A Data Analysis of Senior Student Truancy Data

for the Green Bay Area Public School District

by

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Education Specialist Degree
in

School Psychology

Approved: 6 Semester Credits

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ABSTRACT

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A Data Analysis of Senior Student Truancy Data for the Green Bay Area Public School District

(Title)

School Psychology, Dr. Ed Biggerstaff, 5/05 42

(Graduate Program) (Research Advisor) (Month/Year) (# of Pages)

American Psychological Association, 5th edition

(Name of Style Manual Used in this Study)

Truancy is an important issue in today's society, as it is a clear warning sign for other problems a student may be facing, and also has strong links to delinquency and substance use. Previous research has determined that there is a link between student attendance and student performance. The Green Bay Area Public School District is concerned with truancy levels within the district, and a committee has been formed to determine how to increase student attendance. The committee is currently focusing on the senior year and what changes could be made to the senior year to encourage attendance. This committee asserts that there is a group of students it calls "casually truant." This group is formed by students who have

skipped one or more periods between 5 and 25 times per semester. This study is a pilot analysis of casually truant senior student records. It confirms that within the Green Bay Area Public School District, there is a link between student attendance and performance as measured by grade point average. As student attendance decreases, so does student performance. In addition, this study examines the types of courses that casually truant seniors skip. Results indicate that English classes are most frequently skipped, followed by special education classes, and then study period. While a large number of truant students were enrolled in more than one English or special education course, most students who were truant from study period were only enrolled in one study period during the semester. These results suggest the District should consider reevaluating these and other courses in determining how to improve the senior year. Further research with truancy subgroups is recommended.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude for Dr. Biggerstaff's patience, suggestions, and guidance that made my completion of this study possible. He helped turn an unfortunate situation into a positive experience, and is both an excellent teacher and advisor. In addition, I would like to thank Jill Stanton, who has helped me throughout two research projects. I would like to express my appreciation to Mary Beth Tusing, who was willing to take on this project at a less than optimal time for her. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Ben, and my parents, Gary and Lynn, who have been extremely supportive of my education and research.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

As a part of its strategic plan, the Green Bay Area Public School District is determining how to improve the senior year in order to reduce student truancy. This study is a pilot analysis that will be part of ongoing research within the district.

Statement of the Problem

Student absenteeism and truancy is an ongoing area of concern for many school districts (Lee & Burkam, 2003). There is agreement that truancy is an important issue because of the negative impact of loss of human capital when students do not complete school (Lee & Burkam).

Student absenteeism and truancy are also areas of great concern for the Green Bay Area Public School District. The District reported on student absenteeism and truancy rates for the 2003-2004 school year in its 2004 report, Student Learning and Performance Data. This report indicated that at the high school level, there was an overall attendance rate of 89.2%, with lowest attendance for American Indian students (73.3%) and highest for White students (91.2%). Attendance was generally the same for males (89.4%) and females (89.0%). Attendance was higher for non-low socioeconomic status students (91.5%) than students of low socioeconomic status (83.5%). Attendance of non-English Language Learners was slightly higher (89.4%) than English Language Learners (87.9%). Attendance of students identified with a disability was lower (82.5%) than students not identified with a disability (90.7%). In comparing itself to nine other Wisconsin districts of comparable size, Green Bay ranked ninth lowest for attendance rates (out of 10) (Green Bay Area Public School District, 2004, December). This indicates that students within the School District have lower attendance rates compared to students in Wisconsin districts of comparable size.

The School District also examined truancy data. Habitual truants are defined as students who are absent from school without an acceptable excuse for part or all of five or more days in which school is held during a semester. Habitual truancy was at 34.6% overall at the high school level, with American Indian students having the highest rate (68.3%) and White students having the lowest rate (27.9%). Habitual truancy was higher for males (37.5%) than females (31.6%). In addition, truancy rates for students of low socioeconomic status were nearly two times higher (at 53.2%) than non-low socioeconomic students (26.8%) at the high school level. Habitual truancy was higher among English Language Learners (44.7%) than non ELL students (32.9%). Truancy was considerably higher among students with a disability (51.7%) compared to students without a disability (30.8%). Among 9 peer districts, Green Bay Area Public Schools had the 4th highest habitual truancy rate (out of 10) (Green Bay Area Public School District, 2004, December).

Student attendance and truancy are areas of great concern for the Green Bay Area Public School District. The District is developing strategies with the goal of a 3% annual reduction of students absent 10 or more days per year (Green Bay Area Public School District, 2003). A District Committee has been formed to review and implement these strategies. One of these strategies to reduce truancy is to review the present program for the senior year of high school to determine how to better engage seniors to school. This study is being conducted as a part of this review. It is a pilot analysis of senior truancy data that will be used in future planning for the senior year.

Purpose of the Study

There are two purposes for this study. The first is to find if there is a relationship between increased absences and decreased grade point average for students defined below as

"casual truants." The second is to determine if there is a trend in the types of courses that casually truant seniors skip.

Definition of Terms

Casual truants (As defined by The Green Bay Area Public School District's Truancy Committee) This group includes students who are absent from one or more periods without an acceptable excuse between five and 25 times per class, per semester.

Habitual truants (As defined by The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2004) This group is traditionally defined as students who are absent from school without an acceptable excuse for part or all of five or more days during a school semester.

Non-truants (As defined by The Green Bay Area Public School District's Truancy Committee) This group is defined as students who have fewer than five unexcused absences per class, per semester.

Limitations of the Study

This study examines data only for the Green Bay Area Public School District and is not intended to represent trends in truancy for other school districts. In addition, it only examines data for the senior year and will not represent trends for other grades within the District.

