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EVALUATION OF THE EARLY TRUANCY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

State Attorney's Office, Ninth Judicial Circuit of Florida

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Executive Summary

The University of Central Florida's School of Social Work, The Department of Public Administration and the Center for Community Partnerships has collaborated with the State Attorney's Office, Ninth Judicial Circuit to evaluate the effectiveness of the Early Truancy Intervention Program (ETI) as it has existed for elementary schools in Orange County during the time period 2002-2005. To support the validity of study findings, quantitative data were analyzed from school years 1999 through 2001, plus additional information related to current practices (school years since 2005-2006) was obtained through telephone interviews of over 40 school personnel among 11 preselected Orange County elementary schools.

Findings include the Following:

I. The ETI Program has had a positive impact on reducing habitual truancy among elementary students in Orange County:

1. During the first year a school adopts the ETI Program, the percentage of students who are habitual truants (students with 15 or more unexcused absences) drops dramatically. Of the 36 first time schools, 34 experienced a positive impact, with 26 of these schools showing percentage reductions ranging from 22% to 68%.
2. In the nine instances where schools have enrolled in ETI and subsequently decided to not continue with the program, the percentage of students who are habitual truants has risen dramatically. When ETI is brought back to the school, in all but one case the differences in the percentage of students who are habitual

truants is significantly reduced again by the ETI presence, with percentage decreases up to 59%.

3. For schools that have experienced consecutive years of ETI participation, four have shown clear longer term habitual truant reduction; six have experienced positive or mixed results, and for four schools the ETI program has had no apparent impact on above average levels of habitual truancy.

II. The percentage of students who are habitual truants in Orange County Elementary Schools is significantly higher for the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years compared to the previous four years. There were a total of 5000 habitual truants for 2005-2006, a percentage of 6.24 of all students.

III. Based on information collected from the telephone interviews, there is almost unanimous agreement that the current model in which the school resource officer represents the law enforcement presence at ETI meetings is not as effective as the past model. According to the interviewees, the presence of a law enforcement officer Sheriff at ETI meetings will undoubtedly help further reduce habitual truancy.

IV. The time between when school personnel first identify a student as a habitual truant, and the time of the ETI meeting is much too great. Students may appear at the ETI meeting with many more than the state defined minimum number of unexcused absences.

V. A review of the phases prior to scheduling an ETI meeting, those dealing with attendance review and the Child Study Team (CST) meeting, indicates a great deal of proactive effort is occurring on the part of school personnel. However, there could be greater consistency in specific policies and procedures across the district to further support specific interventions.

VI. A literature review of existing approaches in other school districts nationwide show our study results to be the similar: a proactive approach resulting in a wide variety of school interventions coupled with a judicially based intervention has produced positive results.

VII. A review of literature dealing with causes of habitual truancy supports the ETI goal of reducing entrants into the juvenile justice system by addressing patterns of early elementary absence.

Summary of Recommendations:

Grouped into

- short term: those that could occur prior to the upcoming 2009-2010 school year
- intermediate term: those that may take more than one school year to implement
- long term: those that will take several years to complete and implement

Short Term:

1. Attendance warning letters should be sent out not later than the teacher noting that five unexcused absences have occurred within one month or ten absences within 90 days.
2. Attendance clerks should periodically run attendance reports from the CICs/SMS system to identify patterns of unexcused absences. If the reports indicate the number of absences noted above have occurred, the attendance clerk should generate the attendance warning letter before receiving such information from a teacher
3. It should be determined if the *Ed Connect* automatically generated phone message is reaching a valid phone number. If not, the system should notify the attendance clerk.
4. In the attendance warning letter, the parents should be given 48 hours to respond to the attendance clerk with a written note identifying the reason for the unexcused absences'
5. At the time the attendance warning letter is sent, a child study team meeting should be scheduled.
6. Ensure that attendance contracts are signed by parents at the conclusion of CST meetings—for all cases dealing with habitual truancy.

7. There needs to be consistent policy concerning the measure of student attendance that triggers the ETI letter and meeting. At one extreme, if the child is absent the day after the CST meeting, and contact with the home confirms that this absence is unexcused, then the ETI meeting is scheduled and the letter sent to the home.
8. There should be a return to the former practice of having a law enforcement officer Sheriff attend the ETI meeting.
9. Two schools that have not experienced the ETI Program show percentages of habitual truancy that are much higher than the district wide average. These are Lake Silver and Winegard. ETI participation for these schools should occur.
10. Create an informal “tickle” file of students who were designated as habitual truants or could be deemed “at risk for habitual truancy” at the end of every school year. At the beginning of the new school year, school personnel should consider initiating contact with the families of those students that are in the tickle file to identify any potential problems that require support and encourage a renewed commitment to attendance.
11. Broaden the role of the school resource officer to work more closely with other school personnel in providing provide support and encouragement to students at risk of habitual truancy and families. Mentoring relationships increase the student-school and family-school connection.
12. Encourage senior administration participation via technology communication (voicemail, email, calendar sharing). Whenever possible, encourage senior staff involvement in CST meetings to demonstrate school unity and full scale commitment to problem solving with at-risk families.

13. When the percentage of students that are habitual truants reaches a predetermined amount higher than the previous year district wide average, e.g. 8%, the ETI Program should be enrolled in that school.

Intermediate Term

1. School resources officers should work collaboratively with social workers as a team to distribute responsibility for home visits more equitably.
2. Greater identification with and interaction with community resources should occur.
3. Schools that have had relative longer term success in reducing habitual truancy after ETI Program participation include: Columbia, Hillcrest, Eccleston, Hungerford, Zellwood and Kaley. Further investigation of “best practices” experienced by these schools should occur, with the intent of adoption of such practices by other schools.
4. Schools that have had little success in reducing habitual truancy in spite of the ETI Program presence include: Englewood, Rosemont, Grand Avenue and Pine Hills. Further investigation into the reasons for increases in habitual truancy should occur, with resulting changes in current practices anticipated.
5. A stricter definition of habitual truancy should occur. Two suggestions:
 - A. three days of unexcused absences within a month; or
 - B. five days of unexcused absences.
6. Although more students in seats may have an impact of state supported funding, the process by which data are collected may mean there is no difference in funds allocated to a given school because of efforts to reduce truancy. The linkage between decreasing the number of habitual truants and resulting additional revenue coming to a school needs to be strengthened.

Long Term

1. Develop a more comprehensive system documenting specific issues contributing to truancy or combination of problems in order to triage the issues that are impacting attendance so that assistance can be extended as resources allow, such as divorce, substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness...)
2. Develop a case management/counseling team to work with families who have systemic issues that can be solved with case management and social work (mental health intervention)
3. Develop a panel study tracking children from grade one through grade 10 to determine the impact of truancy on behavior (ie. The relationship between truancy and delinquent behaviors)

I. INTRODUCTION

The Early Truancy Intervention (ETI) Program began in 1998. It represents a cooperative effort between the State Attorney's Office and the Orange County Public Schools. Its main goals include:

- To intervene in truant behavior
- To decrease the number of habitual truants
- To prevent youth from entering the Juvenile Justice System

The ETI Program is a pro-active intervention program designed to instill the value of school attendance in students and parents and to produce a school culture in which truancy is not an accepted approach to education. The nature of the cooperative effort requires both State Attorney's Office personnel and school personnel to collaborate throughout a process that identifies unexcused absences and works to curb truant behavior.

Several definition of terms used to refer to student attendance were identified. As discussed in more detail in the literature review section, a **truant** is defined by some as a student who accumulates one day of unexcused absence. Some states define a **chronic truant** is as a student who misses 20 days of school without providing excused absences for any of those days. This study will focus on the **habitual truant**:

a student who accumulates five unexcused absences
in one month or ten unexcused absences in 90 days.
(Florida Statutes 1003.26)

This definition of student attendance related behavior is what triggers the CST and ETI review and intervention.

