

REDUCING TRUANCY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY

A Prudent Investment

SUMMARY

Last year's 2010-11 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury issued a report *Where is the Truancy Program in Santa Barbara County?* and recommended that the County of Santa Barbara, the Office of the District Attorney, the Santa Barbara County Education Office and Santa Barbara County school districts develop and fund a county-wide truancy reduction program.

In response to that report, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors (County), the Santa Barbara County Education Office, and the Office of the District Attorney (DA's Office) formed a Board of Supervisors' Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Truancy (Truancy Subcommittee) to develop such a program. In May 2012, a Memorandum of Understanding was distributed at the monthly County Office of Education's Superintendents' meeting outlining the responsibilities and commitments of the County, the DA's Office, the school districts, the County of Santa Barbara Probation Department (Probation), law enforcement and social services to such a program.

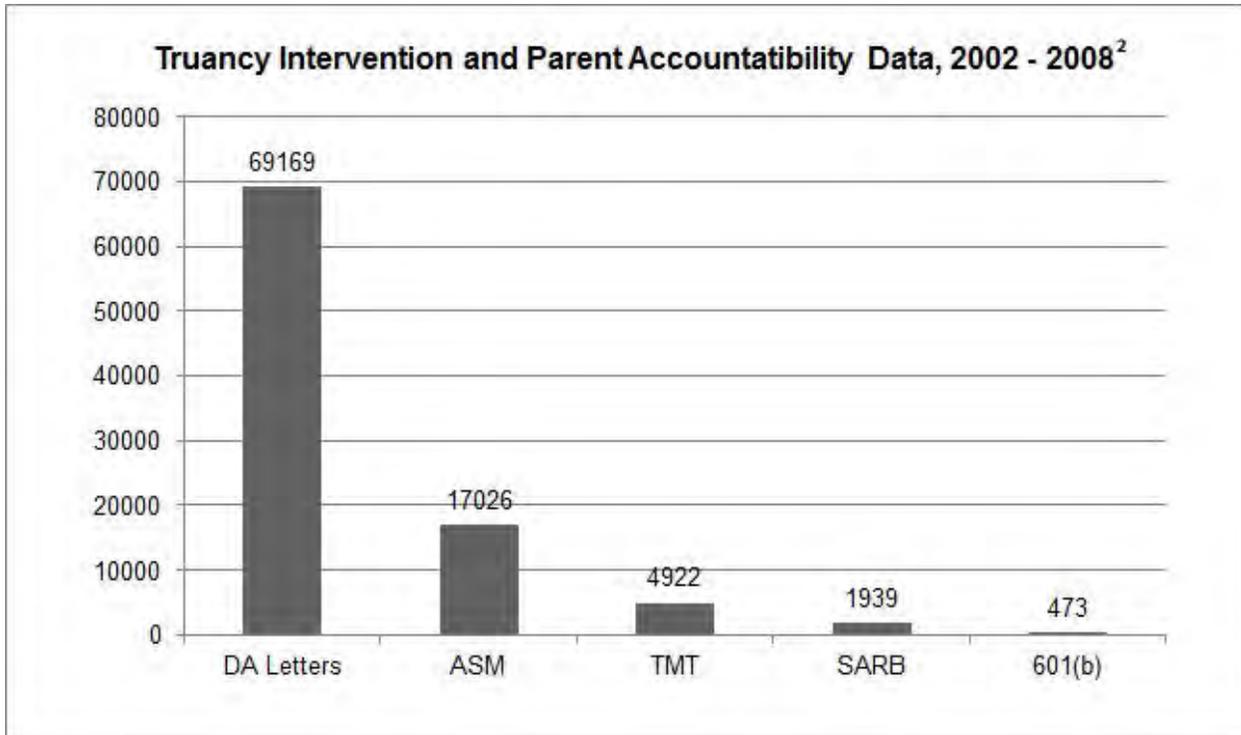
The 2011-12 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) has closely followed the progress of this subcommittee and has been impressed with the deep commitment of the representatives of these agencies to a cooperative effort to guide young people in the right direction for success. The Jury recommends the program be implemented and operational by the beginning of the 2012-13 school year.

HISTORY

From 2000 to 2008, a successful truancy reduction program, which included a series of letters and meetings, was operated through the DA's Office. From 2002 to 2008 between 8,209 and 12,218 parents of truant secondary school students were notified by the DA's Office each year of their child's truancy and the consequences.¹ The vast majority of these students were not truant again.

