Assessing the Prevalence of Truancy: A Four Piece Puzzle

National Center for School Engagement

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Promoting attendance, attachment and achievement

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Truancy is our first and best indicator that a student is headed for trouble. Truancy is

correlated with poor performance on standardized tests (Caldas, 1993, Lamdin, 2001),

high school dropout (Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison, 2006), juvenile delinquency

(Henry and Huizinga, 2005, Berger & Wind, 2000, Gavin, 1997, Wilson, 1993),

substance abuse (NY State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, 1994,

Soldz, Huyser and Dorsey, 2003, Bachman, Johnston and O'Malley, 1998), and eventual

adult criminality (Harlow, 2003, Schroeder, Chaisson, & Pogue, 2004). Intervening early

with truants can avert these negative outcomes. It is therefore critical to understand the

prevalence of truancy in our schools. However, we currently have no state or national

indicators of the prevalence of truancy. This paper examines the challenges of

ascertaining the scope and magnitude of truancy.

Before delving further into the prevalence of truancy, it is important to discuss the

recent controversy surrounding the national dropout rate. Currently there is growing

confusion about what constitutes a dropout and what should be categorized as graduation.

Numerous studies have been released with conflicting conclusions (Greene, 2001,

Swanson, 2004, Balfanz & Letgers, 2004, GAO, 2005, Barton, 2005, Mishel & Roy,

2006). Understanding the definition and formula controversy for high school graduation

provides a learning opportunity which can be applied to calculating a truancy rate.

Historically school dropout and completion were calculated using three sources of

data:

- Current Population Survey (administered by the US Census)

- Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics; NCES)

- Longitudinal Studies Program (NCES)

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The CPS assesses the number of non-completers between 15 to 24 years of age, who leave school each year. It also measures how many 16 – 24 year olds do not have a high school diploma. These methods are called event rates and status rates, respectively.

Another source is the Common Core of Data (CCD) collected by NCES. These data are collected by the state education agencies from the local education authority and then aggregated at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Education. These data indicate the number of high school completers and dropouts as reported by schools across the country. These data are subject to differences in how schools code dropouts and completers. A standard criticism of these data concerns General Education Development (GED). Many schools count GED recipients as high school completers. Additionally, many schools code students who exit with the intent to take the GED as 'GED program' instead of 'dropout'. Schools do not necessarily follow-up to find out if the student did indeed complete the GED. There are other exit codes that are not considered dropout such as 'runaway' or 'whereabouts unknown'. Consequently, this source of data is often considered to provide an underestimate of dropout.

Finally, there are three longitudinal studies conducted by NCES, the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72), High School and Beyond (HS&B), and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). These studies tracked students from school into adulthood. The research designs use a random, representative sample of students from across the United States, and therefore

the findings are generalizable to the larger population. The criticism of this research, however, is that students of color and low-income students are underrepresented.

In 2001, Jay Greene, a researcher with the Manhattan Institute, released a study using a new method for calculating the dropout rate. Using the CCD, Greene calculated the number of 9th graders enrolled compared to the number of high school graduates four years later. He also adjusted for population increases using estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. The result was a much lower high school completion rate than had previously been reported. Since that time, other researchers have conducted similar studies with similar results. Still other researchers have promoted the previous calculation method resulting in higher completion rates (Mishel & Roy, 2006). The difference between Greene's estimates (71%) and the CPS estimates (85%) is 14%, a meaningful difference. Swanson (2004) conducted a similar analysis to Greene using a slightly different calculation method called the Cumulative Promotion Index. His findings were slightly lower than Greene's (68%). Both Greene and Swanson found significant gaps between the graduation rate for whites and for minority students.

What lessons from the dropout studies can be applied to our efforts to measure truancy? First, we cannot use CPS data to estimate truancy rates. The only sources of truancy data that are similar to high school completion are the longitudinal studies or the CCD. In the NELS student questionnaires, there are a number of questions about absenteeism and cutting classes. These questions might provide an idea of how many students are struggling with attendance issues. Additionally, estimates of truancy based on the NELS data or the HS&B data will also suffer from the problem of minority under-

representation. They do, however, provide a starting point for a national truancy estimate.

The CCD relies on state data. Historically, state education agencies have collected *attendance* data from the local education authorities, but not *truancy* data. Attendance data does not distinguish between absences that are excused and absences that are unexcused. However, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) now requires that states establish a common definition of truancy and collect truancy statistics on a school-by-school basis. At this point, it is not clear if the U.S. Department of Education will attempt to collect truancy data from each state education agency. Furthermore, this method is flawed by variations in local definitions of unexcused versus excused absence. Finally, since the statutes defining habitual truancy and compulsory education age vary significantly across states, we might also expect that states' formulae for truancy rates will vary significantly. This would prohibit the national aggregation of state truancy rates. Nevertheless, a truancy rate for each state that includes its formula, the state definition of habitual truancy, and its compulsory age laws would provide another critical indicator of the prevalence of truancy.

Another source of data relevant to assessing the prevalence of truancy is juvenile justice data on truancy court cases. Typically, when a student is identified as habitually truant, a truancy petition is filed (either by the school district or the district attorney's office). In some states truancy falls under the municipal court jurisdiction, while in others, it is heard in the state juvenile court. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention aggregates data on status offenders at the national level. Some states break out the type of status offense while others do not. Furthermore, municipal

truancy court data are often not included in this aggregation process. In addition to these missing data, truancy cases only represent truants who meet the state statute *and* are filed upon in court. In a study of Denver truancy court, conducted by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), it was found that less than 3% of students who met the state statute ended up in truancy court (MacGillivary, 2006.) Despite these shortcomings, truancy court data provide yet another piece of the picture.

