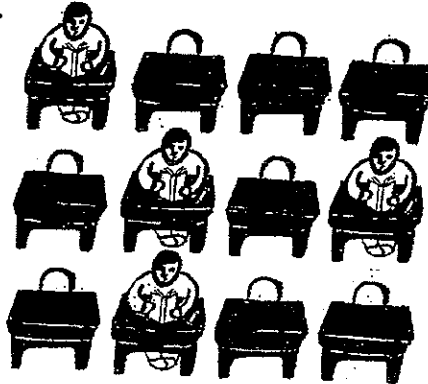


Commentary

Pa. needs to toughen laws targeting truancy

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Thousands of Phila. students are skipping school, but state statutes carry little authority to get them back.



JOHN OVERMYER

In the early 1900s, criminologists noted that almost a quarter of young male offenders had a history of skipping school. Social scientists thus labeled truancy the "kindergarten of crime." More than 100 years later, the issue of truancy has become paramount across the country. And on Nov. 30, 2006, when Mayor John E. Street admonished hundreds of repeatedly truant students and their parents at the Liacouras Center, it became evident that this growing trend plagues the City of Brotherly Love as well.

In Philadelphia schools — not counting charter schools — there are 173,000 students, and the truancy rate remains at alarming levels despite all of the district's recent efforts. Last year, at least 80,000 Philadelphia School District children were absent from school eight or more days, while 118,834 students had three or more unexcused absences and 29,316 were absent at least 25 times.

While officials in school districts such as Philadelphia's

work daily to address the academic needs of these "at-risk" youth, they also understand that a large part of making sure these students reach their potential is ensuring that they attend classes. Within the school districts, there are "alternative" schools that have created special programs aimed at increasing attendance rates. But for any substantive change to occur in this area, school districts must urge the state legislature to follow the lead of many states by

adopting truancy-prevention programs, based on both positive and negative incentives for parents and their truant children.

In 1989, Wisconsin became the first state to pursue substantial welfare reform when it received a federal waiver of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) rules for its "Learnfare" program. The program reduced AFDC benefits to welfare families whose teenage children were excessively truant from school. Soon, other

states, including New York, Ohio, Massachusetts and Maryland, joined Wisconsin by enacting similar reforms. Those on welfare would lose anywhere from \$64 to \$100 per month out of their allotted federal assistance.

Other methods focus on student motivation. For example, 24 states have some type of policy that connects student attendance and/or student achievement to the privilege of driving. Nine states make minimum school attendance a requirement for

receiving a license. Five states have both.

Moreover, 11 states designate truancy or lack of academic progress as causes for suspension of a driver's license. Five states have a combined approach whereby they limit the issuance of driver's licenses as well as suspend licenses for both academic problems and attendance issues. These policies usually apply to 16- and 17-year-olds because 16 is the typical minimum age for a driver's license to be issued.

Little research has been completed on the effect these types of laws have on truancy or dropout rates, but state policymakers should consider that, for many teenagers, driving is "real currency." Promoting this privilege as a reward for attending and succeeding in school resonates with many students.

On average, truancy-reduction programs such as these cost roughly \$100,000 per year, and districts and schools may incur administrative costs in collaborating with their respective motor vehicle departments, but these costs pale in comparison to the cost of truancy. And when studies show that the average high school dropout costs society more than \$200,000 a year, these programs appear

to be a highly cost-effective way to address this issue.

In Pennsylvania, there are currently two state statutes enforcing student attendance, 18 Pa.C.S.A. §6301, titled "Corruption of Minors" and 24 P.S. §13-1533, titled "Public School Code of 1949 — Enforcing Public School Attendance." Neither provides for much enforcement authority against parents or guardians, nor does either offer much support for individual school districts. The time has come to examine our laws, regulations and statutes. The problem is real, and the solutions must be comprehensive.

Of course, programs such as this will also put additional strain on the budgets and time of school administrators. But if a truancy-reduction program is the difference between graduation and dropout for just one student per year, then the program is a reasonable investment. By increasing school attendance, programs like this could help create a better-educated workforce, reduce criminal activity during the daytime, and help to reduce dependence on already limited social resources.

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