Evaluation of Truancy Reduction Efforts in Utah

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Background

Truancy is a legal term that refers to a pattern of unexcused absences from school by a minor over a certain period of time (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Individual states have developed laws that specify the age when a child must begin school, the age when they can legally drop out of school, and the number of unexcused absences allowed by law (NCSE, 2007). Once a student has exceeded the number of absences allowed under state law, they are considered "*habitually truant*."

Research has clearly identified an association between truancy and poor academic performance, low school attachment, delinquency, school expulsion and dropout, substance/drug use, and other problematic behaviors (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Maynard, McCrae, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012; Sutphen et al., 2010; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009). These problems can continue into adulthood, increasing the likelihood of adult criminality, drug and alcohol abuse, marital problems, violence, lower status occupations, unstable career patterns, and unemployment (Eastman, Cooney, O'Conner, & Small, 2007; Sutphen et al., 2010; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009).

In 2009, over 50,000 truancy petitions were filed in juvenile courts throughout the United States (Puzzanchera, Adams, & Hockenberry, 2012). Although the degree of the problem undoubtedly varies by state, only a small portion of all truancy cases are referred to juvenile court and there is general consensus that these figures significantly under-represent the scope of the issue (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). For instance, in a recent study, researchers in Denver, Colorado found that only 2% to 4% of students who met the state's criteria for habitual truancy were actually referred to juvenile court (MacGillivary & Erickson, 2006). Even if these results are atypical, this example highlights the limitations of relying solely on juvenile court referrals to measure the prevalence of truancy. Unfortunately, due to discrepancies in the definition of truancy and a lack of consistent record keeping by schools, there is no way to know the extent of the problem nationwide.

Examination of the truancy issue is further confounded by state variations in how *unexcused absences* are defined (e.g., majority of the day vs. entire day, school excused vs. parent excused) and the number of absences required before a child is considered *habitually truant* (Yeide & Kobrin, 2009; NCSE, 2007). Despite the difficulty in defining and measuring habitual truancy on a national level, there has been a growing movement to understand the underlying causes of truancy and identify effective methods for reducing and preventing truancy.

Literature Review

Factors Related to Truancy

While many factors have been shown to contribute to truancy, the primary factors fall within four domains: individual, family, school, and community (see Table 1 on the following page).

Table 1 Factors Related to Truancy[1]

Domains	Examples
Individual	*Academic*: lack of ambition/motivation, poor performance, low school attachment/connectedness, boredom *Social/Personal*: peer conflict, lack of self-esteem, mental or physical health needs, alcohol/drug use, behavior problems, gang involvement
School	*Administrative*: inconsistently enforced truancy policies, ineffective truancy policies, school suspension/expulsion, poor attendance recordkeeping, parents/guardians unaware of absences, placement in inappropriate classes *School climate*: unsafe school environment, poor school climate, poor relationship with teacher(s)
Family	*Situations:* financial, family member illness, child care, language barriers, homelessness, family mobility, transportation *Dynamics:* family does not value education, lack of parenting skills, abuse/neglect, violence in or near the home
Community	*Neighborhood characteristics*: family mobility, violence, child maltreatment, crime, drug abuse, unemployment, participation opportunities in the community, levels of organization, levels of social support, community norms

[1] Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Bell et al., 1994; Coreville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dilcandro, 1998; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Reimer & Dimock, 2005

Truancy interventions target a variety of risk factors and can be located in a variety of settings, including: schools, community resource centers, faith-based organizations, or juvenile court (Maynard et al., 2012). Specific services may comprise a range of formats, including: individual therapy, family programs/support, parent training, group therapy, monitoring and supervision, case management, incentives and rewards, fines and sanctions, prosecution, social-service referrals, tutoring, teacher training and development, school improvement strategies, alternative educational programs, behavioral programs, remediation, mentoring, and youth engagement strategies (Kilma, Miller, & Nunlist, 2009; Maynard et al., 2012). Given the variety of programs used to address truancy, policymakers have made a recent push to identify the programs and policies that work and eliminate those that do not (Kilma et al., 2009).

Components of an Effective Truancy Program

Based on years of research, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) compiled the following list of critical components of an effective truancy reduction program: collaboration, family involvement, comprehensive approach, use of incentives and sanctions, supportive context, and rigorous evaluation and assessment (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). See Table 2, on the following page, for a description of each component.

Table 2 NDPC/N's Critical Components of Truancy Programs[1]

Collaboration	Establish a multidisciplinary group to guide and implement truancy programming.
Family Involvement	Target family participation in school attachment activities, engage families in all truancy prevention and intervention efforts, and address family-based needs to support attendance.
Comprehensive Approach	The reasons for nonattendance are varied, and a community's response should be flexible and broad enough to take into consideration the specific issues experienced by students and families.
Use of Incentives and Sanctions	A combination of motivating incentives and accountability-based sanctions works best with youth.
Operate in a Supportive Context	To sustain programming, the program environment, including infrastructure and prevailing policies, must be a supportive source of energy and resources.
Rigorous evaluation and assessment	Test the approach to see if the desired outcomes are produced and make midcourse corrections if necessary. Outcome data will help sustain funding for truancy programming and generate positive political will.

[1]Source: Reimer & Dimock (2005)

Collaboration

In 1998, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) launched the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project (OJJDP, 2004). One aim of this project was to encourage collaboration between community members in addressing truancy-related issues. Collaborative partners were drawn from schools, law enforcement, courts, social services agencies, health organizations, probation agencies, businesses, and faith-based organizations. Collaboration is often noted as a critical component of truancy reduction efforts by researchers and expert groups (Bell et al., 1994; Eastman et al., 2007; Reimer & Dimock, 2005; Teasley, 2004). Benefits of broad-based partnerships include having a shared vision, maximizing resources, garnering additional funding, and sustainability (OJJDP, 2004; Reimer & Dimock, 2005), as well as improved sensitivity to local conditions (Eastman et al., 2007). Collaborations also facilitate access to multiple areas of expertise and more extensive resources (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). One study of 39 schools found that programs that utilized family, community, and school partnerships saw improvements in attendance that were sustained one year later (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Despite a large body of support for collaborative efforts, experts caution that developing and maintaining collaborations can be difficult (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). Furthermore, a recent systematic review of truancy interventions found that collaborative and multimodal interventions were no more effective than simple, non-collaborative interventions (Maynard et al., 2012). However, in interpreting this finding, the researchers noted that the lack of significant findings may be due to the difficulty of implementing these complex programs. The authors also identified several limitations to their analyses, including a small sample size and high correlation between factors, which may explain why larger effects were not observed for collaborative interventions (Maynard et al., 2012).

Family Involvement

Research has demonstrated the importance of family involvement and support in the educational success of children. In fact, studies have found that students whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to have better grades, social skills, attendance records, and graduation rates (Fan & Chen, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Izzo Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). Family involvement is not limited to notifying parents that their child is truant or informing them of the actions being taken to address the issue. "True participation means that parents/guardians are sought after for their advice, experience and expertise in the community, as clients of our public systems of care, and as experts in the lives of their children" (Reimer & Dimock, 2005, p. 14). Sheldon and Epstein (2004) found that schools that informed parents of school attendance policies, notified them of attendance issues in a timely manner, and rewarded good attendance, were most effective in reducing chronic absenteeism. The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has developed the following national standards to help guide schools in cultivating a strong partnership with the families they serve:

National Standards for Family-School Partnerships: [1]

1. Welcoming all families into the school community: Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.
2. Communicating effectively: Families and school staff engages in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning.
3. Supporting student success: Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.
4. Speaking up for every child: Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.
5. Sharing power: Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.
6. Collaborating with community: Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

Comprehensive Approach

Comprehensive school- or community-based programs have been shown to be effective at improving school attendance and reducing juvenile delinquency (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1998; Flay, Allred, & Ordway, 2001; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Although no program can be expected to meet every type of need, program staff should be highly knowledgeable of additional resources available in the community. In order to match students and their families with appropriate services, a program must first identify the underlying issues that contribute to the student's truancy. Information regarding the needs of the student and their

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[1] Source: http://www.pta.org/programs/content.cfm?ItemNumber=3126

family can be gathered through an assessment tool or, less formally, through a conversation with the child and their parent(s). Regardless of the method used, efforts to gather information about possible needs should be as comprehensive as possible.

Family needs. Research suggests that the issue of truancy needs to be approached in a holistic manner that acknowledges the student within the context of their family (Catalono et al., 1999; Reimer & Dimock, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). In order to address attendance issues fully, any family-based needs that are contributing to the issue must be identified. Typically, family-based interventions are used to address family dynamics or to connect families with financial or medical assistance.

Dynamics. The issues surrounding family dynamics can range from a simple lack of parenting skills to dealing with more serious issues of child neglect or violence in the home. Due to the strong influence of the family on a child's education and overall well-being, comprehensive truancy interventions must attend to issues pertaining to family dynamics (Kumpfer, Alvarado, & Whiteside, 2003). Based on a meta-analysis, Kumpfer and colleagues (2003) identified core principles for effective family interventions:

- targeted communication, relationships, and parent monitoring
- focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes
- increased treatment dosage (25-50 hours) for higher risk families and less (5-24 hours) for lower risk families
- age and developmentally appropriate activities
- interventions adapted to the cultural traditions of the family
- use of incentives
- caring, confident, and skilled trainer
- incorporate training methods based on interactive skills
- empower clients to identify solutions

Multisystemic therapy (MST), which targets all environmental systems impacting the problem behavior, can be effective at addressing juvenile issues in the home, school, and community (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, & Flynn, 2009; Timmons-Mitchell, Bender, Kishna, & Mitchell, 2006). There is some evidence that family skill training programs and brief family therapies are effective at increasing parental supervision and monitoring, facilitating effective communication of expectations and family values, and improving positive family time together (Lochman, 2000). While some prevention programs offer parent education, family education, family support or in-home family preservation (programs implemented to help parents who are in crisis, and in danger of having their children removed from the home[2]), research does not support these interventions as being effective when utilized with high-risk teens (Kumpfer et al., 2003). Regardless of the specific therapeutic approaches used, research suggests that home-based therapy is more effective at addressing family issues than therapy conducted in an individual or multi-family/peer group setting (Lay, Blanz, & Schmidt, 2001; Thompson et al., 2009).

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[2] Source: http://www.cwla.org/programs/familypractice/fampresfactsheet.htm

Resources. Family income level—which can limit access to medical treatment, child care, and transportation—can also affect a student's ability or willingness to attend school. Most communities have a variety of resources available to help individuals with these types of needs and school officials should help families get connected with appropriate resources (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). State agencies, such as the Department of Workforce Services (DWS), can provide families in need with a variety of resources, such as: child care vouchers, financial assistance (e.g., food stamps, housing), medical assistance, and discounted bus passes.[3] A study conducted by Seits, Rosenbaum, and Apfel (1985) found that impoverished mothers who were provided medical and social services, including quality daycare, through a coordinated intervention experienced long-term positive impacts. Specifically, mothers who received the intervention were more likely to become self-sufficient and attain a higher education-level, while their children had improved social skills and school attendance.

Student Needs. As previously mentioned, students are absent from school for a variety of reasons and approaches to dealing with truancy must, therefore, address those dynamic needs. Interventions should be matched to the underlying needs of the student that are causing or contributing to truancy. Common truancy-related needs include: mental health, substance abuse, personal issues, interpersonal skills, motivation or school engagement, and academics.

Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Personal Issues. Research supports treating personal issues, mental health, or substance abuse with psychological, educational, and/or behavioral interventions (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993). School-based therapeutic services that use counseling as a major component have shown positive effects on: attitudes toward school attendance, school attendance, and insight into attendance problems (Miller, 1986). Although not specific to addressing truancy, mentoring has also been associated with positive effects on personal struggles (Grossman & Garry, 1997; Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005).

A study conducted by Engberg and Morral (2006) reported a direct relationship between treating truant youth for their substance abuse issues and increased school attendance. Group or individual counseling services that use cognitive-behavioral techniques have been shown to be effective for juveniles struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety (Hoagwood & Erwin, 1997; MacRoberts, Burlingame, & Hoag, 1998; Weisz, McCarty, & Valeri, 2006). A meta-analysis conducted on the use of psychotherapy for children and adolescents with depression has also shown positive results (Weis et al., 2006).

Interpersonal Skills. School-based social competence programs focusing on developing problem-solving/conflict resolution skills and improving self-image have been shown to improve pro-social attitudes and reduce aggressive/disruptive behaviors (Blake & Hamrin, 2007; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999; Flay et al., 2001; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). Another study found that high school students who were taught cognitive and social skills had fewer absences one year after receiving the intervention (Sarason & Sarason, 1981). According to a 2003 meta-analysis on social skills training, cognitive-behavioral programs that address students' current behaviors, as well as underlying issues, have the strongest impact on antisocial behaviors (Losel & Beelmann, 2003).

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[3] Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) website: http://jobs.utah.gov/

A recent meta-analysis found that effective youth development programs included at least five positive youth constructs, including: competence, self-efficacy, and pro-social norms (Catalano et al., 2004). Programs that targeted these constructs showed positive changes in interpersonal skills, quality of peer and adult relationships, problem-solving, and commitment to school. Although there are many studies that support the use of social skill programs, not all researchers have found these programs to be effective in improving school attendance or other educational outcomes. For instance, a recent meta-analysis found that youth development programs had no effect on school attendance, achievement, graduation, or dropout rates (Kilma et al., 2009).

School Engagement. Students who lack engagement or motivation in school have been shown to have increased engagement and be less likely to drop out of school when they participate in programs that use alternative educational approaches (Paglin & Fager, 1997; Kemple & Snipes, 2000). According to a recent meta-analysis, alternative programs (such as Career Academies) that offer vocational curriculums within the school but outside the context of traditional classes (e.g., school-within-school) have been shown to improve school attendance, academic achievement, graduation, and dropout rates (Kilma et al., 2009).

Finn and Voelkl (1993) found that students in larger schools and students attending schools where the majority of the student body and/or school personnel were of a different racial/ethnic group were less likely to feel supported and engaged with school. Research suggests that school-based mentoring programs may be effective in increasing school engagement (Wheeler, Keller, & Dubois, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have found that programs that provide supportive mentoring with case management/monitoring (such as the "Check and Connect" program) can be effective at increasing student engagement (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004). Anderson and colleagues (2004) found that when students develop quality relationships with intervention staff they have better attendance and are more likely to become engaged in their school.

Alternative schools, which funnel struggling students into separate schools and typically offer an academic remediation curriculum with a counseling or case management component, were not found to be effective in improving school attendance and may have a small negative impact on dropping out (Kilma et al., 2009). Some researchers have suggested that the negative effect of alternative schools could be due to the fact that many of the students attending these schools are not there by choice and are less motivated to succeed (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Additionally, increased dropout rates may have more to do with a concentration of deviant peer influences, rather than differences in the programming offered at these schools (Gaviria & Raphael, 2001). Although a study of one alternative school program reported improvements in school attendance, academic performance, and self-esteem, these improvements were short-lived and were no longer present at the one year follow-up (Cox, 1999).

Academic Performance. Research has shown that students who are performing poorly in school are more likely to have attendance problems (Roderick et al., 1997). If a student is not attending school because they are struggling academically, research has consistently found that providing either a trained adult or peer tutor will increase academic performance and increase quiz/test-taking skills (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001). Some research has also found a positive impact from afterschool programs on academic performance, engagement in learning, and school attendance (Afterschool Alliance, 2006;

Catalono, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999). Academic Remediation programs are also a popular intervention for truancy; however, a recent meta-analysis found that, in general, academic remediation programs did not have an effect on academic achievement or school attendance (Kilma et al., 2009). This lack of finding may be due to the fact that Academic Remediation was not applied in a targeted manner to youth whose core truancy issues were related to poor academic performance.

Use of Incentives and Sanctions

When implemented swiftly, surely, and consistently, contingency management systems have been identified as an integral component of behavioral change interventions (Griffin, 1999). A study completed by Brooks (1976) found short-term improvements in school attendance among truant youth after a token economy[4] was implemented. Although contingency management systems are considered an important component of an effective truancy program (Reimer & Dimock, 2005), questions remain regarding the long term impact of incentives and sanctions on school attendance (Railsback, 2004).

Incentives. Rewards or incentives can be used to help motivate students and their families and, when applied consistently, can help improve school attendance (Reimer & Dimock, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). For instance, Sheldon and Epstein (2004) found that schools saw improvements in school attendance when they included a list of students with excellent attendance in a newsletter that was periodically sent out to parents. According to the NDPC/N, effective incentives should be: geared towards the interests of the students, attainable by most students, consistently implemented, clearly explained, matched to different levels of achievement, and publicly recognized when achieved (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). Examples of potential incentives include: movie passes, food vouchers/gift cards, bicycles, bicycle helmets, car raffles, shopping sprees, laptop computers, and prepaid credit cards (Reimer & Dimock, 2005).

Sanctions. Families, schools, and communities need to work together to ensure that students are attending school. Expectations should be clearly communicated to youth and their parent(s) and sanctions should be quickly and consistently enforced (Gerrard, Burhans, & Fair, 2003). According to OJJDP, accountability-based sanctions for juvenile offenders should be: quickly and clearly tied to the behavior, focused on teaching and reforming, delivered in the child's community, flexible and diverse, included graduated responses to subsequent infractions, and be effective in reducing the behavior (Griffin, 1999).

Although there is general agreement that sanctions should be clearly tied to the targeted behavior and executed in a swift and certain manner, experts provide few concrete examples of appropriate sanctions for juveniles. According to the NCSE (2007), the primary sanctions imposed against truant youth include: school suspension, juvenile detention, juvenile court petition, and denial of privileges. A number of studies have found that sanctions, such as juvenile detention, school suspension or formal adjudication, that apply punishment without providing the

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[4] "A token economy rewards good behavior with tokens that can be exchanged for something desired." http://education-portal.com/academy/lesson/token-economy-in-the-classroom-definition-examples-quiz.html

child or their family with support, do not improve school attendance and may result in more harm in terms of educational outcomes (Byer & Kuhn, 2003; Heilbrunn, 2007; NSCE, 2006).

A number of sanctions applied to the parents of truant youth were identified; however, research on the impact of these sanctions is extremely limited. Examples of parent sanctions include: community service; fines; parenting classes; orders to attend school with children; and, in extreme cases, jail time or loss of child custody (NCSE, 2007; Reimer & Dimock, 2005). Additional research should be conducted to identify which parent and juvenile sanctions are effective at improving school attendance.

Develop a Supportive Context

In order to be effective and sustainable, truancy reduction programs must exist within a supportive school and community context (Reimer & Dimock, 2005).

School. There are a number of important school factors that increase the likelihood of attendance in secondary schools, including: positive student-teacher relationships, a shared school mission, high academic expectations, instruction that is responsive to student learning, a community that encourages teacher responsibility, and an overall feeling of trust and respect within the school (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2007; Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997; Jenkins, 1997). Creating caring communities happens through a combination of class meetings, peer leadership, family involvement, and whole-school community building activities (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, & Solomon, 1996). Establishing smaller units within schools and building trust among school staff, families, and students, leads to increased student engagement (Felner et al., 1997).

Community. In addition to operating within a supportive school environment, truancy programs must exist within a supportive community context in order to be effective and sustainable. According to the NCSE, existing school policies and state laws should be reviewed to identify any areas that need to be changed to be more supportive of truancy reduction efforts (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). Even an excellent program is unlikely to thrive in the face of unsupportive policies/laws or without the support of the community in which it resides. According to Reimer and Dimock (2005), school and program staff can use the following strategies to help build a supportive context for their truancy program: become a local expert on truancy; get involved at the school district, city, county, or state level; send newsletters or program materials to community and business members; and launch a public awareness campaign to educate students, families, and the larger community.

Evaluate the Program

Although hundreds of truancy programs are listed on national organization registries[5], only a portion of these programs have been evaluated and even fewer meet the standards of rigor for social science research (Kilma et al., 2009; Maynard et al., 2012). Two recent meta-analyses of truancy reduction programs, one conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) and another completed by The Campbell Collaboration, found that many of the

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[5] OJJDP: http://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/programTypesDescriptions.aspx
NCSE: http://www.schoolengagement.org/truancypreventionregistry/index.cfm?fuseaction=programlist
NDPC/N: http://www.dropoutprevention.org/modelprograms/search-database

evaluations of truancy programs had design and methodological issues that impeded researchers' ability to demonstrate causality. Specifically, few of the studies examined used control groups, random assignment, or pre/post tests (Kilma et al., 2009; Maynard et al., 2012). Rigorous evaluation should be considered an important component of any effective truancy intervention efforts. As noted by Reimer and Dimock (2005), such evaluations allow schools and communities that are implementing truancy programs, to assess its effectiveness, make changes, and work on improving the sustainability of the program. Evaluation components should be built into all programs as part of a continual improvement process and to contribute to the further expansion of knowledge of effective truancy reduction interventions.

Study Procedures

Purpose

According to the Utah Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC, 2013), 2,465 truancy-related offenses[6] were referred to the Utah Juvenile Court in FY 2013, accounting for 6% of all delinquency offenses. Nearly half (44%) of these offenses were for habitual truancy and another 45% were for curfew/truancy offenses.[7] The AOC has contracted with the Utah Criminal Justice Center (UCJC) at the University of Utah to gather information on current truancy reduction efforts in Utah and to compare such practices and available programming to best practices identified in the national literature.

Survey Development and Administration

Based on a review of the national literature on effective truancy reduction programming, a brief survey was developed to collect information on current policies/practices and resources for addressing truancy in Utah schools. Contact information for Principals at all Utah-based public, private, and charter middle and high schools were obtained from the Utah State Office of Education website.[8] A total of 435 school Principals were sent an email invitation with an explanation of the study and a link to the online survey. Principals were asked to complete the survey and forward the invitation to other individuals involved in truancy prevention and intervention efforts at their school (i.e., School Resource Officers (SROs), Truancy Specialists, Vice Principals). Due to this particular distribution method, the exact number of potential participants is unknown and a response rate could not be calculated.

