

# Project Evaluation Report

## **Donovan Middle School Truancy Reduction Project**

Prepared for:

**Utica Safe School Healthy Students Partnership Inc.**

March 30, 2009

**Funding for this report was provided by the New York State Division of  
Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) Youth Violence Reduction Initiative via  
Utica Safe Schools Healthy Partnership Inc.**

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## **Introduction and Overview**

This report is the first to take a look at the problem of truancy in Utica public schools. While the primary purpose of the report is to evaluate the effectiveness of a NYS Department of Criminal Justice (DCJS) funded youth violence/youth crime reduction program, we also provide some context and a broad view of the problem of truancy and its solutions in both Utica public schools and the nation at large.

The DCJS program providing funding for this project is called “INSPYRE” and the program it funded is called the “Donovan Middle School Truancy Reduction Project” referred to throughout this report as the “Project” or the Donovan Truancy Project”. INSPYRE is part of a more global set of projects that make up the DCJS Youth Violence Reduction (YVR) initiative.

## **The Grantee and Project Administrator**

Utica Safe Schools Healthy Students Partnership, Inc., the Project grantee is a non-profit organization working closely with the Utica School District, the City of Utica, the Utica Police Department and the Oneida County Department of Social Services on a variety of programs to improve the academic and social well being of Utica public school students. Below is a description of the activities of this organization:

Our mission takes us way beyond a narrow focus on school-based, academic services. In 2004 we contracted with the City of Utica to develop a comprehensive plan to reduce youth violence and juvenile crime in Utica funded by the DCJS Youth Violence Reduction (YVR) initiative. Since this time our organization has been on the steering committee of the City’s Juvenile Crime Enforcement Coalition (JCEC) and we have been actively involved in the implementation phase of the city’s YVR plan (our bullying program receives DCJS/YVR funding). We also are actively participating in two new youth gang initiatives in our community that have just been initiated (summer, 2007) by the Oneida County Executive and the Oneida County DA’s office in response to the emerging youth gang problem in Utica and School Resource Officers who work with our organization are now focusing their efforts on youth gang identification and suppression.

Utica Safe Schools Coordinators are present at 9 elementary schools and both (2) middle schools in the Utica School District. In the 2005-2006 school year our coordinators worked with 5092 students and in a average school month they provided pro social skills groups to 396 students, direct services to 387 students, attended 12 Superintendent’s Hearings, received 268 Instructional Support Team referrals, and worked directly with 234 families. Our Advantage After School Program at Donovan Middle School [the Project site] averaged 115 students/day.

Anne Lansing, Director, Utica Safe Schools Healthy Students, Inc. 2007

## **Characteristics of the City of Utica, NY**

The City of Utica's total population is 60,651 (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000), 7,986 (11.6%) less than the 1990 population of 68,637. Since 1980, the City has become increasingly diverse as white population losses have been offset by white ethnic, and black and Hispanic minority population increases. Our city's white non-Hispanic population has been declining since 1950. From 1990 to 2000 the number of white residents dropped substantially (by 11,313 persons). At the same time, the city's minority population has been increasing since 1980. In 1980 non-whites represented only 8.5 percent of the population. In 1990, this percentage nearly doubled to 16.7 percent. In 2000, the Census reported that racial and ethnic minorities comprise 20.6 percent of Utica's population. One in every five residents claims minority status.

Off-setting population loss from out-migration to some extent, there has been an influx of refugees into the City of Utica and the surrounding areas. Since 1975, more than 10,000 refugees have settled in Utica. Over 6,000 Bosnian refugees arrived in the mid to late 1990s. The Bosnian population in Utica represents the fourth largest Bosnian community in the country, behind Chicago, St. Louis and Phoenix. The second largest group of refugees and immigrants (1,552 individuals) came from countries of the former Soviet Union. The remaining top source countries were Vietnam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cuba, the former Czechoslovakia, Haiti, Hungary, Iraq, Laos, Poland, Romania and Somalia. There has also been a recent increase in Hispanic immigrants from Puerto Rico and Latin American countries and Somali-Bantu and Karen Burmese refugees from Myanmar who arrived in the past several years are now the two most recent groups to call Utica home.

Although this ethnic diversity enriches our community in many ways, it presents significant challenges to parents and youth of both newly arrived and longtime residents, and to public schools and law enforcement agencies. Two recent incidents that resulted in death— a “beat in” by Vietnamese youth gang members and the death of a Utica Police officer were committed by gang members from Vietnam and Puerto Rico respectively and a rash of fights involving Karen-Burmese youth and other ethnic minorities in 2008 presented challenged parents, school administrators, and the Utica Police Department to come up with solutions.

Poor female-headed, single-parent families dominate family composition in the target area. Over half the families in three of four census tracts in Cornhill are single parent families. This is also true for all three census tracts on the Lower East Side and 7 of 8 tracts in West Utica. (US Census Bureau, Census 2000, SF1). Both poverty and single-parent families are documented risk factors for truancy, substance abuse, delinquency and adult crime (National Center for School Engagement, 2006).

Educational and economic attainment in our target area are below the average for the city of Utica, which itself is below state and national averages. West Utica Census Tracts have a range of family poverty rates from 24 to 60 percent. Census Tract 215, which is located in the center of Cornhill on Utica's East side has a median household income of \$17,969, a 66% family poverty rate for single-parent families and a 42% percent family poverty rate for two-parent families. Thirty-one percent of the population over age 25 in this census tract has not finished high school, and only 10% hold a bachelor's or more advanced degree (US Census Bureau, Census 2000, SF3).

