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The High Cost of Truancy

By Farah Z. Ahmad and Tiffany Miller August 2015

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Introduction and summary

Today's students will be tomorrow's workers. As such, high student achievement is the benchmark, not only for an individual's prosperity, but also for the prosperity of the nation as a whole.

While success in school is dependent upon many factors, being present each and every day is critical, particularly for low-income students and students of color, who face a variety of educational barriers. Unfortunately, high rates of truancy—or unexcused absences from school—have become an increasingly challenging issue for educators across the nation.

Time away from the classroom hurts a student's chance to succeed. In fact, truancy is a distinct predictor of low student achievement and high school dropout rates. As a result, students who miss school may face lifelong economic consequences. In fact, truancy can be a gateway to the school-to-prison pipeline. Furthermore, truancy has repercussions far beyond the individual and can affect the overall success of schools, other students, and communities at large.

In most states, truancy is considered a status offense¹—in other words, it is an offense that would not be considered unlawful for an adult but is considered unlawful for minors.² Truant students used to be formally processed through the U.S. juvenile justice system until changes in the 1960s and 1970s, including the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision *In re Gault*³ and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974.⁴ These moved truancy punishments away from institutional confinement and allowed for more discretion by both law enforcement and court officials.⁵ This shift reduced the caseloads of courts around the nation and reduced unnecessary burdens on the justice system. More importantly, it gave many young people an opportunity to make amends and return to their respective communities rather than enter the criminal justice system and potentially limit their future options. Now these cases can be processed through court diversion programs ranging from mentoring programs to parent training to direct provision of services.⁶ These diversion programs are often a collaborative effort between stakeholders such as

students and their families, law enforcement, schools, government agencies, nonprofit institutions, and community members.⁷ Although discretion for truancy offenses is available and working in many jurisdictions, some courts still choose to process thousands of truant youth through the juvenile justice system each year.⁸

In 2012, an estimated 7.5 million students were chronically absent nationwide,⁹ and, according to several studies, low-income students and students of color were more likely to be absent.¹⁰ This is disconcerting given that, in 2013, 14.7 million children were living in poverty nationwide.¹¹ In fact, the child poverty rate of 19.9 percent was significantly higher than the poverty rate for working-age adults at 13.6 percent and seniors at 9.5 percent. Additionally, high school absenteeism rates for students of color are particularly troubling because our nation is becoming increasingly diverse: People of color are projected to be the majority of the U.S. population in the early 2040s.¹² More than half of all babies born today are children of color,¹³ and for the first time in history, the majority of the 2014–2015 public school K-12 population is projected to be students of color.¹⁴

As the United States undergoes these drastic demographic shifts, it is even more important for leaders to take action now, as the cost of truancy is simply too high. The nation can and must prevent truancy, starting from the earliest grades and continuing all the way through high school.

While the causes of truancy are vast and include individual, familial, and community influences, school policies can actually discourage attendance. The recognition of this fact has made early intervention on school attendance a focal point for educators and policymakers in order to increase academic achievement and high school completion amongst students.

This report outlines the many consequences of truancy, explores the students most at risk of chronic absenteeism, examines how and why students become disconnected from schools, and identifies promising measures states are taking that have the potential for expansion across the country. Finally, this report presents concrete and actionable federal, state, and local policy recommendations to combat truancy, including to:

- **Develop a national definition for truancy, chronic truancy, and chronic absenteeism.** Developing a national definition for truancy, chronic truancy, and chronic absenteeism is important for increasing transparency and for identifying trends and solutions, particularly in communities of color and low-income communities. National, standardized definitions also allow for state-by-state data analysis.
- **Improve data collection for early warning systems.**¹⁵ Early warning systems are only as good as their data. States, school districts, and schools should work together to share data—while protecting student privacy—to ensure that the most timely and accurate information is available to the educators and staff providing intervention supports.
- **Increase wrap-around services and aligning them with student needs.**¹⁶ Reducing truancy rates should be an all-hands-on-deck approach in order to support students. This might mean that schools work with social workers, counselors, mentors, tutors, after-school or early learning programs, and health or social service agencies to provide students with the support they need. It may also include partnering with nonprofit organizations to increase schools' capacity to help provide for students' needs.¹⁷
- **Reduce punitive policies.** Schools, districts, and states should evaluate their anti-truancy policies, including zero-tolerance policies, and make punitive consequences, such as ticketing, fines, or removal from the classroom, a last resort.¹⁸
- **Increase parental involvement and the accessibility and availability of education programs.** Schools should consider increasing parental involvement and education in anti-truancy programs. Because truancy is often a product of factors occurring at home, involving parents in solutions is imperative. This should happen through parenting classes or specific parent engagement programs.¹⁹

While truancy is a serious problem in schools across the United States, the good news is that solutions to help keep students in school do exist. Investing in these solutions is an investment in the students who will be the next generation of workers, innovators, and leaders. It is an investment in our nation's future—for both individuals and the economy.

What is truancy?

There is no national definition of truancy. In some states, a child with a single unexcused absence from a class, or even part of a class, can technically be considered truant.²⁰ Each state has the flexibility to set both the age range during which a student must legally be attending school—typically somewhere between 5 and 17 years old—and the hours or days of absence that renders a student truant.

State definitions of truancy vary widely. In California, the definition is very specific: A truant is considered “a student missing more than 30 minutes of instruction without an excuse three times during the school year.”²¹ However, in some states, such as New Jersey, definitions of truancy can also be particularly vague:

*Any child between the ages of six and 16 years who shall repeatedly be absent from school, and any child of such age found away from school during school hours whose parent, guardian or other person having charge and control of the child is unable to cause him to attend school.*²²

Truancy versus absenteeism

Truancy should not be confused with absenteeism, although the terms are related. Absenteeism includes both excused and unexcused absences, which—if chronic—can result in a variety of negative outcomes similar to those of truancy, including not completing high school. Truancy differs from absenteeism in that it refers solely to unexcused absences, which in most states is considered a status offense—meaning it is an offense that would not be considered unlawful if committed by an adult.²³ Status offenses are punishable by law and therefore have additional legal consequences compared with absenteeism in general. Because chronic absenteeism can and does often include truancy, this report will reference both. However, this report will primarily focus on truancy because it encompasses many of the issues associated with chronic absenteeism but also has important legal consequences worthy of attention.

While truancy can refer to even a partial day unexcused absence, states and school districts understandably look at chronic or habitual truancy as the main area of concern. However, habitual truancy has various definitions as well. In Colorado, for example, habitual truancy is defined as “having four total days of unexcused absences from public school in any one calendar month or ten total days of unexcused absences from public school during the reported school year.”²⁴ Conversely, in Florida, the definition of a habitual truant disregards a parent’s consent and considers a student truant if a student has “15 or more unexcused absences within 90 calendar days with or without the knowledge or consent of the student’s parent or guardian“ and who is subject to compulsory school attendance.²⁵

Since the 2005–2006 school year, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has required school districts receiving federal funds to collect truancy rates for each school in the district and report them to state agencies.²⁶ However, because schools and states set their own definitions of truancy and because not all data are made publicly available, state-by-state comparisons and national level data are difficult to ascertain. Despite the dearth of comprehensive data, however, by reviewing reports from various school districts, cities, and states; the number of truancy cases being tried in courts; and data on related incidents such as dropout rates, it is clear that truancy is a national concern.

