

Student Absenteeism and Truancy: Technologies and Interventions to Reduce and Prevent Chronic Problems Among School-Age Children

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Introduction

A major problem facing public schools is that of chronic absenteeism among school-age children. In the United States, each state and the District of Columbia have enacted Compulsory School Attendance Laws that date from the earliest adoption in Massachusetts in 1852 to the latest in Alaska in 1929. Although slight differences occur in beginning and ending ages within the compulsory attendance laws, the range is from five to eighteen. Sixteen percent of the states adhere to a beginning age of five, followed by 19 % at age six, 43 % at age seven, and 4 % at age eight (The Learning Network, 2001). Ending age for compulsory attendance ranges from 59% at age 16, to 18% at age 17, and 24% at age 18 (The Learning Network, 2001). Clearly, by enacting these compulsory attendance laws, legislators have made a strong statement that school attendance is not a choice; rather, it is *mandatory* within the individually proscribed age ranges. Students who choose not to attend school regularly and who exhibit patterns of extended absences are in violation of the law and are, therefore, the focus of many public school systems.

Definition and Incidence of the Problem

Absenteeism often occurs in high numbers due to chronic illnesses and family crises, but these absences are not what offer the most concern to school systems. Unexcused absences are the core of the problem being addressed not only nationally, but also in other countries that have compulsory school attendance laws. Unexcused absences often fall under the term of *truancy*.

Finding out exactly what truancy is and how prevalent a problem it is may not be easy. A search conducted through Georgia's Official Code (OCG) and the Department of Education's Rules did not result in finding a legal definition of truancy, nor were statewide truancy rates readily available. Statewide statistics for Georgia absenteeism/truancy are not collected; they are, instead, collected by each system and reporting is not required at the state level.

Other states, however, have more clearly defined what truancy is and have documented the extent of the problem. According to Section 188.16(1)(c) of the Wisconsin Statutes, "simple truancy [is defined] as any absence of part or all of a school day for which a pupil's parent or guardian has not provided a valid excuse" (Wisconsin, 2000). It is important to note that a primary issue of chronic absenteeism, or truancy, is not that there is no excuse provided, but rather, the excuse is not a valid one. Problems stemming from high rates of absenteeism and truancy are reported from many sources, sometimes in alarmingly high numbers. Wisconsin reports approximately 15,600 students, or 1.6 percent of those enrolled in Wisconsin public schools, as truant on any given day, with approximately 31.1 percent of total absences in the 1998-99 academic year resulting in truancy (Wisconsin, 2000). In California, the Oakland Unified School District averages approximately 3,000 to 3,500 of the 50,000 enrolled students absent per day (PhoneMaster, 1998). Kern County, also in California, reported 143,671 unexcused absences during the 1996-97 school year (VanRy & King, 1998). During 1998, Detroit reported that more than one-third of their 63,000 students missed at least 30 days of school (Fox & Levin, 1999), and in New York City, students absent without a legitimate excuse totaled approximately 65,000 (Fox & Levin, 1999). In 1994, Boston experienced 36,400 truancy court cases – a 67 percent increase since 1985 (Biele, Gatland, & McLaughlin, 1998). Similarly high absentee numbers were reported in New York City, with approximately 150,000 of 1 million students absent daily, and in the Los Angeles Unified School District, where a reported 10% of students are absent daily (DeKalb, n.d.). Truancy and chronic absenteeism are not indigenous only to the United States. Rayner & Riding (1996) cite a 1980 national survey reported by Schostak in the United Kingdom that found at least 800,000 students absent from school for unexcused reasons. A repeated survey by Webb in 1993 resulted in suggestions that approximately half a million students were absent each day (Rayner & Riding, 1996). Besides absenteeism and truancy contradicting compulsory attendance laws, individual students and, ultimately, the school system and society suffer when students do not attend school on a regular basis.