Survey Analyses

As this study is primarily descriptive and intended to provide the Juvenile Court and Utah school administrators with quantitative information on how truancy is currently being handled in the schools, response frequencies are the main statistics reported. In addition to analyzing survey results for respondents as a whole, comparison analyses were conducted by school level (i.e.,

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[6] "Truancy-related offenses" include Utah Statute Codes: 27 (failure to send a minor to school), 303 (curfew/truancy violation), 1076 (habitual truancy), 1249 (habitual truancy citation), 1254 (compulsory education violation-failure to enroll), and 1255 (compulsory education violation)

[7] Remaining 11% for Compulsory Education Violations

[8] http://www.schools.utah.gov

middle school, high school), geographic category (i.e., urban, rural, suburban), and judicial district. Due to sample size limitations, results are only reported for the two judicial districts with the largest percent of respondents (i.e., 3rd District, 4th District) as well as the two districts with the largest percent of truancy referrals to juvenile court (i.e., 1st District, 2nd District).[9] Qualitative survey responses are also reported throughout this section of the report and were analyzed by coding responses and grouping them into common themes.

Survey Results

Demographics

One hundred and twenty-five (125) surveys were completed. Most survey respondents identified themselves as Principals/Directors (59%) or Vice Principals (24%; see Table 3 for all respondent categories). Most respondents were affiliated with middle (55%) or high (40%) schools. Respondents could indicate multiple school affiliations[10]; as such, percents do not sum to 100 in Table 3. The largest proportion of respondents identified their school as being located in a suburban area (47%), followed by rural (36%), and urban (16%).

Table 3 Respondent Demographics

	n	%
Position		
Principal/Director	74	59
Vice Principal	30	24
Truancy Specialist	6	5
Other[1]	14	11
Missing	1	1
School Level		
High	50	40
Middle	69	55
Elementary	16	13
School Type		
Public	102	82
Charter	11	9
Private	4	3
Other[2]	8	6
Geographic Category		
Rural	59	47
Suburban	45	36
Urban	20	16
Missing	1	1

[1]"Other" positions specified: attendance monitors (5), counselors (3), program coordinators (3), campus security (2), student advocate (1)
[2] Other school types specified: alternative high schools (3), residential treatment facilities (2)

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[9] According to an analysis conducted by the Utah Juvenile Court in 2011, nearly two-thirds (63%) of truancy referrals to juvenile court were from the First and Second Judicial Districts (Lizon, 2011).
[10] 82% indicated a single school type, remaining 18% indicated two or more types

As shown in Table 4, a majority of respondents were from schools in counties that are located within the 3rd (25%) and 4th (32%) judicial districts. Although there were far fewer respondents from the 1st and 2nd Districts, juvenile court referral records indicate that a large portion of truancy referrals to the juvenile court come from these two districts (Lizon, 2011). As such, survey results provided within this report are limited to these four judicial districts (see *Survey Analyses* section on the previous page for further explanation).

Table 4 Respondents by Judicial District

Judicial District	Counties	N	%
First	Box Elder, Cache, Rich	9	7
Second	Weber, Morgan, Davis	17	14
Third	Salt Lake, Summit, Tooele	31	25
Fourth	Utah, Juab, Millard, Wasatch	39	32
Fifth	Beaver, Iron, Washington	5	4
Sixth	Sanpete, Sevier, Piute, Wayne, Garfield, Kane	8	7
Seventh	Grand, Emery, Carbon, San Juan	8	7
Eighth	Uintah, Duchesne, Daggett	6	5

A majority of Utah counties were represented among survey respondents (see Figure 1).[11] As shown in Figure 1, over half of respondents were from two of the state's largest counties: Salt Lake County (27, 22%) and Utah County (35, 28%). Due to a significant overlap between the two largest counties and judicial districts[12], a decision was made to exclude county-level results from this report.

Figure 1 Number of Respondents by County[13]

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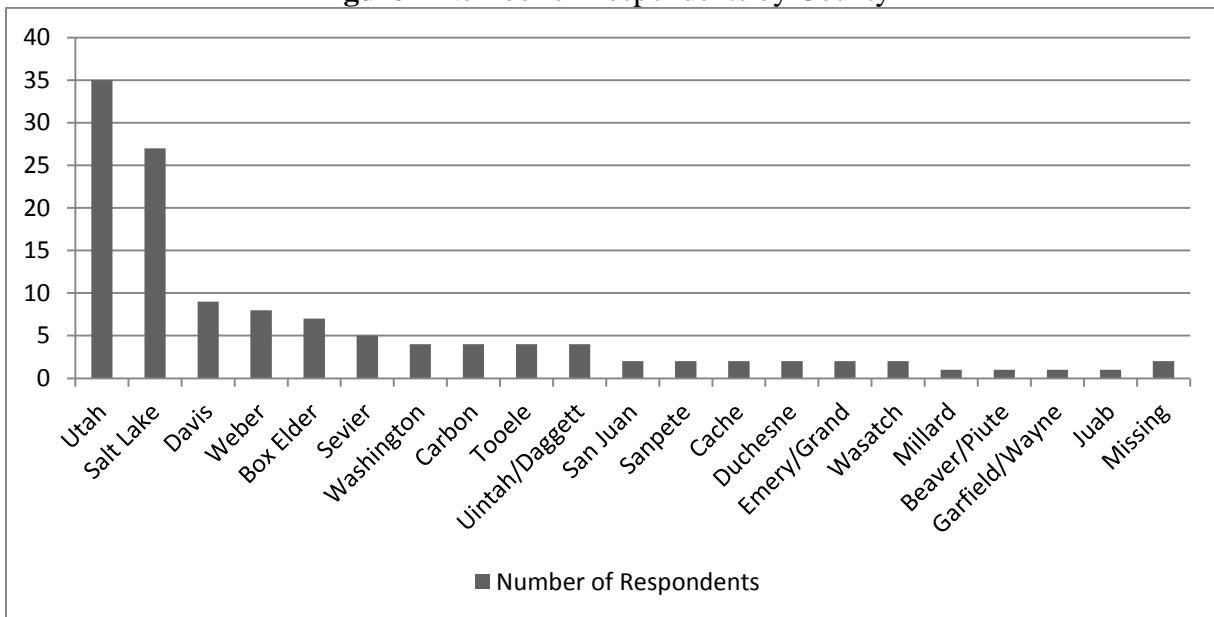
[11] Counties with no respondents include: Iron, Kane, Summit, Rich, and Morgan
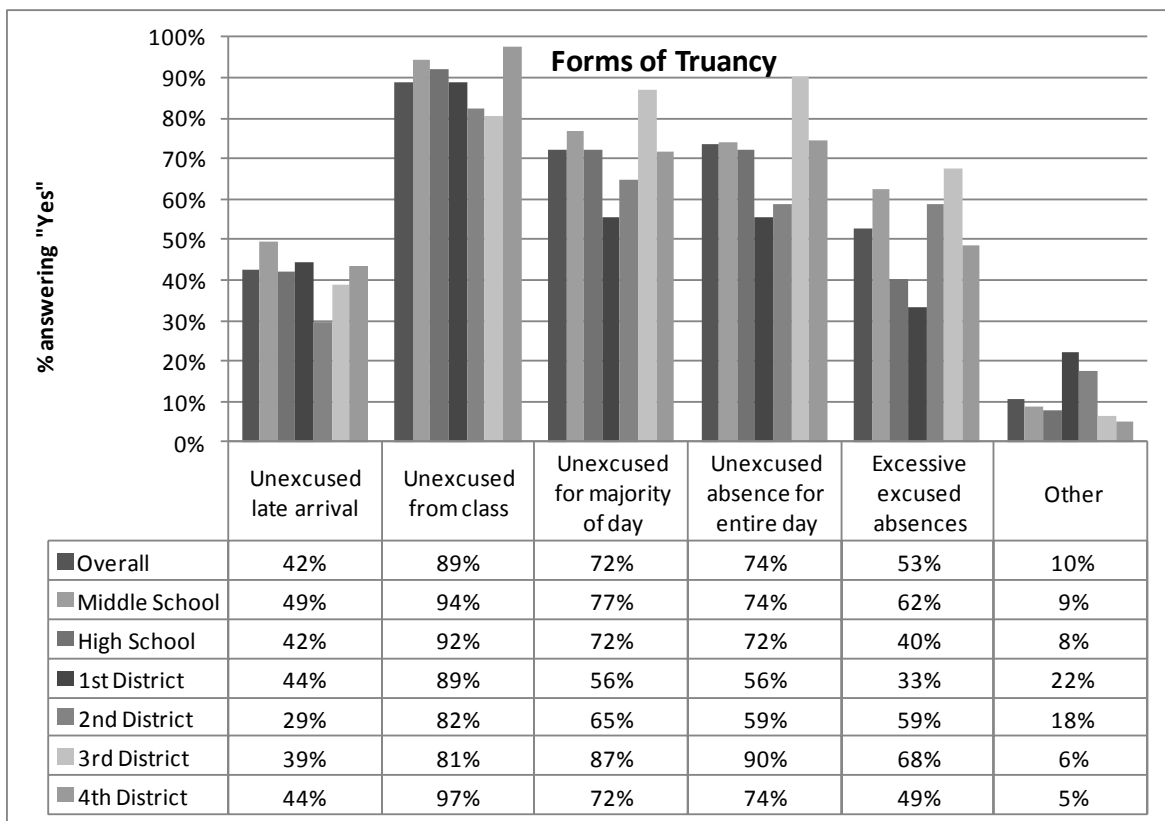
[12] 87% of 3rd District respondents from Salt Lake County; 90% of 4th District respondents from Utah County

[13] The following counties with small populations were combined to protect respondent anonymity; as such, it is not possible to identify which county in the two-county pairs a respondent is from: Beaver/Piute, Emery/Grand, Garfield/Wayne, and Uintah/Daggett

Defining Truancy

Respondents were asked to indicate all forms of absenteeism that are considered truancy at their schools (see Figure 2). The type of absence that the most respondents—regardless of school level, judicial district, or geographic category—agreed was a form of truancy was unexcused absences from class. As shown in Figure 2, being unexcused for the majority or an entire day were also common forms of truancy noted by most groups, especially among 3rd District respondents. Respondents from 1st District schools were more likely than respondents from 2nd and 3rd districts to consider unexcused late arrivals truancy, but were less likely to see excessive excused absences or unexcused absences for a majority or an entire day as truancy. Other differences were also noted at the judicial district level, such as the high percent of 4th District respondents considering unexcused absences from class truancy (97%). Although representing a small portion (16%) of all surveys completed, respondents from urban schools were substantially more likely than other groups to consider excessive excused absences (75%) or unexcused late arrivals (60%) to be truancy (not shown in figure). Additional comments provided by a few respondents suggest that some schools consider students who are on school property but are not in their assigned class or do not have a hall pass to be truant.

Figure 2 Which forms of absenteeism do you consider truant?[14]

	Unexcused late arrival	Unexcused from class	Unexcused for majority of day	Unexcused absence for entire day	Excessive excused absences	Other
Overall	42%	89%	72%	74%	53%	10%
Middle School	49%	94%	77%	74%	62%	9%
High School	42%	92%	72%	72%	40%	8%
1st District	44%	89%	56%	56%	33%	22%
2nd District	29%	82%	65%	59%	59%	18%
3rd District	39%	81%	87%	90%	68%	6%
4th District	44%	97%	72%	74%	49%	5%

Nearly all respondents indicated that their schools track truants using teacher attendance records (87%) and/or school recorded numbers of absences (85%), while 13% reported using other methods (e.g., referrals from parents, teachers, or other school staff). As shown in Table 5, the

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[14] Respondents could select multiple types of absences

number of absences required for a student to be considered habitually truant differed greatly depending on school type, judicial district, geographic category, and type of absence (e.g., unexcused from class, unexcused absence for entire day). Responses suggest that significantly fewer absences are required before a student is considered habitually truant in 1st and 2nd District schools (see Table 5). For instance, according to the average of responses from schools located within these judicial districts, a student in a 1st District school could have five (5) unexcused absences from class before they were considered habitually truant, compared to an average of 23 absences in 3rd District schools. Although these numbers are averages and are not exact, the stark differences between them (as well as the large standard deviation within them[15]) seem to indicate that the threshold for considering a student habitually is not consistent statewide.

