

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TRUANCY

A Tale of Two Cities

SUMMARY

Truancy is defined in the California Education Code as missing thirty minutes or more of a school day without a valid excuse on three separate days during the school year. It is an expensive burden to any school district, costing an average of \$50 per student per day in state funding.

Sonoma County is composed of 40 independent school districts: 31 elementary school districts, three high school districts and six unified school districts. These 40 districts oversee 184 schools in the County with a total of 72,000 students. All of these schools must deal with the effects of student truancy.

State funding is based on how many students are in school, and stay there, on any given day. Dealing with truant students takes staff time and resources. Schools in Sonoma County have lost millions of dollars in state funding because of truancy.

The Civil Grand Jury chose to look at how the two largest unified school districts in the county deal with truancy in grades K-6. Truancy often starts in elementary school. Poor school attendance in the early school years, unlike truancy in secondary school, is largely under the control of the parents. Educating parents in the significance of daily school attendance in these early years has been identified by educators as an important issue.

We found significant variation in levels of truancy, intervention and programs for prevention when we looked at Petaluma elementary schools and Santa Rosa elementary schools. The levels of truancy in the Petaluma elementary schools have remained relatively constant over the last ten years. Petaluma developed a system-wide truancy prevention program during that time. In addition to adhering to the California Education Code, the Petaluma program engages the entire school staff and monitors student behavior and progress.

Santa Rosa elementary school truancy rates rose dramatically in 2011-12, jumped up again in 2013-2014 and stayed high in 2014-15. The Santa Rosa elementary schools appear to approach the issue after the student has already become a truant. This district adheres to the steps mandated by the California Education Code which requires that the school follow a specific process in dealing with a truant. Santa Rosa provides information to parents stressing the importance of getting the student to school and has also started a program that allows students to make up missed days.

BACKGROUND

This is a self-initiated investigation by the 2016-17 Civil Grand Jury.

Sonoma County has 184 schools, 40 school districts and 40 school boards.

Public schools in Sonoma County have lost more than \$30 million in funding in the last three years because of school truancy. They lost over \$11 million for the 2015-16 school year alone.

Average daily attendance (ADA) rate, the number of school days in the year that enrolled students attended school, largely determines funding for California schools. Local experts estimate a loss to a school system of between \$45 and \$50 per day per child not in attendance.

Experts agree that poor attendance and truancy in the early school years correlates with failure to achieve important educational milestones. According to the California Attorney General's Report on Truancy and Absenteeism in California Elementary Schools, truancy rates for kindergarten students average 30%.

Statewide nearly 9% of all first grade students miss 10% of the school year and are considered chronically absent. More than 6% are chronically absent in third grade. 83% of students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are unable to read at their grade level. Third-grade students who were truant in first grade are unlikely to be able to read at a third-grade level. That problem will follow them through their years in school, and they are four times more likely to drop out of school than students who can read at their grade level.

Poverty increases the day-to-day difficulties in getting child care, food, clothing, housing and health care. All of this can contribute to poor school attendance. Minority populations experience higher rates of poverty and the data show that truancy and absenteeism are higher in these populations. Foster children and children with disabilities are also at greater risk of poor school attendance.

Truancy not only impacts a student's academic life negatively. It affects future earning power and society in general. Up to 75% of children who miss 18 days or more in a given school year drop out of high school. Children who drop out of high school are eight times more likely to go to jail or prison than those children who graduate. Nation-wide, 68% of prisoners are high school dropouts. Lifetime cost to society of dropping out of school is \$800,000 as estimated in the California Attorney General's Truancy Report.

According to several people interviewed for this report, every improvement of 1% in the truancy rate may mean up to an additional \$100,000 of ADA funding to a local school district.

METHODOLOGY

Because attendance in early school years is such a critical issue, the Civil Grand Jury limited its investigation to elementary school attendance and focused on schools in the County's two largest elementary school districts: Petaluma City Schools and Santa Rosa City Schools.

