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# Effectiveness of a Truancy Prevention Program in Education Service Regions 15 & 20

Michael W. Harris

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Effectiveness Of a Truancy Prevention

Program In Education Service Regions 15 & 20

(TITLE)

BY

Michael W. Harris

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### Abstract

Truancy is a problem that many school districts must address on a daily basis. One method used to address this problem in Education Service Regions 15 & 20 in southeastern Illinois is a truancy prevention program. This program was presented to six randomly selected second grade classes. Each of these six classes was then paired with a similar second grade class in the same county. This second group of classes was the control group in which no truancy prevention program was presented. The six truancy prevention programs were presented in early September. Attendance rate data were collected for all twelve classes over the entire school year. Attendance rate data comparisons were made between the paired classes.

The initial question addressed by this study was whether there would be a higher attendance rate in each sample class as compared with the control class with which it was paired. A second question that was addressed by the attendance rates in the second semester was whether any effect exhibited in the first was sustained into the second semester.

The findings indicated that those classes that saw the truancy prevention program had a higher attendance rate than did those classes that did not. Analysis of the data for the second semester indicated that some residual

effect still kept the attendance rates higher in the sample classes, but the differences between the attendance rates was considerably less pronounced. The reduced effectiveness of the program suggests that further reinforcement activities or incentives should be continued to sustain higher attendance rates during the second semester.

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## Chapter I

### Overview

#### Introduction and Problem

Public education in the United States has become a popular topic of discussion. The initial impetus for the controversy surrounding public education can, in large part, be traced to A Nation at Risk (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983). From this report and numerous other articles, books, radio discussions, and television discussions, much criticism and concern has been expressed.

Even though a great deal of discussion still ensues at the national level, it is clear that public education is the responsibility of states. The State of Illinois has recognized this responsibility as exemplified by the Education Reform Act of 1985. This act added many new statutes that regulate the education of children. It also modified several existing statutes concerning attendance and the way in which schools should deal with those students whose attendance is inadequate.

In order to participate effectively in the educational process, the student must meet a minimal attendance level. The Illinois State Board of Education has set that level at 90% attendance over the preceding 180 school days. If a child "is absent

without valid cause from such [compulsory school] attendance for 10% or more of the previous regular attendance days", that child is considered a chronic truant (Illinois School Code, 1986, p. 261).

Because the best interests of the state are served by developing an educated and competent citizenry, the School Code also provides that truants' alternative and optional education programs (TAOEP) may be developed specifically to work with students whose attendance patterns make them likely to be dropouts (Illinois Revised Statutes, 1991). Further, all school districts are required to "adopt policies, consistent with rules adopted by the State Board of Education, which identify the appropriate services and available resources which are provided for truants and chronic truants" (Illinois School Code, 1986, p. 264). The State of Illinois provides in the School Code that school districts, community colleges, or education service regions are eligible to apply for grant funds to initiate and operate TAOEP programs. The state also requires in the school code that schools exhaust all possible available services for children before a child is dropped from school rolls. The intent of the state is to have school districts, education service regions, or community colleges develop programs to provide alternative educational choices for those students

deemed at-risk of school failure, those who are most likely to become dropouts, or those who have already dropped out of school.

Education Service Region 20 (Edwards, Wabash, Wayne, and White counties), in conjunction with Education Service Region 15 (Crawford and Lawrence counties), has provided a Truants' Alternative Program (TAP) for the school districts in these six counties. This program has been ongoing for the last six years (1986-1992). During this time, three separate components have been developed.

One of the components is the prevention program. This consists of a brief skit that is presented to each third and fourth grade class in the six-county region. The message from this skit is that staying in school and attending regularly is better than skipping school and dropping out. A year-long contest is initiated either between the third and the fourth grade classes (in smaller schools) or between the sections of the third grade and between the sections of the fourth grade (in larger schools). Rooms are eligible to win the attendance award each month as determined by the percentage of student attendance. Individual students also win awards for perfect attendance each semester.

