

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TRUANCY

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TRUANCY This is Where it Starts

SUMMARY

Santa Barbara County Grand Juries have a history of investigating school truancy and previous Grand Juries promoted intervention programs that are currently being used. These programs are showing continued success. While these programs cover all educational levels, the 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) reviewed truancy reduction programs in the elementary schools. The Jury is particularly interested in the use of the Community Leadership in Achieving Student Success (CLASS) program as it relates to elementary students. The Jury investigated the reasons for chronic truancy at this level.

METHODOLOGY

The Jury held interviews with several elementary school district superintendents, a county probation official, and the District Attorney's truancy reduction staff. The Jury sent out questionnaires to several school districts and reviewed goals 5 and 6 of their Local Control Accountability Plans, which address keeping students in school. The Jury also studied current state and county truancy data and reviewed previous Jury reports.

OBSERVATIONS

The CLASS program established by the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office is used at all public school districts in the county, including elementary:

- Step 1 is a letter informing parents of their child's unexcused absences and the relevant laws regarding school attendance
- Step 2 is a group meeting focusing on parent and student accountability, social and legal consequences of truancy, and information regarding county and community resources
- Step 3 is a meeting with an administrator focusing on addressing individual attendance needs, and where a contract with the school may be signed
- Step 4 is a meeting with representatives from the school and the District Attorney's Office, focusing on addressing individual attendance needs and where a Truancy Mediation Team contract may be signed
- Step 5 is a meeting with an independent panel of district, county and community participants, with possible referral to Probation or the District Attorney

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Few elementary students reach Step 5, the final component of the CLASS program. This is because several school superintendents utilize local programs to provide students and their parents with counselors and social workers to combat truancy causation. The CLASS program has created consistency and emphasized parental accountability and consequences.

Recent state studies have reported the impact of a child's attendance on his or her academic success starts in kindergarten. Chronically absent kindergartners perform below their better attending peers on math and reading skills assessments. These effects are particularly pronounced as absences increase. In California, fourth graders who missed more than three days of class in the month prior to taking national assessments scored more than a full grade level below their peers with no absences during that period.¹

Parental attitude and participation is very important at establishing regular school attendance. Children need to develop the habit of attending school in order to be successful. Some parents seem indifferent as to whether their child attends school regularly. When students are taken out of school by parents for unexcused absences, it disrupts learning. If a student falls behind because of truancy, the child may become discouraged and feel defeated. This can ultimately lead to an attitude of not wanting to attend school, resulting in chronic truancy.

CONCLUSION

An early truancy intervention program can educate youth and parents, helping them realize the importance of school attendance. The Jury learned the success of the CLASS program at the elementary level is improving middle and high school attendance.

Since the implementation of the CLASS program, elementary records reflect a significant drop in truancy between Step 2 and Step 3. School districts have praised the District Attorney's CLASS staff in developing this successful truancy reduction program. The collaboration among participating agencies and community resources has been very successful in identifying students in danger of falling behind academically.

The 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury applauds the District Attorney's Office and the Board of Supervisors for their continued funding and support of the CLASS program. The Jury also commends the school districts for their ongoing efforts to ensure the educational success of our youngest students.

Under *California Penal Code Section 933.05* this report does not require a response.

¹ Attorney General's 2014 report on California's Elementary School Truancy and Absenteeism Crisis <http://oag.ca.gov/truancy> Last visited February 22, 2015