

# TOOL KIT FOR CREATING YOUR OWN TRUANCY REDUCTION PROGRAM

## Introduction

Communities are always searching for early signs of a child's decision that school isn't worthwhile. Poor school attendance is one such marker that a young person may be headed for trouble. It is an indicator of a disposition to give up that is both reversible and preventable. Children who skip school are telling their parents, teachers, and principals that it is time to take action to keep them on track. This tool kit is designed to be a resource for doing just that.

The first chapter of this packet provides an *Overview of Truancy*. People who build programs to reduce truancy should know certain important facts about it – such as research on the extent of the problem, its short and long term consequences, what factors contribute to kids becoming truant, and what kinds of efforts to improve school attendance have actually worked. Such information and more can be found in the *Truancy Fact Sheet*, which contains some eye-opening statistics about a serious national problem.

Good truancy reduction programs rely on the writings, research, and experiences of truancy experts. These are summarized in the tool kit's *Truancy Literature Review*. This analysis of the truancy literature succinctly covers topics such as the extent of truancy, its causes, connections to quitting school, juvenile delinquency, and lessons learned from the evaluation of truancy reduction programs.

Many legal and economic issues arise as we try to cope with truancy. These issues include compulsory attendance laws and their impact on parents, grade retention policies, economic factors contributing to truancy, economic consequences of truancy and of dropping out of school, and the cost-effectiveness of truancy reduction programs. These issues and others are summarized in *The Legal and Economic Implications of Truancy: Executive Summary*. In addition to these topics, this piece includes recommendations for dealing with truancy of interest to courts, schools, state lawmakers, and researchers.

The *Overview of Truancy* chapter is intended to increase your knowledge base about this important national problem. The next chapter of this tool kit – *Truancy Programs* - is a must-read for those who want to do something about it. One of the first issues to be tackled by program developers is to understand how truancy is defined. Most programs look at reductions in rates of truancy to gauge their impact. But as you will learn in *Guidelines for a National Definition of Truancy and Calculating Rates*, there are nearly as many definitions of truancy as there are programs to reduce it. Any program that seeks to show a reduction in truancy rates will have to resolve myriad issues, such as what is an excused and unexcused absence; how many unexcused absences result in a child being labeled as truant; and how much of a school day must a child miss to be considered absent for the entire day. Once truancy is defined, the next task is to figure out how to calculate a rate of truancy – both to allow the extent of the problem to be

understood, and to provide a baseline so that impacts of a truancy program can be measured. The best ways to go about measuring the progress made as a result of a truancy program are covered in *How to Evaluate Your Truancy Reduction Program*. This piece explains elements of evaluation design, including data collection methods, analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, and the use of control groups.

Once these important decisions about how to define and evaluate truancy have been made, program developers must sit down and hammer out the program details. Guidelines for program development are included in *Truancy Prevention in Action: Best Practices and Model Truancy Programs: Executive Summary*. This article outlines critical components of truancy programs such as family involvement, use of incentives and sanctions, developing a support network, and program evaluation. The next report in this chapter – *Blueprint Programs for Violence Prevention Programs That Reduce Truancy and/or Improve School Attendance* – offers more programmatic nuts-and-bolts. It reviews 18 “blueprints” programs from the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, and the evaluated outcomes of those programs related to truancy and school attendance. This report provides useful examples of specific programs in the youth violence prevention field and their impacts upon truant youth. The final item in this chapter, *Using a Typology for Truancy Prevention*, provides an example of a power-point presentation describing the important elements of a truancy reduction initiative that might be used with community groups interested in ways of tackling truancy issues.

Truancy programs are the responsibility of the community and not just of schools, or parents, or the courts. This point and other principles for preventing truancy from rearing its head are highlighted in the third chapter of this tool kit, which is about ***Promoting School Engagement***. This chapter begins with *School Policies that Engage Students and Families*. The policies discussed range from modifying school grading policies related to attendance to creating alternatives to out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

Schools should make concerted efforts to engage students in order to prevent truancy. The next article in this section discusses a long-term effort by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) to develop and validate a way to measure school engagement. *Quantifying School Engagement: Research Report* describes an ambitious project to measure the construct of school engagement that has already achieved some success. The remaining portions of this section cover examples of different campaigns to promote school attendance, achievement, and attachment. *Developing an Effective Media Campaign Strategy* summarizes the work done by some of the most effective public programs that encourage school engagement. *Count Me In For Learning!* is an example of a power-point presentation that describes ways to promote regular school attendance. Finally, a set of posters for self-assessment of student engagement are included in *Effective Marketing Through Truancy Reduction Posters*.

The fourth and final chapter of this tool kit – ***Quick and Easy References*** – gives you practical ideas for managing truancy cases (*Truancy Case Management Handbook*:

*Advice from the Field*), improving school attendance (*10 Things A School Can Do To Improve Attendance*), increasing parent and community involvement (*How Can A School Achieve High Levels of Parental and Community Involvement?*), creating *Alternatives to Juvenile Detention for Courts*, and working with other agencies to keep kids in schools as explained in *Joint Efforts To Improve School Attendance*. The last reference in this chapter – *School Attendance Tracking: Challenges and Effective Practices* – lists some of the challenges involved in tracking attendance, and some effective solutions for addressing those challenges.

It is our hope that this tool kit will serve as a map for guiding communities along the best road to an important destination: the place where one of their most serious juvenile problems is recognized and reversed.