The employment picture in Utica is less than positive. NYS Department of Labor unemployment statistics mask the reality that fewer than half of working age residents work full time throughout the year. In Utica, 42% of white males age 16 or older worked full-time, year round in 1999. Only 26% of Black males and 33% of Hispanic males worked full-time, year round this same year. For females in Utica, labor market participation rates are even lower: 25% of white females, 23% of black females, and 26% of Hispanic females age 16 and older worked full-time, year round in 1999 (US Census Bureau, Census 2000, SF3).

As the above statistics indicate, Utica’s Cornhill section, Lower East Side, and West Utica neighborhoods are populated largely with working class and working and non-working poor families and individuals struggling to pay the rent and take care of other basic needs each month. These neighborhoods are home to a disproportionate number of poor single-parent families and single individuals with disabilities. Extreme economic deprivation, high rates of mobility, low educational attainment, scant legal economic opportunities, and the availability of illegal drugs in these neighborhoods, all contribute to low neighborhood cohesion and social disorganization in general- conditions favorable to delinquency, crime, truancy, and gang activity.

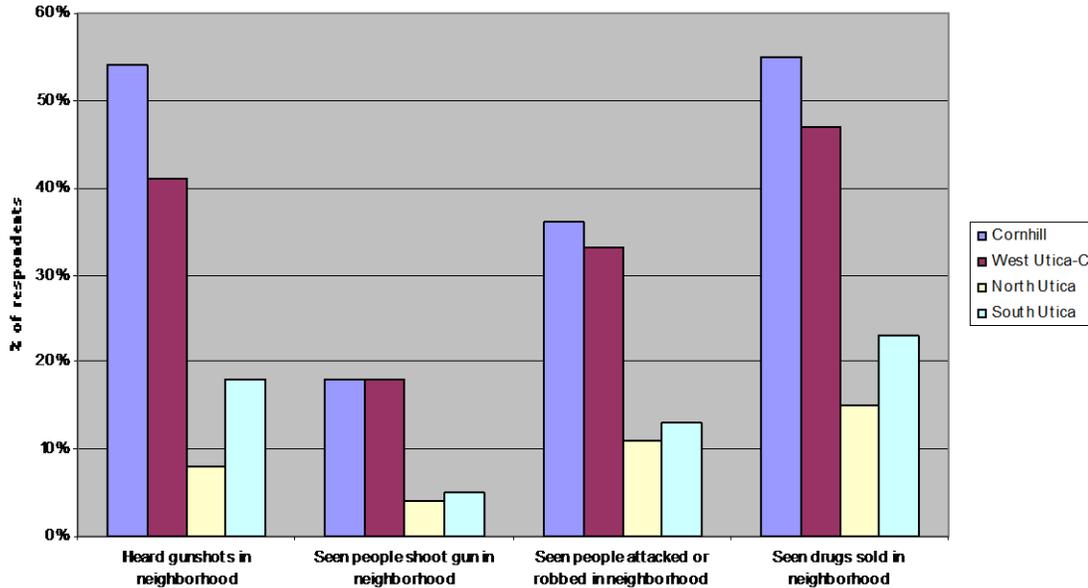
**Neighborhood-level indicators of social disorganization in Cornhill and West Utica**

Neighborhood	Tract	Percent Responding “Yes” to observing following events:			
		Heard gunshots in neighborhood	Seen people shoot gun in neighborhood	Seen people attacked or robbed in neighborhood	Seen drugs sold in neighborhood
Cornhill	207.01				
	212.01				
	212.02	54%	18%	36%	55%
	215				
West Utica-E	203*				
	211.01	33	16	31	26
	211.02				
West Utica-C	201				
	209	41	18	33	47
	214.01				
West Utica-W	214.02				
	214.04	31	15	15	40

SOURCE: Darman, S, et al, “Youth Violence, Juvenile Crime and Youth Gangs In Utica, NY,” Social Science Associates, Utica, NY, 2005.

Over 30% of all student respondents in the entire target area report hearing gunshots and over 15% report seeing such shooting. In most areas, over 30% also report seeing people attacked or robbed, and even higher percentages (over 40% in most areas) report seeing drugs being sold. For basis of comparison, the graph below demonstrates that levels of these indicators are substantially higher in Cornhill and Central West Utica (2 sub-sections of the target area) than areas outside the central city:

**Comparison of Community Disorganization Indicators**



Finally, as a measure of Low Neighborhood Attachment, the 2005 USSHS survey found that between 25.1 and 31.4% of youth surveyed in the target area do not feel safe in their neighborhood after dark.

**Lack of Commitment to School**

Local data points to serious problems directly related to a lack of commitment to school for youth in our target population. A large proportion of Utica students (31.2%) report they skipped at least one class period in the past 30 days, and 15.3% indicated they had skipped three or more in the same time frame. In the County as a whole, 23.1% of students reported cutting class in the past 30 days (Teen Assessment Project (TAP) survey, 2003)

Nearly 30 percent (28.9%) of Utica 2003 TAP respondents reported feeling unsafe at school, about 10 percent more than countywide respondents. Newly released 2007 TAP data for Donovan Middle School, the target school for this project, reveals that nearly half the students (48%) reported that they felt unsafe at this school and one in four students (26.6%) reported missing school because they felt unsafe. The OJJDP Truancy Prevention Online Resource Center reports that five percent of all American children do not go to school because they feel unsafe; thus a strong link between safety and truancy/low school commitment is implied.

A high proportion of students in our target population exhibit behaviors that further inhibit their commitment to school and put them at risk of spending more time in the streets where they are exposed to and often involved in crime and violence. Nearly one in five children (19.8%) in Donovan Middle School reported that they were suspended once during the 2006 school year. Nearly one in ten (9.1%) reported being suspended more than once (Utica TAP, 2007)

**The Project Site: Senator James H. Donovan Middle School in Utica, NY**

Senator James H. Donovan Middle School is located at 1700 Noyes Street on Utica’s West side. It is a magnet school and is considered to be a Title 1 school with the cost of each student averaging up to \$13,000.00 per year. Title 1 is a federally funded aid program based on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in which school districts receive funding to provide supplemental instruction for those students who qualify. The allocation of funds for each school district is based on a legislative formula dependent upon the distribution of low-income students and the state per pupil expenditures. However, Title 1 services are provided for all children who qualify as needing assistance in language arts or mathematics regardless of income. The principal of Donovan is Richard Ambruso. Mr. Ambruso manages a staff 87 teachers with 8% of them having less than 3 years of experience in the job. 28% of Donovan’s teachers have their master’s degree and up to 30 hours of doctorate work.

