Truancy and Attendance: Interventions for High Schools

In A Nutshell

Truancy has always been a concern of educators, but it is growing rapidly in all types of schools. Worse, as students progress through school, and the work becomes more demanding, truancy increases dramatically. Most research shows that isolated, piecemeal approaches don't work to improve attendance. It takes a school and community-wide effort that attempts to monitor attendance, get parent and community cooperation, improve school climate, and employ sanctions in a strategic, developmental manner.

What the Literature Says About Truancy and Attendance

Why does attendance drop and disruptive behavior rise among teenagers? According to a recent Gallup poll, it's because student engagement with the school drops every year. Francesca Duffy writes, "with every year that passes between 5th and 12th grade, the number of students who are engaged in school declines steadily, according to the Gallup Student Poll released last month. A majority of elementary school students—almost eight in 10—qualify as engaged, the poll found. By middle school, however, that number drops to six in 10 students. And when students enter high school, it drops to four in 10." (2013). That's especially alarming because three variables – engagement, hope, and sense of well-being at school – account for about one-third of the variance in student success.

Gallup executive Brandon Busteed says that the drop is due to "our overzealous focus on standardized testing and curricula [and] our lack of experiential and project-based learning pathways for students—not to mention the lack of pathways for students who will not and do not want to go on to college." And, according to Busteed, schools inadvertently stifle students with entrepreneurial potential. While 45 percent of students surveyed by Gallup say they plan to start their own business someday, only 5 percent have spent more than one hour in the last week working, interning, or exposed to real business.

But standardized testing and curricula are certainly part of the contemporary school landscape, and don't show signs of going away anytime soon. So while the philosophical and policy debate continues, what are school leaders to do about the very practical problems of declining attendance and disruptive behavior among middle and high school age kids?

<u>Attendance Interventions</u>

According to the Virginia Department of Education (2005), there are three levels of intervention for school attendance: (1) Legal Intervention, or enforcing attendance laws; (2) Early Intervention, or reducing barriers to attendance; and (3) Prevention, or establishing expectations and positive school climate. Clearly, investing time and energy in Prevention and Early Intervention will help reduce the need for Legal Interventions when the problem gets out of hand.

Start By Understanding Truancy

Understanding truancy is the key to proper intervention. Technically, "truancy" means any unexcused absence from school. But huge differences exist between students who are chronically truant and those who are occasionally truant – and between students who miss days or weeks of school and those who cut a class or two.   Consider these two examples from the Virginia DOE:

> **Ella** was bounced around from relative to relative after her mother lost custody, but none of them worked out. When her father gained custody, her situation failed to improve since he was struggling with drugs and debt. To buy her school uniform and other necessities, Ella began selling drugs the summer before she enrolled in high school. While her attendance in eighth grade was often spotty, it worsened throughout ninth grade. By the end of the semester, she had missed 27 out of 90 days. Ella then missed more than half of her second semester of ninth grade.

> **Jake** was looking forward to high school. He enjoyed learning and was excited to play on the school football team. His parents valued education and encouraged him to do well, but Jake found that high school was more difficult than he had anticipated. When he met a couple of guys who were skipping classes to read comic books in the cafeteria, Jake started to join them. He found his math class, which took place right after lunch, to be particularly difficult. So, he would simply read comics in the cafeteria until math was over. Despite missing only two full days of school during his first semester of ninth grade, he was absent from math class 20 times.

Most principals can easily substitute the names of kids they know for the ones in this story. Clearly, Both Ella and Jake have attendance problems, but for vastly different reasons. Clearly, no single intervention or strategy will work for both students.   The first task, then, is for school leaders to analyze the types of truancy occurring in the school and attempt to identify the underlying causes and contributing factors.   Once that is done, it is possible to design targeted interventions that are more likely to be successful than a more generic, "shotgun" approach to the problem.

Factors Affecting Truancy

Generally, the correlates of truancy fall into several categories:

School factors include issues related to the overall climate, such as a school's size and the attitudes of administrators, teachers, and other students, as well as the degree to which a school is flexible in meeting the diverse cultural and learning styles of students. Another important factor is the manner in which a school deals with truancy among students: Are clear procedures in place and consistently enforced? Do such procedures have meaningful and fair consequences for students?

Family factors include lack of parent supervision and/or guidance, poverty, substance abuse in the home, domestic violence, lack of familiarity with school attendance laws, and varied education priorities.

Economic factors include employment among students as well as students who live in single parent households, have parents with multiple jobs, and whose families lack affordable transportation and/or childcare.

Student factors include substance use, limited social and emotional competence, mental health problems, poor physical health, and lack of familiarity with school attendance laws.

Rather than comprising a fifth category, **community variables** -- which are clearly important when looking at the problem of truancy among youth -- are reflected throughout the four categories above. For example, economic conditions and culturally-based attitudes toward education (mentioned under family factors) could easily be considered community-related variables.

Obviously, some of these factors are easier for the school to influence than others. But even if the underlying cause is beyond the school's control – such as family economic conditions – the school can take action to ameliorate the influence of those factors on an individual student's attendance.   For example, in one Florida high school, students stayed home because they didn't have suitable clothes to wear to school. The school's dress code required either uniforms or spirit wear, so the principal solicited funds from donors to buy school spirit wear and negotiated a lower price for the products from the manufacturer. He then distributed the clothes, very discretely, to students who didn't have money for school uniforms.