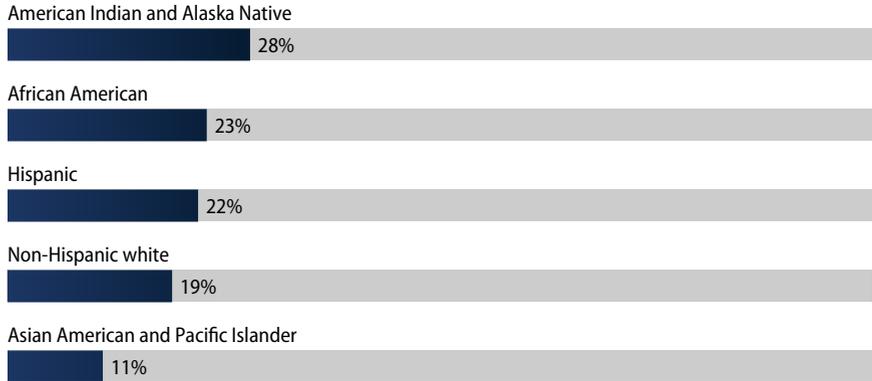
The disproportionate effects of truancy on low-income students and students of color

Truancy is a problem that affects all types of students because its causes are vast and varied. These causes include family issues that impel students to remain at home or problems at school that push them out. However, among students who are chronically truant, many are from low-income families.²⁷ According to a 2010 study, low-income students are 60 percent more likely to be chronically absent and experience poor academic performance as a result of poor attendance,²⁸ and these students engage in truancy at least in part because of their poverty status.²⁹ For example, a study commissioned by California Attorney General Kamala D. Harris found that almost 85 percent of elementary school students who were chronically truant—defined in California as missing 10 percent or more of the school year without a valid excuse—are from low-income families.³⁰ Literature on adolescent development and high-poverty neighborhoods also shows that middle school students in high-poverty neighborhoods are often pressured into activities that hinder school attendance such as being caregivers for family members or as labor for gangs.³¹ Combatting truancy is of utmost importance to the long-term success of low-income students. Some researchers posit that if students who live in high-poverty neighborhoods attended school every day with no other changes being made, students would experience increased rates of academic achievement, high school completion, post-secondary education attainment, and economic productivity.³²

Similarly, students of color, who are disproportionately low income, see larger, more negative effects. Students of color are more likely to be truant compared to their white counterparts: In 2009, among eighth grade students who missed three or more days of school nationwide, American Indian and Alaska Native students had the highest rates at 28 percent, followed by African American students at 23 percent, Hispanic students at 22 percent, white students at 19 percent, and Asian American and Pacific Islander, or AAPI, students at 11 percent,³³ although the AAPI community exhibits an exceptional amount of variation by national origin.³⁴ (see Figure 1) This example is likewise true for many states where data are available. A survey of California public elementary school students, for example, found that 37 percent of African American students sampled were truant, the highest of any subgroup, including homeless students.³⁵ They were also four times as likely as all students to be chronically truant, and 1 in 5 missed 10 percent or more of the academic year.³⁶

FIGURE 1
Eighth-grade student absenteeism rates by race and ethnicity, 2009

Students who missed three or more days of school in the past month



Source: Susan Aud, Mary Ann Fox, and Angelina KewalRamani, "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups" (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015.pdf>.

The costs of truancy

The cost of truancy is high. Not only does it affect the student who is truant in the short run by eroding his or her education but it also has long-term effects that go far beyond school. In fact, school absence can result in absence from the community and presence in the criminal justice system. School absence can also result in absence from the workforce, thus compromising contributions to an individual's family, community, and the economy at large.

The effects of truancy on individual educational achievement and economic prosperity

It is well known that education is a key to success. Truancy, conversely, is the gateway to economic hardship. Research shows that chronically truant students experience employment-related difficulties such as lower-status occupations, less stable career patterns, higher unemployment rates, and low earnings as adults.³⁷ Much of these outcomes have to do with the inverse relationship between truancy and academic achievement.

Each day, hundreds of thousands of children miss valuable opportunities to learn and grow by not attending school. These missed opportunities add up over the course of a school career. For example, according to a 2007 study by the National Center for Children in Poverty, students who miss 10 percent of days in a school year or more are the most likely to suffer lower academic performance in subsequent school years.³⁸ Further, the effect that missing school has on academic achievement compounds overtime, with each year of schooling becoming harder and harder to complete when students have had incomplete schooling in the years prior. Several cohort studies of preschool students found that, for most chronically absent students, absenteeism is a recurring problem with cumulative effects extending from one school year to the next—especially among communities of color. This is concerning given the high rates of absenteeism in many preschools. A University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research study focusing on four

school-based programs that serve nearly 77 percent of preschools in the Chicago Public Schools system found that students of color are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers. For example, African American students are more than twice as likely to be chronically absent—even when controlling for neighborhood poverty in comparison to their white counterparts. Latino students and students of other races—while not as likely to be as chronically absent as African American students—are also more likely than their white counterparts to be chronically absent, even when controlling for neighborhood poverty. These chronic absences have a high probability to continue as students advance in school, and they most likely lead to reduced academic achievement. Several cohort studies of preschool students—such as studies in Chicago, Illinois and Baltimore, Maryland—found that, for most chronically absent students, absenteeism is a recurring problem with cumulative effects extending from one school year to the next.³⁹ This is concerning given high rates of absenteeism in many preschools.

For example, in the 2013–2014 school year, 20 percent of District of Columbia Head Start students were chronically absent—meaning that they missed 10 to 20 percent of the school year—and 29 percent were at risk for absence problems.⁴⁰ A California study found that among chronically absent students in both kindergarten and first grade, only 17 percent were proficient in reading in third grade.⁴¹ What’s more, by as early as sixth grade, high truancy rates become a distinct predictor of whether or not a student will graduate from high school.⁴² Because an estimated 1 in 10 kindergarten and first-grade students missed 10 percent or more of the school year, the long-term consequences for these students are potentially life changing.⁴³ Further analysis shows that even if attendance improved in third grade, test scores in fifth grade still showed negative effects, particularly for low-income children.⁴⁴ Students with the highest rates of truancy have the lowest academic achievement, greater school discipline histories, and are most at risk of dropping out.⁴⁵ Truants have a higher high school dropout rate because, in many cases, dropping out is easier than catching up. Dropping out of high school has lifelong effects on one’s economic prosperity.