Donovan is a bustling school with over a thousand students. In the 2006-2007 school year the National Center for Educational Statistics (CCD Public school data) reports that Donovan had 1,063 students at three grade levels, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>1</sup>. The teacher to student ratio is 1:12.

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b># With 20 or more Unexcused Absences</b>	<b>% with 20 or more Unexcused Absences</b>
Donovan	6	448	62	13.8%
	7	370	62	16.8%
	8	363	98	27.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>1181</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>18.8%</b>

Source: Utica School District Database, 8/13/2007

Truancy at Donovan was very high, especially for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, during the 2006-2007 school year when USSHS made the decision to apply to DCJS for funding to address the problem as indicated by the table above.

Donovan is racially and ethnically diverse with 463 white students (44%), 382 Black students (36%), 74 Asian students (7%) and 144 Hispanic students (14%) in attendance. The families of Donovan students are predominately poor and working poor: in 2006-2007, two-thirds (68%) of Donovan’s students were eligible to receive free lunch and another 10% were eligible for reduced-price lunch.

<sup>1</sup> Note the slight discrepancy between the enrollment total (1181) from the Utica School District database and the total reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (1063).

## **Truancy in the United States**

Among the many problems American communities and their public schools face is an increasing rise in truancy (Dekalb, 1999). Truancy, also referred to as “skipping school” and “ditching”, is defined by all states as unexcused absence(s) from school without the knowledge of a parent or guardian. Truancy has existed in the United States educational system since the 1600s ever since officials of the colonies sought to establish education for their members and their progeny (Mason, 1982). Cutting out on school has been romanticized as the harmless mischief juveniles do on sunny days carefree days in both literature and film by characters such as Tom Sawyer and Ferris Bueller, But the fact is that school-aged children are required by all states to attend school whether that school is public, private, parochial, or some other educational forum, and not attending school is associated with a myriad of both minor and more serious social and personal problems. For example, one study done in New York State on 85 juveniles convicted of murder from 1978-1986, found that 57.6% had a history of truancy (Grant et al., 1992).

Truancy is a status offense as it only applies to people of a certain age. The school age for a juvenile varies from state to state, with most states requiring attendance either from age 6 to age 17 or from age 5 to age 18. There are a number of exceptions, such as Pennsylvania, which denotes school age as between 8 and 17 and Illinois, which denotes school age as between 7 and 16.

The number of days required in order for a juvenile to be labeled "truant," also varies by school, school district, and state. State legislations tend to provide some guidelines for school districts by setting a maximum number of absences allowed. School districts are then allowed to tighten these guidelines. For example, in Pennsylvania, a truant is a school-aged juvenile who is absent from school more than three times after a notice of truancy has been sent to the juvenile's home. In Louisiana, a juvenile is deemed truant after the fifth unexcused absence from school, provided that these absences occurred in a single month. Many school districts define truancy as any unexcused absence, where unexcused means the student has not showed up or has left school property without parental/guardian or school permission.

## **The Rationale for Truancy Laws**

Compulsory education began about sixty years ago and was strongly influenced by labor unions who were trying to keep children from working. The participation of children in the labor force kept adult wages low. Compulsory attendance in schools also lifted some authority of parents over their children to the state, as parents could no longer force their children to work. The state's authority over school attendance was underscored in *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944). In this landmark case, the Supreme Court decided that the state had the right to uphold child labor laws and parents' authority could not preempt that of the state. Therefore, children had to attend school whether their parents supported education or not.

In recent research conducted by the Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, 2001), links between truancy and other, more serious forms of delinquency have been delineated. For example, the links between truancy and substance abuse, vandalism, auto theft, and gang behavior have all been established in criminology literature (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). The link between truancy and later, violent offending has been established in studies that examine male

criminality (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). In turn, adults who were truants as juveniles tend to exhibit poorer social skills, have lower paying jobs, are more likely to rely on welfare support, and have an increased likelihood of incarceration (Hawkins & Catalano, 1995).

Residents have also put pressure on schools and lawmakers to tighten truancy laws as groups of young people loitering in public during school hours often appear threatening. In Tacoma, Washington, an increase in truancy was associated with an increase in juvenile perpetrated property crimes, such as burglary and vandalism. This increase in juvenile daytime crime led to a program targeting the enforcement of truancy laws in this state.

Those school districts with the highest truancy rates also have the lowest academic achievement rates. This link is usually established through truancy policies, which deem automatic failure in courses where students are regularly absent. Therefore, students who do not attend school on a regular basis are unlikely to graduate from high school. Between 1992 and 2002 there have been approximately three million young adults each year aged between 16 and 24 who have either failed to complete high school or not enrolled in high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). This number represents about 11 percent of young adults in the United States. Within this group, there are a disproportionate number of minority students; for example, 30 percent of Hispanics are not completing high school (NCES, 2001). This number increased to 44 percent if the students born outside of the United States were included (NCES, 2001). Thus, the recent wave of immigration appears to have important implications when analyzing high school dropout rates. Researchers have linked this correlation to parental attitudes toward education. However, coming from countries or cultures where education is not always highly valued, parents may not encourage their children to attend school, increasing the truancy rate and also increasing the drop-out rate (Alexander et al., 1997).

