

The Bill Blackwood
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Truancy Task Force

Houston L.S.D.
Police Department

An Administrative Research Paper
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ABSTRACT

Student truancy can be a first sign that an individual is giving up and losing his or her way in the academic realm. The causes of student truancy are far complex. Research shows that students who become truant and eventually drop out of school put themselves at a long-term disadvantage in becoming productive citizens. Response to why students become truant include lack of self-motivation, connectedness with their peers, academic failure, school illness and waking up late.

Research was conducted on this issue to identify the causes of truancy among individuals as well as the risks and consequences involved. There have been numerous research programs implemented throughout the United States that address the issue. The hope of this research is to convey some of these findings to better understand the overall complexities that truancy brings to the forefront. Student truancy has been linked to high daytime burglary rates, vandalism and juvenile gang activity. Students need to remain in school and parents are the key people in helping them to achieve this goal. This research will also include the financial aspect of the students Average Daily Attendance rates and how these rates are calculated to fund students within the Houston Independent School District. At the present time, many school districts have adopted policy, programs and procedures that address student truancy within their respective school communities.

This research is aimed at the members of the Houston Independent School District Police Department, school administrators and community leaders. The emphasis is designed to offer parents, school officials, the Houston ISD Police agency and the community with a set of principles for implementing strategies.

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand some key elements of student truancy and compulsory attendance laws within the Houston Independent School District. Truancy is an everyday occurrence for many students within HISD. HISD had 204,000 students enrolled during the 2000 - 2001 school year.

This research is designed to bring awareness of compulsory laws within the State of Texas as it relates to student truancy for HISD. Truancy is a diverse and complex issue that has evolved since the beginning of academic studies in America. Students become truant for a number of reasons that will be discussed. The Houston Independent School District Police Department has a truancy plan that is limited in nature. However, this research will be an avenue to address the need to have the police department implement a broader approach to engaging positively in its own truancy enforcement. One of the key focus of this research is to implement a truancy pilot program that would provide service to the Houston ISD (HISD) as well as to instill character virtues that would impact student attendance and compliance with compulsory laws within HISD.

The police department can attain the necessary capabilities and strategies available to address this problem of student truancy through student and parental awareness programs.. Student attendance and compulsory compliance is required in order to make a positive impact to deter school age students from leaving school. The student dropout issue is also of concern as students fall out from academics. Research data has shown that truancy is one of the major predictors for juvenile crime and delinquency.

Review of Literature

Excessive student truancy becomes a loss to the school district daily whereby school administrators, law enforcement and the courts have to uphold the compulsory laws in the state in order to deal with this dilemma.

Student truancy has had a past and present effect involving juvenile delinquency and crime. In some instances, truancy by students has been linked to the increase of crime during daytime school hours. In order to deter criminal activity, assistance of different groups in society working together is necessary. First and foremost, the parent becomes one of the most valuable assets for school administrators and law enforcement officials to depend on. Many state compulsory laws place the overall responsibility for enforcing student attendance upon the parents.

After the United States Constitution was ratified in 1789, Thomas Jefferson became the outstanding spokesman for "free, universal education". His belief was that education of the population would minimize the threat of political tyranny by seeking out and cultivating natural talents of children. He further states that for the most part, education increases student productivity, our country's prosperity, a reduction of poverty and lowers youth crime.

In our present day society students skip school every single day. In order to better understand student truancy, an acknowledgement is needed that student truancy can be the first sign that a student is in trouble personally, at home, and at school. This and other factors can lead to the student dropping out of school altogether. Truancy also sabotages opportunities for future employment success. It leaves an open door for drug use and daytime crime and violence. (Williams, personal interview) Student alienation is another

reason why students have tendencies to leave the school. Students who feel that they are part of the fundamental structure of a regular school setting, are prone to feel alienated from their peers. Parental awareness of the compulsory attendance laws is needed so parents could fully understand student attendance procedures. The compulsory attendance law in Texas require that a child between six years of age and 16 years of age must enroll and attend school.