Table 5 Number of Absences before Student is Considered Habitually Truant*

	Unexcused from class	Unexcused for majority of day	Unexcused for entire day
	Mn (SD)	Mn (SD)	Mn (SD)
Overall	**13 (19)**	**10 (12)**	**9 (9)**
School Type			
Middle School	16 (24)	10 (14)	9 (9)
High School	11 (12)	11 (13)	11 (13)
Judicial District			
1st District	5 (4)	5 (3)	5 (3)
2nd District	6 (3)	6 (3)	7 (2)
3rd District	23 (30)	12 (9)	9 (6)
4th District	13 (16)	11 (16)	12 (15)
Geographic Category			
Rural	11 (15)	11 (15)	9 (10)
Suburban	13 (17)	8 (8)	8 (7)
Urban	20 (35)	10 (11)	11 (11)

*Due to small sample size, responses to the question asking how many "unexcused late arrival" and "excessive excused absences" a student may have were excluded from the table.

Utah Truancy Law

According to Utah state law (Utah Code Ann. § 53A-11), a student is considered truant if he or she is at least 12 years of age and is absent with no valid excuse. A valid excuse includes illness, a family death, a permitted absence under an individualized education plan or accommodation plan, or any other excuse deemed valid by the local school board, charter board, or school district. An absence is defined as a failure to attend any class or class period for which the student is registered. Missing multiple class periods in one day may only count as one absence.

While administrators may begin attempting to resolve attendance issues earlier, a notice of truancy may not be issued until the student has been truant 5 times in a school year. Administrators must use multiple methods to attempt to resolve attendance issues, such as counseling, mediation, adjustment of curriculum and issuance of citations to parents and/or
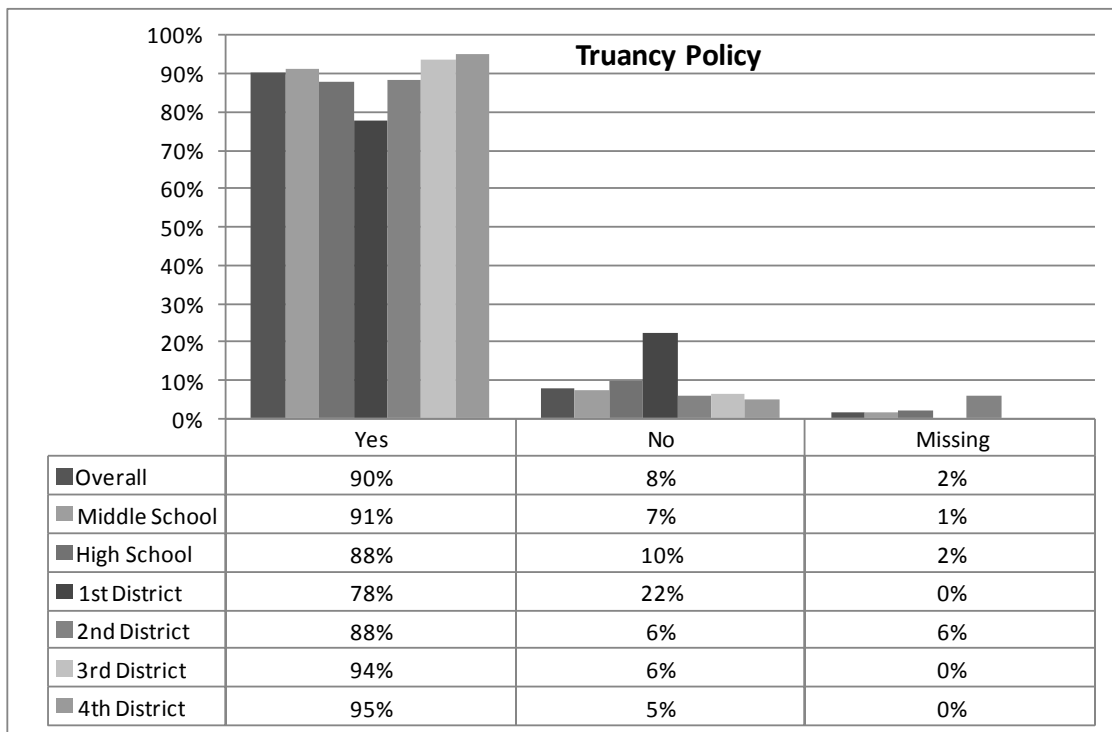
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[15] Standard Deviation (SD) = measure of spread of scores, in normally distributed samples 68% of the group will fall within one SD below or above the Mean (Grimm & Yarnold, 1995)

students. A student will be considered a habitual truant if the student has more than 10 unexcused absences in a school year or if the student fails to cooperate with administrative efforts to resolve an attendance problem. Students who are issued a habitual truancy citation are referred to juvenile court.

School Policies

A vast majority of respondents (90%) indicated that their school has a truancy policy. When examined by judicial districts, respondents from the 3rd and 4th District schools were more likely to have a truancy policy than those from 1st and 2nd District schools (see Figure 3). Respondents from rural schools were slightly less likely to report having a truancy policy (87%) than respondents from suburban (92%) or urban (95% schools (not shown in figure)). Although most respondents acknowledged the existence of a truancy policy, comments suggest that policies and actual practices vary greatly by school. While many respondents indicated that their school follows the school district's policy, others reported that their school has developed a policy that allows more flexibility to consider individual circumstances.

Figure 3 Does your school have a truancy policy?

	Yes	No	Missing
Overall	90%	8%	2%
Middle School	91%	7%	1%
High School	88%	10%	2%
1st District	78%	22%	0%
2nd District	88%	6%	6%
3rd District	94%	6%	0%
4th District	95%	5%	0%

Just over half (54%) of respondents acknowledged deviating from their official truancy policies on occasion. By far the most frequently mentioned reasons given for deviating from the policy were for medical or family/living situation (e.g., homelessness, death in the family) reasons. Although some respondents suggested that consistently enforced policies deter truancy, others stressed the importance of being able to work directly with students and their parents. One such respondent stated:

"Policy should serve as a tool to benefit student learning. We recognize that the power of policy is in its ability to provide guideposts that ensure no students fall through the cracks and that the school is able to provide timely interventions. Working with parents we find that serious medical conditions, family issues, mental/emotional struggles may be needs that have to be addressed prior to dealing with the accompanying attendance issues. Administrators can make those calls."
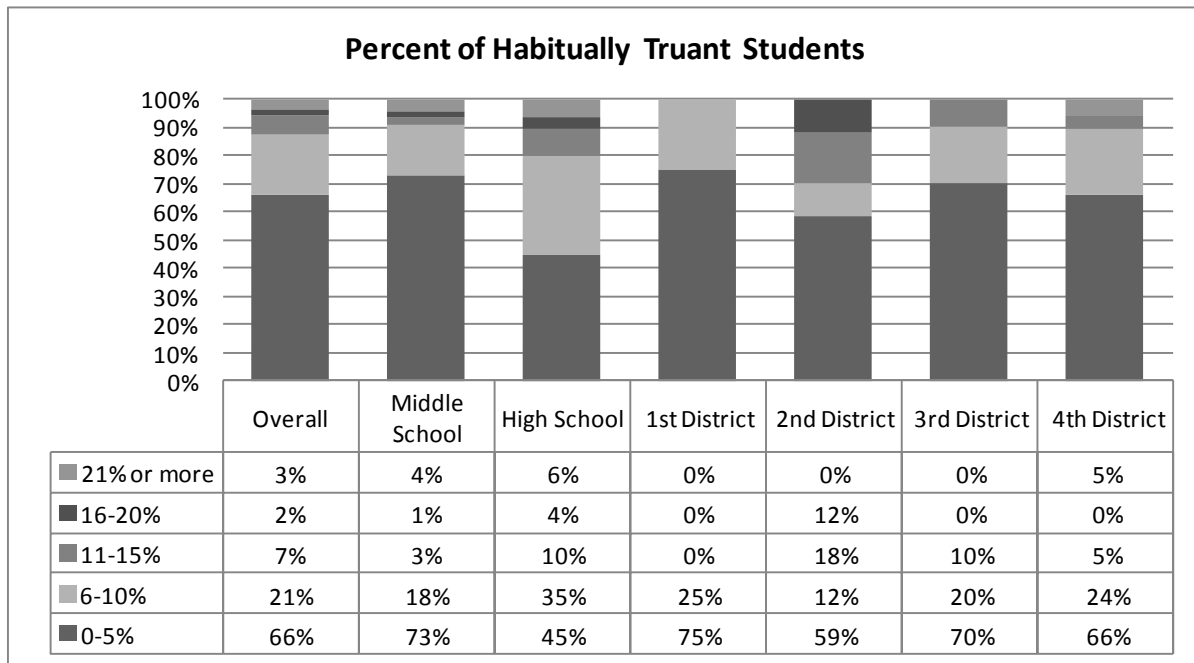
Prevalence of Truancy

Overall, more than half (53%) of respondents indicated that truancy is a problem at their school (see Figure 4). Respondents from high schools were slightly more likely to report a truancy problem at their school (60%) than respondents from middle schools (52%). At the judicial district level, 4th District respondents were the least likely to believe that their school has a truancy problem. Urban respondents were more likely to report a truancy problem (65%) than respondents from suburban (56%) or rural (44%) schools (not shown in figure).

Figure 4 Do you believe truancy is a problem at your school?