Methodology

This study will review recent truancy research, including companion issues related to truancy. The study will examine senior truancy data for the Green Bay Area Public School District. Finally, current related research and areas for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many educators, researchers, and policymakers recognize truancy as an important issue in today's society (Johnson, 1997; Johnson 2000; Lee & Burkam, 2003). While truancy is a costly behavior that has been linked to delinquency, substance use, home problems, and high school dropout, over the past 30 years, only two to six percent of the general public has seen truancy as a major problem facing our public schools (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2003; Phi Delta Kappa, 2003). The following chapter will review the importance of truancy, issues related to truancy, and truancy research conducted by the Green Bay Area Public School District.

Truancy as an Important Issue

To fully understand truancy as an important issue facing today's society, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the importance of schooling. In our nation, a large portion of a child's education occurs within a school setting. This education allows for generations to pass on what they have learned and to add to the skills and knowledge that the child has learned outside of school. Education allows for students to preserve previously acquired knowledge and culture, and to provide a platform for change (Bass, 1997). When students are not present in school, they miss the structured opportunity our society has developed to provide them with the knowledge, skills, and culture that we expect them to have.

In addition to educational opportunities, schools provide assistance to students and help prepare them for today's society and workforce. While the demand for unskilled labor is shrinking, truant students are likely poorly prepared for skilled work. When they enter the workforce, truants are less likely to secure work, and companies often must teach workers who were truant the skills needed for their jobs (Colorado Foundation for Families and

Children, 2003). Jobs now often demand students to be knowledgeable, and to have the ability to evaluate information, think critically, and solve problems (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Students must be committed to school in order to acquire these capabilities.

Schools not only help students prepare for work, but also help students facilitate their transition into adulthood and society. Students who leave school miss valuable information, developmental opportunities, and personal assistance by missing school experiences (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Individuals need educational skills to become attached and integrated in prosocial contexts (Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1995). These opportunities are sometimes only available within the school setting.

Truancy is also important when considered as a warning sign for other problems for which the student may be at-risk. Truancy, within a broad context, is a nonconforming behavior that often includes delinquency and drug use (Huizinga et al., 1995). Truancy provides an indication of low attachment to school, and of a student bonding with deviant peers (Hallfors et al., 2002). To prevent delinquency, substance abuse, and attachment to deviant peers, society and schools must intervene with truancy.

Truancy is an issue nation-wide. In some large cities, daily absentee rates are as high as 30% (Garry, 1996). School districts across the nation have made numerous efforts to increase student attendance. Such efforts vary widely and include linking grades with attendance, creating truancy assessment centers, training parents as truancy officers, and charging parents when their children miss school (Gehring, 2004). Some of these efforts have helped students to stay in or return to school.

Law enforcement agencies are also involved in truancy prevention. Many law enforcement agencies around the country have joined with schools for truancy interventions,

and a large number have developed programs to decrease student truancy (Gavin, 1997). While these efforts have resulted in a decrease in truancy, truancy remains a nation-wide problem. There was a 58% increase in the national rate of truancy offense cases between 1985 and 1998 (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002).

Truancy is an important issue that results in students being less prepared for today's society. Schools and law enforcement agencies nation-wide are attacking truancy through a variety of efforts. While truancy reduction programs are frequently successful, truancy remains an important issue nationally.

Truancy as a Global Issue

The United States is not alone in its concern regarding school truancy. Johnson (1997; 2000) conducted surveys with Canadian school personnel regarding risk factors, or attributes and circumstances that make risk outcomes more likely for students. One recent survey asked Canadian inner-city school principals to rate student-based risk factors, which include: drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, using hard drugs, engaging in criminal behavior, being sexually active, being truant from school, not enjoying school, learning English as a second language, having language limitations, and having limited life experiences. Out of these ten factors, principals rated school truancy as the highest risk factor contributing to overall student risk (Johnson, 2000). In a similar survey of teachers in Canadian inner-city schools, teachers rated truancy as the fourth highest of these same ten factors contributing to student risk, indicating that they believed student truancy strongly to absolutely contribute to student risk (Johnson, 1997).

A large body of truancy research has also come from England. These studies identify truancy as a major issue (Lauchlan, 2003; Bosworth, 1994). One study demonstrated that

there are a number of factors that coincide with student truancy, and that pupil performance is closely related to truancy (Bosworth). Schools in England have also developed interventions to tackle truancy (Lauchlan). Truancy is an issue that other nations have identified as contributing to student risk, and that these nations also work to prevent.

Trends in Truancy

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (2003) noted specific trends in student truancy. Truancy tends to be higher among males, minorities, urban youth, low socio-economic families, single-parent homes, families with many children, and children of dropouts. While these are factors that many schools and families are not able to easily change, parental involvement and attention also correlate with better attendance. Finally, truancy rates tend to increase as children get older, and many students who drop out of high school were truant as early as elementary school (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2003). These trends suggest a framework for understanding some of the issues that may coincide with truancy.

Coinciding Factors

In addition to noting trends in student truancy, there are a large number of factors that have been identified in research that correlate with a student's truancy. A Juvenile Justice Bulletin by Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001) divides these correlates into four factors: family, school, economic, and student. Family factors include issues that the student faces at home, such as lack of guidance or supervision, abuse, poverty, and parental attitudes regarding education. School factors include issues the student faces at school, such as school size and the school's ability to meet the needs of the student. Economic factors include economic problems the student may face, such as lack of affordable transportation and

student mobility. Student variables include issues the student may have personal difficulty with, such as drug and alcohol abuse, poor social skills, and poor health (Baker et al.).

