

**A STUDY OF TRUANCY  
INTERVENTION PRACTICES IN  
VIRGINIA**

**Virginia Department of Education**

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The Study of Truancy Intervention Practices in Virginia was conducted for the Virginia Department of Education by PolicyWorks, Ltd., as part of a Truancy Prevention Initiative that included a statewide institute and regional workshops. Funding for Truancy Prevention Initiative was provided by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A study of truancy intervention practices in Virginia was undertaken in August 2005 as part of Virginia's Truancy Prevention Initiative. The study was designed to provide a broad-brush perspective on current school and community practices. Methodology used included telephone interviews with attendance officers from all 134 Virginia school divisions, an analysis of selected policies and procedures, and follow-up telephone interviews with selected key informants. Findings were used to inform planning for five regional truancy workshops held in spring 2006.

### **Who are attendance officers?**

A very broad range of persons are appointed by local school boards to serve as attendance officer pursuant to §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*. Over 60 different job titles were reported, ranging from assistant superintendent to part-time truant officer; time reported devoted to attendance officer responsibilities ranged from 5 percent to 100 percent. Over one-third were school social workers/visiting teachers and another one-third had job titles associated with pupil services or student services.

### **What are the processes used within school divisions to identify and intervene with students not attending? At what point and under what circumstances is the case reviewed by a school-based team?**

School division policies, procedures, and practices were found to be extremely diverse. Official policies and procedures were found most frequently to simply re-state state law that prescribes certain actions by the principal and attendance officer within specified timeframes.

School child study teams and student assistance teams are frequently used to assess needs and problem-solve in early stages of truancy intervention. Strategies most frequently reported employed with emerging attendance problems included referral for additional school-sponsored services, referral for community-based services, comprehensive assessment, use of alternative education, and education program modification.

School resource officers (SRO) were reported routinely involved in attendance cases in 22 percent of school divisions, occasionally involved in 48 percent, and rarely or never involved in 30 percent. Community-based agencies were reported to be routinely involved in intervention efforts by 24 percent of school divisions, occasionally involved by 48 percent, and rarely/never involved by 16 percent.

### **What practices have been most effective in improving attendance? Where would additional funding, if available, be directed?**

Strategies considered by informants to be effective in truancy prevention included school-wide emphasis on attendance, incentives for classes and students, and disincentives for non-attendance. Strategies considered effective for early intervention with emerging problems included mentors, case managers to monitor closely, engagement of parent in truancy plans and/or contracts, outreach, and linkages to community resources to address

underlying problems. Strategies cited as effective with cases of chronic non-attendance included alternative education plans, penalties for absenteeism, and court intervention.

When asked how they would use an additional \$4 per pupil for truancy prevention, school divisions most frequently cited the need for additional outreach services to students and their parents, supplemental educational/ educational support services, additional parent education/support services, and alternative education options.

**At what point and under what circumstances are cases of truancy reviewed by an interagency team?**

School divisions were asked about both the vehicle and timeline for interagency reviews of truancy cases. Nearly 60 percent of school divisions reported use of Family Assessment and Planning Teams (FAPT); smaller and rural communities were more likely to use FAPTs than were larger, more urban communities. Other vehicles for interagency review reported included County Interdisciplinary Teams, Attendance Review Panel, Prevention/Intervention Team, Family Assessment Service Team, and Truancy Review Board.

Thirty-nine percent of school divisions reported that interagency reviews were conducted before approaching juvenile court intake, 23 percent reported reviews occurred after a judicial hearing but before disposition, and 13 percent reported the reviews occurred as part of the juvenile court intake process. Another 16 percent reported variable timelines, depending on case circumstances.

**What criteria are used to determine whether to pursue action against the child or action against the parent?**

In exploring the process and criteria used by school divisions to determine whether to pursue court action against a child or a parent, it was found that fewer than half the attendance officers interviewed reported consulting with a school board or city/county attorney; 15 percent reported always consulting and 33 percent reported consulting “as needed.” Just over one-third reported having written procedures or guidelines for pursuing court action; upon closer examination, however, guidelines reviewed typically were found to be re-statements of statutory requirements rather than detailed procedures or guidance documents. Where the attendance officers consulted with a school board or city/county attorney, the school divisions were 3 times as likely to report written guidelines.

**How do school divisions and courts work together to address attendance?**

Written procedures and guidelines, developed jointly by school divisions and court service units were found to be rare; those examined typically set forth procedures that mirrored state law but offered little guidance or insights into community approaches or court philosophy.

