

TRUANTS



ILLUSTRATION / JT MORROW ADAPTATION OF EDWARD HOPPER'S NIGHTHAWKS

The challenges of keeping kids in school

By JUNE KRONHOLZ



Presidents at least as far back as Bill Clinton

have made attendance a priority of their school-reform efforts, in part because of the social costs of youngsters not attending. There's a direct line from truancy to juvenile crime, gang membership, and drug use, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. There's an equally direct line from truancy to dropping out of school, and from there to increased incidences of teen pregnancy, poor health, and dependency on welfare.

The patio of my local coffee bar in Washington, D.C., is as good a place to think about truancy as any other. A high school with 1,500 students is two blocks away; a middle school with 900 students is a block beyond that.

Between 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. every school day, two police officers in a white Ford van sweep the neighborhood. Armed with a gun and dressed in blue fatigues, a curly-haired officer hops out of the van, marches through the coffee shop, glances into a shoe store next door, peers down the subway escalator, hikes to a bus stop, and then retraces her steps to take in a drugstore and a Best Buy.

Typically, the two-officer patrol, one of seven full-time truancy patrols in D.C., picks up four or five youngsters at lunchtime and returns them to their schools. Another four or five "runners" take off, knowing that the officers aren't allowed to give chase into the neighborhood's busy streets.

As the officer makes her way through my Starbucks, some youngsters produce cell phones with parents on the other end to corroborate excuses. Others hand over school-issued passes. A few flash identity cards from Maryland schools. The D.C. officers haven't any authority over youngsters from across the state line, a mile away; as it turns out, Maryland police haven't much authority, either. By the end of the school year, D.C.'s truancy officers are on familiar terms with a circle of regulars. "You got your hair cut," one officer remarked to a girl named Ashley, who produced a pass that gave no explanation for her absence from school.

Next, she checked the ID of a Maryland 9th grader named Clyde, who explained that he had missed so

much school already it wasn't worth attending for finals. How do you get away with skipping school, I asked the boy, who wore a Metallica ski cap despite the warm weather. "I just do," Clyde said. And what do your parents say, I persisted. "They can't force me to go to school," he said.

School is the center of social life for most youngsters. It's the necessary step to a good job and income, a message these kids have been hearing since kindergarten. Taxpayers spend almost \$600 billion a year on public education, an average of more than \$10,000 per student.

So, why are so many kids willing to dodge traffic, hide out in shoe stores, and risk apprehension by an armed officer to skip school?

Counting Kids

States and school districts vary in how they define truancy, which means that nationwide truancy statistics don't exist. In Maryland, a truant is someone who has 18 unexcused absences per semester. In Texas, it's 10 unexcused absences within six months. In Florida, it's 15 in 90 calendar days.

Complicating any attempt to compare statistics are divergent state compulsory-education laws. In D.C., youngsters

must attend school until age 18, in Maryland until age 16, and in Pennsylvania until 17.

No Child Left Behind lets states use attendance as an additional indicator of adequate yearly progress, and 37 states do that. But attendance is measured differently from truancy: Attendance is a daily average, and a few youngsters with perfect attendance can hide the absences of those who stay away for days at a time. Attendance tends to hover at about 95 percent in most state reports.

Where states do report truancy, the numbers are staggering. California reported that 24 percent of its 6.2 million public school children, some 1.5 million kids, were truant (missing more than 30 minutes of instruction without an excuse at least three times) in 2008–09. Wisconsin disclosed that 15.4 percent of its high-school students were truant (absent without an acceptable excuse for part or all of five or more days during a semester) in 2008–09, including 62 percent of its African American students.

The New School calculated that 24 percent of New York City's 350,000 high schoolers had 38 or more absences in 2007–08 (the report didn't distinguish between excused and unexcused absences). Washington, D.C., reported that in 2008–09, 20 percent of its students were truant, that is,

absent 15 days without an excuse. But the district also said that it missed counting about 10 percent of its youngsters, so the true number could be higher.

Even a simple calculation suggests that adds up to a bad deal for taxpayers. If 20 percent of D.C.'s 46,000 students miss 15 days each, that's the equivalent of 766 full school years. The U.S. Census Bureau calculates that the D.C. schools spent an average of \$14,594 per pupil in 2007–08. That adds up to \$11 million spent by the district on no-shows.

California, like six other states, funds its schools based on average daily attendance rather than on the once-a-year or once-a-semester headcount that many states and Washington, D.C., use. Some 16 percent of the Los Angeles Unified School District's 272,000 students were



PHOTO / ADAM AUJEL

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truant in 2008–09. That means the district lost at least 130,000 student days of funding.

