicago and Philadelphia has documented that poor attendance is a primary driver of course failure in the secondary grades, and that course failure is at the root of high dropout rates” (Balfanz et al., 2008, 1). In a study that examined the risk factors for school dropout, Hammond and colleagues (2007) identified school performance (low achievement, retention/overage for grade) and school engagement (poor attendance, low educational expectations, lack of effort, low commitment to school, no extracurricular participation) as individual domain factors. More specifically, low achievement, retention/overage for grade, and poor attendance were found to significantly impact dropout rates at all school levels (Hammond et al., 2007).

For the Baltimore project, Balfanz and colleagues (2008) reported that prior to dropping out, students missed progressively more days of school, year by year.

It is possible that more reliable data will be available in the future. The No Child Left Behind Acts requires that school districts receiving Federal money for education need to submit attendance data to their State Government (Heilbrunn, 2007). At the same time, different definitions of and formulas for calculating truancy across States mean that data will not be comparable. Additionally, no provision has been made to track chronic early absence so schools may remain unaware to what extent this is a problem (Chang and Romero, 2008).

Costs of Truancy

The costs of truancy are high. The direct and indirect consequences of truancy for individuals, schools, communities, and society in the short- and long-term are so serious, and truancy is so prevalent, that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention named truancy reduction one of its national priorities for 2003 (Henry and Huizinga, 2007a; OJJDP, 2003).

*Chronic absence is not synonymous with truancy, as it takes into account both excused and unexcused absences. Chang and Romero (2008, 3) note, “Given the critical importance of time devoted to learning, especially in the early years, we believe it is important to count *all* absences. We intentionally use the term ‘chronic absence,’ because the more frequently used term, ‘truancy,’ only refers to unexcused absences and connotes inappropriate student behavior requiring a punitive response.”

Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs that youth potentially are headed for delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure. Research has shown that truancy is related to delinquency, substance use and abuse, high school dropout, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and early sexual intercourse.

Truancy can start early and is associated with poor outcomes both in the short term and in later years. Chronic absence in kindergarten has immediate consequences for academic performance in first grade, particularly among Latino children (Chang and Romero, 2008). Additionally, the majority of students who suffer from chronic absence come from families who do not possess the resources to help the children make up for lost learning (Chang and Romero, 2008). For elementary school children, grades K–3, chronic early absence of 20 or more days is associated with poor achievement, delinquency, substance abuse, and school dropout (Seeley, 2008a). For urban, low-income students in elementary school, each additional day absent from school correlates with a 7 percent lower probability of graduating from high school (Seeley, 2008a). These early patterns have long-term costs for both the individual and society at large: according to the 2000 census, while 83 percent of college graduates and 71 percent of high school graduates were employed, high school dropouts had an employment rate of only 52 percent (Walker, 2007).

Studies have also demonstrated a clear link between truancy and substance use. In the Rochester Youth Study, data comparing 14-year-olds showed that those who skip occasional classes are four times as likely to start using marijuana as those who never skip. Chronic truants (more than 9 days) are 16 times as likely (Henry and Huizinga, 2005 as reported in Heilbrunn, 2007; Seeley, 2008a). In the Monitoring the Future survey, data show that self-admitted high school senior truants are more likely to use marijuana than their peers (Heilbrunn, 2007). Recent research shows that truancy is not only the most significant risk factor for predicting first time marijuana use, it predicts 97 percent of first time drug use (Seeley, 2008a). There is a linear relationship between the two; the greater number of days truant, the greater the drug use (Seeley, 2008a). Henry and Huizinga (2007b) suggest that the strong relationship between truancy and the start of substance use may be largely due to the amounts of unsupervised time that truants spend with peers.