Failure to complete high school not only affects the individual, but it also affects society. Affected students cannot attend college, are more likely to have low paying jobs and become disconnected from full participation in civic society. They contribute less in tax revenue and are more likely to experience health problems, and place a strain on social services (Rosenfeld, Richman and Bowen, 1998). A recent U.S. Department of Labor study showed that 6.7 percent of adults with no high school diploma are likely to be unemployed, while only 3.5 percent of adults with a high school diploma are likely to be unemployed. With a bachelor's degree, only 1.8 percent of adults are likely to be unemployed (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1999).

### **Extent of the Truancy Problem**

Although there are currently no national-level statistics available on the extent of the truancy, many states and cities do keep their own statistics which are often used to influence policy. A recent national study of school principals revealed that truancy was listed as one of the top five concerns by the majority of respondents (Heaviside, et al., 1998). In Chicago, a study conducted during the 1995-1996 school year indicated that the average 10th grader missed six weeks of instruction (Roderick et. al., 1997). Recent OJJDP research suggests that the numbers of truants are highest in inner city, public schools, where there are large numbers of students and where a large percentage of the student population participates in the free lunch program (OJJDP, 2001), a profile that fits the target school for this project.

In terms of court processing, the number of truancy cases referred to juvenile courts is fairly small; for example, in 1998, about 28 percent of referred status offenses were truantries, which is an 85 percent increase compared with the previous ten years. However, this number is expected to increase dramatically given recent changes to truancy laws. This research by the OJJDP (2001) also reported that females are just as likely as males to be adjudicated for truancy.

### **The Urban and Minority Context**

No national data on truancy rates exists, but many large cities report staggeringly high rates of truancy (Baker, Sigman, & Nugent, 2001); in general, larger schools have higher rates of truancy (Puzzanchera et al., 2003). The relationship between race and truancy is not well established, but the truancy data collected by the juvenile court system reveal that whites are underrepresented in petitioned truancy cases (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Puzzanchera et al., 2003). Students with the highest truancy rates are at higher risk of dropping out of school (Baker et al., 2001), and African Americans and Latinos consistently have the highest dropout rates (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). The relationship between income and truancy is also not well established, but it is generally believed that students from lower income families have higher rates of truancy (Bell et al., 1994). The number of truancy cases is evenly divided between boys and girls, and the peak age for petitioned truancy cases is fifteen (Puzzanchera et al., 2003).

### **Correlates of Truancy**

The following factors have been found to have associations with truancy in that the likelihood of truancy is increased given the presence of these variables. Family factors, such as lack of supervision, physical and psychological abuse, and failure to encourage educational achievement are first. Second, school factors which can range from inconsistent enforcement of rules to student boredom with curriculum are correlated with high truancy rates. Economic factors are a third variable, and these include factors such as high family mobility or parents with multiple jobs. The last set of variables impacting truancy are the personal characteristics of students such as drug and alcohol abuse, ignorance of school rules, and lack of interest in education or learning disabilities.

### **Enforcing Truancy Laws**

In all states, the first body responsible for enforcing truancy laws is usually the school. School officials, such as school truancy officers, teachers, and school principals, refer truancy cases to juvenile court jurisdiction. However, if truant individuals are found in a public area, they may be detained by police or taken to a detention facility.

Arizona was the first state in the United States to implement and enforce a get-tough approach to truancy laws. Research on truancy in Arizona began in the early 1990s. Pima County had the highest truancy rate in the state during this time period; in fact, truants from this county made up half of all truants in the state. Because of the extent of the problem, Pima County began a program called ACT Now (Abolish Chronic Truancy) which aimed to strictly enforce state and district truancy laws and offer a diversion program to address the root causes of truancy. The program also sought to provide serious sanctions for both juveniles and their parents if truancy persisted or if

conditions specified by the diversion program were not met. School districts, school administrators, law enforcement personnel, and community agencies are involved in this program.

Once a student has one unexcused absence from school, a letter is sent home to the student's parents explaining the consequences of truancy. After a third unexcused absence, the juvenile is referred to the Center for Juvenile Alternatives (CJA) which makes a recommendation to the juvenile court. A letter is sent to the juvenile's parents explaining the diversion program or the alternative court imposed sanctions, and the parents decide which course of action they would prefer.

The diversion program consists of counseling, parenting classes, support groups, etc. Very often parents have no idea that their child is missing school, or they do not seem to care. Support groups and classes teach parents about the value of education and also help parents communicate more effectively with their teenagers. In their report, the CJA will identify which type of intervention is best for the family, and the juvenile and his or her parents will be referred accordingly. Both parents and the juvenile must sign an agreement promising to abide by the conditions of the diversion program. Successful completion of the program results in the truancy case being dismissed.

The ACT Now program has been formally evaluated by the American Prosecutors Research Institute (APRI), and each school district involved in the program has shown a steady decrease in the number of trancies each year. In the district with the highest percentage of trancies, ACT Now helped reduce trancies by 64 percent between 1996 and 1998. This program and versions of it are financially supported by the Department of Justice and have been implemented in many other states.

### **Getting Tough on Parents**

Many states also hold parents accountable for their children's truancy, and Arizona was the first state to implement such laws. The rationale behind this movement was to coerce parents into taking an active role in their children's education and for all parties to take truancy laws and school attendance seriously. In Virginia, parents can be fined and jailed for failure to adequately supervise school-aged children, which includes making sure they are attending school. In Pennsylvania, parents can also be fined and jailed if they have not taken reasonable steps to ensure their child is attending school. In Texas and many other states, similar laws have recently been passed.