A second program component is the intervention phase. This phase consists of a district notifying

the TAP caseworker that a student has excessive absences without a known valid cause. The caseworker contacts the parents to determine the cause of the absences. The caseworker then works with the family and any social service agency that may help to solve the problem that led to the absences.

The final component consists of tutors who work in each district with students whose attendance has made them at-risk of academic failure or whose prior academic record is such that they are at-risk of academic failure.

For this field study, only the prevention phase of the total TAP program was assessed. Objective measures used by the state in its data collection at the end of each school year determine the success of both the tutoring and intervention phases of the TAP program. Prior to this study, there were no studies of the prevention phase of the TAP program.

#### Assumptions

It was assumed that the reaction of the second grade students to the truancy prevention skit was the same as the reaction the skit elicited from third and fourth grade students. It was also assumed that the six second grade classrooms which were chosen at random (one from each county) were representative of all of the second grade classes in the six counties. The six

second grade classes chosen to be the control group in which no skit was presented (also one from each county) were also assumed to be representative of all of the second grade classes in the six counties. Finally, it was assumed that the effect of the skit on second grade attendance was similar to the effect the skit had on third and fourth grade attendance.

#### Delimitations

This field study focused on school attendance and the effect that a truancy prevention program had on student attendance. Prevention is only one part of the complete attendance program. Because of the scope of the total program and because the effectiveness of the other two aspects of the program had already been evaluated by the state, only the prevention portion was studied to determine its effectiveness.

Statistics gathered from this study are the attendance patterns of twelve second grade classes in eight different school districts in six counties in southeastern Illinois.

#### Operational Definitions

Attendance Rate. A number determined by dividing the total number of attendance days that the students in the class could have attended into the total number of days that the students actually did attend.

Education Service Region 15 (ESR 15). An intermediate education service delivery agency that includes Crawford and Lawrence counties and the six school districts that are contained within those counties.

Education Service Region 20 (ESR 20). An intermediate education service delivery agency that includes Edwards, Wabash, Wayne, and White counties and the fourteen school districts that are contained within those counties.

Truancy. The act of being absent from school without a known valid cause.

Truancy Prevention Program. A program, consisting of a motivational skit, the goal of which is to increase attendance rates.

#### Uniqueness of the Study

Since 1985 Illinois has encouraged school districts to offer services to the educationally at-risk students. Some of the service strategies encouraged are: (a) intervention, (b) tutoring, (c) alternative schools, (d) dropout retrieval, (e) counseling, (f) truancy prevention programs, and (g) parenting classes. Since the beginning of the TAP program in ESR 15 and ESR 20, the prevention aspect of the program has been an integral part of the total program. This field experience is the first attempt to

analyze the effectiveness of this part of the TAP program. It was necessary to determine the efficacy of this aspect of the program to decide whether the prevention program is achieving its goal or whether the prevention program needs to be changed.

## Chapter II

### Rationale, Related Literature and Research

#### Rationale

Truancy often leads students to become dropouts. If students are dropouts or have very poor attendance, they are less likely to obtain a productive, satisfying, and well-paying job. This lack of good job prospects commonly leads to poor self-esteem. Poor self-esteem may be one of the major factors that leads to alcohol or drug abuse. The treatment and rehabilitation of drug and alcohol abusers is a major cost to society

A second cost of truancy is that which is incurred by a school district. The search for truants and the cost associated with attempting to modify their behavior is one cost. The cost of tutoring students to enable them to catch up academically with their classmates by covering the information the truants missed while absent also consumes scarce district resources that could be applied to other areas. Truancy also affects the average daily attendance (ADA). It is the ADA upon which the school's state aid is calculated. The fewer students present to make up the ADA, the fewer dollars given to the district.

A third aspect of truancy is the cost to society that often occurs when a truant has nothing to do and then starts to commit destructive or violent acts. Many inmates of the Illinois prison system began their life of

crime as truants with nothing to do (Illinois Criminal Justice System, 1991).