Data from the Rochester Youth study also show the association between delinquency and self-reports of truancy (Henry and Huizinga, 2007a). Students who admitted to occasional or chronic truancy were, respectively, four and 12 times as likely as nonskippers to report having committed a serious assault, about five and 21 times as likely to report having committed a serious property crime, and two and seven times as likely to report having been arrested (Henry and Huizinga, 2007a). The truancy–delinquency connection appears to be particularly acute among males (Kelley et al., 1997). In addition, decades of research have also identified a link between truancy and later problems in marriage, in jobs, and with violence, adult criminality, and incarceration (Dryfoos, 1990; Catalano et al., 1998; Robins and Ratcliff, 1978; Snyder and Sickmund, 1995). This association starts early: the findings from OJJDP’s Study Group on Very Young Offenders (Loeber and Farrington, 2000) indicate that chronic truancy in elementary school is linked to serious delinquent behavior at age 12 and under.

Absenteeism harms more than the individual and his/her prospects: high truancy and absence rates affect the achievement of the school overall, slowing the rate of instruction, which harms all students (Balfanz et al., 2008; Nauer, White, and Yerneni, 2008; Wilson et al., 2008). Moreover, the Baltimore Education Research Project found that in such a situation, over time, higher performing students leave the school system, exacerbating the problems (Nauer, White, and Yerneni, 2008).

When youth are absent from school, there is increased opportunity to engage in high-risk behaviors. Data from the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) reveal that the incidence of crime by youth ages 10–17 during the 2004–05 school year was 26 percent higher during school hours (Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.) than out of school hours (M–F, 3 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.), and crimes against youth are 13 percent higher (MacGillivray and Erickson, 2006). “The interview data and the focus group data confirm that when students are skipping school, they are usually up to no good,” note the report’s authors. Chronic truants reported “hanging out, cruising in cars, and ‘getting into trouble’” while skipping school (p. 30). In Contra Costa County, Calif., prior to the implementation of the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program (TRDP), 60 percent of the juvenile crime occurred on weekdays between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001). Several studies show that crime and delinquency rates drop when truancy is addressed (Heilbrunn, 2007).

Truancy has an even more direct financial impact on communities: the loss of Federal and State education funding (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001; Heilbrunn, 2007). In North Richmond, Calif., the Verde Involving Parents (VIP) program over four years raised monthly attendance rates from 89 percent to over 93 percent, resulting in an increase of \$470,000 in Average Daily Attendance revenue for the district (Chang and Romero, 2008). Similarly, a program in Fort Worth, Texas, helped raise average daily attendance from 93.8 percent in 2002–03 to 94.9 percent in 2003–04, resulting in an additional \$4 million in revenue for the county (Murphy, 2005).

Truancy reduction can also save public monies. Dropouts are poorly prepared to enter the workforce and require greater expenditures for social services and criminal justice processes than do graduates (Heilbrunn, 2007). Unemployment rates for dropouts are generally almost 20 percent higher than for high school graduates. Employed male dropouts earn about 75 percent of what graduates earns, females only 60 percent (Heilbrunn, 2003). The RAND Corporation estimated that each high school dropout costs society between \$188,086 and \$297,188 (Vernez, Krop, and Rydell, 2000). Lochner and Moretti (2004) estimate accrued social benefits of \$1.8 billion for each one percent increase in the high school graduation rate (in Heilbrunn, 2007). Truancy’s high societal costs are evident in studies of adults who were frequent truants as adolescents. According to Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001), such adults are more likely than others to

- Have poor physical and mental health
- Work in low paying jobs
- Live in poverty
- Utilize the welfare system extensively
- Have children with problem behaviors

- Be incarcerated

After looking at the estimated per incident costs associated with juvenile delinquency, Heilbrunn (2003, 13) concludes: “school failure is so costly that neither the court nor the truancy reduction programs have to be widely successful in order to achieve a positive payback over time. It is likely that they both earn their keep many times over.” Estimates suggest that even the most expensive truancy reduction program, if it graduates one additional truant out of 115, will break even in cost–benefit terms (Heilbrunn, 2003).

Theoretical Context

Youth often face a number of barriers that can challenge their interest in and ability to attend school. While generally the literature on truancy is in its infancy (Heilbrunn, 2007), a variety of school, family, community and individual characteristics have been identified that can contribute to the problem of truancy (Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001; Heilbrunn, 2007; Hammond, Smink, and Drew, 2007; OJJDP and ED, n.d.).