Implications of Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

Several implications both to students and the community have been identified as problematic when student absenteeism increases. Students who have absenteeism problems generally suffer academically and socially. According to Baker and Jansen (2000), studies indicate that students who are absent have lower achievement and may be penalized on test scores. Sustained absences may lead to retention and later to truancy (Baker & Jansen, 2000). In addition, schools that experience high rates of absenteeism suffer loss of learning for students and loss of instructional time (Mayer & Mitchell, 1993). Essentially, when students are absent, not only do those students miss learning opportunities, but the teachers must also try to provide remediation when the students return, accounting for additional loss of instructional time taken from other students.

The implications of absenteeism are felt outside the classroom as well. Continued loss of instruction or poor academic achievement among students with high absenteeism are essential characteristics of students who later drop out of school (Mayer & Mitchell, 1993). Those who drop out of school frequently move on to lives of delinquency and crime, which has a tremendous impact on society. Lotz and Lee (1999) indicate that acts of delinquency are more frequent among students who exhibit low grades, have spotty attendance, and later drop out of school. Further, Walsh (1993) suggests that truancy leads to delinquency and later to adult crime, citing statistics reporting 82% of inmates in Georgia are high school dropouts.

Of major concern to school systems, which rely heavily on funding based on Full Time Equivalency (FTE) formulas, is the financial loss suffered from high rates of absenteeism. Oakland (CA) Unified School District's loss of \$19 per student per day results in nearly \$4 million per year due to high absenteeism (PhoneMaster, 1998). Similar losses are reported in a single large high school in Los Angeles County (CA) amounting to approximately \$200,000 in one calendar year (Mayer & Mitchell, 1993). When sanctions are employed to curtail student absences, reimbursement for lost days can be significant, as in the case of Tulsa County (OK), where interventions kept 800 students in school, resulting in reimbursements totaling nearly \$3,000 per student.

How, then, do school system administrators and local agencies combat the problem of chronic absenteeism and truancy to avoid these problems? Answers are varied and depend upon three factors: 1) why the student absenteeism exists; 2) implementation of sanctions to curtail absenteeism; and 3) interventions to prevent chronic student absenteeism and truancy from escalating. Methods pertaining to each of the three factors will be presented and discussed in this review, as well as conclusions that will identify recommendations for further study and implementation.

Discussion

Identifying Causes of Absenteeism

A key term used synonymously with absenteeism and truancy is school refusal behavior (SRB). Addressed by professionals that include psychologists, educators, and pediatricians, Stickney and Miltenberger (1998) cite Kearney and Silverman's 1990 definition of SRB "as difficulty attending school or remaining in school for the entire day." Included in the classification for SRB are the following manifestations: social phobia, school phobia, anxiety and/or depression, and truancy (Daleiden & Chorpita, 1999; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). While the first three often need medical and/or counseling interventions, the manifestation of truancy is one that presents a diversity of issues of interest to school personnel.

One of the key issues surrounding school refusers is that both negative and positive reinforcement seem to exacerbate the problem. For example, school attendance may be felt by students as punishment in itself, thus acting as negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement occurs primarily in the phobic incidences and separation-anxiety symptoms that are present in younger children that keep them from wanting to go to school (Daleiden & Chorpita, 1999; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). For other children, lack of attendance may be felt as rewarding, offering positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement occurs in the most prominent reason for school refusers: truancy. Stickney and Miltenberger (1998) identify the pursuit of more enjoyable activities as the main reason for truancy in school refusers. These findings were corroborated in additional studies citing attention seeking from parents or guardians and tangible reinforcers such as watching television, playing games, and other pleasurable activities that provide positive reinforcement when students are absent from school (Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Daleiden & Chorpita, 1999). While the phenomenon of SRB is not the sole factor, strong arguments might be made that this clinical manifestation accounts for a portion of the students with problems of absenteeism and truancy.

Alternate Views on Causes of Absenteeism

Other suggestions of contributing factors to chronic absenteeism involve parental and school-based responsibility. Lotz and Lee observe that adolescents today receive less supervision than in the past (1999). Absence of parental supervision is only one side of the issue surrounding parental responsibility. Some studies have pointed out that, in many cases, parents actually condone the absences by ignoring or supplying excuses when no valid reason is apparent for their children's absence from school (Kilpatrick, 1996; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1996).

