Pieces of the Truancy Jigsaw: A Literature Review

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Promoting attendance, attachment and achievement

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Communities across the nation are taking a renewed interest in the problem of poor school attendance. Truancy reduction programs designed to serve students who have attendance problems are rapidly being organized according to a number of models. Some are school-based, others court-based, and some operate through community service agencies. All share the same general purposes: to improve school attendance in the short term, with the longer term goals of raising grades and encouraging high school graduation for students who are at risk of dropping out.

As the search intensifies for ways to nip truancy in the bud and reverse established patterns of school skipping, more people are seeking sources of information about the causes and outcomes of poor attendance, and about practices that effectively reduce truancy. In general, the literature surrounding truancy is in its infancy. Researchers are just beginning to add studies on school attendance to the vast quantity of work on at-risk and delinquent youth. This document seeks to summarize what we know to date, and point to areas in need of further study.

How Extensive is the Truancy Problem?

The scope of the truancy problem is difficult to measure, and data are extremely limited. The first obstacle to data reporting and consistency occurs at the classroom level. The accuracy of school attendance records depends upon the accuracy of attendance taking. The second difficulty is at the level of school district practice and policy. Many schools and school districts record absences as excused unless proven otherwise. Attendance secretaries may be unable to distinguish between legitimate and fraudulent excuses, and as a result, the number of reported unexcused absences is

difficult to establish with any certainty. The third and perhaps greatest obstacle is the lack of consistent data reporting requirements at the state level. Since both compulsory education rules and the definition of truancy are set according to state law, calculating the number of truants across multiple states is like adding apples and oranges. Some states require children to start school at age five, while others do not mandate attendance until age eight. Students must attend school until they are 16 in most states, but a number have increased the age to 17 or 18. Theoretically, data can be summarized across schools within each state, yet, averaging truancy rates across rural and urban districts, or high and low income districts, may obscure important patterns.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires, for the first time, that school districts submit attendance data to their state government if they are to receive federal money for education. Although the NCLB data reporting measure is a positive move, in and of itself it is insufficient to produce a global picture of truancy. For one thing, there is no requirement that states turn those data over to any federal agency. Secondly, states are allowed to define their own formulas for calculating truancy rates, so the rates that schools report will still not be comparable across states. At the time of this writing, not all states have determined the required formulas. Of concern is the possibility that requiring attendance data will create an incentive for some schools to push out students who have attendance problems, rather than try to re-engage them and risk continued absences. A student who has withdrawn cannot be absent.

Although we do not have data on the incidence of truancy, we do have data on the number of truancy-related court filings. According to juvenile court statistics gathered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the number of petitioned truancy cases increased 92% from just over 20,000 in 1987 to almost 40,000 in 1996 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). The same data show the rate of truancy petitions per

1,000 young people aged ten or older increased 97% among black students, 70% among white students, and 11% for students of other races. It is not clear to what extent these trends reflect an increase in the incidence of truancy versus an increase in the propensity of schools to send truants to court. However, a national review of discipline issues in schools conducted in 1996-1997 found that school principals perceived student absenteeism and tardiness to be the two most serious problems in their schools (Fiore et al., 1997).

One example of the prevalence of truancy in our major cities may be derived from a study using Denver Public Schools data from school years 2002/03 to 2004/05. Average unexcused absences per year ranged from just under six for elementary school students, to over eight for middle school students, and to around 17 for high school students. Almost 20% of all DPS students missed at least ten days without a valid excuse, causing them to meet the legal definition of 'truant' in Colorado[1]. Truancy peaked during 9th grade, then tapered off, presumably as the most truant students reached the mandatory attendance age of 16 and dropped out (MacGillivary & Mann-Erickson, 2006).

Though we still cannot see the extent of the truancy forest, we are beginning to understand the life cycle of the trees within that forest. This article summarizes the growing body of research on the causes of truancy, and then on its outcomes or correlates. Lastly, it will review the lessons we have learned based on research to date.

What Factors put Children at Risk for Truancy?