Eighty-six percent of school divisions reported filing at least one CHINSup petition in the past school year; the number filed ranged from 1 to over 200. Fifty-nine percent of school divisions reported filing at least one complaint against a parent; the number of such complaints ranged from 1 to 92. Educational neglect complaints were reported to have

been filed by only ten school divisions. When the numbers of petitions and other complaints were viewed in light of total school division enrollment, extreme variation was observed. For example, one school division with an enrollment of under 5,000 filed ten times the number of CHINSup petitions filed by another school division with enrollment of over 50,000 pupils.

Attendance officers interviewed gave very positive ratings to the effectiveness of collaborative efforts with their local courts. When asked to rate the effectiveness of collaborative efforts with their local court, nearly 40 percent rated the collaborative efforts very effective/effective in almost all cases, 28 percent reported efforts somewhat effective in most cases, and 19 percent reported mixed results – effective in some cases and ineffective in other cases. Only 5 percent reported collaborative efforts with the court to be effective in very few cases. Two percent were unable to judge, typically because they were new to their attendance officer role.

### **Conclusions**

School division policies, procedures, and practices were found to be very diverse, with marked differences in the types of personnel with responsibility for attendance intervention and the patterns and levels of staffing devoted to attendance intervention. Two-thirds of attendance officers cited inadequate personnel resources to respond to attendance cases in a timely and intensive way. Written policies and procedures typically mirror state law but provide little in the way of detailed procedures or guidance in handling cases of chronic non-attendance. Marked differences were found in the stages and patterns of intervention, in methods and timelines for interagency case reviews, and in numbers of complaints filed with juvenile courts. The picture that emerged from interviews was of a “patchwork” of practices that, although keyed to complying with requirements set forth in state law, operate in very different ways and produce very different outcomes. No school division was found to have specific written operational procedures and fully articulated intervention services/programs reflecting a comprehensive approach encompassing both prevention and intervention practices.

These findings suggest that schools and communities could benefit from the dissemination of information about more comprehensive approaches to truancy prevention and intervention. The development and dissemination of model guidelines reflecting a graduated but timely process of intervention, models for interagency review of cases, and model procedures for effective school/court collaboration in cases requiring court intervention would also be helpful.

It is important to note that only school division perspectives are represented in this study. A more comprehensive study would, at minimum, examine juvenile court perspectives and official records. Although attendance officers gave strongly positive ratings to the effectiveness of collaborative efforts with their local juvenile courts, the vast differences across localities in the numbers of attendance-related complaints filed with courts suggests marked differences in levels of court involvement. An examination of these differences and the outcomes they produce would certainly contribute to a more complete picture of court involvement with and of school/court collaboration in Virginia.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. BACKGROUND

A study of truancy intervention practices in Virginia was undertaken in August 2005 as part of Virginia's Truancy Prevention Initiative being implemented by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) with financial support from the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (VDCJS). Truancy is one of ten priorities under DCJS's Three-Year Plan Under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. A state Truancy Prevention Advisory Group with representatives from throughout Virginia provided advisory guidance in planning and implementing a statewide Truancy Institute and regional workshops. The Truancy Institute was conducted on September 21, 2005 in Charlottesville. A new VDOE publication, *Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools*, was released at the Institute. Findings from this study were used to inform the planning of five regional workshops that were conducted in spring 2006.

## B. METHODOLOGY

This study focused on how Virginia school divisions handle cases of emerging and chronic non-attendance and was designed to provide a broad-brush perspective on current school and community practices. Information was collected through telephone interviews with school division attendance officers from all 134 Virginia school divisions. In addition to telephone interviews, the study involved retrieval and analysis of Web-posted school division attendance policies and reviews of selected attendance policies and procedures. The study was conducted by PolicyWorks, Ltd., an independent program evaluation and policy research firm based in Richmond.

### Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions addressed by the study were as follows:

1. Who are attendance officers in local school divisions?
  - What are their positions/job titles within school divisions? What are their duties? What percentage of their time is allocated to attendance officer duties?
2. What are the processes used within LEAs to identify and intervene with students not attending?
  - What are the written policies and procedures that guide the processes?
3. What actions do attendance officers take at key points in the intervention process?
  - What are the respective roles/actions of the principal and the attendance officer and how do they coordinate/collaborate?

4. At what point and under what circumstances is the case reviewed by a school-based team?
5. At what point and under what circumstances is the case reviewed by an interagency team?
6. What practices have been most effective in improving attendance?
7. What criteria is used to determine whether to pursue action against the child or action against the parent? How many petitions were filed in the past 12 months? How many complaints against parents were filed in the past 12 months?
8. How do LEAs and courts work together to address attendance? What is the effectiveness of that collaboration?
9. What prevention, early intervention, and later intervention practices do school divisions consider most effective?
10. What improvements would school divisions make if they had additional resources?