¹ Data extracted from DA's Truancy Intervention and Parent Accountability Program

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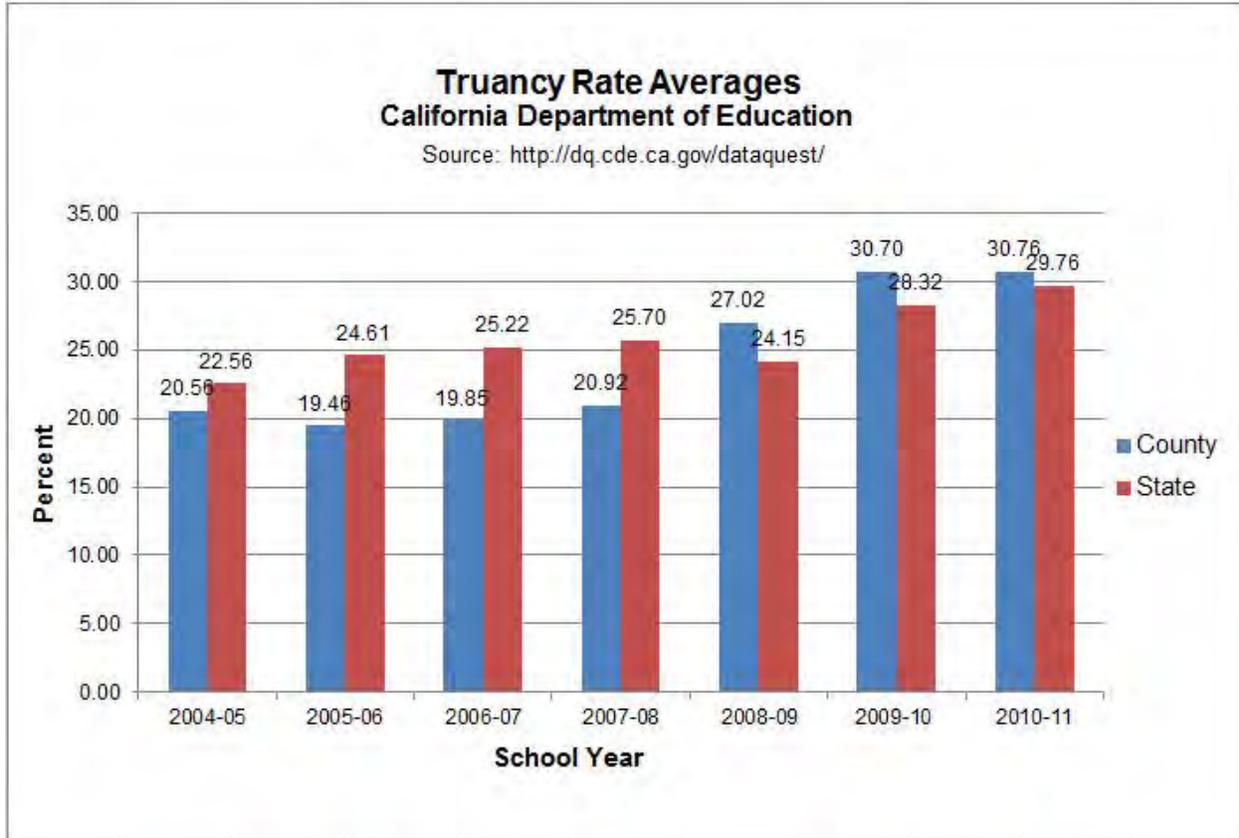


DA letters: Truancy notification letter from the District Attorney; ASM: After School Meeting; TMT: Truancy Mediation Team; SARB: School Attendance Review Board; 601(b): Truant Prosecution

In 2008 the DA's Office said it could no longer fund the program on its own and asked that all school districts contribute to the program. They declined. Some districts, particularly elementary school districts, did not believe they had a truancy problem and were reluctant to commit funds that could be used elsewhere. Others stated "it is not the responsibility of districts to financially support what has always been funded by State and Federal dollars." After the program was cancelled, the truancy figures increased from 20.92 percent to the last reported figure of 30.76 percent, an increase of 47 percent. Santa Barbara County schools' truancy rates went from below the state average to above. Several individual school districts attempted to resurrect truancy reduction programs on a district basis, but the absence of the District Attorney's clout was severely felt.

² Ibid.