Overall, the ETI program intervention shows a strong positive, short term impact in reducing the number of habitual truants. This positive impact is in line with other research efforts, some of which are discussed in the literature review section.

Our study is unique in that longitudinal data over a six year time period is analyzed in an attempt to gain further insights into a longer term picture of ETI Program effectiveness. The impact over a time period of more than one year is mixed. Some schools have shown a positive change in school culture, with habitual truant percentages not increasing, while for other schools the longer term impact is unclear and may be minimal.

Due to the limitations of the study, the determinants of long term impacts are difficult to assess. Much is dependent on the wide ranging reasons that lead to habitual truancy and the effectiveness of school personnel in dealing with these reasons. From all accounts, school personnel are taking a proactive approach to dealing with truancy, going “above and beyond” usual duties to reach out to parents and students, and implementing a wide variety of interventions that most likely have had a positive impact. In many instances, though, school personnel may be spread too thin, without sufficient personnel and/or resources to deal with the numbers of habitual truants. In addition, there is widespread evidence that some parents will not act in ways to end the habitual truancy of their children unless they are threatened with potential court action and time in jail.

The remainder of this report contains the following sections and information. After identifying the Study Team members and summarizing their efforts, a review of relevant programs and practices found elsewhere is presented. Also in the literature review section is a review of literature discussing reasons for truancy that supports the overall goals of the Orange County ETI Program. A detailed review of the school based processes and practices follows,

including specific recommendations for change. Data provided by OCPS is analyzed in the following section, focusing primarily on the percentage of students classified as habitual truants and to a lesser extent reviewing free and reduced lunch data. A list of recommendations follows, categorized into short term, medium and long term implementation time frames:

- short term: those that could occur prior to the upcoming 2009-2010 school year
- intermediate term: those that may take more than one school year to implement
- long term: those that will take several years to complete and implement

Suggestions for future research are identified, along with concluding comments.

Study Processes and Efforts

The University of Central Florida's School of Social Work, The Department of Public Administration and the Center for Community Partnerships has collaborated with the State Attorney's Office, Ninth Judicial Circuit to evaluate the effectiveness of the Early Truancy Intervention Program as it has existed for elementary schools in Orange County during the time period 2002-2005.

The ETI Study Team consists of:

Dr. Shawn Lawrence, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Central Florida (Principal Investigator)

Dr. Wendell C. Lawther, Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Central Florida (Co-Principal Investigator)

Ms. Peggy Hightower, BSW, Masters in Social Work student, University of Central Florida

Ms. Victoria Jennison, RN, MSW, PhD in Public Affairs student, University of Central Florida

The ETI Study Team collected data and information through a variety of means, including:

- Reviewing documents furnished by ETI Program and Orange County Public School (OCPS) staff
- Researching available literature dealing with ETI Programs and related issues such as the causes and impacts of truancy
- Performing over 40 telephone interviews with staff from 11 elementary schools selected by OCPS, including attendance clerks, registrars, assistant principals and principals.
- Reviewing case notes from 20 selected cases of students and their families that experienced the ETI Program meetings
- Collecting and analyzing data provided by the OCPS, for all OCPS elementary schools, 1999-2005, including:
 - Number of students who had 15 or more unexcused absences during a school year
 - Average enrollment by school year
 - Number of students with unexcused absences by school year
 - Number of students with excused absences by school year
 - Numbers of students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch support

The data were converted to percentages to ensure more consistent analysis across schools

The documents reviewed by the Study Team included:

- Attendance Policies and Procedures 2007-2008, Orange County Public Schools
- Cooperative Agreement, School Board of Orange County and the State Attorney, Ninth Judicial Court, signed April 8, 1998.

- Letter addressed to Parent and Guardian, signed by Ronald Blocker Orange County Public Schools, and Lawson Lamar, State Attorney, September 6, 2005
- ETI Schools, listed for each school year, 1998-99 to 2005-06
- Early Truancy Intervention, Procedures and Guidelines (one page)
- Sample letter to be sent to parents requiring their attendance at an ETI Meeting
- Early Truancy Intervention Forms (to be completed as a result of an ETI Meeting)
- Early Truancy Intervention Form Letter sent to parents (who do not attend a scheduled ETI Meeting)
- Florida Statutes
 - 1003.21 School Attendance
 - 1003.24 Parents responsible for attendance of children
 - 1003.26 Enforcement of School Attendance
 - 1003.27 Court procedure and penalties
- Summary of Absences for OCPS, school years 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06
- Early Truancy Intervention Program Results, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, 2004-2005, 2005-2006

Study Timeline and Activities

April 2008-August 2008: Preliminary Meeting with State Attorney's Office personnel; Formation of Study Team; Identification of Needs for Approval from UCF Institutional Research Board (IRB); Initial Study Team Planning Meetings; Submission of completed packet of information to UCF IRB; Initial Contact with OCPS to gather data

September 2008—December 2009: Review of Case files; Literature Review of Relevant Articles and Reports; Document Review and Analysis; UCF IRB approval; OCPS IRB

application and Approval; Request for Additional Quantitative Data and Approved List of Schools for Telephone Interviews.

January 2009-March 2009: Receipt and Analysis of OCPS quantitative data; Telephone interviews approved and performed; Draft Final Report Creation and Submittal

April 2009: State Attorney's Office Review and Feedback; Final Report submitted.

Study Constraints and Limitations

1. Relationships that existed among school personnel and community groups were not studied. Other than with limited information received during telephone interviews, we did not address the effectiveness of intervention efforts that involved community groups and resources.
2. No data were collected concerning the numbers of students whose parents were ordered to appear in truancy court, and/or experienced jail time.
3. The data provided by OCPS would not allow the identification of unexcused absences that occurred after the student and his/her parents experienced the ETI meeting. We could not judge the impact of the numbers of those who must attend truancy court on the effectiveness of the prevention efforts that characterize the ETI intervention.
4. Enrollment data provided by OCPS is an annualized average for the entire school year. Requests for enrollment data based on a smaller time period, e.g., the first day of each month of the school year, were not met, as OCPS personnel indicated that such data were not available for the time period of the study. Therefore, we could not assess the specific impact of ETI meetings on attendance that occurred immediately before and after an individual meeting.
5. Without information concerning individual students' attendance records over a several year time period, the impact of the ETI Program on specific students could not be fully assessed.

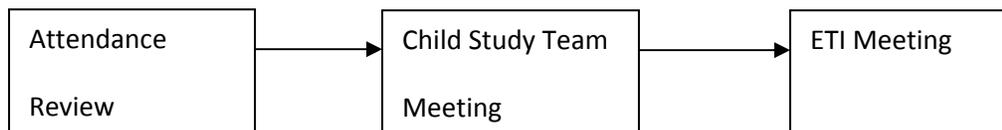
It was difficult, therefore, to fully assess the effectiveness of the attendance review process and CST meetings as they impacted the ETI meetings.

II. ETI PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

During the time period of the study, school years 1999 through 2005, the number of elementary schools in Orange County ranged from 100 in 1999 to 111 in 2005. ETI participation is optional for elementary schools. A total of 36 separate schools have participated in the program for at least one year. Over the study time period several patterns of participation existed, with schools participating one or two years, opting out of the program, and in some cases choosing to participate at a later year. A smaller number of schools have participated in the ETI Program for three or more consecutive years.

The ETI Program does not become involved in dealing with habitual truants until previous efforts to reduce the number of unexcused absences have failed; or these efforts are insufficient to effectively deal with the habitual truant population. As indicated in the flow chart below, and discussed in more detail in Section IV, the ETI Program is dependent upon school personnel in each case, especially those involved in Child Study Team efforts.