The National Center for School Engagement (2005) also reported that the above factors coincide with student truancy. In addition, they noted that truants often have lower self-esteem and greater feelings of parental rejection than non-truants (National Center for School Engagement). Truants are less likely to view school as important and sometimes feel less competent in school than non-truants. Truant students frequently have problems with schoolwork and have difficulty keeping up with other students (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

These are a number of factors that truants may face in addition to their disengagement from school. Given truancy's relationship with the factors outlined above, truancy may be a warning sign for other family, school, economic, and personal problems that the student may be facing.

School Performance

While students may be facing a number of issues in addition to truancy, their performance in school may also suffer greatly if they are truant. Lamdin (1996) found that while the factors outlined above are related to student performance, student attendance is also significantly related to standardized achievement test performance. As student attendance increases, performance on standardized achievement tests increases as well. In addition, one study found that attendance had a greater impact on student performance than school size and average class size (Caldas, 1993). This indicates that while students may have other variables that impact their schooling, attendance is an important factor in their performance.

Truancy rates not only are related to a student's performance on standardized tests, but also to their school performance and achievement, as measured by grade point average.

Students who are truant have lower grade point averages than those who are not (Hallfors et al., 2002). Baker et al. (2001) found that students with the highest truancy rates have the lowest academic performance. In one study, when motivation was measured by truancy and student attendance, motivation had a stronger influence on school grades than cognitive, affective, or attitudinal factors alone (Anderson & Keith, 1997). This indicates that there is a strong link between school attachment and grades independent from other variables.

Truancy has also been an issue related to student performance at the college level. Studies have confirmed a strong relationship between attendance and grades in college (Gump, 2004). Truancy appears to be related to student performance throughout the levels of education.

Student performance on tests has become increasingly important in recent years with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (Gehring, 2000). According No Child Left Behind, schools must improve academic performance. In order to improve academic performance, students must come to school (Gehring). Schools that are faced with large school size and high student-to-teacher ratios are still able to improve student achievement simply by increasing student attendance rates (Caldas, 1993). All too often, research has focused on other factors that put students at risk for low performance, factors that are often outside of society's realm of control. Instead, researchers should focus on improving student attendance, which is significantly related to student performance (Lamdin, 1996). Schools' efforts to improve performance do not yield results if students are not present to learn.

Students who are truant perform more poorly on standardized tests and have lower grade point averages than their non-truant peers. The impact of attendance on grades and standardized tests is also evident at the college level. As pressure for schools to improve

student performance increases, it is essential that students attend school to increase their performance.

Dropping Out

Many students who are truant perform so poorly in school that they are unable to catch up. As a result, many students who are truant drop out of school (Garry, 1996). One study found that 80% of dropouts were chronically truant (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002). Truancy places students at-risk for dropping out of school, which has serious implications for both students and society. Dropouts have fewer job prospects, lower salaries, and are more often unemployed than high school graduates (Baker et al., 2001; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). For example, in 1993 approximately three out of five high school dropouts were unemployed (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf). Dropouts are more likely to depend on welfare and more likely to be imprisoned (Baker et al.). The average dropout costs over $200,000 during their lifetime for government social services and criminal justice costs (National Center for School Engagement, 2005). Each year's class of dropouts costs the Nation over $240 billion in lost earnings and subsequent taxes over their lifetimes. This cost does not include the cost of law enforcement, prison programs, welfare, healthcare, and other social services (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf,). Truancy often leads to dropping out, which is very costly to society.

Students typically disengage from school prior to dropping out. This disengagement is often noted through students cutting class and skipping school (Fredricks et al., 2004). By intervening with students who are disengaged from school, schools can make it less likely that students will drop out.

Youth Study

Three studies in Denver, Pittsburgh, and Rochester revealed developmental pathways that describe disruptive behavior for childhood and adolescence. Students who later had difficulties with juvenile offenses typically began exhibiting stubborn behavior at a young age. Next, some of these students began exhibiting minor acts such as lying and shoplifting, followed by defiance and minor aggression. Then, more serious offenses began as well as avoidance of authority, which includes truancy. For some students, avoidance of authority was followed by more serious violent or delinquent behaviors. These studies suggest that later, more serious offenses can be prevented by intervention with preceding behaviors. While not all students who are truant engage in more serious offenses, by intervening with truants, society may be able to prevent some students from engaging in such offenses (Huizinga et al., 1995).

Delinquency

Delinquency is another area of concern that is problematic to society. It is typically measured by the following offenses: theft, $50-$100; theft, over $100; theft, motor vehicle; burglary; aggravated assault; robbery; rape; gang fighting; purse snatching/pick pocketing; theft from an automobile; sell of marijuana; sell of hard drugs; and, fencing (selling or buying stolen goods) (Huizinga et al., 1995).

There is a well-documented link between truancy and delinquency that was recognized as early as the 1800s (Gavin, 1997). Many juvenile offenders are also habitual truants, and chronic absenteeism is considered the most powerful predictor of delinquent behavior (National Center for School Engagement, 2005; Garry, 1996). Truancy is a clear warning sign for delinquent activity, social isolation, educational failure, expulsion, risk of teen

pregnancy, and drop out (Baker et al., 2001; National Center for School Engagement). Students who are truant are more likely to engage in a number of delinquent behaviors.

