How to Reduce Truancy in an Urban School System

Left without investigation, truancy is a risk factor for serious juvenile delinquency and adult crime

By Janice V. Tankson

In the United States, truancy in high schools has become one of the most troubling issues that school administrators and principals face while attempting to reform public education. Each school day, hundreds of thousands of students are missing from their classroom—many without a valid excuse for their absences. Left without investigation, truancy is a risk factor for serious juvenile delinquency and adult crime.

The information obtained from research extends our knowledge of the phenomenon of truancy, and provides data on what principals perceive to be the most effective intervention strategies to implement within secondary schools. As a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Memphis, I surveyed high school principals in Memphis, Tenn., to find out what their preferred strategies are. (A copy of my survey is below.)

Considering the many mandates set forth by the government, it is critical to identify strategies to will intervene effectively with youth who are chronically truant. It is vitally important to understand the social and economic reasons why truancy is prevalent and which strategies are most effective in combating this problem.

Factors to consider

Why should we be interested in truancy now?

High school truancy is becoming more of a problem in today’s society. It is one of the first signs that indicate a student is losing interest or giving up on life. Research has long shown that students who become truant have a higher rate of dropping out, which puts them at a lifelong disadvantage.

Truancy also affects the school and community. The No Child Left Behind Act has placed an increased emphasis on attendance in some states. When students are not at school, it counts against the school’s AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). Truancy also affects that amount of money schools receive from the state based on the average daily attendance.

National estimates indicate that 10 to 19 percent of school children are truant on any given day; and that on an average Monday, many urban secondary schools have a absentee rate as high as 33 percent. States across the U.S. have begun to battle against teen delinquency by adopting stringent laws that hold parents responsible for the acts of their children. In some states, parents may be fined or jailed for allowing their children to participate in delinquent activity.

Schools are faced with an ever-growing problem of how to encourage children to attend and stay in the classroom. Districts have implemented policies that provide for academic penalties, parental sanctions, and student suspensions. Intervention programs that provide therapy for conduct disorders and other problems that contribute to truancy also have become popular, as has additional academic help through tutoring, and incentives for good school attendance.
The second step in intervention is to meet with family members to assess the extent to which the truant behavior could be due to familial dysfunctions or conflicts. If this is the case, then family therapy should be initiated to help solve these problems. Involving the parent in the child’s education and attendance problem could prove to be very beneficial.

The third and final step in this multimodal intervention approach is to clearly state and consistently enforce the district’s attendance policy. This task directly involves the secondary school administrator. An effective school principal motivates teachers to hold high expectations of all their students, require make-up work for all absences, and provide incentives and rewards for good attendance.

What Memphis is doing

My study looked at Memphis Title I high schools that had 80 percent or more of its free and reduced-price lunch students in attendance. The survey asked 10 questions about what principals believed were the most effective strategies in combating truancy.

Number one on the principals’ list, with 72 percent, was providing additional professional development to teachers. The district has undertaken a major drive to embed professional development for all staff, but truancy-specific training is very important because it will provide teachers with knowledge of how to use their time more efficiently and effectively.

The next strategy that principals and assistant principals considered most effective was providing a school environment that is conducive to all students learning and ensuring their success and safety. This particular concept has proven popular for many years by many education scholars. If a student does not believe that he/she is safe from harm, harassment, ridicule, or any other negative connotations, they will not be eager to attend school. Administrators must provide a safe, orderly environment that is conducive to student’s learning before they can focus on the instructional process.

The third highest-ranked strategy was establishing a pro-attendance culture in which students are rewarded for good attendance. Incentives range from gift certificates to school day dances. The hope is that the extrinsic motivators will eventually lead to the intrinsic motivations of students to attend school.

These three strategies are a great starting point for any district that is trying to develop a strong truancy reduction program. I hope that more research into the study of truancy will be performed in the near future.
REFERENCES
St. Paul: West.
Research and Development in Education, 27(3), 203-211.
Educational Supplement, 4028 (1), 8.
Bull, K., Montgomery, D., McIntosh, D. (1983). The Dropout Problems as  
Perceived by School Psychologists and Administrators. Published doctoral dissertation,  
Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma.
NASSP Bulletin, 73, 21-25.
Stine, M. D. (1990). Do Your Students a Favor and get Tough on Truants.  
Executive Producers, 12, 12-13.
Plan. Washington, D.C.: District of Columbia Public Schools, Division of Quality  
Assurance, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 300 503.)
Learning. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 381 905)
Survey of Strategies Used by Memphis High School Administrators to Reduce Truancy

Please rate how effective you perceive the following strategies to reduce truancy.

1. Enforcement of the mandatory attendance law by holding parents accountable.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

2. Engage students in learning, including such hands-on options as career academies, school-to-work opportunities and community service.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

3. Collaboration with community resources, such as law enforcement, mental health, mentoring and social services.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

4. Establish mentoring and tutoring after-school programs.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

5. Provide a school environment that is conducive to all students learning and ensuring their success and safety.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided
6. When a student is absent, immediately informing the parent/guardian.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

7. Forge a relationship with local businesses where youth may congregate when truant.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

8. Establishment of a pro-attendance culture whereby students are rewarded for good attendance.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

9. Create smaller schools or learning communities within schools.
   A. Very Effective
   B. Effective
   C. Somewhat Effective
   D. Not Effective
   E. Undecided

10. Provide professional development to teachers whereby they can make the most of instructional practices.
    A. Very Effective
    B. Effective
    C. Somewhat Effective
    D. Not Effective
    E. Undecided

Janice V. Tankson (tanksonJ@mcsk12.net) is a doctoral student at the University of Memphis.