State and federal data indicate that truants tend overwhelmingly to be African American and Hispanic. About as many girls as boys are truant. Almost half live in single-parent households, and about one-third live in poverty. Truancy spikes at about age 15, when most youngsters enter 9th grade and the less-supportive atmosphere of high school.

Diane Groomes, an assistant Washington, D.C., chief of police, whose responsibilities include the truancy patrol, said she is noticing that truants are getting younger. This year, her officers picked up more 12-year-olds than in the past, and even a growing number of 10- and 11-year-olds. Why? “Unfortunately, they’re growing up fast,” she ventured.

What’s the Problem?

Back at my coffee shop, I fell into conversation with a 10th grader who said her name was Devora. She had a school pass to keep a medical appointment, although she seemed to be settling into her patio chair for the day. Devora had big plans to study political science or philosophy in college, but she admitted she was absent “a lot,” and she put the blame on—how’s that?—her high school.

“If classes showed more relevance to life—not equations and stuff,” she might attend, she said. A chemistry teacher “yells a lot,” she added. A math teacher has “missed more school than I have. We don’t learn anything.” An English teacher is assigning “3rd-grade work.” Kids “feel trapped in school. The only thing on their mind is they want to get out.”

I read Devora’s indictment to Edward Deci and AnneMarie Conley, who study achievement motivation—Deci at the University of Rochester and Conley at the University of California, Irvine—and they knew all about it.

Deci, a psychologist, co-authored self-determination theory, which holds that we’re motivated to complete a task when we feel we’re competent to do the work, have autonomy in how we go about it, and feel some “relatedness” to the situation; we have friendly teammates or a supportive boss, for example. For lots of kids, school offers none of that, Deci says, and waves of school reforms are only making things worse, he adds.

“Kids know if they can’t do the work. They’re attuned to ‘these people are pushing me around.’ They know if teachers are relating to them in a warm kind of way or a demeaning kind of way,” Deci told me.

Middle schools, desperate to keep order in a hothouse of surging hormones, slap on tighter rules at the very time that kids crave more independence. They also tend to be larger and have many more stu-



Psychologist Edward Deci
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dents per grade than elementary school (see “The Middle School Mess,” *features*, page 40). Kids can have a tough time finding a caring adult or a circle of friends in a big school, and the pressure on teachers to boost achievement may add to that lack of relatedness. “When teachers get pressured on accountability, they get more authoritarian with kids. What kids need is autonomy and support, not control,” Deci said.

Conley, an education professor, studies expectancy-value theory, which doesn’t contradict Deci but says that we’re also motivated by what we expect to get out of a task: what do I gain vs. what do I give up by going to class, for example? Most kids see a social cost in playing hooky: They’d miss being with friends, their peers would think less of them, or they’d suffer a wound to their self-image.

But the calculation comes out differently for other kids. Going to school may mean they can’t hang out at the mall or use drugs. They might miss some serendipitous fun with truant friends or could lose some of their cool, if being truant is cool among their peers.

One morning near the end of the school year, I sat in on a string of meetings between students at Francis Scott Key middle school in Silver Spring, Maryland, and a group of adults—a family-court judge, a district attorney, a school social worker—who are part of a truancy project sponsored by the University of Baltimore School of Law.

At one point, the mentors congratulated a chubby 7th grader for his improved attendance and asked him to explain his success. The boy said his family couldn't afford to pay for cable television any more. "I get bored so I do my homework and go to bed" instead of staying up late and missing school the next day, he added. What would he do if the family got cable again, Montgomery County judge Joan Ryon asked, hoping for lightning to strike. "I'd probably do the same thing again," he said.

"Costs really matter," Conley said when I told her the story. School and homework cost TV time, and that's a price some kids won't pay.

explained that she awoke her 14-year-old daughter for school before hurrying off to her job. The state's attorney said the girl didn't show up.

Judge Stephen Johnson, visibly saddened by the Terrell-Norris case, admonished all three parents on the importance of education for their kids. "They need it as much as food and clothing," he told Terrell and Norris, who—oh, the irony—works in an elementary school. But Johnson has few tools to deal with these parents, and he seemed to admit it.

He put Terrell and Norris on probation so the court can monitor their children's school attendance. Court supervision

Prosecutions are rare because schools see truancy as an issue for social services rather than the courts.

Who's to Blame?

While the kids were telling me that truancy is a result of dysfunction in the schools, adults were telling me that it's the result of dysfunction in the home. Both are probably right.