An overwhelming proportion of truant youth face major problems in their lives that challenge their ability to attend school. Contributors to truancy are often divided into

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[1] Section 22-33-107, Colorado Revised Statutes.

school, family, and personal factors (Bell et al., 1994, Corville-Smith et al., 1998).

Family factors include homelessness (Twaite & Lampert, 1997), poverty, single-parent families, large family size, and transportation difficulties (Jones et al., 2002). Other family factors such as elevated levels of family conflict, and ineffective parental disciplinary practices including inconsistency, both extremes of over-protectiveness and neglect, and rejection also play a role (Bell et al., 1994, Corville-Smith et al., 1998). McNeal (1999) finds that, although all forms of parental involvement result in lower rates of truancy, the beneficial effects of parental involvement are greater among families with higher levels of socio-economic status.

School factors include poor relations with teachers (Corville-Smith et al., 1998), inappropriate academic placement (Jones et al., 2002), and ineffective and inconsistently applied attendance policies (Bell et al., 1994). Pellerin (2000) explores the effect of advanced placement (AP) classes. She finds that high schools in which students are partitioned into AP and non-AP groups promote what she calls disengagement, which she measures by levels of class-cutting. Her results have not been replicated, however. An ethnographic study conducted in a large, multi-ethnic urban high school uses three theories of organizational culture, described as lenses of integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. Using these approaches, she dissects attendance policies and the confusion surrounding them. She paints a complex picture of how jointly held, but conflicting visions of school identity result in inconsistent application of attendance policies. The inconsistency is noticed by students, causing confusion on one hand and a perception of unfairness on the other (Enomoto, 1994).

Personal factors include poor self-esteem, feelings of academic incompetence, poor relationships with other students (Corville-Smith et al., 1998), and gang involvement (Fritsch et al., 1999). Truants generally report less attachment to school,

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and less satisfactory experiences at school, than non-truants. School commitment is sometimes viewed as an intervening variable (Jenkins, 1995) that can mediate the effects of some family variables, such as mother's education and parental involvement, but not others, such as large family size and living in a single parent family. The literature generally differentiates school refusal, which is based on a diagnosed school phobia, from other causes of truancy (King & Bernstein, 2001), offers an extensive literature review); however, from a school's point of view, the outcomes are one and the same.

Data on 634 students served by seven Truancy Reduction Demonstration Programs funded by the OJJDP reveal the depth of the challenges faced by truant youth. Eighty-seven percent qualified for free or reduced lunch, 19% had individual education plans, indicating a need for special education of some kind, 15% had school discipline problems at program intake, and 13% had juvenile justice involvement at program intake – a high proportion considering 70% of the students were not yet in high school. Thirty-six percent lived with only one adult in the home, and 20% lived with no working adult in the home (Finlay, 2006).

The most serious home problems often result in interventions by protective services. Records of over 17,000 New York City children in foster care reveal dismal school attendance rates – only 76.2% before being placed out of the home, and 77.7% afterward (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). A study of Colorado truants with persistent attendance problems included an analysis of juvenile justice records, which were available for 29 of the 30 study participants. The records showed that twelve of the 29 youth (41%) had been removed from their homes at some point by the child welfare agency. Out-of-home stays ranged from 19 days to over three years, with an average of almost one year each (Heilbrunn, 2004).

The juvenile magistrate who ruled on truancy cases in Denver took an unofficial tally of the major issues he found to exist among the truants whom he saw in court on one day early in 2003. Of the 40 truants, only three revealed no readily discernable underlying problem. A wide range of issues surfaced among the 37 remaining students including child neglect, abandonment, mental and physical health concerns including substance abuse among both parents and students, and 18 prior referrals to health and human services (Heilbrunn, 2004).

Mental and physical health problems, poverty, and family dysfunction can contribute to truancy, as can negative aspects of a student's school experience, such as bullying or feelings of academic failure. Personal academic motivation may help a child overcome some of these challenges, but given the seriousness of some of the issues faced by chronic truants, many need significant support to get them back on track.

Outcomes and Correlates of Truancy

Truancy has been clearly shown to be related to high school dropout, substance use and abuse, and delinquency. The relationships are circular, rather than linear. That is, truancy can be both a cause and a consequence of any of these troubling behaviors.