School factors include

- Inconsistent and ineffective school attendance policies
- Poor record keeping
- Not notifying parents/guardians of absences
- Unsafe school environment
- Poor school climate
- Poor relations with teachers
- Inadequate identification of special education needs

Family and community factors include

- Negative peer influences, such as other truant youth
- Financial, social, medical, or other programs that pressure students to stay home to help with family
- Child abuse and neglect
- Family disorganization
- Teen pregnancy or parenthood
- Lack of family support for educational and other goals
- Violence in or near the home or school
- Differing culturally based attitudes towards education

Student factors include

- A lack of personal and educational ambition
- Poor academic performance
- Low school attachment
- Retention/overage for grade

- Poor relationships with other students
- Gang involvement
- Lack of self-esteem
- Unmet mental health needs
- Alcohol and drug use and abuse

In a study examining the risk factors for school dropout, Hammond and colleagues (2007) identified four factors that significantly impact dropout rates at all three school levels: low achievement, retention/overage for grade, poor attendance, and low socioeconomic status (SES). Henry and Huizinga (2007a) found that the most robust predictors of truancy are school performance and involvement with delinquent peers, though these two factors appear to behave synergistically so that truancy is mitigated for those associating with delinquent peers but performing well in school.

Barriers facing truant youth are significant and often multifaceted. Data from OJJDP's Truancy Reduction Demonstration Programs showed that of the 634 students participating

- 87 percent qualified for free or reduced price lunch
- 36 percent lived with only one adult in the home
- 20 percent lived with no working adult in the home
- 19 percent had individual education plans
- 15 percent had school discipline problems at program intake
- 13 percent had juvenile justice involvement (Finlay, 2006b)

In one informal tally carried out in a truancy court in Denver in 2003, of the 40 truancy cases heard that one day, only three cases involved no major, identifiable issue other than truancy; over half had prior referrals to the Department of Human Services; and approximately 30 percent were classified as incorrigible/ungovernable (Heilbrunn, 2004).

Data from a study by the National Center for Children in Poverty (2008) study show that the most common risks experienced by U.S. kindergarteners include the following:

- 19 percent live with a single mother
- 18 percent live below the Federal Poverty Level
- 14 percent come from a large family with four or more children at home
- 12 percent live with a mother who has not completed high school

The self-reported reasons for truancy vary considerably, and studies show that dropouts are not a homogenous group (Hammond et al., 2007). According to focus groups at truancy reduction sites, youth reported various reasons for their truancy, including getting behind in school and work, which often initiated a cycle of chronic absenteeism; being bored; a school environment with uncaring adults and teachers; poor relationships with teachers; bullying; and disrespect from staff (Attwood and Croll, 2006; Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley, 2002). According to a 1992 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (McMillen et al., 1993), four dropouts in 10 said that they left school because they were failing or they did not like school, and males and females reported in roughly equal numbers that they were leaving school because of personality

conflicts with teachers. More males than females dropped out because of school suspension or expulsion. The dropout rate among 16- to 24-year-olds who had repeated more than one grade was 41 percent, compared with 17 percent of those who had repeated only one grade and 9 percent of those who had not repeated any grades. Dropout rates were highest among those who had repeated grades 7, 8, or 9. Although most dropouts reported school related reasons for leaving, most female dropouts reported family related reasons. Among dropouts, 21 percent of females and eight percent of males dropped out because they had become parents (McMillen et al., 1993).

Students and school staff often disagree on the reasons for truancy. In one survey, students cited boredom, loss of interest in school, irrelevant courses, suspensions, and bad relationships with teachers as major factors leading to the decision to skip school. In contrast, school staff believed truancy to be related to students' problems with their families and peers (DeKalb, 1999).