### **Truancy and Home Schooling**

The popularity of home schooling has increased dramatically between 1997 and 2002, and the Department of Education estimates that between 700,000 and two million children were home schooled during the 1999-2000 academic year. This fact has a large impact on the enforcement of truancy laws, as home schooled children may be out in public during school hours and could be apprehended by police. In many states, the right to home school children is protected by the state's constitution. For example, the constitution of the state of Oklahoma reads:

THE LEGISLATURE SHALL PROVIDE FOR THE COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE AT SOME PUBLIC OR OTHER SCHOOL, UNLESS OTHER MEANS OF EDUCATION ARE PROVIDED,

OF ALL THE CHILDREN IN THE STATE WHO ARE SOUND IN MIND AND BODY, BETWEEN THE AGES OF EIGHT AND 16 YEARS, FOR AT LEAST THREE MONTHS IN EACH YEAR.(Article XIII)

Many states, like Oklahoma, have not yet resolved how home schooling affects the enforcement of truancy laws. For example, in Illinois, there are currently no provisions for home schooled children under the law, and these children would be in violation of the state's truancy laws if those laws were enforced. The only exceptions to the truancy laws, that is, those circumstances in which school-aged individuals are not required to attend a public school in Illinois are: those attending private or parochial schools, those who are physically or mentally unable to attend school, those females who are pregnant or have young children, those who are lawfully employed, and those individuals who are absent for religious holidays.

The regulation of home schooling thus varies greatly by state. Some states have very little regulation and do not require parents to contact the state to inform officials that children will be home schooled. Some of these states are Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois, Oklahoma, Michigan, Missouri, and New Jersey. Other states, such as California, Arizona, New Mexico, Alabama, and Kentucky, have low regulation and require that parents who are home schooling their children report this fact to the state. Other states, such as Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Colorado, Oregon, Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana, have moderate regulation in which parents must report test scores and student evaluations to the state. Some states, such as New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maine, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Washington, and Utah, require parents to submit test scores and evaluations of students and also professional evaluations of teachers and curriculum for approval. The level of regulation in each state affects how truancy laws can be enforced. If the state has no record of students being home schooled, it is difficult to enforce truancy laws across the board.

### **Examples of State Truancy Laws**

Although states vary in their responses to truancy, their laws in defining truancy are fairly similar. Below are some examples for various states.

**CALIFORNIA:** Any school-aged child who is absent from school without valid excuse three full days in one school year or tardy or absent for more than any 30-minute period during one school day on three occasions during the school year or any combination thereof is considered truant and should be reported to the supervisor of the school district.

**CONNECTICUT:** A truant is a child between the ages of five and 18 who is enrolled in any public or private school and has four unexcused absences in a month or 10 in any school year. A habitual truant is a child of the same age who has 20 unexcused absences from school during a school year.

**ILLINOIS:** A truant is defined as any child subject to compulsory schooling and who is absent from school unexcused. Absences that are excused are determined by the school board. A chronic or habitual truant is a school-age child who is absent without valid cause for 10 percent out of 180 consecutive days. The truant officer in Illinois is responsible for informing parents of truancy and referring the case to juvenile court.

LOUISIANA: Any student between the ages of seven and seventeen is required to attend school. A student is considered truant when the child has been absent from school for five school days in schools operating on a semester system and for ten days in schools not operating on a semester basis. A student may be referred to juvenile court for habitual absence when all reasonable efforts by school administrators have failed and there have been five unexcused absences in one month. The school principal or truancy officer shall file a report indicating dates of absences, contacts with parents, and other information.

VIRGINIA: Any student between the ages of five and 18 is subject to compulsory school attendance. After a pupil has been absent for five days during the school year without a valid excuse, a notice is sent to parents outlining the consequences of truancy. A conference with school officials and parents is arranged within fifteen school days of the sixth absence. Once a truant has accumulated more than seven absences during the school year, the case will be referred to juvenile and domestic relations court.

NEW YORK: In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, New York's state truancy law considered children from ages 5 to 14 as vagrants and was considered as part of the criminal code and demanded that they be arrested for not going to school (New York Times, 1910). At that time, authorities knew that some parents could not afford to clothe their children and send them to school because their presence was needed around their households where they had to attend in the child-care and rearing of their younger siblings while their parents went out and earned a living. Authorities at the time viewed the law as unjust and called upon a commission to present this problem to the legislature to revise this harsh and somewhat draconian approach to truancy.

In September 1997, the *New York Times* reported that three city schools would be among the first in the state to pilot a learnfare program. By law, the program would extend to all schools in the state by September 1999. The article described the state law:

"...If a child missed five or more days of school in a three-month academic quarter 'without good cause,' the social services agency is required to cut welfare benefits for that child's household. The law applies to children in first through sixth grades."

According to the article, "Critics have asserted that the policy punishes children for their parents' failure to get them to school. Supporters defend it as a route out of welfare for children who are encouraged to stay in school."

These actions also grab the attention of parents and guardians, but again caution must be taken to avoid penalizing families when it is not warranted

### **Model Truancy Reduction Initiatives**

Each community needs to determine how it will reduce and deter truancy. Below are descriptions of truancy programs being used in communities around the country which employ some or all of the elements described above:

**Milwaukee, Wisconsin:**

*Program elements:* Parents, police, and the school system focus on the causes of truancy in the Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression (TABS) initiative in Milwaukee. Attendance is taken every period in all high schools. Local police officers pick up truant students and bring them to a Boys and Girls Club for counseling. Parents are called at home automatically every night if their child did not attend school that day. If the parent is not supportive of regular school attendance, then the district attorney is contacted.

*Results:* In a recent sample of students who went through the TABS process, 73 percent returned to school the next day, 66 percent remained in school on the 15th day, and 64 percent still are in school 30 days later. Since the TABS initiative began, daytime burglary in Milwaukee has decreased 33 percent, and daytime aggravated battery has decreased 29 percent. Aquine Jackson, Director of the Parent and Student Services Division of the Milwaukee Public Schools, says, "I think the TABS program is so effective because it is a collaboration among...the Milwaukee Public Schools, the Milwaukee Boys and Girls Clubs, the Milwaukee Police Department, and the County Sheriff, and because it is now a part of state statute that police officers can stop students on the street during school hours."

