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## INCREASING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

### NSSC RESOURCE PAPER

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## INCREASING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Compulsory education requires that young people attend school, but some students have always chosen to “play hooky.” Even the use of the term “playing” connotes, at most, a harmless game. But truancy is illegal, and its effects are far-reaching.

Our nation’s greatest asset is our youth. Sadly, each year a sizable portion of that resource is wasted because of truancy and dropouts. Clearly, the nation’s social and economic health suffers because of undereducated and uneducated youth. Truancy affects not only the student, but also the school and ultimately the community. Irregular attendance for individual students means that they fail to learn what is needed for adequate competition in the employment market. Schools suffer the loss of state and federal funding. Society pays in monetary terms through escalated daytime burglary rates, costs to businesses for re-education and retraining, and costs of incarceration for those truants who also turn to patterns of delinquency and crime. The loss of self-esteem and waste of undeveloped potential are beyond price.

According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1991*, the states with the highest dropout rates are Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia and Nevada. The lowest dropout rates were tabulated in Nebraska, Iowa, Wyoming, Minnesota and North Dakota.

A 1992 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, *Women In Jail 1989*, showed that in the United States local jail population, only an estimated 50.6 percent of the women and an estimated 45.8 percent of the men had completed high school or attended college. Research by the Stanford Education Policy Institute estimates that dropouts cost the nation as much as \$228 billion a year in unemployment and welfare payments, lost tax revenues, additional law enforcement expenses and other costs.

Definitions of truancy vary according to specific state codes. Generally truancy is considered any absence where the student voluntarily misses school to engage in actions not deemed legally excused. Most state education codes allow students to miss school for any of the following reasons: illness, quarantine, medical or dental appointments, attendance at the funeral of a family member, exclusion based on health code regula-

tion, or, in some instances, jury duty. Some states permit limited absences for religious reasons such as doctrinal instruction, retreats and special holiday observances or ceremonies; verified court appearances; employment interviews; college inspection trips; or medical appointments for a student's child if the student is the caretaker.

Unfortunately, there is little concrete evidence to show what really works to combat the problem. In addition, no nationwide consensus exists about how to specifically define a dropout or how to measure the problem. Three types of dropout rates measure different facets of dropping out. For example, event rates measure the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school. Status rates measure the proportion of the population who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when dropped out. A third type, the cohort rate, measures what happens to a single group (or cohort) of students over a period of time.

According to the most recent annual report to Congress by the National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1992*, approximately 383,000 students or 4.4 percent of all high school students 15 through 24 years old dropped out of grades 10 through 12 in 1992 (the event dropout rate). In 1992, about 3.4 million persons in the United States ages 16 through 24 were high school dropouts, representing approximately 11 percent of persons in this age group (the status dropout rate). The cohort dropout rate for students who were eighth graders in 1988 and who had left high school by the spring of 1992 without finishing was 11.6 percent.

In spite of the problems in finding accurate data on truancy and dropout rates, school attendance is one of the most important issues facing educators today. Truancy is the midway point in a continuum that begins with absenteeism and recurrent tardiness and ends with suspension or expulsion. Dropping out of school frequently follows periods of truancy. Often the decision to skip or leave school is the result of a problem that began in elementary grades, where the student felt alienated from the traditional educational setting.

Nonschool and family-related factors often promote a decision to avoid school, but numerous school-related difficulties contribute to the choice as well. *Scholastic elements* include lack of basic skills, low math and reading scores, achievement below grade level, poor or declining grades, or failure to pass. *Individual factors* include being somewhat older than other classmates, classification as a slow learner, classification as gifted and/or talented (and therefore easily bored), verbal deficiency, inability to tolerate structured activities, a lack of goal orientation and a disincli-

nation to question or reason critically. *Faculty attitudinal indicators* show two failures on the part of school personnel: They neither respect students nor encourage them to stay in school.

The issue of truancy and dropouts among our nation's youth has captured the attention of several state legislatures as they have tried to assess and address the problem. States take both punitive and rehabilitative approaches to the problem of truancy. Most states distinguish between "truants" and "habitual truants," providing the majority of sanctions and programs for the latter. For example, Connecticut defines truancy as four unexcused absences in a month or 10 in a school year; habitual truancy is 20 unexcused absences in a school year. In contrast, Nevada defines truancy as an unexcused absence for any part of the day and habitual truancy as three or more unexcused absences within a school year.

States also use different strategies, some relying heavily on punitive measures. For example, in some states, including Idaho, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, students can be suspended or expelled for habitual truancy. In other states, such as Arizona, Florida and New York, truancy cannot be punished by either of these methods.

In Arizona, truancy is a crime investigated by the sheriff. The juvenile court handles truancy cases in Illinois and is given the discretion to punish either the child or the parent. Truancy in Illinois is a Class C misdemeanor, punishable by not more than 30 days imprisonment and/or a fine of up to \$500, for *anyone* who "knowingly and willfully permits such a child to persist in his truancy within that school year."

Intentional noncompliance with the North Dakota compulsory attendance law is considered a violation by the parent, not the child. Ohio courts may require a parent who has a truant child to post a \$100 bond. An Ohio school board can also require the parent to "attend an educational program established ... for the purpose of encouraging parental involvement in compelling the attendance of the child."

A Wisconsin judge may suspend a truant's driver's license for 30 to 90 days, order the child to attend counseling, community service or a supervised work program, or require the child to remain at home and attend an educational program designed for him or her. Maine forbids habitual truants under age 16 from obtaining a work permit.

Other state programs tend to be less punitive and designed more for treatment. Rhode Island has created a "youth diversion program," which provides outreach and advocacy services to youth ages nine to 17.

The program is designed for those who are the subject of a family court petition or at risk of committing wayward or disobedient acts, including truancy, running away and violations of school rules.

Referrals to the program are for a maximum of 90 days and include an assessment of the needs of the child and family; development of a plan for education and employment; counseling; family mediation; crisis intervention; advocacy on the child's behalf with schools, police, employment resources and other community agencies; short-term respite limited to three days during crisis periods; and follow-up and after-care services as needed.

Wisconsin requires each county to have a truancy committee, convened by the superintendent of the school district containing the county seat. Members include representatives from the following county agencies: each school district, the district attorney's office, the sheriff's department, the law enforcement agency that has jurisdiction over the county seat, the circuit court, the department of social services, the juvenile court intake unit, the department of human services, and other members as determined by the committee. The responsibility of the committee is to develop recommendations for dealing with truancy.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have compulsory school attendance/education laws. But enforcing these laws often is difficult when both school and law enforcement officials find themselves faced with many other high-priority problems. However, educational and juvenile justice practitioners have noted an apparent link between school truancy and delinquency in the community.

Evidence shows that up to two-thirds of the nation's daylight burglaries are committed by juveniles who are truant from school when the offenses occur. Police departments in several cities have been successful in decreasing daylight burglaries in areas where a program targeting truancy was initiated. For example, within the first year after the Department of Public Safety in Rohnert Park, California, began the Stop and Cite Program, a comprehensive crime reduction and truancy intervention effort, daylight burglaries decreased 48 percent.

Whether the problem is excessive absences or dropping out altogether, nonattendance creates long-range complications for students, schools and communities.

Compared to the general public, dropouts are more likely to face unemployment, menial jobs and reliance on public assistance. Nearly half of the new workers in our nation's labor pool are educationally deficient,

according to a May 29, 1989, article in the *Los Angeles Times* on the cost of dropouts to society. "Across the nation, business and government leaders say that as the nation moves [from an industrial] to a more technical society, there is little room for high school dropouts," the article points out.

Consider the following:

- The unemployment rate for dropouts is 70 percent higher than for high school graduates, according to a U.S. Department of Labor report.
- An American male with less than 12 years of school can expect to earn \$601,000 in a lifetime of steady work. But if that same male graduates from high school, his earnings increase to \$861,000, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

While many of those who drop out end up in similar situations, experiencing reduced employment and professional opportunities, the circumstances that lead them there may not all be the same.

The California Departments of Justice, Education, and Alcohol and Drug Programs recently sponsored a survey that studied the level of drug and alcohol use among dropouts and truants. The survey, conducted by the Southwest Regional Laboratory, interviewed 1,436 youths between the ages of 15 and 17. These youths from Anaheim and Oakland were either dropouts, former dropouts who have since joined an alternative education program, or chronic truants.

A comparison of the youths in the survey and their peers in school revealed noteworthy differences in their drug and alcohol usage. Additionally, the survey uncovered a wealth of valuable information about the reasons many youths drop out of school and the common fate of this group. The reasons cited for dropping out or being habitually truant included: trouble with school work, 37 percent; problems dealing with teachers and other staff, 35 percent; problems with other students, 32 percent; and trouble with gangs, 24.1 percent.

Of those surveyed, only about one-fourth were employed, mostly with part-time jobs. One-third said that they had been involved in a gang at some point in their lives. Eighteen percent had children, 40.7 percent said that they had sold drugs, while 16.2 percent said that they had committed a crime to get drugs.

One positive note in the survey was that dropouts who had returned to school reported less drug or alcohol use than those who had stayed

away.

A study by the Open Road/Citizens Policy Center found that twice as many boys as girls leave school before graduation. Of the dropouts interviewed, more than half cited school-related reasons for quitting, while 42 percent said they had family problems. Others said drug or alcohol problems or financial need were their reasons for leaving school.

Of the girls who drop out, the study found that two-thirds cite pregnancy as the main reason. Nationally, 80 percent of pregnant and married female teens drop out, according to the study.

Truancy is a learned behavior, and strict attention to attendance patterns is crucial for the early identification of potential truants. The New York City Board of Education attributes the decline of high school dropouts in recent years in part to its increased emphasis on tracking truants.

The Los Angeles Unified School District offers the following guidelines for observing attendance patterns:

- Log frequent tardiness.
- Look for students present in the morning but absent in the afternoon.
- Be aware of Monday blues and Friday boredom.
- Watch absence patterns that increase during winter months, improve until the end of the year, then increase heavily during June.
- Observe those students who are often absent on gym days and/or test days.
- Note younger siblings following patterns of absence established by older siblings.
- Question frequent absences excused as illness.
- Monitor scattered but frequent absences due to "family business" or "personal business."
- Notice lengthy "unauthorized" family vacations or extensions of regular winter or spring vacation periods.
- Talk with staff regarding numerous same-period absences, before or after lunch absences, and the limiting of hall passes.

## **Tuancy prevention strategies**

The first step toward improving attendance simply is to prevent students from staying out of school without a valid reason. Although truants are not in class, they often are somewhere on or about school grounds causing disruptions. Those who leave campus most likely are loitering somewhere in the community. Efforts to prevent truancy are, therefore, the collaborative responsibility of educators, law enforcers, parents and community members. The following strategies have worked in schools across the nation.