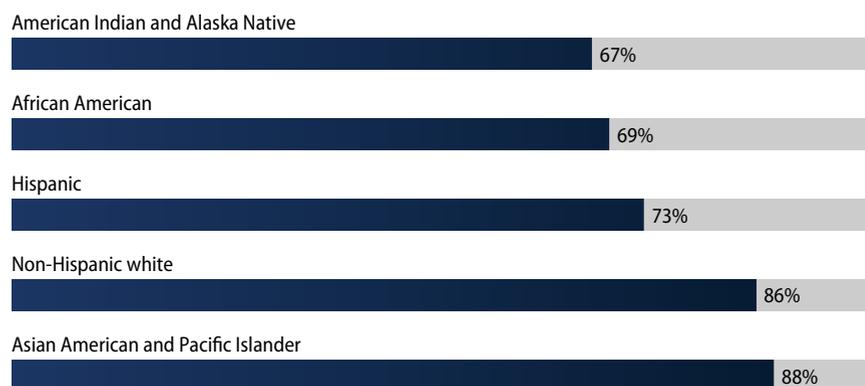
Because absenteeism often leads to dropping out of high school, it is not surprising that high school graduation rates have a similar pattern of racial gaps as absenteeism rates. Nationwide, the public high school four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, or ACGR—a measure of students who graduated on time in four years—was 80 percent during the 2011–2012 school year.⁴⁶ A disaggregated examination of the ACGR by race, however, tells a different story. The ACGR was highest for AAPIs at 88 percent. AAPIs, however, are in an incredibly diverse group whose educational

By as early as sixth grade, high truancy rates become a distinct predictor of whether or not a student will graduate from high school.

attainment is highly varied by national origin, with some groups having similar graduation rates to non-Hispanic whites and others similar to African American students.⁴⁷ Non-Hispanic whites have an ACGR at 86 percent followed by Hispanics at 73 percent, African Americans at 69 percent, and American Indian and Alaskan Natives, or AIANs, at 67 percent.⁴⁸ (see Figure 2) The ACGR for economically disadvantaged students—generally those eligible for free and reduced-price lunch⁴⁹—was similar to many students of color at 72 percent.⁵⁰

FIGURE 2
Public high school four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, or ACGR, 2011–2012

Students who graduate on time, adjusting for students who transfer into the school or leave the school



Source: Marie C. Stetser and Robert Stillwell, "Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12" (Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014391.pdf>.

Furthermore, on-time graduation rates vary from state to state, ranging from 60 percent in Nevada to 93 percent in Vermont in the 2011–2012 school year.⁵¹ Similarly, truancy rates vary within states, such as the 30 percent truancy rate of San Luis Obispo County in California compared to the 5 percent of Inyo County.⁵² This suggests that geography, school resources, school culture and policies, access to effective teachers, and household income level, among other factors, can play an important role in the severity of truancy instances and lower rates of high school completion.⁵³

Glossary of terms

Note: The terms listed below are broad definitions and in some cases—such as chronic truancy, chronic absenteeism, and severe chronic absenteeism—have been commonly accepted. However, definitions can and do vary by jurisdiction.

Excused absence is an absence from school due to a reason deemed valid by school administrations, which may include illness, doctor or dentist appointments, personal reasons justified by a parent or guardian, and other reasons within the discretion of school administrators.

Unexcused absence is any absence from school that is not deemed excused under the guidelines of a particular school administration.

Truancy is any unexcused absence from school.

Absenteeism is any absence from school, including both excused and unexcused absences.

Chronic absenteeism is missing 10 percent of the school year for any reason.⁵⁸

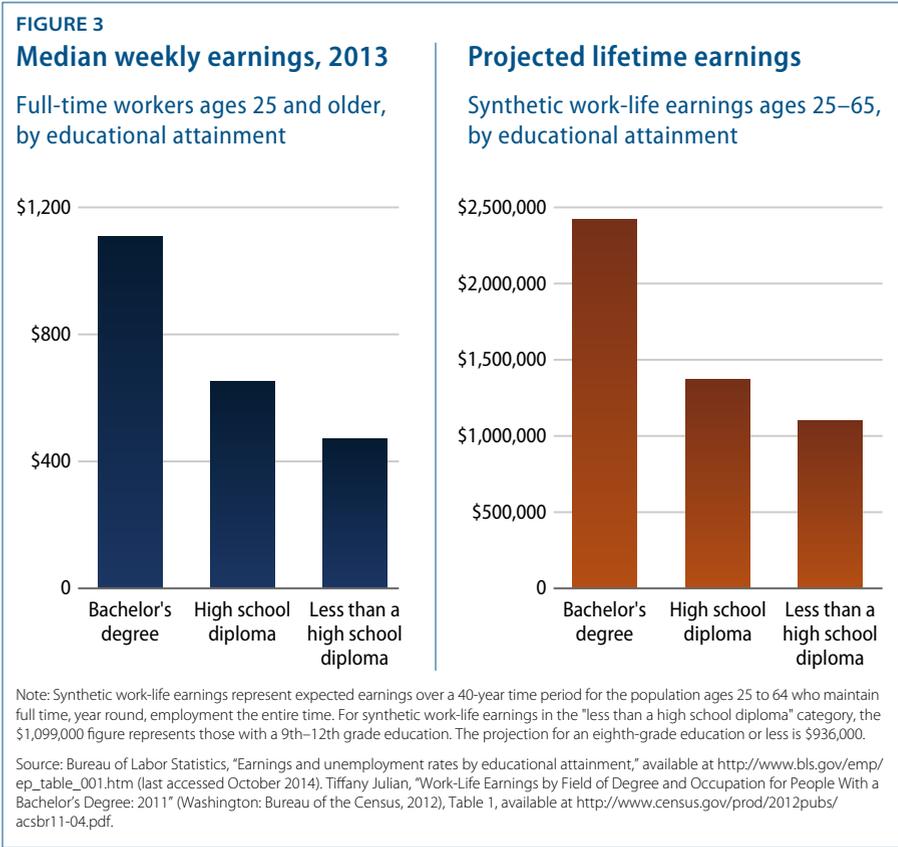
Chronic truancy is missing 10 percent of the school year without a valid excuse.⁵⁹

Severe chronic absenteeism is missing 20 percent of the school year for any reason.⁶⁰

Status offense is an offense that would not be considered unlawful for an adult but is considered unlawful for minors.⁶¹ Status offenders can be charged or adjudicated under the law of jurisdiction.⁶² In some states, the consequences of a status offense may not only affect the minor but may affect the parent or guardian of the minor. Common examples of status offenses include running away from home, truancy, underage alcohol possession, and curfew violations.⁶³

Employment-to-population ratio, or employed share, measures the proportion of working-age people in a community who are employed and is essentially an indicator of the job opportunities available to each community.

The outcomes for truant students who drop out of high school are bleak. In 2013, those 25 years and older without a high school diploma had an employment-to-population ratio of 40.1 percent, whereas employment prospects improve more than 14 percent for those with a high school diploma.⁵⁴ Additionally, high school dropouts today earn almost 28 percent less than high school graduates⁵⁵ and earn around \$300,000 less over a lifetime.⁵⁶ (see Figure 3) Dropping out of high school is an increasingly concerning problem: In today’s complex and technology-reliant society, completing a high school degree is essential and is often the minimum requirement for most jobs and for obtaining a post-secondary education.⁵⁷



Furthermore, when one takes into account that college graduates already earn close to 70 percent more than high school graduates and 135 percent more than those with less than a high school education, it becomes clear how dropping out of high school can translate into significant income and wealth disparities throughout adulthood.⁶⁴ (see Figure 3) A 2013 analysis of data by the Pew Research Center showed that people with only a high school diploma are three times more likely to

be unemployed and close to four times more likely to be in poverty compared to those who hold a bachelor's degree.⁶⁵ For those who do not make it to high school graduation, outcomes can be even worse. The effects of dropping out go far beyond income. High school dropouts have worse health outcomes and are overrepresented in the nation's prison population.⁶⁶