There is a large body of research that links truancy with crime. Many communities have noticed that many daytime crimes such as burglary and shoplifting are committed by truants who would otherwise be in school (Gavin, 1997). In addition to these crimes, students who are often absent are at a higher risk of engaging in violent behavior (Garry, 1996). These behaviors tend to start at an early age; for one-tenth of delinquents, a street offense was committed by the age of seven. In addition, the rate of street offenses continues to increase up to the age of 17, and youth who are not highly committed to school one year have higher levels of street crimes the following year (Huizinga et al., 1995). Nationally, efforts to reduce truancy have produced significant reductions in crimes associated with juvenile offenders (Gavin; National Center for School Engagement, 2005). When Milwaukee schools began a Truancy Abatement Burglary Suppression Program, there was a reduction in violent crime during school days. Homicides went down 43%, sexual assaults went down 24%, aggravated assaults went down 24%, and robberies went down 16% (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). Educational success is necessary for children on probation or in aftercare to prevent recidivism and further involvement in justice systems (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf). As communities fight truancy and educate students, they seem to be able to reduce crime.

Substance Use

In addition to a strong link with crime, truancy is also linked to substance use. A study of 58 communities' school survey data collected from 1980-2000 determined that truancy was a strong predictor of substance use, especially at the middle school level. Students who are truant are more likely to use cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, inhalants, and

other illegal drugs. For example, one study found that the rate of marijuana use among eighth graders was 27% for truants, compared to six percent of non-truants (Hallfors et al., 2002). Truancy was also a predictor of substance use at the high school level. The rate of marijuana use among twelfth graders was 33% for truants, and 13% for non-truants (Hallfors et al.). Frequent truants are also more likely to affiliate with drug-using peers, and often use drugs while cutting class (Hallfors et al.).

The use of such drugs can add to the difficulties the student may already be facing. A study by Huizinga et al. (1995) found that with the onset of drug use, violent offenses and the carrying of concealed weapons tended to increase. In addition, continued drug use was related to an increase in violent offenses and frequency of carrying concealed weapons. Changes in substance use are found to have a larger impact on delinquent behavior than the reverse (Huizinga et al.).

School Problems

Truancy is also related to problems within the school setting. For example, 70% of suspended youth were chronically truant within the last six months before their suspension. Fifty percent of expelled students had been chronically truant in the year preceding their expulsion (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002). Many youth who are habitually truant are the same youth who bring weapons to school, bully peers, or disrupt the school's learning environment (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

Truants' difficulties at school are not limited to behavioral problems. Many students who become delinquent have undiagnosed learning disabilities (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). Schools must understand the link between truancy, delinquency, and school problems to prevent further difficulties. It appears that for most jail inmates, school difficulties and

disengagement typically occur before crime alone forces them to drop out of school. Over a third of jail inmates said the main reason they quit school was because of academic problems, behavior problems, or lost interest, whereas only one in six dropped out due to illegal activities and related consequences (Harlow, 2003).

While the relationships between truancy, dropping out, and delinquency are strong, schools are able to intervene with school engagement, as it is considered malleable. Commitment to school has been identified as a protective factor for avoidance of delinquency (Huizinga et al., 1995). Students often disengage from school well before they become habitual truants or drop out (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002; Lee & Burkam, 2003). By decreasing truancy rates and increasing student engagement, communities are able to prevent the poor outcomes of delinquency (Huizinga et al.). By understanding the strong link between truancy and delinquency, communities can help students who are at-risk for future difficulties.

Truants as Adults

The link between problematic behavior and truancy is not limited to children. Adults who were truant as children are more likely to have difficulties in adulthood with violence, marital problems, job problems, adult criminality, and incarceration than adults who were not truant (Baker et al., 2001). For example, the majority of criminals were school truants (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2003). In 1997, 74.5% of state and 59.4% of federal prison inmates had not completed high school (Harlow, 2003). Clearly, the difficulties related to truancy do not end when the student becomes an adult.

The Cost of Truancy

Truancy is an issue that has financial implications for society as well. While an exact dollar amount cannot be put on the cost to society resulting from truancy, there are significant costs due to a less educated work force, increased daytime crime, business loss because of said crime, cost of social services, and loss of education funding (Baker et al., 2001; Garry, 1996). In addition, there is a negative impact of the loss of human capital when students do not complete school (Lee & Burkam, 2003). As noted previously, if the truant dropped out of high school, the costs increase. It is estimated that one high school dropout costs the public over $200,000 throughout his/her life in public service programs, and each year's class of dropouts cost the Nation more than $240 billion in lost earnings and foregone taxes (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2003; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

Truancy is costly not only to society, but to individuals as well. Adults who were truant have a reduced earning capacity (Garry, 1996). Adults who were often truant tend to have lower paying jobs and a higher reliance on healthcare (Baker et al., 2001). The costs of truancy to both society and those who were truant are great, and truancy interventions help reduce these costs.

Wisconsin Law

Truancy laws are designed to help states combat truancy. These laws vary from state to state. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2004), students are legally required to attend school either until they graduate or until the end of the term in which they turn 18. Students are required to attend school regularly during the full school periods and hours. Truancy proceedings begin after a student misses part or all of five or more days in a semester without an acceptable excuse. If students do not attend school, their

parents and guardians could be fined up to $300 or imprisoned for 30 days, for the first offense (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction). These laws enforce the importance of attending school.

Green Bay Area Public School District Open/Closed Campus Research

The Green Bay Public School District shares the concerns regarding student truancy and has conducted research to better understand truancy within the district. As part of its action planning to reduce student absenteeism, the District gathered data regarding its open campus policy for lunch (Green Bay Area Public Schools, 2004, November). This study found that a higher percentage of students were truant during the periods before and after lunch than during the remaining school periods. Of the students who were considered truant (missing five or more periods during the school year), 21.6% had higher truancy during the periods before and after their lunch hour. This research was presented to the School Board; however, no decisions have been made yet regarding the school's lunch policies.