Interventions

One thing that's clearly under the control of the school is the climate that is created around attendance and engagement. The Colorado Foundation for Children and Families propose 10 steps schools can take to help boost attendance and student engagement – and make sure students like Ella and Jake are getting the help they need.

- **Make students and parents/guardians feel welcome.** Make a point to say "hello" to every parent/guardian or student you see in the halls and outside--make it your business to know his orher names.
- **Create an environment that enables students to feel successful in something—no matter how small it may seem.** Award academic and attendance "letters," as you do for athletics.
- **When a student is absent, immediately talk to the parent/guardian — not their answering machine.** Make a personal phone call in the evening, or call parents/guardians at work during the day.
- **When a student is absent, immediately talk with them about why they were gone—let them know you are aware…**and that you care that they are at school.
- **Forge a relationship with local businesses where youth may congregate when truant—encourage them to keep students in school during school hours.** Create a poster that states "We support youth in school and will not serve anyone under 16 during school hours."
- **Forge a relationship with local law enforcement—make them your allies in showing the community, families, and students that school is the place to be.** Empower community police officers to return youth to school.
- **Don't provide the temptation for youth to be truant.** Close your campuses during breaks and lunch.
- **Empower and expect classroom teachers to take action when they think a student may be truant.** Ask teachers to make calls to absent youth or families in the afternoon or evenings.
- **Reward and recognize good attendance—not just perfect attendance.** Post large signs giving the daily attendance for the day. Reward individuals, classes, and the school for increased attendance.
- **Make your school a place where students feel safe and respected.** Adopt a character education program that is planned and implemented by students.

One of the most practical and comprehensive lists of interventions for student attendance comes from the National Center for Student Engagement's _**Twenty-one Ways to Engage Students in School**_. Their recommendations cover a number of types of interventions that can be customized for individual school settings:

- Best practices (evidence-based and researched-based)
- Activities/Special Events for students, families, and communities
- Incentives
- Instructional and/or curricular innovations
- Professional development for educators and program providers
- School policies
- School-wide programs

The Bottom Line

The conclusions that emerge from all of these studies and recommendations can be summarized very briefly. These include:

1. Truancy is a problem with multiple causes. No single solution will work for all kids or all kinds of truant behavior.
2. "Stealth" practices and policies affect student truancy in unanticipated ways. For example, eligibility requirements for participation in extra-curricular activities may keep kids from participating in the one thing that may bring them to school – and into contact with a productive adult relationship. Look carefully for "stealth" policies in your school, and try to eliminate them.
3. Some factors are beyond the school's control, but many other variables can be influenced by the school. The school should focus on those first, while also trying to ameliorate other, external influences as well.
4. Boosting attendance requires a comprehensive, concerted effort. Piecemeal approaches and random strategies seldom work to produce good results.
5. Punishment and sanctions generally do not result in long-term improvement, and may make the problem worse. If school is a place where a student comes to be punished, it won't take long for him or her to stop coming at all. Sanctions work only when there is a productive, positive element as well – such as academic assistance or a mentoring program attached to Saturday School.
6. A comprehensive, school and community effort to promote school engagement is the best overall solution to truancy problems.

References and Resources

- California Department of Education (2011). *School Attendance Improvement Strategies*. Sacramento: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ai/cw/attendstrategy.asp

Very specific, research-based strategies and tips from the California Department of Education. These are in use in California schools and have anecdotal data about their effectiveness from principals across the state.

- Colorado School Foundation for Families and Children. *Ten Things a School Can Do to Improve Attendance*. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancypreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/10ThingsASchoolCanDoToImproveAttendance.pdf

School Engagement.org is devoted to solving attendance problems by creating engaging environments.

- Duffy, F. (January 14, 2013). Gallup: Student Engagement Drops with Each Grade. *Education Week Teacher*. Retrieved from: http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2013/01/gallup_student_engagement_drops_with_each_grade.html

A succinct report on the growing crisis in attendance and truancy at the high school level. This is an excellent discussion-starter for a faculty meeting.

- Get Schooled (2012). *Track Your Attendance: How Missing School Can Affect Graduation Rates*. https://getschooled.com/attendance-counts/report

This is an interactive "game" of sorts that shows how attendance affects graduation rates and college attendance. It also contains the executive summary of a research study from Johns Hopkins on the effect of attendance on graduation.

- National Center for School Engagement (n.d.). *Twenty One Ways to Engage Students in School.* Author. Retrieved from: http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancypreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/21WaystoEngageStudentsinSchool.pdf

As the title suggests, this is a report on 21 effective strategies for reducing truancy and boosting attendance. It include specific examples and suggestions for implementation.

- Reeves, D. (May, 2008). Improving Student Attendance. Educational Leadership. 65:8. Retrieved from: http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may08/vol65/num08/Improving-Student-Attendance.aspx

An interesting article from Doug Reeves on how uncoupling grades from attendance actually improves attendance at the high school level.

- Virginia Department of Education (2005*). Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools.* Richmond, VA: Office of Student Services, Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/prevention/dropout_truancy/improving_school_attendance.pdf

An extremely comprehensive, yet readable and user friendly report on attendance issues, research, and proven strategies recommended for schools in Virginia.