	Yes	No	Missing
Overall	53%	43%	4%
Middle School	52%	43%	4%
High School	60%	38%	2%
1st District	67%	33%	0%
2nd District	65%	29%	6%
3rd District	61%	35%	3%
4th District	51%	46%	3%
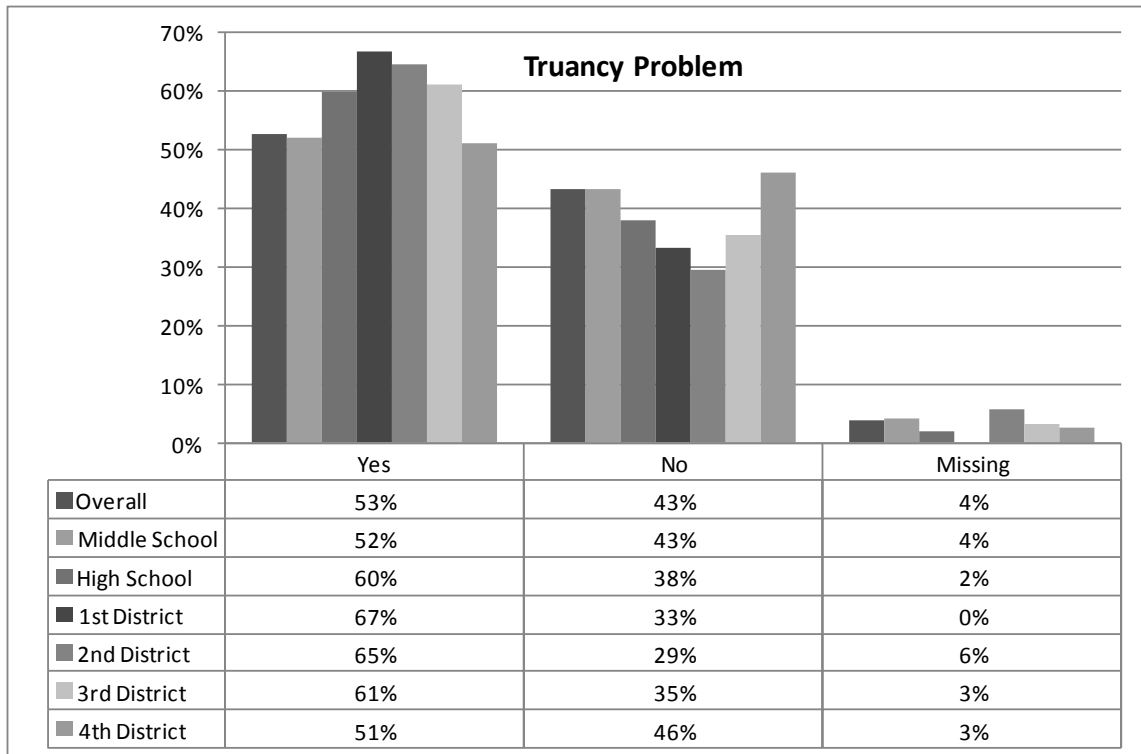
Two-thirds (66%) of respondents indicated that between 0-5% of the students at their school are habitually truant (see Figure 5 on the following page). Respondents who represented high schools were most likely to indicate a habitual truancy rate between 6-10% and 2nd District respondents were the most likely to place their habitual truancy rate in the highest categories. Although not shown in the figure, respondents from urban schools were more likely to indicate that their habitual truancy rate was between 11-15% than respondents from suburban or urban schools.

Figure 5 What percentage of currently enrolled students at your school do
you believe are habitually truant

Percent of Habitually Truant Students

	Overall	Middle School	High School	1st District	2nd District	3rd District	4th District
21% or more	3%	4%	6%	0%	0%	0%	5%
16-20%	2%	1%	4%	0%	12%	0%	0%
11-15%	7%	3%	10%	0%	18%	10%	5%
6-10%	21%	18%	35%	25%	12%	20%	24%
0-5%	66%	73%	45%	75%	59%	70%	66%

Perceived Reasons for Truancy

Respondents were asked to identify why students are truant. The complexity of this issue was apparent in the diverse and numerous reasons provided by respondents. The most commonly cited reasons surrounded family issues, such as a lack of: parental support for the value of education, parenting skills, financial resources, child care, supervision, or transportation. A number of respondents also noted issues stemming from differing cultural norms.

> "Some of our families from other countries don't value school and understand the importance of being here. Some have problems with transportation. We also have some students taking siblings to school in the morning because both parents are working or a single mother is trying to do it all."

Additional reasons for truancy noted by the survey respondents include: health (e.g., physical illness, anxiety, depression), social (e.g., conflict with teacher or peers, peer pressure, bullying), or academic issues (e.g., fall behind, not prepared for class, boredom, language barriers). A number of respondents also cited students' lack of motivation or disengagement from school as contributing to truancy.

According to respondents, the *primary* reasons that their schools have a truancy problem are inconsistently-enforced school policies and parental complacency.

> "Parents have not instilled the value of education in their students. Administrators do not follow policies at all or consistently that would provide consequences for students. Parents allow excessive excused absences to keep consequences from their students (e.g., detention hours to be made up; participation in sports, music, etc.)."
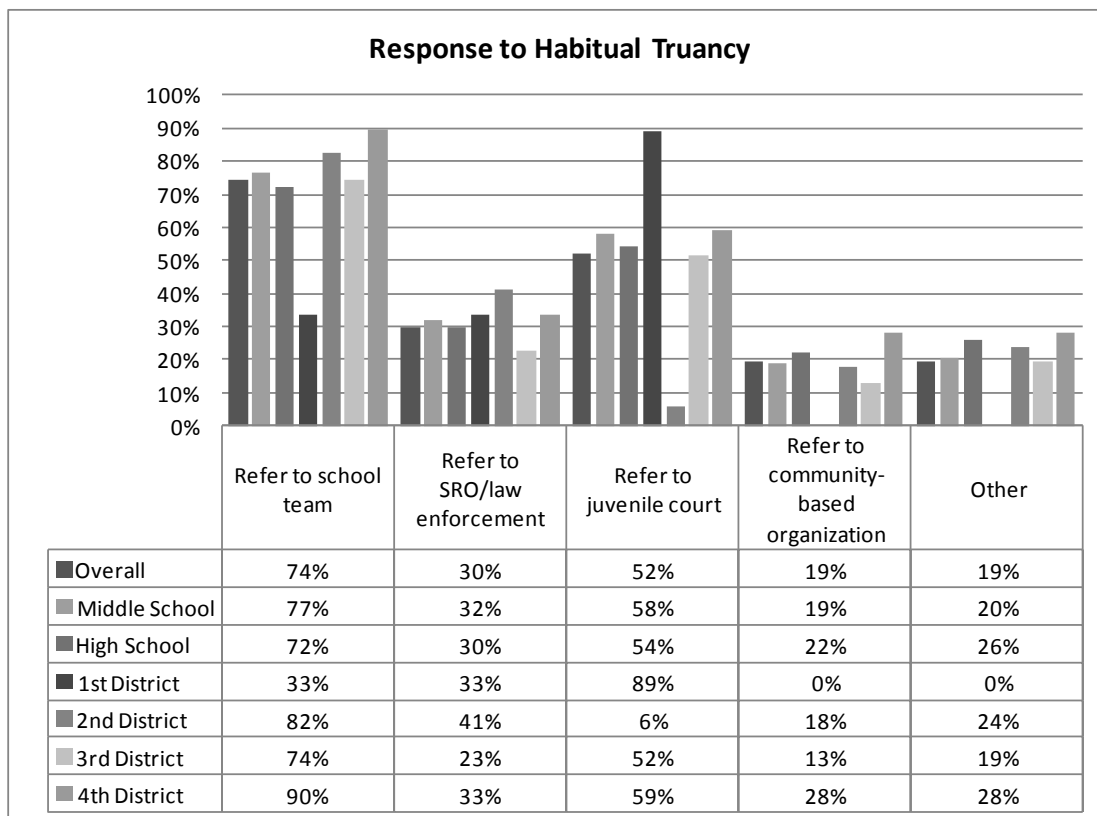
Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of careful attendance tracking, early detection and intervention, and support from the juvenile court.

Responding to Truancy

When a student is first identified as truant it is most common for schools to respond with a phone call (83%) and/or letter (67%) to parents, as well as a meeting with a counselor or school administrator (61%) (respondents could select multiple responses). Far fewer respondents identified suspension (6%) as an action that is taken when a student is first identified as truant. Respondents identified additional early responses to truancy, including: requiring students to attend school-based programs that target academic/attendance and assigning students to "Attendance Trackers."
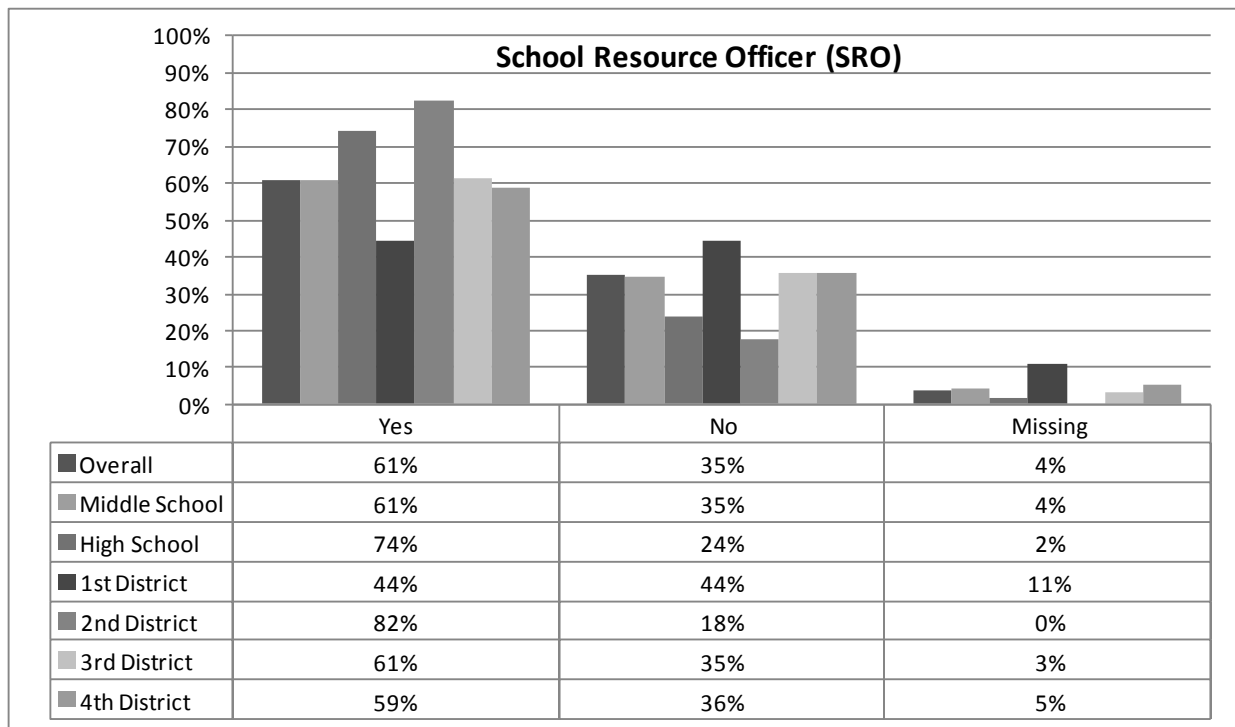
Once a student is identified as habitually truant, it is most common for schools to refer the student to a school team (74%; e.g., handle in-house, notice to parent, meeting with parent) and/or refer to juvenile court (52%; see Figure 6). Respondents from 1st District schools were substantially more likely (89%) to refer habitually truant youth to juvenile court and less likely to refer youth to a school team than any other group. Conversely, while only one respondent from a 2nd District school reported referring habitually truant students to juvenile court, 82% of 2nd District respondents indicated that they refer students to school teams. Other responses to habitual truancy noted by respondents included meeting with parents and referring students to: truancy schools, alternative schools, student advocates, truancy prevention classes, and mediation.