The Civil Grand Jury reviewed the following official documents:

- California Education Codes about attendance reporting requirements and truancy laws
- The California Department of Education's recommendations about truancy and absenteeism
- The policies of the Sonoma County Department of Education
- Every Student Succeeds Act, passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into law on December 10, 2015
- U.S. Department of Education's 2016 Report on Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools
- California Attorney General's 2013, 2014 and 2015 Executive Reports on Truancy and Absenteeism in Elementary Schools in California.
- Data reported to the CDE (California Department of Education) for elementary schools in the Santa Rosa School District and Petaluma about truancy and absenteeism, demographics and funding

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed representatives of:

- The Sonoma County Office of Education
- The Sonoma County District Attorney's Office
- SARB - School Attendance Review Board
- The Santa Rosa School Family Engagement Office/Child Welfare and Attendance Office (SAFE)
- The Santa Rosa City Schools District
- The Santa Rosa School Board
- The Petaluma City Schools District
- The Keeping Kids in School (KKIS) Program

DISCUSSION

Compulsory Education Laws

The first compulsory education law in America was passed in New England in 1642. The first compulsory education law in California, affecting children aged 8 to 14, was passed in 1874 and guaranteed State aid for each school based on the number of children in each district. California's compulsory education laws today apply to minors aged 6 to 18.

Other mandates in the California Education Code are focused on early identification of truant behaviors and contain individualized approaches to addressing each student's difficulties with complying with mandatory school attendance. (For details see the SARB Process, Appendix A.)

Reporting Requirements

California schools are required to track and report truancy rates and average daily attendance (ADA) rates, as well as suspension and expulsion rates. The Every Student Succeeds Act passed by Congress in 2015 mandates reporting of chronic absenteeism. Many educators think that this figure is more important than truancy rates for predicting student success. California only began collecting chronic absenteeism data in the 2016-17 school year.

State Mandates for Dealing with Truancy (see Appendix A for SARTs and SARBs)

The California Education Code sets up a step-by-step process for dealing with student truancy. The process includes local SARTs (School Attendance Review Teams) and SARBs (School Attendance Review Boards) and addresses truancy after it has become a problem. This process begins with letters to the student's parents and can end (if all else fails) in Juvenile Court.

Keeping Kids in School (KKIS) Program

The Sonoma County Probation Department received a three-year Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) to provide case management services for truant K-12 students in Sonoma County. The resulting program is Keeping Kids in School (KKIS).

KKIS case management services may involve spending time in the home helping parents develop parenting skills, making referrals to community providers of social services and health services or providing targeted financial support. Targeted financial support may be money for public transportation to school, or new tires for the car used to drive the student to school. The case managers develop close relationships with the students and families, fostering trust and cooperation.

KKIS began offering services in May 2015 and served over 170 families during the first year of funding. The grant now funds eight case managers serving students in 9 of the 40 school districts in Sonoma County.

The program contracts with Seneca Family Agencies for case management services. Seneca Family Agencies is a California-based nonprofit organization that provides wide-ranging services, including school-based and home-based case management. Referrals for KKIS services are also accepted from the Court. The total cost of a case manager in

this program is \$70,000 per year. A single case manager can work with up to 15 families at a time.

The KKIS program is working to reduce truancy but it is only funded for a total of three years. Early indications are that the KKIS program is successful in both Petaluma City Schools and Santa Rosa City Schools.

Part of this grant is creating a lasting case management approach to dealing with truancy in Sonoma County Schools. Part of the emphasis of the program is to standardize how statistics about truancy and absenteeism are derived and reported.

Students in Sonoma County

There are 72,000 students enrolled in Sonoma County public schools. More than 50% of the students in Sonoma County qualify for free or reduced-cost school lunches, which is an indication of poverty. Many experts view poverty as a leading factor in truancy.

Petaluma Schools

The eight Petaluma elementary schools enrolled 2,409 students for the 2014-15 school year. 39% of these students were eligible to receive free or reduced-cost school lunches, an indication of poverty.

Petaluma has a program to improve attendance that includes all of the elements of the SARB process and SARTs (see Appendix A for details of this process).

The significant element in how the Petaluma elementary schools approach truancy is identifying truant-like behavior before it actually becomes truancy. Staff members at all of the schools are trained to spot and report, or deal with behavior that signals a problem with the student, before the truancy develops. Petaluma's KKIS case manager is not assigned to a specific school, but works with students in several elementary schools. The goal is to prevent truancy.

Petaluma uses a three tiered prevention, early intervention and intensive intervention program to monitor a student's position in the system. The student is continually monitored, and any change in behavior, grades or attendance triggers early intervention and prevention activities. The system-wide process is based on emphasis on attendance, targeted intervention and (if necessary) SARB meetings.

Petaluma schools also use the concept of an evidence-based triangle to monitor student progress and alert teachers and administrators to the need for intervention. The parts of the triangle are: attendance (no more than 5% excused absences), academic standing (grade-level equivalent skills), and behavior (no suspensions, or behavior problems). Weakness in any of these areas signals the site-staff to begin a prevention program.