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Nationwide, educators and those who work in the fields of social services, law enforcement, and criminal justice agree that the costs of truancy are numerous and not only financial. These costs may include the truant dropping out of school and/or resorting to crime. Dropping out is often easier than catching up. Truants who drop out exact a high financial cost not only on society, but on themselves. Studies indicate that those who drop out of school cost society an average of over \$200,000 in public social programs over the course of their lifetimes.³ For the dropout, his or her standard of living is forever affected as the average dropout earns 40 percent less than a high school graduate.⁴ Another study states that chronic truants are 12 times as likely to have committed a serious assault, 21 times as likely to have committed a serious property crime, and almost seven times as likely to have been arrested as non-truants.⁵

BACKGROUND

From responses to last year's Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report *Where is the Truancy Program in Santa Barbara County?* the Jury learned that while truancy issues are important in all school districts, secondary schools are more severely impacted than elementary schools. Therefore the Jury has limited its Findings and Recommendations to the secondary level. In

³ Joanna Z. Heilbrunn, *The Costs and Benefits of Three Intensive Interventions with Colorado Truants*, October 2003, National Center for School Engagement

⁴ United States Department of Education in 2011

⁵ Joanna Z. Heilbrunn, *Pieces of the Truancy Jigsaw: A Literature Review*, January 2007, National Center for School Engagement

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response to the report the Board of Supervisors established an Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Truancy (Truancy Subcommittee) which included two supervisors, the DA's Office and the County Office of Education. This subcommittee was supplemented by several school district superintendents, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department, and Probation.

The Truancy Subcommittee has met and defined a program based on a modified version of the previous successful program. The subcommittee representatives have displayed a deep commitment to a cooperative effort to bring this plan to fruition. The District Attorney has asked for funding for one full-time and one halftime position plus expenses. This funding will be used to enforce truancy laws, prosecute when necessary, and provide additional support to school districts in their efforts to design and operate effective truancy programs. A Memorandum of Understanding covering the commitments and responsibilities of the County, the school districts, the DA's Office, Probation, law enforcement and social services has been developed and is in the ratification process.

On May 22, 2012, the Truancy Subcommittee made its final report to the Board of Supervisors on its development of a truancy reduction program. The presentation included what is to be delivered, performance measurements, and what still has to be worked out.

METHODOLOGY

The Jury attended the following meetings: Truancy Subcommittee, School District Superintendents, and Board of Supervisors. The Jury also:

- Reviewed last year's Grand Jury report on truancy
- Reviewed responses to last year's Grand Jury report on truancy
- Discussed truancy with Probation and the DA's Office as well as school superintendents and County Supervisors
- Reviewed State laws regarding school attendance
- Reviewed the draft Truancy Reduction Memorandum of Understanding developed by the Truancy Subcommittee

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

In his response to last year's Jury report, the Superintendent of County Schools agreed, "The District Attorney's Truancy Program, which operated until 2008, contributed to getting students to school, educating parents about mandatory attendance, and providing leverage for districts to implement measures that helped reduce truancy and impact student behavior."

The DA's Office declared, "We have firsthand experience observing the direct correlation between truancy and delinquency." The Superintendent of the County Office of Education agreed, "...truancy handicaps the likelihood of success for those students who struggle." The Board of Supervisors added, "The social and economic benefits of limiting truancy and increasing high school graduation rates are vitally important to this board."

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The DA's Office also stressed that truancy is the bellwether signaling that a student is off-track. Interventions need to be found that help parents return their children to school and help keep them out of the juvenile justice system. The DA's Office sees its direct role in the first and last steps of any truancy reduction program. Intervention and prevention are key elements.

The Truancy Subcommittee did not try to "reinvent the wheel." It examined the original Truancy Intervention and Parent Accountability Program and looked at how it could be successfully modified and implemented. The program being considered involves five graduated steps that identify truants and provide for meaningful intervention:

1. **District Attorney Truancy Information Letter:** The letter sent to all families at the start of the academic year, describing the truancy program and the law. This letter has been provided to all school districts.
2. **Truancy Notification Letter:** The letter sent following **18 Unexcused Period Absences** (or an equivalent of three full days of unexcused absences and tardiness in excess of 30 minutes). This letter gives the family an opportunity to address the truancy problem and to avoid the need for additional intervention (*Education Code (EC) §48260.5*).
3. **After School Meeting:** A meeting held following **36 Unexcused Period Absences** (or an equivalent of six full days of unexcused absences and tardiness in excess of 30 minutes) (*EC §48262*). The student and parents or guardian are directed to attend a mandatory After School Meeting (ASM). This meeting is attended by representatives from school administration, the District Attorney, Probation, law enforcement and community based organizations as needed.
4. **Truancy Mediation Team:** a meeting held following **60 Unexcused Period Absences** (or an equivalent of 10 full days of unexcused absences and tardiness in excess of 30 minutes) (*EC §48262 and §48264.5(c)*). The student and parents or guardian are directed to attend a mandatory Truancy Mediation Team (TMT) meeting. This is attended by the ASM participants plus representatives from Mental Health and Child Protective Service.
5. **School Attendance Review Board (SARB) Subpoena:** A subpoena issued following **84 Unexcused Period Absences** (or an equivalent of 14 full days of unexcused absences and tardiness in excess of 30 minutes) (*EC §48264.5(c)*). This subpoena directs the student and parents or guardian to attend a mandatory SARB meeting. Attending this meeting are all the participants in the TMT plus Probation and the DA's Office.

