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## Truancy Intervention For Teenagers

by *Melissa Jones, Esq., Health Policy Analyst*

Since teenage truancy frequently stems from social issues, its remedies include mental health and social services, health care access and behavioral counseling and tutoring— as well as law enforcement.

Truancy programs are typically school-based, community-based or court-based, depending on who spearheads, funds and staffs them. But they all use similar procedures: strong attendance policies, counseling, well-trained staff and continuing internal evaluation.

They also all feature collaboration, between community resource providers and the school district/county office of education, and between government and community services.

Overall, the programs have:

- a well-structured Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) or a look-alike structure through the DA's office called Truancy Mediation;
- multi-agency cooperation between the county and the community;
- strong partnerships with law enforcement, probation and the DA; and
- consistent enforcement of relevant California laws.

Funding is a consistent challenge, although several possibilities include Safe Schools Healthy Students grants, the Mental Health Services Act, Juvenile



Justice grants, S.H. Cowell Foundation grants, and offset costs with increased ADA dollars.

### Student Attendance Review Boards & Multi-Agency Collaboration

SARBs are integral to effective truancy pro-

grams, and counties successful with their interventions have a consistent SARB in place. These review boards meet to address attendance issues for specific students, then make referrals to resources and sometimes to the DA's office.

A clear and standardized procedure is known throughout the county, and students are referred to a SARB until age 17.

For a SARB to reduce truancy, it must respond quickly. This depends upon well-trained staff, which is familiar with the procedure and able to respond appropriately— including getting the student file “court ready” if that student and parents do not comply.

Some counties have one person that coordinates truancy efforts. The position is funded by contributions through the districts, based on the number of SARB referrals.

SARBs routinely consist of many players from different agencies and with different backgrounds including: County Mental Health, Child Protective Services, Police Department, Family Resource Centers, Alcohol and Other Drug Ser-

vices, Department of Social Services, Probation Department, County Sheriffs, as well as school nurses, counselors and administrators from local school districts.

These same agencies also may be involved in the school itself or be present for hearings. Some counties have a handbook that guides who is on the SARB and how the various agencies should interact. Their relationships and responsibilities may also be defined through an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The support and cooperation of these services are an absolutely vital component to truancy programs.

### **Strong Partnerships Between Schools and Enforcers**

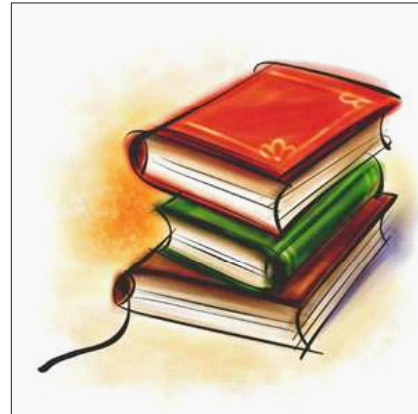
Without exception, the DA's office, law enforcement and probation department are key partners in truancy intervention, although their involvement is varied among counties and programs.

Some programs have formally outlined their relationships with the DA's office, law enforcement and probation department, but a more informal method may have the SARB handbook outlining DA, court and probation department relations. Many county offices have significant buy-in, with County Offices of Education partially funding a DA to handle all truancy related cases.

The DA's early role may represent an outside authority within SARB meetings and in court. This seemed important for emphasizing that truancy needs to be taken seriously by the student and by the parents. Additionally, parents and students may meet in a group setting with the DA to become familiarized with the formal truancy process.

Probation officers may cover specific school districts or regions, so they will do home visits and help coordinate services. In some counties, this role is filled by a truancy outreach officer (discussed in a later section).

Targeted truancy sweeps are conducted by probation or police in some counties. This can be especially effective when promoted through the media, because it shows the community that consequences for truancy are real. The county conducts the sweeps



when there are a regular number of bench warrants for not showing up in court.

### **Enforcement of Laws**

There are well known laws in place that define truancy,<sup>1</sup> outline sanctions for parents (fines, decreasing Cal WORKS benefits, imprisonment)<sup>2,3,4</sup> and sanctions for students (community services, suspension/revocation of driver's license, fines).<sup>5</sup> Such reprimands are not to be relied on to "cure" truancy, but should be used as a last resort to follow through and emphasize the serious nature of truancy to the community.

