

## Study suggests schools need to be more creative in attempts to keep students in school



Carolyn Gentle-Genitty

April 4, 2008 - One in ten middle school students in the US is considered a chronic truant. If there is any hope to see a fall in chronic truancy numbers, public schools must be creative in developing opportunities for students to feel as if they are a part of their schools, suggested a study conducted by an Indiana University School of Social Work doctoral candidate, Carolyn Gentle-Genitty. The study results, based on responses from nearly 100 middle and junior high public schools, will be shared with the Indiana Department of Education, who assisted Gentle-Genitty in gathering some of the information for the study.

For some students, middle school is the age where they begin to show signs of disliking school. "Many students feel like they are falling down a black hole; the students feel like there is no one to pull me out; the school doesn't believe in me, my parents don't believe in me, I don't believe I can do it. I might as well let everything go down the drain," Gentle-Genitty articulated. By building on activities that engender a sense of commitment, involvement, attachment and a belief in themselves, students are more likely to want to come to school, said Gentle-Genitty, who is also an associate faculty member in the School of Social Work.

In essence, children who are engaged and attached to school in some way are likely to have mentors and teachers to support them and help them believe they can succeed, she added. "If they have a favorite teacher, they won't want to let that teacher down," she explained. "But if you have a school system that doesn't offer opportunities for students to get involved, build attachments, or address reasons students skip school, the likelihood is that the child might dislike coming to school and not have anyone that cares if they do."

Instead of saying, "ok, you don't like school so let's explore why and create opportunities for students to stay in school, schools are going in the opposite direction," Gentle-Genitty said. Some schools are placing the blame for truancy on the child, but do little to improve the situation. Typically, what happens is a student will miss several days of school and as a result end up in in-school suspension. With additional unexcused absences, they are either placed in out-of-school suspension or are eventually expelled. Some schools also limit student participation in school activities for missing a particular class.

"You have to enable students to want to go to school, to believe it is something they should want to do," Gentle-Genitty said. Schools must look beyond regular activities like cheerleading or student government, as there is only so many students that can be cheerleaders or be on the debate team, she noted. If the school does not create such an environment, then all it is doing is punishing the child, Gentle-Genitty said.

But a divide remains between families and schools over who bears the responsibility for fixing the problem. As parents are unable to stay at home because they have to work, they have "outsourced," the care of their children to schools, Gentle-Genitty said. But schools still place the responsibility to resolving the truancy problem at the feet of the family and child. "They don't see it as their primary responsibility," Gentle-Genitty said of school administrators.

Gentle-Genitty recommends schools consider the following recommendations:

- Create policies that support children struggling to bond with school rather than dismiss them from school.
- Limit zero-tolerance and out-of-school punishment policies in relation to absenteeism.
- Define and standardize how to categorize different types of truants and truancy.
- Create more options for truant students to return to school without loss of previous work.
- Increase school opportunities beyond basic academics for students to be involved and believe in the value of school.

Gentle-Genitty suggested schools re-adjust how they react to unexcused absences and view the problem of truancy as more than the number of unexcused absences. Sometimes a student may miss a certain class because they don't like the teacher or the subject, whether its math or gym, she explained. The current procedures for dealing with truancy are that when a student fails to show up, a call is made to the student's home. After four absences, the school calls home and sends a letter. "The belief along the way is that the parent is to deal with this issue, not us," Gentle-Genitty explained.

It is only when the student misses 10 cumulative days of school that the school becomes proactive and joins with others (i.e., the police, the courts and social workers) involved, she noted. Instead of waiting for the problem to rise to a level where the student could be expelled, why not focus more resources earlier when the student is still in school, she explained.

As schools do not report specific numbers of truant students, but rather a percentage of missing students, Gentle-Genitty estimates about two percent of students in Indiana can be considered chronic truants, or students who have 10 or more unexcused absences a year. "When you think about crime, most people say one percent of the population commits most of the crime," she said. If you have two percent of the school population unaccounted for, it raises the question of what are they doing, she noted. "If we avert chronic truancy and thus decrease the incidence of juvenile delinquency in our communities, the pool of future leaders and competent workers will be increased." Schools, parents, and communities together must share the responsibility for helping all students be engaged in school.

For more information contact Rob Schneider, Indiana University School of Social Work, 317-278-0303 or at [robschn@iupui.edu](mailto:robschn@iupui.edu)

Retrieved from:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20080704053626/http://iupui.socialwork.iu.edu/indexer/1768/content.htm>