III. ETI Process (Flow Chart)



III. Literature Review concerning ETI Programs and Truancy

The challenge facing the Study Team in performing the literature review section of this effort was to identify literature in two areas:

- A. Evaluation Studies and ETI efforts nationwide
- B. Research relevant to the causes and impacts of habitual truancy

Evaluation Studies and ETI Efforts Nationwide

Other ETI models and similar school district efforts appear elsewhere throughout the nation. We discovered a limited number of relevant evaluation studies: those that focused on elementary schools, or that resulted in findings that support the findings and recommendations of this study. A brief summary of selected findings is found below.

Oakland County, Michigan

In 1998 the Superintendent of Schools for Oakland County, MI created a cooperative agreement among all schools in the County, initially focusing their efforts on second and third graders who were experiencing truancy problems and were labeled “at risk of habitual truancy”. In February 2005 the Oakland Truancy Task Force was created. This is a network of schools, various community agencies, and governments who:

work together to promote the three A’s in education—Attendance, Attachment and Achievement (Oakland, 2008):3

Different programs have been developed for different school levels. The program that is closest to the ETI Program in Orange county focuses on elementary and middle school children. The protocol, as modified August 2008, targets poor attendance patterns. Although records are kept identifying unexcused and excused absences, the protocol examines both types of attendance records in determining whether a truancy problem exists. Interventions then occur

that involve school personnel and community agencies. Ultimately, court action may be required.

Jacksonville/Duval County, Florida

In the Fall of 1994, the State Attorney for Jacksonville, Florida made a commitment to decrease the levels of truancy for schools in Duval County. Similar to the Child Study Teams in the Orange County Program, an Attendance Intervention Team was established to identify students with 5 unexcused absences in a month or 10 in a 90 day period. The Truancy Arbitration Program encompasses many of the same functions as the Orange County ETI Program. In addition, in 2000, a diverse group of community stakeholders was formed to deal with truancy at all school levels. This group is known as Jacksonville United Against Truancy.

An evaluation study undertaken in 2003-04 of 471 randomly selected students from Jacksonville Schools resulted in identifying 44 students who experienced the non-judicial hearing similar to the ETI meeting. The average number of unexcused absences for these students dropped considerably after the hearing, from 10.6 days to 2.2 days. A survey of 20 selected parents reinforced that the threat of arrest was instrumental in motivating them to make sure their children attended school. (NCSE, 2005)

Aurora, Colorado

In 2006, school district leaders in the Aurora, Colorado school district undertook several measures designed to proactively reduce the number of habitual truants, defined as students with 10 or more unexcused absences in a school year. Protocols were developed. The school superintendent visited selected homes. Teachers in some schools were provided additional compensation to manage cases of habitual truants. Truancy experts worked with schools, community groups, and parents to develop intervention efforts.

Although the efforts focused on all grade levels, the results for elementary schools were very positive. From school year 2006-07 to school year 2007-08, the percentage of habitual truants dropped from 6.4 to 2.6, as 620 fewer students were classified as habitual truants . Throughout the entire school system, a total of 51 chronically absent students were brought back to school by October 2007, resulting in an additional \$350,000 allocated to the school system. (National Forum, 2009)

Wisconsin

An investigation of truancy in Wisconsin in 1999, made by the Legislative Audit Bureau, resulting in findings that are relevant (Bezruki, Monroe & Cornelius, 2000). In part, the study wished to assess the impact of changes made in the definition of habitual truancy made by the legislature in 1997. This change was from five days of unexcused absences within ten consecutive days or 10 within a semester; to 5 days within a semester.

The investigators spoke with representatives from 23 school districts throughout Wisconsin. Findings included support for several principles and practices related to dealing with truants. These include:

..Timeliness of action - Several school administrators

indicated that it is important to establish a close link between truancy and the resulting negative consequence so that students understand their truancy will be addressed.

..Early intervention - Several school administrators

stated it is important to intervene early, so that fewer days of instruction are lost and the student does not develop the habit of being truant.

..Personal contact with parents or guardians - Many

school administrators indicated personal contact is important because it gives responsible adults a chance to speak with school personnel.(Bezruki, Monroe & Cornelius,2000:15).

Research Relevant to the Causes and Impacts of Habitual Truancy

The last 40 years has seen school absenteeism come full circle as a juvenile justice concern. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, more violent juvenile crime pushed relegated status offenses like truancy to the back burner of juvenile court concerns. Policy changes during this time period encouraged non-intervention responses to status offenses that included diversion, divestment from juvenile court, and decarceration (Kobrin & Klein, 1983). The late 1980's saw a recommitment to joint juvenile justice and education efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism in an effort to alter childhood behavior patterns that could significantly affect teen and adult functioning (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004).

One challenge inherent to the measurement of truancy is distinguishing whether there is a difference between absenteeism and truancy. Some researchers distinguish between absent and chronically absent, where chronically absent is defined as absences reaching 20% of attendance (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). In other literature, researchers use truancy interchangeably with chronic absenteeism. When defined, the true definition of truant is described as unauthorized absence, or absence without permission, regardless of the length of the absence (Attwood & Kroll, 2006). Regardless of the precise definition, truancy is a complicated social and educational issue that often results from a myriad of influences and usually requires intervention at many levels.

Factors that Influence Attendance

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention offers a four category model of variables that contribute to truancy. The four variables include **family**, **school**, **economic**, and **student** factors. **Family** factors include parental supervision, differing attitudes toward the need for education, and unfamiliarity of attendance laws. Parents find it more difficult to get their

children to school if they lack community or social support systems (McCluskey, Bynum & Patchin, 2004). In elementary school, one of the most regularly reported reason for absence is missing the bus. This is significant in that it illustrates how many very young children are responsible for getting themselves to/on the bus on time, a responsibility we would normally assign to parents among elementary children (Garrison, 2006) Cultural norms must also be taken into consideration. Certain cultures may not find formal education to be an important part of life, nor a school education to be as vital as caring for a sibling or elder family member (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001).

School factors include school size, diversity of student learning, access to mentors, and attitudes of teachers and other students. The transition from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school presents other issues to vulnerable children. The task oriented learning environment children became accustomed to in elementary school becomes more performance and process oriented in middle school. High school brings its own changes in social strata, class formatting, and access to teachers. These shifts in perspective often require different patterns of thinking and relating to people, information, and ideas. Class sizes increase; students have multiple teachers with multiple subjects, and students are expected to prove their aptitude compared to their fellow classmates (Garrison, 2006). It is not uncommon for youth to develop anxiety and self doubt prior to these transitions, especially which move from elementary to middle school. Students that experience high levels of psychosomatic distress are more apt to concede defeat more quickly and put forth less effort than their peers. Without extra attention given to this transition period, the child may experience anxiety and be less willing to attend school. Unfortunately, these children may be starting a downhill trajectory that ultimately leads

to failure in school that culminates in dropping out during the high school years (Garrison, 2006).

Economic influences include single parent households, lack of affordable transportation and/or childcare, high mobility rates, and parents working two or more jobs. In fiscally stressed schools, breakfast programs, after school childcare programs, and extracurricular activities could provide an incentive to families to improve attendance but are often too expensive to start or maintain.

Student variables include individual mental health problems, poor physical health, unfamiliarity with attendance laws, or substance abuse. Learning disabilities, cognitive and social skills deficits, and emotional disorders have also been associated with increased school absenteeism. Students with reduced cognitive or social skills have greater difficulty developing relationships with fellow students and teachers (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004), consequently finding school to be a source of stress. These stresses can have an immense impact on young people's school experience and will eventually impact their school attendance (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). One significant study of truancy in Chicago schools found a critical gap in the recognition of underlying mental health problems in adolescents who are truant, particularly those in urban environments with high levels of poverty and crime (Roderick, 1997 as cited in DeSocio, VanCura, Nelson, Hewitt, Kitzman, & Cole, 2007). In addition, youth with poor school engagement are more likely to participate in risk behaviors that compromise their physical and/or mental health (DeSocio, VanCura, Nelson, Hewitt, Kitzman, & Cole, 2007; Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Strickland, 1999).