**Rohnert Park, California:**

*Program elements:* The Stop, Cite and Return Program is designed to reduce truancy and juvenile crime in the community and to increase average daily attendance for the schools. Patrol officers issue citations to suspected truants contacted during school hours, and students are returned to school to meet with their parents and a vice principal. Two citations are issued without penalty; the third citation results in referral to appropriate support services.

*Results:* Due in large part to this initiative, the daytime burglary rate is 75 percent below what it was in 1979. Haynes Hunter, who has worked in different capacities on the issue of truancy in Rohnert Park for over 15 years, says the program is effective because it is a "high visibility" effort. "Being on the street, being in contact with the kids makes them aware of the fact that we care. We want them to get their education."

### **New Haven, Connecticut:**

*Program elements:* The Stay in School Program targets middle school students who have just begun to have problems. Targeted students go to truancy court, at which a panel of high school students question them and try to identify solutions. After court, youth and attorney mentors are assigned to each student for support. The student and the court sign a written agreement, and after two months, students return to the court to review their contract and report on their progress.

*Results:* Denise Keyes Page, who recruits and trains mentors for this initiative, says "This program works because it harnesses the power of peer pressure. Truants are judged and mentored by their peers, instead of just by adults who may seem distant and unconnected. Our program uses both the carrot and stick approaches, providing both supportive mentorship and real courtroom accountability to truant students. One of the evolving strengths of the program is that not only are we providing support to the truant, but we are serving as a resource to their parents."

### **Atlantic County, New Jersey:**

*Program elements:* The Atlantic County Project Helping Hand receives referrals from six Atlantic City and four Pleasantville elementary schools for youth in K through eighth grades who have five to 15 days of unexcused absences. A truancy worker meets with the youth and family to provide short-term family counseling, usually up to eight sessions. Referrals for additional social services are made on an as needed basis. If the family fails to keep appointments, home visits are made to encourage cooperation. Once a truancy problem is corrected, the case is closed and placed on an aftercare/monitoring status with contact made at 30, 60, and 90 day intervals to ensure that truancy does not persist.

*Results:* During the past school year, 84 percent of the students who participated in the Atlantic County program had no recurrence of truancy. Colleen Denelsback of project Helping Hand says that "our philosophy is one of early intervention, both at the age level and the number of unexcused absences. We stress that the earlier intervention takes place, the greater the chance for positive outcomes. Early intervention will prevent truancy and later delinquency."

### **Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**

*Program elements:* The THRIVE (Truancy Habits Reduced Increasing Valuable Education) initiative is a comprehensive anti-truancy program spurred by an ongoing community partnership of law enforcement, education, and social service officials. Police bring a suspected truant to a

community-run detention center where, within one hour of arrival, officials assess the youth's school status, release the youth to a parent or relative, and refer the family to any needed social service agencies. Parents are notified by the district attorney of potential consequences for repeat behavior. Parents who harbor youth with 15 days of consecutive unexcused absences are subject to misdemeanor charges.

*Results:* Since THRIVE's inception in 1989, the Oklahoma City Police Department reports a 33 percent drop in daytime burglary rates. Tom Steemen, the parent of a student who went through THRIVE, says, "The first I heard of the program was when my son was caught and taken to the center. I was real glad to know they had something like THRIVE." His son Ken, age 15, says, "THRIVE shook me up. I knew (while in the police car) just how wrong I was."

### **Norfolk, Virginia:**

*Program elements:* The Norfolk, Virginia school district uses software to collect data on students who are tardy, cut class, leave grounds without permission, are truant but brought back to school by police, or are absent without cause. Each school has a team composed of teachers, parents, and school staff that examines the data to analyze truancy trends. For example, a team may try to pinpoint particular locations where truant students are found during school hours and then place additional monitors in these locations. A team may also notice certain months when truancy is prevalent and then design special programs to curb truancy during those months.

*Results:* Ann Hall of the Norfolk Public Schools says, "Attendance has improved at all levels of schools since 1992 - two percent at the elementary and secondary levels. The overall district average is up one percent. This is significant in that leg al attendance is at the 93rd percentile. Tighter attendance policies, grading practices, and teamwork have lead to this improvement...There are few, if any, teachers complaining that discipline and law violations are not being handled consistently throughout the district. This is a marked improvement over the report that was made in the teacher satisfaction survey conducted in 1988."

### **Marion, Ohio:**

*Program elements:* The Community Service Early Intervention Program focuses on potential truants during freshman year. Referred students are required to attend tutoring sessions as directed, give their time to community service projects, and participate in a counseling program. In addition, students are required to give back to the Intervention initiative by sharing what they have learned with new students in the program and by recommending others who might benefit. Parental

participation is required throughout the program. Upon completion of the six-week sequence, school records relative to truancy are nullified. If the student fails the program, formal court intervention is the next step.

*Results:* Of the 28 students who took part in the program this semester, 20 have improved attendance records and will pass freshman year. The eight who did not improve their attendance records either moved from the school district or were removed from the school for failure to meet attendance requirements. Misty Swanger, Community Educator for this initiative, saw a general improvement in the grades and behavior of the students. Executive Director Christine Haas says, "This program is a combination of early intervention and early attention. As long as the child knows that someone is watching out for them and taking an interest in them, they will not be truant. The attention factor is very important. It creates success." The intervention program has already identified 100 ninth grade students with truancy problems to work with in the coming year.