The effects of truancy on the school-to-prison pipeline

Truancy has been established as an early warning sign for educational failure that is not only linked to dropping out of high school in the long term, but also to suspension, expulsion, or delinquent behavior in the short term.⁶⁷ Educational failure, in turn, is one mechanism that propels the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to policies and practices—including zero-tolerance discipline policies, policing in schools, and court involvement for minor offenses in school—that push students out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.⁶⁸

A criminal records review⁶⁹ on Washington state high school students by the Washington State Center for Court Research revealed that while 26 percent of truant students had already come into contact with the criminal justice system prior to receiving a truancy petition, 33 percent of first-time truants were charged with a criminal offense—most often a misdemeanor—after their first petition but before turning 18 years old.⁷⁰ This suggests a mutual relationship between school disengagement and other at-risk behavior. In fact, the study found that 50 percent of all truants ended up with a criminal charge by the time they turned 18 years old—a level statistically significant when compared to only 12 percent of nontruant students.⁷¹ Research suggests that even students who begin to engage in truancy at early ages may suffer higher rates of incarceration than nontruants.⁷² Nationwide, high school dropouts are three-and-a-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated.⁷³ A 2001 Coalition for Juvenile Justice report found that 82 percent of inmates in adult prisons had dropped out of high school.⁷⁴ Additionally, high school dropouts are not just more likely to commit a crime but are also more likely to be a victim of crime. In fact, data from the San Francisco District Attorney's office from 2004 to 2008 found that 94 percent of homicide victims under age 25 are high school dropouts.⁷⁵ Furthermore, a study of Baltimore city public school youth who were victims of violence⁷⁶ between 2002 and 2007 revealed that 92 percent of the victims were chronically truant between 1999 and 2007 in at least one academic year.⁷⁷ Thus, it is clear that policies that focus on preventing truancy can be a way to curb the school-to-prison pipeline and increase public safety.

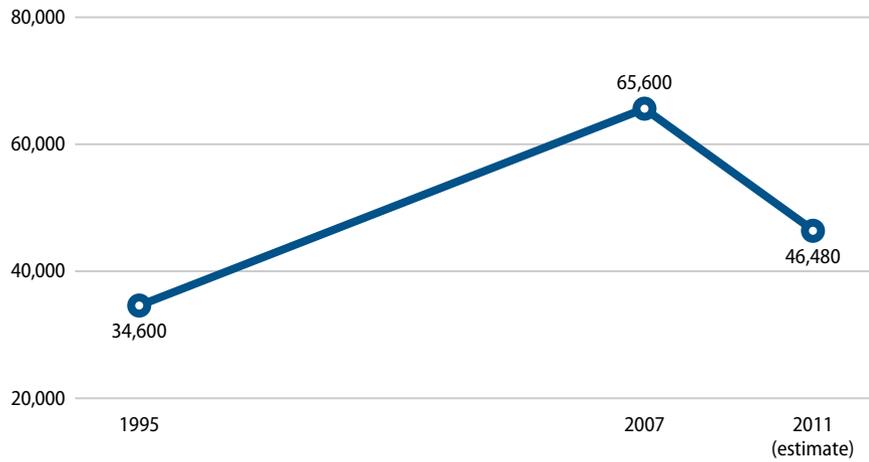
Young people who regularly attend school are less likely to become involved in crime.⁷⁸ In a number of cities, authorities conduct regular truancy sweeps—powers given to schools, police, or community groups to search for truants in public areas during school hours⁷⁹—and then analyze changes in crime afterward. Many police departments report increased crime rates during the daytime hours due to truant students committing crimes when they should be in school.⁸⁰ In Van Nuys, California and St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, crimes such as purse-snatching and shoplifting decreased by 60 percent and 50 percent, respectively, after truancy sweeps.⁸¹ Many of the criminal offenses truants commit are drug-related. In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Drug Use Forecasting program, looking at a sample of 403 juvenile arrests in the San Diego, California area, more than half tested positive for drug use.⁸² Truants accounted for over two-thirds of those who tested positive for drug use, suggesting a relationship of mutual influence.⁸³

Truancy: A criminal offense

Because all states have compulsory education laws mandating that minors attend school, truancy often involves government entities, such as the legal system and courts, as well as child and family welfare services.⁸⁴ Furthermore, in most states, truancy is considered a status offense—a crime for minors which would not be considered a crime if committed by an adult.⁸⁵ Other examples of status offenses include running away from home, violating curfew laws, or possessing alcohol or tobacco.⁸⁶ Status offenses are punishable under the law and can result in arrest or court summons.⁸⁷ The consequences for violating this law not only affect the individual student but also their parents or guardians. In Washington, D.C., for example, a violation of the district’s truancy law can result in charges filed against the student or parent, court supervision, probation of students or parents, or community service for students and parents.⁸⁸ Some consequences of truancy can effect the student alone, such as being referred to Court Diversion and community-based interventions, while other consequences effect only the parent or guardian, such as neglect charges, fines, court-ordered parent education and counseling, or even jail time.⁸⁹ In California, for example, a parent can be charged with a criminal misdemeanor for failing to reasonably supervise and encourage a child’s school attendance, punishable by a fine of up to \$2,000 and by jail time of up to one year.⁹⁰

Court involvement and related social services increase the cost burdens on states and localities and are poised to rise if the number of truancy cases continue to rise: Nationwide, between 1995 and 2007, the number of petitioned truancy cases tried in courts more than doubled from 34,600 to 65,000 cases, although it declined by 28 percent through 2011.⁹¹ (see Figure 4) However, importantly, truancy cases make up the vast majority among all status offense cases—a share that has been growing.⁹² In 2002, 33 percent of petitioned status offense cases were for truancy; this figure rose to 40 percent in 2011.⁹³ (see Figure 5) Furthermore, in 2011, 65 percent of petitioned truancy cases were referred to courts by schools—with slightly more than 20 percent being referred by law enforcement—indicating that schools play a critical role in determining outcomes for truant youth.⁹⁴ And while court sanctions are used to stop ongoing truancy of students and increase student achievement, the results are unclear—and potentially detrimental. In a Washington state study of 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students, for example, 23 percent of petitioned truants went on to have multiple truancy petitions throughout their schooling.⁹⁵ A survey of Washington students found that about half of all truants surveyed reported that they did not expect to obtain any education beyond high school⁹⁶—a lifelong disadvantage in today’s society.

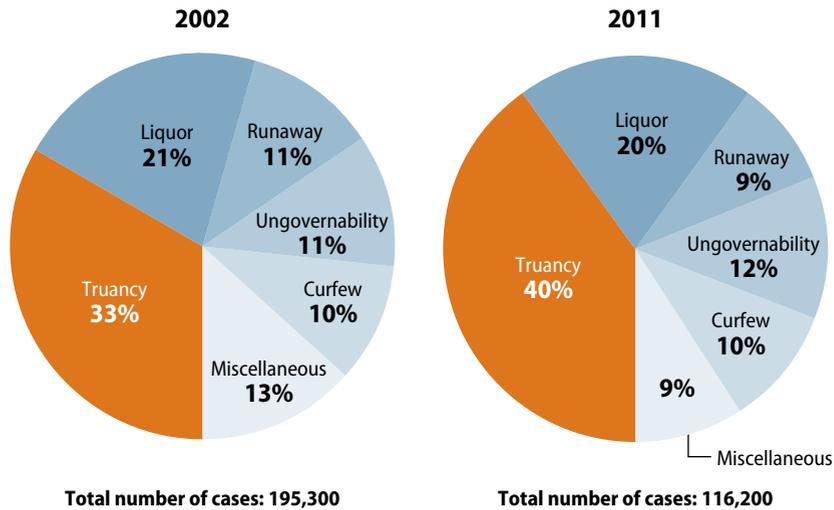
FIGURE 4
Petitioned truancy cases, nationwide



Source: Sarah Hockenberry and Charles Puzzanchera, "Juvenile Court Statistics 2011" (Pittsburg, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2014), available at <http://ojdp.gov/ojstatbb/njcda/pdf/jcs2011.pdf>.

