Stop Truancy Before it Starts:
Getting every kid to school, everyday

A Truancy Prevention & Early Intervention Policy Brief
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Authors: Brittany Roulette, BSW, MSW Candidate; Hannah Twedt, BSW, MSW Candidate; Paula Skala, BSW, LSW, MSW Candidate
Department of Social Work, Minnesota State University, Mankato

Executive Summary

Attending school consistently builds a foundation for academic achievement and social success in the future. Students missing an excessive number of school days throughout childhood for any reason experience increasingly negative outcomes as they grow older. When truancy leads to dropping out of school, this costs individuals money in lost wages associated with reduced education levels. Truancy also costs society as a whole in reduced tax collection, increased crime, and increased need for public services.

Research demonstrates that minority students and youth with other risk factors are more likely to experience school disengagement leading to truancy.

Punitive school policies such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion can also lead to a snowball effect of getting behind on schoolwork and missing more school.

Several highly effective evidence-based truancy intervention models are outlined in this brief. Early identification and intervention becomes a crucial strategy for effectively reducing absenteeism that in turn increases graduation rates. The State of Minnesota can reduce truancy rates and improve long-term outcomes for students by adopting an array of strategies, including increasing the number of school social workers and other support personnel, funding mental health services in schools, developing state-wide tracking of attendance, and state mandated early truancy intervention.

Truancy is caused by many different factors including mental health, physical health, poverty, suspensions, homelessness, unreliable transportation, dysfunctional family functioning, unhealthy housing, trauma, substance abuse, and embarrassment at being behind.

High numbers of school absences for any reason correlate with disengagement from school, reduced learning, lower grades, decreased graduation rates, and an increased chance of dropping out. Truant youth are found to be more likely to struggle with ADHD, have a mental health diagnosis, or have been exposed to trauma or chronic stress, at greater risk for poor health, and lower lifetime earnings.

The consequences of truancy remain far-reaching for youth who become disconnected from school and for the entire community. Excessive school absenteeism and truancy is correlated with high unemployment, underemployment, and an increase in reliance on public assistance. The average high school dropout costs society more than $800,000 over the course of their lifetime. Truant youth remain much more likely to engage in other delinquent behavior and to enter the juvenile justice system and prison.

In 2015, Minnesota ranked 43 out of 50 states in graduation rates of lower income high school students graduating on time. The current graduation rate of students in Minnesota is 82%, this ranks the state as 32 out of 50 states.

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Interventions Demonstrated to Work

The following intervention programs attend to the factors that lead to truancy early on in a child’s life. By using these, or similar early intervention techniques, students, families, and communities can reap the short and long-term benefits from reducing the number of truant students.

The Ramsey County Truancy Intervention Project (TIP)
- Reduced number of students missing 15 days of school or more for any reason by 50%.
- Raised graduation rates by over 50%, over a period of ten years.
- Connects students and families with services to deal with root issues of chronic truancy.
- Based on early intervention and early identification of absenteeism.
- Based on a three-level intervention strategy.
- Becomes increasingly intrusive if attendance does not improve.
- Allows for flexibility in taking families individual situation into consideration.
- Parents often required to communicate with schools to monitor the child’s attendance.
- Requires each child to attend summer school.
- Includes an interdisciplinary coalition of county attorneys, social workers, teachers, education assistants, school administrators, service providers, and probation officers.
- Students and their families are connected with support services to help deal with risk factors associated with habitual truancy.

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports
- Utilized in over 18,000 United States schools.
- Focuses on teaching social skills and positive behavioral intervention early in the school year.
- Teaches positive behaviors to all students.
- Goal includes reducing problem behaviors in the entire student body.
- Reduces the use of exclusionary discipline, by improving the overall school climate.
- Utilizes a 3-tiered approach, begins with prevention, through rewards and consequences.
- Allows for increasingly individualized instruction for at-risk students.

Restorative Practices
- Four Chicago High Schools experienced increased attendance and up to an 80% reduction in misconduct and arrests after two years of beginning restorative programming.
- Student-focused approach that focuses on individual accountability.
- Utilized after a student has been responsible for disruptive or unsafe behaviors at school.
- Focuses on repairing harm to any victims and the school and the community as a whole.
- Approach found to be particularly effective for African-American students.
- Collaborative approach between students that can include peace circles, student juries, peer mediation, peer conflict resolution and other initiatives.

“Keeping kids connected to learning is not solely a school problem; families, communities, and any adults who touch children’s lives should also be part of the solution. If children are hanging out near businesses during school hours, adults should ask them why they aren’t in school. Neighbors need to notice when children are home too often. Schools and families should use online portals to keep on top of student attendance. Caring adults must surround kids with this message: School attendance matters. Showing up in class and being engaged in learning every day are keys to future success.”

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Attending school builds a foundation for academic achievement and social success in the future. School absenteeism can progress to truancy, which has been demonstrated to be a major stepping stone to dropping out of the education system entirely.

- Support state policies to mandate implementation of early intervention to address truancy.
- Develop a statewide program to keep track of attendance and truancy for students who move out of county and/or school district.
- Increase funding for Mental Health services in schools.
  - SF 0768: School-linked mental health services funding increase; school staff and program development; intermediate school districts program evaluation and alternative learning centers (ALC) additional supports; appropriations.
  - HF 1255: School-linked mental health services appropriations increased, school staff and program development provided, intermediate school district program evaluation required, and additional supports for students attending alternative learning centers provided.
- Increase school staff and establish an educational foundation across Minnesota schools.
  - SF 0189: General education disparity aid creation for school districts with low general education revenue and low property wealth per pupil and appropriation.
  - SF 0181: State aid new source created for school districts with low general education revenue per pupil and low property wealth per pupil, and money appropriated.
- Increase the number of school social workers in our schools.
  - HF 0967: Voluntary school social worker aid program funding provided, and money appropriated.
  - SF 0535: School social worker aid program appropriation.

All bills were introduced during the 2017 Minnesota legislative session.

References

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