Senior Year Planning

The Green Bay Area Public School District is now examining how to improve the senior year to reduce student truancy. It is focusing its efforts on truant students who have not completely disengaged from school, or those students who still attend school. In addition, the current study examines truancy specifically for the senior year. It will identify the relationship between senior truancy and grade point average. Next, it will determine if there is a trend in the District regarding the types of classes that students skip. This information will assist the District in its decision making about how to change the senior year.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This research is being conducted as a pilot analysis for the Green Bay Area Public School District's Truancy Committee. It will determine if a link between student truancy and low student performance exists for senior students within the Green Bay Area Public School District. It will also describe trends in the type of courses that District seniors skip. The following chapter reviews the student records selected, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and limitations of the methodology.

Subject Selection and Description

The records of senior students within the Green Bay Area Public School District were reviewed in this study. These records were for the first semester of the 2004-2005 school year. These senior students' records were selected from the District's four regular education high schools. Records for students who had fewer than twenty-five unexcused absences in all periods were included in the study. The records of students who were not enrolled in their courses throughout the semester due to dropout, chronic absenteeism, withdrawal from courses, or incarceration were not included in the study.

Student records were then utilized to break students into two groups, non-truant and casually truant. The first group, non-truants, consisted of students who had fewer than five absences in all periods. The second group, casual truants, consisted of students who had between five and twenty-five absences per period, for one or more periods.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected from the School District's student record database, Zangle 2004. It included the students' identifying information, unexcused absences by period, and semester grade point average. This information was transferred to an Excel 2000 file. The students'

schedules for the first semester were also collected from Zangle, and the absences by course type were transferred to another Excel file.

Data Analysis

Grade point average analysis. Using the Excel 2000 file, the average of the non-truants' and average of the casually truants' grade point average were calculated. Next, the casually truant group was sub-grouped into the number of periods from which they were truant, in increments of ten periods. The average grade point averages were then calculated for each subgroup.

Type of courses skipped analysis. For students within the casually truant group, all periods were identified that had been skipped five or more times during the semester. Using Zangle 2004, the researcher determined what type of course the student was scheduled for during their truancy. The type of course was identified by the class identification code given by the School District. Two courses, study period and Reaching Educational and Personal Objectives, were assigned their own category, as they identified a specific course or program of interest. The type of course was broken down into the following categories:

1) Agri-science (courses related to the environment and natural resources, such as Animal Science and Landscaping and Horticulture)
2) Business (courses in the field of business and marketing, such as Computerized Accounting, Marketing, Keyboard Skills, and Web Page Design)
3) English (courses in English Language Arts, such as English, Theater, Writing, and Communication)
4) Family and consumer sciences (courses related to family, economic, and social systems, such as Culinary Arts, Child Service Skills, and Certified Nursing Assistant)

5) Math (courses in mathematics, such as Integrated Math, Geometry, Statistics, and Calculus)
6) Personal Finance/Management (course required for graduation that addresses real-life personal and financial situations)
7) Physical Education (courses in health and physical education, such as Physical Education, Adaptive Physical Education, and Health)
8) Reaching Educational and Personal Objectives program (self-contained program for special education students who are credit deficient; includes a work-study component)
9) Science (courses in science, such as Physical Science, Biology, Chemistry)
10) Social Studies (courses in history and social issues, such as History, Economics, and Geography)
11) Special Education (courses for students identified as having an educational disability, such as Special Education Resource, Communication Skills, History, and Math)
12) Study Period (non-credit period in which students complete homework or study)
13) Technology Education (courses related to engineering, science, and technology, such as Small Engines, Graphics, Architecture, and Engineering)

Categories that had fewer than 100 periods skipped were eliminated from the study, as the categories typically had only one class within them, or had a small number of students enrolled in the class. These categories include English as a Second Language, Foreign Language, Music, Art, Health, Off-Campus, Utility, and Plato. The Cooperative Educational Services Agency program was also excluded from this portion of the study, as only two students were casually truant in that course. Courses within the category of “Other” besides

Study Hall and Reaching Educational and Personal Objectives were also excluded, as the District uses this category to identify courses that do not fit into any other category.

Two students had more than one course scheduled during a period from which they were truant. The information from this period was excluded from this portion of study, since it could not be determined which course they had skipped.

After it was determined from which periods students were absent, the number of absences per course was then inputted into another Excel 2000 file. These absences were then added to determine the total number of periods skipped by course type.

Limitations

Given the nature of the research, the group sizes vary greatly between the non-truant and casually truant groups and casually truant subgroups. In addition, the possibility of human error for the input of data into Zangle 2004, and the input of course types into Excel 2000 exists. This analysis also only includes descriptive data, and is not intended to predict or demonstrate causal relationships.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This pilot analysis, which reviewed senior student attendance records, has two purposes. The first is to find if there is a relationship between increased absences and decreased grade point average for casually truant students. The second purpose is to determine if there is a trend in the types of courses that casually truant seniors skip.

This analysis used student records to collect information regarding students' attendance, grade point average, and course schedule. Using this information, the average grade point average of non-truants and casually truant subgroups was calculated. The type of course that students were truant from was identified and totaled. Descriptive statistics are used to synthesize the information gathered.

The Relationship Between Absences and Grade Point Average

The analysis of average grade point averages between the non-truant and casually truant seniors confirms the relationship between school attendance and grade point average within the Green Bay Area Public School District. There were a total of 1376 student records used in this portion of the study. There were 1148 students within the non-truant group, and their average grade point average was 2.789. The casually truant group included 228 students, and the average grade point average for this group was 1.995. There was a difference of 0.794 grade points between the two groups, indicating that the grade point average of the casually truant group tended to be lower than the grade point average of the non-truant group.