Connections to High School Dropout

The link between truancy and dropout has been demonstrated by a number of studies that show that dropouts may begin having attendance problems as early as 1st grade (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), or 4th to 8th grade (Morris et al., 1991). Students who skip significant numbers of classes often fail to earn credit for those classes, either because they also neglect homework and fail tests, or because of mandatory attendance requirements set by the schools. Students who have experienced school retentions and are overage for grade as a result, are at greater risk of high school dropout, even when the

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retentions occur in the early grades (Abrams & Haney, 2004; Herzenhorn, 2004; Roderick, 1995). When they occur in high school, the chances of giving up on a degree are even greater. Baker et al. (2001) provide a more thorough review of a larger number of retention studies, a task beyond the scope of this article. Data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey show that attendance and other behavioral engagement measures have an effect not only on high school graduation, but, for those who do graduate, on college enrollment and graduation as well (Finn, 2006).

Several studies document the failure of truants to earn credits and progress on schedule. A study of the class of 2000 in Philadelphia shows that time enrolled in school does not necessarily equate to educational accomplishment. Researchers found that most Philadelphia dropouts spent several years registered in their high schools, but earned very few credits during those years (Neild & Farley, 2004). A recent analysis conducted in Denver Public Schools shows that high school graduates in the class of 2004 missed an average of 14 days over the school year, while those who dropped out in that year missed 53 days. Over 25% of the original freshman class had fallen behind by at least one year, and affected students reported that poor attendance had been a contributing factor. Graduates averaged a 2.86 GPA (B-), compared with 1.0 GPA (D) for dropouts (Hubbard, 2005).

Several studies analyze the motivational factors that keep young people in school or cause them to drop out. Hardre and Reeve (2003) find that a combination of three factors successfully predicted 27% of the variation in attitudes toward dropping out. One of those factors alone – school performance – predicts 17% of the variation in dropout intentions. School performance, as measured by standardized achievement tests, is heavily impacted by attendance (Caldas, 1993; Lamdin, 2001). Data from the National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect show that students with 95% attendance

were more than twice as likely to pass standardized achievement tests as students who attended only 85% of the time (Kelly et al., 2005). Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison (2006) surveyed young people who left high school without graduating and find that, depending on the grade level in which they dropped out, between 33% and 45% say they missed class often during the year before they dropped out, and between 59% and 65% say they missed class frequently during the year in which they dropped out. Truancy, therefore, is a clear warning that a child may drop out.

The NCLB has had a profound influence on schools' incentive structure. NCLB requires that states set academic improvement goals based on standardized test scores and graduation rates, with the goal of 100% test proficiency and 100% high school graduation by the year 2014. However, test score accountability has been enforced much more strictly than graduation rate accountability. School administrators are keenly aware that a school is better off if low-performing students drop out (including most severely truant students) than if they take standardized tests and reduce the school's chances of earning Annual Yearly Progress (Losen, 2004). A review of the records of New York City Public Schools found that over 160,000 students were "discharged" between 1997 and 2001; the figure represents the number of students who were dropped from the rolls by the schools, not necessarily those who dropped out voluntarily. Although attendance records of the discharged students were not included in the report, students with poor grades, learning disabilities, and English language learner status were over-represented in the group. The author hypothesizes that many of these students were forcibly dropped as part of an effort by schools to avoid being identified as low-performing (Gotbaum, 2002). Long before the enactment of NCLB, research documented how strict and unevenly applied high school disciplinary procedures target disruptive and truant students and create an

environment that encourages dropout rather than high school completion (Bowditch, 1993).