Figure 6 Actions Taken when Student is Identified as Habitually Truant

Response to Habitual Truancy

	Refer to school team	Refer to SRO/law enforcement	Refer to juvenile court	Refer to community-based organization	Other
Overall	74%	30%	52%	19%	19%
Middle School	77%	32%	58%	19%	20%
High School	72%	30%	54%	22%	26%
1st District	33%	33%	89%	0%	0%
2nd District	82%	41%	6%	18%	24%
3rd District	74%	23%	52%	13%	19%
4th District	90%	33%	59%	28%	28%

Around two-thirds of respondents (61%) reported that their school has a School Resource Officer (SRO) (see Figure 7); however, only 30% of respondents reported referring habitually truant youth to an SRO or law enforcement agency (see previous figure). Three-quarters (74%) of respondents from high schools indicated that their school has an SRO, compared to 61% of middle school respondents. Furthermore, 2nd District respondents were the most likely to report having an SRO at their school (82%), while respondents from 1st District schools were least likely (44%). Respondents from urban (70%) and suburban (64%) schools were more likely to report having an SRO than those from rural schools (51%; not shown in figure). One respondent commented on the importance of having an on-site SRO as a member of the team; another reported that SROs at their school conducted home visits with school team members in serious cases.

Figure 7 School Resource Officer (SRO) at School

	Yes	No	Missing
Overall	61%	35%	4%
Middle School	61%	35%	4%
High School	74%	24%	2%
1st District	44%	44%	11%
2nd District	82%	18%	0%
3rd District	61%	35%	3%
4th District	59%	36%	5%

Parent notices/meetings were the most commonly reported truancy reduction effort used by the schools (see Table 6 on the following page). This was also the primary effort for middle and high schools, all four judicial districts, and the three geographic categories.[16] Counseling was the second most common effort listed for all groups except for 1st District, where education and involvement was the second most common. Truancy or youth court was identified by at least half of respondents in all groups except for 2nd District, which offered more case management than the other groups. Very few schools reported using truancy centers, vocational programs, community teams, or receiving centers.

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[16] Rural (91%), suburban (86%), urban (95%)

Table 6 Programs/Models Currently used in Schools

	Overall	School Level		Judicial District			
		Middle	High	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Truancy or youth court	53	57	52	56	35	58	59
Truancy mediation	32	38	30	11	35	29	44
Truancy centers	3	3	6	0	0	3	5
Truancy specialist	22	25	30	0	0	39	31
Alternative school programs	26	14	42	22	24	16	33
Vocational programs	6	3	10	0	6	6	13
Case management	20	19	26	11	47	13	21
Parent notices and meetings	89	94	86	89	88	87	87
Community team	8	10	10	11	0	13	8
Education and involvement	51	48	54	67	47	48	56
Mentoring projects	22	20	32	0	18	13	41
Counseling	71	72	74	33	76	65	82
Receiving Center	8	9	8	0	0	16	3
Other[1]	6	6	8	0	6	3	13

[1] Truancy school, student advocates, attendance monitoring, case management, attendance court, and referrals to community resources

Respondents were also asked to identify specific interventions being used at their schools (see Table 7). Although each intervention is used, to some degree, by all groups, respondents most frequently reported that students receive counseling (58%) and attendance monitoring (50%) as part of their truancy reduction program. It was also relatively common for respondents to indicate that academic remediation/tutoring (42%) and parent outreach (41%) were parts of their truancy reduction programs. Use of career/technical education (20%), youth development programs (20%), and referrals to additional services (14%) were less common interventions.

Table 7 Specific Interventions Experienced in Truancy Reduction Programs

	Overall	School Level		Judicial District			
		Middle	High	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Academic remediation/tutoring Assessment of skills and specialized instruction based on results	42	46	42	22	53	29	54
Career/technical education Increase student awareness of connection between school and work life, teach technical skills	20	19	24	22	29	10	21
Case management Problem-solve barriers to school success and refer student and family to community or other services	33	33	32	11	53	29	31

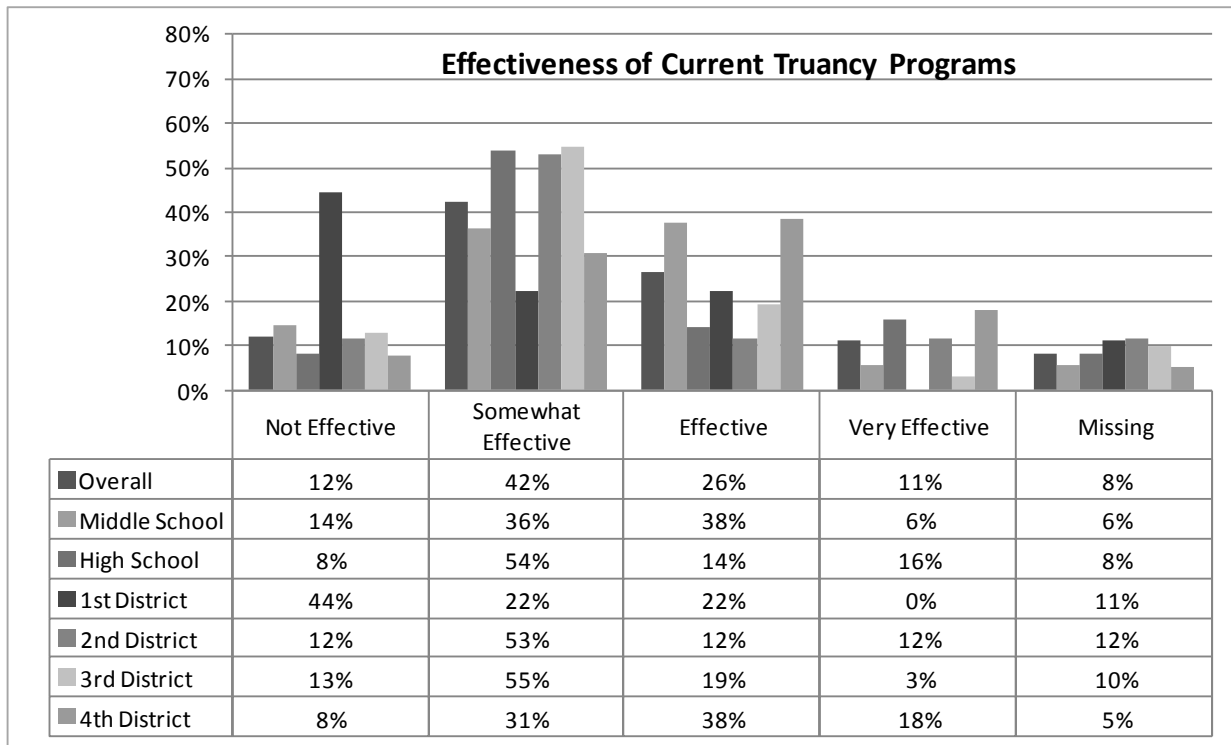|	Overall	School Level		Judicial District			
		Middle	High	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Contingency Management Systematically reward desirable behaviors and sanction undesirable behaviors	25	28	24	33	24	26	31
Counseling Analyze and problem-solve barriers to school success including personal, family, and social challenges	58	59	56	33	65	52	67
Mentoring/advocacy Provide students with a role model who supports their educational endeavors and advocates for them in the school system	29	28	36	11	29	19	44
Monitoring attendance Intensively tracking student attendance and follow-up with students and parents immediately	50	51	52	33	59	39	59
Parent outreach Engage parents in identifying and solving their child's school problems; sometimes families are referred to other supportive services	41	42	38	33	35	48	41
Youth development Provide opportunity for skill building, competence, and resilience and improve connection to school with positive adults	20	23	12	11	35	16	23
Additional services Offer services to meet additional needs of at-risk population served, parenting classes, community learning center	14	13	16	11	12	19	15
Other (please specify)[1]	0	4	0	0	12	3	3

[1]Referrals made to community programs

In general, high schools and middle schools offer similar interventions in their truancy programs, with a few age-appropriate differences. For instance, high school programs appear to offer more career/technical education and mentoring/advocacy services, while middle school programs are more likely to conduct parent outreach and youth development activities (as shown in Table 7). Attendance monitoring and counseling were common components of school truancy programs in all four judicial districts. Programs in 2nd and 4th Districts focused more on academic remediation/ tutoring, while parent outreach was a large component of 3rd and 4th District programs.

Overall, one-third of respondents (37%) rated their current truancy reduction programs as "very effective" or "effective" and 12% rated them as "not effective" (see Figure 8). This general trend

varied slightly by school level, with respondents from the high schools being the more likely to rate their current truancy programs as "very effective" (16%, compared to 6% for middle schools). Respondents from rural schools were the least likely to rate their truancy programs as "very effective" (7%), compared to those from suburban (14%) and urban (15%) schools. Respondents from 1st District were most likely to rate their current truancy programs as "not effective."

Figure 8 Self-Rating of Effectiveness of Current Truancy Programs

Effectiveness of Current Truancy Programs

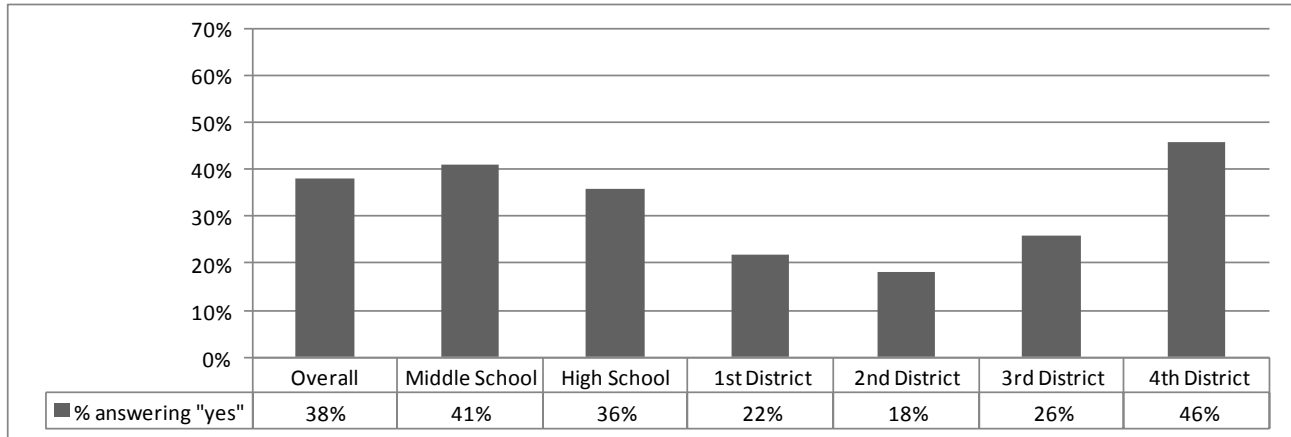|	Not Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Very Effective	Missing
Overall	12%	42%	26%	11%	8%
Middle School	14%	36%	38%	6%	6%
High School	8%	54%	14%	16%	8%
1st District	44%	22%	22%	0%	11%
2nd District	12%	53%	12%	12%	12%
3rd District	13%	55%	19%	3%	10%
4th District	8%	31%	38%	18%	5%

Additional Resources

Roughly one-third (38%) of respondents indicated that their school has enough resources to effectively respond to truancy (see Figure 9 on the following page). Slightly more respondents from middle schools and urban areas[17] felt that they had sufficient resources to address truancy in their schools. Respondents from 4th District schools were far more likely to report sufficient resources than those from schools within the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd judicial districts.

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[17] Rural (38%), suburban (36%), urban (45%) respondents

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Figure 9 Sufficient Resources to Respond to Truancy

	Overall	Middle School	High School	1st District	2nd District	3rd District	4th District
■ % answering "yes"	38%	41%	36%	22%	18%	26%	46%

When asked what additional resources were needed to address truancy, most respondents identified additional support from parents, funding, truancy programming, and support from and cooperation with the juvenile court (see Table 8 on the following page). Not surprisingly, the same three issues were the top barriers listed by respondents.