The average grade point average for the casually truant seniors was further examined by subgroups based on the total number of unexcused periods in the semester. As illustrated in Figure A, there were differences noted in average grade point average even among

students who had skipped only five to 14 periods per semester. The average grade point average for the 60 students who had unexcused absences for five to 14 periods was 2.400, a difference of 0.389 grade points from the non-truant group. For the next group, which included 70 students who had skipped between 15 and 24 periods, the average grade point average was 1.946, a difference of 0.843 grade points from the non-truant group.

The number of students included in each subgroup decreased for the groups that included more than 25 period absences, and Figure A shows that average grade point average was around 1.9 for students who skipped between 15 and 54 periods. For the 10 students who skipped 25 to 34 periods, the average grade point average was 1.968; for the 24 students who skipped 35 to 44 periods, it was 1.886; for the 11 students who skipped 45 to 54 periods, it was 1.913.

The average grade point average and the number of students included in each subgroup tended to decrease again for students who were absent for 55 or more periods, as illustrated in Figure A. The average grade point average for the seven students who skipped 55 to 64 periods was 1.547, a difference of 1.242 grade points from the non-truant group. For the six students who skipped 65 to 74 periods, the average grade point average was 1.672, and for the eight students who skipped 75 to 84 periods, it was 1.664.

Grade point averages again decreased when students missed 85 or more periods. For the eight students who skipped 85 to 94 periods, the average grade point average was 1.470. The eight students who skipped 95 or more periods had an average grade point average of 1.322, a difference of 1.467 grade points from the non-truant group.

For each casual truant subgroup included, the average grade point average was lower than the average grade point average of the non-truant group. This implies that within the

Green Bay Area Public School District, student absence has a negative impact on student performance as measured by grade point average.

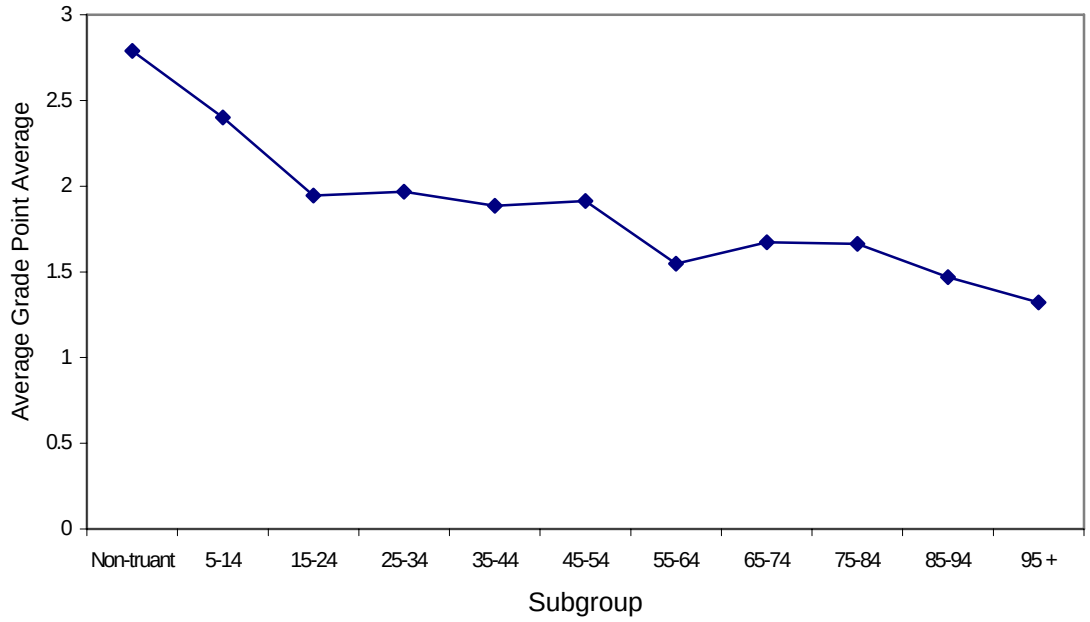

Figure A. Average grade point average by non-truancy group and casually truant subgroups of total unexcused period absences.

Trends in Types of Courses Skipped

There were a total of 226 student records used in this portion of the study, which identified trends in the types of courses that seniors skipped. It is important to note that a number of students were enrolled in more than one course in a given area. For example, one student may have been absent from three different English classes during their school day. Another student may have been absent from two different social studies classes during their day. As a result, a link was noted between the number of periods in a course area that students are truant from and the number of total unexcused absences in that area.

Figure B illustrates that the courses that were skipped most frequently were English classes. Seventy students were truant from 96 different English classes, indicating that a

number of students were enrolled in more than one English class during the first semester. These students had a total of 904 total unexcused absences in those classes.

The next course group with high frequency of skipping was Special Education courses. There were a total of 32 special education students who were truant from 74 different special education classes. Again, a number of students were enrolled in more than one special education class. Their unexcused periods totaled 669. The difference between the number of English periods and the number of Special Education classes skipped was 235 periods.

Study period was the third most frequently skipped class. The number of students who skipped a study period was greater than the number of students who skipped a special education class; however, these students were enrolled in fewer periods of study hall. Fifty-eight students were truant from 60 study hall periods. Their unexcused absences totaled 619 periods.

Math and social studies courses had approximately the same rate of skipping, as illustrated in Figure B. There were 44 students who were truant from a total of 53 math periods. These students had a total of 524 unexcused absences. There were 39 students who were absent from 50 social studies courses. These students had a total of 517 unexcused absences.

While approximately the same numbers of students were truant in science as in math, the students in science tended to have fewer truancies in their courses. There were a total of 37 students absent from 40 different science periods. Their unexcused absences totaled 371 periods, 146 fewer periods than period absences in social studies courses.