Although the incidence of unexcused absence is are hard to pin down, we have a better idea of what high school dropout and graduation rates actually look like, and they are nowhere near what schools generally release to the media or post on their websites. When students stop attending, high schools generally assume they have transferred rather than dropped out. Dropout rates are counted only in terms of the number of students who take the time to fill out the drop forms. Graduation rates are based on the unverified assumption that many dropouts have moved elsewhere and their numbers are removed from the denominator as well as the numerator of the equation. Another common practice is to divide the number of graduates in June by the number of entering seniors in the previous September – so any student who dropped out before beginning his or her senior year is not counted. However, data show that most dropping out occurs long before students earn enough credits to be considered seniors. A number of recent studies seek to calculate more accurate graduation rates by focusing on larger geographic areas and taking city or statewide demographic changes into account. These studies, while differing slightly in their estimates, show general agreement in concluding that roughly 1/3 of our children are not graduating with a regular diploma four years after they enter high school (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2005; Greene, 2002; Greene & Winters, 2005).

Connections to High School Expulsion

A study of students expelled from Colorado schools found that nearly half of the youth had been chronically truant in the year prior to the expulsion, and 20% of the sample had been expelled for truancy (Seeley, K. & Shockley, H., 1995). (The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) advocates *never* suspending or expelling a child for truancy.) A 1998 survey of all Colorado school districts indicates that most teachers

and school administrators believe they can identify students who will eventually develop chronic truancy problems as early as second or third grade and further believe these same students are often those who later become disengaged with school and eventually drop out or are expelled.

Connections to Substance Use

Although most work focuses on the relationship between substance use and school problems generally,[2] a number of studies have looked specifically at truancy. Data from the Rochester Youth Study show a clear, linear relationship between truancy and the initiation of marijuana use. Among 14-year-olds, students who report skipping occasional classes are four times as likely to initiate marijuana use as students who reported never skipping class. Those who reported skipping between one and three days are seven times as likely, and those who reported missing four to nine days were 12 times as likely to initiate marijuana use. Chronic truants, defined as those who report missing ten or more days in a school year, are 16 times more likely to initiate use as non-skippers (Henry & Huizinga, 2005).

The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (Rainone et al.1993) conclud that serious truants are prone to substance abuse at much higher rates than non-truants, and that about 24% of serious truants need alcohol or drug treatment, while only 10% of moderate truants and 3% of non-truants need such treatment. Evidence from a Massachusetts study shows that truancy is also predictive of blunt[3] use (Soldz et al., 2003). And data from *Monitoring the Future*, collected in schools, show that even among high school seniors, those who admitt to truancy have higher rates of marijuana use than those who are not truant (Bachman et al., 1998). A

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[2] Perhaps the best, most recent work is drawn from the Adolescent Health Survey. Blum, Beuhring and Rinehart (2000) found that frequent problems with school work are predictive of both cigarette and alcohol use.

[3] Blunts are hollowed out cigars stuffed with marijuana.

study conducted among 10th and 12th graders at one urban Michigan high school shows that truancy is a consistent predictor of high levels of cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use, as well as binge drinking. However, it does not predict changes in substance use between 10th and 12th grade, leading the authors to conclude that young truants develop patterns of substance use early and tend not to change those patterns greatly (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2002). A meta-analysis of data from 28 communities shows that truancy, along with low-GPA and recent sexual activity, is a strong predictor of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use for 7th to 12th graders, but that truancy is a particularly strong predictor for the middle school students (Hallfors et al., 2002).

Connections to Juvenile Delinquency

The correlation between school failure and delinquency is well established (Balfanz et al., 2003; Gottfredson & Hirshi, 1990; Hawkins & Lishner, 1987; Smith, 2000; Wang et al., 2005). In Hirshi's (1969) landmark book, *Causes of Delinquency*, he proposed that a lack of school bonding releases students from their connection to conventional society and thereby leads to delinquent behavior. Since that time, many researchers continue to establish this link (Empey, 1982; Farrington, 1996; Thornberry, 1996).

Truancy as a specific type of school problem clearly relates to delinquency. Farrington (1996) finds that of the 400 youth in their Cambridge, England study, 48% of truants were convicted of delinquency, while only 14% of non-truants were convicted. Researchers conducting the OJJDP study entitled "Causes and Correlates of Juvenile Delinquency" identify three pathways to boys' problem behavior and delinquency. Truancy is an early, and key, step in what they call the "authority avoidance pathway"

(Huizinga et al., 1994)[4]. Data from the Rochester Youth Study, one of the three studies

contributing to the "Causes and Correlates" work, show a startling relationship between

self reports of truancy and delinquency. Students who report skipping occasional classes

are four times as likely as non-skippers to report having committed a serious assault,

almost five times as likely to report having committed a serious property crime, and twice

as likely to have been arrested. Chronic truants are 12 times as likely to report having

committed a serious assault, 21 times as likely to report having committed a serious

property crime, and almost seven times as likely to have been arrested as non-skippers

(Henry & Huizinga, 2005).