In late June, I sat in a Montgomery County courtroom, just outside Washington, D.C., as two criminal misdemeanor cases were called against three parents for failing to send their children to school. The first case was against 30-year-old Stephanie Terrell and Alexander Norris, who spoke up only to correct the court's misimpression that he had fathered all eight of Terrell's children or that he lived with the family. He did neither.

Attendance records showed that Terrell and Norris's oldest child, a middle schooler, missed 14 percent of his school days in September 2009, 45 percent in October, 50 percent in November, and 71 percent in December. Four siblings did no better: two missed half of November, when the family was homeless; a third missed 44 percent; and a fourth missed 94 percent because he lacked immunizations.

Montgomery County had clearly tried to help. The schools scheduled parent-teacher conferences, home visits and, finally, three Truancy Review Board hearings, where a panel of school and social workers hoped to get Terrell and Norris to sign an attendance contract (the couple skipped two of the hearings). Social services found the family a seven-bedroom house, and produced a grant to send the children to summer camps so Terrell could attend a job-training program. "She really does want these children to go to school. She's just overwhelmed," Terrell's lawyer told the judge.

Minutes later, the court called the case of Mayra Yesenia Argueta, a worried-looking woman, dressed for work, who

is "a big stick...that's all it is," he told them. "Do the best you can," he told Argueta, as he put her case on hold for six months while ordering her to see that her daughter attends summer school, the same girl who had failed to attend so much of the regular school year.

Truancy laws generally target parents because, the reasoning goes, they have violated the state's attendance laws by not getting their kids to school. Educational neglect, the legal term in many jurisdictions, is a misdemeanor that generally carries the threat of jail time and a fine. But enforcement is typically lax: Washington, D.C., is one of only three or four cities with dedicated truancy patrols. Other jurisdictions depend on beat patrols or the occasional citywide sweep. Prosecutions are rare because schools see truancy as an issue for social services rather than the courts.

Under Maryland law, police can't pick up truants, even to return them to school, because it is the parents who are committing the offense. Montgomery County counted 5,000 "habitual truants" between 2005 and 2010, but prosecuted the parents of just 55 of them. Sentences are minimal—10 days in jail and a \$50 fine in Montgomery County—and penalties are seldom imposed. What judge is going to risk sending children into foster care while their mother cools her heels in jail?

The courts generally deal with the truants themselves only when children who already are under its jurisdiction fail to go to school: Attendance is usually a condition of probation for young offenders. The courts also can declare a child to be "in need of supervision" for missing school. But in inner cities, truancy takes a backseat to serious offenses. Some 3,752 juvenile cases were filed in D.C.'s family court in 2009, including four rapes and three armed robberies by children

aged 10 to 12. The 135 child-in-need-of-supervision petitions seem almost trivial by comparison.

A few states that have aggressively enforced truancy laws have come to regret it. In 1995, Washington State passed a law that, among other things, required schools to file court actions when youngsters have seven unexcused absences in a month or 10 in a year. Students face up to seven days in juvenile hall and parents are subject to fines. The law overwhelmed the courts: 15,000 truants went to court in 2005. Lawmakers now are trying to amend the law to make truancy reporting discretionary.

School districts often have elaborate protocols for dealing with truancy. An automated call system in Fairfax County, Virginia, made 625,014 calls to parents about attendance issues between July and May, or almost four per Fairfax student. In D.C., an automated call notifies parents whose kids were absent that day and, for high schoolers, which class periods they missed. A teacher calls or sends a letter after a third unexcused absence. After the fifth absence, the school dispatches a certified letter asking for a parent conference.