**Form a community truancy prevention committee.**

The goals and activities of the truancy prevention committee should be mutually determined by school, law enforcement, community and parent representatives. Prior to the initial meeting, which should occur at the beginning of the school year, a letter should be sent to all parents and residents in the immediate community to explain the collaborative nature of the committee; committee goals and possible activities; the full text of the state's compulsory education law; the legal explanation of parental responsibility for a child's school attendance; school policies regarding truant offenses; the connection between truancy, dropouts and crime; and the economic consequences of truancy and dropouts. The letter should conclude with an invitation to become involved in a collaborative effort to help solve the problem.

**Set clear truancy policies.**

The student code of conduct should state the legal requirements for school attendance, as well as the school's expectations and clear definitions of what comprises truancy. The policy must state the school and court consequences of being truant.

**Promote communication with parents and community members.**

Communication with parents and residents in the immediate community about truancy is essential. If no truancy prevention committee exists in the community, general meetings should be arranged at the beginning of the school year. Quarterly newsletters should be mailed that include updated information about both the continuing problem *and* improvement. Such communication might include an explanation of the student code of conduct, state compulsory education laws and legal consequences for the truant student, as well as the connection between truancy and dropouts and related economic consequences.

**Encourage law enforcement school visitations.**

Law enforcers can give guest lectures to classes or plan assemblies to explain the law enforcement and legal response to truancy. If a particular law enforcement program is in effect, the program and its consequences should be carefully explained.



Identifying the existence of a potential or actual truancy problem requires school intervention. This strategy is especially important as it is designed to diagnose the problem and then find ways to divert the student from serious truant behavior.

## Truancy intervention strategies

Teachers must be involved in the attendance process through three basic actions: keeping regular and active attendance records; communicating to students the importance of daily class attendance; and *promptly reporting all absences to the office*. Further, if a teacher suspects a student is truant or cutting class, he or she should personally work with the student upon return to class, assign some correctional activity (detention or whatever is used in the school), and communicate with the student's parents.

Involve teachers in the attendance process.

Phone calls before noon to the homes of all absentees on the day of nonattendance brings several positive consequences: a message to the parents and student that the school not only cares, but also will not tolerate truancy; a message to other students that if you are truant from school, you will be caught; and sometimes the immediate return of the truant to school.

Provide immediate follow-up for absences.

When truant behavior is suspected or actually discovered, parents should be asked to come to school for a meeting. Parental involvement must be stressed for a collaborative resolution.

Conduct parent meetings.

Many schools face a moral dilemma about whether attendance should be a factor in granting academic credits. For those schools that deny credit to truants, the reasons and consequences must be made clear to the student and parents after the first offense. Schools that allow credit to be made up must provide a formal mechanism which requires work to be completed immediately after the first truancy to prevent an excessive backlog of make-up work.

Deny academic credits.

Schools with a truancy problem should sponsor public awareness campaigns to identify the problem as more than a school concern. Community members can be made more aware of the problem by publicizing local daytime juvenile crime rates, especially residential burglary rates, loss of school income due to truancy and other relevant statistics. Such publicity should be followed by a positive media campaign. Announcements, posters and meetings could emphasize a slogan such as: "Love Your Children -- Keep Them in School!"

Sponsor a public awareness campaign.

When a school begins experiencing truancy problems, it may be time to free counselors from traditional desk-bound assignments for active community liaison functions. Counselors can work within the community to

Establish school counselor liaisons.

build parental awareness of the problem and to network with law enforcers who often deal with truant students.

Counsel or transfer high-risk students.

Students identified as truants or "high risks" for truant behavior (i.e., they demonstrate patterns of excessive tardies or class cutting) should be enrolled in career education or guidance courses that may deter the truant behavior. If their classes are not meeting their expectations or if problem patterns appear, transferring the student to another class may be necessary. In some cases, transfer to another school within the district may be helpful.

Enact statewide attendance legislation.

Statewide laws that require a certain number of days of school attendance and allow a maximum number of excused *and* unexcused absences to pass can be an effective truancy intervention strategy. South Carolina's Education Improvement Act of 1984 requires 170 days of attendance with a maximum of 10 absences; since its passage, many local schools have noticed an increase in student attendance.

Prosecute parents for failing to make sure their children are in school.

The Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office sends out warning letters to parents of chronically truant students requesting that the parents and children appear at a meeting. At the meeting, parents are informed that they can be taken to court for not making certain their children attend school. To prevent prosecution, parents must sign in at the school attendance office with the child. If the child remains truant, at least the district attorney's office will know the parents tried. Also at the meeting are representatives from community-based organizations. They tell the group about available services, ranging from counseling and tutoring to art, music and computer classes.

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### **Additional prevention strategies**

Truancy prevention and intervention strategies can range from a simple telephone call to a complex system of interagency cooperation, depending upon budgetary considerations and available personnel. Some additional prevention strategies include:

- distribution of all policies to students and parents;
- computerized telephoning to homes of all absentees;
- annual attendance reviews prior to opening of school;
- interviews with poor attenders from the previous year;
- weekly or monthly assessment of poor attenders;
- attendance incentive programs;
- special activities on Mondays and/or Fridays;
- electives for students with limited academic ability;
- teacher training to identify high-risk students;

- tutorial help for students with attendance problems;
  - work permits for students with acceptable attendance;
  - establishment of dropout prevention programs.
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Once the truancy problem in a school shifts from a potential or minor problem into an actual or chronic problem, school personnel must be prepared to respond with a variety of options, including:

### **Truancy response strategies**

- *In-school suspension* — Chronic truants may be assigned to isolated classes where the students are closely supervised rather than sent home. During in-school suspension, students work on classroom assignments, but they may not socialize with other students on campus. All lunch and other breaks are scheduled when other students are in class. These programs report success for several reasons: parents who work are assured that suspended students receive appropriate education and supervision; the student actually is in school, so no financial loss is suffered by the school; and students are less likely to fall behind in their studies and can be more easily reintegrated into class.
- *Saturday school program* — Saturday school is a structured, supervised, minimum-day program that usually includes tutorial assistance in completing classroom assignments that students missed because of excessive trancies, tardies or class cuts. Students are assigned to this program in lieu of suspension. Saturday school infringes on the student's free time and, therefore, usually modifies the behavior that led to the student's assignment to the program. In addition, the program emphasizes the student's responsibility to arrive on time and to complete classwork.
- *Operation Stay-in-School* — Operation Stay-in-School, begun in Fresno, California, and now used statewide, is a truancy-reduction program operated under the collaborative sponsorship of a school district and a local law enforcement agency. Its main objective is to enforce compulsory school attendance laws. During stipulated days and hours, law enforcement officers locate unsupervised school-aged students who are out of school during school hours without a valid reason. When a truant student is apprehended by law enforcement officers, the student is taken to a reception center. (The California Education Code Section 58625 allows apprehended students to be taken to a reception center operated by the school district.) At the center, personnel contact the school and the student's parents are requested

to come to the center and return the student to school. The center provides the opportunity for parents to meet with school personnel to discuss the situation and to talk with their son/daughter. In some areas where a reception center is not available, the student is returned to school, and the parents are contacted to set up a conference before the student can be readmitted to the regular school program.

- *Truancy court referral procedures* — A collaborative agreement can be arranged between school and court authorities about how to deal with habitual truants and their parents.
- *Student Attendance Review Boards (SARBs)* — SARB committees are comprised of school, law enforcement and county officials who meet to discuss how serious student attendance problems may be resolved. SARBs hold meetings with students and parents, asking for relevant input from school officials. After such meetings, a contract often is signed that indicates exactly what is expected of the student.
- *Juvenile court rulings* — Where chronic truancy is a problem, juvenile court judges may exercise their judicial authority to cite the parents and child for contempt of court if the child refuses to attend school. These legal issues are yet to be clearly resolved by the courts.
- *Fines assessment* — Districts experiencing heavy financial losses due to chronic truancy can adopt a district policy to levy a series of truancy fines, as well as court costs, for the offense. Districts interested in such a program also should hire a school/home liaison who can follow each case through the appropriate legal channels and make certain severe cases actually are prosecuted in court.
- *Tighter enforcement of truancy laws* — Educators and local law enforcers facing a serious truancy problem can agree to tighten the enforcement of existing truancy laws. Such agreements must be well-publicized to students, parents, and community members.

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## Truancy reduction model programs

Effective truancy programs address the needs of students through a wide range of community agencies and individual volunteers. Lowering truancy, dropout and daytime juvenile crime rates do not require a standard formula, as the following approaches demonstrate.

**Project HOPE.** Helping Others Pursue Education is a program established in 1983. Designed for intervention with students in grades five

through 12, it provides schooling on a daily basis for those picked up in truancy sweeps and alternative placement for students who have been suspended or expelled. This approach uses resources from the City of Inglewood and Los Angeles County agencies of education, social services, probation and the juvenile courts.

The primary goal of Project HOPE is to educate high-risk students in a small, success-oriented academic atmosphere. Approximately 290 students are currently being served at this facility. Since the inception of this program, police records show lowered daytime burglary rates. For further information, contact Edward Brownlee, Project HOPE, Inglewood Unified School District, 401 Inglewood Avenue, Inglewood, CA 90301.

**Absence-Addict Program.** Blaming students for skipping school, instead of trying to understand their problems, contributed little toward keeping them in school. In 1989, principal Delia Armstrong-Busby of Colorado Springs decided to take a different approach.

Students with excessive absences are invited to join support groups, modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous. In these groups, students encourage one another, in addition to recruiting other students who also appear to be on the verge of dropping out. Both paid and volunteer personnel provide equal measures of counseling and listening.

In the last three years, the dropout rate has been reduced from 10 percent to 2 percent. More information is available from Delia Armstrong-Busby, Mitchell High School, 1205 Potter Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80909, 719/520-2701.

**PALS and PRO.** Tatum (Texas) Independent School District operates two low-cost programs designed to give immediate help to at-risk youths. People Against Losing Students, for grades K-12, pairs a troubled student with an adult volunteer; the two meet at a mutually convenient time and place, at school. The adult attention fosters a basic need for feelings of self-worth among the students.

The Parents Reaching Out program, for grades 4-6, enlists parents to help students with homework for an hour after school each day. The parents are paid \$5 per hour using federal funds, and supervision is provided by a teacher. Student placement is recommended by teachers, who also contact individual families to make the specific study-time arrangements. PRO benefits both students who have little support at home for academic endeavors and students who need extra coaching in specific subjects. Further information is available from Dr. Jack Clemmons, Superintendent, Tatum Independent School District, P.O.

