Truancy

Community-based Positive Behavior Strategies for Keeping Adolescents in School

What is Truancy?

Truancy is defined as an pattern of un-excused absences from school.

Keeping Trevor in school

Trevor is one of a growing number of adolescents who has lost interest in school. At 12, he began making excuses like "I don't do well in school, so why bother?" and "School's a waste of my time." In time, these passive excuses became filled with anger and more frequent. Now, Trevor's mother is over-whelmed with her son's behavior. How can she work with the school, the community, and Trevor to keep his attendance up?

Why is attendance so important?

Research shows that students who are chronically truant ore more likely to drop out of school , become a gang member, and be unemployed later in life. (Bimler & Kirkland,2001 and Reid, K.,2000)

Of those who are employed, high school drop outs earn significantly less than their diploma holding peers. By attending school each day, students are sheltered from the dangerous neighborhoods they may live in. So why do students chose to skip school? First, they may be avoiding a potentially dangerous or difficult situa-tion. Perhaps they are struggling with their schoolwork, and in turn overwhelmed with the academic demands of school. Or perhaps they are skipping school to send out a signal that they are physiologically distressed. Every child who skips school needs encouragement from their parents, teachers, and community to get back on track.

Five Community-wide steps to reduce truancy

"In Pittsburgh, each day approximately 3,500 students or 12 percent of the pupil is absent and about 70 percent of these absences are unexcused." (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996). In order to combat this growing problem, its important to involve parents, the school, and the community. Each of theses players has an important role in deterring truancy.

While each community and student body is unique, the U.S. Department of Justice has determined that there are 5 distinct steps a community should take the reduce truancy:

1. Involve parents in all truancy prevention

2. Ensure that students face firm sanctions for truancy.

3. Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility

4. Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in school.

5. Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts.

(U.S. Department of Justice, 1996)

Communitywide Prevention

Numerous studies have found that high rates of truancy are linked to high daytime rates of burglary, vandalism, and other crimes (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001; Reid, K., 2000). While parents, administrators, and teachers are the first line of defense, students who are chronically truant may need a stronger intervention. In cities like Miami, Minneapolis, and San Diego, police sweeps have significantly increased school attendance amongst chronic truants.

One such community wide intervention was implemented in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Attendance was taken every period to ensure that students are present in each of their classes. For students who were not within the building, police sweeps took students to the local Boys and Girls Club for counseling, rather than to be processed at the police station. Finally, parents are called each night if their child did not attend school that day. By involving the school, parents, and law enforcement, Milwaukee Public Schools was able to eliminate about a third of the cases of burglary and aggravated battery in the city. (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001).

Parental Responsibility

In order to effectively combat truancy, the school, the community, and the family must play an active role in attendance.

The parent's role is particularly important. While the school and surrounding community can offer incentives and punishments to help curb unexcused absences, the student's parent or guardian should be there each morning to ensure that your child gets up each day prepared to learn.

If a child refuses to attend school, parents have the opportunity to work with teachers and administrators to help make it right. Parents have a unique opportunity to speak with their children about the importance of attending school each day.

"Every child who skips school needs encouragement from their parents, teachers, and community to get back on track."

The Teacher's Role in Preventing Truancy:

Research describes a variety of characteristics of teachers successful at deterring truancy:

- Teachers who are able to keep control of the classroom
- Teachers who have a sense of humor
- Teachers who foster warm, empathetic relationships
- Teachers who teach their subject well, with enthusiasm, and in a variety of interesting ways
- Teachers who are consistent and fair
- Teachers who offer their students a sense of choice and Freedom

Research subsequently indicates that there are 4 distinct teacher characteristics that students dislike:

- Teachers who are "stand-offish" or take their role too seriously
- Teachers who fail to show an interest in their students as individuals
- Teachers who are soft and/or inconsistent
- Teachers who are unfair, biased, or make unreasonable demands

"Adults who were frequently truant as teenagers are much more likely than those who were not to have poorer health and mental health, lower paying jobs, an increased chance of living in poverty, more reliance on welfare support, children who exhibit problem behaviors, and an increased likelihood of incarceration (Bell, Rosen, and Dynlacht, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Hawkins and Catalano, 1995; Ingersoll and LeBoeuf, 1997; Rohrman, 1993)."

