



International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

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School Attendance

When school attendance became free, compulsory and universal, nations looked for ways to make sure that all children enroll and attend regularly. In many countries, such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Ghana and Malta, school boards hired attendance officers or welfare workers to encourage and sometimes enforce school attendance. As it soon became clear that social problems prevented children from attending school, this attendance role was gradually broadened to include social work activities, and social workers were hired to work in schools.

Improving school attendance is still a central part of the school social work role around the world. Most countries place a high value on school attendance. For example, China requires 260 school days a year, Germany about 240, Nigeria 190 and the US about 180. School social workers are well placed and trained to understand the dynamics of absenteeism and to apply social work skills to resolve problems of absenteeism and increase attendance rates.

Why children miss school

Forces within the individual, family, school, community and society combine to result in a pupil missing too many school days. It is important to consider how much absence is too much. For example, if the average attendance rate at a school is 95%, the school population is missing on average 9 days (in the US) to 13 days (in China) a year. However, there are often individuals who miss 20 days or more. This amounts to a full month of school. These children miss valuable instruction and make classroom teaching and learning difficult.

It has been common to label absenteeism as “truancy”. Regrettably, the label “truancy” permits schools to ignore the complexity of absenteeism and to avoid finding remedies. In 2005, The Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment of Malta developed definitions for non-attendance in order to avoid labeling all as “truancy”. This is a helpful starting place for schools.

- *Unauthorised absenteeism with parental knowledge (condoned by parent)*
- *School refusal/School phobia (avoidance due to anxiety)*
- *Truancy (absent without parent’s permission)*
- *School Transience (moving without notice)*
- *Authorised non-attendance (illness, vacation, bereavement, religious observance)*

https://www.education.gov.mt/MediaCenter/Docs/1_school_attendance_improvement.pdf

Effective intervention

These categories cover widely different situations that the social worker needs to deal with. Moving away from the term “truancy” is a positive step. School systems achieve better

results when they focus on “improving attendance”, rather than on the judgmental term “truancy” that often leads to punitive and counter-productive measures. Punitive measures are continuing as reported recently, illustrating both their ineffectiveness and potential to be damaging.

A mother from Cornwall has been jailed for 20 weeks after continuing to fail to ensure her three ‘truanting’ children regularly attended school. The court heard that the woman’s children – aged 5, 14 and six years old – all continued to miss school despite their mother being successfully prosecuted by the Local Authority on four previous occasions. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-21499008>

Unsuccessful and punitive interventions have prompted the UK Government to commission a review of attendance policies. Charlie Taylor, the Government’s Expert Adviser on Behaviour, has just published a report *Improving attendance at school*, which recommends many constructive measures including focusing on improving total attendance, avoiding the negative term “truancy” and working on early intervention with troubled families. School social workers can use their full range of assessment skills, knowledge of behavioral change, systems theory and intervention skills to work on all categories of absenteeism. Improving *total* school attendance is also a worthy focus, enabling school social workers to produce statistically significant results that demonstrate how they can manage effectively a complex problem that schools want resolved.

While penalties for parents are still in effect, training for school personnel working on attendance in the UK (<http://www.naswe.org.uk/>) now reflects a more constructive approach and includes topics such as:

- Working effectively with parents
- Engaging parents to take an interest in child’s learning
- Parent involvement policy
- Setting targets
- Analyzing data
- Early intervention
- Using best practices
- Whole school approach
- Awards for attendance
- Staged intervention
- Parenting contract
- Engaging hard to reach students and parents

School refusal

Schools everywhere must also help the child who refuses school. As the Ministry of Education in Japan defines it *tōkōkyōhi* is the phenomenon of a child who cannot attend school due to psychological, emotional, physical and/or social and environmental factors. In 2007, the number of truant junior high school students in Japan came to 105,197, up 2,200 from the previous year. This means one out of every 34 junior high school students, or 2.9 percent, was absent from school, according to the Japan Times on Aug 21, 2008. Although the term “truant” is used in this report, many of these students fit the definition of *tōkōkyōhi* in which psychological and environmental factors interact. Students identified personal issues, relationships, poor academic performance and bullying as contributing to their absence. *Tōkōkyōhi* has been growing in Japan and merits handling by skilled school social workers in order to develop effective interventions that fit the situation. School refusal is a complex response to interacting personal and societal problems, and it presents an ideal opportunity to demonstrate effective social work skills as school social work gets started in Japan.