Box 808, Tatum, TX 75691, 903/947-6482.

**Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT).** Modeled after neighborhood watch programs, ACT is designed to energize the entire school community to combat truancy and enhance Los Angeles' existing Truancy Mediation Program. The focus of the program is not to punish either parents or students, but to get truants off the streets and back in the classrooms. Specially selected deputy district attorneys work with school administrators and teachers at targeted schools.

The first step is a meeting with parents of students who have school attendance problems. Three points are emphasized in the meeting:

- Parents should send their children to school because they want to improve the quality of life for their children.
- If problems are interfering with the ability of the child to attend school, the district attorney will attempt to find community resources to assist in overcoming these problems.
- If necessary, the district attorney will take legal action if the child does not attend school.

The deputy district attorney and school staff track the attendance records of the students in the program. If attendance problems continue, the at-risk students and parents will be given special attention by a School Attendance Review Team (SART). This team will analyze the student's problems and offer suggestions for help. The central message focuses on the parents' obligation to send their children to school. If this action does not produce satisfactory school attendance, the case is then referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) and then to the district attorney's office for an office hearing. The office hearing represents a final attempt to resolve the attendance problem informally and without prosecution. If the hearing does not result in regular school attendance, the district attorney's office will prosecute the student, the parents or both.

Further information is available from the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office, 18000 Criminal Courts Building, 210 West Temple Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

**Community Service Early Intervention Program.** The Marion County (Ohio) Juvenile Court and the Marion City schools have teamed together to develop a program aimed at providing supportive guidance and counseling for at-risk youth, helping them to have a more positive and productive school experience.

The Community Service Early Intervention Program focuses on potential truants and dropouts during their freshman year. The youth, referred by teachers, the school nurse, guidance counselors and outside youth-serv-

ing agencies, are evaluated to determine if they have physical problems or limitations or social dysfunction caused by sexual/physical abuse, drug/alcohol abuse, family difficulties or special education needs. Using this assessment, the coordinator selects community interventions that best serve the youth and his/her family.

While enrolled, youth devote their time to community service at local sites and tutoring appropriate to their needs. They are also required to participate in the Adolescent Drug/Alcohol Prevention and Treatment (ADAPT) Program, a social-educational program that deals with issues facing adolescents today. In addition, students are required to support the program, enabling them to incorporate what they have learned with what they can teach others. For example, a student might research and prepare a chart that displays current statistics on the age of dropouts.

Parental participation is required throughout the entirety of the program. Upon completion of the six-week sequence, school records relative to truancy are nullified. If the youth fails the program, formal court intervention is the next step.

For more information, contact Molly Ratliff, Coordinator, Community Service Early Intervention Program, Edward J. Ruzzo Juvenile Justice Center, 1440 Mt. Vernon Ave., Marion, OH 43302, 614/389-5476 or 614/387-3300.

**Rohnert Park Stop and Cite Program.** (California) Begun in 1978, the Stop and Cite Program was designed to reduce truancy and juvenile crime in the community and to increase average daily attendance funds for the schools. During the program's first year in operation, daylight burglaries in Rohnert Park decreased 48 percent; during the second year, an additional 16 percent decrease was noted. Over the same two-year period, vandalism decreased 35 percent, thefts decreased 12 percent and the savings to the community due to such improvement amounted to \$262,000.

This program stresses "positive" contact between police and students. Patrolmen issue courtesy citations to suspected truants contacted during school hours. Two citations were issued without penalty, and students were returned to school to meet with their parents and a vice principal. The third citation results in referral to appropriate support services.

Contact the Rohnert Park Department of Public Safety for further information. The address is 5200 Country Club Drive, Rohnert Park, California 94928, 707/585-1122.

**Dropout prevention strategies**

Because the dropout problem affects home and community life, resolution necessarily involves parents, community members, juvenile justice personnel, law enforcers and youth-serving professionals. These groups, along with educators, need to form a support network to prevent students from dropping out of school.

Since attendance behavior is learned, early efforts should be used to deter the development of student absentee patterns. Initial efforts should be directed at students, parents and school staff. Recommended strategies include:

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| Set clear attendance policies.     | State regulations and district attendance policies and procedures must be clearly explained and widely disseminated to students, parents and staff. A description of the truancy policy should be included in the student conduct code and be distributed to students and parents.  |
| Train school staff.                | School personnel, especially classroom teachers, need training to explain the importance and legal ramifications of enforcing attendance policies and procedures. Training may include methods for identifying and assisting <i>high-risk</i> students; techniques for efficient record-keeping; facts about the financial impact of nonattendance on the school; and information on daytime juvenile crime, especially residential burglary.   |
| Enlist parental support.           | Parental support is essential, and meetings, bulletins and other communication with parents should clearly convey the importance of regular attendance. Parents must be notified and their assistance requested when absentee patterns begin.   |
| Provide academic aid.              | Students whose classwork has suffered because of attendance problems may need opportunities for independent study or tutorial instruction.  |
| Conduct attendance record reviews. | An annual attendance record review helps schools identify students with poor attendance patterns in previous years. Reviews made before school opens allow staff to schedule interviews with these students at the beginning of the academic year. Interviewers can discuss reasons for absences, apprehensions about school, the relationship between attendance and academic success, consequences of not graduating and ways to improve attendance. Weekly or monthly reviews of students with attendance problems indicate whether additional intervention is needed. |
| Build self-esteem.                 | Dropout prevention programs must address the special needs of students most likely to leave school before graduation. In primary grades, the goal is a safe, risk-free classroom environment. Curriculum includes activities that build self-esteem, develop problem-solving skills and encourage regular attendance. Secondary school programs should reinforce and  |



extend these primary school efforts. Junior and senior high counselors must help instructors identify and monitor potential dropouts and enlist the support and involvement of the student's parents.

When attendance, truancy or dropout problems appear, schools must initiate efforts to interrupt and change unacceptable patterns. These efforts include:

### Dropout intervention strategies

- *Counseling* — Individual or group counseling is needed for students with erratic attendance. Parents should be notified and offered support as well. Students and parents must be informed of laws mandating attendance.
- *Adopt-A-Student* — Adopt-A-Student or peer programs may encourage better attendance. Teachers, students or community volunteers work with individual students to develop and promote attendance goals.
- *Alternative classes* — Special curricula or program changes may be needed to improve attendance. Independent study, tutorial, half-day, homebound or self-contained classes are options. In an extreme situation, transfer to another school may be necessary to remove the student from peer situations that are contributing to absenteeism. Pregnant students often require alternative education programs, including academic instruction, job training, GED preparation, and support services such as counseling, child care and health services.
- *Public programs* — Public awareness campaigns can help reduce truancy and dropout rates. New instruction units can involve students in developing and enforcing attendance rules. A speakers' panel composed of successful or well-known adults who themselves overcame attendance or dropout problems can be formed to talk to student and community audiences about the social and economic consequences of such behavior.
- *Special interagency teams* — Students with high potential for dropping out can be referred to an interagency team, or I-Team, which includes school, law enforcement and community members. The team develops programs for individual students, encourages parental involvement, identifies any medical problems, and refers students to appropriate school and community agencies. When possible, the team also works to improve the student's home environment.

**Dropout response strategies**

When attendance becomes a chronic problem or students drop out, school personnel need to respond accordingly.

**Conduct student interviews.**

An interview by a counselor can determine if excessive absences are related to psychological disorders, learning disabilities or family problems. These discussions can encourage school attendance and establish a plan for the absentee, truant or dropout to return to the academic environment. A buddy system, pairing the returnee with a student who successfully re-entered, is an effective policy. Counselor-monitored programs offering rewards or attendance contracts also promote attendance.

**Present workshops for students.**

In response to the needs of students who have legally quit school, educators can sponsor return-to-school workshops. Invite school dropouts to learn about increased employment opportunities and other benefits for graduates. Counselors can describe ways the school will assist them in their return to school.

**Offer workshops for parents.**

Workshops for parents of dropouts provide positive reinforcement to those supporting readmission. Parents learn about the adjustments students face when returning. Parents and re-enrolling students should be personally recruited and, when possible, transported to the workshop by a school employee.

**Provide alternative schools.**

Alternative education opportunities should be provided for students who are unwilling or unable to resume a traditional academic program. Vocational or skill centers, sometimes known as "second-chance" schools, teach returning students a trade as well as basic educational skills. Students graduating from these centers must demonstrate minimum academic skills.

**Establish continuation schools.**

Continuation schools offer another alternative educational environment for high school dropouts. Students usually have individualized instruction and learn at their own pace. While the learning environment is different than the traditional school, students study the same basic courses, receive the same credits and must pass identical minimum academic skill tests to graduate.

**Initiate teen mother programs.**

If they did not drop out during their pregnancy, teen mothers are likely to drop out after the baby is born because of child-care problems, exhaustion, lack of emotional support and financial need. Education is essential for teen-age mothers who are responsible for the future and well-being of a baby as well as themselves. One approach to keeping young mothers in school and helping them as much as possible is a comprehensive program that offers child care, parenting skills, job training and varied opportunities for the mother to complete her education. Hav-

ing child-care facilities on or near the high school campus provide these student parents an opportunity to spend time with their children during the school day. The child-care component of the program also provides an opportunity for community members to get involved and help in the effort to prevent dropouts.

At Jenkins High School in Jenkins County, Georgia, dropout teen mothers have a chance to return to school without worrying about daycare for their infants. A nursery with a full-time aide is provided for students enrolled there. Parenting skills are enhanced and supported through a requirement that the young mothers spend two hours per day in the nursery. If the teen fathers are enrolled, they also are expected to do nursery duty.

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Educators throughout the nation have developed many successful school programs. Usually what works at one school can be adapted to meet similar problems at another campus. Brief descriptions of some model programs follow.

### **Dropout prevention model programs**

**Positive Alternative Gang Education (PAGE).** Hawaii students who miss four hours or more of school without a valid reason may be required to attend a four-hour Saturday program with their parents. Failure to attend the program may lead to stiff penalties, including arrest for truancy, police counseling or referral to family court.

This pilot program is a joint project of Hawaii's Department of Education and local law enforcement. PAGE's major thrust is educating at-risk students about alternatives to gang activities. The program requires an ongoing relationship between both agencies. For example, the school's role includes keeping accurate attendance records; supplying police with a list of offenders each week; and providing a large, clean assembly area for the Saturday meetings. The police coordinate the program.

The program helps keep students in school, and juvenile crime and gang activity are reduced as a result. The Saturday sessions inform students and their parents about status laws, increase decision-making and critical thinking skills; improve self-esteem; and include activities designed to help students reconnect with school.