FIGURE 5
Share of petitioned-status offense cases

By most serious offense, 2002 and 2011



Source: Sarah Hockenberry and Charles Puzzanchera, "Juvenile Court Statistics 2011" (Pittsburg, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2014), available at <http://ojdp.gov/ojstatbb/njcda/pdf/jcs2011.pdf>.

The effect of truancy on schools

While truancy has negative consequences for students, it also has negative effects on their schools. In most schools, for example, truant students get assigned to counselors who, in urban and low-income schools, are already overburdened with caseloads. In the 2007–2008 school year in public schools nationwide, there was one school counselor for every 360 students.⁹⁷ In addition to truancy’s burden on limited school resources, it can also affect other students. A study by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, which analyzed fourth graders in 705 New York City public schools from 2001 to 2008, found that students with high attendance rates suffer academically from attending a school with high absenteeism.⁹⁸ For example, a student with above-average attendance enrolled in a school with above-average attendance rates will likely have better scores on their fourth grade assessment than if the student went to a school with below-average attendance rates.⁹⁹ Thus, high rates of school attendance not only benefits individual students who exhibit this behavior, but also has positive externalities for their classmates.

The effect of truancy on communities

The mounting evidence suggests that allowing a student to go from truant to dropout comes at a very high cost to both the individual and to society as a whole. In fact, the average high school dropout costs society more than \$800,000 over the course of their lifetime through potential decreases in tax revenue from lower earnings, consumption of social services, and utilization of the justice system, among other costs.¹⁰⁰ According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, if even half of dropouts in the class of 2010 nationwide had graduated, it would mean an additional \$7.6 billion in increased earnings and \$713 million more in tax revenue in an average year, as well as \$9.6 billion in economic growth as these students enter the middle of their career.¹⁰¹

The causes of truancy

Truancy is a multifaceted problem with push-and-pull factors from a variety of sources, including student-specific variables, family- and community-specific characteristics, school-specific factors, and influences such as poor academic performance, lack of self-esteem or ambition, unaddressed mental health needs, alcohol and drug use, and poor student health.¹⁰²

But truancy is often not solely the individual student's problem. In fact, the reasons often have little to do with a person's individuality and more to do with situational factors, particularly, for students who are truant in elementary school, where caregivers almost always dictate school attendance choices. Some of the situational factors that often contribute to truancy include financial and medical issues, as well as issues at home that pressure students to stay home to help their families. Other family or community related factors can include a lack of family support; poor home conditions; parents who do not highly value education; child abuse or neglect; siblings who performed poorly in school; a large number of household members; chronically ill parents; low parental education attainment; foreign-born parents; providing child care for younger siblings; teen pregnancy or parenthood; violence near one's home or school; homelessness; unreliable transportation; and having a family criminal history or an incarcerated parent.¹⁰³

Lastly, school characteristics can keep students from attending school. Some characteristics are specific to a school's community and culture, such as students' fear of bullying or harassment in school; peer pressure from fellow students; an unsafe school environment; poor school culture; and school size. Others are particular to administration of the school, such as ineffective school attendance policies; poor record keeping or not informing a parent or guardian of truancy; and poor identification of special education needs.¹⁰⁴

School climate: Disincentivizing school attendance

Punitive policies

Beginning in the late 1980s, school districts in some states, such as California and New York, mandated expulsion for drugs, fighting, and gang-related activity.¹⁰⁵ By the mid-1990s, these types of zero-tolerance policies—policies that involve law enforcement personnel and mandate removing students from school—were widely adopted by schools across the nation.¹⁰⁶ Initially created to control more dangerous problems, such as keeping guns and drugs out of schools, these zero-tolerance policies were, over time, used to keep control of students and for lesser offenses such as fighting in school or smoking tobacco.¹⁰⁷ Some schools even enact zero-tolerance policies for much more common offenses such as disrespectful behavior and attendance problems.¹⁰⁸ The efficacy of these policies on student success and equal treatment of students have come into question and, in recent years, some schools have begun to abandon them and replace them with restorative justice policies.¹⁰⁹ Yet, many schools still use zero-tolerance policies as a primary disciplinary tool. Because zero-tolerance policies generally necessitate an out-of-school suspension for a first offense, the widespread use of these policies has increased suspensions nationwide: In the 2009–2010 school year, 1 in 9 students were suspended, compared to 1 in 13 in the 1972–1973 school year.¹¹⁰ During this same time period, the suspension rate for African American students rose from 11.8 to 24.3 percent, and the Latino student suspension rate increased from 6.1 to 12 percent, compared to the rate for white students, which only rose from 6 to 7.1 percent.¹¹¹

Suspension can have long-term consequences for students. A recent Florida study shows that three-quarters of ninth graders who were never suspended graduated from high school, compared to about half—52 percent—of ninth graders suspended once and 38 percent of ninth graders suspended twice.¹¹² Among suspended students, African American students, special education students, and low-income students were disproportionately represented.¹¹³ Even more troubling is that recent research has shown that these punitive policies have impacted our nation's youngest schoolchildren, with many preschools adopting similar zero-tolerance practices. And among preschoolers, African American children overwhelmingly bear the brunt of these policies. A 2013 study by the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, for example, found that while African American children only account for 18 percent of preschoolers, they make up a staggering 48 percent of those receiving multiple suspensions.¹¹⁴ Comparatively, white students make up 43 percent of preschoolers and account for 26 percent of those suspended more than

once.¹¹⁵ Suspensions and expulsions in the earliest years of schooling go on to affect a child's K-12 experience and beyond. When young children are suspended or expelled from school, they are more likely to drop or fail out of high school, report feeling disconnected to school, and be incarcerated later in life.¹¹⁶ Given that these negative experiences come at a time when children are just beginning to form the foundation of their relationships with peers, teachers, and the institution of school, they are especially concerning as an indicator of a student's future outcomes. While keeping students out of school, for some offenses, particularly at older ages, might make sense on occasion, suspending students for missing school is not only counterintuitive but further deprives students of their educational rights.