Truant youth contribute significantly to the incidence of daytime crime. Data

from the National Incidence Reporting System indicate that the number of crimes

committed by school age youth in Denver during school hours exceed those committed

after school (MacGillivary & Mann-Erickson, 2006). When truancy is addressed, crime

and delinquency rates drop. A drop in the crime rate occurred when police conducted

truancy sweeps in Miami (Berger & Wind, 2000) and St. Petersburg, Florida, (Gavin,

1997), and when Tulsa County Schools successfully reduced truancy through a new

policy of filing court cases (Wilson, 1993). The Dallas Police Department successfully

reduced gang-related crime by aggressively pursuing truant youth (Fritsch et al., 1999).

Connections to Other Risky Behaviors

Young people who skip school also engage in a number of risky behaviors.

Adolescent Health Survey data show school problems, including truancy, to be related to

weapon related violence, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and early sexual intercourse.

The effects hold for the population in general, and for almost every combination of ethnic

group and risk factor (Blum et al., 2000). Data from the "Monitoring the Future" study

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[4] Study participants present the specific correlations between school problems and delinquency in other publications. See Huizinga & Jakob-Chien, 1998, and Huizinga et al, 2000.

show that truancy is predictive of drinking, driving after drinking, and riding in a car with someone who has been drinking (O'Malley & Johnston, 1999). In an anonymous survey of 25 Colorado truants, 12 report having carried a gun or other weapon at least once. Even if the weapons were intended for defensive purposes only, the figure is indicative of a high potential for violence in these young people's lives (Heilbrunn, 2004).

Connections to Adult Crime

Though data on the relationship between truancy and adult criminal behavior are limited, chronic truancy clearly leads to high school dropout and dropouts are greatly over-represented among prison and jail inmates. Bureau of Justice data from 1997 (Harlow, 2003) show that while 18.4% of the general population had neither a high school degree nor a GED, fully 41.3% of the incarcerated population did not have a degree. By 2002, the proportion of jail inmates without a high school degree rose to 44% (James, 2004).

Heckman and Masterov (2005) conclude that "one of the best-established empirical regularities in economics is that education reduces crime." A three-state recidivism study (Steurer & Smith, 2003) compared recidivism rates between jail inmates who completed educational programs while incarcerated and those who did not complete an educational program. The study shows that in all three states—Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio—rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration rates are all significantly lower for those completing a program. Alternatively, Lochner and Moretti (2004) estimate that increasing the high school graduation rate by one percent would yield $1.8 billion dollars in social benefits, largely a result of preventing an estimated 94,000 crimes each year. A moving and in-depth study of death row inmates reveals that truancy beginning in elementary school, and a continued pattern of failure throughout school, are typical of our most tragic criminals (Schroeder et al., 2004).

Official Responses to Truancy

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (JJDPA) instituted several regulations designed to reduce the number of juveniles, particularly status offenders, sentenced to detention, and to protect all detained juveniles from exposure to adult criminals. Following the passage of the Act, the number of truants sentenced to detention fell dramatically (Juvenile Offenders and Victims, 1999). However, the Act still allows for juveniles to be detained for failure to obey a court order. That means that a judge may write a truant a court order to attend school, and a child who does not obey that order may then be sentenced to juvenile detention without technically violating the JJDPA.

Despite the intent of the JJDPA, many judicial districts send young people to detention for failure to attend school. The practice is common enough to warrant serious reflection. Data from the *Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook* show that 784 juveniles were being held in a residential facility for truancy on the last Wednesday in October 2001. (Notably, that figure was lower compared to previous years. In 1997, 1,307 juveniles were in custody for truancy on count day, and in 1999, 913 were in custody on count day.) Multiplying the 2001 count of 784 jailed truants by 365 days in a year yields an estimate of 286,160 total days spent annually in juvenile detention for reason of truancy (Sickmund et al., 2004).

