

### This Issue: **TRUANCY**

**Truancy: The Next Great Health Risk?** The costs connected with truancy and subsequent school dropout rates have long been recognized economic and social losses for society.

In a recent health study of 134 schools querying thousands of youth in 7th to 12th grades found that “frequent problems with school work”, a characteristic common to truant students, is predictive of every health risk common to youth. Smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, weapons violations and related violence, suicidal thought or attempts, and early sexual activity are recognized to occur in the lives of students who are struggling in school due to lack of consistent attendance (Blum, etal. 2000). The authors of that study concluded, “School failure is a public health problem”

Other studies evaluating school attendance find that schools across the nation report epidemic levels of truancy. Most urban schools in the USA indicate that thousands of students are truant daily.

Truant students and those who dropout of school face other negative outcomes. They may have low self-esteem, unemployment, and social isolation, participate in criminal activity and eventually become incarcerated.

Will it take a council as powerful as the World Health Organization to address truancy? Or can schools and communities curb the tides of this current epidemic?

### What is the Definition of Truancy?

There is no universal definition of truancy. It is defined differently by each state or country based on compulsory attendance laws and school district policy.

Generally truancy refers to a students' unexcused absences. (However, as any teacher can tell you. Many families “enable” their children to fail by writing excuses that should not be excused) Most concerns about truancy tend to include any absence from learning including trades.

#### Also In This Issue:

- **What Causes Truancy?**
- **What Can Schools Do?**

### Facts About Truancy

- A dropout cost society more than \$200,000 over a course of his lifetime.
- 41% of inmates in the state or federal penal institutions in 1997 did not have a diploma or GED. That number is predictably even higher today.
- 1999 employment data indicate:
  - 52% employment rate for dropouts
  - 71% employment rate for high school graduates
  - 83% employment rate for college graduates
- Men who dropout earn less than 75% of those with high school diplomas.
- Females who dropout of school earn just over 60% of those with a diploma.
- A recent Harvard study indicates that only 68% of US students graduate from high school.

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## What Causes Truancy?

Students miss school for a variety of reasons. A national study in 2003 found that about 5% of all US students in grades 9 through 12 reported that they felt unsafe at or traveling to school.

Factors effecting truancy are usually identified in three categories:

### School Factors

- Inconsistent and ineffective school attendance policy.
- Bullying and harassment.
- Poor record keeping.
- Not notifying parent/guardian of absences.
- Poor school climate.
- Unsafe school.
- Inadequate identification of student special needs.

### Family and community factors

- Negative peers.
- Financial , social, medical or other problems in the family that pressure a student to stay home
- Child abuse and neglect.
- Family disorganization.
- Teen pregnancy or parenthood.
- Lack of family support for educational or other goals.

### Student Characteristics

- Lack of goals congruent with school success.
- Poor self esteem.
- Unmet physical and mental health needs.
- Alcohol and drug abuse

## What Can Schools Do?

Develop community truancy task force with police, the courts and community agencies to create awareness and support for getting children to school consistently.

Outline clear attendance policies and sanctions. Use only researched based prevention efforts in designing comprehensive community agreements.

Document, evaluate, and adjust prevention results periodically.

View the student in the context of his/her family. Enlist community agencies in meeting family /student needs.

Increase student and family attachment to school by making your school more inviting and family friendly.

Develop intervention programs, which address student academic weaknesses.

Increase staff development in the design of hands on programs and methods attractive to disenfranchised learners.

Make good attendance desirable in your school and community. Reward students and staff when improvements are achieved.

Allow all students to be successful in something, no matter how small.

Provide alternative educational environments to meet the needs of untraditional learners.

Develop rapport with students who may be susceptible to dropping out.