

A Community Response to Truancy – Why Johnny and Jane Skip School

by Bonnie Bucqueroux

Whenever I work with community groups on efforts to intervene positively with at-risk kids, talk inevitably turns to the pressing problem of truancy. And I am always surprised that otherwise progressive people are quick to demand zero-tolerance. They want police and prosecutors to hold the kids and their parents accountable through fines and fees and even jail time, if need be. They urge legislators to crack down by passing laws that tie driving privileges to staying in school. All stick, no carrot.

It is easy to understand people's frustration. Truancy is strong risk factor for future problems. For too many youngsters, cutting classes is the first slip down the icy slope toward delinquency. As early as 1915, sociologists were calling truancy the "kindergarten of crime." A 1979 study of 258 adult recidivists showed that 78% had been arrested for truancy, and two-thirds of the remainder admitted they had been chronically truant but were never arrested (Gavin 1997).

There is a sense that parents fear truancy as if it were an infectious disease that will strike their own kids if it isn't eradicated. As Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in her 1990 book *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, middle-class parents now see education as the only way they can help their youngsters succeed. Gone are the days when youngsters who hated school could still find a secure home in the military or a high-paying job on the line in the factory. A high-school diploma today is no guarantee of a job that pays enough to raise a family. Concerned parents worry that high school graduation is merely the minimum their kids must attain.

So it is easy to understand why people are quick to demand drastic action to bring truancy under control. Yet when challenged to think of all the reasons that a youngster might cut school, it quickly becomes clear that solving the problem defies a quick-fix, get-tough approach.

Just a few of the many reasons and causes

Certainly, there are kids who cut classes to hang out with friends and, left unchecked, today's lark can become tomorrow's chronic bad habit. There are also kids whose parents simply do not care - maybe Mom and Dad hated school, too, and consciously or unconsciously send that message. Early intervention and strict accountability can help communities get a handle on these problems.

But tough talk will do little to help the kids who fail at school because of abuse at home. Youngsters who endure physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of their parents may well face more of it if the parents are forced to pay fines or do jail time if the youngster cuts classes.

Sometimes parents are not the only adults who should be held accountable. A detective in Lansing, Michigan, who was investigating the chronic truancy of two adolescent girls, discovered that a 27-year-old man had lured them into spending

time at his apartment during the day. A study by the Population Reference Bureau found that roughly two-thirds of babies born to teenage mothers were fathered by men 20 years old or older (DaVita 1996). Research in California showed that men over 25 fathered twice as many teenage births as did boys under 18, and men older than 20 fathered five times as many children with junior high school age mothers as teenage boys did (Males 1996).

And what of the youngsters who are bullied every day, forced to hand over their lunch money? We know how merciless kids can be when teasing those who are different - too tall, too short, too fat, too skinny, too light, too dark.

Imagine kids like my gay friend Mike, who was taunted and attacked every day for being a "fag." A Massachusetts Department of Education Youth Risk Behavior survey in 1997 showed that 22% of gay, lesbian and bisexual students reported skipping school because of safety concerns, compared to 4% of their peers. A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report showed that 28% of gay and lesbian youth drop out of school because they do not feel comfortable there (Boston Public Schools 2000).

Think what it must be like to sit in classes each day if you are unable to read. While statistics on the illiteracy rate in the United States are hard to come by, kids who have not mastered this basic skill must find the classroom a torture chamber. What if the other kids find out? What if the teacher ridicules me in front of them?

Many kids suffer from learning disorders and emotional illness. Then factor in the physical problems suffered by the millions of kids whose parents have no health insurance.

Then there are the artistic kids, the creative dreamers who find it hard to conform. Even as the information and education industries hunger for talented newcomers, many of our schools are still preparing youngsters for manufacturing jobs that no longer exist or retail jobs that do not pay a living wage. As states struggle to deal with the deepest cuts in tax revenues since the Great Depression, the arts are often the first programs that schools sacrifice. In 1997, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 80% of U.S. schools did not offer any dance classes and 74% had no classes in theater. Only about half the schools offered visual arts and music at least three or four times a week (National Center for Education Statistics 1999).