Some status offenders spend considerable amounts of time in detention. Thirty-six percent (36%) of committed status offenders had been in placement for at least 180 days on the day of the 1997 survey, and about 15% had been in placement for 360 days. That is longer than youth sentenced for property offenses, although not as long as those placed for person offenses (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999).

Lessons Learned

Lessons from Schools that Sought to Recapture Lost Revenue

In some cases, schools and districts have been able to recover significant amounts of funding by actively pursuing truant students. In response to a $20 million deficit, Oakland Unified School District in 2003 decided to begin prosecuting parents. The effort was specifically designed to regain up to $19 million in per pupil funding (White & Fiss, 2003). In Tulsa, Oklahoma, county officials created a system in which parents are held legally responsible for truancy on one hand, but are provided with parenting support on the other. They credit the program with increasing school enrollment by 800 students a year and regaining $300,000 in per capita funding (Gerrard et al., 2003). The Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas added $4 million in state money to their 2004-2005 budget after raising their average daily attendance by 1% the year before (Murphy, 2005).

Lessons from Truancy Reduction Program Evaluations

Several excellent sources of information about best practices are readily available. Reimer and Dimock (2005) assemble a detailed description of effective programs, policies, and practices to reduce truancy, available through the National Dropout Prevention Center. Additionally, two Web-based databases are good public sources of information on a wide range of TRPs. The NCSE maintains a growing online database of truancy reduction programs at www.schoolengagement.org. At this writing, over 130 program directors have entered information about their approaches to truancy reduction and their accomplishments. The National Dropout Prevention Center maintains a similar database that includes programs with a range of goals. Searching the database for "truancy" currently yields 60 programs.

Programs that show improvements in school attendance tend to involve intensive case management, be family focused, and incorporate both sanctions for continued truancy, and rewards for improved attendance. Project Respect in Pueblo, Colorado involves entire families in fun activities that require school attendance for participation (Baker et al., 2005). The Louisville, Kentucky truancy court meets in elementary and middle schools before the school day starts and involves "pep talks" and applause for the accomplishments of each student (Byer, 2000). Jacksonville, Florida provides a continuum of interventions, beginning with one-day Attendance Intervention Team Meetings, followed by intensive case management, and eventually results in a possibility of a one-day parental arrest for educational neglect (Finlay, 2006).

True cost/benefit studies of a broad range of truancy reduction programs have not been conducted. However, one study analyzed the costs of three Colorado truancy reduction programs (TRPs), and the three truancy courts which participants must attend if they fail these programs (Heilbrunn, 2003). The study asks how many students a program must help through graduation in order to recoup its cost. It concludes that the most expensive of the three TRPs must only result in high school graduation for one out of 115 participants in order to pay for itself. The less expensive programs need to graduate one of about 350 participants. The smallest of the three court programs must encourage one of 115 petitioned truants to graduate, while the Denver truancy court must motivate only one of 739 truants to graduate in order to be financially worthwhile. These dramatic figures suggest that any program that is demonstrably successful in returning truant students to the classroom is likely to be highly cost-effective as well.

Many, but not all, truancy reduction programs show improved attendance subsequent to intervention. A study of a police-run truancy sweep in which truants were taken to a truancy center and required to sit still and be quiet, with heads on desks, for up

to six hours before being released to parents or the school, showed little positive effects on subsequent school attendance or delinquency (Bazemore et al., 2004). The lesson from this study might be that one-time interventions that involve punishments, but no supports, are not sufficient to correct any of the underlying problems that initially prompt the truancy.