The course with the seventh highest rate of absences was physical education courses. Twenty-three students were absent from 26 different physical education courses. Their absences totaled 254 periods.

The Reaching Educational and Personal objectives program, technology education, and personal finance/management courses had approximately the same number of unexcused periods. There were 14 students who were casually truant from 18 periods of the Reaching Educational and Personal objectives program. These students had a total of 210 absences. Nineteen students were truant from 24 different technology education courses. These students had a total of 209 absences. The 18 students who were casually truant from personal finance/management were enrolled in the same number of courses; students did not take more than one personal finance/management course during the semester. These students had a total of 202 unexcused period absences.

Business, family and consumer sciences, and agri-science courses had fewer than 200 periods absences. There were 19 students who were truant from 21 different business periods. Their unexcused absences totaled 176 periods. Eleven students were truant from 12 different family and consumer science courses. Their unexcused absences totaled 123 periods. Nine students were truant from a total of 13 different agri-science courses. Their unexcused absences totaled 108 periods.

This portion of the study demonstrated trends in the type of courses that seniors skipped. English courses had the highest frequency of unexcused absences for the semester. This frequency of skipping appeared to be related to the number of courses that the truant students were enrolled in for a given course area. Across all course categories, students who

were truant from a class tended to be truant an average of approximately 10 periods in that class per semester.

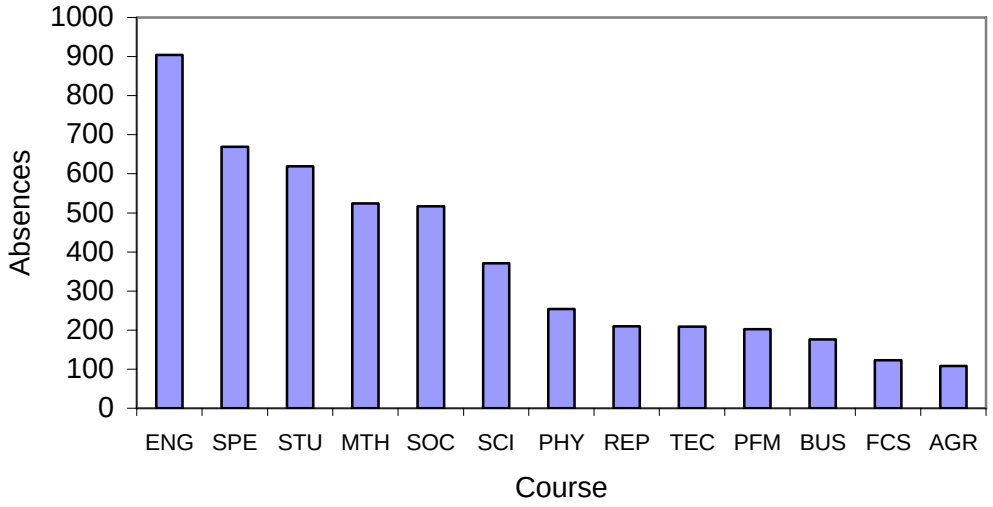

Figure B. The total number of casually truant seniors' unexcused period absences by course type. (ENG=English, SPE=Special Education, STU=Study Period, MTH=Math, SOC=Social Studies, SCI=Science, PHY=Physical Education, REP=Reaching Educational and Personal Objectives, TEC=Technology Education, PFM=Personal Finance/Management, BUS=Business, FCS=Family and Consumer Sciences, AGR=Agri-Science)

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Truancy is an important issue in today's society. Schools play an important role in preparing students for the workforce and for life. There are a number of family, economic, school, and student factors that coincide with truancy. In addition, researchers have identified a link between student performance and student attendance. As students are increasingly truant from school, their performance (as measured by grade point average and standardized test scores) tends to decrease. Many students who drop out from school were previously truant from school, and their disengagement began before they dropped out.

Truancy is also part of a developmental pathway that can lead to additional problems for students. Truancy is considered a warning sign for delinquency, social isolation, educational failure, and risk of pregnancy. Truants are at a higher risk for substance use than non-truants, especially at the middle school level. Students who are truant are more likely to have problems in school, including suspension and expulsion.

The issues related to truancy continue when the student becomes an adult. Adults who were truant as children are more likely to have difficulties in adulthood with violence, marital problems, job problems, adult criminality, and incarceration than adults who were not truant. There are considerable costs of truancy to society due to a less educated work force, increased daytime crime, business loss because of said crime, cost of social services, and loss of education funding.

Truancy is also an important issue within the Green Bay Area Public School District, and has been studied by the District. One study found that there were higher rates of truancy in the hour before and after the lunch period. A committee was formed to tackle the issue of truancy within the District. It is currently focusing its efforts on the senior year, and on

students it defines as “casually truant.” This study is a pilot data analysis for the District truancy committee. It examines senior student truancy and grade point average, and identifies the types of courses that students tend to skip. The information gathered from this study will assist the District with further planning.

Limitations

This study is only intended to represent senior truancy data within the Green Bay Area Public School District. It is not intended to predict or determine causal relationships. There is the possibility for human error within the analysis, and the group sizes vary.

Conclusions

The Grade Point Average Analysis confirmed that as student absences increase, student performance decreases, as measured by grade point average. Students who were not truant tended to have a higher grade point average than students who were casually truant. In addition, students who were more often truant had lower grade point averages than students who were less often truant; however, this relationship was not perfectly linear. Large differences in grade point average were noted between the non-truant group and the casually truant group that had skipped five to 14 periods. The grade point average then seemed to plateau around 1.9 for casual truants who had skipped 15 to 54 periods. Grade point average again decreased in the groups that had higher rates of truancy.