Local schools provide parental counseling and parent workshops to inform them of the consequences of truancy and ways to prevent it. Truancy prevention programs are designed to make the transition from home to school as consistent as possible. Student involvement in the school helps them overcome personal and family impediments to school attendance. It is generally believed that to prevent truancy a sustained, multi faceted, and personalized program for each individualize campus according to statistical average daily attendance reports should be developed.

Alienation from school is a major reason why students become truant, and tracking practices that traditionally marginalize poor and minority students are a primary cause of alienation. To promote both the attendance and achievement of all students, a Baltimore High School reorganized itself into a career-focuses academy, and provided teachers with training to improve their ability to work with challenging students. Low performing students received extra supports, and disruptive students were taught in a twilight program where they can be educated without disturbing other learners. (McPartland, Legters, Jordan, & McDill, 1996). For example, an effective anti-truancy program in Pittsburgh, Kansas- the Well Community Council- involves schools, business and religious leaders, social service workers, and judges.

The Council, recognizing that truancy runs in families, works to help families change both their attitudes and behavior. The involved agencies provide intensive services, ranging from educational remediation and enrichment for students to long-term family counseling. With the goal of maximizing effectiveness and ensuring the ongoing commitment of collaborators, the Council has identified and announced the different role that each agency is to play in working with families. Furthermore, the agencies are expected to communicate with each other; and the sequence of intervention to be used, escalating in severity from initial meetings with parents to court hearings (Sheverbush and Sadowski, 1994)

In general, schools with low truancy do not experience disruption or violence. Teachers arrive on time, have low absentee rates, and are committed to remaining at the school. Frequent praise, interact with the entire class, and use open-ended questions are utilized. They minimize corporal punishment, verbal reprimands, and competition. (Rohrman, 1993). In 1996, HISD and the Absent Student Assistance Program (ASAP) began as a collaboration between the Harris County Precinct 7 Constables and two middle school to reduce unexcused absences. By 1997, the program had expanded to a second precinct and an additional middle and high school. The schools provided precinct deputies with a list of absent students daily, and deputies then visited the students' homes in the evening to discuss the absence with student and parents and to plan needed assistance. The overall attendance rate in precinct schools went from 91 % before the program to 93.6% in 1996-97. Deputies provided many additional services for the schools including an increased police presence at or near the schools.

The school principals reported that the program improved attendance. The schools then became eligible for state funds for improved attendance, the program generated funds above its costs. (HISD Department of Research and Accountability, 1999). Similar programs such as these are needed to help youth resist engaging in other types of negative behaviors and inoculate them against the desire to skip school. Special school programs teach youth impulse control, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Students who are identified as truants need help in developing problem solving and school conflict resolution skills. This will help these individuals acquire and develop self-awareness and self esteem. Schools and attendance clerks must also inform parents of their children's schedule consistently in relevance to chronic absenteeism.

Most parents appreciate and understand the value and importance for their children to attend school on a regular daily basis. Sometimes though, parents are unaware that their child may be skipping school due to misinformation at the school level. Parents should have a clear understanding of the compulsory law in order to recognize the liabilities and consequences outline by compulsory attendance laws. Sometimes language barriers attribute to the cause of misunderstanding by parents because no one is there to inform them. This is a regular practice among non-english speaking parents. This research will show that the minority population in HISD become the catalyst for truancy and dropout rate incline. At times, these parents find out that their son or daughter has been missing school only after the child and or parent has received a notice to appear in court from a law enforcement official or juvenile court notification. This brings together the collaboration from school teachers, administrators,

and counselors to convey the message home to the students parent or guardian sooner rather than later.

Within HISD, Attendance Specialists personnel oversee the entire operation of the school districts 200K student attendance records on a daily basis. These Attendance Specialist are the case managers who initiate involvement within the juvenile or family court system whenever there is a truancy violation or serious absentee infractions. The HISD Police Department Officers are allowed by state law to enforce the Education Code / Compulsory Attendance. The student truancy officers can issue a Class C misdemeanor for failure to attend school. Parents in Texas can also be filed with a class C misdemeanor for contributing to the child's failure to attend school.