### **Interview and Data Recording Process**

Cases of emerging and chronic non-attendance are recognized as complex in nature. The problems contributing to poor attendance are typically complex; the case management procedures that must be followed are complex; and the judgments about how a particular case will be handled are complex. Because of the inherent complexity of attendance cases, special care was taken to employ very highly qualified interviewers. For this study four exceptionally well qualified interviewers were recruited: two were recently retired school social workers, one was a recently retired visiting teacher, and one was an attendance officer. In addition to expertise in interviewing, all four were experienced in handling attendance cases and were deeply knowledgeable about problems underlying poor attendance, case management procedures, and legal aspects of attendance practices. Each of the four interviewers was assigned to call school division attendance officers in two of Virginia's eight educational regions. Telephone interviews began to be conducted in late August 2005 and continued until attendance officers in all 134 school divisions had been reached in late fall.

Interviews were conducted in accordance with Interview Guidelines using a standardized interview protocol. Data from each interview were written in an Interview Record in Microsoft Word format. Completed Interview Records were e-mailed to the Principal Investigator at PolicyWorks, Ltd. and data from Interview Records were entered into a Microsoft Access database. Data storage, management, analysis, and reporting were facilitated using the relational database. The Interview Guidelines and Interview Record are included in Appendix A.



## **Use of Findings**

The study was designed to yield findings that could be used to inform the planning and implementation of training, technical assistance, and other activities to support local schools and communities in their efforts to improve school attendance and effectively address chronic absenteeism. Findings may be also of value to other stakeholders including educators, juvenile justice and social services professionals, juvenile judges, and others involved with crime and delinquency prevention and youth development. A summary of preliminary findings was prepared and presented at the September 21, 2005 Truancy Institute. Interview data were also shared with the Truancy Prevention Advisory Group and used to inform planning of five regional truancy workshops that were held in spring 2006.

## **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to gain a broad-brush perspective on current practices across Virginia. As such, it has produced a general, wide-angle “snapshot” of current practices that appear to be quite diverse. The study was not designed to serve as a definitive research study but a preliminary exploration that has, indeed, identified numerous areas that merit closer examination. It is also important to note that only school division perspectives are represented in this study. A more comprehensive study would, at minimum, examine juvenile court and other stakeholder perspectives as well as official records such as attendance/absentee rates. A closer examination of community contexts and resources, of different approaches and practices, and of the outcomes they produce would certainly contribute to a more complete picture of how schools and communities are addressing truancy and its prevention.

# **II. FINDINGS**

## **A. Who are attendance officers?**

A very broad range of persons are appointed by local school boards to serve as attendance officer pursuant to §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*. Over 60 different job titles were reported, ranging from assistant superintendent to part-time truant officer. Over one-third were school social workers/visiting teachers and another one-third had job titles associated with pupil services or student services.

When asked the percentage of time devoted to attendance officer responsibilities, responses ranged from 5 percent to 100 percent; in general, those with higher ranking titles tended to devote lower percentages of time to these duties. In larger school divisions, the designated attendance officer almost always reported serving in a supervisory capacity with others providing case-specific direct services; in smaller school divisions, the designated attendance officers typically reported providing direct services in many of the

locality's cases. Two-thirds of attendance officers cited inadequate personnel resources to respond to attendance cases in a timely and intensive way.

**B. What are the processes used within school divisions to identify and intervene with students not attending? At what point and under what circumstances is the case reviewed by a school-based team?**

School division policies, procedures, and practices were found to be extremely diverse. Official policies and procedures were found most frequently to simply re-state state law that prescribes certain actions by the principal and attendance officer within specified timeframes. Few school divisions have written procedures that go beyond re-stating state law. Although just over half of Virginia's school divisions reported having a local definition of truancy, closer examination revealed almost universal reliance on statutory language.

School child study teams and student assistance teams are frequently used to assess needs and problem-solve in early stages of truancy intervention. When asked to report how frequently certain strategies were employed with emerging attendance problems, referral for additional school-sponsored services was reportedly used regularly by over 70 percent of school divisions and used occasionally by nearly 20 percent; only 6 percent rarely or never used this strategy. Alternative education programs or placements at the same or other schools was a strategy reported used regularly by nearly half of Virginia's school divisions and used occasionally by 35 percent; fewer than 13 percent reported rarely or never using alternative education as a strategy. Referral for community-based services for the student and his/her family was used regularly by 41 percent of school divisions and used occasionally by 47 percent; only 7 percent reported rarely or never using this strategy. Referral for comprehensive assessment involving a special education eligibility determination was reported to be a strategy used regularly by nearly 40 percent of school divisions and used occasionally by 47 percent; 10 percent reported this strategy rarely or never used. Referral for educational assessment for possible regular education program modification was reported used regularly by 28 percent of school divisions and used occasionally by 37 percent; 31 percent of school divisions reported rarely or never using this strategy. Change of teacher and/or class schedule within the same school was reported used regularly by about 31 percent of school divisions and used occasionally by 43 percent; this strategy was reported used rarely or never by about 24 percent of school divisions. Referral for substance abuse assessment was reported used regularly by about 12 percent of school divisions and used occasionally by 51 percent; 28 percent reported rarely or never using this strategy.

