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Nanette K. Jackson and Susan Taylor

Truancy is a concern for all grade levels of all schools. According to Capps (2003) the average student misses thirteen days of school each year. Many students entering middle school have already accumulated 180 days of questionable absences, the equivalent of a full year of school. Studies of school dropouts show students begin distancing themselves from school at an early age. These students are absent more often than other students as early as the first grade (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). There is a pattern of increasing absenteeism throughout a student’s entire school career. It is not too early to begin looking for those patterns in elementary and middle school.

The Georgia Department of Education (2003) (GDOE) defines a truant student as “any child subject to compulsory attendance who during the school calendar year has more than five days of unexcused absences” (p. 1). The GDOE Policy Division (2003) reported one third of the state’s middle and high school students were absent 10 or more days in 2002. It also reported approximately 10% of Georgia’s student population is absent 20 or more days per year and 74,000 students are absent on a daily basis.

The “O.C.G.A. (Official Code of Georgia Annotated) & 20-2-694 grants school systems the responsibility to administer and enforce the state’s attendance laws” (GDOE, 2003, p. 1). The GDOE office encourages local systems to be comprehensive and collaborative in their efforts to decrease truancy. Five key points are noted on the website to help school systems produce successful anti-truancy programs: (1) involve parents in all aspects of truancy prevention; (2) schools must consistently enforce the truancy policies; (3) parents have the responsibility to keep their children in school; (4) schools need to continually attempt to eliminate the causes of truancy; and (5) a strong collaborative effort with law enforcement, juvenile court, and family court officials is needed (GDOE, 2003, p. 2).

The Troup County School System truancy policy is similar to that of the Columbus State University’s Partner School Network in that both require a note from the parent or guardian the day after a student’s absence. According to the Troup County Board of Education the student’s teacher should attempt to contact a parent or guardian by phone or letter. After three absences, a doctor’s note is required. After five absences, the school will make two attempts to send the Truancy Notice letter to the parent or guardian via certified mail, receipt requested. If the parent or guardian does not respond to the certified mail, a social worker is sent to the home. If the student’s absences continue without a doctor’s excuse, the school may notify the appropriate law enforcement agency. The parent or guardian may be charged with a misdemeanor and could be fined up to $100.00 per day or imprisonment not to exceed thirty days, or both, if found guilty of violating the Compulsory Attendance statute. Each day’s absence will be considered a separate offense as related to the penalty.

One local elementary school established a watch list and an at-risk list for truant students. The watch list consists of students who had poor attendance the previous school year. The at-risk list consists of students whose attendance has been poor throughout their school career. The school counselor is involved with these families from the beginning of the school year. After three unexcused absences, the teacher makes a phone call to the parents or guardians of the student to explain the truancy policy. After five unexcused absences or ten total absences the teacher schedules a conference with the child’s parents or guardians to discuss the attendance policy. At this time the child’s name is given to the principal to determine if referrals need to be made to local authorities.

A Troup County middle school has initiated several incentives to help with the truancy rate at the school. The school counselors meet with groups of truant students each grading period to explore
truancy and a means of correcting the problem. The small group sessions last for six to eight weeks. The school has a truancy coordinator who keeps track of absences and sends out letters to parents or guardians. The truancy coordinator may schedule conferences with a parent or guardian or make referrals to the social worker. The school has also held several competitions to improve attendance. Each homeroom makes a poster to hang in the cafeteria to promote good school attendance. Currently the school is participating in a “Homeroom Attendance Super Bowl” in which each homeroom competes for points. When a homeroom has perfect attendance, it receives a touchdown worth six points. To receive the extra point, that same classroom must also have perfect attendance the next day. If a class has no more than one student absent, it receives a field goal worth three points. Each day that there are less than four students absent, a homeroom receives a first down worth ten yards. When one hundred yards have accumulated, that homeroom receives a six point touchdown. This type of incentive gets the students involved and uses peer pressure for a positive outcome. Last year incentives like this decreased the truancy rate of students missing more than 10 days of school from 18% to 15%.

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children offers suggestions for schools to improve attendance. Schools need to ensure students and parents feel welcome and create a warm and inviting atmosphere in which students feel safe and respected. Teachers can make personal phone calls during or after school to the parents or guardians and speak with a person, not to an answering machine. Teachers can also talk with students immediately upon arrival to find out why they were absent and to let the students know that someone cares. Schools need to forge a relationship with local businesses, social agencies, and law enforcement. Rewards should be given for good attendance not just perfect attendance. These rewards can be extended to individuals, whole classrooms, or the entire school. The school environment needs to help students identify early areas of success to build foundations for future successes (Baker, 2000, p. 51).

The GDOE website helps students and parents to understand Georgia truancy laws. It provides implementation guides for school systems. The site also provides best practices and examples of effective and successful truancy programs from schools in Georgia and other states.

Truancy is a warning sign of lost hope. Truant students often perceive “the world around them as unstable and confusing...they question their academic prowess, exhibit low self-esteem, and have difficulty establishing positive relations with peers and school staff” (Capps, 2003, p. 34). The student falls so far behind that it is easier to drop out than catch up. “Student disengagement from school should be understood as a long-term process, developed over time, beginning with early school experiences” (North Central Regional Educational Library, ¶ 11).

References


