

## Incarceration Issues Committee

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Valerie Fischer, Director of Safe & Healthy Schools; Director of Adult Education  
Department of Public Instruction  
328.4138; vfischer@nd.gov

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Chairman Carlisle, members of the Committee - I'm Valerie Fischer, Director of Safe & Healthy Schools and Director of Adult Education for the Department of Public Instruction. On behalf of State Superintendent Baesler, I've been asked to provide information on the status of truancy in North Dakota schools.

Beginning with the 2005-06 school year, *No Child Left Behind* required states collect and report truancy rates. Truancy can be defined as unexcused absences from school by a minor that exceed the number of absences allowed under state law. Each state has its own school attendance laws, which specify the age at which a child must begin school, the age at which a teen can legally drop out of school and the number of unexcused absences that constitute truancy under the law.

In ND, truancy, as defined (NDCC 15.1-20-02.1) as any unapproved absence from school by a student between the compulsory attendance ages of 7-16 in any of the following situations:

- a. Three consecutive school days during either the first half or the second half of a school or school district's calendar;
- b. Six half days during either the first half or the second half of a school or school district's calendar; or
- c. Twenty-one class periods.

*(of note: a parental excuse is considered approved; truancy is not recorded for students over the age of compulsory attendance -16)*

Truancy data is annually collected by NDDPI as reported by every school building. I refer you to the attached Truancy Data History (handout). Equal to national patterns, ND school districts with the highest volume of truant

students are the larger districts and school communities with high enrollments of Native American students.

As this committee so well knows, the costs of truancy are high. Truancy has been universally identified as one of the early warning signs that youth potentially are headed for delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure. Research has shown that truancy is related to substance use/abuse, and school dropout. These early patterns have long-term costs for both the individual and society. Dropouts are poorly prepared to enter the workforce and require greater expenditures for social services and criminal justice processes than do graduates.

Truancy reduction can also save public monies. Truancy prevention ... what works best to encourage a student to stay in school ... there is no one solution, but rather a comprehensive approach must be set into motion. Long-standing research has been accurate in correlation between truancy and four key categories of risk factors: family, school, economic, and student. Therefore, prevention efforts must also target these same risk categories.

The most effective research on reducing truancy has drawn on a risk/protective factors framework. This broad prevention approach includes

- better defined and enforced attendance policies
- parental relationships and mutual expectations
- school culture and climate
- teacher/student relationships
- early community, social and legal interventions
- greater access to counseling and academic supports to include CTE classes and extracurricular participation

There are positive indicators that truancy prevention is working. Statewide graduation rates have held steady at 87%; statewide dropout rates are also holding steady at just under 10%. Students who struggle to learn or adapt in

the traditional setting are transitioning to three alternative environments – alternative programs, alternative high schools and attainment of a GED; the latter choice requires a formal drop out process, but the long term gain is academic completion and should not be viewed as negative. The increase of alternative programs and alternative high schools as well as the growing number of students enrolled (and waiting lists) confirms this alternative as viable.

In 2009, our sister state, South Dakota, raised the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18. Rob Monson, Executive Director of School Administrators of South Dakota, confirmed that increases in alternative high school enrollments, out of school suspensions, and truancy rates have been documented. This past 2015 legislative session, SD lawmakers passed a bill which imposed a \$100 one time fine on parents or emancipated youth for truancy. Mr. Monson, stated, that while it is every administrators goal to educate students, forcing students to remain in school who have ‘academically, emotionally and socially checked out’ causes greater disruption for everyone else, and if they could return to age 16 for compulsory attendance, they would do so ‘in a heartbeat’.

I hope this information has met your needs to learn more about truancy. I am available to address your questions, concerns or gather additional information you may need as you move forward. Thank you for your interest and time.