#### Review of Literature and Research

Jones and Myrent (1991) identified six factors that are associated with poor academic performance and/or truancy. These six factors are: (a) feelings of mistreatment by teachers or other problems with school officials, (b) being detained by local juvenile authorities, (c) family or personal problems, (d) trouble keeping up with peers academically, (e) drug or alcohol abuse problems, and (f) dyslexia or other learning problems. Jones and Myrent also discussed why students are truant and drop out of school as well as what steps schools should take to deal effectively with truants. A study made by the Kane County Education Service Region was also discussed by Jones and Myrent. This study found that a strong correlation exists between early absenteeism (K-3) and a student's likelihood of becoming a chronic truant or dropout.

An associated document entitled Education and Crime in Illinois: Recommendations for Change (Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1991) recommended that educational authorities and professionals from the many service agencies develop policies to keep students in school or to re-enroll those who have dropped out. The idea that absenteeism patterns develop early was a

consistent theme here and suggests that early prevention programs can and do increase attendance.

Orr (1989) discussed causative factors relating to absenteeism, truancy, and dropping out of school. She analyzed the descriptors usually associated with those students who are at-risk of dropping out or those who have already dropped out. Orr reported that there are several factors usually present in a situation where a student is a potential dropout (i.e., high truancy rate) or when a student actually drops out of school. Her contention was that if these factors are addressed, most chronic truancy would be eliminated and the dropout rate would decrease. She also stated that large numbers of dropouts--if the causative factors of their separation from formal education are addressed--could be retrieved. Orr stated that there are four core components in each of the fourteen successful programs that she reviewed in her book. These four are: basic skills remediation, world-of-work exposure, supportive services, and personal development.

Several aspects of programs used to keep students in school were reviewed in The Dropout Prevention Handbook by Myll (1988). One of the two basic programs offered by Myll is to provide an alternative school either in or outside of the traditional school setting. The second option was to provide incentives for students to induce

them to stay in school. Usually, this incentive program was offered only to older students and consisted of a vocational or work study program that allowed part-time work to serve as an inducement to students to remain in school.

Myll (1988) provided interesting ideas for dealing with specific at-risk populations such as: (a) parenting teens, (b) expectant mothers, (c) transitory students, (d) students who have already dropped out and (e) home-schooled youth entering or re-entering public school. Most of Myll's book addressed issues from the junior high to the adult level. These problems may well be alleviated to some extent by an early intervention strategy to help prevent truancy.

Doty (1984) devised a program that she used to reduce absenteeism in her first grade class. This program was set in a rural school in northern Florida. In this program a comparison was made of attendance and grades before the program was implemented and attendance and grades after the program was implemented. The two sets of data were analyzed to determine whether the program had achieved the desired effect of reducing absenteeism. As would be expected, the results varied by child, but some students increased their attendance rates by more than ninety percent. All the students in this study also received grades of C or above during the study period.

Good attendance was discussed during actual math and reading lessons and a sticker was given at the outset of the program to establish a positive rapport. The most telling aspect of the entire report and its success was the fact that another teacher in this school noticed the change in behavior and attendance and adopted most of the program methods for her classroom.

Gilmore (1985) conducted a project at the Dangerfield Primary School in Freemont, Illinois, which involved eighteen first grade students who had poor attendance. This project had increased attendance as its goal. This goal was sought by involving the parents of the eighteen students more fully in their children's schooling. Newsletters, phone calls, home visits, and parent workshops were used to involve and inform the parents. The project was deemed successful because the parents of fourteen of the eighteen students became much more involved in their children's school career. This led to an eighty percent increase in the first graders' attendance pattern. This result clearly suggested that early prevention strategies do have a positive effect on attendance patterns.