Of all strategies used to resolve emerging attendance problems, use of in-school resources were reported used most frequently, followed by referral to community-based services. All interview responses on the regularity with which school divisions use particular strategies to resolve emerging attendance problems are summarized below in Table 1.

**Table 1. Strategies Used to Resolve Emerging Attendance Problems**

<b>Strategies Used to Resolve Emerging Attendance Problems</b>	<b>Used regularly</b>	<b>Used occasionally</b>	<b>Rarely/never used</b>
Referral for additional school-sponsored services (tutoring, Lunch Buddies, etc)	71.64% (96)	19.40% (26)	5.97% (8)
Alternative education program/placement at same/other school	49.25% (66)	35.07% (47)	12.69% (17)
Referral for community-based services for student/family	41.04% (55)	47.01% (63)	7.46% (10)
Comprehensive assessment for special education eligibility determination	39.55% (53)	47.01% (63)	10.45% (14)
Change teacher/class schedule within same school/program	30.60% (41)	42.54% (57)	23.88% (23)
Educational assessment for possible regular education program modification	28.36% (38)	37.31% (50)	31.34% (42)
Referral for substance abuse assessment of student	11.94% (16)	51.49% (69)	28.36% (38)

Community-based agencies and organizations were reported to be regularly involved in attendance cases in about one-quarter (24.63 percent) of school divisions, occasionally involved in 48 percent, and rarely or never involved in over 16 percent. In light of statutory requirements for referral to or involvement by community-based service providers when early efforts by schools to resolve problem attendance are not successful, it is interesting that 22 school divisions reported community-based agencies/organizations rarely or never involved. Closer examination of responses from these 22 school divisions revealed that 14 (or 64 percent) subsequently cited some community agency involvement; however, levels of community-based agency involvement tended to be markedly lower than many other school divisions of comparable size.

School resource officers (SROs) were reported involved with attendance cases regularly in 22 percent of school divisions, occasionally in 48 percent of school divisions, and rarely or never in 30 percent of school divisions. All interview responses on the regularity of involvement of community-based agencies/organizations and of school resource officers are summarized below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Community-based Agency and School Resource Officer Involvement in Attendance Cases**

<b>Resources Involved</b>	<b>Involved regularly</b>	<b>Involved occasionally</b>	<b>Rarely/never involved</b>
Community-based agencies/organizations	24.63% (33)	47.76% (64)	16.42% (22)
School Resource Officer	19.40% (26)	46.27% (62)	30.60% (41)

Nearly half (47.76 percent) of attendance officers interviewed identified local departments of social services as a resource for truancy intervention. Community Services Boards were identified by nearly one-third (32.84 percent) as an intervention resource. FAPT Teams were cited as resources by over 30 percent, court service units by 13 percent and health departments by 10 percent of attendance officers. Among other community-based intervention resources cited were truancy response teams, Offices on Youth, Sheriff's Offices, Police Departments, and private, non-profit organizations providing such services as mentoring and in-home services. Community-based agencies and organizations most frequently identified as truancy intervention resources are reported below in Table 3.

**Table 3. Community-based Agencies and Organizations Cited as Resources for Truancy Intervention**

Agencies/Organizations	Number / percent of school divisions reporting agency/organization as a truancy intervention resource
Departments of Social Services	47.76% (64)
Community Services Boards	32.84% (44)
FAPT Teams	30.60% (41)
Court Service Units	13.43% (18)
Health Departments	10.45% (14)

**C. What practices have been most effective in improving attendance? Where would additional funding, if available, be directed?**

When asked to identify strategies school divisions were using that they considered effective in truancy prevention and intervention, attendance officers described a very broad range of practices. *Prevention activities* included those that placed a school-wide emphasis on attendance typically involving class and individual recognition or incentives (e.g., pizza parties for classes or students entered in a raffle). Conversely, disincentives for absenteeism such as ineligibility for sports or extracurricular activities were also cited as effective prevention practices. Examples of *early intervention practices* with emerging cases of problem behavior included use of case managers or mentors to closely monitor attendance, active engagement of parents in problem-resolution typically involving truancy plans or attendance contracts, outreach to parents, and linkage to needed community-based services. Examples of *interventions with cases of chronic non-attendance* included the development of individualized or alternative education plans and court involvement. The types of practices described reflect a continuum of interventions generally consistent with provisions set forth in Virginia law.

