To: Heidi Carter  
From: Curtis Beach  
Date: 22 Dec 2011  
Re: Evidence-Based Truancy Interventions for Middle Schools 

**Goal**

The purpose of this policy memo is to provide the Durham Public Schools (DPS) with a literature review of evidence-based practices for truancy reduction in middle school, with the ultimate hope that the education and lives of at-risk students within DPS can be greatly improved.

**Responding to Truancy Incidents**

A number of studies have shown that notifying a student's parent immediately after truancy is effective in significantly reducing truant behaviors.\(^1,2\) DPS is already implementing some form of notification to parents after unexcused absences—precisely after three, six, and ten unexcused absences according to North Carolina law. While DPS sends automated messages to parents following truancy incidents, it may be more effective to replace these messages with personal contact. A social worker in DPS recommended that the responsibility of contacting parents be shifted to teachers. By doing so, every case of truancy would elicit a response and the teacher-parent connection would be enhanced, which may ultimately improve the student’s education.

**Attendance Tracking & Intervention Monitoring**

While average daily attendance is a statistic many school systems rely upon, it can conceal important data on truancy. Education researchers have recommended that attendance be categorized based on the total number of absences (not just unexcused) and on the following criteria: Very Good Attendance (less than 5 absences in a school year), Moderately Absent (between 10 and 19 absences), Chronically Absent (greater than 20 absences), and Extremely Chronically Absent (greater than 40 absences).\(^3\)
Categorizing attendance this way would allow DPS to observe improvements in attendance at all levels. It is possible that monetary incentives could be implemented for schools that diminish truancy at particular levels, rather than strictly average daily attendance. However, if such a policy were implemented, schools would need to be careful about appropriately allocating funds to the schools in most need of support rather than to affluent schools that naturally have fewer truants and would not need as much funding to diminish their truancy. In addition, tracking which type of truant received which intervention may lead to important insights on the effectiveness of certain interventions as they pertain to specific types and severities of truancy. This method could possibly be used as a part of the “continuous progress monitoring” in the Response to Intervention system listed in the DPS Strategic Plan.

Strategies that Work & Strategies that Don’t

The most effective programs for reducing truancy incorporate a combination of “supports, sanctions, and rewards” as noted by Joana Heilbrunn. Furthermore, Robert Balfanz concludes that it is essential to provide “the right intervention to the right student at the right time.”

Programs to reduce truancy that have empirical evidence in support of their effectiveness:

1. **STEP: Student Transitional Environment Program**
   - Stimulates socially supportive relationships
   - Homeroom teachers take on the role of school counselors
   - Clusters of students have at least four classes together to enhance connectedness with each other

2. **Check & Connect Program**
   - Mentors are assigned to individual students, meet three times per week
   - Role of Mentor: pinpoint individual causes, advocate for student and against out-of-school suspension, connect family to school, provide educational and life advice

3. **Behavior Monitoring and Reinforcement Program**
   - Rewards Positive Behavior
   - Provides feedback to parents regarding their child’s actions
• Devises positive behavior strategies with students

4. Alternative Schools
• Specialized Truancy School: De Kalb Truancy School 10
• KIPP Charter Schools, Big Picture Learning Centers 11,12
• Certain accelerated middle schools 13
• While the models above are considered effective, most alternative schools based outside of traditional school models appeared to be less effective than alternative systems within a traditional school.

5. Independent Academies within Traditional Schools
• Can be modeled after alternative schools
• STEP, accelerated middle schools, and truancy schools can be possible programs structured as independent academies within schools
• Effective in one study with specialized instruction and after-hours program to reduce serious attendance and delinquency problems 14

Strategies that tend to be ineffective or detrimental:

• Police-led intervention for chronic and delinquent truants 15
  ○ Effective in short-term, ineffective to detrimental in long-term
• Out-of-school suspension 16
• Grading based on attendance 17
• Punishment only prevention strategies, with no supports or incentives 18

A Novel Truancy Initiative Needing Scientific Examination

A program without scientific evidence for effectiveness, but with much support and advocacy is the Get Schooled movement sponsored by Nickelodeon.19 It is a national online competition to see which schools can improve attendance the most. It also organizes inspiring concerts with national celebrities who encourage students to remain in school. This program may be worth consideration (1) to receive public recognition for truancy interventions, and (2) to motivate students to maintain good attendance. Such innovative programs might offer unique ways (e.g., capitalizing on highly motivating incentives) to nuance existing evidence-based truancy programs.

The Financial Value of Truancy Programs

Considering the social welfare expenses and criminal justice expenditures, each eventual dropout places an estimated cost of over $200,000 to the public.20 This means that a truancy intervention program may only need to prevent a small
percentage of students from dropping out to be cost effective. In Colorado, an expensive program costing $728,000 and serving 400 youths needed to graduate only 1 in 115 participants to pay for itself. The less expensive programs costing $50,000 and serving 90 youths needed 1 in 350 participants to graduate to pay for itself. The truancy court costing $268,000 and serving 1000 youths per year needed to graduate 1 in 739 participants to be financially worthwhile. Assuming these statistics are accurate, it seems like a worthy decision to invest in truancy intervention programs from a purely financial standpoint.

**Conclusion**

Many of the above programs and strategies could effectively reduce truancy, improve the lives of many DPS students, and ultimately make for a more prosperous society. The most practical step might be to shift the responsibility of contacting parents following incidents of truancy to teachers so that personal connections to parents can be made. Another relatively simple improvement lies in data tracking methods: categorizing attendance based on the levels of truancy before targeting particular interventions to certain types of truants may make for a much more effective way to execute truancy initiatives. An excel spreadsheet has been included with this report to demonstrate a possible method to categorize truancy severity and to track other contributing variables to truancy. Lastly, the truancy programs above have shown empirical evidence for their results: some have served to improve attendance (STEP, Check & Connect, Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program), while some have been ineffective or have been counterproductive (police-led truancy interventions for chronic truants, out-of-school suspension, grading based on attendance, and punishment-only initiatives).

I sincerely hope that the programs and strategies mentioned in this memo can guide you to make the effective decisions necessary to improve the lives of truant students in DPS, as well as their families and friends affected by the problem.
References