Most shocking of all perhaps is that schools in the United States administer corporal punishment between 1 and 2 million times a year. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, corporal punishment may adversely affect "a student's self-image and school achievement and that it may contribute to disruptive and violent student behavior." (American Academy of Pediatrics)

Far too many schools also suffer from a decaying infrastructure and inferior technology. As one critic said, when schools increasingly seem like prisons, we shouldn't be surprised when the inmates try to escape.
Opportunities for community collaboration

Reading through the daunting list above can make it seem that truancy defies solution. Yet the fact that it is such a far-ranging and complex problem makes it an ideal candidate for a restorative, community-based approach.

What community policing teaches us about community criminal justice
by Bonnie Bucqueroux

Some communities have made a good start. In June 1999, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funded an evaluation of seven national truancy reduction programs (Contra Costa County, CA; Jacksonville, FL; Honolulu, HI; Yaphank, NY; Houston, TX; Seattle, WA; and Tacoma, WA). Innovations include everything from home visits to special efforts to deal with youngsters who don't speak English. In Traverse City, Michigan, TIP (Truancy Intervention Program) reports that success requires changing from a "you really blew it this time and here's what's going to happen to you" attitude to "how can we help?". Making the most of community-based problem solving

However, the real concern is why we do not already see truly comprehensive efforts established in every city and county nationwide. Next year will be the 10th anniversary of the death of community policing pioneer Dr. Robert Trojanowicz, who directed the National Center for Community Policing at Michigan State University. In the early 1980s, he saw firsthand the power of marrying the formal control of the juvenile justice system with the informal control that community groups and individuals can exert on young people.

In early "foot patrol" experiments in Flint, Michigan, police officers acted as catalysts in bringing together professionals and community residents in focused efforts to deal with chronic problems involving juveniles. The professionals brought their experience and resources to the table, as did the residents. A police officer might know how to cut government red tape and bring funding to the table, while community residents knew the underlying dynamics that would ultimately determine whether the project would succeed or fail. Many also had unique talents that could be brought to bear.

In the succeeding two decades, practitioners such as Drew Diamond, deputy director of the Police Executive Research Center, have helped communities forge effective grassroots problem-solving alliances between professionals and community residents. In the early 1990s, this author, Diamond and Bill Matthews, executive director of the Community Policing Consortium, worked with more than 60 public housing developments nationwide at the height of the violence spawned when the invention of crack brought cocaine within the economic reach of the young and the poor. Many of the most impressive successes were achieved because of focused problem solving that illuminated the underlying dynamics that inevitably feed chronic problems.

In Chandler, Arizona, for example, the community residents at the table wanted help in preventing boys 8 to 12 years old from becoming involved with drugs gangs, since they served as the supply of new recruits that would move in as soon as more senior members were arrested (or killed). Promising Saturday morning bike-riding sessions, organized by an enterprising resident, were limited by the fact that many kids could not afford bikes. So the police stepped in and provided refurbished bikes that they would otherwise have auctioned off. A locally based police officer worked with parents and the schools to allow kids to earn points to get a bike through school attendance and respecting curfews.

Trojanowicz struggled to articulate a theory that would fully explain the awe-inspiring changes that can take place quickly when community-based problem-solving efforts take root. In their Atlantic Monthly article "Broken Windows," John Q. Wilson and George Kelling first outlined how addressing low-level problems at the community level can disrupt the dynamics that allow more serious crime problems to erupt

(Wilson 1982). Books like Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell 2000) and Steven Johnson's *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software* (Johnson 2001) further explore how seemingly minute decisions at ground level can have a dramatic impact on the big picture.

The reason that we see so few success stories is usually a lack of sustained leadership and a pinched vision. Movements such as community policing and restorative justice, both of which promote collaborative, community-based problem solving, take years to implement and institutionalize, yet professionals come and go quickly. A 1997 study by the Police Executive Research Forum showed that the tenure of police chiefs in major cities had dropped to 2.5 to 4 years. Unfortunately as well, these innovations are often rejected by middle managers as yet another "flavor of the month" program, of which they have endured far too many.