Additional information about this program is available from Robert T. Golden, Education Specialist, Office of Instructional Services, Department of Education, Honolulu, HI 96816, 808/733-9109.

**New Futures School.** New Futures School, an alternative school of the Albuquerque Public School System, offers programs to help keep pregnant and parenting teens in school. Employment training, counseling, child care and health services, secondary education and GED preparation are offered. Support has come from the public school district, a Community Development Block Grant, the Jobs Training Partnership Act, a Social Services Block Grant and private foundations.

During the 1989-90 school year, approximately 60 teen parents had partially subsidized employment out of the 550 youths served.

Satisfactory school progress and daily participation in a job training class is required for participation in the student employment program, which awards school credit for work experience. The center recruits community employers and offered vocational awareness programs, funded by a grant from the Levi Strauss Foundation.

Write or call: New Futures School, 5400 Cutler NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110, 505/883-5680

**Comprehensive Dropout Prevention Program.** The Richmond (Virginia) Public Schools have a systemwide community/school dropout prevention program. Schools are urged to demonstrate care and concern for every child's success by matching teaching and learning styles, providing interesting course content, motivating through a sense of achievement, involving students in school activities, formulating alternatives to traditional classes, and communicating regularly with the home.

Dropout prevention strategies at each school promote regular attendance: awards for perfect attendance, special extracurricular activities, an "adopt an absentee" plan for all staff, and competitive, spirited attendance campaigns. Other Richmond strategies include:

- providing a dropout prevention team at each school consisting of principal, counselor, social worker, teacher, parent and student;
- identifying potential dropouts by screening absence records in monthly segments;
- forming study groups and workshops for parents of potential dropouts;
- increasing public awareness of at-risk students;
- developing counseling programs for dropouts;
- encouraging teachers to use self-esteem activities;
- utilizing peer counseling;
- identifying reasons some marginally successful students choose to remain in school;
- training staff to work with potential dropouts; and

- implementing a schoolwide monitoring system.

Monitoring begins on the first day of absence. A brief contact with the home is recommended, preferably from the teacher "who knows the student best." The third consecutive absence also calls for contact with the home, including home visitation, from an attendance officer at the secondary level or the teacher or principal at the elementary level. A fifth consecutive absence authorizes home contact from social workers and return-to-school officers. Five days of absence within any six-week period will initiate a parent-student-school conference.

The community is expected to be the "chief enforcer of the school attendance law." Publicity campaigns have gained the cooperation of local merchants who:

- exhibit positive attitudes towards schooling;
- exclude children from businesses during school hours;
- employ students only after school, except for school-sponsored work-study programs;
- participate in neighborhood watch programs;
- provide incentives for school attendance; and
- recruit students for clubs and recreation programs.

Alternative programs for at-risk students are numerous: transitional first grade for developmentally slow kindergartners in preparation for entering the first grade; Pep-Up, a basic skills program for developmentally slow third graders preparing to enter fourth grade; Project Basics, a reading and mathematics competency program; technology education for students over 15 years; Park School for pregnant teens; vocational evaluation for physically challenged and economically disadvantaged students; vocational career training with day and evening schedules; Richmond 7001, an open entry/open exit, self-paced individualized GED preparation for out-of-school youth ages 16 to 21; Educare, alternative schooling with behavioral modification for long-term suspensions or expulsions; and various adult career and education programs.

For further information, contact: Richmond Public Schools, 301 North Ninth Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219, 804/780-7711.

**Cities In Schools, Inc.** During the 1960s and early 1970s, staff who would later form Cities In Schools, Inc. (CIS) worked in inner-city areas to develop what were called "Street Academies" for high school dropouts. The purpose of the street academy was to offer an alternative to young people, especially those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, who had dropped out of school before graduation and appeared caught in the dead-end cycle of unemployment, crime and

welfare.

Although the street academies initially were funded almost exclusively from private sources, primarily large corporations, the program now receives support from public sources.

The various CIS model programs throughout the country coordinate both educational and social services for youths through working partnerships between public and private sector leadership.

Since its inception, the CIS program consistently has demonstrated an ability to keep potential dropouts in school, bring current dropouts back to school, improve attendance and increase academic achievement. Contact: Cities In Schools, Inc., 401 Wythe Street, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314, 703/519-8999.

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## Additional resources

Educators, community members, parents and law enforcers have many available resources from which to choose when tackling attendance problems. The following examples, while not comprehensive, provide a representative sampling of helpful school attendance resources.

The Bureau for At-Risk Youth, 1992. *School Attendance, Truancy and Dropping Out*.

Bureau of Justice Statistic Special Report, 1992. *Women in Jail 1989*.

Clemson University, 1991. "School Attendance as a Condition of Drivers' Licensure: A Study of West Virginia's 1988 Law."

Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, 1993. *Truancy Mediation Program*.

Los Angeles County Office of Education, 1986. *The Prevention of Truancy: Programs and Strategies that Address the Problems of Truancy and Dropouts*.

Massachusetts Board of Education, Bureau of Student Development and Health, 1991. *Structuring Schools for Student Success: A Focus on Discipline and Attendance*.

National Center for Education Statistics, 1992. *Dropout Rates in the United States, 1992*.

National Center for Education Statistics, 1992. *Dropout Rates in the United States, 1991*.

The National Dropout Prevention Center. *The Focus Database*, a nationally accessible database of information about school dropout prevention and at-risk youth.

The National Dropout Prevention Center. *The National Dropout Prevention Newsletter*.

Open Road Issues Research Project Citizens Policy Center, 1982. *Push Out, Step Out--A Report on California's Public School Drop-Outs*.

### **Organizations and Contacts**

National Dropout Prevention Center  
Clemson University  
Clemson, South Carolina 29634-5111  
803-656-2599

International Association of Pupil Personnel Workers  
c/o William Meyer  
Mt. View, Post Office Box 36  
Barnesville, Maryland 20838

National Diffusion Network  
Resource Development and Dissemination  
U.S. Department of Education  
555 New Jersey, Room 510  
Washington, D.C. 20208

John Burton  
Coordinator of Child Welfare and Attendance  
San Bernardino County Schools  
Office of Superintendent of Schools  
601 North "E" Street  
San Bernardino, California 92410

## District 116 hires truant officer as data show a high absentee rate

■ **Round Lake:** Former high school principal James Prault has been formally approved by the Board of Education as the truant and hearing officer for District 116.

The appointment, made by board members at a meeting Monday, was announced in conjunction with the release of the 1993 school report card, a state-mandated assessment of school districts that documents truancy rates, demographic variables and test scores.

According to the report card, District

116 had 366 chronic truants, defined as a student who has been absent from school for 10 percent or more of the past 180 days for which they were enrolled. The vast majority of these truants were identified as being of high school and junior high school age.

The 366 students translate into a 7.2 percent rate of chronic truancy districtwide, compared with the state average of 2.2 percent.

C.A. Abbinanti

Kansas City Star  
Kansas City, MO  
October 7, 1993

## KC schools use freebies as rewards

By LYNN HORSLEY  
Education Writer

Attention, students: Show up in class, and fast-food meals, movies with free popcorn and even the chance to win a camcorder or compact disk player could be your reward.

Those are some of the incentives the Kansas City School District is offering secondary students in certain schools to improve attendance.

Already, 90 students with the best attendance records at Central Middle School have won free tickets to the Kansas City Chiefs-Cincinnati Bengals game Sunday.

In their push to improve academic

achievement, district officials have said the first hurdle is making sure students are in class. They are determined to improve on last year's attendance record, which averaged about 84 percent in middle schools and 76 percent in high schools.

The district has teamed with Coca-Cola, AMC Theaters, Burger King, the Full Employment Council, KPRS Radio, the Kansas City Blades, *The Kansas City Star*, and Project Neighbor-H.O.O.D. to offer incentives for student with 100 percent and 95 percent attendance. The program also will reward students who show the most improvement in attendance.

Participating schools are Northeast and Metro high schools and Westport, Bingham, Southeast and Nowlin middle schools.

In a separate effort, Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Martin Bayless is giving tickets to Central Middle School students for the Cincinnati game. Central was chosen because it had the highest average attendance for the first month of school of any

Kansas City middle school, 93.9 percent.

Bayless met with the winning sixth- and eighth-grade students Tuesday, encouraging them to follow their dreams and to promote safe schools by avoiding any use of guns or violence.

The other attendance campaign will be kicked off Monday. Students with perfect or near-perfect attendance will be eligible for a variety of awards and recognition each quarter.



# School absences a concern

■ One official lays blame on the large size of the high schools. He hopes that restructuring plans will help.

By STEVEN EISENSTADT

Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Student absences at the city's high schools held steady last year after hitting their highest level since at least the mid-1980s, according to the School Department.

On an average day in the 1992-93 school year, 19 percent of the nearly 5,400 high schoolers were absent, equaling the rate for 1991-92.

The figure is the highest in the eight years for which the School Department has statistics available.

"I'm disappointed in the results," Paul Vorro, assistant superintendent for secondary education, said yesterday. "I thought the numbers would be better."

Last fall, Vorro said improving attendance was his "number one priority for the year" and ordered schools to notify parents of unexcused absences, as required by School Department policy but not always done.

Vorro said that while the clampdown put a dent in absences at some schools, the inability to lower the overall rate is symptomatic of deeper problems in the schools.

"I think it's all part of the large, impersonal nature of the high schools, and that's why we're restructuring them," Vorro said.

Supt. Arthur Zarrella has ordered three

highschools — Central, Hope and Mount Pleasant — to divide into smaller "schools-within-a-school" next fall to provide a more personalized learning environment. Each group would consist of 250 to 300 students who would remain in that group, along with their teachers, all four years.

Under the new structure, students will be more likely to feel comfortable in schools and less likely to be absent, Vorro said.

Central High School had the worst attendance record among the four large high schools last year, with only 73 percent present on a given day, down from 75.2 percent the previous year.

The other high schools reported more promising numbers, as attendance rose from 79 to 81 percent at Mount Pleasant, from 74.4 to 75.1 percent at Hope, and from 93 to 94 percent at Classical.

Still, the attendance rate for the high schools was far lower than in the middle schools (87.2 percent) and the elementary schools (92.4 percent).

Among middle schools, Nathan Bishop and Roger Williams reported the highest attendance rates — 89 percent. Oliver Hazard Perry was at the other end of the scale with 84.4 percent.

In the elementary schools, the rates ranged from 94.3 percent at Asa Messer to 91 percent at five schools — the Asa Messer annex, Broad Street, Laurel Hill Avenue, Mary E. Fogarty and Pleasant View.

The School Department calculates the averages by studying daily attendance reports from each school.

# A giant step toward helping dropouts

■ Wayne Township's 'positive harassment' aimed at helping keep youngsters in school.

