

Brief Number 1: The Community

Approach to Truancy

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The Supreme Court of the United States in *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared that “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local government. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities. It is the very foundation of good citizenship...it is doubtful that any child may reasonably succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.” Yet those dealing with school attendance issues have experienced children saying “we don’t need no education,” parents saying “my child doesn’t need that education” and schools saying “we don’t want to educate that child.”

Our history has provided many examples of successful men and women who dropped out of school in the 5th or 6th grade and made more than enough money to raise a family. How many School Boards or Boards of Supervisors, when debating money and programs, have had some parent stand up and confront them by saying, “I don’t have a college or high school degree and my child doesn’t need one either”? So while some of us repeat in public grandiloquent slogans about the importance of education, why should our communities be concerned about whether Dick or Jane regularly attend school and get a high school degree if they, or their parents, do not care?

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children and the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), in “Saving Money, Saving Youth: The Financial Impact of Keeping Kids in School,” provided a partial answer to this question when they calculated the costs to the community for a child dropping out of school. Using figures developed by Vernez, Krop and Rydell at the RAND Corporation, the 2003 report concluded “one high school dropout can be expected to cost the public in excess of \$200,000 over the course of his or her life.” Part of this cost was attributed to the loss of tax revenue, part to the cost of social programs used (higher for women than men) and part to the cost of criminal justice services (higher for men).

A Truancy Fact Sheet prepared by the NCSE provided the following verification of the connection between school attendance and criminal justice concerns:

- Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out.
- In 1991 and again in 1993, three grand juries in Dade County, FL analyzed the data from more than 5,000 of the county's most serious juvenile offenders and found that excessive truancy was one of the three traits most of them had in common.
- After the police opened a truancy center in North Miami Beach and began picking up school aged youth on the street during school hours, crime diminished substantially in the targeted neighborhoods. For example, vehicle burglaries decreased by 22%, and residential burglaries criminal mischief both decreased by 19%

Of the increased cost of social programs for high school dropouts, a portion is the expense of health care. And while some of our parents do not value a high school degree for their child, we assume that all but the most callous parents want their 18 year old child to be healthy. Children who attend school and do well are more likely to be healthy and less likely to cost the community medical dollars.

In "Protecting Teens: Beyond Race, Income and Family Structure" Dr. Robert Blum, formerly at the University of Minnesota and now at Johns Hopkins, analyzed data relating to teenage health issues from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Blum isolated risk factors and protective factors for white, Hispanic and black male and female teens for (1) cigarette use, (2) alcohol use, (3) weapon related violence, (4) suicidal thoughts and attempts and (5) sexual intercourse. Among the conclusions reached were the following:

- Youth that have problems with schoolwork are more likely to experience health risks. This is evident, with very little exception, across the groups studied making school failure a public health problem.

- Teens who spend their time “just hanging out” with friends, especially friends involved in specific risk behaviors, are more likely to become involved themselves. Clearly, one’s choice of friends matters. There may also be health consequences to substantial amounts of unstructured leisure time

The results of studies suggest that the community has legitimate reasons to be concerned about whether our youth regularly attend and graduate from high school. We need solutions that improve the chance that they will do so. Since not all children skip school for the same reasons, the community cannot treat all truants the same and effectively reduce the dropout rate.

In a study entitled “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” John Bridgeland, former Director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House for President George W. Bush, interviewed high school dropouts about why they dropped out and the top reasons were as follows:

- Classes were not interesting (47%)
- Missed too many days and could not catch up (43%)
- Spent time with people who were not interested in school (42%)
- Had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life (38%)
- Was failing in school (35%)

Of the high school dropouts interviewed, 66% said they would have worked harder if their school had demanded more and 82% were at least somewhat confident that they could have graduated. The dropouts were asked what changes would have improved their chance of success. They responded:

- Make classes relevant with opportunities for real world learning (81%)
- Better teachers, keep classes interesting (81%)
- Smaller classes, more individual attention (75%)
- Parents and School to communicate with each other (71%)
- Parents to ensure kids go to school every day (71%)
- Increase supervision at school to ensure kids attend classes (70%)