When asked how they would use an additional \$4 per pupil for truancy prevention or intervention, attendance officers most frequently cited the need for additional outreach services to non-attending students and their parents (46 percent), followed by supplemental educational/ educational support services (34 percent), additional parent education/support services (34 percent), and alternative education options (29 percent). About 7 percent would spend the additional funds on staff training about school “connectedness” and related strategies, 5 percent would spend the funding on additional mental health/substance abuse services, and almost 4 percent would spend the funding on a truancy court.

Nearly two-thirds of attendance officers reported inadequate personnel resources for timely and intensive intervention in truancy cases. Consistent with this view, about 75 percent of respondents would spend any additional funding on services/programs/activities that would add personnel, particularly for outreach and intensive case management. Types of programs and services for which additional funding would be used are summarized below in Table 4.

**Table 4. Types of Programs and Services for Which Additional Funding Would Be Used**

Type of program/services that funding would be used for	Percent/Number of School Divisions
Additional outreach services to non-attending students and their parents	46.27% (62)
Supplemental educational/educational support services	34.33% (46)
Additional parent education/support services	33.58% (45)
Alternative education options	29.10% (39)
Staff training on school “connectedness” and related strategies	6.72% (9)
Additional mental health/substance abuse services	5.22% (7)
Truancy court	3.73% (5)

**D. At what point and under what circumstances are cases of truancy reviewed by an interagency team?**

School divisions were asked about both the vehicle and timeline for interagency reviews of truancy cases. Nearly 60 percent of school divisions reported use of Family Assessment and Planning Teams (FAPT); smaller and rural communities were more likely to use FAPTs than were larger, more urban communities. Other vehicles for interagency review reported included County Interdisciplinary Teams, Attendance Review Panel, Prevention/Intervention Team, Family Assessment Service Team, and Truancy Review Board. Agencies cited most frequently as involved in truancy case reviews were social services (85 percent) and community services boards (79 percent).

Thirty-nine percent of school divisions reported that interagency reviews were conducted before approaching juvenile court intake, 23 percent reported reviews occurred after a judicial hearing but before disposition, and 13 percent reported the reviews occurred as part of the juvenile court intake process. Another 16 percent reported variable timelines, depending on case circumstances. Timelines reported for interagency review of truancy cases are summarized below in Table 5.

**Table 5. Timeline for Interagency Reviews of Truancy Cases**

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Percent/Number of School Divisions</b>
Before approaching juvenile court intake	38.81% (52)
After judicial hearing but before disposition	23.13% (31)
Variable times, depending on case circumstances	16.42% (22)
Part of the intake process	13.43% (18)

**E. What criteria are used to determine whether to pursue action against the child or action against the parent?**

In exploring the process and criteria used by school divisions to determine whether to pursue court action against a child or a parent, it was found that fewer than half the attendance officers interviewed reported consulting with a school board or city/county attorney; 15 percent reported always consulting and 33 percent reported consulting “as needed.” Just over one-third reported having written procedures or guidelines for pursuing court action; upon closer examination, however, guidelines reviewed typically were found to be re-statements of statutory requirements rather than detailed procedures or guidance documents. Where the attendance officers consulted with a school board or city/county attorney, the school divisions were 3 times as likely to report written guidelines.

**F. How do school divisions and courts work together to address attendance?**

Written procedures and guidelines, developed jointly by school divisions and court service units were found to be rare. Although about 30 percent of school divisions reported having such procedures and guidelines, upon closer examination, materials examined typically set forth procedures that mirrored state law but offered little guidance or insights into community approaches or court philosophy.

Eighty-six percent of school divisions reported filing at least one CHINSup petition in the past school year; the number filed ranged from 1 to over 200. Fifty-nine percent of school divisions reported filing at least one complaint against a parent; the number of such complaints ranged from 1 to 92. Educational neglect complaints were reported to have

been filed by only ten school divisions. When the numbers of petitions and other complaints were viewed in light of total school division enrollment, extreme variation was observed. For example, one school division with an enrollment of under 5,000 filed ten times the number of CHINSup petitions filed by another school division with enrollment of over 50,000 pupils.

Attendance officers interviewed gave very positive ratings to the effectiveness of collaborative efforts with their local courts. When asked to rate the effectiveness of collaborative efforts with their local court, nearly 40 percent rated the collaborative efforts very effective/effective in almost all cases, 28 percent reported efforts somewhat effective in most cases, and 19 percent reported mixed results – effective in some cases and ineffective in other cases. Only 5 percent reported collaborative efforts with the court to be effective in very few cases. Two percent were unable to judge, typically because they were new to their attendance officer role. All ratings of effectiveness are summarized below in Table 6.

