



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE AUDIT BUREAU REPORT SUMMARY

August 2000

A BEST PRACTICES REVIEW OF TRUANCY REDUCTION EFFORTS

On average, 15,600 students are truant from Wisconsin public schools on any given day. The number of students who meet the statutory definition of habitual truant increased from 6.9 percent of Wisconsin's public school enrollment in 1997-98 to 8.7 percent of enrollment in 1998-99, or from 59,304 to 74,569 students. One reason for the increase is that 1997 Wisconsin Act 239 reduced the number of unexcused absences before a student is classified as habitually truant to part or all of five school days in a semester. However, we found that truancy had been increasing before that change took place. We also noted that the habitual truancy rate is significantly higher in some larger cities. For example, in 1998-99, 23.9 percent of students enrolled in the Racine Unified School District and 32.3 percent of students enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools were habitual truants.

Effective Approaches to Truancy Are Prompt and Personal

By statute, schools must notify a parent or guardian of a student's unexcused absence by the end of the second day following the absence. Statutes also require the schools to inform parents or guardians when their children reach the threshold for being classified as habitual truants. Schools' efforts to address truancy are most effective when they include timely action that links the truancy and a resulting negative consequence; early intervention, so that truancy does not become a habit; personal contact between parents and school personnel, which enables both to work together on the truancy; and assurance of contact, because truant students can circumvent some parental notification systems.

Municipalities Have New Options for Addressing Truancy

1997 Wisconsin Act 239 permits municipalities to enact ordinances against both simple and habitual truancy. Eight of Wisconsin's ten largest cities have enacted local ordinances against simple truancy, which is a single unexcused absence from school. With the exception of Kenosha and West Allis, the ten largest cities have also enacted local ordinances prohibiting habitual truancy. Local ordinances, which are enforced under the municipal court system, can increase both the speed and the extent to which truancy is addressed. For example, administrators in the Tomah School District indicated that they are able to bring some habitual truants before a municipal judge in approximately three weeks, whereas prosecuting habitual truants in circuit court takes five to seven weeks. In some counties, because of higher loads of more serious cases, circuit courts have not been able or willing to handle truancy cases.

Municipal sanctions against habitual truancy may include suspension of driving privileges; a fine of up to \$500, assessed against the student or a parent or guardian; home detention; revocation of a work permit; or a court order to participate in various programs, including teen court, community service, and formal or informal supervision. However, the number of students whose driving privileges have been suspended has declined in recent years. In calendar year 1999, a total of 1,617 driver licenses were suspended for truancy.

Truancy Abatement Centers Target Truancy and Daytime Juvenile Crime

Some communities have established truancy abatement centers, which provide short- and long-term counseling for juveniles who have been apprehended for truancy, as well as for their parents or guardians. While the primary goal of the centers is to address truancy, an important secondary goal for some is to reduce daytime juvenile crime associated with truancy.

Centers are currently located in Appleton, Eau Claire, Milwaukee, Racine, and Sheboygan. Eau Claire County has

funded the Eau Claire center since its inception. The remaining centers were initially supported by federal juvenile justice grants. Those grants typically provide 100 percent of funding in the first year and require a 25 percent local match in the second. Centers that have exhausted their federal funding are now supported by their municipalities, school districts, and local law enforcement agencies. Statutes require the Milwaukee center—the Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression Program located in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Milwaukee—to be funded by Milwaukee Public Schools.

Truancy abatement centers have evaluated their effects on truancy and juvenile crime and found that, in general, their effects on local truancy rates have been limited because they can serve only a small percentage of truants. Data indicate the centers may have a greater effect on reducing daytime juvenile crime. A community interested in establishing a truancy abatement center should consider whether residents believe truancy is a significant issue, whether daytime juvenile crime is a significant problem, whether other attempts to curb truancy have had limited success, and whether it will be able to continue funding a program after any initial grant funding is exhausted.

[full report, PDF file \(159KB\)](#)