Impact of Truancy

Although absences at early elementary ages are often thought to be due to illnesses or parental discretion, early absenteeism may establish an attendance pattern that becomes a truant one later in life (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004). Attention to early elementary attendance is important, as the stereotype of the truant student is rapidly changing from high school students to students as young as second grade (Capps, 2003). Garrison found that children who are truant in elementary school are three times more likely to be truant in high school than students who were not truant during their elementary school years (Garrison, 2006). Regardless of the exact elementary age at which truancy patterns are first observed, there is ample evidence that if left unaddressed, the patterns will continue into high school. This pattern places children, adolescents, and eventually adults at high risk of educational, social, psychological, physical, and financial distress (Anderman & Midgley, 1997).

Education literature supports the common sense premise that students who are not in school have fewer opportunities to learn, and as a result, lower achievement potential (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 as cited in McCray, 2006). Research has shown that missing just 30 hours of instruction negatively affects a student's academic performance (Commentary, 2002). Given a six hour learning day, this translates to children considered at risk of habitual truancy once they miss five days of school.

In addition, youth with poor school engagement are more likely to participate in risk behaviors that compromise their physical and/or mental health (DeSocio, VanCura, Nelson, Hewitt, Kitzman, & Cole, 2007; Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Strickland, 1999). Developmentally, early school failure can cause long-term problems in education, including placement in special education classes, reduced educational expectations, and negative self

perception and can also serve to limit opportunities for developing relationships with peers (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992).

Social scientists began to explore the relationship between truancy and crime back in the early part of the 19th century, labeling truancy as the “kindergarten of crime (Gavin, 1997). Research suggests that school may actually be a protective factor for at risk of habitual truancy youth. After controlling for IQ, socioeconomic status, early delinquency and family disruption, school had a significant protective impact among males (Henry, Caspi, Moffitt, Harrington & Silva, 1999). Poor attendance often leads to a poor commitment and attachment to school, which may in turn lead to increased delinquency and substance abuse (McClusky, Bynum & Patchin, 2004).

Individuals who have not received adequate education (as defined as not having a high school education) are two-and-a-half times more likely to receive public assistance, almost twice as likely to be unemployed, and will earn significantly less income than adults who take advantage of a full education (Kaufmann, Kwon, & Klein, 1999; Safe and Drug Free Schools Program, 1996).

Current Best Practices in Truancy Prevention Programming

As illustrated, absenteeism in early academic years is an important predictor of absenteeism in high school years. Therefore, it is critical to examine and concentrate on the attendance rates in elementary school years (Epstein, & Sheldon, 2002). Truancy intervention programs have several commonalities: parental involvement, consistency within school administrative sanctions, firmness in upholding these regulations, and involvement of community and neighboring social service agencies. Research into successful programs has indicated that when the school works with the family as a unit, rather than just the parent or

child, to get the children to school, attendance rates increase. Historically, schools have addressed issues of truancy by blaming individual students. Schools rarely involved families until the problem was so severe that the students were failing their courses. Families are now being recognized as an important influence on student attendance and an important resource for decreasing truancy and chronic absenteeism (Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams & Dalicandro, 1998; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1992).

Communication is vital between the school administration and the family; this is a basic obligation for all schools. It has been found that fulfilling this obligation can make a significant change in attendance scores. School administrators should implement a contact person that can be provided to family members to discuss attendance issues or other issues that may be pertinent to school policy. Establishing this level of two way communications, especially in larger schools, can help alleviate many stressors that parents and families experience, especially for families that do not speak English as a primary language at home (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

Because truancy is also associated with factors within the school environment, characteristics of elementary school environments that can reduce truancy include attending to individual student needs, engaging students in supportive relationships, establishing incentives for attendance, promptly addressing student absences, minimizing punitive responses, and forming alliances with community agencies to address the problems of students and their families. Many students lack parental support and consistent relationships. Literature indicates that attendance can be improved upon by making students feel as though they are an important part of the classroom (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). For example, one troubled high school in Baltimore increased student attendance when the school portioned itself into smaller academies, thereby increasing student–teacher interactions and decreasing the anonymity of students at the

school (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998), resulting in the children in the school feeling important. Many students who are truant lack positive adult role models. Mentoring programs allow youth to form positive healthy relationships with adults (McCray, 2006). Successful mentoring programs benefit the student and the community, bolster the student's motivation, offer role models to promote work ethic, reduce feelings of victimization and facilitate family involvement. An example of a successful mentoring program was one created in Escambia Florida. This program provided additional services to students processed through the Truancy Court Conference Program. The program uses mentors who are matched with "prodigies," as the student mentees are called, based on interest. Prodigies also receive small-group tutoring in mathematics and English. In addition, the families of these students are expected to participate actively in the program with their children to ensure student success (Reglin, 1997).

IV. ETI Program and Process

One of the goals of the project was to assess how a student is determined to be a truant, and subsequently enters into a process that brings him/her and the parents into contact with the ETI Program. This process is at the heart of the ETI efforts, and represents the key aspects of the cooperative effort among ETI and OCPS personnel. The following description and analysis of the process represents a compilation of data and information from a variety of sources including formal written policies dealing with attendance as well as information gleaned from interviews with school principals and other staff. Those areas in which inconsistencies were found across schools, leading to recommendations for changes in practice that produce greater consistency, are noted and discussed as appropriate.

To some extent, as a result of the telephone interview process, it was readily apparent that school personnel are going “above and beyond” their usual job duties to help students and parents to overcome barriers that prevented school attendance. For example, school administrators, teacher and staff have reported the following activities and techniques to get truant students to school:

1. Picking up children from their homes when their parents could not provide transportation
2. Working with parents on time management skills and techniques (ie. Packing backpacks the night before, putting clothes out the night before, and setting earlier bedtimes.
3. Supplying families with alarm clocks
4. Teachers working with local stores (K-mart) to donate clothing and school supplies to less fortunate children

5. Teachers walking children across busy intersections to get to school and home when no crossing guard was present
6. Teachers calling home during their free time to inquire as to the absent child's whereabouts
7. Teachers or administrators making home visits after hours to inquire as to whether they can be of assistance in getting child to school.

Each part of the process is dependent on the one preceding it. The efforts of the attendance clerk are followed by a Child Study Team review. If behavior does not change at that point, the law enforcement officers that are part of the ETI program then meet with the parents and students. To a certain extent, the success of the ETI program is determined by the success of the efforts made those previously contacting the student/parent.

Attendance Data Collection and Review

All schools are required to collect accurate data concerning daily attendance. Teachers take attendance at the beginning of the school day and then enter the information into the CICS/SMS OCPS system noting those students who are not present. If a student arrives at school after the "tardy bell" has sounded, and after attendance has been taken, the teacher, or in some cases the student or parents, must notify the attendance clerk/registrar of this change. The attendance clerk is required to enter the attendance data into the OCPS system by 1pm each day, triggering the Ed Connect system to send a recorded telephone message to the home of every student marked as absent.

If a student is absent on a given day, it is the responsibility of the student and his/her parents to ensure that the attendance clerk is notified of the reason for the absence. In addition, some teachers will take it upon themselves to make sure that the student does take the written

absence to the attendance clerk. In some cases, teachers may take the written note to the attendance clerk themselves.