> "Most parents call in and excuse absences so actually identifying habitual truancies is difficult. Even when we go through the process of identifying the student, meeting with parents and finally referring them to court, generally they get nothing but a warning for the first 2-3 references. It takes a lot of effort to track and refer kids and for no action to be taken it is just not worth the effort."

> "Our biggest conflict at this time is Juvenile Court. This includes getting cases to the judge in a timely manner; getting cases to the judge at all (probation intervenes and makes decisions with little information or history on the student); lack of consequences for students who do go to Juvenile Court."

> "Many school administrators feel like there is no consistent program on an on-going basis to assist them with habitually truant youth and their families. More training is needed for assistant principals provided by the court as the variance is too great and inconsistent in most school districts."

Some respondents also felt that the school district was not supportive enough and a number expressed frustrations with existing policies and laws regarding truancy.

> "We need our Legislators to listen to the folks who work in the trenches to revise the laws we have…We need more teeth…We need more backbone. If we are to provide a well-rounded education, we need students to be in class to receive the instruction."

> "The state legislature is giving less and less power to courts and schools to require school attendance and intervene when students are not attending."

Table 8 Additional Resources Needed to Respond to Truancy

	Overall	School Level		Judicial District			
		Middle	High	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Funding	38	53	35	15	7	21	36
Access to truancy programming	28	39	19	15	10	17	10
Support from law enforcement	20	35	9	7	6	14	10
Support from juvenile court	31	47	21	15	13	18	15
Support from school district	14	18	12	4	4	10	5
Support from parents	39	51	31	19	10	22	28

Respondents were asked to identify programs that they do not currently have but think would be useful in addressing truancy. Roughly one-third of respondents from both school levels and all three geographic categories[18] indicated that having a truancy specialist would be useful (see Table 9). Interest in a truancy specialist was expressed by respondents from all four judicial districts, but was especially high among 2nd District respondents. A number of 1st and 2nd District respondents expressed an interest in truancy or youth courts, truancy centers, and community teams.
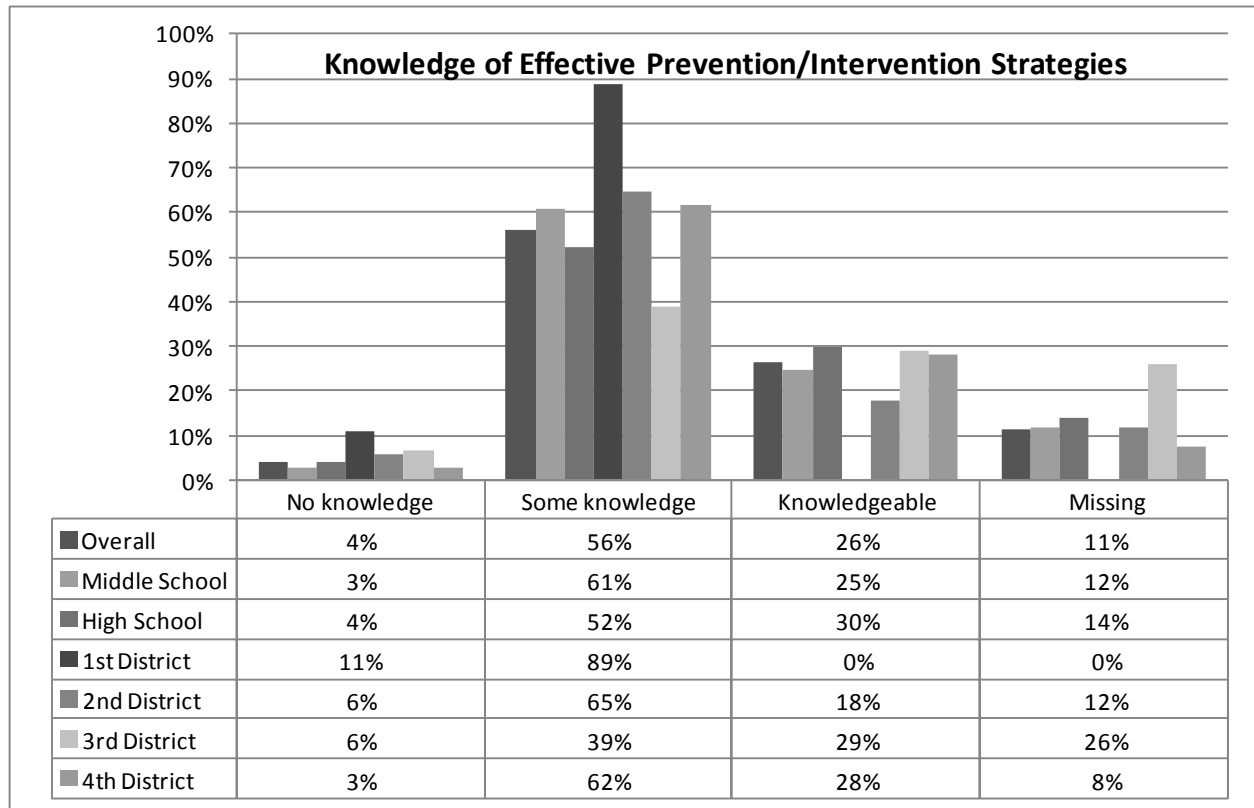
Table 9 Truancy Reduction Programs/Models that would be Useful

	Overall	School Level		Judicial District			
		Middle	High	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Truancy or youth court	14	19	12	22	24	16	8
Truancy mediation	10	6	8	11	6	19	5
Truancy centers	14	16	12	22	29	16	8
Truancy specialist	30	30	30	33	65	26	23
Alternative school programs	14	17	12	0	24	10	13
Vocational programs	9	16	2	0	12	13	10
Case management	10	13	8	0	12	13	10
Parent notices and meetings	3	6	2	11	0	0	5
Community team	17	19	14	22	35	13	13
Education and involvement	8	7	8	22	6	10	8
Mentoring projects	14	13	14	11	24	16	5
Counseling	6	6	10	11	0	3	5
Receiving Center	6	1	12	0	6	6	5

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[18] Rural (29%), suburban (31%), urban (35%) respondents

One-quarter (26%) of respondents believe they are knowledgeable about effective truancy prevention and intervention strategies and an additional 56% reported having "some knowledge" (see Figure 10). Respondents from high schools were more likely than those from middle schools to indicate that they are "knowledgeable" of such strategies, and middle school respondents were more likely to have "some knowledge." The small percent of respondents identifying themselves as knowledgeable about effective truancy reduction strategies suggests the need for additional trainings for school professionals. This was especially true in 1st District where respondents self-reported less knowledge of effective truancy strategies than respondents from the other three judicial districts examined and were the only group with no respondents indicating that they are "knowledgeable."

Figure 10 Self-Rated Knowledge of Effective Truancy Prevention/Intervention Strategies

Knowledge of Effective Prevention/Intervention Strategies

	No knowledge	Some knowledge	Knowledgeable	Missing
Overall	4%	56%	26%	11%
Middle School	3%	61%	25%	12%
High School	4%	52%	30%	14%
1st District	11%	89%	0%	0%
2nd District	6%	65%	18%	12%
3rd District	6%	39%	29%	26%
4th District	3%	62%	28%	8%

Discussion

The following section of this report summarizes the survey results and compares current truancy reduction efforts in Utah to best practices identified in the national literature.

Truancy in Utah

Over half (53%) of the survey respondents reported that truancy is a problem at their school. Respondents from high schools and those in urban areas were more likely than respondents from suburban, rural, or middle schools to report a truancy problem. Two-thirds (66%) of the

respondents estimated that 0-5% of their student population have a problem with being habitually truant. However, a number of respondents commented that acknowledging a truancy problem at their school had less to do with the number of truant youth, and more to do with the negative impacts that truancy can have on youth's education and quality of life. There is a large body of research supporting the link between truancy and a number of other negative outcomes, such as: poor academic performance, low school attachment, delinquency, alcohol/drug use, and dropping out of school (Bell et al., 1994; Maynard et al., 2012; Sutphen et al., 2010; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009). Furthermore, many of these problems continue into adulthood, increasing the likelihood of adult criminality, drug and alcohol abuse, marital problems, violence, lower status occupations, unstable career patterns, and unemployment (Eastman et al., 2007; Sutphen et al., 2010; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009).

School Policies

The vast majority of respondents reported they had a truancy policy, although the number of respondents from the 1st District who identified having a truancy policy was noticeably lower than the remaining districts. The definition of truancy, the process for responding to truant students, and services provided vary dramatically across the state. Research has found that in order to be effective, school policies regarding unexcused absences need to be clear and well-defined, aligned with state law and school district policies, consistently enforced, and include full family involvement (Chang & Romero, 2008; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Railsback, 2004). Truancy efforts should also utilize incentives and sanctions; however, school policies should be aimed at changing, rather than punishing, the behavior (Railsback, 2004; Skiba, 2000). As such, researchers suggest reconsidering the use of zero tolerance policies, such as suspension, for truancy and instead consider less severe consequences such as community service or in-school detentions (Skiba, 2000). Notably, a very small number of respondents (6%) identified suspension as a commonly used response to truancy.

Definitions

A vital component of a well-defined policy includes clear definitions of what behaviors constitute unexcused absences, truancy, and habitual truancy. Responses from the survey indicate a lack of consistency in definitions as well as some confusion regarding state law (see page 15 for a description of Utah's truancy law). Even though state law requires that a student have five truant behaviors before the school issues a notice of truancy, schools expressed substantial discrepancy in the number of absences that are considered habitual truancy. For instance, respondents from schools located within the 3rd judicial district reported an average of 23 class absences before considering a student habitually truant, compared to an average of five (5) class absences in 1st District schools. This discrepancy suggests that students in 1st District schools are more likely to be referred to juvenile court for truancy. This theory is further supported by juvenile court records showing that over one-third (28%) of truancy referrals to juvenile court in 2011 were from 1st District (Lizon, 2011). In order to create more uniform definitions and policies, educators and policy makers should receive more training on what "types" of absences constitute truancy and when a student should be labeled a habitual truant. In addition, school policies should clearly describe expectations and potential consequences of unexcused absences; these policies should be articulated to students, parents, staff, law enforcement, and court personnel.

Consistency

Research notes that policies that are followed consistently amongst staff, administrators and districts, are more effective and that strategies for tracking and recording truant behaviors are an important component of truancy interventions. The majority of schools reported using attendance records and/or school-recorded absences as their method for tracking truancy. Complications occur when using school-reported absences for a few reasons: teachers do not always mark their attendance rolls accurately; and attendance secretaries do not always code absences accurately as unexcused or excused (Finlay, 2005). Relying on attendance records is also risky, because this method tends to underreport the problem of absenteeism. A recent study by the University of Utah reported that students who were enrolled in Utah public schools attended approximately 95% of the days for which they were enrolled (Utah Education Policy Center, 2012). This number obscured the fact that 13.5% of all Utah students were chronically absent during that same year. The following recommendations strategies may address these challenges: motivating teachers, including consequences for non-compliance, making school attendance a school culture; and defining absence codes more appropriately based on students attendance patterns (Finlay, 2005).