Schools, their curricula, and the strength of sanctions against chronic absenteeism are also cited as contributing causes to the problem. Lack of challenging/interesting course work and curriculum was cited by some students as a reason for non-attendance (Kilpatrick, 1996; Lotz & Lee, 1999; Khazzaka, 1997/98). In studies addressing truancy behavior, the desire to participate in hedonistic activities and socialization with peers away from school provide other explanations for high absenteeism (Lotz & Lee, 1999; Teevan & Dryburgh, 2000).

In addition to the anxiety disorders described in SRB, Lotz and Lee corroborate that some students cite a negative self-image and low self-esteem as reasons for non-attendance (1999). The negative self-images are sometimes a result of labeling and tracking within the school system (Lotz & Lee, 1999). Indicators such as course failure, low school effort, low reading achievement, and retention in previous grades are strong predictors for students to exhibit absenteeism (Watkins & Watkins, 1994).

An interesting study by Unger, Morton, & Laing (1997) presents the argument that students who participate in co-operative work experiences actually have a higher rate of absenteeism. While the cause for this occurrence is not conclusive, the researchers point out two possible explanations. First, students who already exhibit absenteeism might be attracted to the programs in order to leave school and thus have more days of non-attendance. Secondly, students in co-operative programs might disassociate themselves more from the school setting since they are experiencing the world of work, especially since older students who participate may have access to their own transportation and find it easier to be absent (Unger, Morton, & Laing, 1997). Correlating with this view regarding length of the school day, implementation of Block Scheduling with fewer classes and longer periods, when compared to a seven-period day with shorter periods, appears to reduce absenteeism; thus, school systems that still implement the six- or seven-period day may experience a higher rate of absenteeism (Khazzaka, 1997/98).

Problems Associated With School Structure and Policies

Students often do not receive clear messages about the importance of attendance at school, particularly from their school or district. In debating the issue of ethics in caring and justice, Enomoto provided a case study of an urban high school in which students exhibited high rates of absenteeism (1997). From interviews and anecdotal references, Enomoto discovered that students perceive instances of inconsistency between policies and enforcements. They learn quickly which teachers or administrators will enforce attendance policies and which will be lenient; thus, they are able to escape from punishment for absenteeism. Lack of consistency in policies and enforcement are also cited as contributing factors by Wilson (1993) and Rayner & Riding (1996). When students perceive that teachers do not care enough to follow up on absences, their motivation for attendance is not high (Enomoto, 1997). Interestingly, a converse view of compulsory attendance is provided by Lotz & Lee as contributing to and furthering the absentee problem (1999). Their argument is that forcing older students to remain in school when they are not motivated will only increase their absenteeism.

Clearly, having lenient policies in place, or not enforcing existing policies sends the wrong message to students and their parents regarding the importance of attending school. Compliance to compulsory attendance laws is obviously not working in many schools across the country. Some form of sanctions or interventions must be employed to begin curtailing the losses of instructional time and vital funding for school systems with high rates of absenteeism.

Programs Providing Regulation and/or Tracking of Absenteeism

With problems resulting from absenteeism, many schools and communities across the country have suggested solutions that place the responsibility on four components of society: parents, students, schools, and the community. Wisconsin statutes hold parents responsible for their students' absenteeism and truancy by enforcing fines, requiring counseling, requiring that parents attend school with their children, and requiring meeting with school officials (Wisconsin, 2000). Similarly, Lee & Miltenberger (1996) report that parents who are perceived as contributing to school refusal behavior by providing attention and tangible reinforcers must receive counseling to reverse high absenteeism. Some schools require counseling and home visits for parents whose children are chronically absent (Ford & Sutphen, 1996). Arkansas and Tulsa County (OK) impose fines on parents, and sixteen school districts in Tulsa County participate in an Absence Registration System that prosecutes parents for repeated absenteeism (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997).