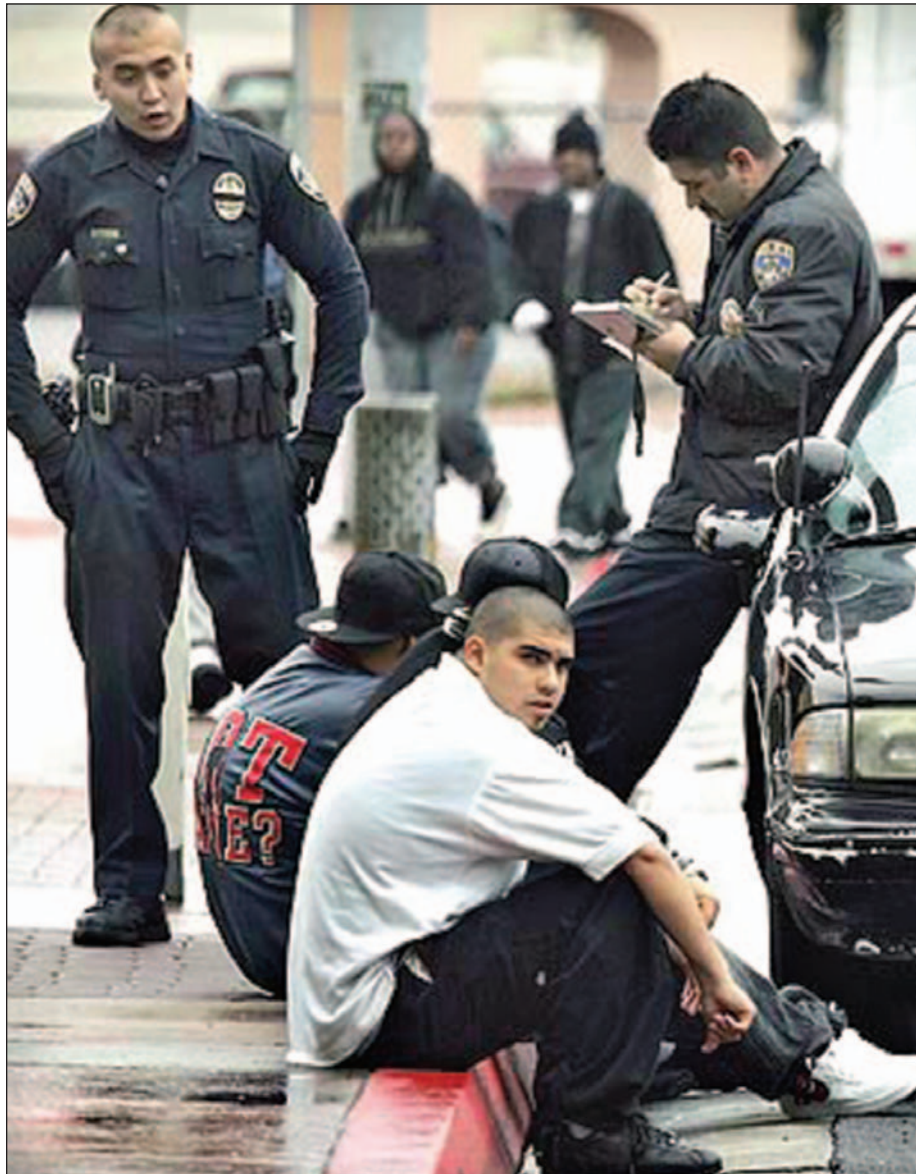
After the 10th absence, the school attendance committee is convened to devise an intervention. After 20 absences, the city's social-service agency is called in and, after 25 absences, the case is referred to family court. If the truancy patrol picks up a youngster, the process fast-forwards to the 5th day, the certified letter and parent conference.

But that all supposes that youngsters don't erase telephone messages or destroy letters, and that they don't slip out the back door of the school after attendance is taken. "It's one thing to say we're getting kids back in school; it's another thing to know they're back in class," said Curtis Watkins, the director of LifeSTARTS, which works with youngsters in two Washington, D.C., middle schools. His counselors check classrooms three times a day to be sure that students who are targeted by the program are still in class.

It also supposes that parents want to and can get their children to school. Hedy Chang, who heads a research project called Attendance Counts, has calculated that children living in homes without enough food missed two days more than better-fed kids, children whose mothers are unemployed missed two more days than those whose moms had jobs, children whose mothers had less than a high-school education missed 1.5 more days, and those whose mothers are in poor health missed two days more.

Chang's research was on kindergartners, but it would also seem to apply to older children. At the Francis Scott Key middle school meeting, the mentors told a 7th grader who had been tardy 58 times in three months that her attendance hadn't improved enough for her to graduate from the program and receive the promised reward, an MP3 player. The girl shrank sullenly into her hooded sweatshirt and said she'd been "too tired" to come to school one day the previous week because she had had to watch a three-year-old niece who "screamed all night long."

On other weeks, the girl had explained that another family had moved into the house and disrupted things, that she was



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Teacher absenteeism was high, Mel Riddile says, which seemed to some kids to validate their own absences.

tired because boys came around to visit her at night, and that her mother takes medication for a chronic illness and can't awaken herself to get the girl off to school.

Truancy is never the problem, school staffers, social workers, prosecutors, and police officers told me over and over. Truancy is the symptom.

Promising Efforts

When Mel Riddile took over as principal of Fairfax County's J. E. B. Stuart High School in 1997, he said, average daily attendance for the year was 89 percent, which means there were 19 absences per student. Within three years, Riddile says, average daily attendance was up to 96 percent. There were some easy victories: early on, Riddile linked a computer to Stuart's phone system, which made autodial wake-up calls to youngsters with the worst attendance records. One youngster thanked him, Riddile said: No one had ever cared whether he came to school.