Analysis of student attendance records and schedules indicates that English courses had the highest frequency of skipping by seniors. It is important to note that the District requires four credits of high school English for graduation, more credits than required for any other course area. A number of truant students were enrolled in, and therefore truant from more than one English course. For example, several students were enrolled in three English

classes during the semester, presumably to meet graduation requirements. When these students were casually truant, their truancy was typically in more than one English course.

Special education courses had the second highest frequency of skipping. As with English courses, there were a large number of students who were enrolled in more than one special education course. In addition, students with disabilities tend to have higher rates of truancy than non-disabled peers, according to District reports. These two factors help explain why truancy rates in special education courses are quite high considering the number of students enrolled in them.

One interesting finding was that study period also had a high frequency of truancy. Both the English and special education categories had more than one class within them; that is to say, they represented more than one course. Study period, on the other hand included only one class, and only two students were enrolled in more than one study period. Nevertheless, study hall had the third highest frequency of periods skipped. It is possible that students do not view study hall as an important class since the period is for independent work rather than instruction. It is also possible that more truant students enroll in a study hall so that they can make up the missed work from their truancy in other courses.

Another finding was that the number of different periods the students were truant from was related to the number of total unexcused periods. In all categories, students who were truant from any course were likely to be absent approximately ten times in that course per semester. This indicates that while students may have shown a preference for skipping one class over another, the frequency of skipping that class was approximately equal across class categories.

Recommendations

District changes. This study was intended to provide information that would help the District understand senior truancy better, and to provide baseline data for the casually truant group. Based on the study's findings, several changes to the senior year could be explored further.

As found in previous research, truant students often have difficulty catching up after they are truant, which can lead to dropout. The District provides the opportunity for students to obtain the credits necessary for graduation by allowing students to take more than one English class. As the study found, though, students tend to have high truancy rates in English. Perhaps the District should explore other possibilities for helping students to catch up in English rather than enrolling students in separate one-credit English courses. For example, the District could offer an English course that is designed specifically for students who are credit deficient in English. The course could span over two periods, and would allow for students to have a comprehensive two credit English course rather than taking two separate courses. It would allow for seniors to receive remedial instruction before tackling the more difficult work expected of senior-level English courses. In addition, students would be able to focus on one course rather than two. There would be less overlap of large or similar assignments that they may have in separate courses.

The course area that had the second highest frequency of truancy was special education. This is especially problematic considering special education students already have another barrier to learning besides attendance. In addition, special education students have smaller class sizes and have more opportunities to build relationships with staff, factors that typically decrease the likelihood of truancy. The Truancy Committee plans to hold a focus

group to ask seniors for their perspectives on truancy, and what changes could be made to decrease truancy. Perhaps the District would find it beneficial to hold such focus groups specifically for special education students. This would help the District to determine how to better meet the needs of these students.

The Green Bay Area Public School District has demonstrated in previous research that student truancy tends to be higher in the periods before and after lunch. To date, the Board of Education has not reached consensus to close the campus during lunch, which the District hopes would lower truancy. Perhaps another viable option would be to hold open study halls for seniors during the hour before or after lunch. This would allow students who wish to take an extended lunch off campus to do so without being truant. It would also allow students the opportunity to make decisions about how to best use their free time, decisions that they will be making after graduation. In addition, the open study hall could be used as an incentive for attending class.

Previous research has demonstrated that truancy interventions are most effective when they address not only student truancy, but are also a collaborative effort to address delinquency and substance abuse. While changing the senior year may impact senior student truancy, the School District may also want to consider a more comprehensive intervention for those students who need additional support to return to school.

Future truancy research. While the current focus of this study is senior truancy, the District Truancy Committee plans to examine truancy at all levels of education. The District may find it beneficial to conduct similar analyses at the different grade levels to determine if the trends demonstrated in the present study are consistent across grade levels.

This study points to new research that would be beneficial to both the District and to other truancy researchers. First, the trend in classes skipped appeared to vary for students who had fewer than 15 total unexcused period absences. These students were often truant in only one course during the day. It appeared that the students who had fewer than 15 total unexcused periods tended to skip less academically demanding courses, namely study hall and physical education. This observation can only be verified by further research.

This study also indicates trends in the types of courses seniors skip that may or may not exist in other school districts. Other districts may find it beneficial to conduct similar research that would determine if their students skip the same types of courses as students within the Green Bay Area Public School District. This would help educators examine if there are certain areas of instruction or programs that may need to be redesigned to better engage students.

The Green Bay Area Public School District has high truancy and low attendance rates when compared to Wisconsin districts of comparable size. As they did with their Open/Closed Campus Report, the District may wish to consult with these other districts regarding their truancy policies and interventions. This would help the District to understand how other districts in Wisconsin are working to engage students.

Most research in truancy has focused on habitual truants and students who have dropped out. The Green Bay Area Public School District has proposed another level of disengagement between non-truants and truants, those students it defines as casual truants. This is a step in the direction of understanding and studying disengagement and truancy as continuums rather than distinctive categories. According to the current definitions of truancy, a student who has skipped study hall 5 times during the semester and a student who has

skipped 75 days out of the semester are grouped together as habitual truants. It seems intuitive that these students will likely need different interventions to encourage them to return to school full-time, and that they will need different supports to remain in school once they have returned. By understanding the different levels of truancy, we will be more able to understand truants and therefore design effective interventions.

Truancy is an issue that has not received a great deal of public attention despite its links to many other problems. Research is important as it increases knowledge of truancy and helps the public to understand the issues related to truancy better. As society expects students to gain specific knowledge and skills from education, we must make sure that they are coming to school and attending their classes.

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