Strict measures have also been employed for students in many school districts. Wisconsin statutes allow for fines, counseling, participation in work programs, home detention, revocation of work permits, and probationary

tactics through teen court programs (Wisconsin, 2000). In the case study conducted by Enomoto (1997), stricter adherence to school rules by students is enforced to reduce absenteeism. Ultimately, students are the ones who must accept responsibility for attending school.

Schools also have a role in taking responsibility for student absenteeism and providing sanctions against those who are chronic abusers of attendance policies. Wisconsin statutes require that schools must contact parents by the end of the second day of absence and allow schools to provide detention and additional assignments as deterrents. Additionally, schools in Wisconsin may prohibit participation in extracurricular activities, allow for lower class participation grades, and revoke student work permits for students with high absenteeism or truancy (Wisconsin, 2000). In one small community in the Midwest, faculty members formed a committee to reform their attendance policy. The result was stricter enforcement, in-house suspension on Saturday mornings, verification of absences, and stronger efforts to inform parents when students reach 10 days of absence (Kube & Ratigan, 1991). Absences fell 65% and truancy fell 78% following implementation of stricter policies. Gullatt and Lemoine (1997) cite a Canadian study requiring schools to monitor attendance, track students with high absenteeism, involve students and their parents in guidance and counseling, and provide relevant curriculum as deterrents for absenteeism. Consistent enforcement of school attendance policies can and does make a difference in reducing high rates of absenteeism, such as adopting uniform reporting procedures from schools within a district or adjoining districts (Wilson, 1993).

Perhaps the strongest programs for deterring absenteeism are those in which communities take responsibility. There are a variety of examples of such programs across the U.S. Wisconsin allows for municipalities to enact ordinances against truancy (Wisconsin, 2000). Programs such as Oklahoma City's Truancy Habits Reduced Increasing Valuable Education (THRIVE), promote picking up truants, holding them until their parents pick them up, and then following up with fines and/or jail time for non-compliance. Dropout rates, directly related to chronic absenteeism, have decreased from 13.9% to 11.8% after the implementation of this program (Baldauf, 1999). As a result of consistent prosecuting for absenteeism and truancy and advocating high school diplomas and resumes for entry-level positions in such businesses as McDonald's, Tulsa County (OK) has reduced dropout rates by 45% and day-time crimes have been reduced by 22% (Baldauf, 1999). Police officers patrol the Bronx (NY), picking up truants, registering them for later tracking of offenses, and returning them to school (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997).

There are still other examples of successful programs. North Miami Beach's (FL) police officers patrol communities and require truant student offenders and their parents to receive counseling and training sessions to redirect behavior in their Police Eliminating Truancy (PET) project (Berger & Wind, 2000). Similarly, volunteer lawyers in the Atlanta Truancy Project (GA) are paired with children identified as at-risk because of chronic absenteeism and truancy in an effort to provide early intervention (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997). Provo, Utah, provides a tough-love truancy program in which students with absenteeism or truancy are required to complete reading and writing assignments before being released from the program. Assignments such as reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and writing about it require much effort. In a dramatic turn-around story about a reformed truant, the student worked so hard to get OUT of the program that he benefited by becoming more interested in his academic achievements. His grade point average increased from 0.1 to 3.79 before he completed school (Biele, Gatland, & McLaughlin, 1998). Strong messages from communities like these seem to be that they will not tolerate truancy and its effects.

