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Best Practices Review:

Truancy Reduction Efforts

September 2008

Report Highlights

In the 2006-07 school year, 9.3 percent of pupils in kindergarten through grade 12 were habitually truant.

DPI's role in districts' truancy reduction efforts is limited.

School districts have implemented varied truancy reduction efforts within the statutory framework.

Truancy reduction efforts have yielded mixed results in Milwaukee Public Schools.

DPI could facilitate broader dissemination of district assessments of truancy reduction programming.

Wisconsin's compulsory attendance law, s. 118.15, Wis. Stats., requires children to remain in school until they graduate or until the end of the school term, quarter, or semester during which they turn 18 years of age. Unexcused absence from school is often associated with poor academic performance and is sometimes associated with delinquency, criminal behavior, and dropping out of school. The Legislature has enacted planning and procedural requirements to clarify the role of school districts in ensuring pupils attend school and do not become truant. Within these requirements, districts exercise autonomy in designing programs consistent with local priorities and attendance goals.

Under s. 13.94(8), Wis. Stats., the Legislative Audit Bureau is required to conduct reviews to identify local government practices that can save costs or provide for more effective service delivery. Best practices reports seek to build upon successful local efforts by identifying and publicizing efficient approaches. This report, which focuses on efforts by selected Wisconsin public school districts to reduce truancy, analyzes:

- habitual truancy rates through the 2006-07 school year, the latest year for which data were available for the 425 public school districts at the time of our fieldwork;
- school district compliance with selected statutory requirements related to attendance and truancy policies and procedures;
- the use and effectiveness of statutorily allowed municipal truancy ordinances; and
- discretionary efforts undertaken by school districts to prevent and reduce truancy.

Key Facts and Findings

Districts' truancy rates ranged from 0 to 58.2 percent, and most habitual truants are from the 20 largest districts.

Habitual truancy rates ranged from 4.5 percent for fourth graders to 17.2 percent for ninth graders.

DPI awarded $1.9 million in federal truancy reduction grants for the four-year period ending with the 2007-08 school year.

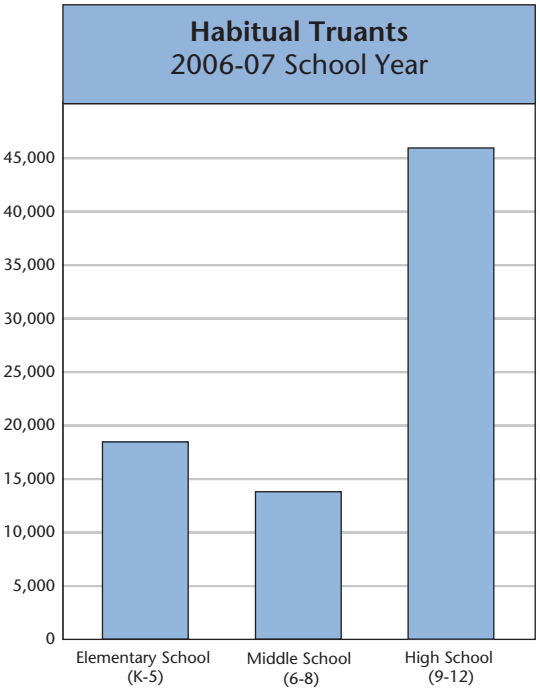
District truancy reduction efforts include community collaboration, alternative programming, and sanctions.

In the 2006-07 school year, the habitual truancy rate in Milwaukee Public Schools was 46.3 percent.

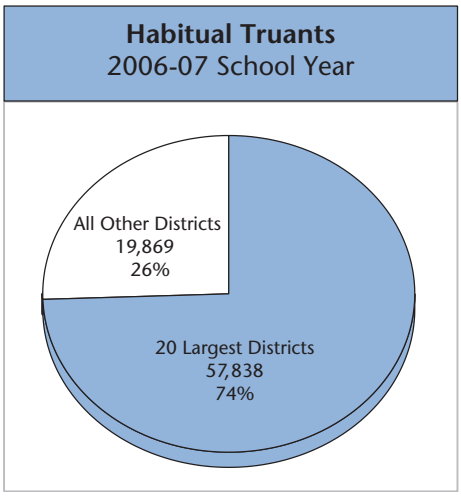
Truancy Rates

The statewide habitual truancy rate, defined as the percentage of enrolled pupils with five or more unexcused absences in a semester, has changed modestly each school year since 1998-99. In that year, 8.7 percent of public school pupils were classified as habitual truants.

The rate increased to 10.0 percent in the 2001-02 school year. In the 2006-07 school year, it was 9.3 percent, or 77,700 pupils in kindergarten through grade 12. Most were enrolled in high school.



The habitual truancy rate varied among districts in the 2006-07 school year, ranging from 0 in 47 districts to a high of 58.2 percent in one district. The 20 largest school districts account for nearly three-quarters of habitual truants, but we note that districts with high rates of truancy vary in size and location.