#### Summary

Both Gilmore (1985) and Doty (1984) in their respective projects targeted students in early elementary grades (first grade) in their efforts to reduce absences

(truancy). The finding of the Kane County Education Service Region research is that early truancy patterns often lead to chronic truancy or to students becoming dropouts. The 1991 study of the criminal justice system in Illinois also suggested that early intervention in truancy cases is likely to reduce the dropout rate and also is likely to reduce the number of prisoners in Illinois' prisons. The governor of Illinois, James Edgar, in his foreword to this study stated that in 1991 the cost to educate a student was an average of \$4,200 per year while the cost to keep an adult in prison was \$16,200 per year. Clearly, for the taxpayers in Illinois to keep a student in school is much more cost effective, than keeping him later in an Illinois prison as an adult.

### Chapter III

#### Design of the Study

##### Research Questions

Education Service Regions 15 and 20 have had an ongoing truancy program for six years. The prevention component of that program has been one of the basic parts of the total program since its inception. In order to determine whether the prevention component is successful, it is necessary to be able to show that attendance has increased, or conversely, that the truancy (nonattendance) rate has decreased. A truancy prevention program should be able to show a measurable attendance rate difference between those classes in which the program was presented and those in which no special effort was made to increase attendance. Therefore, the questions on which this study focused were:

Question 1. Was there a significant difference in attendance rates in the first semester between second grade classes in which the truancy prevention program was presented and those in which no truancy prevention program was presented?

Question 2. Was there a sustained, measurable, increased attendance rate between these two sets of second grade classes during the second half of the school year?

### Sample and Population

During the 1991-1992 school year there were sixty-one second grade classrooms in the school districts in Edwards, Crawford, Lawrence, Wabash, Wayne, and White Counties. In an attempt to get a representative sample of these classes, one class was chosen at random from each of the six counties. This sample represents approximately 9.8% of the total classrooms in the six-county area. A second group of six classes, one from each county, and usually one from the same school district, was chosen to serve as the control group for comparison purposes.

The truancy prevention program, normally presented to the third and fourth grade classes, was presented to the six second grade classes in the sample group. This program consisted of a discussion about the importance of good attendance, a humorous skit, some magic tricks, and a brief video. All of these parts had aspects related to good attendance. The program was presented by TAP personnel who had made these presentations for the past three years.

### Data Collection

Each month the schools in which the twelve classes were located were called to collect attendance data. The attendance rates of each of the twelve second grade classes were tabulated. Tables in Chapter IV present the monthly and semester attendance rates of the classes. The figures in each table were then compared and the differences calculated. The results are also found in tables in Chapter IV.

### Data Analysis

The classroom attendance rates for each sample class and each control class were compared on a monthly and semester basis. Attendance rates were calculated arithmetically by dividing the total number of attendance days that were possible in a class into the total number of attendance days that the class actually had. This gave an attendance rate as a percentage of the total attendance possible. The differences between the sample class and the control class were determined by subtracting the percentage of attendance of the control class from the percentage of attendance from the sample class. This difference, when positive, represents a higher attendance rate for the sample class. When the difference between the percentage rates was negative, the control class had the higher attendance rate.

The attendance rate data were divided into two parts--roughly equal to a semester. For the original question concerning higher attendance rates, the attendance rates for the months of September, October, November, and December were used. For a determination of sustained effects (question 2), the attendance rates of the months January, February, March, April, and May were used. Descriptive statistics in the form of percentages were used to make the comparisons.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Introduction

Data pertaining to the original question of whether or not the presentation of a truancy prevention program made a measurable difference in attendance rates are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

#### First Semester Attendance Rate Comparisons

School Name	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Sem. Ave.
Bellmont	95.00	95.08	97.00	90.03	94.28
South	94.37	98.16	93.18	86.36	93.08
Mt. Erie	97.00	96.00	93.00	93.00	94.75
Johnsonville	99.02	99.00	94.03	92.06	96.03
West Salem	98.96	98.20	97.25	97.20	97.90
Albion	96.64	97.10	96.11	89.73	94.90
Lincoln	97.54	96.48	97.32	96.52	96.97
Jefferson	96.52	94.85	94.36	87.92	93.41
St. Francisville	98.02	96.04	96.64	88.07	94.69
Lawrenceville	96.02	93.00	94.52	87.63	92.79
Hutsonville	98.42	97.20	97.97	98.21	97.95
Palestine	97.56	97.00	97.09	96.03	96.92

#### Results

Table 1 presents the schools in pairs by name with the corresponding attendance rates of each by month. The first school in each pair listed was the school that was selected for the sample group. The second school in the

listed pairs was the control school with which the first school was compared.