Technology Solutions

With so much emphasis being placed on technology in schools, it is surprising that very little evidence exists that school systems are using technology as a solution for tracking and preventing chronic absenteeism. IBM has implemented a program in only two school systems: Broward County, Florida, and Gwinnett County, Georgia. With grant assistance, IBM AS/400 computers were placed within the schools for collection of data. Data from all schools are then routed through a district AS/400 Data Warehouse where analysis can occur (Shaw, 2000). In Broward County (FL), the system was initially used for collecting information about reading scores. An added reward is that school personnel discovered that chronic absenteeism problems have also been brought to light and patterns can be traced through data mining (Shaw, 2000). Citing studies that involved the use of computer tracking of attendance records in the United Kingdom and Holland, Gullatt and Lemoine (1997) reveal that two other popular data storage systems currently in use in the United States have the capability of tracking attendance patterns. The Osiris School Administration Program and Comprehensive Information Management for Schools (CIMS III) both have capabilities of retrieval of individual schools' records at a central location that can then be monitored by district personnel. Both OSIRIS and CIMS III have the capability of programming to send letters and/or phone parents when students have crossed the threshold set by the school system as an unacceptable number of absences (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997). Citing attendance improvements in the European studies, Gullatt and Lemoine advocate the use of these systems' notification programs to assist in tracking and notification. In an effort to reduce the 15% absenteeism rate, Oakland (CA) Unified School District implemented a school calling system with the PhoneMaster

2000 systems in 1997. Connected to the district's area network and centrex system, PhoneMaster generates calls to the homes of parents of each student who was absent two or more periods each day. Attendance records are downloaded into the system and phone calls are made to the parents' homes between 7 and 9 p.m. on school nights. Parents can enter a Personal Identification Number (PIN), followed by a number corresponding to reason for absence. Unexcused absences or unanswered calls receive follow-up calls (PhoneMaster, 1998). Statistics from these technology solutions are not presented, so it is difficult to determine their effectiveness except in fulfilling state and/or system requirements of notification.

Local Policies Addressing Attendance Issues

In South Georgia, a sample of five area counties' policies that address attendance and the consequences for non-compliance (Berrien, Cook, Colquitt, Lanier, Lowndes) indicate that some discrepancy occurs within the identified region. Cook County and Lowndes County require written excuses for absences. No written excuses are required by Berrien County unless suspicion of truancy is present, and principals are given discretionary authority regarding what constitutes excused absences and punishment for offenses. Unexcused absences in Cook County and Lowndes County result in referrals to social workers, with repeated offenses referred to juvenile authorities in Lowndes County. Lanier County policy dictates that students may not miss more than five days per semester and investigation may lead to legal action, but no specifics about excuses or notification of parents are addressed. In Berrien, Cook, and Lowndes Counties, letters are sent to parents periodically before students attain the maximum number of days. Absences in excess of the maximum result in denial of credit in classes in the three counties. Attendance Appeals Committees are available in all three counties for students who go over the maximum number of days.

Colquitt County Truancy Reduction Program is the strictest program of the five area counties studied. After three unexcused absences, students are referred to the school's social worker, who contacts parents and/or conducts home visits. Five more unexcused absences results in referral to the Juvenile District Attorney's office, where mandatory conferences are scheduled during which contracts are signed by students and parents to prevent further attendance problems. Violation of the contract results in referral to the juvenile court system, where parents may be charged with misdemeanor or criminal charges; if found at fault, parents may be prosecuted.

Interventions and Programs to Decrease or Prevent Absenteeism

In studies involving absentee problems classified as student refusal behavior (SRB), methods to decrease or prevent absenteeism unanimously call for early intervention (Daleiden & Chorpita, 1999; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996). Early identification by school personnel allows for counseling for students and parents to curtail absenteeism. School systems that have had some success with counseling and other programs advocate early intervention by school counselors at elementary school before waiting for absentee problems to escalate in middle or high school, observing that later school interventions are sometimes too late to prevent the problem of chronic absenteeism or truancy (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Walsh, 1993). In fact, in one study regarding the efficacy of restructuring the curriculum to curtail absences, statistics indicated that 30% of students had formed their attendance patterns by grade 6, and 55% by the end of grade 7 (Kilpatrick, 1996). Waiting until middle and high school to intervene may be too late for the students.