In almost all schools, the attendance clerk has the responsibility to make the change of a student's classification from absent to tardy. In addition, once the attendance clerk receives the written note (it cannot be a verbal message), she/he will make the change from unexcused to excused if the reason expressed in the note fall into one of the following official seven categories of excused absences (FI statutes). If the note is unclear, the attendance clerk will contact the home for clarification. If the note cannot be clarified, then the attendance clerk will review the note with the Assistant Principal. This person will make the determination to keep the excuse categorized as unexcused or change it to excused. In rare occasions, the Principal will make the determination to change the status of the absence.

Absences shall be excused for:

- (a) illness, injury or other insurmountable condition
- (b) illness or death of a member of the student's immediate family
- (c) recognized (or established) religious holidays and/or religious instruction
- (d) medical appointments
- (e) participation in an approved activity or class of instruction held at another site
- (f) prearranged absences of educational value with the principal's prior approval
- (g) head lice infestation (up to four (4) days during the school year)
- (h) catastrophic disasters that significantly impact the life of the student (e.g. loss of residence from natural disaster) (Attendance Policies, OCPS:9)

If the student does not bring in a written note, and the number of days of unexcused absences continues, teachers may call or visit the home under various circumstances. At a minimum, because they are the first point of noting and recoding attendance, they have the responsibility to contact the attendance clerk /registrar or the guidance counselor—whoever is responsible to start the Child Study Team process (see below)--once the number of unexcused absences reaches 5 in a month or 10 in 90 days. (Attendance Policies, OCPS)

At about the same time as the teacher contacts the attendance clerk, many schools will attempt to contact the parents at home, either via a phone call or visit. This contact can be made by a variety of school staff, including teachers, attendance clerks, resource officers, and in some cases the assistant principal or principal. If a written note is obtained, then the attendance record is changed at that time.

Upon receipt of the information concerning unexcused absences from the teacher, the attendance clerk or registrar generates a form letter that is sent to the student's home. This letter is termed an "attendance warning letter" (see appendix A). This letter informs the parent that a written note is required for every absence. The letter also indicates that if the student attendance does not change, or written notes supporting the absence as excused, the parents will be required to attend a Child Study Team meeting. In this letter, parents are not given a specific number of days within which they must respond to the attendance clerk.

Analysis

Interviews with school personnel indicated that efforts in taking attendance and recording changes were consistent across schools, as attendance clerks and teachers were acting in accordance with OCPS Policy and Florida Statutes. In large part schools are acting proactively in this initial phase to deal with students who may be habitual truants in an attempt to limit the number of unexcused absences and potentially change student and parent behavior towards the value of school attendance.

Inconsistencies were noted, however, in two key decision points that occur at the conclusion of this initial phase. First, the number of unexcused absences that triggers the attendance warning letter varies. Some schools mail this letter after 5 unexcused absences within one month, while others mail the letter after 10 unexcused absences even if 5 such absences

occur within one month. Second, the number of days parents are given to respond to the school after receiving the letter varies. Some schools give parents 48 hours while other schools allow seven days.

Recommendations:

1. Attendance warning letters should be sent out not later than the teacher noting that five unexcused absences have occurred within one month or ten absences within 90 days.
(short term)
2. Attendance clerks should periodically run attendance reports from the SMS system to identify patterns of unexcused absences. If the reports indicate the number of absences noted above have occurred, the attendance clerk should generate the attendance warning letter before receiving such information from a teacher (short term)
3. It should be determined if the Con Ed automatically generated phone message is reaching a valid phone number. If not, the system should notify the attendance clerk. (short term)
4. In the attendance warning letter, the parents should be given 48 hours to respond to the attendance clerk with a written note identifying the reason for the unexcused absences'
5. At the time the attendance warning letter is sent, a child study team meeting should be scheduled (see next section for more explanation).

At this initial phase, the emphasis should be placed on obtaining written reasons for absences that have been classified as unexcused. Parents should be given opportunities to provide these reasons, so that at a minimum all non-habitual truants can be excluded from the remainder of the CST and ETI Process. More important, with school personnel acting proactively, within shorter time frames than some schools now permit, it may be

possible to convince parents to change behaviors in ways that prevent their children from becoming habitual truants.

Child Study Team Process and Review

When the parents do not respond to the attendance warning letter in a timely fashion, the attendance clerk sends a second letter to the parents informing them to appear at a Child Study Team (CST) meeting. Once this second letter is sent, the parent must attend the CST meeting; providing a written note explaining their children's absences will not excuse them from attending the meeting.

The CST meeting is scheduled to coincide with the day that the assigned school social worker is scheduled to appear at that school. The meeting is typically scheduled two to three weeks from the date the letter is sent to the parents.

The CST meets to review a case and potentially recommend one or more interventions. These include:

- Additional visits from the social worker
- References to local social service agencies
- Counseling
- Mentoring
- Tutoring
- More communication between teacher and family
- Attendance contract completion (Attendance Policies, OCPS)

The personnel that comprise the CST vary from meeting to meeting, depending on the nature of the case that it reviews. In every case, though, it does include the school social worker. In addition the attendance clerk, guidance counselor, resource officer, teachers and principals may also comprise the CST at any given meeting. As indicated in the Attendance Policies, OCPS (82):

The composition of the child study team can change as necessary to ensure that the persons having the needed knowledge and skills are present to address the referral program.

The CST meets on an ad hoc basis, as needed to discuss specific cases.

In the case of truancy, as defined above, a meeting between the CST team and the parents is scheduled. At that meeting, an attendance contract can be signed (see appendix A). The parent promises corrective action, including promising that the student will not miss additional days of school; and all excuses will be accompanied by a written excuse, including a doctor's statement if appropriate. All actions taken by the CST are documented and recorded according to forms found in the Attendance Policies of the OCPS.

A joint effort is put forth by the school staff prior to the CST meeting being scheduled. If the social workers are unavailable to visit the home, school staff members, as well as teachers and resource officers, have gone to the family's home to see if additional services are needed within the residence.

Analysis:

The proactive attempts to contact students that occur in the initial stage can be inconsistent, depending in many cases on the good will of individuals to go "above and beyond" their usual duties. In contrast, interview data suggested that because of the CST meeting intervention much more consistently occurs at that time. In many instances, the social workers or other resource officers go to the families' home to discuss the child's unexcused absences as well as to meet with the parents regarding other issues that may be preventing the parents from getting their children to school. Community resources are provided to the families, as well as working with the families on time management, transportation, assistance with utilities and food, and with child care.

Throughout this phase in the process, it is very rare for the parents not to attend CST meetings.

Interview information did identify concerns that impact the effectiveness of the CST meeting and related processes. These include:

- Many of the staff mentioned that the social workers are spread too thin in their responsibilities. Social workers are not able to spend the needed time with the students and families that may actually prevent some of these attendance issues.
- There is a definite concern about the cultural differences within the school communities. Many of the parents are not able speak or read English. This limits the communication process between the school staff and the families. In some cases, the cultural differences highlight a disparity of parental concern for their children's education.
- While making home visits, in some cases school staff are finding that families are no longer living at the address on file with the school. Mobility may be due to financial reasons, employment opportunities, or custody issues. Parents have said that they do not change their address so that their children are able to continue at the same school.
- In some cases, attendance contracts are not signed during a CST meeting, either due to oversight or because the truancy issue has been resolved.

Recommendations:

1. School resources officers should work with social workers as a team to distribute responsibility for home visits more equitably (medium term).
2. Greater identification with and interaction with community resources. Referring families to local agencies for either case management and/or counseling may resolve truancy

issues and/or prevent future issues. In addition, collaborating with local agencies will allow for the dissemination of information regarding the importance of education.

3. Ensure that Attendance Contracts are signed by parents at the conclusion of CST meetings—for all cases dealing with habitual truancy (short term).