Given the multifaceted issues that can lead to truancy, prevention programs need to

- “Be comprehensive, flexible, responsive, and persevering
- View children in the context of their families
- Deal with families as parts of neighborhoods and communities
- Have a long-term, preventive orientation and a clear mission and continue to evolve over time
- Be well managed by competent and committed individuals with clearly identifiable skills
- Have staff who are trained and supported to provide high-quality, responsive services
- Operate in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect.” (Schorr, 1997 as quoted in Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent, 2001, 7).

Engagement

Engagement has been identified as one key element in preventing truancy. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), engagement can be usefully conceptualized along three dimensions: behavioral engagement (e.g., doing school work, following the rules), cognitive engagement (e.g., level of effort and motivation), and emotional engagement (e.g., emotions, values). These three dimensions interact synergistically, and research suggests varying degrees of engagement's impact on achievement and dropping out (Finlay, 2006a).

The chance of disengagement increases during periods of transition, if the transition is not negotiated well. If students feel connected and welcomed during these periods, engagement can diminish the probability of attendance problems. Periods of transition include starting kindergarten; moving to a new home and school; beginning a new year of school; graduation from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school; reentry from absences, whether due to disciplinary actions or health issues; and movement from special education to mainstream classes (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2006). To ensure engagement at periods of transition, the Center Mental Health in Schools (2006) outlines three levels of attention/assistance that can be offered to ensure smooth integration: “broadband,” or universal, practices that help provide support to all students; “enhanced personalization” for

those who manifest minor adjustment difficulties; and “special assistance” for those who have failed to successfully make the transition.

It is critically important to identify those who have disengaged and provide support for reengagement. This process includes clarifying and bringing into the open the negative perceptions of school that youth hold, reframing school learning in a meaningful and concrete way for the youth, renegotiating their involvement in school learning, and establishing a productive working relationship (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2006).

Truancy Prevention and Intervention Programs

All programs have a short-term goal of improving attendance in the short run; many have longer term goals of raising grades and improving graduation rates. Given the multiple factors that can lie at the root of truancy, prevention and intervention programs need to integrate both school and community resources to best address these factors.

According to Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001), programs that show the most promise in reducing truancy and other risk factors have several key elements:

- Parental involvement
- Meaningful sanctions or consequences for truancy
- Meaningful incentives for attendance
- Ongoing school based truancy reduction programs
- Involvement of community resources

These components include both “carrots” and “sticks” for youth and their families. Frequently, since truancy is related to community, family, and individual factors, programs include some form of case management, so that the youth and family are referred to services offered through various agencies and entities in the community. This case management is sometimes overseen by a multidisciplinary Student Attendance Review Board (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley, 2002). Contracts can be used to avoid proceeding further in the court system.

Truancy prevention programs are designed to promote regular school attendance through one or more strategies, including the following:

- Court alternatives
- Mentoring programs
- Law enforcement participation
- Increasing parental involvement
- Truancy awareness campaigns
- Other strategies, such as improving parent–teacher communication and drawing upon community resources

There are many different types of interventions, settings, and approaches/strategies for truancy reduction. Broad categories include systems change, court-based programs, and school-based

programs. At the same time, many programs include elements from different types of programs to successfully meet the needs of local communities.

Systems Change/School Policies

Policies and procedures can create barriers to addressing absenteeism and truancy. For instance, many districts specify suspension as a punishment for truancy, which ends up “pushing out” students. One study found that in Colorado, 70 percent of the students suspended were chronically truant in the six months prior to the suspension, while 80 percent of dropouts were chronically truant the year before (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley, 2002). This suspension model fails to address the underlying causes of truancy and can exacerbate the disengagement from school on the part of the youth (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley, 2002). Certain procedures allow the problem to go unaddressed, such as automated phone calls that can be ignored or erased by students at home (Gonzales, Richards, and Seeley, 2002). Policies that tie grading or participation in athletics to attendance can similarly be counterproductive.