Studies also indicate the importance of involving school counselors or social workers in intervening to curtail or prevent absentee problems, especially at the elementary level (Daleiden & Chorpita, 1999; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Lee & Miltenberger, 1996; Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998; Unger, Morton, & Laing, 1997; Wisconsin, 2000). School counselors provide more interventions in cases of SRB (64%), followed by social workers with 22% (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1998). At the high school level, school counselors are involved not only in tracking attendance, but in providing counseling for students to enroll in vocational studies, particularly for students involved in co-operative work situations (Unger, Morton, & Laing, 1996). In addition to counseling, interventions that successfully provide assistance with absentee problems, particularly in elementary students, involve rewards such as certificates, ribbons, prizes, announcements over school intercoms, and other methods of recognition valued by the students (Baker & Jansen, 2000; Enomoto, 1997; Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Mayer & Mitchell, 1993).

Programs that have proven successful not only have sanctions that are strong, provide counseling to curtail continued absentee behavior, and extrinsic rewards for good attendance, but also provide continued communication to students and their parents. The communications take various forms, and include school handbooks, contracts for students and/or parents, notification by letter/phone/home visits, or through media postings announcing attendance policies and consequences of non-compliance (DeKalb, 1999; Kilpatrick, 1996; Wilson, 1993).

Conclusions

Summary of the Problem and its Implications

From the review of literature, it is apparent that high rates of absenteeism and/or truancy are problems that affect many schools throughout not only the United States, but also in other countries that have compulsory school attendance laws. Students who habitually miss school exhibit loss of learning and instruction, and have been identified as at-risk for dropping out of school altogether. School systems suffer also when students are absent by loss of instructional time that often must be repeated for the absentee student, which in turn leads to loss of instructional time for other students. Additionally, schools suffer from loss of revenue from FTE funding when absentee rates are high. Statistics indicate that absenteeism can lead to truancy, which in turn leads to delinquency and later to adult crime; thus, the community also is affected by students who may perpetrate day-time crimes while absent from school or progress to more serious adult crimes if they do not finish school.

Several causes for absenteeism have been identified, with statistics to support the theory of school refusal behavior (SRB), which may manifest in many ways, including truancy. Other identified causes for absenteeism include lack of parental involvement and supervision, lack of interesting and challenging curriculum for students, a desire for hedonistic activities with peers, negative self-image and self-esteem, and participation in co-operative work experiences for older students. Additionally, many students seem to take advantage of the lack of consistency in attendance policies and their enforcement by both teachers and administrators. Conversely, keeping older students in school because of compulsory school attendance regulations has also been cited as contributing to high absenteeism for those who simply have no desire to remain in school.

Interventions and Preventive Measures

School systems that have experienced some degree of success in reducing their rates of absenteeism seem to have several common factors. First, their attendance policies are strict and enforced, and in some cases are backed by community support. Parents and students are held accountable for absences, with strong sanctions when they do not comply. Second, early interventions that include counseling to try to prevent continued patterns of absenteeism have been successful in some schools, as well as positive reinforcement by school personnel to reward students who improve their attendance. Third, schools that methodically monitor and track their students' patterns of absenteeism and who follow up with parental contact and legal sanctions report some reductions in absentee rates.

Implications for Further Study and Action

While technology solutions for monitoring, tracking, and communicating with parents are beginning to be employed by a few school systems, there are few reported results for this intervention. Is the technology too new, too expensive, or are school systems simply relying on old methods of monitoring attendance? With record numbers of students consistently absent, particularly in large school systems, it seems that the cost of implementing software programs and automatic phone calling systems would be offset by the gains in recovered funding from higher FTE counts when absenteeism rates are reduced. Additionally, funding from grant sources might be available. High rates of absenteeism, particularly when they lead to dropouts and truancy, might be repeated when students finish school and carry over into their work experiences. Community and business leaders might join together with school systems to seek grants for funding technology solutions.

Further research is indicated to determine the success of the software programs and phone systems that help monitor and report absences. Identification of patterns of absenteeism, through a central location within the school system, could be followed by early intervention by school counselors and social workers. Early intervention could then lead to preventive measures such as counseling and therapy to prevent future problems among school-age children.

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