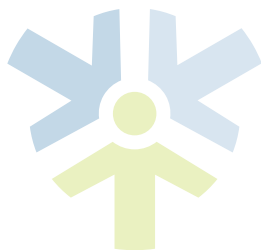# The Importance of Student Attendance

White Paper

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Improving school attendance is an important goal for any school district. Not only is attendance a matter of school funding, but it is a key contributor to a child's educational success. Numerous studies have proven that those individuals who do not complete high school are "more likely to be unemployed, in poor health, and impoverished. . ." (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morrison iv). In addition, dropouts are more likely to become parents of children who themselves later drop out of school.

High school dropouts, on average, earn "$9,200 less per year than high school graduates" (Dunsworth and Billings 136). In addition to financial repercussions, the societal costs likewise add up. For example:

- "Over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about $260,000 less than a high school graduate.

- If the male graduation rate were increased by only 5 percent, the nation would see an annual savings of $8 billion in crime-related costs.

- Dropouts from the class of 2008 alone will cost the nation more than $319 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes."

    (Alliance for Excellent Education 1)

Each year, approximately 1.2 million students fail to graduate from high school. More than half of these students come from minority groups. Nearly 2,000 of the more than 27,000 high schools in the nation have been identified as producing more than half of the nation's dropouts. Statistics show that in these "'dropout factories,' the number of seniors enrolled is routinely 60 percent or less than the number of freshmen three years earlier" (Alliance for Excellent Education 1). To combat this rising number, districts must seek first to understand the causes for truancy before developing solutions.

Along with the abundant financial repercussions of student truancy, school districts must consider the personal and environmental hardships that contribute to truancy among students. The following white paper will discuss the definitions of truancy and tardiness, the factors that contribute to them, and what educators can do to counteract these tendencies.

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SECTION 1: KNOW WHY

Truancy

The word *truancy* is typically synonymous with unexcused absences from school. However, truant behavior does not necessarily constitute chronic truancy. As described in *Improving School Attendance: A Resource Guide for Virginia Schools,* "A student displays truant behavior with a single unexcused absence from school, but a student needs to reach or surpass a certain number of unexcused absences to be considered a chronic truant" (3). The distinction therefore would imply that there is no universal standard of school absences that defines truancy (or chronic truancy)—so this definition will differ from state to state.

Tardiness

Students who are late to class or are *tardy*, while not as problematic as truants, still have a negative effect in the classroom setting and requires some attention in addition to chronic truants. Latecomers disrupt the focus of the rest of their class, bring negative attention on themselves, interrupt the teacher's thinking, often become disruptive after they sit, and proceed to ask questions about items explained prior to their arrival. Tardies can be considered as harmful as truancies when taking into account the larger number of students affected by another's lateness.

Categories of Conflict

Many researchers state truancy is not the issue, but that it indicates the presence of other problems (Virginia 4). Educators cannot create effective

solutions to combat truancy when they do not understand why students are not in school.

The term "at risk" is used to describe "those students whose life experiences put them in the group that is statistically most likely to drop out of school" (Dunsworth and Billings 135). For these individuals, "negative experiences tend to pile up over time until so many have accumulated that they seem insurmountable. Failure seems inevitable, and remaining in school, not worth the effort or simply too painful" (Dunsworth and Billings 135).

Students typically encounter three categories of conflict which contribute to their level of attendance and participation at school:

1. School

2. Home

3. Student-related

These categories are by no means all-inclusive, but serve as a comprehensive list of the most typical contributing factors. The educational and personal environments a student lives in are ever-changing and depend upon their location in the country; there may be more underlying reasons than those explained here.

Conflict at School

A student may find themselves affected by a number of issues while at school that may be dependent upon the environment and conduct of those present (i.e., school size, administrators, teachers, and other students). These conditions are further influenced by the learning styles of peers, cultural diversity, and school policies for addressing truancy.

There are five school-related conflicts found to be most common:

1. *Poor links with teachers, staff, administration*

When a student has a conflict of personalities with the teacher (e.g., the student tends to ask too many questions and the teacher chides them frequently for it), the child feels unwelcome or self conscious and will either skip the class or the entire day.

Blum (1) defines school connectedness, or "linkage," as "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals. . ." When students do not believe that their teachers care about individual growth, they find little motivation to participate in class or grow academically.

2. *Bullying or negative social links*

Students skip whole days of school when they feel they are not safe. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety ranks second-only to physiological needs (food, sleep, etc.), which puts it as a high priority among the basic needs of any person. Bullies cultivate fear among students and can convince the student their academic advancement does not compare to their own physical and emotional safety. Bullying can be done by students, staff, and administrators alike and can have a long-lasting effect.

Victims of bullying have most often been found to have "an increased chance of academic failure, low self-esteem and inability to connect socially" (Boeke, Mann, and Seeley 8). There are also long-term repercussions for bullies as well, typically manifesting in a criminal record by age 24.

Bullying occurs with the most frequency in a middle school setting. In a survey performed by Kaye Boeke, Gretchen Mann, and Ken Seeley, Ed.D. it was discovered that, of 25,641 respondents within the Adams County region of Colorado, 38% of middle school students had been harassed or