As stated in the recommendations for the previous section, the sooner the CST meeting can be held, the greater the chance that habitual truancy can be addressed and resolved. Because parents do attend the CST meeting, the intent of the meeting should be to identify solutions to help solve logistical issues faced by parents who really want their children to attend but cannot overcome these issues. Interviews identified many efforts by schools to help at this point, including “outside the box” solutions such as providing alarm clocks for students. More efforts such as these, including partnerships with community organizations, can help more students and parents avoid habitual truancy.

ETI Intervention and Review

If the unexcused absences continue, the attendance clerk from the school contacts the ETI Program staff to schedule an ETI meeting. A third letter is sent to the parents informing them that they must attend the ETI meeting. Language in this letter indicates that failure to attend may result in court action taken against them.

At the ETI meeting, many of the same school staff who were present at the CST meeting will also be present. It is much more likely that the school Assistant Principal or Principal will be at the ETI meeting as well compared to the CST Meeting.

The forms to be completed at this meeting are often much more detailed compared to the CST meeting in terms of recording personal family names and circumstances (see Appendix A). Topics discussed include many of the same that were most likely discussed at the CST meeting.

Reasons for habitual truancy are recorded as well. Such reasons fall primarily into two categories: family problems and medical problems, though quite often the specific problem is not identified, therefore making intervention difficult.

If parents do not attend scheduled ETI meetings, a “Notice of Conference” form is completed and mailed to the parents. This informs the parents that another ETI meeting will be scheduled that they must attend.

Analysis:

There are two general reasons why parents and students are asked to attend ETI meetings. First, preceding efforts to help parents meet logistical issues have either failed or have been insufficient. These reasons include a lack of transportation, having insufficient appropriate clothing for the students; and failure to ensure that the children are awake in the morning to get to school on time. Second, parental attitudes that include a lack of commitment or understanding of the value of education for their children have not been changed. As supported by the data that are discussed in the data analysis section, the ETI program has been successful in changing truant behavior with the threat of court action.

Recommendations:

1. A consistent policy concerning the measure of student attendance that triggers the ETI letter and meeting should be adopted. At one extreme, if the child is absent the day after the CST meeting, and contact with the home confirms that this absence is unexcused, then the ETI meeting is scheduled and the letter sent to the home (short term).
2. There should be a return to the former practice of having a law enforcement officer Sheriff attend the ETI meeting. (short term) Many of the school staff and administrators expressed that the ETI program was more effective when the detective was present.

3. Identify the specific “family problems” and “medical problems” the student or family is experiencing so that appropriate referrals and interventions can take place.

The “trigger” that leads to ETI intervention may be inconsistent. For some schools, it is one more day of unexcused absences. For example, if the child is absent the day after the CST meeting, and contact with the home confirms that this absence is unexcused, then the ETI meeting is scheduled and the letter sent to the home.

More important, as was consistently voiced during the telephone interviews, and supported by data there is a rising percentage of students with 15 or more unexcused absences. This indicates that the threat of future court action is apparently insufficient with the presence of only the school resource officer representing law enforcement.

Conclusion

The overall process must be compressed, as the current process allows habitual truants to not attend without the threat of sanctions for too long a time period. Ideally the success of the ETI Program depends in part on reducing the number of habitual truants for which ETI meetings must be held. Greater cooperation among school and ETI personnel can help to reduce these numbers.

V. Data Analysis

Data Sources and Methodology

Information concerning ETI school participation was compiled from data submitted by ETI Program Staff in April 2008. All data analyses reflected below is based on data submitted by Ms. Angel Wienecke, ETI Program Liaison, Orange Public Schools, in PDF format on January 16, 2009 and February 12, 2009.

School population for the 111 Orange County elementary schools varies widely, from a low of 250 (Hungerford) to a high of 1498 (Avalon), using enrollment data for 2005-2006. More important, the average enrollment in schools across the six year time period varies widely for some schools, with changes from year to year reaching as high as ten percent. Overall enrollment in Orange County schools was lower in the final three years of the study.

To more validly compare results across schools, all data provided by OCPS was converted into percentages. Data for a given school across different time periods was facilitated by using percentages rather than numbers of habitual truants, as trends in the incidence of habitual truancy can be more validly identified. The percentage of habitual truancy is viewed only as a general measure of the extent of the problem.

The Problem: Scope and Framework

Description of the Problem

For the time period of the study, school years 1999-2000 through 2005-2006, Orange County elementary schools had a consistent student population for 1999-2002, averaging almost 82,500 students. During the last three years of our project timeframe, student population averaged just over 78,000, a decrease of over 5% compared to the previous four years.

Year	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	Average
Student Population	80,335	82,922	84,236	82,566	75,859	78,229	80,097	80,605

The ETI Program focuses on those students who can be termed habitual truants, defined as those with at least 15 such absences during a school year.

Year	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	Average
Numbers of Habitual Truants	3518	4578	4789	4523	4363	5519	5000	4613

For all schools, including those that enrolled in the ETI Program, the average percentage of students who were habitual truants was 5.72.

Year	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	Average
% of Habitual Truants	4.38	5.52	5.69	5.48	5.75	7.05	6.24	5.72

The percentages differed by region, with the Central region schools experiencing the highest percentage of students who are habitual truants. Overall, percentages have risen during the last three years of the study time period, compared to the previous four years.

Percentage of students who are Habitual Truants, by Region, 1999-2005

Year	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06
Central	9.21	10.44	10.20	9.81	9.25	10.98	11.47
East	3.10	3.74	3.58	4.22	4.85	6.02	4.92
North	3.54	4.69	5.23	4.59	4.87	7.26	6.34
South	3.38	4.73	5.05	4.08	4.96	5.78	4.85
West	2.78	4.42	5.03	5.38	5.47	6.41	5.11

ETI Program: Quantitative Data Analysis Results

Of the 111 number of elementary schools in OC during this time period ¹, 36 have enrolled in the ETI Program for at least one year, 14 have enrolled for two years; seven for three or more years; and one school for four years.

1. First Year of ETI Program Impact

During the first year a school adopts the ETI Program, the percentage of habitual truants drops dramatically. Of the 36 first time schools, 34 experienced a positive impact, with 26 of these schools showing percentage reductions ranging from 22%-68%.

First year of ETI Impact on percentage of 15 unexcused compared to previous year

school	year	% Hab Truants Previous Yr	% Hab Truants ETI Year	diff	% Change
Grand Avenue	2000-01	18.76	15.47	3.29	17.56
Hiawassee	2000-01	12.18	6.32	5.86	48.1
Orange Center	2000-01	11.08	10.11	0.97	8.73
Pineloch	2000-01	15.38	13.66	1.72	11.23
Washington Shores	2000-01	15.16	10.88	4.28	28.21
Columbia	2000-01	5.98	3.87	2.11	35.22
Fern Creek	2000-01	5.59	7.82	-2.23	-39.76
Zellwood	2000-01	7.15	3.8	3.35	46.86
Ocoee	2000-01	4.68	2.67	2.01	43.04
Sadler	2000-01	8.85	6.05	2.8	31.55
Richmond Hgts	2000-01	15.73	16.34	-0.61	-7.07
Apopka	2001-02	8.89	4.65	4.24	47.69
Eccleston	2001-02	11.85	5.42	6.43	54.26
Azalea Park	2001-02	6.22	3.78	2.44	39.23
Chickasaw	2001-02	5.98	3.02	2.96	49.50
Dream Lake	2001-02	8.94	5.64	3.3	36.91