These answers clearly show the role that parents and the school play in whether a child graduates from high school. Yet the community at large can have both a positive and negative impact on graduation rates. Some localities try to limit the allure of skipping school by promoting truant free shopping areas where truants will not be served during school hours. Other localities struggle with

the competition from businesses that devour young, unskilled workers. One only has to follow the caravans of trucks, filled with chain saws and teens, advancing northward on Route 29 from Culpeper during the morning commute to appreciate the impact of a \$100 a day “tax-free” job on school attendance. In other communities, gang issues spill into schools, spawn concerns about student safety and impact attendance.

A comprehensive approach to truancy that involves the community, family, and school was one of the primary themes of the Washington, D.C. Conference titled “Partnering to Prevent Truancy: A National Priority.” Robert Flores, the Administrator of the Office on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and a co-sponsor of the Conference with the U.S. Department of Education, used terms like “multidisciplinary” and “collaborative” when describing the search for solutions. He emphasized that the focus could not just be on student attendance but had to include all of the three A’s-“Attendance, Attachment and Achievement.”

The Three A’s are interrelated. For example, attaching or connecting a child to a school increases the chance that the student will attend and achieve success. One way to attach children to school is through extra-curricular activities. Some studies have found a positive correlation between time spent by students on extra-curricular activities and graduation rates while others have documented a positive correlation between extra-curricular activities and educational aspirations.

Nicholas Zill concluded in “Adolescent Time Use, Risky Behavior and Outcomes: An Analysis of National Data” that children who participate in extra-curricular activities tended to do better in school. In a comparison of 10th grade students who spent 1-4 hours a week in extracurricular activities and 10th grade students who spent no hours a week in extracurricular activities, students in the latter group were:

- 57 % more likely to drop out of school,
- 49% more likely to use drugs,
- 37% more likely to be a teen parent,
- 35% more likely to smoke,
- 27% more likely to be arrested

The “Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness” summarized some of the research about school connectedness or attachment. The approaches that were found to improve student connectedness to schools were:

- Implementing high standards and expectations, and providing academic support to all students. (research citations omitted)
- Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.
- Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families.
- Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.
- Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.
- Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school

Courts in Virginia have been called on to deal with truants when other efforts have failed. While truants can be sentenced to detention for failure to follow a Court order to attend school, there is little research on the effectiveness of detention on truants. One study that involved Colorado students found that “no one’s attendance or grades improved markedly following detention.” A minority of the 30 detained truants reported that they were better off after detention while others reported they were worse off. The group that seemed to be most impacted positively by detention consisted of the low risk students who may have been “scared straight.” Dr. Edward Latessa of the Division of Criminal Justice of the University of Cincinnati, as well as others, has cautioned that detaining low risk children can push them further into the criminal justice system.

The Colorado study has been criticized because of the small number of children involved in the study. Judge Cole of Boulder, Colorado was involved with a follow-up study that focused on interviews with truants who were not detained but knew detention was a possible sanction. Of the 41 non-detained youths surveyed, 74% claimed that the thought of jail time motivated them to attend school regularly.” More study is needed to determine if detention, or the threat of detention, is an effective means of increasing school attendance.

In a time of economic turmoil and foreign countries arming themselves for the future by training scientists and mathematicians, producing successful educational outcomes for all children, not just the children in our own home, is crucial. Solutions to truancy will need to include comprehensive support by the community, parents and school for the student. As programs are

implemented, they will need to be analyzed to see if they produce the desired results and if they are an efficient use of time, energy and money.

References

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“An Effective Approach to Truancy Prevention,” Jessica Geller, Honors Thesis obtained through the University of Colorado, includes the follow-up study by Judge Cole’s group

“Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools,” Virginia Department of Education, www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/studentstvcs/ImprvngSchAttend.pdf

“Juvenile Detention for Colorado Truants: Exploring the Issues,” National Center for School Engagement, <http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/JuvenileDetentionforColoradoTruantsExploringtheIssues.pdf>

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