From Table 1, the conclusion drawn from the data presented in five of the six paired schools was that the school in which the truancy prevention program presentation was made had a measurably higher attendance rate. Four months of comparisons were made with six pairs of schools. This meant that a total of twenty-four comparisons were made (excluding the semester averages). Of these twenty-four comparisons, twenty were positive comparisons and four were negative comparisons. Table 2 lists the comparisons by themselves. Numbers in parentheses () are negative comparison numbers.

Table 2

Monthly and Semester Differences in Attendance Rates

<u>School Name</u>	<u>Sept.</u>	<u>Oct.</u>	<u>Nov.</u>	<u>Dec.</u>	<u>Sem. Ave.</u>
Bellmont/South	0.63	(3.08)	3.82	3.67	1.26
Mt. Erie/Johnsonville	(2.02)	(3.00)	(1.03)	0.94	(1.28)
West Salem/Albion	2.32	1.10	1.14	7.47	3.00
Lincoln/Jefferson	1.02	1.63	2.96	8.60	3.56
St. F'ville/L'ville	2.00	3.04	2.12	0.44	1.90
Hutsonville/Palestine	0.86	0.20	0.88	2.12	1.03

The comparisons indicate that in the first semester, all of the second grade classes in both the sample group and in the control group had a relatively high attendance rate. Based on the researcher's experience, this is not uncommon in the geographic area of southeastern Illinois in which these schools are located. However, a consistent pattern (with one exception) of higher attendance rates was seen in those classes in which the truancy prevention program was presented. Approximately eighty-three percent (5 of 6) of the sample group showed a higher attendance than did the control group. Very likely, the independent variable (the truancy prevention program) significantly influenced the outcome of the dependent variable (higher attendance rates).

Table 3 shows a comparison of attendance rates between the same twelve second grade classes from January through May. Again, most of the comparisons show positive results when the monthly and semester averages are compared.

Table 3  
Second Semester Attendance Rate Comparisons and Differences

School	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Sem. Ave.
Bellmont	95.98	98.02	93.99	94.54	97.12	95.93
South	93.48	92.20	97.05	95.24	97.62	95.12
difference	2.50	5.82	(3.06)	(0.70)	(0.50)	0.81
Mt. Erie	93.89	93.58	97.59	94.33	95.15	94.91
Johnsonville	96.87	93.13	91.71	96.45	95.44	94.72
difference	(2.93)	0.45	5.88	(2.12)	(0.29)	0.19
West Salem	95.67	97.11	94.46	97.40	97.80	96.89
Albion	94.86	97.33	94.70	96.80	97.11	96.16
difference	0.81	(0.22)	1.76	0.60	0.69	0.73
Lincoln	96.11	96.83	94.70	94.25	97.48	95.87
Jefferson	93.86	92.70	93.55	95.38	93.68	93.83
difference	2.25	4.13	1.18	(1.13)	3.80	2.04
St. F'ville	94.29	97.44	94.56	95.94	99.16	96.30
Lawrenceville	94.81	95.71	94.38	96.46	96.68	95.61
difference	(0.52)	1.73	0.27	(0.52)	2.48	0.69
Hutsonville	96.91	99.84	95.87	97.63	97.55	97.56
Palestine	96.92	95.03	97.02	97.37	98.46	96.97
difference	(0.01)	4.81	(1.22)	0.26	(0.65)	0.59

The question addressed by the comparisons in Table 3 is whether there was a sustained positive effect on attendance that was the result of the truancy prevention program. In the absence of any other known variable that affected the entire group of twelve classes, the comparisons of attendance rates in Table 3 were assumed to be the result of the truancy prevention presentation or the lack of a presentation.