Other types of punitive policies beyond suspension and expulsion, such as ticketing or fines, for truancy has shown negative effects on students, particularly on low-income students who often do not have the ability to pay these fines. Take, for example, the Los Angeles Unified School District, or LAUSD, where 62 percent of students qualified for free and reduced-priced lunch in the 2010–2011 academic year.¹¹⁷ Until 2013, LAUSD regularly used truancy tickets and fines of \$250 and greater for a truancy offense.¹¹⁸ Enforcement of this policy led to a disproportionate amount of students of color being ticketed compared to their white counterparts, as well as disproportionate ticketing of low-income students who relied largely on unreliable public transportation to get to school.¹¹⁹ The consequences of these tickets were extensive. A survey of 1,400 students and parents in LAUSD found that truancy tickets have the opposite of the intended effect and actually deterred students who are running late from going to school due to fears of interacting with law enforcement.¹²⁰ In LAUSD, during the same time period in which officers issued 47,000 tickets, the truancy rate in LAUSD increased from 5 percent to 28 percent.¹²¹ Furthermore, truancy tickets not only affected students but their families as well. A truancy ticket issued for \$250 could engender \$1,000 in additional court fees and missed days of work for parents and guardians in order to attend court hearings, totaling a heavy price to pay for low-income families.¹²²

A six-year public campaign to end the egregious ticketing practices in the LAUSD was successful in 2012; the school district reduced student ticketing for truancy and tardiness by 80 percent, and truant students are now more likely to be sent to counselors rather than to court.¹²³ While LAUSD has taken steps in the right direction, similar ticketing practices still exist in other states, such as Texas and Pennsylvania, regardless of the consequences.¹²⁴ The price of policies that push students out of school is high: It crushes their earning potential, derails their educational trajectory, and limits their ability to contribute economically to their communities.

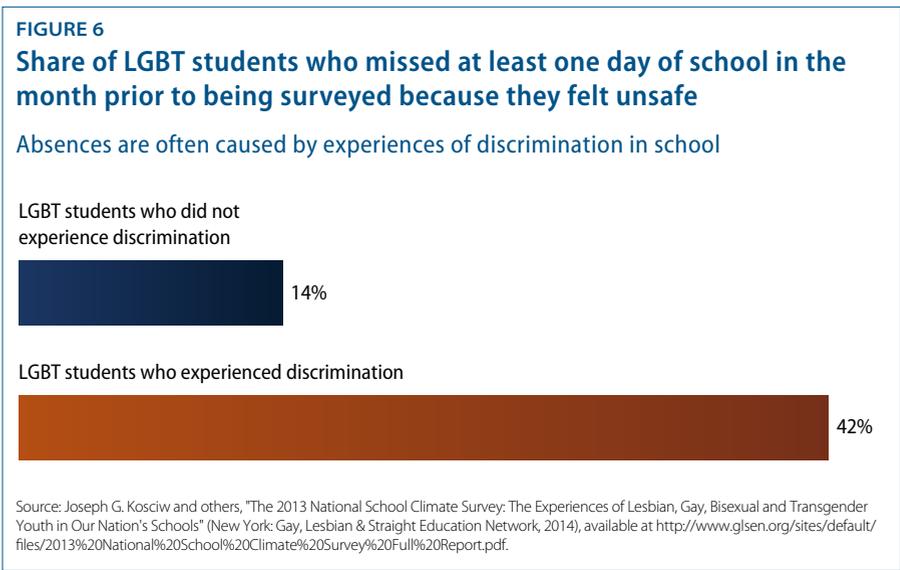
Because of the negative effects of such severe and punitive policies, in January of 2014, the U.S. Department of Education issued guiding principles to improve school climate and discipline with a focus on prevention strategies in an effort to foster a more nurturing, positive, and safe school environment that sets students up for success.¹²⁵ Some of the department's guidance includes reducing inappropriate referrals by law enforcement, removing students from the classroom as a last resort, and training staff to apply school discipline policies in a fair and equitable manner in order to reduce the disproportionate effect on students of color.¹²⁶ Additionally, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights has begun collecting data focused on the disproportionality resulting from zero-tolerance policies, suspensions, and expulsions.¹²⁷

Bullying and school absence

Activities and conditions within schools that go without intervention can be a cause of truancy for some students. One such example is bullying in school. While much of the conversation around bullying focuses on the emotional and psychological costs, there is evidence that suggests that it has an impact on school attendance. In a recent study, one in five students who were excessively absent from school—missing seven days or more—were victims of bullying.¹²⁸ For victims of bullying, missing school is an understandable defense mechanism that is within their control, particularly when bullying goes unnoticed by school officials. Teachers and administrators often underestimate the amount of bullying happening in schools, especially cyberbullying—the use of technology, such as cell phones and the Internet, to bully or harass another person—which has been on the rise. The charity ChildLine reports that cyberbullying cases totaled 4,507 in 2012–2013, which was an 87 percent increase from the 2,410 cases in the 2011–2012 school year.¹²⁹

Multiple studies have shown that teachers are vastly unaware of bullying in their classrooms, especially emotional bullying, and students believe teachers do not intervene sufficiently. For example, as illustrated in a *Canadian Journal of Education* study that surveyed students and teachers through lengthy interviews, of 17 students who were bullied, teachers were aware only of 7—and among those 7, teachers only intervened to stop the bullying with 5 of the students.¹³⁰ Another study that appeared in the *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* finds that 84 percent of teachers reported intervening during bullying incidents always or often, but students reported the teachers only intervened in 35 percent of incidents.¹³¹

The correlation between school climate and attendance is perhaps best documented for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or LGBT, students. A survey from the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network found that, nationwide, LGBT students who experienced LGBT-related discrimination were three times as likely—42 percent—to miss school in the month prior to being surveyed compared to those who did not experience discrimination, at 14 percent.¹³² (see Figure 6) Issues of safety are not always limited to bullying of students by other students. In fact, a 2005 Advocates for Children and Youth study found that 47 percent of LGBT students reported being called offensive names by teachers, and one in four reported they had derogatory language directed at them by campus security guards.¹³³ Furthermore, LGBT youth—particularly gender-nonconforming girls—are up to three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment by school administrators than their non-LGBT counterparts.¹³⁴ This is consistent with findings regarding criminalizing truant and nonconforming students. LGBT youth are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, making up 5 percent to 7 percent of the overall youth population but representing 15 percent of students in the juvenile justice system.¹³⁵ Furthermore, where data are available, the data suggest a disproportionate number of LGBT young people are homeless or part of the child welfare system. For example, in Los Angeles, California, one in five foster youth identify as LGBT, which is about twice the number of LGBT youth estimated to be living outside of foster care.¹³⁶ And several state and local level surveys on youth homelessness find that between 9 percent and 45 percent of these youths is LGBT.¹³⁷ While students should be held accountable for attendance, it is incumbent upon teachers, districts, and state agencies to ensure that students have the ability to learn in a safe and healthy environment and support students who have particularly unstable home or family situations.