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By Wendi C. Thomas  
STAR STAFF WRITER

Wayne Township Schools has a lofty goal: a 100 percent graduation rate.

Which translates into extra efforts to keep kids from dropping out of the township's high school, Ben Davis.

Enter guidance director Dan Carrington and the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Program — a long, official-sounding title for what amounts to concerned and constructive harassment.

"We're literally like bulldogs," Carrington said, smiling but serious. "Once you get on our list, you're not forgotten."

According to the Indiana Department of Education, about 11 percent of Wayne Township students in grades 9 through 12 failed to complete high school in the 1991-92 school year.

Carrington — a man who lives by the adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" — and the other Ben Davis guidance counselors track incoming students with more than 10 absences a semester.

A list of chronic absentees is also given to the school nurse, so she can cure any phony illnesses contracted to get out of school.

If a student continues to miss school, he or she is placed on strict attendance probation and monitored by the atten-

dance intervention team: a guidance counselor, a home school adviser, the school psychologist and the assistant principal.

To seek an excused absence, both the child and his or her parent must call the school before the school day begins, Carrington said.

Judith B. Erickson, director of research services at the Indiana Youth Institute, described Wayne Township's dropout prevention program as impressive.

Erickson, who has studied dropout rates statewide, said other township systems, such as Decatur and Lawrence, also are making tremendous strides in keeping students in school.

But the best of programs, Carrington said, often fail with students struck with the "4 Ds": depression, drug involvement, deprivation and disenfranchisement.

When a kid stays up all night to keep a drunken father from beating his mother, or a teen-age girl sits up with her sick baby, or a student has to work an after-school job to help out the family — these kids aren't likely to make it to school the next morning, Carrington said.

For these kids, there are options: attending Ben Davis' night school or day school at Wayne Enrichment Center.

"It's expensive education, but it's still cheaper than incarceration or welfare," Carrington said of the schools with 10-1 student-teacher ratios.

At night school, students attend for six hours a night, Monday through Thursday — which fits the teen-age mothers' schedules and affords those who need to work the chance to learn, Carrington

said.

At Wayne Enrichment Center, students attend either a three-hour morning or afternoon session, five days a week.

A poster on a classroom wall reads: "Personally, I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught."

The reasons students are there are numerous as the students. Aaron Phelps, 17, threatened to drop out because he didn't want to wear the school's mandatory swimming trunks for gym — dubbed "Daisy Dukes" after the popular short shorts. "They don't look right on a chubby guy."

Jeremy Copley, 16, got caught up with the wrong crowd and got in trouble in every imaginable way — from fighting to drugs. "Ben Davis didn't want me," he says with a smile.

But at Wayne Enrichment Center, Jeremy and his classmates feel as if they fit in — many for the first time. They can drink sodas in class, they work at their own pace, they call their teachers by their first names.

"The only reason you come to work is because of us," Jeremy teased his social studies teacher, Tony Starks.

"Yeah, that and it's my community service I have to work off. I still have 300 hours I have to do," Starks came back.

The banter might seem out of place in school, but this is the first time many of his students have had a positive relationship with an adult, Starks said.

For many, it's also a last chance he's hoping they'll take.

"Some people react when they are pushed to the edge, and this is the edge."

# Boot camp for dropouts

## Congress funds pilot to keep teen-agers in school

By Carolyn Battista  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

**N**iantic, CONN. - Rachel Shumsky dropped out of high school because, she says, "there were just too many gangs."

Richard Declet didn't drop out. "I got thrown out," he says, because he pulled a gun on a guy who had a knife.

But now Shumsky, Declet and 112 others who left high school are on their way to equivalency diplomas, decent jobs and better lives. They are in the country's first Youth Challenge Corps, which began late last month at the Connecticut National Guard's Camp Weicker in Niantic.

"This is the pilot for the country," said James Spellman, an instructor at the camp. "We hope to create a new window of opportunity for what they do with the rest of their lives."

Congress authorized \$44 million for Youth Challenge Corps program, \$4.7 million of which went to the pilot. This fall, the program is scheduled to begin at National Guard facilities in nine other states. Those eligible are dropouts aged 16 — 18 who have no drug problems or criminal records.

The 17-month program starts with a five-month residential phase much like boot camp. Corps members sleep in barracks, do physical training before breakfast and march by platoons to meals and to classes.

They have scheduled study sessions, sports and community service, which includes working on the grounds and buildings at Camp Weicker by the Niantic River.

Corps members get \$15 a week for personal expenses; they get little time for the camp beach.

If they successfully complete the residential phase, they will receive help for the next year in seeking and starting jobs or additional schooling. They also receive up to \$2,000 each for education or job training. They are not obligated to join the National Guard.

Originally, 173 youths arrived at Camp Weicker last month, from cities and towns around Connecticut. More than two-thirds were black or Hispanic; nearly a quarter were female. Some came from troubled families, foster homes, rival gangs or just years of not getting along in school or elsewhere.

Since then, about 60 have dropped out; for those who stay, camp administrators expect to provide a means to success.

"Now their resume is blank except for their name and a set of failures," says Lt. Col. Ron Boremski, an instructor. "But they'll leave here credentialed."

Spellman says it bothers him that high-school dropouts are stigmatized. Somebody leaving a school that's rife with trouble, he believes, may be trying to "be a good citizen."

Boremski says programs for dropouts often fail for lack of "a holistic approach." Students commute to classes, then

return to family problems or neighborhood gangs.

"We have the luxury of getting them out of that environment," he says. He and Brig. Gen. David D. Boland, director of the Niantic program, developed its curriculum. Both are former public school administrators.

Camp instructors are certified teachers; other staff members have backgrounds that include military service, working with young people or both.

### Relating to the instructors

"Basically, I used to be one of these kids," says N'Gai Lobon, an assistant team leader. "They can relate to me."

According to Lobon, some corps members initially resented having to practice marching, follow orders, and do pushups if observed doing anything out of line such as wearing a cap backward.

Still, he says, they know "what they're here for," and they see that the military approach "disciplines the mind."

Says team director Vincent Lafontan, "The biggest thing I've heard from them, believe it or not, is that they're looking for some discipline, some self-discipline."

The camp motto is "If it is to be, it is up to me."

Many corps members are behind in reading and math; all take 200 hours of academic instruction. All also take a concentrated program on drug and alcohol awareness. Those who don't have a driver's license take driver's education.

They also all take the Adkins Life Skills Program, developed at Teacher's College, Columbia University. Its subtitle is "How to choose, find, get and keep a job."

At one Adkins class recently, instructor Joseph Lea asked students to make — and then discuss — giant drawings representing events in their lives. Angel Figueroa drew a devil to mark his 18th year when, he says, he "began messing up big time."

He drew a sun to represent his hearing about Camp Weicker.

"I wanted to get away from drugs and bad stuff," he said.

"There is a way out," said Lea, whose class will help the students prepare for job interviews and work situations.

Boot camp is only the beginning. Albert Crowley, a post-residential coordinator, is recruiting industries to offer jobs to corps members. He also will establish a network of mentors to help them when they go off to jobs, military service or more schooling.

"We'll keep track of them for a year," he said.

Administrators of Youth Challenge Corps programs that will start this fall in Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Oklahoma and West Virginia, have been calling Camp Weicker to ask what's working and what isn't.

Camp Weicker administrators are asking themselves the

# Boot camp for dropouts gets a try-out at Camp Weicker

Continued from previous page

same questions, for their pilot funding also covers a second session, to start in January.

"We'll have many lessons as a result of this one," says Gen. Daniel McGuire, deputy director. One aim is to reduce the number who leave the program. McGuire thinks a more extensive orientation session might help prospective corps members see clearly what's ahead and help camp staff members recognize those who will not succeed.

Corps members have left Niantic for reasons such as insufficient motivation and health and family problems. As he waited recently for someone to pick him up, Mike Vetti cited

recent deaths in his family.

"It's a bad time for me now, but I'm coming back in January," he said.

A dozen participants were expelled for behavioral problems; four of those were arrested for assaulting another. Only days earlier, one of the four said he had left school to work when he became a father.

"This program will help me to get a better job, to support myself and my daughter," he said at the time. "I need to get away from the streets, anyway. Too many gangs, drugs, fights." Somehow, however, his plan failed.

Those who remain, said McGuire, "want this badly. They are willing to make every effort to get an education."

# Tracking Truants

■ **Education:** Prosecutor Brenda English won't take any guff in her fight to halt hard-core truancy and pull kids off the road to prison. The strategy: Not-so-subtly put the heat on the parents. It's working.

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By BETTIJANE LEVINE  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**I**f not for a fluke of timing, you might have met Debra Johnson on the nightly news, another mother grieving for a child gone wrong.

Johnson is a single mother of three who until recently lived in South-Central Los Angeles — and whose son, Andre Holloway, 13, tended toward gang buddies and refused to go to school.

Then the threat arrived in the mail. On official stationery of the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

If read, in part: "... School attendance is mandatory. You and your child's failure to comply may result in court action against you. You and your child are requested to appear at a meeting. ..." It was signed: Brenda English, Deputy District Attorney.

"Court action? District attorney? Don't I have troubles enough already?" Johnson thought. She was angry and scared.

"Of course she was," says English. "That's exactly the reaction we want. It means we got her attention."

Since January, English has administered a new program designed to catch truant kids before they become criminals.

"That's what happens to truants," English says. "Statistics show 85% of all daytime crime is committed by school kids. Statistics also show truancy is the single most common factor in the profiles of those who become adult criminals. It's even more common than dysfunctional families."

And because about 300,000 (out of 1.6 million) students are truant from public schools *every day* in Los Angeles County, English adds, the crime forecast is increasingly bleak.

So the head of the district attorney's juvenile division, Tom Higgins, devised a plan to get parents' attention and intercept kids before they become statistics. His plan is unusual because it uses deputy district attorneys outside the courtroom to prevent crime, rather than inside to prosecute it.

Higgins, a father of eight, says he came up with the project — which formally began in January — after analyzing county records of "the kids who are the robbers, the rapists, the drive-by shooters. Virtually every one of them has had a failed educational experience."

So, he reasoned, "if we get the 10-year-old back in school and functioning, he won't become the 16-year-old drive-by shooter." After a 15-month tryout at Parmelee Elementary

School in South-Central, Higgins got a grant from the state's Office of Criminal Justice Planning.

He then assigned three of his deputies to different areas — Pasadena, Long Beach and South-Central — putting each in charge of three schools. Their mission: to eliminate truancy.

It is more than a full-time job, English says.

But the plan seems to be working. Of 132 truant students in the Parmelee pilot, attendance of all but one changed dramatically during the first semester; that student straightened out the next semester, English says, thereby avoiding prosecution.