### **Peoria, Arizona**

*Program elements:* In Operation Save Kids, school officials contact the parents of students with three unexcused absences. Parents are expected to relay back to school officials steps they have taken to ensure their children regularly attend school. When students continue to be truant, cases are referred to the local district attorney. To avoid criminal penalty and a \$150 parent fine, youth are required to participate in an intensive counseling program, and parents must attend a parenting skills training program.

*Results:* Since Operation Save Kids began two years ago, daytime juvenile property crime rates have declined by 65 percent. Truancy citywide has been cut in half. "Look at today's truant, and you're looking at tomorrow's criminal," says Assistant City Attorney Terry Bays Smith.

### **Bakersfield, California**

*Program elements:* A consortium of school districts in Kern County, California has formed the Truancy Reduction Program. Local schools reach out to youth with a history of truancy through parent contact, peer tutoring, and mentoring services. Persistently truant youth are referred to the County Probation Office. Probation officers visit parents at home one-on-one, check on the youth at school weekly, and in the majority of cases refer youth and their families to one or more needed social service agencies. The County Probation Office and local school continue to track the youth for a full year before making referral to the local District Attorney's Office.

*Results:* "The majority of graduates of the Truancy Reduction Program's first year no longer present a truancy problem," according to the Kern County Public Schools Coordinator, Steve Hageman. Over a fifth of that 1994 class had perfect school attendance records in the year following their participation.

(SOURCE: US Department of Education website: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Truancy/index.html>)

### **Safe School /Healthy Students Survey to Explore Why Students are Truant**

Safe Schools/Healthy Students and Social Science Associates developed a survey that was distributed amongst 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Donovan Middle School which was the focal point of the truancy reduction project. The survey utilized the four domains of established research and was distributed amongst 45 students throughout the three grades in order for researchers to sample the thoughts of students and obtain some input in helping to develop ideas for programming that might be used in the future. This was not a representative sample of all the students at Donovan and it was left up to the students to self report but it did give researchers some valuable information on problems in the schools pertaining to truancy and what the students themselves think about the causes of it. Donovan also fitted the criteria of the minority, low socio-economic status (SES), along with the urban factor that were previously discussed in the report because its' student population consists predominantly of a student body with these factors. The survey did not inquire into the racial/ethnic identity of anyone doing the survey or who the survey was about but it did inquire into the participants' knowledge of the absentees' grades and gender, as well as problems that might stem from these areas.

- 1) The survey asked the students if they knew anyone at Donovan who skipped school? 35 answered yes which was 77.8% of the student surveyed. 9 answered no which was 20% and one gave no answer at all which was 2.2%.
- 2) The next question asked the student if these kids were mostly boys or mostly girls or all boys and all girls? 11 gave no answer at all which was 24%. 13 answered that it was all boys which was 28.9%. 16 answered that it was both boys and girls which was 35.6%. 4 answered mostly boys which was 8.9% and 1 answered mostly girls which was 2.2%.
- 3) The next question was which grades were most of the students in? 14 gave no answer which was 31.1%. 1 answered 6<sup>th</sup> grade which was 2.2%. 4 answered 7<sup>th</sup> grade which was 8.9%. 13 answered 8<sup>th</sup> grade which was 28.9% and 7 answered all grades which was 15.6%.
- 4) The next five questions focused around the domain of problems with school or schoolwork and/or other kids. The survey asked the student to answer yes to only the ones that they think best described why the kids they knew were missing a lot of school. Question a. inquired if it was because other kids picked on them? 20 gave no answer which was 44.4% and 25 answered yes which was 55.6%. Question b. asked other kids threatened them or made them feel unsafe while at school? 20 gave no answer and 25 answered yes to this

- question. Question c. asked if the kids were pretty smart and did not care about school? 21 gave no response which was 46.7% and 24 answered yes to this question which was 53.3%. Question d. asked if the kids just weren't able to get passing grades in most of their classes and just have given up? 29 gave no response which was 64.4% and 16 answered yes which was 35.6%. Question e. asked the students if they felt the other students didn't think that a high school diploma or going to college was important for their future? 29 gave no response and 16 answered yes to this question.
- 5) The next five questions looked into the domain of problems with adults in school or policies of the school. Question a. asked if they thought that the kids had trouble listening to the teachers when they taught? 28 gave no response which was 62.2% and 17 answered yes which was 37.8%. Question b. asked if some teachers or other school staff treated them bad and because of it they might not want to come to school? 29 gave no answer and 16 answered yes. Question c. asked if it was because the kids got into trouble all the time at school with the teachers and other adults that worked there? 23 gave no response which was 51.1% and 22 answered yes which was 48.9%. Question d. asked if the students thought that the other students think that they can get away with skipping school because they think the school is not checking on them? 12 gave no response which was 26.7% and 33 answered yes which was 73.3%. Question e. asked the students if the other students were worried about getting punished after they skipped which caused them to skip even more? 31 gave no response which was 68.9% and 14 answered yes which was 31.1%.
  - 6) The next seven questions covered the domain of problems at home. Question a. asked the students if it was because the other students thought that the persons taking care of them didn't care if they went to school or not? 25 gave no response which was 55.6% and 20 answered yes which was 44.4%. Question b. asked the students if it was because the other students were needed at home to help out so the parents let them stay home? 36 gave no response which was 80% and 9 answered yes which was 20%. Question c. asked the students if the other student were so poor that they did not have enough to eat? Again 36 gave no response and 9 answered yes to this question. Question d. asked if they didn't have decent clothes to wear because they are poor and embarrassed to come to school? 33 gave no response which was 73.3% and 12 answered yes which was 26.7%. Question e. asked if it was because the caregiver was sick and unable to care for the kids that skipped? 29 gave no response which was 64.4% and 16 answered yes which was 35.6%. Question f. asked if the caregiver thought the kids were in school but in reality, they were skipping? 17 gave no response which was 37.8% and 28 answered yes which was 62.2%. The final question f. asked if the kids were not living at home anymore and were staying with friends or homeless? 33 gave no response which was 73.3% and 12 answered yes which was 26.7%.
  - 7) The next six questions covered the domain of neighborhood problems. Question a. asked if the students thought that the other students did not feel safe walking to school? 20 gave no response which was 44.4% and 25 answered yes which was 55.6%. Question b. asked if the other students don't feel safe riding the school bus? 21 gave no response which was 46.7% and 24 answered yes which was 53.3%. Question c. asked if it was because the other kids were fighting all the time with other kids in their neighborhood? 31 gave no response which was 68.9% and 14 answered yes which was 31.1%. Question d. asked if these students were fighting with other kids before or after school? 28 gave no response which was 62.2% and 17 answered yes which was 37.8%. Question e. asked if it was because they belonged to a gang that was pulling them away from school? 18 gave no response which was 40% and 27

