

A Helping Hand for the Chronic Truant

Sam P. Sentelle



A separate program with one teacher keeps some high school students from dropping out and helps improve their attendance.

The Elizabethton, Tennessee, School Board has set up an alternative program for chronic truants that meets in a location apart from the regular school. The students assigned there number between 10 and 20 at any given time. For the most part, they take their assignments from the teachers in their regular high school program. Yet they have one teacher alone to whom they are responsible throughout the day.

What the program means for a youngster and his/her education depends upon whom you ask, and when. Those who resist assignment to the program most strongly often resist leaving it when their time is up.

"They don't ring bells in truancy school," is a comment often heard. "I could take as much time as I needed. I could stay with something until I learned it." "You can talk more often with the teacher," we are told. "They want to talk with you at the high school, too. But they seem so busy all the time that they really can't spend very much time with you."

Not a Punishment

Some of our students—and parents—view the truancy program as punishment for skipping classes, but there are many forms of punishment less troublesome to officials and school boards—suspension or outright expulsion, for example. The problems would simply be passed along for the community to resolve in a few months or years through the courts and social services.

The truancy program is not a punishment, and it was not intended as such. Truancy by itself, contrary to popular opinion, is seldom a problem. Students who fail to meet their classes usually have other problems that contribute to their delinquency. Truancy is a symptom. Often the problems of living and growing up first show themselves in erratic attendance patterns at school.

As a student misses classes, school work suffers, and a new problem is added to the student's other troubles. The more classes missed, the more the student falls behind, and the harder it becomes to return to class.

Upon returning—if the student returns—teachers must help him/her learn material that was missed. Time is spent for makeup that otherwise might have gone to teach the majority who have been constant in



their attendance. All students are penalized by the truant.

Does High School Encourage Truancy?

Almost all students in the truancy program come from the high school. Perhaps youngsters in this age group have more problems. Perhaps their access to automobiles or other means not available to their younger peers makes temptation too strong to resist.

The very structure and organization of the secondary program may encourage truancy. The traditional program is organized by department and subject. A student may have six different teachers, each with as many as 150 students. He or she can all too easily, or even willfully, become lost in the crowd.

For all these reasons and more, the truancy school represents a helping hand for students with problems. The program offers a setting where, for a

time at least, a more intimate understanding may grow between student and teacher. This understanding can lead to personal instruction, study help, and counseling.

This emphasis on the individual, more than any single feature, distinguishes the truancy school and sets it apart from the regular high school program. Through the truancy program, a student has a chance to make up for lost time with a study plan designed to serve individual instructional needs. With only one teacher throughout the day, the temptation for missing class or hedging on assignments is diminished considerably.

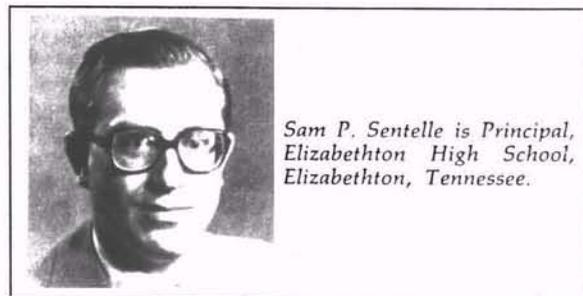
A student remains in the truancy program until able to demonstrate a pattern of regular attendance. The rule-of-thumb is ten school days or two calendar weeks. There are a few assignments of shorter duration according to the discretion of school authorities, and many run longer than the minimum.

Develops a Personal Commitment

Hopefully, when a student returns to the regular high school program, he/she has made a personal commitment for regular attendance. In addition, she/he has made up for the work missed. The student thus returns on an equal footing with classmates, and is able to participate fully in a class.

In some instances, returning students are ahead of their classmates. And often, their teachers report, their classroom performance shows a marked improvement. Sometimes, however, a student never completes the truancy assignment. Sometimes, despite the special attention and encouragement to continue, a student drops out of school altogether.

Perhaps the result would have been the same in many instances without this special program. Yet the decision was made without the lingering frustration and disruption that chronic absence would have caused within the regular program. Most important, a number of students are now continuing in the regular high school program who, according to their own testimony, would have ended their school days prematurely without this helping hand at a critical moment along the way. *EL*



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