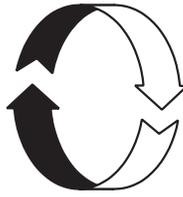


# How to Combat Truancy



*It stands to reason that a student who isn't in school learning will have a greater tendency to leave school before graduation. In addition, truancy is the most predictor of juvenile delinquency. According to the Department of Juvenile Justice, in Miami more than 71% of 13- to 16-year-olds prosecuted for criminal violations had been truant. In Minneapolis, daytime crime decreased 68% after police began citing truant students. In Pittsburgh each day, approximately 3,500 students—or 12% of the pupil population—are absent, and approximately 70% of these absences are unexcused. In Philadelphia, approximately 2,500 students a day are absent without an excuse. In Chicago, 35,000 children are truant at least 1 day of the school year.*

*Truancy is a direct contributor to drop out. Those who regularly do not attend school, do not regularly graduate. Each school needs to develop strategies, including a comprehensive strategy that focuses on incentives and sanctions for both truants and their parents, to deter truancy.*

- ◆ **Involve parents in all truancy prevention activities.**

Many truancy programs contain components that provide intensive monitoring, counseling, and other family-strengthening services to truants and their families. Schools may want to consider arranging convenient times and neutral setting for parent meetings, starting homework hotlines, training teachers to work with parents, hiring or appointing parent liaisons, and giving parents a voice in school decisions. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression initiative calls parents at home automatically every night if their child did not attend school that day. If the parent is not supportive of regular school attendance, then the district attorney is contacted.

- ◆ **Ensure that students are aware they face firm sanctions for truancy.**

State legislatures have found that linking truancy to student's grades or driver's licenses can help reduce the problem. Delaware, Connecticut and other states have daytime curfews during school hours that allow law enforcement officers to question youth to determine if their absence is legitimate.

- ◆ **Create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility.**

It is critical that parents of truant children assume responsibility for truant behavior. It is up to each community to create meaningful incentives for such parents to ensure that their children get to school. In some states, par-

ents of truant children are asked to participate in parenting education programs. Some other states, such as Maryland and Oklahoma, have determined that parents who fail to prevent truancy can be subject to formal sanction or lose eligibility for public assistance. There can also be *positive* incentives for responsible parents. Such incentives may include increased eligibility to participate in publicly funded programs. Local officials, educators, and parents working together can choose the incentives that make the most sense for their community. For example, Operation Safe Kids in Peoria, Arizona, contacts parents of students who have three unexcused absences. Parents are expected to relay back to school the official steps they have taken to ensure that their children regularly attend school. When children continue to be truant, cases are referred to the local district attorney. To avoid criminal penalty and a \$150 parent fine, youth are required to participate in an intensive counseling program, and parents must attend a parenting skills training program.

◆ **Establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in school.**

Truancy can be caused by or related to such factors as drug use, violence at or near school or at home, association with truant friends, lack of family support for regular attendance, emotional or mental health problems, lack of a clear path to more education or work, or inability to keep pace with academic requirements. Schools must address the unique needs of each child and consider developing initiatives—including tutoring programs, added security measures, drug prevention initiatives, mentoring efforts through community and religious groups, campaigns for involving parents in their children’s school attendance, and referrals to social service agencies—to combat the root causes of truancy.

Schools need to find new ways to engage their students in learning, including such hands-on options as career academies, school-to-work opportunities, and service learning. They should enlist the support of local business and community leaders to determine the best way to prevent and decrease the incidence of truancy. For example, business and community leaders may lend temporary support by volunteering space to house temporary detention centers, by establishing community service projects that lead to after-school or weekend jobs, or by developing software to track truants. New Haven, Connecticut’s Stay in School program targets middle school students who are sent to truancy court, at which a panel of high school students question them and try to identify solutions. After court, youth and attorney mentors are assigned to each student for support. The student and the court sign a written agreement and, after two months, students return to the court to review their contract and report their progress.

Students and parents in 10 elementary schools in Atlantic County, New Jersey’s Project Helping Hand program with 5 to 15 days of unexcused absences meet with a truancy worker to provide short-term family counseling, up to 8 sessions. If a family fails to keep appointments, home visits are made to encourage cooperation. Once a truancy problem is corrected, the

case is closed, and the truant student is placed on aftercare/monitoring status where contact made at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals to ensure that truancy does not persist. The Norfolk, Virginia, school district uses software to collect data on students who are tardy, who cut class and leave grounds without permission, who are truant but brought back to school by police, or who are absent without cause. School teams composed of teachers, parents, and school staff examine the data to analyze truancy trends. Marion Ohio's Community Service Early Intervention Program focuses on high school truants during their freshman year. Referred students are required to attend tutoring sessions and to give their time to community service projects and participate in a counseling program. In addition, students are required to give back to the Intervention Initiative by sharing what they have learned with new students in the program and by recommending others who might benefit. Parental participation is required throughout the program.

◆ **Involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts.**

School officials should establish close links 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. Police sweeps of neighborhoods in which truant youth are often found can prove dramatically effective. The Stop, Cite, and Return Program of Rohnert Park, California, has patrol officers issue citations to suspected truants contacted during school hours, and students are returned to school to meet with their parents and a vice principal. Two citations are issued without penalty; the third citation results in referral to appropriate support services.