



The current state of truancy reduction programs and opportunities for enhancement in Los Angeles County



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ABSTRACT

School truancy, defined as any intentional unauthorized or illegal absence from school, influences, and is influenced by, multiple academic, health, and social factors. This project sought to describe how truancy-reduction systems are operating in Los Angeles County and identify the highest priority policy and program options to effectively address truancy. The Department of Public Health convened an expert panel and collected data through literature review, key informant interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Results describe the interconnected players that are working to address truancy. Recommendations focus on increasing school-based efforts, identifying innovative ways to address students' and families' physical and mental health needs, enhancing coordination across partners and elevating their commitment, expanding evidence-based programs, and enhancing data collection efforts to better identify additional effective strategies. Other jurisdictions can build off our prioritization framework to describe the current state of their systems and identify promising programs to augment system functioning.

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1. Introduction

School truancy, any intentional unauthorized or illegal absence from school, is a significant and persistent problem in the United States. School truancy differs from chronic absenteeism, which includes missing extended amount of school for any reason (including excused and

unexcused absences). School truancy is common among older age youth. In 2009, 11% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 reported skipping school in the past 30 days (Vaughn, Raynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). However, truancy also impacts younger students. In the 2011–2012 school-year, 691,470 California elementary school children, or 1 out of every 5 elementary school students, met California's definition for being truant (missing 3 or more days of school without a valid excuse) (California Department of Education, 2014).

School truancy is a problem that influences, and is influenced by, multiple academic, health, and social factors. Students who are absent

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from school are more likely to perform poorly on standardized tests, receive lower grades, and drop out of school (Kobrin, 2009; Maynard, Salas-Write, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012). Poor attendance and dropping out of school are associated with higher rates of involvement in violence and crime, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and poor mental health (Claes, Hooghe, & Reeskens, 2009; Kearney, 2008a). Likewise, high school dropouts have poorer long-term health and social outcomes; they are more likely to be unemployed, twice as likely to live in poverty, and have higher rates of chronic disease (Stuit & Springer, 2010). Truancy and drop-out also impact communities as a whole, for example, through lower tax revenues, higher crime rates, and greater spending on public assistance and health care (Stuit & Springer, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Truancy is caused by a complex web of interrelated factors. It is influenced by environmental issues, including community and home situations (e.g., poverty, homelessness, availability of transportation) as well as school structure and climate (e.g., educational style and curriculum, safety and disciplinary procedures). Relationships and level of support from parents, teachers and other students also play a role. Finally, individual characteristics such as students' level of engagement with learning, academic performance, risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse), and physical (e.g., asthma, dental diseases) and mental health problems (e.g. depression, anxiety) influence truancy (Freudenberg & Reglis, 2007; Kearney, 2008a; Maynard et al., 2012).

The multi-faceted nature of school truancy has led to involvement from a variety of multidisciplinary partners, including schools, social service agencies, law enforcement, juvenile courts, and health. Over the past three decades, multiple school, community, and legal interventions have been developed and tested. A recent systematic review by Maynard and colleagues found a significant, but small effect size, for existing court-, school-, and community-based programs to reduce truancy. They found the literature on truancy to be “voluminous and disparate” and that, overall, there was limited evidence of the effectiveness of truancy interventions (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2013). Moreover, although data suggest that truancy in elementary and middle schools has a long term impact on school attendance patterns (Schoeneberger, 2012), relatively few interventions for younger age groups have been tested (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004).

In California, truancy issues have received increased attention, prompting increases in state-wide legislative activity and changes to school funding formulas (Harris, 2013). Despite increased attention and activity at the state level, there has been a limited focus on understanding current system operations and defining concrete priorities and actionable recommendations at the local level. Since efforts to reduce truancy are ultimately dependent on responses from local actors, this represents a critical need.

The purpose of this article is to describe how truancy-reduction systems are operating and interacting in Los Angeles County (LAC) and to identify highest priority program and policy options to effectively address truancy in this diverse, populous region of the United States. This article focuses on describing the system from an “insider”

(within-the system) perspective, in an effort to increase transparency and lay the groundwork for meaningful dialogue with external partners. This multi-faceted case study aims to provide concrete guidance for key stakeholders and agencies in the frontline of youth truancy prevention and reduction in LAC. In addition, the process used to describe system functioning and prioritize truancy-reduction strategies can serve as a model to critically evaluate these systems in other jurisdictions.

2. Methods

In recent years, there has been an increased effort to enhance cross-sector collaboration to address truancy in LAC; therefore, we begin with a brief overview of these efforts. We then describe data collected for this study in order to help achieve our goal of describing current system functioning and opportunities for enhancement.

2.1. Context in Los Angeles County and formation of an expert panel

In 2010, the LAC Education Coordinating Committee (ECC) convened the LAC School Attendance Task Force (SATF) to identify promising approaches to reduce truancy. The SATF brings together key stakeholders, including representatives from school districts, law enforcement, probation, courts, and community and youth-serving organizations. In its 2012 report, the SATF synthesized current research and recommended specific system changes at the school, juvenile justice, and community levels (Los Angeles County School Attendance Task Force, 2012). Since release of this report, several key reforms have been implemented, the majority of which have focused on changing law enforcement citation and processing protocols for youth in violation of daytime curfew laws, spurred, in part by the closure of the County's Informal Juvenile and Traffic Courts (Los Angeles Police Department, 2010, 2011). For example, instead of issuing fines to youth who are cited, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) partnered with the City of Los Angeles to enhance the capacity of 13 YouthSource centers to provide academic and career services to youth who received citations. While these changes represent major steps toward a more restorative system, only a subset of youth with truancy problems are actually cited for daytime curfew violation, highlighting the need for additional focus on broader, systems-level approaches.

In order to build on this momentum, the LAC Department of Public Health (DPH) convened an expert panel workgroup in the spring of 2014 with the goal of “identifying opportunities to strengthen systems to reduce truancy in LAC.” The expert panel, consisted of members from all of the key LAC systems involved in addressing truancy including schools (Los Angeles County Office of Education [LACOE]), courts (LAC District Attorney, Los Angeles City Attorney), social services (LAC Department of Mental Health, LAC Department of Children and Family Services [DCFS]), and law enforcement (LAUSD School Police, LAC Department of Probation). The expert panel met four times over the course of six months to provide and review data, develop and prioritize recommendations, and draft this publication (Table 1).

Table 1
School Attendance Task Force Expert Panel meeting process: scope of each meeting and inputs, Los Angeles County, 2014.

Meeting	Scope	Inputs
March, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert panel roles and responsibilities, products, timeline • Discussion of opportunities and challenges and preliminary identification of recommendations • Discussion of current state of truancy reduction systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Themes from key informant interviews of expert panel members • Draft of process map depicting current state of truancy reduction systems
May, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of programmatic, focus group, and survey data collected • Development of final draft list of recommendations • Discussion of process for prioritizing recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesis of programmatic data of truancy-reduction efforts • Themes from focus groups with school attendance administrators • Results from survey of school-based mental health providers
June, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of results of prioritization process and finalization of recommendations • Identification of key actions for each prioritized recommendation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results of Delphi process to prioritize recommendations
August, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and feedback on draft manuscript • Discussion of dissemination and next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft manuscript

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