Stability at home affects stability in school: A closer look at the effects of foster care and homelessness on truancy

Students who are in the foster care system or who experience homelessness are perhaps the most vulnerable student populations at risk of falling through the cracks of the public education system. In 2012, close to 400,000 children and youth were in foster care, two-thirds of which were school age.¹³⁸ At 26 percent, youth in foster care are disproportionately African American when compared to their share of the population at 14 percent.¹³⁹ Foster care students are particularly unique in other ways as well. They have much higher rates of school mobility compared to their nonfoster counterparts.¹⁴⁰ A study of public school students in California, for example, revealed that only 68 percent of students in foster care maintained their education at the same school for an entire academic year compared to 90 percent of low-income students overall.¹⁴¹ In fact, close to 10 percent of students in foster care attended three or more schools during the school year.¹⁴² School mobility is associated with negative effects on school performance and not completing high school.¹⁴³ Multistate studies show that students in foster care are twice as likely to be absent from school compared to other students—a sign of school disengagement and a critical point of intervention to prevent students from dropping out of high school.¹⁴⁴

A similar story is true for homeless youth, whose homes are the most unstable, and often involve shelters and high levels of mobility. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that around 380,000 youth, those under 18 years old, experienced homelessness for more than one week—among them, 131,000 experienced homelessness for more than one month.¹⁴⁵ The challenge of academic achievement for homeless students is even present in early years of school. A recent 2014 report by the California Attorney General's Office found that among K-6 students, 30 percent of homeless students in the sample were truant in 2013–2014, with more than 15 percent missing 18 or more days of school.¹⁴⁶ Reports on homelessness suggest that within a single year, 42 percent of homeless youth change schools at least once.¹⁴⁷ The challenges of transitioning between homes and schools are

difficult for all children, but for homeless youth, the effects can be incredible: One-third of homeless children will have to repeat a grade and children experiencing homelessness are more likely to drop out of high school compared to their counterparts in stable homes.¹⁴⁸ The unique needs of homeless students are often not met due to limited resources, data, and adult supervision and mentorship. A statewide survey of Illinois school districts and regional offices of education in December of 2013 found that 50 percent of homeless students did not receive help with long-term housing and 56 percent did not receive counseling.¹⁴⁹ Forty-four percent of surveyed school districts reported that their capacity to identify and enroll homeless children and youth not in school was limited and, furthermore, one-third of respondents reported that more than half of homeless students who needed truancy prevention could not receive it with current resources.¹⁵⁰

Tracking students in foster care and homeless students in a more thorough and robust way, including tracking attendance and truancy rates, is a necessary step toward improving their outcomes. Unfortunately, the collection and availability of data relating to this particularly mobile and transient population is limited—especially at the district level—making interventions challenging. In California, like in many other states, for example, education and welfare systems do not have common unique identifiers within each system, which often results in student needs being inadvertently concealed.¹⁵¹ However, there have been attempts for improvement. New York City, for example, is tracking student attendance at 15 shelters and provides liaisons at those shelters to help students stay on track.¹⁵² The city's Department of Education and Department of Homeless Services have even begun working together to place homeless families in shelters in their specific school district in order to assist with education continuity. These efforts are a step in the right direction to make sure that at-risk students in foster care or who are homeless can access the same educational opportunities all students are supposed to be afforded.

Reconnecting students to schools: Examples from schools making a change

The good news is that many local-level interventions have reduced truancy and reconnected students to school. This is particularly true in schools and districts that predominately serve students of color and low-income students. Many truancy-reduction programs, for example, operate on less than \$100,000 a year—yet they can be highly effective.¹⁵³ Some of the efforts of cities and school districts, including many volunteer-based programs that have had success in reducing truancy through effective programs, are explored below.

California

In 2006, then-District Attorney of San Francisco and current California Attorney General Kamala D. Harris started an elementary school truancy initiative after investigating factors contributing to the city’s violent crime rate and finding that 94 percent of San Francisco homicide victims under age 25 were high school dropouts.¹⁵⁴ Harris partnered with the school district to inform parents that they had a legal duty to ensure their children attended school, to provide parents of chronically truant students with wrap-around services and school-based mediation, and to prosecute parents in the most severe cases where other interventions did not work.¹⁵⁵ Over a two-year period, the initiative reduced truancy among elementary students by 23 percent, according to the San Francisco Unified School District.¹⁵⁶ The initiative also served as a model for Senate Bill 1317, enacted in 2010, which defined “chronic truancy” for the first time under state law and established the initiative’s model of combining meaningful services with smart sanctions in the California Penal Code.¹⁵⁷

Additional recent changes in California education law have further prioritized truancy and absenteeism. In July 2013, California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) signed Assembly Bill 97, the cornerstone of which is the Local Control Funding Formula, or LCFF. Now implemented throughout the California public school system, LCFF is a new school-financing system that, among other reforms, provides

additional funding to schools with high-needs students, including English Language Learners, low-income students, and foster youth—all student groups who are disproportionately truant.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, the LCFF requires school districts to create annual Local Control and Accountability Plans, or LCAPs. These plans outline school district goals with attention to eight state priority areas, including student engagement as measured by chronic absenteeism and attendance, among other indicators.¹⁵⁹

Lastly, Attorney General Harris has also commissioned two reports—each titled “In School + On Track”—which examine the state’s elementary school truancy rates by county and their effect on student success and public safety.¹⁶⁰ Together these companion reports highlight the importance of school attendance and truancy prevention and intervention efforts. Specifically, the 2013 report provided recommendations to combat truancy for schools, districts and counties, law enforcement and district attorneys, advocates and community members, and policymakers.¹⁶¹ The 2014 report highlights attendance improvement efforts at the school-district level, such as better data collection and more frequent review of attendance data, recognizing students and schools for improved attendance rates, changing discipline policies to keep students in school, and identifying and reaching out to chronically absent students.¹⁶² When school districts that made such reforms were surveyed about the impetus for these changes, they cited Attorney General Harris’s “In School + On Track” reports along with increased awareness of attendance issues and the creation of Local Control and Accountability Plans.¹⁶³

The combination of legal and policy efforts in California have increased awareness of and accountability for student attendance.

Washington, D.C.

In 2012, the Show Up, Stand Out program was founded as a way to increase school attendance in Washington, D.C. by targeting students in grades K-8 who exhibit persistent attendance problems. The program is based on a system that allows students five unexcused absences before participating schools make referrals to the program. Schools then work with students and their families to increase attendance by creating individualized plans to meet the student’s specific needs. These plans include wrap-around services such as help with job searches, single parenting, transportation, filling out paper work, and parental education. Following the

organization's first year, a comprehensive study commissioned by the Justice Grants Administration analyzed 457 families involved in the program. According to the study, 98 percent of program participants were single parents, 78 percent were single mothers, and 97 percent were either African American or Hispanic parents. The study found that participating students improved among all metrics of success, including those beyond school attendance such as improved caregiver supports and improved caregiver-child interaction. Regarding the program's central goal of improving school attendance, among those who took part in the program, 73 percent increased their attendance compared to the previous year and 76 percent were not referred to the program again the following year. Parental education seems to have played a large role in the program's success by increasing awareness about the importance of daily school attendance. Furthermore, Show Up, Stand Out has been particularly effective at establishing a stronger relationship between parents and schools.¹⁶⁴

New York City

In New York City, former Mayor Michael Bloomberg (I) initiated the Interagency Task Force on Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and School Engagement to combat the issue of chronic absenteeism from elementary school to high school.¹⁶⁵ Over three years, the strategies developed by the task force were tested in 100 schools with more than 60,000 students.¹⁶⁶ The pilot and comparison schools were almost entirely attended by African American and Latino students.¹⁶⁷ Some key strategies employed by the task force include: collecting data in order to target where resources need to be applied and where progress is being made; developing mentorship programs; promoting awareness about chronic absenteeism; and incentivizing school attendance. The results of the program were largely positive. Schools involved in the program vastly outperformed similar schools in reducing chronic absenteeism. Students in poverty were 15 percent less likely to be chronically absent than those in similar schools.¹⁶⁸ Students in temporary shelters were 31 percent less likely to be chronically absent than similar students at comparison schools.¹⁶⁹ The mentorship programs proved to be most effective.¹⁷⁰ In the most successful quartile of participating schools, chronically absent students supported by mentors increased attendance, on average, by more than one month of school.¹⁷¹ Additionally the mentorship program increased the likelihood that students remained in school.¹⁷²