DPI's Role

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is statutorily responsible for collecting attendance data and for reporting certain data to federal agencies. DPI is not, however, required to review or approve school districts' attendance policies, truancy plans, or truancy reduction efforts.

Over the past four school years, DPI has administered federal funds totaling $1.9 million for districts with high pupil poverty rates, higher habitual truancy rates, and inadequate yearly progress as measured by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Eight districts have received federal truancy reduction funds: Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), Menominee Indian School District, the Green Bay Area Public School District, the School District of Beloit, the School District of Janesville,

Kenosha Unified School District Number 1, Madison Metropolitan School District, and the Racine Unified School District.

These districts have formed the Peer Consultation Network for Increasing School Attendance, which meets every six to seven months to share best practices for reducing truancy and learn about resources available from other state agencies. DPI provides staff support to the Peer Consultation Network.

The attendance and truancy data DPI collects from the districts are published on the Wisconsin Information Network for Successful Schools (WINSS), a Web site implemented by DPI to meet federal reporting requirements and allow districts to assess their progress using various performance indicators.

Because errors identified after publication are not corrected, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of truancy reduction efforts in the affected districts. However, errors in the published data for two districts are not likely to have materially affected the statewide habitual truancy rate in 2006-07.

School District Efforts

Districts have generally complied with statutory requirements by developing attendance policies, monitoring attendance, and notifying families of unexcused absences. They have also adopted truancy plans, and most have completed timely reviews of their own plans and reviewed those of other districts within their counties. These periodic reviews have helped to identify policy questions, such as how a district's tardiness policy affects the number of pupils classified as truant.

Districts have implemented a variety of truancy reduction efforts. For example, social workers at some elementary schools contact pupils and their families to promote good attendance and provide resources to prevent tardiness. At the high school level, districts have developed alternative programming such as night schools and schools within schools to meet the needs of students who have not performed well in traditional classrooms.

Local ordinances enable a more immediate response to truancy and habitual truancy than is possible under state law, where enforcement involves referral to the District Attorney. However, available data indicate their effectiveness has been mixed. For example, in Kenosha Unified School District Number 1, 79.0 percent of pupils who received truancy citations did not comply with the order to attend school. In contrast, 55.0 percent of Racine Unified School District pupils who received citations had fewer instances of truancy after being cited.

Milwaukee Public Schools

The habitual truancy rate in MPS was 46.3 percent in the 2006-07 school year. Community collaboration—including working closely with police, the District Attorney's office, and community organizations that offer mentoring and tutoring services—has been evident in the district's truancy reduction efforts, but results have been mixed.

For example, since 1993, MPS has collaborated with the Milwaukee Police Department and a local organization to operate the Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression (TABS) Program.

In the 2006-07 school year, 6,453 juveniles were stopped by TABS officers, 2,954 were counseled by TABS staff, and 294 received additional services, such as home visits and social service referrals. Among those who received additional services, 78 improved their attendance by an average of ten percentage points.

The effectiveness of truancy citations in MPS is also mixed. TABS staff noted that for a separate sample of pupils cited during the 2006-07 school year, 33.2 percent increased their attendance, 61.1 percent decreased their attendance, and the balance maintained the same attendance.

The effectiveness of the district's school-level efforts is also unclear. Habitual truancy rates at three of the six MPS schools that received federal truancy reduction grants in the 2006-07 school year increased from the previous year.

Further Action

Many truancy reduction efforts undertaken by school districts are

consistent with best practices identified through national research, including collaboration among community service providers, family involvement, and a comprehensive approach to the pupil's social and academic needs. Districts' efforts to evaluate their programs, which is also a best practice, vary.

Districts that have not already done so would likely benefit from evaluations of their truancy reduction efforts at both the pupil and the program level. Outcome and other evaluation data would be of value to other districts seeking effective programming options in a period of constrained fiscal resources.

While DPI has supported the sharing of programming results within the Peer Consultation Network, it could identify additional cost-effective means to facilitate information sharing, such as Web sites and electronic bulletin boards.

Best Practices

It is a best practice for school districts to:

- ☑ regularly review compliance with statutory requirements for attendance monitoring and truancy planning *(p. 26)*;
- ☑ monitor habitual truancy at each grade level and develop strategies to minimize truancy in the early grades *(p. 28)*;
- ☑ identify alternative programming to help truant high school pupils obtain high school diplomas *(p. 30)*;
- ☑ involve parents and guardians in truancy-related matters *(p. 31)*;
- ☑ identify and collaborate with community service providers to meet the needs of habitually truant pupils *(p. 33)*;
- ☑ consider the full range of available sanctions for addressing truancy *(p. 37)*; and
- ☑ evaluate and modify, as necessary, their truancy reduction efforts on a regular basis *(p. 52)*.

It is a best practice for DPI to:

- ☑ research and resolve significant attendance and truancy data discrepancies before they are published on the WINSS Web site *(p. 21)*; and
- ☑ facilitate cost-effective information sharing among the districts concerning truancy reduction efforts *(p. 52)*.

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Additional Information

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