Finally, another method for calculating the prevalence of truancy is to select the largest school districts from across the country and assess how many of their students meet the state definition of habitually truant. NCSE conducted a similar study in Denver and found that approximately 20% of all students (K-12) had enough unexcused absences to be considered habitually truant (ten unexcused days in a school year). This method is much more labor intensive than the previous method. In this case, NCSE requested an electronic file of the attendance records for all students for the past three school years. The data set did not include any personally identifying information, but it did include the total number of days absent in the school year for any student *ever enrolled*. By contrast, most schools estimate their truancy rates based only on the attendance of their active enrollment list at the end of the year. Since many students who are truant eventually drop out, looking at all students ever enrolled provides a more accurate estimate. Conducting a similar analysis with selected school districts from across the country could provide another source for estimating the prevalence of truancy.

Four sources of data could be mined to determine the prevalence of truancy;

1. NCES longitudinal data,
2. NCES Common Core of Data,

3. Juvenile Justice Statistics on Truancy Court, and

4. A Sampling of Large School Districts from across the Country.

Each of these sources provides a piece of the prevalence picture. Despite the conflicting data available on high school dropout and graduation, there is at least a range within which the "true" figures are likely found. In contrast, we have very little data on truancy. Currently, the only readily available information comes from juvenile justice statistics that represent a very small percentage of habitual truants.

As is the case with dropout, nationally we must decide how best to use the above sources of data to calculate a truancy rate. The NCES longitudinal data have already been collected and are therefore not amenable to changes. However, juvenile justice systems should collect detailed information about truancy court cases including gender, age, ethnicity and outcomes of the case. These data should be comparable whether truancy falls in the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, family court or municipal court. Finally, currently state agencies are not required to submit data to the US Department of Education. However, we highly recommend that truancy rates become a component of the Common Core of Data. States and school districts across the country should use a comparable formula to calculate a truancy rate. Absences need to be categorized as either excused or unexcused. After an official review of all absences, all unverified absences should be converted to unexcused absences. Additionally, out of school suspensions and expulsions should be considered excused absences. Other than these general guidelines, it is up to the school building administration to define what is considered an excused absence and what is an unexcused absence.

To get a more precise measure of school absence, three rates should be considered; an Excused Absence Rate (EAR), an Unexcused Absence Rate (UAR) and a Habitually Truant Rate (HTR). The EAR and UAR provide a school-wide picture of absences similar to an attendance rate. However, the HTR addresses whether there are many unexcused absences among a few students or a few unexcused absences among many students.

The most accurate measure will be obtained by using Average Daily Enrollment (ADE) for the denominator. ADE is the total number of students enrolled for each school day divided by the total number of school days. Taken in aggregate, the denominators of school-by-school truancy rates should reflect the total number of students ever enrolled in the school district at any point in the school year. Active enrollment on school count day or, worse, at the end of the school year, may underestimate the number of students for two reasons. First, since highly mobile students are more likely to be truant, active enrollment does not capture the students who had many unexcused absences in one school and then moved to another. Second, students for whom school is not a priority may have many truancies, and may also be more likely to enroll late in the year, and drop out before the year is over. Students who move from one school to another within the same district should not be double-counted, nor should we inflate the denominator with students who were only enrolled for two or three days. Using Average Daily Enrollment eliminates all these problems and should be used for each of the three rates recommended here – the excused absence rate (EAR), the unexcused absence rate (UAR) and the habitually truancy rate (HTR).

The numerator for each rate would be different. For the Excused and Unexcused Absence Rate, the numerator should be the total number of days of excused absences and unexcused absences respectively. At the high school level, any periods skipped should count as absent for that day. The formula would be:

EAR = <u>Total Days of Excused Absences</u>
           Average Daily Enrollment

UAR = <u>Total Days of Unexcused Absences</u>
           Average Daily Enrollment

Using each of these rates gives good information about the nature of absences that cannot be derived from an attendance rate. Excused absences are different in nature from unexcused absences. Yet, excessive excused absences are also problematic and indicate that the school may want to work with the family to develop a specialized education plan.

For the Habitual Truancy Rate the numerator should be the total number of students who meet the state statute defining habitually truant. For example, in Colorado "a child who is "habitually truant" means a child who has attained the age of seven years and is under the age of seventeen years having four unexcused absences from public school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from public school during any school year" (C.R.S. 22-33-107. Enforcement of compulsory school attendance).

In the following example, the numerator is based on the number of absences within the school year and within a certain time period (one month). Additionally, the compulsory age laws must be considered. The resulting formula is:

HRT = <u>Number of Students who Meet the State Statute for Habitually Truant</u>
                      Average Daily Enrollment

Using this formula, an annual truancy rate can be calculated at the school district level. All school district rates and raw numbers should be reported to the state education agency so they can use the raw numbers to calculate a state EAR, UAR and HRT.

Improving students' attendance throughout their school experience will increase the number who successfully graduate. In a recent Education Week online chat, Robert Balfanz said, "*Students who do not graduate commonly have poor attendance records-my rule of thumb is that students who attend 90% of the time or more graduate 80% of the time or more*." Knowing the truancy rate will give us an early indicator of the risk of dropout. Without this valuable information, we cannot fully understand the challenges schools face in trying to educate their students, or the solutions that are needed.

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The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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