Some schools mandate course failure, suspension, or transfer to special programs after a certain number of unexcused absences. (Rohrman, 1993). In the city of Houston, there is a curfew law during school hours that allow all local law enforcement officers to question youth that are found wandering in the community. The law enforcement officer will then detain and transport the truant to the school for processing and parental notification.

Methodology

It is hypothesized that student truancy is a common problem within many urban school districts in America. While some educators believe that truancy can best be prevented by positive measures, there is some evidence suggesting that "no method has been effective as taking truants to court". (Wilson, 1993). The hypothesis is to focus on efforts of improving student attendance by community, school and law enforcement incentives and sanctions for truants and parents. Some of the inquiry methods for

looking closer at student truancy is to include district and state research data. The Texas Education Agency covers many areas of data that include the Houston Independent School District. The data is very resourceful in identifying the secondary schools that have a low attendance rate as well as the drop out rate for each individualized campus. This data research can be utilized by the HISD Police Department so that it can concentrate its efforts and resources to the geographical areas that are most critical within the city.

Furthermore, this data along with the daily attendance figures from each individual campus can be analyzed and use to serve the community at large. The awareness and involvement by the HISD Police Department is critical to the low performing schools. Thus, the enforcement initiative can also be a financial gain for the school district in terms of improved student attendance rates. School communities must have a clear understanding of the compulsory attendance laws that would help parents and students to reasonably grasp the duties and consequences of compliance within the school district.

. In Ohio, the *Learning, Earning, and Parenting Program* (LEAP) ties the amount of welfare grants to pregnant and parenting students to school attendance, while also providing support services. The goal is to encourage graduation from high school, which significantly increases the lifetime earnings capabilities of young parents. A multi-year evaluation of LEAP indicates mixed results: overall, school attendance increased and a significant number of adolescents initially in school continued to attend, received

diplomas or GED certificates, and went off welfare because they secured employment (Bos & Fellerath, 1997).

Findings

The following charts and graphs that outline in detail some of the key items that can give the HISD Police Department the necessary tools to focus in on some of the critical areas that affect student truancy.

The following graph shows parental involvement in the State of Texas. (Figure 1).

Characteristic	Attended general meeting		Attended scheduled meeting with teacher		Attended school event		Acted as a volunteer or served on a committee		Indicated involvement in any of the four activities	
	1996	1999	1996	1999	1996	1999	1996	1999	1996	1999
Grades 6-8										
Total	77.9	80.8	69.5	71.2	65.7	67.2	30.4	31.2	91.5	92.5
Race/ethnicity										
White	80.0	83.0	70.1	70.7	72.1	73.6	34.9	36.2	93.9	94.8
Black	72.6	76.9	68.2	71.8	52.0	53.2	21.4	20.8	85.9	86.9
Hispanic	75.2	73.1	68.2	69.8	51.7	50.5	20.0	20.2	87.5	86.7
Other	73.5	84.4	69.4	79.8	58.1	68.9	23.9	24.9	87.8	94.0
Household income										
\$10,000 or less	63.7	65.9	67.0	64.7	45.1	46.3	17.2	15.5	80.6	83.1
10,001-20,000	69.0	66.8	65.2	65.9	56.5	47.4	20.4	19.8	86.1	83.9
20,001-35,000	75.1	77.8	67.5	72.1	61.2	62.7	25.0	26.6	90.6	91.1
35,001-50,000	82.2	84.1	73.0	73.6	72.8	75.3	33.2	31.8	94.8	95.5
50,001 or more	88.2	89.3	72.1	73.2	78.7	77.7	43.5	40.8	97.9	97.1
Parents' highest education level										
Less than high school	60.0	61.5	60.8	61.1	37.4	40.2	12.4	10.7	77.4	79.2
High school diploma/GED	70.1	73.9	66.6	68.3	58.2	59.7	21.8	21.4	87.9	89.7
Some college/vocational/technical	81.5	82.3	71.7	70.0	70.1	67.8	32.5	31.9	94.5	93.5
Bachelor's degree	86.9	89.0	73.9	78.4	77.2	76.1	42.7	38.3	96.9	97.3
Graduate/professional school	90.3	90.0	73.1	75.3	80.5	81.0	44.2	46.8	97.6	96.7
Family structure										
Two biological/adoptive parents	82.7	85.9	69.9	72.5	70.2	73.1	37.1	38.2	94.5	95.7
One biological/adoptive parent	70.0	72.5	68.0	68.9	59.0	57.6	21.4	22.1	86.1	86.7
One biological/adoptive and one stepparent	78.2	82.3	73.4	71.4	66.7	70.5	23.6	26.8	94.5	95.4
Other relatives	*63.4	*71.2	*59.0	*74.9	*46.6	*51.4	20.1	14.5	78.8	88.5
Step- or foster parents*	75.7	55.9	83.0	53.5	49.8	36.5	21.4	22.0	83.0	69.2

