

THE RISK OBSERVER

STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND “TRUANCY” OFFICERS

Truancy Today

There is no nationwide definition of the term, “truant.” Individual states define the term through law, commissioner’s regulations, and local school board policies. A student is required to attend as few as nine or as many as 13 years of school, depending on his or her state of residence. School attendance policies, administrative recordkeeping, parent/guardian communication, and coordination with law enforcement are all part of a cohesive attendance program. One area of common agreement is that reducing absence and tardiness is in the best interests of both the educators and the students.

Tracking Attendance and Parental Notification

Typically the responsibility for monitoring and enforcing student attendance and tardiness is delegated down through the school administration to the schools’ principals who are responsible for assuring that accurate attendance records are kept by teachers and/or administrative staff. Large school districts and those with frequent attendance issues may have a full time Attendance (or Truant) Officer. Attendance Officers spend most of their time communicating with the parent or guardian and maintaining documentation.

Many districts use an automated telephone message system to make parents aware that their children were not in attendance on a particular day - regardless of any pattern of absence. State laws and regulations frequently require the school to notify the parent or guardian in writing of its determination that the student is absent, and where authorized by law to warn the parent of the consequences for the student and the parent of failing to respond.

Regular reviews of individual school and district-wide student attendance records enable the school administration to identify trends in declining attendance and revise policies as needed. Communication of the school policy as well as the attendance trends and statistics help to reinforce the importance of student attendance with the community.

Coordination with Law Enforcement

In practice, Attendance Officers work with police, the courts, and other community agencies to investigate and pursue cases of truancy. Some states provide statutory authority for an



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Attendance Officer to arrest a truant, but it is not recommended that physical restraint be authorized. School employees should leave the responsibility of arrests to the police and the courts.

One of the problems of coordination with law enforcement, which is frequently encountered, is the lack of a dedicated court for dealing with truancy cases. School administrators are reluctant to spend a lot of time in a general court (family or otherwise) waiting through cases dealing with other matters. In a few cases, courts have set up dockets dealing exclusively with truancy problems to expedite case handling, and these have been well received by school personnel.

The U.S. Office of Education, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Justice, recommends the following:

“Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts. In order to enforce school attendance policies, school officials should establish close linkages with local police, probation officers, and juvenile and family court officials. Police Departments report favorably on community-run temporary detention centers where they can drop off truant youth rather than bring them to local police stations for time-consuming processing. When part of a comprehensive anti-truancy initiative, police sweeps of neighborhoods in which truant youth are often found can prove dramatically effective.”
www.ed.gov/pubs/Truancy/index.html

Truancy Program Key Components

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has sponsored several research and demonstration programs to address the challenge of reducing truancy. The successful projects are cited as having several key components:

- Parental involvement
- Meaningful sanctions or consequences for truancy
- Meaningful incentives for school attendance
- Ongoing school-based truancy reduction programs
- Involvement of community resources (e.g., law enforcement)

State Regulations on Truancy Vary

In **South Carolina**, a student who misses three consecutive days of school without an excuse, or five days altogether, is considered to be truant.



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Colorado defines a truant as having 10 or more unexcused absences in an academic year, or four or more unexcused absences in one month.

In **Texas**, the absence of a child from school on ten or more days or parts of days within a six month period, or from school on three or more days or parts of days within a four week period is “conduct indicating a need for supervision” under the Juvenile Justice System.

In **Connecticut**, a student who is absent without a proper excuse four or more times in one month or 10 or more times in one school year is considered to be truant. Local school boards can hire attendance officers to investigate student absences and present violations to prosecutors. Local police have authority to check to see whether school children are truant, and if they are to send them to school. Police can also arrest habitual truants.

In **Illinois**, a “truant” is defined by law as “a child subject to compulsory school attendance and who is absent without valid cause from such attendance for a school day or portion thereof.” A “chronic or habitual truant” is defined as “a child who is absent without valid cause from such attendance for 10% or more of the previous 180 regular attendance days.”

New York State requires that each Board of Education, BOCES, etc., establish a comprehensive attendance policy for the purpose of ensuring the maintenance of an adequate record verifying the attendance of all children at instruction and establish a mechanism by which patterns of pupil absence can be examined to develop effective intervention strategies to improve school attendance.

References

For a good overview of the topic, see the following:

Truancy Prevention in Action: Legal and economic implications of Truancy by Jay Smink and Joanna Zorn Heilbrunn, published by the National Dropout Prevention Center, College of Health, Education and Human Development, Clemson University. Email ndpc@clemson.edu, <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/>.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Juvenile Justice Bulletin, September 2001: “Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School.” www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.

For powers and duties of attendance officers, etc., in New York State, See www.emsc.nysed.gov/sss/Laws-Regs/Attendance/3213.htm.

For Duties of the District Attendance Officer in the state of Texas, See http://www.cfbisd.edu/sts/attendance_officer.htm.



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