These intervention and prevention activities have evolved over ten years and are followed by all schools within the district.

Petaluma's program proved to be successful in reducing truancy. The Petaluma City School's truancy prevention program and the training behind it are recommended by Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) staff as valuable to teachers and staff of other school districts.

Santa Rosa Schools

A total of 5,796 students were enrolled in the 14 elementary schools in the Santa Rosa City Schools District in the 2014-15 school year. In Santa Rosa 64% of these students were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, an indication of poverty. Santa Rosa elementary schools lost \$459,478 in funding because of truancy during the 2014-2015 school year.

Santa Rosa elementary schools have an uneven history of truancy. The truancy numbers reported to the California Office of Education vary dramatically over a period of 8 years. (See Table 1 for details.)

The Civil Grand Jury could not determine the cause for the sudden increase in truancy in Santa Rosa elementary schools. Several interviewees expressed theories about the increase:

1. The increase was caused by large turnover in staff. A significant number of new staff in the school district over a short period might overwhelm the district's ability to train them all in the protocol for dealing with truancy and truancy prevention.
2. According to Santa Rosa City Schools staff, they were not well equipped to respond to truancy when it occurred. Staff describes being overwhelmed by the number of students facing their School Attendance Review Teams (SARTs).
3. The Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) conducts training programs in preventing and changing truant behavior for school site-staff. Indications are that the Santa Rosa Schools District has not required staff to attend those programs.

Santa Rosa City Schools have just adopted a comprehensive program for improving attendance that includes all of the elements of the SART and SARB process. (see Appendix A for details about this process). Most of this approach deals with truancy after it has already happened.

The Santa Rosa program will also include staff training in developing a positive school climate, a program for students to make up for lost school days, and a campaign to alert parents about the critical role of attendance in predicting student success.

As part of the new approach to reducing truancy, the Santa Rosa City Schools District has created a short video to highlight the foundational nature of regular school attendance. This video presentation was prepared specifically for parents and is shown at the beginning and the end of Back-to-School Day.

KKIS case managers are assigned to specific schools and work with the students there. The district appears to have a critical shortage of staff who could address attendance problems. School Attendance Review Teams (SARTs) are only able to address the severe truancy cases and do not seem able to act on early signs of truant behavior in students as they do in Petaluma.

Table 1

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TRUANCY					
TRUANCY RATES:	2010-11	2011-12	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Petaluma	9.23%	10.8%	8.7%	9.5%	10%
Santa Rosa	5.48%	32.1%	42.5%	41.1%	Not Avail.

Source of data: Sonoma County Office of Education

Conclusions

5,793 students were enrolled in Santa Rosa elementary schools in the 2014-15 school year. In that year Santa Rosa had a truancy rate of 41.1%. That means that 2,381 Santa Rosa children did not get the education they need to compete in today’s world.

The loss of ADA funds means that our community suffers. These truant children are more likely to drop out of school, commit crimes and live in poverty than those children who attend school regularly.

Santa Rosa Elementary schools will continue to lose ADA funding as long as the truancy rate remains high. The loss of money means fewer teachers and support staff and fewer programs designed to hold student attention and provide them with life skills.

FINDINGS

- F1. Petaluma City Schools has developed a comprehensive and successful truancy prevention program in their elementary schools.

- F2. Santa Rosa elementary schools have lost a substantial amount of ADA funding (\$459,478 in 2014-15 alone) because of high truancy rates.
- F3. The number of students living in poverty in Santa Rosa elementary schools is almost twice that of students in Petaluma elementary schools.
- F4. The Civil Grand Jury was unable to determine the cause for the sudden increase in truancy (from 5.48% to 32.1%) that began in the 2011-12 school year in Santa Rosa elementary schools.
- F5. Santa Rosa City Schools staff may not have been sufficiently trained in effective truancy prevention and reduction, possibly because of a high rate of staff turnover.
- F6. A case management approach to truancy used in the Keep Kids in School (KKIS) contract program has been successful for both Petaluma City Schools and Santa Rosa City Schools. The current grant expires in 2018.
- F7. A 1% reduction in the rate of truancy would result in additional ADA funding that could more than pay for one or more case managers for a school district.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. The Santa Rosa City Schools' truancy program be modeled after the Petaluma City Schools' program to reflect an emphasis on truancy prevention. (F1 & F2)
- R2. A Santa Rosa City Schools' action plan for the implementation of these best practices used by Petaluma City Schools be completed by the beginning of the 2017-18 school year. (F1 & F2)
- R3. Santa Rosa City Schools require that all staff who interact with students attend the truancy training programs offered by Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE). Implementation of this recommendation should begin no later than the first semester of the 2017-18 school year.(F5)
- R4. The Petaluma and Santa Rosa City School Districts seek additional grants to continue the Keep Kids in School (or its equivalent) case management program in Sonoma County Schools. (F6)
- R5. Santa Rosa City Schools develop a budget and plan by the end of January 2018 to hire an adequate number of case managers to work with truants and their families. (F7)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