(Texas Education Agency, 1999)

The graph above gives a concise understanding of the analysis and nature of the survey across the ethnic, financial, educational background and family structure. This

information can be used to analyze the hypothesis as to parental participation and influence.

The other aspect of the HISD Police department would include daily interaction and enforcement of the states compulsory attendance law. The following graph shows the yearly attendance rate for 1999-2000 school year in Texas. The graph also includes the dropout rates for the different ethnic groups. (Figure 2)

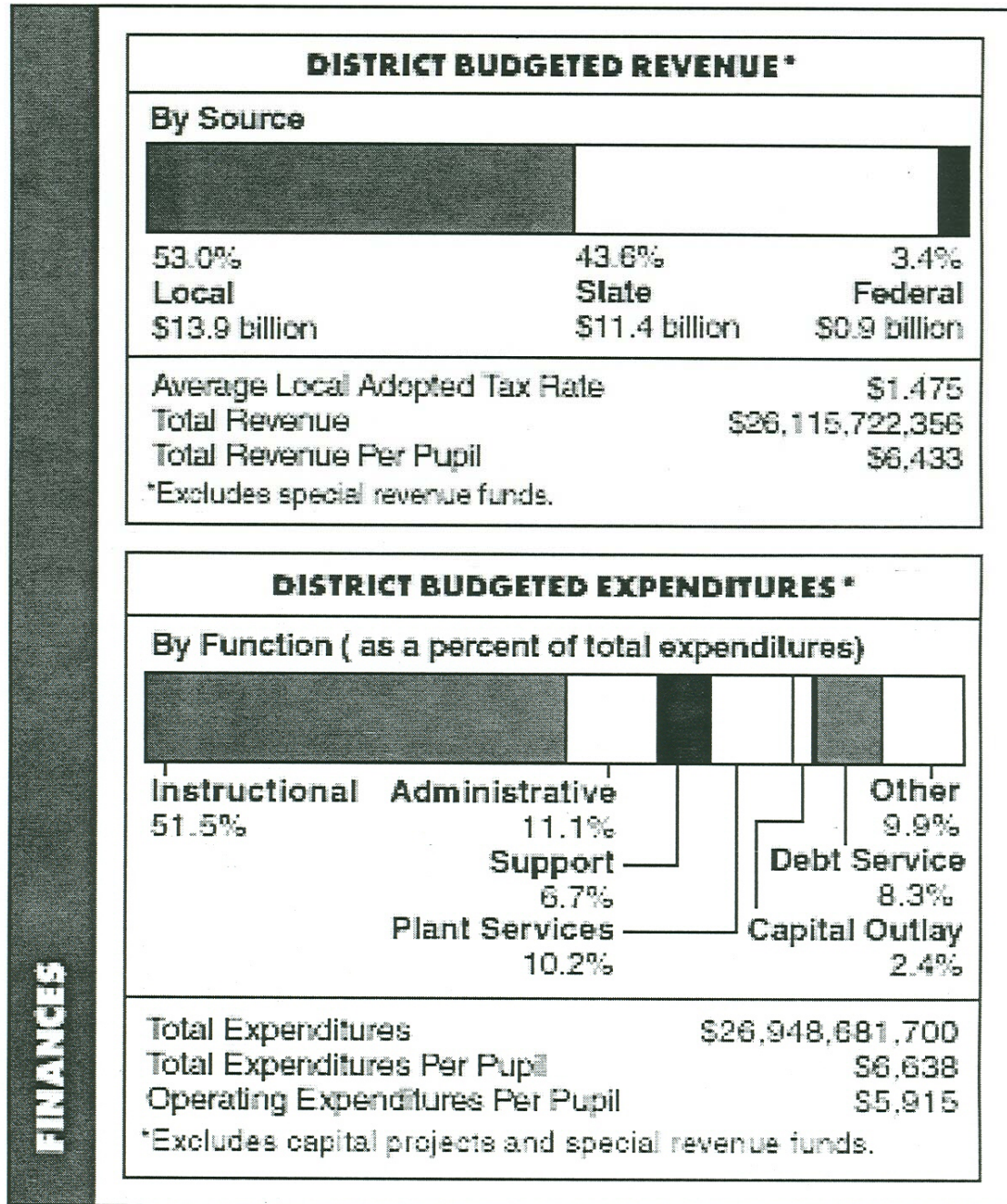
1999-2000 ATTENDANCE RATE					
	All	African American	Hispanic	White	Econ. Disadv.
State	95.6%	95.3%	95.3%	95.9%	95.4%