Baltimore, Maryland

In Baltimore, in 2005, the Center for Families, Children and the Courts launched the Truancy Court Program. This voluntary program operates both a fall and spring session and consists of 10 weekly in-school meetings per session. Participants are of all age groups, with the median participant being 11 years old.¹⁷³ The vast majority of participants, 86 percent, are African American.¹⁷⁴ Each meeting involves the student and their family, along with teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, principals, staff from the Center for Families, Children and the Courts, a law student, and a volunteer judge.¹⁷⁵ The students meet weekly with a mentor who checks in with the student's family.¹⁷⁶ The meetings are a means to identify and target the causes of the student's truancy and to figure out on a case-by-case basis which tools and resources will support and encourage a student to regularly attend school.¹⁷⁷ As of fall 2011, data indicate that this program has been a success: Three-fourths of participants graduate and the average reduction in unexcused absences is 71 percent.¹⁷⁸

Hartford, Connecticut

In 2004, the Truancy Court Prevention Project, or TCPP, began to study the causes behind the chronic absenteeism of high school students from low-income communities in Hartford, Connecticut.¹⁷⁹ In the program, students are paired with case managers who analyze a student's academic, social, and behavioral needs.¹⁸⁰ The case manager engages families in the process and develops recommendations that can range from enrolling the student in special education to assigning the student a mentor to increase academic performance and combat chronic absences.¹⁸¹ The program also offers informal court sessions in school, legal assistance to connect students to needed government services, and legal advocacy to help with issues such as fair discipline policies.¹⁸² The program has been so successful that, since its inception in 2004, it has expanded to support middle school and elementary school students. Recent data from the 2012–2013 school year revealed that 81 percent of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders enrolled in the TCPP program achieved an attendance rate of 90 percent. Overall attendance increased by 28 percent between the three schools.¹⁸³

Recommendations

While truancy is a challenging problem in our nation's public school system, it is a solvable one. Interventions, such as those referred to in the case studies, may include a combination of student, school, family, and community-based approaches that address the causes of truancy and assess individual student needs with the involvement of educators, administrators, family members, and the community as an alternative to punishments such as fines and confinement.¹⁸⁴ These multimodal interventions work, especially when implemented early in a students' education. Younger students, for example, whose truancy issues were addressed early were found to have half the likelihood of dropping out of high school when compared to older students in middle school who had no intervention.¹⁸⁵

As such, we recommend the following for federal, state, and local governments, as well as school districts and schools:

- **Develop a national definition for truancy, chronic truancy, and chronic absenteeism.** Through our research, we found that the ways in which states defined truancy and other related terms vary dramatically and, in some cases, are vague. Developing a single definition of truancy, chronic truancy, and chronic absenteeism is important for increasing transparency and for identifying trends and solutions to a growing problem, particularly in disadvantaged communities. National, standardized definitions also allow for state-by-state data analysis. More data collection under these terms, particularly longitudinal studies on truancy and absenteeism, is a necessary tool to better assess and address these issues. The U.S. Department of Education should lead this process, in consultation with states, analogous to the movement toward a single, clear definition for the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. Subsequent to that change, states had better data and were well positioned to identify high schools with high dropout rates and execute a coordinated approach to tackling the problem.¹⁸⁶ Grappling with high rates of truancy and absenteeism could be on a similar trajectory, with a single approach to defining these terms and then identifying more about the problems that affect truant students.

- **States, school districts, and schools should improve data collection for early warning systems.**¹⁸⁷ **Early warning systems use up-to-date data to identify students who are at risk of falling behind in school and provide alerts to educators so that they can appropriately intervene and support students to advance and eventually graduate from high school.** These systems can play an important part in reducing truancy rates and in increasing high school graduation rates. Yet, early warning systems are only as good as their data. While protecting student privacy, states, school districts, and schools should work together to share data to ensure that the most timely and accurate data are available to educators and staff providing intervention supports. Furthermore, providing unique numeric student identifiers and developing a method of transferring attendance records when students change schools is critical. Depending on a state’s capacity, this may potentially include having one system at the state level under which all schools operate in order to better capture students who change schools or school districts, which is especially important for mobile children, such as those in the foster care system or who are homeless. As one report on this topic explains, “Inaccurate data produce incorrect recommendations for interventions, citing too many, too few, or misidentified students as ‘off track’ and for the wrong reasons.”¹⁸⁸ In order to be successful, early warning systems need the most accurate and timely data possible.
- **Increase wrap-around services and align them with student needs.**¹⁸⁹ **Robust data collection systems and accurate reports are only useful if they’re aligned with the appropriate interventions to combat truancy.** Reducing truancy rates should take an all-hands-on-deck approach to supporting students, particularly in disadvantaged communities. In many instances, this might mean that schools work with social workers, counselors, mentors, tutors, after-school or early learning programs, and health or social service agencies to provide students with the services they need. It may also include partnering with nonprofit organizations to increase schools capacity to support students.¹⁹⁰
- **Reduce punitive policies.** Schools, districts, and states should evaluate their anti-truancy policies—including zero-tolerance policies—and make punitive consequences, such as ticketing, fines imposed on students and/or their parents and guardians, or any punishment that removes students from the classroom, a last resort.¹⁹¹ Punitive policies should be replaced with systems that support students and reinforce the importance of attendance. Punitive policies could also be replaced with a myriad of incentives for students and/or their families that reward school attendance, including recognition at assemblies or through

certificates, interschool attendance competitions that rewards the class with the best or most improved attendance with a party, and the potential to receive gift certificates and transportation passes or raffles for other prizes.¹⁹² Furthermore, decriminalizing truancy will foster a positive and inclusionary school climate where students feel welcome and wanted and will reduce students encountering the legal system.¹⁹³

- **Conduct outreach to parents and guardians of students at risk for truancy and increase parental involvement and education.** Schools should consider targeted initiatives to reach out to families and guardians of students at risk for truancy and to increase parental involvement and education in anti-truancy programs. Because truancy is often influenced by factors occurring at home, involving parents in solutions is imperative. This should happen through parenting classes or specific parent engagement programs.¹⁹⁴ For example, schools could create a process or program where students who are truant are referred to school counselors or truancy reduction program specialists that will contact parents to discuss the attendance policies confidentially, as well as why attendance matters, and develop a relationship with them through asking questions. Together, they can create a family plan and strategies to increase the student's attendance.¹⁹⁵

Conclusion

Punitive policies, insufficient family and student support, and a lack of robust and comprehensive data all are contributing to increased rates of truancy and its consequences. Truant students are more likely to drop out of high school, face economic hardship as adults, or enter the criminal justice system. These potential outcomes of truancy are unacceptable in a society whose foundation is built upon opportunity. Education has long been seen as the means to prosperity, but that only happens if students attend school regularly on their way to completing their education. Fortunately, there are many ways to ensure completion through thoughtful and holistic truancy prevention strategies.

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Endnotes

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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