(U.S. Department of Justice, 1996)

ANOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bimler, David & Kirkland, John. (2001). School Truants and Truancy Motivation
        Sorted out with Multidimensional Scaling, 16(1), 75-102.
        In this study, informants first ranked the applicability of 73 motives and causes for absence from
        school. After organizing the results into categories by similarity of motivation, 5 main clusters
        emerged. Of these clusters, two cover a previously recognized pattern of parent-condoned truancy,
        whereas the other three are related to recognized syndromes of adolescent delinquency. However,
        there may be considerable differences between these clusters in terms of developmental antece-
        dents, prognosis, and most effective form of intervention.

Kerr, M.M. & Nelson, C.M. (2006) Strategies for addressing behavior problems in
        the classroom, 5th Edition. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing
        Company
        This practical book provides an in-depth look at specific behaviors and the strategies employed for
        addressing each behavior. This revision places school-based interventions in the context of positive
        behavioral support, a view embraced by practitioners and supported by research. It continues to
        promote collaboration between other agencies and families, along with better coordination of treat-
        ment options to create effective services and intervention in education

Quinn, William H. (2004). Family solutions for youth at risk : applications to
        juvenile delinquency, truancy, and behavior problems. New York, N.Y.: Brunner-Routledge.
        Although this book has 10 chapters, none of which specifically focus on truancy, this piece offers a
        complete family and community based plan for at risk students. Quinn argues that the recourses
        currently available to help families change is limited. In general, this text tells the story of a multi-
        ple family group experience that is utilized to draw out resources (attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and
        affect) of individuals and families that can be shared among participants.

Reid, Ken. (2000). Tackling Truancy in Schools: A Practical Manual for Primary
        and Secondary. London, U.K.: RoutledgeFalmer.
        This piece breaks down the causes of, strategies for reducing, and outcomes of truancy. Most nota-
        bly, one chapter includes a 5-year plan to increase student attendance. To follow up, the final chap-
        ter includes an annual progress report of this plan, implemented in urban districts in the U.K.. This
        book is exceptionally helpful, as it is directed toward teachers and other professionals within the
        public school context and attacks all causes of truancy; from low-self esteem to delinquency to
        learning disabilities.

U.S. Department of Education in cooperation with the U.S. Department of
Justice. (1996). Manual to combat truancy. Washington, D.C.
In Pittsburgh, for example, each day approximately 3,500 students or 12 percent of the pupil population is absent and about 70 percent of these absences are unexcused. The communities that have had the most success in deterring truancy not only have focused on improving procedures, such as those that accurately track student attendance, but each also has implemented a comprehensive strategy that focuses on incentive s and sanctions for truants and their parents. The manual suggests five primary elements of a comprehensive community and educational strategy to combat truancy. First, involve parents in all truancy prevention activities. Next, ensure that students face firm sanctions for truancy. Third, Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility. Fourth, Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in school. Finally, Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts.

U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
(2001). Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School. Washington, D.C.
This newsletter-style article primarily addresses the correlation between truancy and juvenile crime. Like many other articles on this subject, the authors first break down the causes of truancy, followed by the symptoms and outcomes. Most importantly, the suggestions for implementing truancy prevention programs involve all the right players; from the school board to the community, from teachers to parents. Additionally, the findings of this project are posed in reader-friendly question format, answering tough questions such as "How does the threat of prosecution affect whether parents ensure that their children attend school?"

Whitney, Ben. (1994). The Truth About Truancy. London, U.K.: Routledge
While this study focuses on UK law regarding truancy, I feel that the suggestions offered are internationally relevant. The chapter titled "Whole- School Policies" is partiality useful. It breaks authorized and unauthorized absences into two courses of action involving the child and their parents. Suggestions include education supervision orders, similar to a behavioral plan specific to attendance, and prosecutions of the parents. Particularly for younger children, this article subscribes to the belief that the parents are primarily responsible for truancy.