Even the formerly fearful Johnson believes she was lucky her son's problems erupted just when the plan went into action. And even luckier that Andre's school — Horace Mann Junior High — was in the project. And luckiest, perhaps, that someone like Brenda English was at the helm.

"I want to thank her, thank the principal, thank the tutor, thank the Lord for what happened to us," Johnson says. "It has put our lives on a whole different track. I believe if we'd had this kind of help before, he never would have become a problem."

Others have saluted the program too. It was a semifinalist for the Ford Foundation's 1993 Innovations in Government Award and won the 1993 Achievement Award from the National Assn. of Counties for the abolition of chronic truancy.

Though you can't tell by looking at her, English is one emotionally exhausted woman.

After eight months on the assignment she remains energetic, enthusiastic — and a verbal black belt.

As a divorced mother of one and a former teacher who earned her law degree from Southwestern University at night, she can leap large obstacles to achieve a goal.

But it is hard to hear English's backlog of truancy tales and believe she has any enthusiasm left for this seemingly overwhelming battle.

"That's ridiculous," she snaps. "I've just begun this work and we're already turning things around. It's absolutely exciting." Then she returns to her tale of a father so intent on helping his gang-involved, truant son that the father sat in all the son's classes while the son stayed home with his friends.

"I had ordered the father to come to school with his son, to make sure the child attended every class. The son refused to go. But the father, to keep his commitment, sat through every class. He'd call me and say, 'I am trying as hard as I can.' Eventually, the child was so moved by his father's dedication that he started attending school. He's been going ever since."

The beauty of Higgins' plan, English says, is that parents and kids know the district attorney's office can prosecute, can potentially put them in jail. (So far, there have been no prosecutions.)

Also, a new law ups the possible penalty to \$2,500 and/or

# TRUANT

Continued from previous page

one year in jail. That's strong incentive to do what's right, English says.

What's more, the Higgin's method reaches hundreds of truant children and their parents in a single stroke, instead of the 10 or 15 children typically processed in a year by school-attendance counselors.

First, the prosecutor meets with school faculty and requests that teachers keep strict attendance records and that a school representative phone the parents of each child who is regularly absent or tardy.

At Horace Mann, where Andre Johnson was enrolled, for example, the faculty came up with about 200 regularly absent students. English sent hand-signed letters inviting their parents to a mass meeting. School administrators, used to lackluster parent involvement, thought no one would show. English knew different.

"When parents see a letter from the D.A., they realize something serious is happening," she says. "They show up, even though the meeting is held in the afternoon and they may have to miss work."

At the first meeting, parents are generally hostile and irate, English says. But she tolerates no back talk, no excuses and no questions about individual cases. "I am there unarmed, with no guards. I want them to sit down and listen," she says. "First, I let them know what their legal responsibility is — that if they do not make certain their child attends school, they can be taken to court. They learn that their name, and their child's name, is on file with our office, that they have been identified and we are monitoring them."

To prevent prosecution, parents must sign in at the school attendance office with the child. If the child remains truant, at least the district attorney's office will know the parent tried.

What if the parents works and can't take the child to school?

"That's not our problem," English says. "If the child is truant, we say, 'That child is your responsibility. Make sure he gets there.' I can't waver on that point, no matter what the hardship is."

Also at the mass meeting are representa-

tives from community-based organizations. They tell the group about services they offer — from counseling and tutoring to art, music and computer classes. And, because the organizations receive part of the grant funds, English adds, they have incentive to do their jobs.

At the end of the meeting, hostility is usually replaced by grudging hopefulness, English says. Parents see they have an ally in the district attorney. The kids show muffled enthusiasm too, English says. Most sign up for free counseling and all sorts of activities before they leave. Some parents believe their lives have been saved.

"Say your child is violent toward you at home. We have a community organization that's available 24 hours a day, that comes to your house as soon as you call. We have parents who live in terror in their own homes. The kids' gang comes in, takes over the house, carves up the furniture, does graffiti on the walls — the same things we see on the street every day, these parents see in their homes."

And a little letter from the district attorney can get these warriors in school?

"No just the letter, but the process," English says. Even the toughest kids, at this relatively young age [9 to 12], don't want their parents put in jail. "If nothing else, they know it's Mom or Dad who's their meal ticket and who puts the roof over their heads."

■

For Andre and 45 other truants at Horace Mann, the mass meeting didn't work.

Andre's mother would walk him to school and sign him in, but the minute she left through the front door, he'd go out the back.

English studied daily attendance records of all 200 in the group for eight weeks after the first meeting. Those who still didn't come to school were about the enter Phase II of the Higgins plan.

"That's where we deal with them and their parents on an individual basis, because these are the ones with deep-seated problems." At the second meeting, English and a cadre of school and community professionals sit down with the child and parent and get into "the nitty-gritty of this family's life." It is a drama that constantly "amazes and exhausts" but produces results, she says. Often, the family never discussed their lives with such clarity.

Under English's no-nonsense cross-examination, with help from psychology experts, the stories come out.

In Andre's case, the second meeting was simple. Andre said he stopped going to school because was failing every class and couldn't do the work. His mother backed him up, explaining he'd always had special-education classes until junior high. She also worried out loud that he might join a gang, because he had so many gang-involved friends.

The district attorney hooked Andre up with an organization to provide tutoring, free of charge, and then requested that Andre's mother accompany him to school each day and sit in on all his classes.

"He didn't think it was a good idea," Debra Johnson now says. "But I want every day, along with my 5-year-old girl, because I had nowhere else to leave her. She'd draw quietly while I sat and made sure Andre stayed in class. The teachers never bothered us, 'cause they knew what we were doing."

Andre says it turned out to be no big deal to have his mother and baby sister, Darcel, in class every day. "Actually, it made me feel a lot better to know my mom cared so much, that she was willing to do something like that."

What's more, he says, the tutoring worked so well that he wound up the semester with Bs and Cs and he's going to really crack his books in the fall, he says.

His mother says: "Mrs. Essie Love, the tutor, was wonderful. She worked with him on everything — his reading, his math, his respect for adults. It turned him around."

Brenda English agrees. People outside these problems tend to think the worst of those involved, she says. But the truants and their parents are often good people who need a temporary helping hand.

Francis Nakano, special assistant to the superintendent of the L.A. Unified School District, says the system has 150 employees who deal with attendance problems. "But they do not have the same leverage as the D.A.'s office, which can put an immense amount of responsibility and pressure on individuals" and can back it up with consequences. "I would support that kind of program 100%; I wish we could have it in every school."

Andre, asked what finally made him get his act together, said simply: "I didn't want to hurt my mother." By the way, he said with wonder in his voice, "I found out I like school. I really like it."

# District Looks at Truancy as a Criminal Matter

■ **Schools:** Critics say the get-tough, deterrent policy is insensitive and does little more than to put parents in the glare of publicity.

DOWNEY

By HOWARD BLUME

TIMES STAFF WRITER

Prosecutors and educators are looking at a 15-minute Downey court hearing this week as a potentially landmark juncture in dealing with truant children.

Parent Leticia Delava stood before a Municipal Court judge Monday to be sentenced on one criminal count of contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Her crime was not getting her 12-year-old son to school often enough. Her son had 30 unexcused absences last year.

The case marked the first time in at least 30 years that a California parent faced criminal charges for a child's truancy, prosecutors said.

Judge David W. Perkins sentenced Delava, 35, to three years of probation and 100 hours of parenting classes and counseling. The single mother of two had pleaded no contest in November to one criminal count. She had faced up to a year in jail and a \$2,500 fine.

This effort to pursue criminal charges in truancy cases has won praise from many in education and legal circles. They said school officials have unveiled a powerful new tool to fight truancy and its long-term effects.

"It's all about deterrents," Deputy Dist. Atty. Thomas Higgins said. "Sometimes you have to say, 'This is what happens if you don't [get a child to school]. We want the kid in school. That's all I want. That's all our office wants.'"

Higgins said he plans to use the criminal code in future truancy prosecutions.

Critics said the case sets a bad precedent about how far a school district can go in using blunt discipline to solve attendance problems that deserve more sensitive solutions.

Downey Unified's aggressive approach to truancy has resulted in two federal citations issued last year for civil rights violations, they added. Delava's attorney characterized the case as a publicity stunt by the

district attorney's office and the Downey Unified School District.

"If it had never come this far, we would have been better off," attorney Jeffrey Oberman said.

The district attorney filed charges against Delava last June, but the child's attendance problems had developed over several years, district officials said. Delava claimed that her son had chronic stomach trouble that sometimes made him unable to attend school.

But Delava failed to document these problems with doctors' notes, and as a result, Downey Unified treated the absences as truancies.

"Downey Unified is among the leaders when it comes to attempts to get kids back to school," said Phil Kauble, an administrative consultant with the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

Excluding dropouts, Downey Unified has improved its attendance rate each of the past three years, from 93.28% to 94.32%, according to the county office. By comparison, Long Beach Unified has an attendance rate of about 92%, Glendale Unified about 95%. The Alhambra school districts have an attendance rate similar to Downey's.

Downey's attendance is impressive for a district in which thousands of students belong to transient families, Kauble said.

Besides the educational benefits, good attendance means dollars for a school system. School districts receive state money based on each day a child is in school. One absence costs about \$17 a day.

The mechanisms for dealing with truancy are the same in Downey as elsewhere, but Downey officials are more aggressive than many districts in using them, Kauble added.

Like other school districts in the county, Downey Unified has a committee at each school to deal with attendance problems. These committees have dealt with 310 cases this year in the district of 15,800 students. Officials expect another 100 cases by June.

If a truancy problem persists, the family goes before a School Attendance Review Board.

Parents must sign a contract stating that the child's attendance will improve. The next step is a hearing before a probation officer working with the district attorney's office, and possible prosecution of the parent, child or both.

The district attorney's office joined the anti-truancy campaign three years ago after research showed that today's truants tend to become tomorrow's criminals.

Until the Delava case, such prosecutions had been pursued under the Education Code. A conviction under that code is like a traffic ticket. A parent or child can be taken into custody only after violations of a probation agreement and then only for five days.

In the Delava case, Downey officials bypassed the Education Code prosecution and opted to press criminal charges, which received heavy press coverage.

"We didn't feel she'd respond to the Education Code process," said Stan Hanstad, director of pupil services for Downey Unified. "We obviously got the attention of the parent this way."

Hanstad said that Delava's son had few unexcused absences since the charges were filed.

"Our intent is never to have a parent or child go to jail," he said.

But Delava's attorney said his client was denied due process and rushed to criminal prosecution to be made an example of. "You take the guillotine to the problem rather than dealing with it," Oberman said. "It does the child and family no good."