The Truancy Subcommittee has identified some problems with the earlier program that need to be addressed. One is coordination of the After School Meetings, the Truancy Mediation Team and the School Attendance Review Board. These meetings need to be held in a timely manner so that the truants' needs can be diagnosed and addressed as quickly as possible. However, multiple meetings challenge the availability of non-educational departments' staffs. To meet this challenge, the Truancy Subcommittee encourages school districts to network and collaborate with other districts in designing programs that avoid unnecessary duplications. Some districts are already going forward with this.

In order for the District Attorney to prosecute truancy cases, the schools need to follow certain legal procedures to document all relevant information. The DA's Office has developed and distributed a *Truancy Review Checklist* to all school district superintendents that spells out each step schools need to follow.

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The major difference between the old program and the one under discussion is that school districts rather than the District Attorney will be responsible for running their own truancy programs. From the beginning, the County Superintendent of Schools has emphasized that truancy is a local issue. School districts differ in size, make up, and grade levels. One size does not fit all. The District Attorney's role will be to provide school districts with guidance for designing individual programs; as well as a presence at school meetings and participation in a school district's truancy program. Probation, law enforcement and social services will also play supporting roles.

The new truancy reduction program is to be supported in two ways. The County has been requested to provide funding for the District Attorney's participation. The superintendents have been charged with looking within their systems to identify the assets they will bring to the table; no financial contribution will be requested of them. It appears most districts have some sort of truancy program in place, but lack the outside support for intervention and prevention that is currently being proposed.

School districts are funded primarily by local property taxes, but many school districts also receive funding from the State. This funding is based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA). The ADA, and consequent funding available for those school districts is reduced by truancy. Therefore, reducing truancy increases the funding available to those school districts. According to one superintendent, his small district is losing \$140,000 - \$145,000 a year due to pupil absences. One can assume other districts are experiencing the same type of loss. If money could be restored due to students remaining in their class, it would be prudent to invest in a program that accomplishes that.

CONCLUSION

The 2011-12 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury supports this effort by the Board of Supervisors, District Attorney and educators to pull together to solve the problem of truancy that is expensive for all taxpayers and devastating for Santa Barbara County's young people. The Truancy Subcommittee is to be commended for building on a program that has a proven track record. It is a matter of investing a little to get a lot.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

There is a direct correlation between truancy and delinquency.

Finding 2

Between 2000 and 2008, Santa Barbara County had an effective truancy program under the direction of the Santa Barbara County Office of the District Attorney. During that time the truancy rate averaged 20 percent.

Finding 3

After the termination of the program, truancy rates increased to a high of 30.76 percent in Santa Barbara County in 2010-11 and exceeded the truancy rate for the State of California for three years in a row.

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Finding 4

All agencies consulted agree that the involvement of the Santa Barbara County Office of the District Attorney is necessary for an effective truancy reduction program.

Finding 5

Reducing truancy rates at the secondary school level would result in significantly increased revenues to the school districts.

Recommendation 1

That each secondary school district be responsible for establishing and operating its own truancy reduction program that conforms to the legal requirements of the State of California's Education Code by the beginning of the 2012-13 school year.

Recommendation 2

That the Office of the District Attorney request and that the Board of Supervisors approve the appropriate amount in the Office of the District Attorney's budget to support its participation in truancy reduction programs.

Recommendation 3

That the Office of the District Attorney assign staff to support the truancy reduction programs.

Recommendation 4

That all secondary school districts document their efforts to address truancy in a manner that can be used by the Office of the District Attorney, if and when legal proceedings are initiated.

Recommendation 5

That all secondary school districts estimate the amount of money lost in the 2011-12 school year due to truancy and report this information to their school boards, the Santa Barbara County Education Office and the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors.

Recommendation 6

That all secondary school districts track any reduction in truancy after the implementation of the truancy reduction program and calculate the increase in revenue resulting from such reduction and report this information to their school boards, the Santa Barbara County Education Office and the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with California Penal Code Section 933.05, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each.

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Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 5, 6

Santa Barbara County Office of Education — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 4, 5

Recommendations 1, 5, 6

Santa Barbara County District Attorney — 60 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4

Carpinteria Unified School District — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 5

Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6

Cuyama Joint Unified School District — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 5

Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6

Lompoc Unified School District — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 5

Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6

Santa Barbara Unified School District — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 5

Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6

Santa Maria Joint Union High School District — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 5

Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6

Santa Ynez Valley Union High School District — 90 days

Findings 2, 3, 5

Recommendations 1, 4, 5, 6