COMPLETION RATE/STUDENT STATUS (Class of 2000)				
	Graduated	Rec'd GED	Cont. H.S.	Dropped Out (4-yr.)
African Amer.	76.9%	3.5%	9.7%	9.9%
Hispanic	72.8%	4.2%	11.8%	11.2%
White	86.7%	5.6%	3.6%	4.0%
Other	88.0%	2.6%	5.6%	3.8%
State	80.7%	4.8%	7.3%	7.2%
Economic Disadv.	72.6%	4.7%	11.2%	11.6%

1999-2000 DROPOUTS BY ETHNICITY (Grades 7-12)			
	Dropouts	Annual Dropout Rate	% of All Dropouts
African American	4,675	1.8%	19.9%
Hispanic	12,540	1.9%	53.5%
White	5,852	0.7%	24.9%
Other	390	0.7%	1.7%
Total	23,457	1.3%	100.0%
Economic Disadv.	8,303	1.3%	35.4%

(Texas Education Agency, 1999)

The following graph shows the financial resources that are allocated per pupil in Attendance per year for the 1999-2000 school year. (Figure3).



(Texas Education Agency, 1999)

The following scenario outlines a vivid example of the effectiveness of the HISD Police Truancy Task Force Program:

Sample: Milby High School

Student population, 2000

$2000 \times \$6433 \text{ per pupil} = \$ 6,433,000$

$5\% \text{ of } 2000 = 100$ (students at risk for truancy / dropout)