Parental Involvement

Research recommends that parents be informed immediately about unexcused absences and involved in the development of a plan to address them (Railsback, 2004). Almost all survey respondents indicated that the initial school response to truant behavior was a letter and/or phone call to a parent, as well as a meeting with a counselor or school administrator. Research suggests that merely notifying parents of an absence is insufficient and does not have the same effectiveness as when parents are fully involved (Railsback, 2004). Although the survey results do not specifically identify the content of current meetings between parents and counselors or school staff, qualitative responses suggest that these meetings were used to inform parents of an attendance problem and to inform them of the school's truancy policy. The absence of effective parental engagement in the truancy remediation plan is of particular relevance in Utah schools, because a majority of survey respondents identified family issues, predominantly parenting problems, as the main reason for youth not attending school. Effective parent involvement should go beyond informing the parent of a problem and explaining the policy/law. Rather, meetings with the parent(s) should be used to gain insight into the underlying causes of the student's truant behavior and to begin work on a plan to address the problem.

Flexibility

In addition to having a well-defined and consistent policy that involves parents, school policies need to have enough flexibility to allow for a range of responses, depending on the best interest of the student and family. For example, military families may choose to let children miss school to spend time with parents before deployment (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Most survey respondents indicated that their school has a truancy policy and just over half noted that they are able to deviate from the policy depending on individual student and family circumstances (e.g., medical/health, family situations, homelessness, death in the family). This practice seems to adhere to the research, but conflicting comments from respondents indicated a lack of awareness on the part of school personnel of the importance of flexibility in truancy

policies. For instance, some professionals expressed frustration with the lack of adherence to school policies and expressed concern that students or families were not being held accountable. These responses suggest a lack of understanding and agreement about how and/or when a school truancy policy should be flexible.

Causes of Truancy

Literature indicates a number of factors or needs that contribute to truancy. Factors primarily fall within four domains: individual risk factors (e.g., academic problems, social problems, personal problems); family risk factors (e.g., financial, medical, parental problems, family dynamics); school risk factors (e.g., staff/administrative problems, school climate problems); and community risk factors (e.g., neighborhood characteristics, community participation/employment opportunities) (Coreville et al., 1998; Hammond et al., 2007). The most common causes of truancy identified by survey respondents included family factors (e.g., parent support/skills, child care/transportation) followed by individual student factors. The emphasis on family/parent problems as the primary and most commonly reported problem suggests the need for more effective parent/family involvement in truancy efforts. This finding may also suggest a myopic view of the causes of truancy among many school professionals, as research consistently indicates a broad range of factors contributing to truancy.

Truancy Interventions

As interest and concern with the negative outcomes of school absenteeism grows, so does the list of interventions designed to address the problem. Programs and services vary in their focus and can target individual, school, family and/or community factors and also be school-, community-, or court-based. Unfortunately, rigorous research on the effectiveness of these programs or modalities is limited (Maynard et al., 2012; Kilma et al., 2009). In order to address truancy comprehensively, a program must identify the underlying issues that are contributing to a student's truancy and use approaches that have been shown to be effective at addressing those needs. The most commonly used truancy reduction approaches include: academic remediation/tutoring, career technical/education, counseling, case management, contingency management, mentoring/advocacy, monitoring attendance, parent outreach, and youth development (Kilma et al., 2009; Maynard et al., 2012).

Academic Remediation/Tutoring

Academic remediation/tutoring has been shown to be effective at increasing academic achievement and school attendance when a truant student has specific struggles with academic performance (Cohen et al., 1982; Hock et al., 2001). Almost half of survey respondents (42%) identified academic remediation/tutoring as one of the services they provide to truant students, often as a first response to truancy. In order to effective, programs that offer academic remediation or tutoring need to include an assessment of skill deficiencies and provide specialized or intensive instruction based on results to meet the academic needs of the student. Of further concern, slightly more than half (51%) of respondents indicated that their schools offer education and involvement as a truancy intervention. Although most truant youth could benefit from these programs, academic remediation programs should only be used as the primary

approach for those students who are not coming to school because they are struggling academically.

Career/Technical Education

Career/technical education programs have been shown to help students who struggle with a lack of motivation/engagement with traditional school programs. Career/technical education programs help students make a connection between school and work life and can be located within a school or in a separate building (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). In addition to improving engagement, alternative school programs (e.g., schools-within-schools) have also been shown to increase school attendance and reduce truancy (Kilma et al., 2012). In the state of Utah, only one-quarter (20%) of respondents from the high schools reported the availability of career/technical education programs at their school, and even fewer reported them in the middle schools. It is unclear from the survey whether respondents are referring students to vocational programs (e.g., Mountainland Applied Technical Center (MATC)) or if specific career/technical education courses are offered in some schools.

Of note, almost half (42%) of the high school respondents identified alternative schools as their truancy reduction program. While it was not clear if these alternative schools were programs that incorporated the principles behind career/technical education (MATC) or alternate school programs (e.g., East Shore High School), research suggests that alternative schools that are separate from traditional schools can have positive effects on school engagement with some students; however, these schools sometimes demonstrate increased truancy (Gaviria & Raphael, 2001; Paglin & Fager, 1997).

Case Management

Case management has been identified as a program-enhancing service that helps support students who have multiple needs (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). There is also some evidence that case management, provided as an additional component of other interventions, can enhance the impact of truancy reduction programs. For instance, Washington State saw considerable reductions in truancy petitions filed to court after implementing a case management/mentor program (i.e., "Check and Connect") to their Truancy Board program (Strand & Lovrich, 2011). One-third (33%) of survey respondents reported using a case manager in their truancy reduction programs and one-fifth (20%) identified case management as the model/program currently being used in their school. Within a truancy program, case managers should focus on building and maintaining connections with students, families, and schools and connecting them with effective services.

Contingency Management

Contingency management involves the use of incentives and sanctions to motivate a truant student and their parents to participate in the intervention; when used consistently, contingency management can help improve school attendance (Reimer & Dimock, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). According to the NDPC/N, effective incentives are: geared towards the interests of the students, attainable by most students, consistently implemented, clearly explained, matched to different levels of achievement, and publicly recognized when achieved (Reimer & Dimock,

2005). A number of studies have found that sanctions, such as juvenile detention, school suspension or formal adjudication, that apply punishment without providing the child or their family with support, do not improve school attendance and may result in more harm in terms of educational outcomes (Byer & Kuhn, 2003; Heilbrunn, 2007; NSCE, 2006). According to the survey, only one-quarter (25%) of respondents reported using incentives and sanctions as a component of their school's truancy reduction program, and few respondents (6%) reported the use of school suspension as a response to truancy.

Counseling

Counseling has shown positive results with students who are struggling with diverse personal problems (e.g. mental health-anxiety/depression, substance abuse), and family dynamics (e.g. communication between parents and students, conflict between family members) (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Lochman, 2000; Miller, 1986). Furthermore, individual counseling that utilizes cognitive-behavioral techniques has been shown to be effective method for addressing substance abuse and mental health problems (Hoagwood & Erwin, 1997; MacRoberts et al., 1998; Weisz et al., 2006) and some research suggests that it may be effective for improving school attendance (Engberg & Morral, 2006). Family therapy, whether in-home or in-office, incorporating counseling components has also been shown to resolve issues related to family dynamics and increase student attendance (Kumpfer et al., 2003). Nearly three-quarters (71%) of survey respondents identified counseling as a component of their truancy program. In order to be effective, counseling programs should identify the specific needs of the student and their family, match services/interventions to those needs, and problem-solve challenges in a safe supportive environment.

Mentoring/Advocacy

Mentoring/advocacy has been identified by research as an effective strategy for improving school attendance (Anderson et al., 2004) and has shown positive effects with students who struggle academically and interpersonally, and who lack engagement with school (Wheeler et al., 2010). Less than one-third (29%) of survey respondents reported that their school uses mentoring/advocacy as a part of their truancy reduction efforts.

Monitoring Attendance

Monitoring of school attendance is essential for all students, regardless of the risk factors. Monitoring attendance in a consistent and accurate manner gives school officials an accurate picture of truancy at their school and is necessary to facilitate immediate notification of parents and the swift administration of sanctions and incentives. Half (50%) of survey respondents indicated that their school closely monitors the attendance of truant students. Furthermore, some respondents indicated the use of "attendance trackers" when students are first identified as being truant. Accurate attendance records are a necessary component of any effective truancy reduction efforts.

Parent Outreach

Parent outreach is another service that should be used with every truant student. Research confirms the importance of parental involvement in each stage of the truancy process: contributing cause, initial notification, plan development, assessment of student and family needs, support, and follow-up with every truant behavior (Reimer & Dimock, 2005). A vast majority of respondents identified the use of parent notices and meetings; however, only 41% of respondents indicated that parents were involved in problem-solving components. In order to be effective, parents should be encouraged to play a more active role in these meetings as well as other planning or problem-solving activities.

Youth Development

Youth development programs have been found to be effective on some outcomes for students who struggle with interpersonal skills (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competences) and provide opportunities for pro-social involvement (Catalano et al., 2004; Losel & Beelmann, 2003). Although effective at modifying certain interpersonal risk factors, studies have found that, in general, youth development programs are not effective for improving school attendance (Kilma et al., 2009). Approximately one-fifth (20%) of survey respondents reported using youth development services in their school's truancy reduction program.

Maynard and colleagues (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of truancy reduction programs that found no difference in effectiveness when comparing school-, court-, or community-based programs; furthermore, no modality (single or comprehensive) was significantly more effective than any other. The authors noted that a small sample size and high correlation between factors may explain the lack of statistically significant findings. Conversely, another meta-analysis found that alternative programs (schools within schools), mentoring, and behavioral programs are effective programs for increasing school attendance (Kilma et al., 2009). Both studies found that, regardless of the intervention, providing services to truant students has a positive impact on school attendance.

Conclusion

With increasing truancy rates and the well-documented short- and long-term negative consequences of truancy, educators, policy-makers, and researchers are paying increased attention to chronic absenteeism. A review of the current best-practice literature on truancy has found:

- Truancy is caused by a range of individual, family, school and community factors
- Services need to be targeted at the specific barriers for each truant student
- Alternative school programs within schools, mentoring, and behavior management programs have shown a positive increase in student attendance
- Effective programs start with clearly defined policies
- Components of effective programs include: collaboration, parent involvement, a comprehensive approach, use of incentives and sanctions, a supportive context, and program evaluation

Furthermore, surveys completed by school professionals from Utah middle and high schools suggest that:

- Parent/family issues are the main contributors to truancy
- Inconsistent definitions of truancy exist statewide
- Parent phone calls, letters, and/or meetings are utilized by a majority of the schools
- Schools are using varied interventions with truant students, with an emphasis on counseling, academic remediation, monitoring, and parent contact
- Truancy or Youth Court, Truancy Mediation and alternative schools are the most commonly identified truancy reduction programs
- Additional resources needed: funding, support from parents, support from juvenile court, access to truancy reduction programs

Aside from understanding services and programs offered by Utah middle and high schools, this report does not evaluate individual programs/practices. Additional research would be required in order to determine how closely programs adhere to these components and which programs are effectively reducing truancy. Truancy/Youth Court and Mediation were identified by respondents as comprehensive truancy programs currently being used in Utah. More in-depth analysis of these programs would be required to gain a better understanding of program components and to determine whether they are effective at reducing truancy.

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