answered yes which was 60%. The final question f. asked if it was because their friends didn't go to school so these kids skipped also to hang out with them? 23 gave no response which was 51.1% and 22 answered yes which was 48.9%.

- 8) The next section of seven questions covered the domain of personal problems. Question a. asked if it was because the other kids were drinking and drugging too much? 21 gave no response which was 46.7% and 24 answered yes which was 53.3%. Question b. asked if it was because they were or might be pregnant? 21 gave no response which was 53.3% and 24 answered yes which was 46.7%. Note: This response does not coincide with the self report of gender in the above question # 2 which was asked about skipping school because the numbers do not add up to make this valid and reliable. Question c. asked if it was because other kids thought that the kids that skipped were too thin or too fat? 33 gave no response which was 73.3% and 12 answered yes which was 26.7%. Question d. asked if it was because other kids thought the kids were gay and picked on them? 27 gave no response which was 60% and 18 answered yes which was 40%. Question e. asked if it was because the other kids were physically sick all the time? 36 gave no response which was 80% and 9 answered yes which was 20%. Question f. asked if it was because they were being abused by a boy or girlfriend? 33 gave no response and 12 answered yes. The final question g. asked if it was because they were depressed? 18 gave no response which was 40% and 27 answered yes which was 60%.
- 9) The next section asked the students five questions and to rate the questions from 1 being the biggest reason why these kids were not attending school to 5 being the least reason for this. Question a. was problems at school with schoolwork or other kids: 9 gave this as the biggest reason which was 20%; 6 answered this as the second biggest reason which was 13.3%; 2 answered this as the medium reason which was 4.4%; 23 answered this as the next to last reason which was 51.1%, and 5 answered this as the last reason which was 11.1%. Question b. asked if it was problems in school or school policies: 3 answered this as the biggest reason which was 6.7%; 1 answered as the second biggest reason which was 2.2%; 6 answered this as the medium reason which was 13.3%; 9 answered this as the next to last reason which was 20%; and 26 answered this as the last reason which was 57.8%. Question c. asked if it was problems at home: 9 answered this as the biggest reason which was 13.3%; 17 answered this as the second biggest reason which was 37.8%; 13 answered this as the medium reason which was 28.9%; 4 answered this as the next to last reason which was 8.9%; and 2 answered this as the last reason which was 4.4%. Question d. asked if it was problems in their neighborhoods: 4 answered this as the biggest reason which was 8.9%; 9 answered this as the second biggest reason which was 20%; 16 answered this as the medium reason which was 35.6%; 8 answered this as the next to last reason which was 17.8%; and 8 answered this as the last reason which was 17.8%. The final question e. asked if it was personal problems: 20 answered this as the biggest reason which was 44.4%; 12 answered this as the second biggest reason which was 26.7%; 8 answered this as the medium reason which was 17.8%; 1 answered this as the next to last reason which was 2.2%; and 4 answered this as the last reason which was 8.9%.

## **The Donovan Truancy Reduction Project**

Project elements included: 1.) A Truancy Reduction Coordinator working directly with Donovan students and their parents in close cooperation with the Truancy Officer at Donovan School and performing home visits when necessary; 2.) One-on-one mentoring provided by School Resource Officers (SROs) to students who were truant and returned to school or who were otherwise at high risk of truancy; 3.) Use of a part-time school attendance verification administrative assistant who three days a week- would contact the homes of students who failed to show for school on that day. Unlike Proctor High School in Utica, Donovan Middle School does not have an automatic dialing system to perform this function; 4.) Shifting the homeroom period to the end of the school day so students begin the day with their first class; 5.) Holding teachers accountable for taking attendance in each class and reporting which students are absent for quick follow up, and 6.) Enrolling truant students and students at high risk of truancy in the Donovan Advantage After School Program.

This evaluator observed a shift in culture at Donovan Middle School during the Project time frame. The new principal's focus on improving the social and academic atmosphere in the school combined well with his focus on truancy reduction to both support and supplement the resources provided by DCJS for the Truancy Reduction Coordinator and the mentors. A congenial atmosphere and close cooperation between school administrators and teachers, the truancy officer, the truancy reduction coordinator, and Advantage After School Program staff facilitated the rapid success of this program which culminated in a dramatic drop in the truancy numbers and the truancy rate at this school.

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## **Organizations**

### ***Home School Legal Defense Association***

P.O. Box 3000  
Purcellville, VA 20134-9000 USA  
URL: <http://www.hslda.org>

### ***Kansas City In School Truancy Prevention Project***

1211 McGee Street  
Kansas City, MO 64106 USA  
Phone: (816) 418-7946  
URL: <http://www.kcmsd.k12.mo.us/truancy/index.html>

### ***National Home Education Research Institute***

P.O. Box 13939  
Salem, OR 97309 USA  
Phone: (503) 364-1490  
Fax: (503) 364-2827

### ***Project Intercept***

1101 South Race Street  
Denver, CO 80210 USA  
Phone: (303) 777-5870

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