While proponents argue that innovations such as community policing and restorative justice are philosophies, not self-limiting programs or projects, far too little is done to educate both the professionals and the community about what that means in practice. All too often, the professionals see themselves as the problem-solvers, with the community as helpers, not partners.

Sustaining grassroots collaborations, particularly after the crisis has passed, is possible only when the community is fully engaged and empowered. All too often professionals find it easier and quicker to work with their peers, rather than with the people whose lives are most directly affected by success or failure. Community residents are viewed as clients, not as people who have the power to resolve their own problems. Long-term solutions require that the community accept the ultimate responsibility for resolving the problem, with support and resources from their partners within "the system."

Core elements in community collaborations

The following tips and ideas can help communities take truancy prevention and intervention to the next level:

- **Keep expanding the circle of community stakeholders** - Many programs begin by bringing together police, prosecutors, social workers and school officials. As the examples above suggest, the outreach should then focus on recruiting a wide-ranging roster of community groups and individuals, from the local gay and lesbian alliance, to substance abuse and mental health counselors, to non-profit agencies, to the faith community. Each group and every person has unique assets that can be harnessed to the task. In addition to paid professionals, community volunteers have much to offer. Hold meetings at times and places that suit the residents and offer child care, food and other inducements to increase participation. Also make sure to involve young people (and not just the "student council" types).
- **Tailor the response to local needs** - Maybe the priority problem in your area is a specific decaying and dangerous school. Another school may need to implement an effective attendance monitoring system that notifies parents at the first sign of trouble. The challenge is to identify the full spectrum of problems before you begin to prioritize and craft your responses.
- **Address hidden problems** - Finding out the real reasons that an individual child is chronically truant often means investing in strategies that build trust. Children are often reluctant to confide in adults. Is the young girl too

ashamed to say she's abused? Is the young boy afraid his parents will throw him out if they find out he's gay? Is that young girl hiding a secret "affair" with an older man?

- **Invest in family and neighborhood conferencing** - Restorative conferencing opportunities focus on identifying interventions that can help the youngster succeed. Do the parents need help with alcohol or drug problems? Does Mom have a hard time getting up in the morning to make breakfast because she works two jobs? Maybe the neighbor can pitch in.
- **Make school discipline restorative** - Train teachers and staff in mediation and conflict resolution. When kids victimize other kids, engage both the offender and the victim in structured dialogue that focuses on ways that the youngster can repair the harm.
- **Expand competency development opportunities** - Kids who do well in class want to show up. Develop a roster of tutors and mentors. Offer community-based reading and math classes. Help parents overcome their own deficits. Give kids the skills and tools they need to succeed.
- **Build better schools** - Why can't every school be a "magnet" school? Are parents willing to donate their time to help teach music, dance, and theater? Could parents who speak other languages offer after-school classes? Can the community find ways to offer arts enrichment classes to young and old alike? The goal is to make each school the hub of community activity, a place where every youngster feels safe, secure and challenged to do his or her best.
- **Balance accountability with support** - Many children today are growing up in single-parent homes or in families where both parents work outside the home. While we must always hold parents and youngsters accountable, we must also offer a helping hand when and where it is needed.
- **Evaluate progress and trumpet success** - How will you measure success? In an era of tight resources, it is important to document success and share good ideas with others.
- **Support risk-taking leadership** - Building broad-based community coalitions is difficult. Decades of isolation and neglect often make it difficult to win the community's trust and respect. It takes time and commitment to work through issues of race, ethnicity, religion, class, education and income. It also takes courage for leaders to commit to the process, especially since some well-meaning efforts will fail. The CYA (Cover Your Anatomy) culture within the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems often promotes timidity, so it takes courage to support and sustain these efforts.

Solving the problem of truancy requires working together on the real problems in young people's lives that prevent them from succeeding - and the problems that schools often have in challenging the entire spectrum of youngsters to do their best. What has been lacking so far are initiatives that broaden beyond traditional collaborations among school and juvenile justice professionals. The goal should be to build on that foundation, by reaching out to community groups and concerned parents who can make unique contributions in re-directing our errant children, one by one, as they begin to go astray.

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