50% of at risk truants / dropouts succeed in average daily attendance

\$ 321, 650 earned through awareness, education and law enforcement

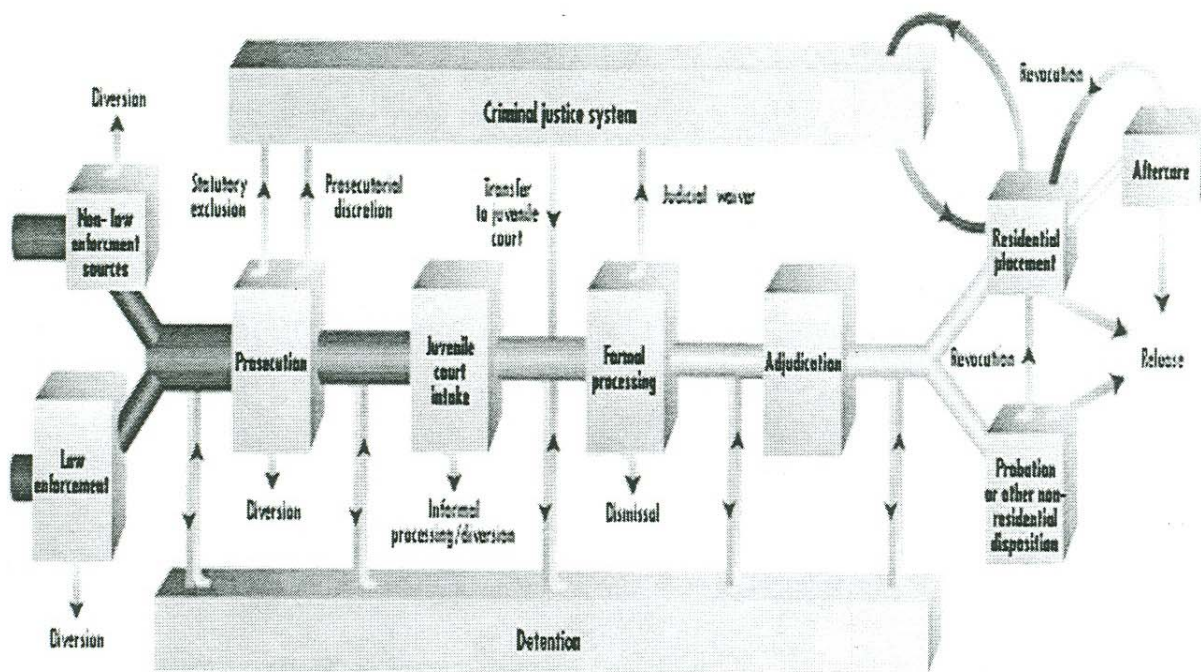
The HISD Police Truancy Task Force for Milby High School is comprised of the following staff:

- 1. 1 Police Sergeant supervisor @ \$ 40,000 per year**
- 2. 4 Specialized Truancy Officers @ 35, 000 per year**

The profit earning for the school district would be $\$321, 650 - \$182, 650 = \$ 141,000$ net profit vs. a net loss of revenue. The Truancy Task force would be cost effective to the school district. Notwithstanding the unsurpassed merit that it places on the lives of many young people that would positively enrich their lives in ways that money can't describe.

Juvenile Justice Facts & Figures

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention



This graph provided by the United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention illustrates the paradigm of what occurs with a juvenile who is handled within the criminal justice system. (Figure 4)

Conclusion

Student truancy is a major issue that school administrators, parents and local law enforcement officers have to encounter on a day to day basis within the Houston Independent School District. The minority student population through research ranks as the highest ethnic group that commits truancy. These students are most at risk at quitting or dropping out of school altogether and with more frequency. The purpose of the research is to initiate a Truancy Task Force Pilot Program for the HISD Police Department to serve the crucial truancy areas within our own school district.

Student truancy is an ongoing situation that must be addressed in order to positively affect the average student daily attendance rate. Parents again play a vital role in making sure that their children rise early everyday and attend school. In this manner, the parent is contributing to his/her duty and responsibility in fulfilling with the compulsory attendance laws of Texas. In closing, school administrators, teachers and counselors have an impact on student success as well.

The findings of this research produces valid reasons to bring the issue of student truancy to the forefront of the HISD Police Department. It should also be understood that in order for a truancy program to be successful, careful analyzes and resources have to be allocated for its efficiency. It takes police manpower to accomplish this task and to see overall results. The Truancy Task Force Program has the advantage of collecting and compiling data to have a realistic approach of its effectiveness to the school district at the end of each fiscal year. With this in mind, the decisions from the HISD Police Command staff and the HISD School Board can be systematically agreed upon. In the end, a win win approach is best.