"We've dragged [Delava] into the glare of television lights. . . . The school district should be working with families, not newspapers and televisions."

Even some school officials questioned whether a criminal prosecution was necessary.

Parent advocate Jeanne Corbett said Downey Unified, in its zeal to confront truancy, has brought parents before truancy boards improperly.

"Yes, people should send their kids to school, no question about it," Corbett said. "But when people have well-documented medical reasons for not attending school, it seems real bizarre to use this process."

# Support groups slash truancy, dropouts

Treating chronic class skippers as kids addicted to their behavior works for Springs high school

By Berny Morson

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

**COLORADO SPRINGS** — When temptation beckons Mitchell High School sophomore Scheria Moore to skip classes, pressure to stick around comes from the very people who used to skip with her.

"We try to get each other to class," says Christina Robillard, 17, also a sophomore.

The result: Scheria was absent only twice in February and she missed only three classes on days she attended school. That's a marked turnaround from last fall, when she missed two-thirds of her classes.

"All of our grades are getting better," Scheria says of herself and the four students she hangs out with.

If that sounds like an Alcoholics Anonymous approach to eliminating absences, it is. Students with excessive numbers of absences are urged to join support groups, look out for one another and recruit others who appear at risk of dropping out.

It's all the brainchild of Mitchell principal Delia Armstrong-Busby. In what she calls an "intuitive leap," Armstrong-Busby in 1989 sensed that kids who repeatedly skip classes are addicted to their behavior.

She recalls students saying they really want to go to class but don't know how—just like drunks who say they want to stop drinking.

Armstrong-Busby is quick to note that she was the one who used to kick students out for poor attendance. "It wasn't working."

Showering students with blame instead of understanding that they were out of control, made her part of the problem, she says. "If I see you as a bad guy, I'll treat you as a bad guy, but if I see you as someone with something you can't control, that changes your behavior," the principal says.

Steve Rauch is a clinical social worker

in private practice who helped establish the Mitchell program. He isn't convinced that chronic absences are an addiction, but he agrees that Armstrong-Busby's approach makes sense.

"They acknowledge it as a problem and say, 'We need to assist you with that problem,'" says Rauch, who counsels some of the students in his office.

"She's tough, but she cares," Rauch says of Busby-Armstrong. "That trickles down. ... It comes across when you talk to her staff. They don't give up on kids."

After three years, the annual dropout rate at Mitchell has fallen to 2% — one of the lowest in the state. That's down from 10% in the 1988-89 school year.

The 2% dropout rate is remarkable considering Mitchell is attended by many students from single-parent or low-income families who often are blamed for the rising dropout rates in America's urban high schools. At Mitchell, nearly one in six students receive discounted or free lunches made available to poor families; nearly one in four students is a minority.

This semester, about 120 youngsters are in support groups, with students bringing friends who also need help.

Christina was brought by Scheria. "She said this (program) is interesting and you learn things," Christina says. "It's not free time, but we talk about our problems."

No one is forced to attend the group sessions.

The potato-chips-and-fruit-juice meetings are conducted around a coffee table in a second-floor classroom. They are run by motherly and fatherly counselors who are good listeners and equally good dispensers of common sense.

Marsha Peeler, who runs the program, concedes that some people earn big money without going to college. Garbage collectors in New York earn more than teachers in Colorado Springs, she tells a dozen students sitting around the table.

"But think about the garbage in new York," she adds.

Traditionally, schools dealt individually with students, says Peeler, a counselor for 20 years. "If we work with an entire group of kids who skip, they can have support from

each other."

Student comments during the group sessions have helped make the school more friendly to potential dropouts, Peeler says. "They said it would be nice if the teacher would smile and speak to us when he or she enters the room," Peeler says.

"The at-risk student needs something to feel connected or welcome at school," she says. "They take it personally (if the teacher is brusque) and the teacher may not have a clue that the student takes it that way."

Students agree that the failure of such seemingly simple communications skills leads youngsters to drop out. "If people listen to you and understand what you're talking about, you wouldn't have a problem," says Sonya Green, 15, a sophomore.

Sonya didn't have a lot of unexcused absences but is in the program because it allows her to "let off steam" over her problems at school.

If she were advising other teachers how to communicate with youngsters as effectively as Peeler, Sonya says, "I would tell them, 'Open your eyes, open your heart — it will just come to you.'"

The group sessions are a substitute for the support and direction that high-achievers get at home and from their college-bound friends, counselors say.

One morning, Scheria and her friends bring a new student to a group session run by Della Moore, a volunteer counselor. "Is there a reason you don't come to school?" Moore asks Donny Epplen, 17, the newcomer.

"Yeah — because I don't want to be here," Donny says.

"Where do you want to be?" Moore asks.

"I don't know," Donny says.

"You can't hang out at the mall and at your friends' houses for the rest of your life," Moore tells him. "Don't you think that would get old?"

Moore, 46, comes to Mitchell every Thursday to run a group session. She walks the halls on Tuesday, making sure group members are in class.



## Burglaries dip as anti-truancy effort thrives in Oklahoma City

An anti-truancy program started by a coalition of law enforcement, social services and community agencies in Oklahoma City will be expanded to surrounding Oklahoma County after preliminary results show it may have helped cut the city's dropout rate and the number of daytime burglaries reported to police.

The THRIVE program — short for "Truancy Habits Reduced, Increasing Valuable Education" — began on a pilot basis in November 1989. But since its inception, officials say, THRIVE may have helped reduce the dropout rate by nearly two-thirds, from almost 8 percent to 3.3 percent, and burglaries have fallen from about 50 per day to about 25, said Capt. Charlie Owen of the Oklahoma City Police Department.

THRIVE, modeled on a similar program in San Jose, Calif., known as TABS, or Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression, was started by the Oklahoma County Coalition of Citizens and Professionals for Youth, which began three years ago "to intervene to keep kids out of the criminal justice system, hoping they can get them back into productive activities" and "address where the gaps are that aren't being served in the system," says Pam Harrell, THRIVE's executive director.

Truancy became a prime focus of the coalition, which found that not much was being done to keep kids in school — and out of the misbehavior that sometimes occurs when students play hooky. The group lobbied for a tougher anti-truancy law, which was passed last year by the Legislature and allows for misdemeanor

charges against parents if their child misses more than 15 consecutive days of school. Penalties include fines of up to \$100 for each additional missed day, and up to one year in jail if parents do not pay the fines.

The law also authorized Oklahoma law enforcement agencies to enter into agreements with local school districts to allow them to act as "attendance officers," Harrell told LEN. The THRIVE Center, a large classroom at the Westwood School near downtown Oklahoma City, serves as a processing center for truants brought there by police officers. No crime need be committed in order for police to detain youths 7 to 18 years old at the center, where an intake interview is conducted. Workers at the center call schools to verify enrollment, check to see whether the child has any outstanding warrants, and call parents, who are told to pick up their children in one hour or the youths will be turned over to the Youth Services Bureau.

A police officer is assigned to the center to pick up and transport to the center truants or any child of school age who is not in school on a school day. The police "really are the key to the program," said Harrell, and they have a vested interest in the program because it seems to have helped reduce the number of daytime crimes, some of which, particularly burglaries, are known to be committed by truant youths.

"Our main reason for getting into it was to try to impact daytime juvenile crime during school hours and to give officers an opportunity to interact with

juveniles by making them accountable for why they're not in school," Captain Owen told LEN. "It has been a success in both areas. Juvenile crime has been impacted by about one-third, and the interaction between officers and youths has prompted opportunities for an officer to reach out to the kids or at least make it a priority for him to do so."

Nearly 400 students have been processed at the THRIVE center thus far.

The program had no budget last year, said Harrell, and in order to keep it operating, personnel from six agencies involved in THRIVE were rotated. Much-needed financial support and donations of space and equipment have come in from local businesses and residents. Its board of directors, known as Youth Cornerstones, includes corporate as well as community leaders, which has "established a real cross-over between the private, corporate and public sectors," she said.

The pooled resources of the Oklahoma City School Board, the Oklahoma City Police Department, the Oklahoma County District Attorney's Office, the county's Bureau of Youth Services and Juvenile Bureau, and the state's Department of Human Services are vital to the program, Harrell added. "The plan is to continue the rotated staffing because it allows for interaction and coordination between the agencies that might not take place otherwise," she said, adding that an assessment and interagency referral project targeting troubled students is on the drawing board.

## Costs to Society

# *Dropout Not the Only One Who Pays*

By RON HARRIS,  
*Times Staff Writer*

NEW ORLEANS—At 15, Robert LeBlanc didn't know exactly what he wanted to be when he grew up, but like many youngsters his age, he figured he would be something special.

Maybe he would be a musician, he thought. He liked the piano and organ, and he practiced them both diligently. Friends, relatives and instructors who admired his drawing skills thought he might become a commercial artist, a draftsman or even an architect.

What LeBlanc never guessed was that two years later he would drop out of high school. Nor did he suspect that shortly after he left school he would spend 25 months behind bars for burglary and trespassing. But most of all, LeBlanc never imagined that when he reached manhood at 21, he would be lucky just to get a job as a sacker at a New Orleans area supermarket at \$3.75 an hour.

"I don't know what to do. I'm lost. I'm a nobody — that's what everybody thinks anyway," LeBlanc said.

Every day, government officials, business leaders and sociologists say millions upon millions of high school dropouts stand just where LeBlanc is now, struggling for a toehold in a changing society while the room for them grows smaller and smaller.

Theirs are personal stories of bleak prospects. Like LeBlanc, government studies show, these dropouts will shuffle between low-paying jobs and unemployment. They will be twice as likely as graduates to end up behind bars. For female dropouts — mostly unwed moth-

ers — welfare dependency awaits.

### **Nation's Future**

But sociologists, academicians and business leaders warn that the story of Robert LeBlanc and his peers is far more than individual tragedy. Their future is the nation's future, they say.

As its dropout rate continues to hover at 30%, the United States is reaping a labor pool in which nearly half of its new work force is educationally deficient. At the same time, a changing economy is putting a premium on reading, math and thinking skills.

Consequently, business leaders are hard pressed to find workers, and American business is spending \$30 billion a year training employees in reading and math skills that they should have received in high school.

There are monetary costs to society as well. Experts estimate that the dropouts in each year's class represent both an increasing welfare burden and, over their lifetimes, \$240 billion in lost tax revenues. Meanwhile, prison incarcerations have shot up dramatically, nearly doubling in 10 years.

If the problem of high school dropouts and a faltering educational system is not met head on, it is not just individuals but the entire nation that is at risk, said David P. Gardner, president of the University of California system and head of a blue-ribbon panel studying the issue.