But mostly, cutting truancy was a hard slog. Some Stuart parents from Central America and the Middle East weren't interested in having their daughters complete school. Teacher absenteeism was high, Riddile said, which seemed to some kids to validate their own absences (the daily absentee rate for teachers nationwide is about 5 percent, according to some studies, compared to about 1.7 percent for private-sector workers).

Riddile, now associate director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, held parent conferences aimed at forging "partnerships" with families. He referred 70 youngsters to court for child-in-need-of-supervision hearings: That was enough to jolt all but 12 into coming to school. And to avoid diffusing staff energy, he kept his focus on just two or three outcomes. They're reflected in the name Riddile chose for his reform efforts: RAGS, for Reading Plus Attendance Means Better Grades and a Safer School.

The challenge is even harder in tumultuous inner-city schools, although no-excuses charters seem to be making headway. KIPP DC says that from 3 to 8 percent of the students in the five grade schools that it operated last year had 15 or more unexcused absences, the D.C. definition of truancy. KIPP operated just one high school, and it enrolled only 9th graders, which likely skewed the truancy rate downward compared to the city's district schools. But KIPP also takes a tough stand. Parents and students sign an attendance contract during a lengthy home visit. Kids can be dropped from the rolls

after 20 unexcused absences, and a handful have been, says Irene Holtzman, the director of accountability, although the school is "still willing to have a conversation" with youngsters who pile up more absences.

Sick days require a doctor's note at KIPP. Social workers provide wake-up calls, go-to-bed calls, and bus passes, if necessary, as well as the occasional McDonald's lunch as a reward for good attendance. "It's helpful to frame expectations up front," Holtzman adds.

What to Do?

A generation of school reforms has aimed at making school a place that youngsters should want to be. Districts are slowly breaking up megaschools and weeding out teachers—hopefully the yellers and those missing in action that Devora complains about. They're adding dual-enrollment programs that allow high-school youngsters to take some college classes. A few are setting graduation requirements that are based on learning rather than "seat time," and that could move youngsters through high school more quickly. Fairfax County, like many districts, no longer flunks a youngster for missing class if he otherwise earns a passing grade.

But critics also say that the No Child Left Behind focus on testing has narrowed and standardized curricula, and discouraged teachers from experimenting with lesson plans that do more than get kids past a test. Deci proposes a vast reform of all this reform in an effort to motivate kids. Abandon standardized testing and curricula to give teachers and students more autonomy, he says. Create more small schools where youngsters can develop relationships with teachers and peers. Individualize instruction so it accommodates youngsters who are behind and challenges those who want to race ahead.

Conley proposes finding out what kids feel they give up by being in school. "We can't just tell them to go to school; we have to increase the costs of not going to school," she says.

Those costs already seem extraordinarily high to taxpayers, employers, the police, the schools, social workers, college admissions officers, and most parents. Truancy seems a dumb choice and a lousy bargain to us. Still, on a spring afternoon at Starbucks, teenaged customers were sitting with me in the sun.

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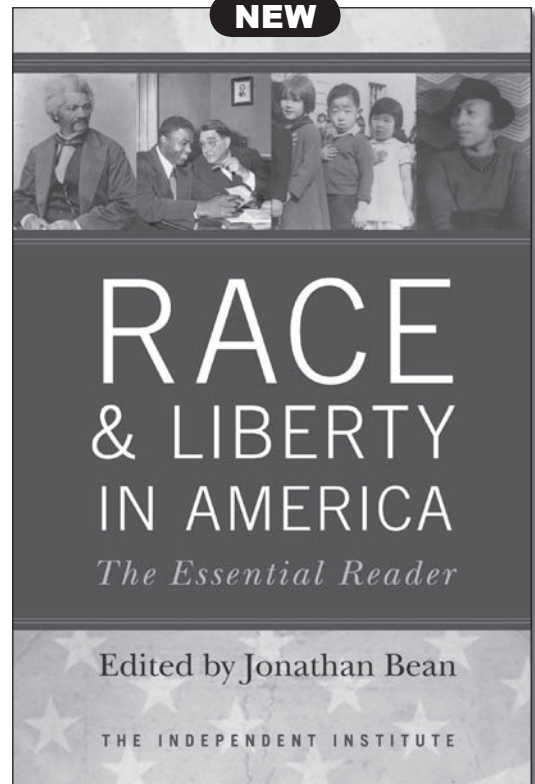
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