New Ways to Address Truancy
By Stephanie Walton

Truancy is a risk factor for a host of problems, including substance abuse, youth violence and delinquency, and is an obvious precursor to dropping out of school. A Los Angeles County study found that truancy is the leading predictor of later delinquency. Truancy contributes to poor academic performance; one study of dropouts found that 80 percent had been chronically truant in the prior year. Truancy also negatively affects the larger community. Studies in California and Washington indicate that crimes committed by school-age juveniles typically occur during the school day. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that male dropouts earn less than 75 percent of their counterparts with high school degrees, while female dropouts earn slightly more than 60 percent of women with high school diplomas. The National Center for School Engagement estimates that the lifetime cost to society of a single high school dropout—based on direct public expenditures and lost tax revenue—is roughly $200,000.

Addressing truancy early can prevent more serious, negative behaviors in young people, save money and improve lives. Truants who successfully reengage in school will increase their lifetime earnings and will be less likely to engage in risky behaviors and crime. Unfortunately, the traditional response of many schools to truant students actually worsens the problem and can push youth toward dropping out. Some communities, however, are establishing successful programs that keep students engaged in school.

Responses to Truancy. Truancy is a status offense—it is illegal only if the person committing it is a minor. Some states specify the age range for which a student can be classified as truant. Colorado limits truancy charges to children under age 16, while officials in Connecticut can bring truancy charges until youth reach age 18. The traditional response to habitual truants has been suspension and expulsion, often coupled with referral to juvenile court or the child welfare system. Common sense suggests, and research shows, that it is counterproductive to punish students who will not attend school by forbidding them to attend. Such policies are more likely to cause students to drop out.

Successful Programs. Numerous studies suggest that successful youth programs share several core characteristics. To prevent youth violence, substance abuse and teen pregnancy, or to address truancy, the best programs provide a safe environment, connections with caring adults, and build on the strengths and assets of the kids in the programs. This approach—“positive youth development”—also encourages systems to work together

Characteristics of Successful Truancy Programs
• Parental involvement.
• A continuum of services, including truancy courts, tutoring and academic supports, in-school suspension programs, consequences and supports.
• Collaboration of law enforcement, mental health, mentoring and social services.
• School administrative support and commitment to keeping youths in the educational mainstream.
• Ongoing evaluation.
Truancy programs work with families and students to address the problem.

Truancy Intervention. A typical program alerts the parents after several unexcused absences and asks them to attend a meeting at the school or in a community truancy center with school officials, someone from the juvenile court and, frequently, a counselor. Elementary school truants may not be included in the meeting, but middle school and high school youth usually are. Officials try to determine why the child is not attending school, and work with the family to address the issues. Families frequently are referred to other community resources to help them address the causes of truant behavior. Family members generally are asked to sign an agreement that they will seek help and that the child will attend school. Students may be asked to complete a writing assignment or complete missed school assignments. If either the parents or the student fail to meet the terms of the agreement, they face increased sanctions or, ultimately, referral to the juvenile court.

Communities that have successful truancy intervention programs have reported a decrease in crime committed by juveniles during school days, decreased drug and alcohol use by young people, increased school attendance and fewer dropouts, decreases in truancy, and improved school performance.

State Action

State policymakers have an important role in supporting truancy reduction programs. They can use the characteristics of positive youth development to create criteria for funding and to assess program performance. They also can help facilitate and strengthen local partnerships by creating similar state-level partnerships. Legislators also can significantly influence program funding. Most of the programs described above depend on a combination of federal, state and local funds, although some programs also receive private funding.

A 1999 Louisiana bill (SB 1008) created a framework for successful truancy programs; subsequent legislation expanded the program to create 16 truancy centers around the state. These programs are proving to be cost-effective and are reducing truancy. In the 2003-2004 school year, 27 percent of students had no unexcused absences after referral to a Truancy Assessment and Service Center (TASC), and 68 percent had five or fewer unexcused absences. The average cost of a TASC intervention is $681.

Virginia legislation passed in 2003 (HB 1559) allows intake officers to defer filing a juvenile court complaint and work with the student to develop a truancy plan. The student and family have 90 days to comply with the plan, which includes an agreement to seek appropriate services. If they do not complete the plan, then the petition is filed with the court.

Maryland established a truancy reduction pilot program in 2005 that allows court officials to order truant youth to perform community service, attend counseling or substance abuse evaluation and treatment, or attend mental health evaluation and treatment.

Federal Action

Several federal government agencies provide funding that communities can use for truancy intervention. Common sources include grants through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Weed and Seed, and Safe and Drug Free Schools. Some programs have used Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds for truancy intervention. The No Child Left Behind Act also requires that school districts collect and track rates of truancy and encourages schools to work with other community agencies to enforce attendance laws.

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