Hungerford	2002-03	12.89	8.56	4.33	33.59
Ivey Lane	2002-03	15	9.39	5.61	37.40
Lake Weston	2002-03	9.56	7.38	2.18	22.80
Maxey	2002-03	11.38	3.72	7.66	67.31
Wheatley	2002-03	11.39	6.49	4.9	43.02
Hillcrest	2002-03	13.5	6.17	7.33	54.30
Oak Hill	2002-03	9.07	5.73	3.34	36.82
Rosemont	2002-03	9.09	4.83	4.26	46.86
Lancaster	2002-03	8.66	3.04	5.62	64.90
Pine Castle	2002-03	9.14	6.78	2.36	25.82
Catalina	2003-04	23.08	9.36	13.72	59.45
Palmetto	2003-04	11.76	11.35	0.41	3.49
Pine Hills	2003-04	11.42	8.18	3.24	28.3
Rock Lake	2003-04	12.9	5.08	7.82	60.62
Three Points	2004-05	10.34	6.12	4.22	40.81
Conway	2004-05	10.71	10.39	0.32	2.99
Kaley	2004-05	10.62	3.35	7.27	68.46
Spring Lake	2004-05	6.75	4.96	1.79	26.52
Eagles Nest	2005-06	14.45	12.82	1.63	11.28
West Oaks	2005-06	7.04	5.73	1.31	18.61

Year	Number of schools first year ETI	% habitual truants previous year	% habitual truants first ETI year	Percentage difference of habitual truants	
2000-01	11	10.44	8.23	21.2	
2001-02	5	7.86	4.36	44.5	
2002-03	10	10.3	5.85	43.2	
2003-04	4	14.38	9.41	34.6	
2004-05	4	9.55	6.43	32.7	
2005-06	2	10.8	9.07	16.0	

2. First year Impact of ETI Program Reenrollment

A similar impact is shown in instances where schools have enrolled in ETI and subsequently decided to not continue with the program. In nine cases, the percentage of habitual truants increased dramatically. When ETI was brought back to the school, in all but one case the differences in percentage of habitual truants is significantly reduced again by the ETI presence.

School	% Habitual Truants ETI First and subsequent Year (s)	% Habitual Truants subsequent non ETI yr(s)	% Habitual Truants ETI First yr return	% Difference previous non ETI yr With first return ETI yr
Lake Weston	1.79 (1999)	7.98 (2000) 9.56 (2001)	7.38 (2002)	22.8%
Lovell	5.94 (1999) 5.80 (2000)	10.48 (2001)	5.75 (2002)	45.1%
Ridgewood	7.59 (1999) 9.53 (2000)	11.46 (2001) 10.38 (2002) 9.61 (2003)	7.83 (2004)	18.5%
Wheatley	4.91 (1999)	9.39 (2000) 11.39 (2001)	6.49 (2002)	43.0%
Azalea Park	3.78 (2001)	7.24 (2002) 6.97 (2003) 14.42 (2004)	8.57 (2005)	40.6%
Ventura	2.80 (1999) 3.45(2000) 1.39(2001)	3.32 (2002) 5.01 (2003) 6.08 (2004)	3.08 (2005)	49.3%
Rolling Hills	2.26 (1999) 2.45 (2000) 3.83(2001)	6.73 (2002) 8.37 (2003)	9.32 (2004)	(11.3)%
Conway	3.02(1999)	7.03 (2000) 9.66 (2001) 9.33 (2002) 10.71(2003)	10.39(2004)	3%
Lake George	2.24 (1999)	4.37 (2000) 6.01(2001) 5.49 (2002) 7.50 (2003) 5.02 (2004)	2.08 (2005)	58.6%

3. *Negative Impact after ETI Program Has Left*

Other schools did not experience the ETI Program, or experienced it for only one or two (consecutive) years, during this time period, but did experience above average percentages of habitual truants. In two cases listed below, schools have never enrolled in the ETI Program.

School	% Habitual Truants before ETI Program year	% Habitual Truants During ETI Program Year(s)	% Habitual Truants after ETI Program Year
Chickasaw	7.48 (1999) 5.98(2000)	3.02 (2001)	4.96 (2002) 8.61 (2003) 9.92 (2004) 9.71 (2005)
Dream Lake	7.08 (1999) 8.94(2000)	5.64(2001) 4.38(2002)	7.17 (2003) 10.93 (2004) 8.32 (2005)
Lake Silver	NA	NA	.44 (1999) .58 (2000) 1.57 (2001) .71 (2002) .97 (2003) 15.68 (2004) 16.83 (2005)
Oak Hill	3.87 (1999) 6.28 (2000) 9.07 (2001)	5.73 (2002)	8.66 (2003) 9.4 (2004) 10.02 (2005)
Riverside	NA	2.84 (1999)	6.29 (2000) 7.09 (2001) 8.32 (2002) 7.11 (2003) 12.01(2004) 6.41 (2005)
Winegard			7.13 (1999) 13.11(2000) 11.85(2001) 12.03(2002) 11.92(2003) 13.03(2004) 8.33 (2005)

Bonneville	NA	2.27 (1999)	4.30 (2000) 5.95 (2001) 5.19 (2002) 5.81 (2003) 5.27 (2004) 3.82 (2005)
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4. Impact of Non Consecutive ETI Program Enrollment

Other schools enrolled and withdrew from the ETI Program at least twice during this time period. Results are similar to above analysis, as in most cases the absence of the ETI Program lead to higher percentages of habitual truants.

Sadler: The first year of ETI participation (2000) resulted in a drop in the habitual truant percentage to a low of 6.05. After two subsequent years of non-participation, in which the percentage jumped to 13.19, the ETI Program returned. There was a significant drop in 2004 to 5.6, but the percentage of habitual truants jumped to 9.21 in 2005.

Lancaster : Enrolled in ETI in 1999, it began the study time period with a low of 5.3% of habitual truants. Without ETI, the percentage jumped to 13.67 the next year. Reenrolling in ETI in dropped the percentage down to 3.04 in 2002, but a lack of subsequent participation in ETI has seen the percentage climb in each of the final three years to a high of 9.1 in 2005.

Spring Lake : A pattern of ETI enrollment followed by at least one year of non enrollment has occurred three times during the study time period. In each case, in the years after the ETI Program is not present, the percentage of habitual truants has risen.

5. Consecutive ETI Program Experience

Schools that have experienced the ETI Program for consecutive years have had both positive and negative results.

Positive Impact:

Zellwood: Six consecutive years of ETI Program experience have kept percentages of habitual truants below or close to district averages: ranging from 3.75 to 7.65 during the 2000 to 2005 time period.

Kaley: In 2004, the first of two consecutive ETI years, percentages dropped significantly from previous years. In 2005, the percentage dropped again to a low of just over 3%.

Positive/Mixed Impact:

Hiawassee experienced success during the four consecutive years it enrolled in the ETI Program, producing percentages that ranged from 6.32-8.02 during 2000-2003. However, during the last two years, without ETI enrollment, percentages have shot back up to over 13% each year.

Catalina has had some success with the ETI Program, experiencing a drop in % of habitual truants during 2003, the first year of its enrollment. The percentage fell from 23.08 in 2002 to 9.09 in 2003. Subsequently, under two more years of the ETI Program, the percentage rose to 12.99 in 2005.

Dover shores: during the two years of ETI Program enrollment, 1999 and 2000, percentage of habitual truants dropped to 3.68 in 2000. The next two years saw similar low percentages, but in the last three years percentages have risen again, experiencing a high of 10.48 in 2004.

Negative Impact:

Englewood has had a mixed experience with ETI, as three consecutive years of ETI enrollment during 1999-2001 reflected an increase in the percentage of 15 unexcused to 6.6 in 2001.

Percentages and enrollment in the ETI program fluctuated subsequently, with 2005 showing a 9.28 percentage of habitual truants.