Since all of the six groups compared showed a higher semester attendance rate for the sample classes than for the control classes, it was assumed that there was some

residual effect that the initial presentations continued to exert on those classes in which the program was originally presented.

There were thirty comparisons made in Table 3. Of the thirty comparisons, seventeen were positive, indicating that the majority (17 of 30) of the sample classes still had a better attendance rate than did the control classes. Another way of looking at these figures is that more than fifty-six percent of the sample classes showed a higher attendance rate over a particular period of time than did the control classes.

The conclusion from these data is that while the beneficial effect of the truancy prevention program could still be seen in the sample classes during the second semester, the beneficial effect was decreasing as the independent variable (TAP program presentation) receded in time.

## Chapter V

### Summary, Findings, and Recommendations

#### Summary

The goal of this study was to determine whether a truancy prevention program presented to six second grade classes would affect the attendance rate of those classes in a positive and measurable manner. The six sample classes were chosen from each of the six counties in a random manner. These six classes were paired with six control classes, again one from each county, in which no truancy prevention presentation was made. After the presentations were made in the six sample classes in early September, attendance records were kept on all twelve classes.

During September a review of literature related to truancy and truancy prevention was conducted by the researcher. This research reviewed several truancy prevention projects which focused their activities in the early grades (K-2). In each of the studies reviewed, a high absentee rate existed. In each case the results of a truancy prevention program greatly increased attendance.

#### Findings

When comparing the results from the three tables included in this study, the finding for question one was that the truancy prevention program had a positive effect on attendance rates. However, the finding for question

two was that this effect diminished fairly quickly over time. The greater differences and consistently positive differences between the attendance rates between the two groups of classes in the first semester as compared with the smaller positive comparisons between the two groups during the second semester indicated that absent some outside event, the effects of the presentation diminished. Because the attendance rates in the second grades in this area are very high, even the smaller comparisons in attendance rates in the second semester may be somewhat more significant than they appear. Since there is such a small opportunity for a positive change in the attendance rates, in a situation in which absenteeism (truancy) was much greater, much more significant results might be shown.

#### Recommendations

The truancy prevention program did have a positive effect on attendance. In order to make that effect greater and more lasting, there needs to be some type of reinforcement given to the program. There are three areas in which that reinforcement should be applied.

The first area to address is that support of the program by the teachers is imperative for the success of the program. Teachers can be convinced that this program actually saves time for them. Teachers can see this if they consider the extra time spent preparing make-up

homework assignments for students who have been absent or if they consider the time required to reteach concepts that absent students have missed. Finally, when teachers consider the extra time spent grading assignments that are late because of absences, they will realize that fewer absences mean less time that a teacher must spend attending to the matters mentioned above.

More classroom visits by the TAP personnel to develop collegial relationships with the teachers would create more teacher support of the program. A classroom attendance chart left by the TAP personnel would also make keeping track of attendance easier for the teachers and thus be easier for them to accept and become active agents in the program.

Once the classroom charts or other methods of recording attendance were in place, an attendance competition between grade levels or between different sections of the same grade level would be easy to develop. This competition would foster a positive peer pressure to increase attendance.

A second avenue to address is the development of an incentive program. Some type of award for the class with the highest average attendance each month should be developed. This could be expanded upon for the class(es) with the highest overall attendance rate each semester or year. Incentives should be provided for individual

students with perfect attendance or near perfect attendance rates on a quarterly, semester, or yearly basis.

In order to make this effort a school/community project, the parent teacher association (PTA) should be involved to provide support and incentives for those classes which are not currently being served by the current TAP program.

Implementing these recommendations is likely to reduce the rate of truancy by creating a competition and by supporting the total program with incentives. The increase in attendance would help the school district by increasing the ADA and thus increasing the number of dollars that the district would get from the state. Implementation of these recommendations with the current Tap program would help the teachers by reducing the time that teachers spend with make-up work. The program would also create a more positive working atmosphere between the teachers and the community.

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