**Table 6. Ratings of Effectiveness of Collaborative Efforts with Courts**

<b>Ratings of Effectiveness of Collaborative Efforts with Courts</b>				
<b>Very effective/ effective in almost all cases</b>	<b>Somewhat effective in most cases</b>	<b>Mixed – Effective in some case; ineffective in other cases</b>	<b>Effective in very few cases</b>	<b>Unable to judge</b>
38.06% (51)	28.36% (38)	19.40% (26)	5.22% (7)	2.24% (3)

### **III. CONCLUSIONS**

School division policies, procedures, and practices were found to be very diverse, with marked differences in the types of personnel with responsibility for attendance intervention and the patterns and levels of staffing devoted to attendance intervention. Two-thirds of attendance officers cited inadequate personnel resources to respond to attendance cases in a timely and intensive way. Written policies and procedures typically mirror state law but provide little in the way of detailed procedures or guidance in handling cases of chronic non-attendance. Marked differences were found in the stages and patterns of intervention, in methods and timelines for interagency case reviews, and in numbers of complaints filed with juvenile courts. The picture that emerged from interviews was of a “patchwork” of practices that, although keyed to complying with requirements set forth in state law, operate in very different ways and produce very different outcomes. No school division was found to have specific written operational procedures and fully articulated intervention services/programs reflecting a comprehensive approach encompassing both prevention and intervention practices.

These findings suggest that schools and communities could benefit from the dissemination of information about more comprehensive approaches to truancy prevention and intervention. The development and dissemination of model guidelines reflecting a graduated but timely process of intervention, models for interagency review of cases, and model procedures for effective school/court collaboration in cases requiring court intervention would also be helpful. Much information on best practice models is included in the Virginia Department of Education's publication Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools. Both national and Virginia-specific models were showcased at the September 2005 Truancy Institute and will be showcased in upcoming regional Truancy Workshops.

It is important to note that only school division perspectives are represented in this study. A more comprehensive study would, at minimum, examine juvenile court perspectives and official records. Although attendance officers gave strongly positive ratings to the effectiveness of collaborative efforts with their local juvenile courts, the vast differences across localities in the numbers of attendance-related complaints filed with courts suggests marked differences in levels of court involvement. An examination of these differences and the outcomes they produce would certainly contribute to a more complete picture of court involvement with and of school/court collaboration in Virginia.



## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDELINES AND INTERVIEW RECORD

### Study of School Attendance Practices in Virginia Interview Guidelines (Developed August 2005)

#### Background

A study of school attendance practices in Virginia is being undertaken in association with a Truancy Prevention Initiative being implemented by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) with financial support from the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (VDCJS). Truancy is one of ten priorities under DCJS's Three-Year Plan Under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. A state Truancy Prevention Task Force with representatives from throughout Virginia is providing advisory guidance in planning and implementing a statewide Truancy Institute and to eight regional workshops to follow. The Truancy Institute is scheduled to be held September 21, 2005 in Charlottesville. The Institute agenda and online registration can be viewed at: [http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/soe/csc/truancy\\_prevention\\_institute.asp](http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/soe/csc/truancy_prevention_institute.asp) A new VDOE publication, *Improving School Attendance*, will be released at the Institute.

The study of attendance practices is being conducted by PolicyWorks, Ltd., an independent program evaluation and policy research firm based in Richmond. The study is designed to yield findings that can be used to inform the planning and implementation of training, technical assistance, and other activities to support local schools and communities in their efforts to improve school attendance and effectively address chronic absenteeism. Findings will be of value also to other stakeholders including educators, juvenile justice and social services professionals, juvenile judges, and others involved with crime and delinquency prevention and youth development.

#### Methodology

The study will focus on how Virginia school divisions handle cases of emerging and chronic non-attendance. Information will be collected through telephone interviews with school division attendance officers (designated pursuant to §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*). An additional component of the study will be involve the retrieval and analysis of all web-posted attendance policies of Virginia school divisions.

Cases of emerging and chronic non-attendance are recognized as typically presenting complex problems that require thorough assessment and appropriate intervention. Added to the complexity inherent in such cases are requirements set forth in Virginia statute for parent notifications, conferences, development of plans, interagency consultation, and related required documentation of all efforts. In light of these complexities, interviews will be conducted by a team of highly qualified professionals, each of whom has direct experience in managing such cases within Virginia school divisions.

Telephone interviews will begin to be conducted on August 15, 2005. A summary of preliminary findings will be prepared for the September 21 Truancy Institute and a final written report will be completed when all interviews have been completed.

#### Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions to be addressed by the proposed study include the following:

11. Who are attendance officers in local school divisions?
  - What are their positions/job titles within school divisions? What are their duties? What percentage of their time is allocated to attendance officer duties?
12. What are the processes used within LEAs to identify and intervene with students not attending?
  - What are the written policies and procedures that guide the processes?
13. What actions do attendance officers take at key points in the intervention process?
  - What are the respective roles/actions of the principal and the attendance officer and how do they coordinate/collaborate?
14. At what point and under what circumstances is the case reviewed by a school-based team?
15. At what point and under what circumstances is the case reviewed by an interagency team?
16. What practices have been most effective in improving attendance?
17. What criteria is used to determine whether to pursue action against the child or action against the parent? How many petitions were filed in the past 12 months? How many complaints against parents were filed in the past 12 months?
18. How do LEAs and courts work together to address attendance? What is the effectiveness of that collaboration?
19. What prevention, early intervention, and later intervention practices do school divisions consider most effective?
20. What improvements would school divisions make if they had additional resources?

### **Reaching the Right Person**

It is critically important that information is collected from the most authoritative source within each school division. For purposes of this study, the target informant is the school division's attendance officer as defined by §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*.

The VDOE does not maintain a list of school division attendance officers and in very few cases do school divisions list in their directories the title "attendance officer." Therefore, in most cases interviewers will need to locate that person within the school division. Interviewers are being provided a list of school divisions that includes complete contact information for superintendents' offices and for other likely starting points, including offices of student services, pupil services, visiting teacher/school social work departments, and, in a few cases, attendance offices. In a number of very small school divisions only the superintendent is listed. Also noted in the list of school divisions are members of the state Truancy Prevention Task Force.

Please follow these steps to ensure that you have reached the right person:

1. Identify the school division's official attendance officer as defined by §22.1-258, *Code of Virginia*.
2. Interview the attendance officer.
3. Interview an alternate person only if the attendance officer specifically authorizes you to do so or refers you to the other person as a more knowledgeable source.
4. At the end of the protocol there is a space for the interviewer to make notes about the quality of the information provided. Please comment in this space if you have concerns of observations. Examples of appropriate entries include:
  - Very knowledgeable about all aspects of attendance practices.
  - New to position; has never taken a case to court.
  - Negative about such cases and court response.

## **Approach to Recording Interview**

Very knowledgeable and experienced interviewers have been recruited because the processes associated with truancy intervention are complex and differ significantly across localities. Narrative responses will be given to protocol questions. As skilled professionals, interviewers are expected to listen carefully to informant responses, synthesize what is said, and record an accurate, concise, "Reader's Digest" version. For some questions, the information will need to be categorized or ratings will need to be determined.

The process of recording is likely to involve hand-written notes taken during the interview on a blank interview protocol form with the final record of the interview being produced afterward. It is strongly recommended that the Interview Record be completed immediately after the interview is completed while content details and tone can be readily recalled and accurately summarized. An Interview Record is to be completed for each school division from which information is collected. The Interview Record is to be completed as a MS WORD document named using the following convention: Interview Record Accomack.doc, inserting the name of the city or county school division. As Interview Records are to be submitted as they are completed. E-mail as an attachment to: [AJAtkinson@policyworkslltd.org](mailto:AJAtkinson@policyworkslltd.org) All information collected will be entered into a relational database to facilitate data storage, analysis, and reporting.

## **Keeping Perspective**

Remember, the purpose of this study is to gain a broad-brush perspective on current practices across Virginia. It is not designed or funded at a level to serve as the definitive research study. Depending on the quality and value of findings, a follow-up study may be conducted in the future to examine certain practices in a more in-depth way. In the meantime, do your best to capture information that will allow us to produce a general, wide-angle "snapshot" of current practices.

# STUDY OF ATTENDANCE PRACTICES IN VIRGINIA

## Interview Record

### I. Identifying Information

School Division			
Informant Name			
Informant Job Title			
Interviewer		Interview Date	

### Introduction

Introduce yourself by name and explain the following:

- The study of attendance practices is being conducted as part of a Truancy Prevention Initiative that has been undertaken by the Virginia Department of Education with support from the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. The study is being conducted by PolicyWorks, Ltd., a program evaluation and policy research firm in Richmond.
- As part of the Truancy Prevention Initiative, a statewide Institute will be held in Charlottesville on September 21 and regional workshops will be offered during the 2005-06 school year. If they have not heard about the Institute, tell them where the information is located on the Internet and offer to have a notice sent to them.
- The study focuses on how school divisions handle cases of emerging and chronic non-attendance. The interview should take about 15 to 20 minutes.