"The task must be faced and the price must be paid," Gardner said. "We are out of alternatives."

Robert LeBlanc's troubles and the dilemma he presents for New Orleans and Louisiana represent a drama being played out across America.

LeBlanc left high school in the 12th grade with a spotty academic record.

"I dropped out because I was doing terrible in school," he said. "I was sleeping in class. I used to hardly ever study."

His biggest problem was reading — the school system never succeeded in teaching him to master it.

"I can't understand what I'm reading," he said. "I don't remember it. Just to get my driver's license I had to read the book about 15 times."

Consequently, he failed English five years in a row, and three times he went to summer school to make up credit.

Before he left school, LeBlanc also got into trouble with the law. When he was 17, a girl he knew let him into her uncle's house and suggested that he take \$170 in cash and give her a share later. He was caught two days later and charged with burglary. Already doing poorly in school and now facing a trial with the possibility of spending two years in prison, he decided that trying to go on was pointless.

Like dropouts across the country, LeBlanc waded into the work force with few skills. He was already working at a fast-food restaurant as a short order cook for minimum wage, but shortly after he left school the job disappeared when the company was sold. He landed a job at McDonald's but, after a week, he quit. He had made only \$8 in his first week because of short hours, he said, and the manager couldn't promise much more.

### **Some Good News**

In court, LeBlanc got some good news. He was given three years probation. But as he applied for job after job, he discovered that almost nobody wanted him.

Across the nation, business and government leaders say that as the nation moves toward a more technical society, there is little room for high school dropouts.

"The problem now is that we have a greater need for graduates than we ever had before," said Sally Hayes, head of the education committee for the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce. "In order to be able to function competitively, they have to be able to think, they have to be able to problem solve. This is a different set of skills."

In a recent report, the Hudson Institute, an Indianapolis-based think tank specializing in public policy issues, forecast that by the 1990s, more than half of all new jobs will require some education beyond high school.

Business leaders are already complaining that today even those who are graduated from high school are deficient in the skills needed in the new economy. High school dropouts, they say, are so far off

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the mark as to drop almost totally from consideration.

One example of just how far off the mark those graduates are is the National Education Assessment Test given last year to 21- to 25-year-olds. A score of 300 on the literacy portion indicates an ability to follow directions to travel from one location to another. Seventy-eight percent of dropouts failed. A score of 300 on the math portion indicates the ability to enter deposits and checks and balance a checkbook. Seventy-nine percent of dropouts failed.

"It's tough for these kids," said Karen Evans, acting supervisor at the West Bank Training Center, a federally funded job training operation just outside of New Orleans. "They come in reading at the fifth- and sixth-grade level and they're competing with adults who are out of work. And there aren't enough blue-collar jobs that pay \$7, \$8, \$10 an hour. They just don't exist. They're looking at jobs that pay minimum wage, and sometimes they are part-time jobs.

"A lot of time, our time is spent in 'reality therapy.' They say: 'I want a job making \$5 an hour.' Kids tell us: 'Nobody can live on \$3.35 an hour.' Our response is: 'Take a look: this is what the real world is like.' We say: 'What can you do that somebody is going to pay you more than \$3.35 an hour for?'

"At first, they're shocked. They look at us like 'what are you talking about?' The kids come in and think that — they've worked on their cars at home — they can get a job as a mechanic. They discover that even to do minor tune-ups, you have to be able to read a computer printout. It takes more literacy. Nobody is going to let you work on their \$15,000 car if you haven't had some experience and training."

Before many of those dropouts get to Evans, they have been to the office of Regina Roat, employment manager for Hyatt Regency in New Orleans.

"Seventy percent of the people who come through this office haven't graduated from high school," said Roat, whose office hires hourly employees — the reservation clerks, PBX operators, house-

keepers, stewards, cooks, waiters, waitresses, and cashiers who make up 90% of the hotel's staff.

### Many Applications

"It's frustrating. I have people come in and fill out a job application and they have someone with them to help them out. I spend a lot of time when I'm interviewing just filling in the blanks. I expect that, to a degree, because these are low-paying, hourly jobs, but not to the severity that it is here. I can't hire someone who can't speak and who can't read and write, and I get a lot of those."

Consequently, Roat said she finds herself wading through a stack of applicants to fill one simple job.

"I probably interview at least 30 people for one desk position, probably 15 for a housekeeper. I had a lady who came in who was perfect for a waitress position in our deli. She was bubbly, she was clean. She had to be able to read to take orders and ring things up. She told me she couldn't work in the deli because she couldn't read and write."

Other New Orleans companies report similar situations. Chevron, for instance, is looking for operations and maintenance personnel at its New Orleans facility.

"A lot of them have a hard time passing the basic reading, writing and arithmetic test," said Chris Lardge, manager of employment in Chevron's San Francisco headquarters. "They have a lot of people lined up per job, but they whittle them down quickly because a lot of them can't read instructions clearly and understand what they're reading, and write things, and they have some problems with basic mathematics. It's true across the country, in our Richmond refinery, our Philadelphia refinery. I was down in Pascagoula, Miss., and they were saying the same thing."

New York Telephone Co. reports that in a six-month period in 1987, 84% of its job applicants failed the entry-level examination. Only 20% of job applicants at Motorola could pass a simple seventh-grade test of English comprehension or fifth-grade mathematics test.

Aside from skills, dropouts present "an attitudinal problem," said Hugh

Farrabaugh, human resources director for Martin Marietta in New Orleans.

"They lack the discipline and commitment to operate within a structure," he said. "They have difficulty assimilating into an industrial structural environment."

And as industry moves toward high technology, even workers now on the job seem to lack the educational skills to handle more automated tasks. What many companies are finding is what Motorola Inc. Vice President Carlton Braun told the congressional Joint Economic Committee last April.

"We have found to our disappointment that many workers are not prepared to operate the factory of the present, much less of the future," he said.

At Martin Marietta, makers of booster rockets for the space shuttle, officials are wrestling with how to move a work force toward more advanced technology.

"Our intent is to get more automated," Farrabaugh said. "As we become more automated and upgrade our capability ... we may have to get training in computer literacy. Technical vocabulary is a problem. Computation skills are not what we like them to be. Presently the company is trying to figure out at what grade level should it write new training and instruction material.

"We want to write the documents to an acceptable level, but not to a third-grade level," he said.

Robert LeBlanc eventually landed a job at a Burger King. That lasted three days. He was arrested atop a building near his home one night after work and charged with burglary. Already on probation, he spent six months in jail before pleading guilty to a reduced charge of criminal trespassing — a misdemeanor. After his release, he found a job as a busboy at a local country club. But, on the day before he got his first paycheck, his probation on the original burglary charge was revoked because of the misdemeanor conviction. He was sent to Jefferson Parish Prison for 19 months.

There he found lots of people like himself.

"From what we're seeing, they drop out of school and end up in juvenile institutions and in prison," said Martha

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Jumonville, communications director for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 62% of the nation's prison inmates in 1986 were high school drop-outs. That was up from 53% just seven years earlier. The median education level has declined from 11 years of schooling in 1979 to 10 years in 1986.

### Incarcerations Up

Meanwhile, incarcerations have shot up. In California, for example, in 1980, 103 people out of every 100,000 were behind bars. Last year, the figure had more than doubled to 239 out of 100,000.

Prison was a rude awakening for LeBlanc.

"I don't want to go back there," he said. "That's why I need to get a job and keep my mind on work." In prison, he found, "You don't do nothing, you don't see nothing, you don't go nowhere. It's just nothing. They feed you cold food. They treat you like dogs. I got into a lot of fights. You have to fight to survive. I thought I'd never get out."

When most inmates finally make it out, they end up back on the streets with the same education inadequacies. It is little surprise to prison officials that they soon return to jail.

"If, by reason of not having the ability or having a skill and education, an inmate cannot go out and sell himself, then he can't find a job — that is, a non-skilled, non-reading job," said Tony Travisano, executive director of American Correctional Assn., the professional organization that represents various correctional groups around the United States. In that case, Travisano said, he is likely to return to crime — "He's going to get his bread from some place."

Nationally, 63% of prison inmates are back behind bars within six months after release. In an attempt to deal with that problem in Louisiana, state legislation has been introduced that would require inmates to be able to read and write before becoming eligible for parole.

"If you do get out, what are you going to do if you don't have the skills to get a job?" Jumonville asked. "You need to have something to keep you from going back to the crime that you committed. If you can't read, can't write, chances are you're going to wind up back in prison."

New Orleans Judge Miriam Waltzer has watched them trudge through her courtroom. A year ago, she said: "I just got sick and tired of seeing people who can't read." So she instituted a program of sentencing people to earn their high school graduation equivalency degree.

Once a week her courtroom is turned into a classroom. The rule is simple: show up for class or go to jail.

"They would plead guilty and there is a form they have to fill out," Waltzer said. "I'd ask them to read the first paragraph of a form they have to fill out and they would say I forgot my glasses. I'd ask them what 'waive your rights' means and they would waive would mean wave your hand."

LeBlanc got is general equivalency degree while in prison. After his release, he headed for the West Bank Training Center and, with the help of a job placement agency, landed a job at minimum wage, 25 miles from his home. That lasted one day. Without a car or transportation, he says, he couldn't get there.

For the three weeks after that, he looked for jobs sporadically, sometimes staying at his mother's home, sometimes at his father's house, and occasionally spending the night with a cousin who owns a local lounge. During the day, he idled away his time.

One day recently, LeBlanc sat at his mother's kitchen table bemoaning his fate.

"I sit around. I straighten up around the house for a while. I go talk to my father. I go talk to my grandma or just hang around with one of my brothers. Shoot pool on Wednesday nights and sometimes I go to my cousin's lounge."

"Seems like every step I take I run into a locked door. Now my girlfriend is starting to talk trash — her daddy says she shouldn't be with me because I don't have a job. I'm in a mood like I don't want to do nothing no more."

"Most people, they don't want nobody like me. They want a dependable person with a car, somebody they can call any time of the day. I've got a record, you know."

"I just want to find a job and stay with it and learn things about it. I just want to stay with something and work my way to be a somebody. I don't want to be a nobody."

The very next day, LeBlanc landed his part-time job as a sacker at a local grocery store. But there is a hitch. Because of his prison record, he can't start work until he produces a letter from the court that says there are no other pending charges against him. In the interim, a family friend has hired him at \$25 a day to clean up and help out around his tuxedo shop.

For now, LeBlanc is pleased.

"He's happy," his mother, Lynn James, said. "He's got a little money and he fixed his brother's car and he's got that."

Still it's a long way from being a musician or a draftsman.

"I'm just hoping that working and getting in a job situation and making money he'll think about doing something more with his life," his mother said.