Lessons from Youth with AttendancePproblems – Students' Voices

Fires in the Bathroom (Cushman, 2003) reports students' experiences in high schools, and their advice for teachers. It is the product of extensive focus groups with students from a variety of backgrounds. A chapter is dedicated to what happens when things go wrong, the first section of which deals with truancy and dropping out. The students have a number of poignant comments about skipping school. One student sums up the affect of being overwhelmed by a huge, new school. "When I was first starting ninth grade I felt so alone. I used to cut every day, leave classes early, come in late, just to avoid being there…. Some people like just being a face in the crowd, but it made me feel like nothing." (p. 162) The students report that truancy becomes a pattern that is harder and harder to break the longer it goes on, even after cutting classes loses its appeal.

> When you skip school it's like an addiction, you skip it so much that you're like: What's the point of going, even if you want to be in the school. After a while it's not fun anymore, you're sitting there watching TV – all the stuff that was fun when you're first skipping gets a little boring. And you're like: I shoulda been in school, it would be more fun. There's this block that keeps you from going. A kid knows their life is going down the drain. But if you don't like your school, and then you skip so much that you're embarrassed to go back, then you just don't go. I used to cut and smoke, and drink, and read. I think I was depressed. (p. 166-167)

Attempts to return to class often result in sarcasm from teachers, which, not surprisingly, sends students fleeing once again. One student said that "after three straight days [of cutting] I went back and the teacher said in a sarcastic way, 'Why are you here? I'm glad

you've graced us with your presence.' And that was it, I'm like: [forget] you. I just left and didn't go back" (p. 166).

Interviews conducted among 467 high school dropouts reveal that almost all of them wish they had not dropped out. Having "missed too many days to catch up" is the second most common reason cited for dropping out, and is cited by 43% of the interviewees. Seventy percent of the participants report that having increased supervision in school to ensure that students attend their classes would improve students' chances of staying in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Once schools have exhausted their interventions, court is generally the last resort. Although judges make use of a wide range of sentencing options (Heilbrunn, 2006), little solid research has been conducted on the comparative effects of various choices. Most hotly contested is the use of juvenile detention for truants. The small, Colorado study discussed earlier asked 30 students who had spent some time in detention, whether, in retrospect, they thought they had benefited from the experience. Their assessments were fairly evenly divided, however, those who said they benefited from detention had spent considerably fewer days there than those who said they did not benefit. This may indicate that if detention is going to have a positive effect, it will do so quickly, and repeated and long sentences may be futile, or even counterproductive (Heilbrunn, 2003).

Conclusion

In general, the causes and outcomes of truancy are much more thoroughly researched than the effectiveness of various interventions. It is clear that truancy is an outgrowth of other underlying problems. Factors that contribute to truancy include family issues arising out of substance use, mental health needs, or poverty that causes parents to work long hours or requires inadequate living conditions. School factors

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including whether a child feels like someone at school cares, strict policies that may have the unintended consequence of pushing students out of the classroom, and inappropriate class placements may contribute to making a child feel like he or she does not fit in to the school community. Layered on top of family and school experiences, are personal factors such as academic ability, placing a value on education, and motivation. Some truants have physical and mental health needs that make school attendance difficult.

Although truancy often results from deep-seated problems in a child's life, it creates additional problems in its wake. Although some young people miss school to care for younger siblings or to work, truancy frequently leaves young people with plenty of time to get into trouble. The frequency of risky behavior, including alcohol, tobacco and drug use, early sexual intercourse, driving or riding with a driver under the influence, and criminal activity increase with the frequency of truancy. Truants tend to do poorly in school, and fail to earn high school credits and progress toward graduation. A large proportion become discouraged and drop out altogether. Failing to earn a high school diploma is devastating for the individuals, but the negative effects of inadequate education seep throughout society. Dropouts are rarely prepared to contribute to the workforce, use more social service dollars than graduates, and require greater criminal justice expenditures than graduates.

It is in every community's interest to correct truancy before it becomes such a serious problem that it threatens high school graduation. Schools, school districts, courts, and community coalitions across the country operate a wide variety of programs to improve the attendance and achievement of struggling students. Although rigorous evaluations are few, many such programs show great promise. Truancy can be corrected, particularly among the youngest students, and among students whose attendance is addressed promptly. Punishments alone are not adequate to bring students back to the

classroom because they do not correct the causal problems. Combinations of supports,

sanctions and rewards reduce truancy, and pay off for individual students and for society.

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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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