Truancy courts or a regular truancy calendar with one judge is a common feature of many of these programs, and they aid in the consistent enforcement of the laws because inconsistent enforcement can be a barrier to effective truancy intervention. Parents and students need to know that the laws exist and that they will be enforced, both by the DA and the judge that handles the truancy court or calendar.

In two counties interviewed, one mechanism of enforcing court orders is to threaten juvenile facility visits on weekends. If a student does not follow through with a court order, the DA will cite and threaten him or her with two weekends in a juvenile detention facility. The student attends for the first weekend, and if attendance improves for a month, they get the second weekend removed. If they fail to improve attendance, then they must go for a second weekend. While they are at the facility, they are paired with a trainer/mentor to give them skills to cope with life and school.

### Truancy Outreach Officers

Anecdotal evidence suggests that truancy outreach officers, someone who visits the home and makes personal contact with chronically truant students, can be part of an effective strategy.

Truancy outreach officers may be more appropriate for smaller, more rural counties. The programs that handled more students, were more complex or were located in counties that contained at least one densely populated urban center tended to not use truancy outreach officers. They would instead rely on police or probation.

Districts that use truancy officers that are not probation officers pay for the program based on the number of SARB referrals from that district. Each investigator handles a variety of grade levels (K-12, community schools). The investigators work with schools, parents and students to identify needs and help connect the family with community resources. They may even sit on the SARB and do regular school site visits and home visits.

### Looking to the Future – Life Skills

Some programs employ tactics that help prepare students for the future instead of focusing on failed

attendance or traditional education, which may be beyond a point of effective intervention.

Members of the business community and other professions visit the school to talk about their jobs and broaden horizons about opportunities available to students. Students are encouraged to take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to identify skill sets or get help taking the GED. Teachers may take students on tours of the community college campus, in part to show them an academic environment outside of high school that may be more exciting or help expose them to career options.

### Conclusion

Truancy is a problem that exists in many schools in rural regions. This results in a loss of money for the district through reduced daily attendance dollars, but also it makes it difficult to truly serve the academic needs of students. Truancy intervention programs directed towards older populations are time intensive, but serve a purpose in helping these students prepare for life outside of high school, which may only be a year away.

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### Endnotes

1. Cal Edu. Code §48260.5; Cal. Edu Code §48263
2. Cal Penal Code §272
3. Cal Edu Code § 48292
4. Cal Welfare & Institutions §11253.5
5. Cal Edu. Code § 48260.5; Cal. Edu. Code §48264.5; Cal. Welfare & Institutions §601

## Acknowledgments

### Many thanks to:

- The California Wellness Foundation & The California Endowment for providing support for this work.
- Sid Dominitz
- Rollin Richmond, President, Humboldt State University
- Denice Helwig, Special Assistant to the President, Humboldt State University
- Garry Eagles, Superintendent, Humboldt County Office of Education
- Sheila Silan, Coordinator, El Dorado County of Education, School Attendance Review Board
- Elizabeth Thomas, Deputy DA, Monterey County Truancy Abatement Program
- Harold Jones, Child Welfare and Attendance Officer/Truancy Investigator, Lake County Truancy Reduction Program
- Linda Tyner, Director, Lake County Court and Community Schools
- Daryl G. Thiesen, Prevention Programs Coordinator, Truancy Reduction & Attendance Coalition of Kern
- Brianne Stetson, Truancy Prosecution Specialist, Shasta County Office of Education, School Attendance Review Board
- Beth Shipley, M.P.H.
- Terry Uyeki, M.S.Ed., Director of Evaluation & Community Services; & Alissa Leigh, Research Associate
- Humboldt State University Sponsored Programs Foundation



*This report is funded in part by a grant from The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF). Created in 1992 as an independent, private foundation, TCWF's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness education and disease prevention.*



*This research and report were made possible by grants from The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, and in-kind support from Humboldt State University.*