Grand Avenue portrayed the most negative record throughout the study period, as four years of ETI enrollment did not result in much apparent reduction, as percentages of habitual truants ranged from 18.85 to 23.06 during the seven year period.

Rosemont : Although there was a significant drop in the percentage of habitual truants during the first year of ETI Enrollment to 4.83% in 2002, the subsequent three years of ETI presence has been accompanied by rising percentages that were over 8% in both 2004 and 2005.

Pine Hills: Three consecutive years of ETI enrollment, 2003-05, have produced percentages ranging from 8.18 to 13.16. These percentages are similar to the three years preceding the ETI Program adoption.

6. Longer term Successes without ETI Enrollment

There are schools that could be touted as longer term success stories, as several schools have lowered or maintained their population of habitual truants after experiencing the ETI Program.

Columbia: percentage of habitual truants fell to 3.87 in 2000 in the first year of two consecutive years of the ETI Program. After leaving the program in 2002, the percentage of habitual truants has varied between 3.23 and 6.05, always below the district average.

Hillcrest: in 2002, during the only year ETI program was adopted, the percentage of 15 habitual truants dropped more than 50% to 6.17%. Since then, the percentage has continued to drop, ranging from 4.23 to 6.14.

The percentage of FRL for schools that participated in the ETI Programs ranged from 8 to 23% higher than the district wide average.

Recommendations:

1. Schools that have had relative longer term success after ETI Program participation include: Columbia, Hillcrest, Eccleston, Hungerford, Zellwood and Kaley. Further investigation of “best practices” experienced by these schools should occur, with the intent of adoption of such practices by other schools.
2. Schools that have not had much success in spite of the ETI Program presence include: Englewood, Rosemont, Grand Avenue and Pine Hills. Further investigation into the reasons for increases in habitual truancy should occur, with resulting changes in current practices anticipated.
3. Two schools that have not experienced the ETI Program show percentages of habitual truancy that are much higher than the district wide average. These are Lake Silver and Winegard. ETI participation for these schools should occur.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the specific recommendations that appear above, the following recommendations potentially have greater impact on the ETI Program. Similar to those found earlier in the report, they are classified as short term, medium term and long term, including those made as a result of the review of other similar programs nationwide.

Short Term

1. Create an informal file of students who were designated as habitual truants or could be deemed “at risk of habitual truancy” at the end of every school year. At the beginning of the new school year, school personnel should consider initiating contact with the families of those students that are in the tickle file to identify any potential problems that require support and encourage a renewed commitment to attendance.
2. Broaden the role of the school resource officer to work more closely with other school personnel in providing provide support and encouragement to students at risk of habitual truancy and their families. Mentoring relationships increase the student-school and family-school connection.
3. Encourage senior administration participation via technology communication (voicemail, email, calendar sharing). Whenever possible, encourage senior staff involvement in CST meetings to demonstrate school unity and full scale commitment to problem solving with at-risk families.
4. When the percentage of students that are habitual truants reaches a predetermined amount higher than the previous year district wide average, e.g. 8%, the ETI Program should be enrolled in that school.

Intermediate Term

5. Because the ETI process is currently a long one, putting the students at risk of falling further behind in school, a stricter definition of habitual truancy should occur. Two suggestions:
 - a. three days of unexcused absences within a month; or
 - b. five days of unexcused absences.

This change will allow all interventions to begin much sooner than occurs under present definitions. Earlier interventions will help to prevent students from becoming habitual truants, especially for those families who relocate to a different school system because habitual truancy increases the fear of court action.

6. Although more students in seats may have an impact of state supported funding, the process by which data are collected may mean there is no difference in funds allocated to a given school because of efforts to reduce truancy. The linkage between decreasing the number of habitual truants and resulting additional revenue coming to a school needs to be strengthened.
7. Add a positive reinforcement component to the current ETI program. For this there are two suggestions:
 - a. Recognize the students who have perfect attendance in the schools with a certificate and perhaps the chance to win a prize
 - b. Recognize those students who were part of the ETI program but have since reformed and now have perfect or near perfect attendance.

Long Term

8. Develop a more comprehensive system documenting specific issues contributing to truancy or combination of problems in order to triage the issues that are impacting attendance so that assistance can be extended as resources allow, such as divorce, substance abuse, domestic violence, and homelessness.
9. Develop a mentoring program. Older students who are reformed ETI students mentor the younger students about the importance of coming to school.
10. Develop a case management/counseling team to work with families who have systemic issues that can be solved with case management and social work (mental health) intervention

VII. FUTURE RESEARCH EFFORTS

1. Additional study can be made of the CICS SMS system that records attendance, as well as related policies. For example, if a home visitation identifies that the student is no longer living at the address on file within the school system, and has moved outside the school district, at this time, the recording of unexcused absences for this student by the school district should end.
2. More thorough research dealing with the effectiveness of the attendance review and Child Study Team processes would provide additional insights into ETI Program effectiveness.
3. Conduct a panel study, following students who are flagged as being truant in elementary school (first grade) throughout their academic years (through 10th grade). This will allow not only for intervention at later dates, but also for longitudinal data to aid in developing new programs.

VIII. CONCLUSION

For the ETI Program, success or effectiveness must be determined by a reduction of habitual truants, even though the causes for reduced truancy cannot always be easily identified, nor can the reasons for apparent changes in behavior be attributed to any one cause or process. What is very evident in terms of determining success are the actions and efforts of school personnel that are taken prior to ETI meetings. Although the primary focus of this study was not on the interventions that took place prior to the ETI meeting, any recommendations for reducing habitual truancy must focus on the relationships built between students, their parents, the school personnel that provide the interventions, and any community resources that are drawn upon to assist with these interventions.

The very evident short term success of the ETI Program is primarily due to the effectiveness of the threat of truancy court and jail time has on changing student attendance behavior. With the limited information and data that we had, it is difficult to assess the impact of interventions to reduce habitual truancy made prior to the ETI meeting on the effectiveness of the ETI Program. In some cases, previous interventions may have been successfully in changing parental attitudes through eliminating logistical barriers for parents to reduce habitual truancy, leaving a smaller number of parents for whom the threat of court time was effective. In other cases, school staff may have not performed effective interventions, assuming that the court threat would be effective no matter what the reasons for habitual truancy.

The lack of longer term effectiveness of the ETI Program throughout a broader range and number of schools suggests that efforts must be made across school years to identify habitual truants and to ensure longer lasting behavioral changes. Although reduced habitual truancy may be achieved for some students for a given school year, longer term changes in attendance

behavior may not occur. For those students who change school districts, for example, OCPS and ETI must work together to track individual students and provide additional interventions if needed. Only through greater cooperation, support and renewed involvement of community groups will longer term reduction in habitual truancy occur.

Notes

1. This number includes 11 schools that were not in existence for the entire time period of the study. The following schools first enrolled students in the year indicated: Andover (2005); Avalon (2001); Camelot (2000); East Lake (2005); Three Points (2001); West Creek (2004); Citrus (2000); Eagles Nest (2004); Thornbrooke (2002); West Oaks (2004); Whispering Oaks (2005).
2. The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced cost lunches is taken from data provided by the OCPS. For the purposes of this study, data from categories 2 and 3 were combined. A percentage of students for each school that represented the total of these two categories was then calculated.

Categories of relevant data were coded as follows:

- 2- The student is eligible for free lunch
- 3 - The student is eligible for reduced-price lunch
- 4 - The student is enrolled in a USDA approved Provision 2 school
- 6 - The student is eligible for free meals based on direct certification which is the automatic approval for free meals but declines the free meals.
- 8 - The student is eligible for reduced-price lunch, but the information may not be used for verifying eligibility for other programs such as the Federal Chapter I Program
- 9 - The student is eligible for free meals based on direct certification which is the automatic approval for free meals.

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