If the time you first reach the informant is not a good time for them to talk, schedule another time/day to call them back.

### II. Staffing

#### II.A. *Who serves as the school division attendance officer?*

1. Job Title:
2. Nature of duties:
3. Is there a formal job description for the attendance officer? Yes/No (circle)
4. Approximate % of time devoted to attendance intervention duties: \_\_\_\_\_

#### ***B. Excluding the building secretary or clerk(s) who document daily attendance, who else is directly involved with intervening with emerging or chronic non-attendance?***

Job titles (e.g., principals, VT/SSW)	Nature of duties/activities

**C. To what extent are school resource officers (SROs) involved with truancy intervention? Check one:**

Routinely involved in most cases     Occasionally involved in selected cases     Rarely/never involved

**D. To what extent are community-based agencies/organizations an intervention resource in cases of truancy? Check one:**

Routinely involved in most cases     Occasionally involved in selected cases     Rarely/never involved

**E. Please describe the nature of intervention provided by any involved agencies/organizations**

Agency/Organization	Nature of Intervention Services Provided in Truancy Cases

**III. Identifying Problem Attendance**

Note: The study focuses on non-attendance of enrolled students and not specifically on non-enrollment, although that may become an issue in some cases.

**A. Does your school division have an official definition of truancy?**

Yes/No                                      If yes, what is it?

If yes, ask informant to e-mail ([AJAtkinson@policyworkslltd.org](mailto:AJAtkinson@policyworkslltd.org)) or fax a copy to (804) 726-9982.

**B. Please tell us the extent to which certain strategies are typically used to resolve emerging attendance problems (typically at or before the 6<sup>th</sup> day absent parent conference):**

Strategies	Used regularly	Used occasionally	Rarely/never used
Change teacher/class schedule within same school/program			
Educational assessment for possible regular education program modification			
Comprehensive assessment for special education eligibility determination			
Alternative ed program/placement at same/other school			
Referral for additional school-sponsored services (tutoring,			

Lunch Buddies, etc)			
Referral for community-based services for student/family			
Referral for substance abuse assessment of student			
Other strategies (specify)			

**IV. Interagency Involvement**

Virginia law clearly supports an interagency interdisciplinary approach to resolving problems that contribute to non-attendance. Communities have developed a wide range of practices from using existing FAPT teams to forming separate interdisciplinary teams that deal exclusively with court-referred cases.

**A. How are interagency reviews of attendance cases conducted in your locality?**

Describe briefly:

Categorize timeline:

- Before approaching juvenile court intake
- As part of the juvenile court intake process
- After a judicial hearing but before disposition
- Other (specify)

Interagency entity employed for review

FAPT       Other    If other, specify name of group: \_\_\_\_\_

**B. Who is involved with the interagency review?**

Agency/Organization	Regularly involved	Occasionally involved	Rarely/never involved
Local Department of Social Services			
Local Community Services Board (mental health, substance abuse svcs)			
Police/Sheriff's Office			
Private therapists			
Juvenile crime control/delinquency prevention agency			
Juvenile court intake officer			
Other community agency/organizations: (specify)			



**D. Based on your school division's experience in working with the juvenile court service intake and local judge, how would you characterize the effectiveness of your collaborative efforts with the court? Check one:**

Very effective/ effective in almost all cases	Somewhat effective in most cases	Mixed – Effective in some cases, ineffective in others	Effective in very few cases	Unable to judge

Comments related to D:

## VI. Effective Practices

Please think of attendance practices in terms of prevention, early intervention with emerging non-attendance, and intervention with chronic non-attendance:

**A. What do you consider to be the most effective truancy prevention strategies that your school division uses?**

**B. What do you consider to be the most effective early intervention strategies with emerging non-attendance that your school division uses?**

**C. What do you consider to be the most effective intervention strategies your school division uses in cases of chronic non-attendance?**

**D. If your locality had an additional \$4 per pupil for preventing truancy how would you spend it?**

Interviewer: Summarize response here:



Interviewer: Categorize response here:

Check here	Type of program/services that funding would be used for
	Supplemental educational/educational support services
	Alternative education options
	Staff training on school "connectedness" and related strategies
	Additional outreach services to non-attending students and their parents
	Additional parent education/support services
	Truancy court
	Additional mental health/substance abuse services
	Other: Specify

**Conclusion**

Thank informant for his/her time and valuable contribution to the study.

Remind informant that a preliminary summary of findings will be prepared for the upcoming Truancy Prevention Institute on Sept. 21 and that a full report will be prepared afterward. Ask if he/she would like to receive a copy. If so, obtain e-mail address:

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer Notes:**