R1-5. Santa Rosa City Schools superintendent

R4. Petaluma City Schools superintendent

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

APPENDIX A

School Attendance Review Board (SARB)

SARB is a State-sanctioned process created by legislation in California in 1975 to assist students with attendance and behavior problems. Section 48320 of the California Education Code was created to enhance the enforcement of compulsory education laws. The goal of the legislation is to divert students with school attendance or behavior problems from the Juvenile Justice system until all other available resources have been exhausted.

County SARBs are designed to reflect the community and must be composed of representatives of a variety of community organizations. A local SARB may be similarly composed.

SARB members are not paid for their services. They are acting within the scope of their roles in the community.

The SARB process is designed to enhance the ability of the school to intervene early when poor attendance occurs. SARB results show early intervention to be an effective strategy for improving attendance.

The Members Of A SARB: representatives of the following entities, as appropriate

- School districts
- County probation department
- County social services department
- Sonoma County Office of Education
- School superintendents
- Members from law enforcement
- Community-based youth service centers
- School guidance personnel

- Child Welfare and Attendance (CWA)
- School or County health care
- School, County or community mental health program
- County District Attorney's office
- County public defender's office
- A parent
- Other members as needed

The SARB Process

The SARB process consists of three distinct levels of intervention when truancy occurs:

1. Early Intervention: California law requires that parents be notified when a student has been truant on three occasions during the school year. The notification is usually made by a formal letter from the school that informs the parent of the truancy and of the parent's obligation to compel attendance. This letter must outline the resources available to the parent for accomplishing this. The letter also outlines the penalties for failure to compel the student's attendance.

Classifying the student as a truant does not occur unless this notification has taken place. This letter is the earliest intervention required by law.

A second letter is required if the student has another unexcused absence. In addition, the School Attendance Review Team (SART), attendance Supervisor or other authorized school official should meet with the student and a parent to determine the cause and possible solutions for addressing the truancy. The SART is a less formal process than a SARB. It can pull together resources from the community to address truant behavior.

A student is classified as a habitual truant if they have been reported as truant three or more times during the school year and the school has attempted to meet with the student and parents.

2. Referral to SARB: Every school in the County is served by one of eight SARBs and may refer a truancy case to its respective SARB. The SARB process is a legally structured process that provides the basis for a court referral if mediation is unsuccessful.

The SARB reviews the specific circumstances of each truancy case and determines the appropriate community resources that are necessary to support the student and the student's in order to improve attendance.

The SARB has the ability to address many of the issues that are involved in truant behavior. Students who are disruptive in the classroom or chronically absent may also be referred to the SARB.

3. Referral to the District Attorney: A student who has missed 10% or more of class time in a school year because of truancy may be deemed a chronic truant. The SARB may determine that community resources are not adequate to address this truant behavior. At that time the SARB may choose to refer the case to the District Attorney.

The District Attorney's office can compel parents to meet and attempt further interventions, or it may petition the court to intervene. The Judge in the Truancy Court has broad discretionary power to address truancy. The strategy is to avoid criminalizing the behavior. The goal is to address the causes of that behavior. Prosecution of the parents of truants is a last resort and virtually unheard of.

SCOE's Role in Preventing Truancy and Absenteeism

The Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) has established a Truancy Mediation Program and oversees the County SARB. The County SARB meets quarterly to:

- Promote interagency and community cooperation and communication in addressing serious attendance problems
- Identify resources and services to address attendance or behavior problems of students
- Recommend policies and strategies for truancy prevention, intervention and mediation/prosecution
- Promote public education regarding truancy
- Develop informational brochures, handbooks and forms to assist local SARBs
- Establish policies, criteria, forms and procedures for local SARB referral of cases to the District Attorney

GLOSSARY - Definitions Of Levels Of Students' Absence From School as Defined In The California Education Code

- Truant – misses thirty minutes or more of a school day without a valid excuse on 3 separate days during the school year
- Habitual Truant – five or more trancies occur in the school year
- Chronic Truant – trancies account for 10% or more of the school year
- Absentee – absences total 10% or more of the school year at any time of the current school year

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.