

WESTMORELAND COUNTY CHILDREN'S BUREAU



Testimony Presented
to the
House Education Committee
September 22, 2014

Good Morning House Education Committee Members. My name is Shara B. Saveikis, M.S.W. I am the Executive Director for the Westmoreland County Children's Bureau, one of 67, public, non-profit, child protective services agencies in the Commonwealth. My entire professional career has been in the Child Welfare System serving in various capacities. In the public sector, I was employed at both the state and local level. At the state, I served as a Regional Program Representative for the Western Region Office of Children, Youth and Families, and at the local level, in Monroe County as a caseworker I, II, III, and Program Manager. In the private sector, I served as a counselor in a residential setting for treating adjudicated dependent/delinquent youth. It is a pleasure to be afforded the opportunity today to discuss truancy.

My testimony today comes from my professional experience in working directly with truant children and their families as well as indirectly toward developing, supporting and sustaining systemic change in order to achieve truancy reduction.

Truancy is often a symptom of underlying, serious problems. Truancy is a multifaceted issue and the causes can be categorized into three realms. The child's own circumstance and personal image, parental and community factors, and school climate.¹ Enforcing truancy laws initiates the intervention process that can assist the child and family in crisis. Early research believed that truancy was said to be caused by the child, the student's family or the school. More recently, it is understood that a combination of all three factors usually effect truancy.²

Often times the truant child may be dealing with:

- Peer pressure
- Separation or divorce in the family
- Teen pregnancy or a teen parent
- Abuse or neglect
- Mental and physical health issues
- Drug and alcohol abuse by the parent and or student
- Multiple moves
- Low self esteem
- Financial problems
- Lack of friends
- Safety concerns at school or in route to school
- Lack of academic skill or boredom in school
- Negative attitude toward school or their teachers

¹ See Greater Greater Education website at <http://greatergreatereducation.org/.../tackling-truancy-part-2-why-wont-they-go-to-school/>

² See Truancy Prevention website at <http://www.truancyprevention.org>

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Often times the characteristics of the family include:

- Parent(s) who do not value education
- Parent(s) who did not complete school, or were truant themselves
- Poor parenting skills
- Low socioeconomic status
- Physical or mental health problems of parents
- Family history of delinquency
- Single parent families
- Many children in the family
- Working parent(s) (not home to get the child off to school)

Characteristics of the school:

- Unsafe environment
- Weak or no monitoring of attendance
- Inconsistent attendance policies
- Parent(s) not notified of absences
- Push out policies (out of school suspensions for truancy)
- Lack of parent involvement in the school
- Lack of personal attention to the student
- Lack of teacher expectation toward achievement
- Lack of relationship among the teacher(s)/student
- Inadequate identification of special education needs.

Effects of truancy for the student include:³

- Decreased earning ability
- Involvement in daytime crime
- Two and half times more likely to be on welfare
- Involvement with gangs
- Struggling to catch up with school assignments and/or failing classes
- Truancy effects an entire class as teacher slows down to assist truant child that is behind

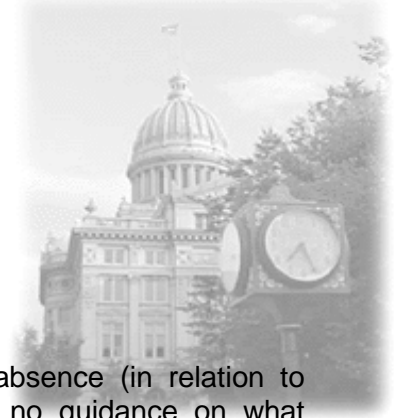
Truant behavior is extremely costly to society and often results in high school drop outs. Studies show that each high school drop-out costs over \$800,000 over the course of their lives. These costs are due to increase in health care costs and uncompensated care, loss of income taxes due to unemployment or low salaries, higher social service expenditures, and an increase in welfare and criminal justice costs.⁴ 82% of the prisoners in America are High School Drop Outs.⁵ Clearly, the drop out crisis in Pennsylvania affects everyone in every community. It is a business issue, healthcare issue, criminal justice issue and an education issue.⁵

³ see Causes and Effects of Truancy website at <http://www.co.grand-traverse.mi.us/page3995.aspx>

⁴ See National Center for School Engagement website at <http://www.schoolengagement.org/index.cfm/index.cfm/Truancy>

⁵ See Succeed in Pa Pennsylvania Dropout Prevention Network website at <http://succeedinpa.org/>

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In the commonwealth, the law does not clearly define attendance, absence (in relation to tardiness and early dismissal) and excused absences, and there is no guidance on what documentation constitutes a legal absence. This results in each district and/or buildings within a district, to potentially have different policy and procedures relating to truancy.

The solutions in combatting truancy and preventing drop outs start with prevention and early intervention. In 2012, Westmoreland initiated a truancy pilot project involving seven school districts.⁷ This project utilized best practices supported by the National Center for School Engagement⁴ and Pennsylvania's State Roundtable on Educational Success and Truancy Prevention⁶. The truancy advisory committee was comprised of all disciplines within the community. The planning stages included intense communication and collaboration among all entities in developing uniform definitions, data collection, and developing clearly defined roles and responsibilities of each system involved. A flow chart was developed that illustrated the process. Prevention was initiated within the schools. Each participating district developed school engagement plans targeted toward children and parents; they modified their truancy policy and procedures and clearly articulated these changes to the children and parents. They committed to develop truancy elimination plans (TEP's) after three unlawful absences. The purpose of this plan is to engage the child and parents to identify the root causes for the absences and to develop solutions to remedy the problems. The schools would then make a referral to the Children's Bureau if the implementation of the TEP was unsuccessful. Upon receiving the referral, the Children's Bureau would conduct a root cause analysis to determine the cause of the truancy and would provide the needed intervention through the utilization of evidence based or positive outcome based services. Each district believed that the development of the TEP's were the most successful tool in their success in reducing truancy. After the first year of implementation, one entire school district success with school engagement and the development of TEP's resulted in no filings made to the Magistrates. Another district reduced their truancy rate by 50 %. This data is compelling and illustrates the positive impact that prevention has merely when schools create an engaging environment for children and parents, with the focus on attachment to school and academic achievement, and offer timely interventions.

In closing, Truancy prevention and intervention programs are best coordinated as a community problem involving the schools, children and youth, courts and the community. Successful programs are those that are evidence based, research based or outcome based and involve the child, parents, family and encourage collaboration among all systems. Due to the detrimental lifelong effects that truancy predicts, it is imperative that systems work together to engage children, parents and caregivers, in order to implement preventive measures to combat truancy and ultimately reduce dropout rates.

⁶ For more information on the State Roundtable on Educational Success and Truancy Prevention go to <http://www.ocfcpcourts.us/about-ocfc/truancy> or to see copy of annual reports that go to Pennsylvania State Roundtable at <http://www.ocfcpcourts.us/childrens-roundtable-initiative/state-roundtable-workgroups/educational-success-and-truancy-prevention>

⁷ For more information about Westmoreland County's Truancy Pilot Project go to their Human Services website at <http://www.co.westmoreland.pa.us/index.aspx?nid=1927>

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On behalf of Westmoreland County Children's Bureau, I want to thank you for the opportunity to address your committee and welcome any of your questions.

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September 23, 2014