Such policies, when changed, can support truancy reduction programs to achieve positive outcomes. For instance, in-school suspension policies, detention, or use of alternative school programs allow students to continue academic progress in the school setting rather than having unsupervised time outside of it (Seeley and MacGillivray, 2006). Currently, 27 States allow young people to withdraw at age 16 (Smink and Heilbrunn, 2005); a recommendation would be to require attendance until 18 (Seeley, 2008b). Changing policies that link grades to attendance may encourage continued engagement, rather than dropping out (Seeley and MacGillivray, 2006).

Court-Based and Court Diversion Programs

Court-based programs leverage the power of the court in order to coordinate and oversee the delivery of services that are identified for the truant youth, and often for the family as well. Programs can differ in how long they run, the number of times the youth/family appears before the judge, the role of a social worker or case manager, the representatives included, and the types of services overseen by the court. Many systems have established diversion programs that offer services after a petition has been received but before a youth is adjudicated. These programs have various levels of connection to the court, some even being labeled “truancy courts.”

One example of a court-based program is the Truancy Court Diversion Project (sometimes referred to as the Byer Truancy Reduction Program), which uses family courts as the means to provide a broad array of services to families. The Family Court judge and a uniformed bailiff convene “Truancy Court” weekly in the school building, where there is also regular contact among the court, child, parents, school officials, and services providers. Locating the court process in the school fosters better communication, improves needs assessment and understanding of issues by all involved parties, and increases coordination and integration of services. Services are provided by a team composed of judge, school/court liaison, counselor or other involved school employee, case manager (social worker), treatment provider or providers, and any other court, social service, or school personnel invested in a particular child or family.

Some programs are connected to the court, but are designed primarily to divert youth from court before adjudication. The St. Louis (Mo.) County Truancy Court is a voluntary diversion program that schools, families, and students may choose to participate in before a student's absence from school becomes so severe that the school must refer the case to family court and/or the Division of Family Services. The program targets students who have a pattern of excessive absence and tardiness and who the school believes will benefit from participation in the program. The truancy court team consists of volunteer judges and attorneys who serve as truancy court judges, school social workers and/or guidance counselors who serve as truancy court family advocates, and a deputy juvenile officer from the family court. The goals of the program are to increase attendance, improve academic achievement, build character, and curb delinquent behavior.

Similarly, the Washtenaw County (Mich.) Status Offense Diversion Program provides effective, noncourt intervention for status offenders to resolve presenting problems and prevent delinquent behavior. In response to a petition, the court caseworker will provide supervision for juvenile status offenders and services for the family for a limited duration, typically the equivalent of a 16-week school semester. Diversion is a voluntary contract between the juvenile, his or her parent or legal guardian, and the court, *without authorization of the petition*. Conditions of diversion focus on regular school attendance, parents' attendance and participation in educational planning or progress meetings, and referrals to community-based or court-sponsored treatment programs.

School-Based Programs

Many programs are based in schools, especially when they aim to identify truancy and absence problems before they reach a chronic level and before patterns become entrenched and harder to reverse. The following programs are just a few examples of the variety of school-based programs that have been implemented and evaluated for truancy reduction.

The Multnomah County, Ore., School Attendance Initiative (SAI) is a nonpunitive, culturally appropriate approach to help students maintain regular attendance. One of SAI's goals is to identify attendance problems early so they will not become serious. The primary intervention strategy consists of outreach to families of K–8 students, in support of their efforts to improve their children's attendance. Rather than focusing on a family's deficits, SAI staff members help identify its strengths, which are in turn supplemented with school-based services such as extended-day activities, family engagement, and the Parents Organizing for School Success program. Also included are individual, family, and group support.

A Los Angeles County, Calif., truancy reduction program called Abolish Chronic Truancy (A.C.T.) targets elementary school children who have excessive absences. The program places prosecutors in the schools to work with administrators, teachers, parents or guardians, and students to intervene at the very beginning of the truancy cycle, before the problem is ingrained. A.C.T. uses a series of graduated interventions to hold students and parents accountable for attendance problems. The program sends a letter to parents of students with attendance problems. Parents and children are invited to meet with the deputy district attorney. Also present are representatives from community-based organizations and schools, to offer parenting classes, counseling, and other needed services. If attendance problems continue, parents are invited to

meet individually with a School Attendance Review Team, including the deputy district attorney and school officials. If truancy continues, students are referred to the School Attendance Review Board, which includes members from probation, mental health, and other agencies. If all of these steps fail, a case is filed in court against the parents/guardians and/or the child. Throughout the involvement of the district attorney's office, school personnel conduct many family interventions, including home visits, meetings, phone conversations, and written communications.

Bigs in School (Big Brothers Big Sisters) is a one-to-one mentoring program that takes place in the school setting. School-Based Mentoring (SBM) differs from the more traditional community-based mentoring approach in several important ways. Mentors in SBM programs spend more time working on academics or doing homework with their mentees, and they also have more contact with teachers, and feel more effective in influencing their mentees' educational achievement. The goal of virtually all mentoring programs is to support the development of healthy youth by addressing the need for positive adult contact, thereby reducing risk factors for negative behavior and enhancing protective factors for positive behavior.

Community-Based Programs

Some communities address truancy through community-based programs. These programs recognize that truancy is not an individual or family problem alone, but that chronic truancy is a community problem that can best be addressed by collaboration among various systems in the community. The following are just a few examples of programs that have been implemented and evaluated for truancy reduction.

The Truancy Assessment and Service Centers (TASC) are one example of a community-based approach. The legislation establishing the need and authority for TASCs recognizes that the reduction of truancy and its many causes is the responsibility of multiple agencies. Thus, each TASC is organized as a cooperative, interagency program, drawing on various agencies to provide an effective use of resources. TASCs mobilize all segments of the community—including schools, mental health and social services, law enforcement, and courts—and take a comprehensive approach to address problems of diverse populations in their neighborhoods. The centers provide children in kindergarten through fifth grade early identification, assessment, and prompt delivery of coordinated interventions to prevent continued unexcused absences from school. Children who have five unexcused absences are referred to the TASC program and screened for treatment. Since these collaborations have been put in place, the truancy centers have been empowered to remove barriers to overall program effectiveness and fill in other identified gaps in services previously facing at-risk families.

A different approach to a community-based program is represented by the New Jersey Juvenile/Family Crisis Intervention Units (JFCIUs), which are authorized to divert matters involving family-related problems (i.e., incorrigibility, truancy, runaway, and serious family conflict) from court proceedings. The JFCIUs provide short-term crisis intervention services with the goal of stabilizing the family situation and/or referring the juvenile and family to available community agencies. The units work by providing 24-hour on-call service, interviewing the

youth and his or her family, providing family counseling and crisis stabilization services, and referring the family to community-based services.

The Kern County (Calif.) Truancy Reduction Program emphasizes daily school attendance through a collaborative effort of parental participation, school involvement, and casework management. The program focuses on early intervention and stresses collaboration between schools and juvenile probation officers. Components include assessment, home visits, weekly school contacts, counseling with the student and family, referrals to community resources, mentoring and evaluation. Students referred to the program are usually monitored for an entire academic year. Since the program began, chronic school absences and tardiness have decreased at participating schools.

Evaluation Results

Rigorous data on the effectiveness of dropout programs have been lacking to a large degree, but there is a growing body of evidence regarding truancy reduction programs. A number of programs have been found either to be effective for prevention of or intervention with truancy or to have promising or emerging evidence of programmatic effectiveness. Additionally, many programs that address multiple risk factors may have positive outcomes in regard to truancy reduction, although that may not be the primary goal of the program. For instance, CASASTART and Operation New Hope, while not directly targeting truancy, can reduce it. Specific program descriptions found on this site delineate the available evidence for each program.

There are also multiple programs that lack sufficient evidence to be classified as effective or ineffective. Strategies shown to be ineffective at reducing truancy include solution-focused group interventions (for at-risk students) (Newsome, 2004) and financial sanctions (Gandy and Schultz, 2007).

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